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Friendship, Beneficence, and the Self

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy

by

Stephen John White

2012

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2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Friendship, Beneficence, and the Self

By

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Doctor in Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Barbara Herman, Chair

Many of the things that make for a meaningful human life—the various projects and relationships that make a life worth living—appear to require that we focus a good deal of our attention and resources on ourselves and the few people with whom we have close ties. Yet, the well-being of other people should matter to us even when we have no personal connection with them. And it must be admitted that the special attention we give to what is good for us and our friends often means that other people will be significantly worse off than they would have been had we instead devoted our resources and efforts toward them. How, then, can such *self-centeredness* be morally justified, and in what form? This is a question of permission. But there is also a question about the variation among our obligations to others. Given that we have obligations to concern ourselves with and promote others' welfare, why should it be the case, as it seems to be, that we

have greater obligations in this regard toward our friends than we do toward strangers?

This dissertation addresses these and related questions. I argue, first, that the kind of privileged status we may legitimately assign to our own lives and interests should be understood in terms of what we must assume responsibility for. Each person has a kind of responsibility for his or her own welfare that others do not share. This contrasts with views according to which we are permitted to assign greater weight to our own interests, or see them as providing us with different and stronger reasons for action than the interests of other people.

Second, I present an account of why we are specially responsible for how our own lives go. The reason is that accepting this responsibility is a condition of maintaining the authority to lead one's life in view of what one judges to be of value while also respecting others' right to do the same.

Third, I build on this account to explain the special obligations grounded in friendship. What is required in order to properly respect another person's autonomy, in this sense, will differ, however, depending on whether the other person is a stranger or a friend. In particular, friends have a kind of mutual influence over each other's lives that would be problematic among strangers. In the context of a friendship, however, such mutual influence is compatible with securing the right kind of authoritative connection between each individual's pursuits and his or her own conception of the good. It is this important fact about friendship which, I argue, helps explain why we generally have a greater responsibility for the welfare of our friends than we do for that of strangers.

The dissertation of Stephen John White is approved.

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2012

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VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes one finds that one is in a position to do some good for somebody—perhaps oneself, perhaps some other person or persons. There are, often enough, occasions when one will have the opportunity to advance someone's interests or get what he or she needs, to protect someone from harm, or to otherwise enhance the quality of someone's life. On at least some of these occasions, one ought to take such welfare-promoting opportunities into account in deciding what to do. And on at least some of *those* occasions, one should actually take the opportunity and act so as to benefit the person in question. The question at the heart of this dissertation is how it might make a difference to the relevance of such welfare-promoting opportunities that the person whose welfare one is in a position to promote is oneself or someone whom one is close to—a friend, for instance.

Let me begin by stating up front some guiding assumptions.

First, I assume that it is intuitively implausible that we are, in general, rationally or morally required to take up and act from a fully impartial attitude toward the lives and well-being of all persons. Rather, most of us hold and act from the view that some degree of *self-centeredness* is permitted. By “self-centeredness” I do not mean *selfishness*, which is the vice of being overly concerned with one’s own interests, placing too much importance on what is good for oneself vis-à-vis what is good for other people. Nor do I mean to focus exclusively on the notion of self-interest. The sense of self-centeredness I

have in mind is broader. It has to do with how the import one assigns to various things and people in one's practical deliberations can depend on how, specifically, they are related to one. My loyalty to my friends, for example, is not self-centered in the sense of being narrowly self-interested. Such loyalty may, on the contrary, lead me to sacrifice my own interests for the sake of my friend. Nevertheless, loyalty to a friend, considered as the motive of my action, necessarily refers back to myself in that the friend must be *my* friend (and I must think of him *as* my friend) for the concept of loyalty to have any application at all.

More generally, in thinking about what to do, we normally treat considerations having to do with our own lives—including the people in our lives—differently than considerations that are relevant to the lives of people with whom we have no special relationship. The fact that, for instance, doing such-and-such will affect my interests or my friend in a particular way is a consideration that seems to bear on what I should do over and above the fact that doing such-and-such will affect *someone's* interests or *someone's* friend. In this sense, such self-centeredness—as I'm calling it here, without prejudice—is manifest in the fact that our practical orientation toward the opportunities we have to promote the interests and well-being of strangers differs substantially from both the kind of orientation we have toward our own needs and interests as well as the kind we have toward those of our friends.

But I also assume that egoism is false. That is, we ought to treat the interests and well-being of other people as things that matter in their own right; they provide us with reasons for action that do not merely derive from our own interests or needs. Moreover, I assume that other people matter *qua* people—and not just because they are people we

happen to like, or people who are members of our particular community, etc. Finally, I take it that the our moral obligations with regard to the good or welfare of other people, considered as such, go beyond negative duties, for instance, the duties we have not to harm them or gratuitously interfere in their lives. We have, in addition, positive duties, duties of aid and beneficence, which are not limited to one's own "circle" of personal relations—though such duties may come to have a different determination and force depending on one's more particular relations with others.

Most people will find the rejection of egoism to be perfectly intuitive. Thus, I take it that the commonsense position conjoins the acceptability of some basic self-centeredness with the acknowledgment that it has its limits, and that we will sometimes, perhaps frequently, be required to set our own interests aside and act for the sake of those with whom we have no special connection. The question I am primarily interested in is whether our intuitions here can be vindicated. In particular, can the differences in practical orientation with respect to different welfare-promoting opportunities be justified, and on what grounds?¹

There is, however, a prior issue, which is to characterize more precisely the differences in the kinds of relevance we assign to our own good and that of our friends, in contrast with the welfare or good of strangers, when it comes to forming judgments about how we should live and act. The question is, what *form* of self-centeredness can we

¹ I should perhaps make explicit a further assumption I rely on throughout this work. This is that claims about what we should do, and what we have reason to do—including claims about what morality requires of us—are concerned with objective matters of fact. Such claims can be evaluated as true or false and are not merely expressive of, or conditional on, subjective attitudes—for instance, desires, sentiments, tastes, commitments, intentions, or plans. Moreover, I assume that some such claims about what one should (or may, or is obligated to) do are true. This seems to me to be the commonsense view with respect to these matters and I have not been persuaded by the philosophical arguments in favor of skepticism. But I do not argue for this assumption here. I simply presuppose it, as it seems to me necessary to give point and purpose to the kind of normative inquiry I undertake here, as well as to make sense of some of the other claims and assumptions I will be making.

plausibly hope to justify?

Of course, we can't hope to find a conclusive answer to this question independently of the actual attempt to provide such a justification. Still, there are some constraints on an acceptable answer. We can consider these even in some abstraction from any particular account of what could justify a practical orientation in which we devote special attention to ourselves and those close to us.

There is, first, the question of how well our characterization of a legitimate form of self-centeredness fits our considered judgments about which kinds of behavior and ways of thinking about ourselves and others are acceptable and which are not. This is not a hard and fast constraint, since we should be open to the idea—especially with regard to this particular subject-matter—that we are, even in our cool-headed moments, prone to selfishness and other forms of bias that can distort our intuitions about what morality requires of us. Nevertheless, we should be sensitive to any incompatibility between our intuitive judgments and our account of, for instance, the role that self-interest has in our deliberative economy.

Second, there are constraints imposed by the need to develop an account that is consistent with what is morally or rationally required of us when it comes to conduct that is not directly concerned with the appropriate response to welfare-promoting opportunities.

The first two chapters consider such constraints on what a reasonable and morally viable form of self-centeredness might involve. The primary aim of Chapter One is to show that a certain interpretation of the special consideration we give to ourselves and loved ones is not, contrary to what is commonly held, forced on us by our ordinary

intuitive judgments. The interpretation in question is one that appeals to a distinction between “agent-neutral” and “agent-relative” reasons. On this account, the kind of self-centeredness I’ve been discussing is a matter of taking a person’s interests, projects, relationships, and so on, to provide her with reasons for action that are merely agent-relative, in the sense that, while they provide *her* with reasons to do various things (such as devoting resources to the success of her projects), they do not provide similar reasons to other people. I argue, however, that this characterization of the self-centeredness we find intuitively acceptable, is based on mistaken assumptions about the nature of practical reasoning. If we give up these assumptions, then there is no conflict between these intuitive phenomena and the idea that the reasons we have for and against various actions are always agent-neutral—that is, that they are considerations that count in favor of or against action for anyone and everyone who is in a position to respond to them. Chapter One concludes by taking the argument one step further (and this is where the second constraint mentioned above comes in). It’s not just *possible* to maintain, consistently with the intuitive phenomena, that practical reasons are agent-neutral in this sense, we actually have reason to believe this is the case. The reason is that, arguably, a familiar kind of cooperative engagement with others is rational only on the assumption that reasons for action are agent-neutral.

Chapter Two turns from issues about the structure of reasons and reasoning to moral theory and concerns about the relation between the requirements of morality and the personal life of the individual. The issue raised in this chapter is, specifically, whether it is a good objection to a moral theory that it demands a great deal of individual agents. Many have criticized utilitarianism, for instance, for the degree of sacrifice it will often

require individuals to make for the sake of the common good. The claim is that this ignores the distinctive importance to a person of her own life and interests. I argue, however, that we cannot articulate a coherent objection to a moral theory on the grounds that the costs to individuals of complying with the theory are too high. The rest of this chapter develops an alternative account of what underlies the basic intuition that theories like utilitarianism are overly demanding. This alternative articulates a notion of responsibility and claims that those theories that strike us as overly demanding do so because they hold people responsible for too much. What underlies the “demandingness objection,” then, is our sense that a person has a special responsibility for her own life and well-being in particular. This conclusion, in conjunction with the claims made in Chapter One, gives us good grounds for characterizing the form of justifiable self-centeredness in terms of those things that we are and are not responsible for.

This allows us to focus on a more specific question, namely, why should the responsibility for how a person’s life goes fall primarily to that person herself? Why shouldn’t we take ourselves to have the same kind of responsibility for everyone welfare, insofar as we have the opportunity to affect it, as we do for our own? Chapter Three answers these questions by showing how a person’s responsibility for her own welfare is closely related to the value of leading an autonomous life—the value, that is, of a person’s determining the course of her life in light of what she takes to be worthwhile or important. Taking on the primary responsibility for how one’s life goes is, in fact, a condition of respecting others’ autonomy while at the same time maintaining one’s own. This is because one cannot consistently respect the autonomy of others while also taking them to have the same basic responsibility for one’s welfare as one does oneself *unless*

one allows them to have a say in how one leads one's life. And yet, such a requirement to allow others this kind of influence over one's aims and pursuits obviously conflicts with one's ability to govern one's life by one's own lights. It follows that if one's own judgment about what is worth doing is to have the right kind of authority in relation to one's decisions about what to pursue, one must assume the primary responsibility for one's own life.

Chapter Three focuses on one's distinctive responsibility for one's *own* welfare. Chapter Four builds on this account to explain the special relevance of opportunities to promote the welfare of one's friends. The connection between a person's autonomy on the one hand, and her responsibility for her well-being on the other, depends on the idea that there is an important value in a person's living her life by her own lights. The premise argued for in Chapter Three is that this value is undermined if one is required to give others a say with respect to what aims and projects one should adopt. Being friends with someone, however, involves granting that person just this type of influence over one's own life. Indeed, this is essential to what makes friendship such a meaningful relationship. What this ultimately shows is that friendship is incompatible with demanding the sort of discretion over one's time and resources that the value of personal autonomy would support in relation to strangers. And this means that there is not the same normative pressure for friends to accept such a stark division of responsibility for each other's welfare. Assuming a greater degree of shared responsibility for a friend's needs and interests does not pose the same problems when it comes to leading one's life in light of what one judges to be of value.

CHAPTER ONE

AGENT RELATIVITY IN PRACTICAL REASONING

§1. Agent-neutral versus agent-relative reasons

This opening chapter examines a familiar way of interpreting our ordinary ethical experience. This is an interpretation that relies on a distinction between, on the one hand, reasons for action that are *agent-neutral*—that is, reasons for anyone to act—and on the other hand, reasons that are *agent-relative*—reasons which are only reasons for particular agents. For example, if repairing your sign will improve your business, this might give you, but not me, a reason to repair your sign. If so, this reason would be agent-relative. On the other hand, if reducing carbon emissions will forestall climate change, this probably gives everyone a reason to try to do this. This reason would then be agent-neutral.

The basic idea is that if, in specifying a certain reason-giving consideration, it is essential that we make reference to the agent for whom that consideration provides a reason, then the reason is agent-relative. If no such reference to the agent is necessary, then the reason is agent-neutral.²

Many find it quite intuitive that reasons for action divide in this way. We might think, to take another example, that I have reason to further my interests in part because

² See Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, (Oxford, 1986). p. 152. There is a large literature on exactly how to draw the distinction. But most agree that there is a need to draw some such distinction in order to describe some familiar phenomena (even if the author ultimately wants to argue that the appearances are misleading in this respect). However, since I am interested in the basic motivations for dividing reasons into these categories in the first place, I will mostly prescind from the details of these debates about the precise formulation of the distinction.

they are mine. My reasons to further my interests are different than the reasons just anyone has to further my interests. This is widely taken just to be the common-sense position. By contrast, the idea that reasons are *never* relativized to agents in this way is regarded as being in various ways unpalatable.

I think this view about how best to represent the intuitive phenomena is questionable and I want to raise some doubts about the apparent need to posit agent-relative reasons. I'll do this by challenging two assumptions I take to support the view. The first assumption is that reasons are, at bottom, reasons to promote the occurrence of events or bring about states of affairs. (I'll call this the teleological assumption.) The second is a view about how one is to take into account, in one's deliberation, the various considerations that may constitute reasons for action. (I'll call this the comparative assumption.)

What I am ultimately interested in can perhaps best be articulated in the first-person. The question is: What kind of difference does it make, with regard to the reasons that apply to me, that something is mine? Whether we're talking about, say, my enjoyment, or my promise to you, or my friends and family—in what ways might it affect the reasons I have that these things in some sense belong to me as opposed to someone else?

One answer, as I've said, appeals to a kind of relativity exhibited by normative reasons for action. Part of what I hope to show is that this is just one answer, and not one we're forced to accept, even if we accept that, for instance, what is mine and what belongs to me can make an important and non-trivial difference in ethics and practical reasoning generally. There are, I think, more illuminating ways to interpret the basic

intuitive data without positing agent-relative reasons.

§2. Motivations for the distinction

So, why should it seem natural to think that (at least) some of our practical reasons are agent-relative? There are, very broadly, two kinds of considerations that are usually thought to exemplify our common-sense commitment to agent-relativity. One is the case of deontological moral requirements and constraints. The second encompasses those things that have special significance for us in our personal lives, including our relationships with other people, our important aims and projects, and so on. In both the moral and the personal case, it is normally thought that to construe the relevant reasons as agent-neutral would seriously distort our ordinary thinking about what we have reason to do.

Let's start with deontology. Intuitively, an agent has reason not to violate a person's rights, even if this would prevent a greater number of rights-violations on the part of other agents. A similar structure is exhibited by promissory obligations. You may not, in general, break a promise you've made just to ensure that several other people are able to keep promises they've made.

The way such obligations work seems to imply that the reasons we have not to break our promises or violate others' rights must be agent-relative.³ If the reason to keep a promise were agent-neutral, then why should it matter to you, in considering what you should do, whether in the end the promise kept is yours or someone else's? And yet it does matter. If one has made a promise, then this promise should have a special status in

³ See, for example, *ibid.* ch. 9.

one's deliberation. It is not simply one more opportunity to make sure a promise is kept—an opportunity one might forego in order to ensure that some other, possibly more important, promises are kept by other people.

Turn now to reasons stemming from one's personal projects or commitments. Most of a person's projects or goals—the goal of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, say, or of writing a book on Kant—are optional. There are a variety of things a person might reasonably choose to pursue. But once she has taken up a certain project, it takes on a new importance in her life. Adopting an end for yourself involves giving it a certain priority over other things. But this does not mean that a person's success in her projects should have the same priority for other people. For one thing, other people have their own projects and commitments and these legitimately take priority for them.

But giving priority to one's own ends seems to be inconsistent with the thought that, in general, the reasons a person has to pursue her ends are agent-neutral. If my reason to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro is agent-neutral, then everyone has the same reason I do to make sure this happens. Moreover, if this reason supports prioritizing my getting to the top of Kilimanjaro over your becoming a successful dancer—such that I may spend money on climbing equipment for me, rather than on dance lessons for you—then it should support this priority not just for me, but for you as well. You'll have the same reason to sacrifice your dance lessons for the sake of my mountain climbing as I do. According to this line of argument, if the reasons grounded in one's personal projects were agent-neutral, this would mean, effectively, that one could not reasonably develop personal projects and commitments of one's own.⁴ And similar points can be made about

⁴ Cf. Bernard Williams, "Critique of Utilitarianism," in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism For and Against* (Cambridge, 1973), and "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981).

reasons grounded in various special relations we stand in to other people.

Our intuitions in these different cases therefore push many to accept that some of our reasons for action must be agent-relative. For it can seem that any attempt to explicate in agent-neutral terms the reasons we have to care for our friends and family, or our reasons not to lie or murder, is bound to distort our ordinary thinking about our lives and relationships. Most of us would not be satisfied, for example, with an account that justifies the extra attention and effort devoted to one's spouse on, say, grounds of efficiency— or that I should focus on my child's needs because I'm in a better position to know what they are. This type of account plainly fails to capture the kind of importance and practical relevance loving relationships have for those involved in them.

§3. The teleological conception of practical reason

The intuitive case for this kind of agent-relativity rests on two assumptions that I think we have reason to doubt. I turn now to the first of these. This is the assumption that practical reasons can in all cases be formulated as reasons to promote events or states of affairs.⁵ Consider Thomas Nagel's original formulation of the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons in *The Possibility of Altruism*. He assumes that reasons for action can be specified by principles that take the form: *Any agent has prima facie reason to promote events that ___*, where the predicate that fills in the blank tells us exactly what it is about the event that gives the agent reason to promote it.⁶ Nagel then distinguishes between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons by saying that, if the

⁵ For related discussions of this assumption, see Christine Korsgaard, "The Reasons We Can Share," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, 1996), John Skorupski, "Agent-neutrality, Consequentialism, Utilitarianism... A Terminological Note," *Utilitas*, 7, (1995); and R. Jay Wallace, "The Publicity of Reasons," in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23 (2009),.

⁶ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Princeton, 1970). See p. 47.

reason-giving predicate that figures in a particular principle contains a variable for the agent—as it would, for example, in a principle stating that any agent has *prima facie* reason to promote events that make that agent happy—then the reason is relative.

According to such a principle, the fact that some event makes me happy gives me reason to promote it, and likewise, you have reason to promote your happiness. But for all this says, none of us has any reason to promote anyone else's happiness. On the other hand, a reason is agent-neutral if the reason-specifying predicate does not contain a free agent-variable. We might, for example, accept the principle that if an event makes Stephen happy, then anyone has *prima facie* reason to promote that event. (Stephen's happiness is a source of agent-neutral reasons.)

This conception of reasons may seem strange insofar as it seems clear that we have reasons to do things besides promote events. We have reasons to tell the truth, to prevent disease, to hold our heads high, etc. Nagel formulates principles in this way because it provides a relatively clear distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons. We do have reasons to prevent things from happening. But we can formulate these reasons as reasons to promote the non-occurrence of those events. He also says that we can treat action as a "degenerate case of promoting the occurrence of the act."⁷ So my reason to tell the truth can be formulated as a reason to promote the event of my telling the truth. And one (pretty easy) way for me to promote this event is simply to tell the truth.

This simplifying assumption, however, is not innocent. It is in part what has led to the objections to agent-neutrality that I canvassed earlier. If the thesis that all reasons are

⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

agent-neutral is interpreted against the background assumption that all reasons for action are fundamentally reasons to promote events (or states of affairs), then it will be no surprise that the thesis makes it difficult to get deontological restrictions right or to capture the value of personal projects and relationships.

To see this clearly, suppose both that the reason to keep one's promise is understood as a reason to promote the keeping of one's promise, and that all reasons are agent-neutral. Thus, everyone has reason to promote the keeping of everyone's promises. It will no doubt seem to require some fancy footwork to avoid the conclusion that what we should be trying to do is maximize promise-keeping. And it's clear that if this is our conclusion, we will have misrepresented the nature of promissory obligations.

But the underlying assumption about the teleological form of reasons is not plausible. Consider this example. Marge sees that she has hardly any food in her refrigerator and that she therefore has reason to go to the grocery store. She realizes that, if she smokes her last two cigarettes, she'll be out and will need to go the store to buy another pack. Once she's there, she knows that she'll also purchase the groceries she needs. And so she decides to smoke her last two cigarettes in order to get herself to go buy groceries.

If Marge's reason to stock up on groceries were based on the reason she had to promote the state of affairs in which she goes to the store and buys groceries, then there should be nothing especially problematic about the above course of reasoning. For Marge's smoking is, we can suppose, a perfectly good way of promoting this state of affairs. But in fact, there seems to be something off about Marge's reasoning. It does not seem that her reason to buy groceries is equally a reason to smoke her remaining

cigarettes so that she'll do this. The fact that she's running low on food seems to directly provide her with a reason to go to the store. Any reason to promote this event or state of affairs in some less direct way seems to be supported only if Marge expects that she is not likely to respond rationally to the primary reason to just get up and go. Marge's reasoning seems to make sense, for instance, if we suppose that Marge thinks she'll be too lazy or forgetful to get to the store unless spurred on by a nicotine craving. But such an explanation makes Marge's reasoning intelligible precisely by implying that she does in an indirect way acknowledge the primacy of the reason to simply go grocery shopping as compared to the reason to promote the action's occurrence.

What this example shows is that, first, a reason to perform an action cannot simply be equivalent to a reason to promote the occurrence of one's act. For there are less direct ways of promoting the occurrence of one's act than simply performing it. And moreover, it does not seem plausible that our reasons to act are derived from more general reasons to promote the event constituted by our acting. The derivation in fact seems to go in the other direction. We may have reasons to promote our own actions in more or less direct ways, but they are typically not on a par with our reasons to *perform* those actions. If we treat reasons to promote our actions as basic, we won't have any way to capture the intuitive rational defect exhibited in the failure to move from the recognition of a reason directly to the action supported by that reason.

Indeed, Nagel himself remarks on the distinction between reasons for action and reasons for bringing about events in his discussion of deontological reasons. He writes, "Deontological reasons," he writes, "have their full force against your doing something—

not just against its happening.”⁸ But if this is right, and we should think of reasons for *action* as primary here, then we *shouldn't* think that the only way to account for the formal character of deontological constraints is to suppose that they represent agent-relative reasons to, say, promote the state of affairs in which one keeps one's own promises, or in which one does not commit murder.

This paves the way for thinking of promissory obligations (for example) as agent-neutral. Take my act of keeping the promise I made to walk your dog. The relevant feature of my action, which gives me reason to perform it, is that it would be the act of keeping a promise. Described in this way, the reason-giving feature of the act makes no reference to me or the fact that it is *my* promise that I am keeping. In this sense, the reason I have to keep my promises is just the reason anyone has to keep promises generally. But here there is no implication that I should be as concerned with whether or not other people keep their promises. I might prevent another person from breaking her promise. But this, of course, will not amount to keeping a promise myself. And since it will not actually constitute the satisfaction of a promissory obligation, there is no pressure to think that my reason to prevent someone from breaking her promise will compete on the same footing with my reason to, e.g., walk your dog—something I have promised to do.

One might object at this point that this way of securing the neutrality of promissory obligations is forced. We have avoided certain counterintuitive consequences only, as it were, by sneaking agent-relativity in through the backdoor. It would, however, be a mistake to think that the non-teleological formulation of the reason in this case

⁸ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 177.

renders its agent-neutrality nothing more than a technicality. On the contrary, I think it brings out more clearly what exactly we are interested in in asking whether the reason is neutral or relative.

It is true that the reason given by my promise to walk your dog is, in a sense, indexed to me, in virtue of my having made it. My promises are relevant to me in a way that promises made by others are not. This is for the straightforward reason that, normally, nothing I do will amount to keeping a promise unless it is a promise I myself have made.⁹ But we should distinguish this way in which the promissory obligation is tied to me from the kind of agent-relativity we have been focusing on. True, it is only if I have promised to walk your dog that my act of walking your dog will fall under the description, “keeping a promise.” But if it does fall under this description, this will give me a significant reason to do that. And it is not as though what matters is the additional fact that it is *my* promise in particular that I will be keeping. We might put it this way: It is not that the *value* of keeping a promise is agent-relative. On this view, the value itself does not depend on whether it is my promise or someone else's I am keeping. Rather, what is relative to the agent in the case of a promise is the potential for a certain kind of reason-giving fact to be true of the agent's action.

Let me pause to summarize the points I've been making. Accepting certain deontological requirements, such as the requirement that one keep one's promises, appeared to commit us to agent-relative reasons. That argument went like this. It should clearly matter much more to you that you keep your promises than that other people keep theirs. For instance, it would typically be wrong for you to break a promise you've made,

⁹ Unless the content of the promise makes this possible, e.g., where I merely promise that I'll get someone to walk your dog tomorrow.

even if doing so would be the only way for you to prevent another person from breaking a more serious promise. If the reasons here were agent-neutral, however, then your reasons to make sure other people keep their promises would be on a par with the reasons you have to keep your own promises. But this implies that if you could prevent someone from breaking a very serious promise only by breaking a somewhat less serious promise that you've made, you should do so, other things equal. This is false, however. So the reasons we have to keep our promises must not be agent-neutral.

But we need not accept the premise of this argument that, if the reasons are agent-neutral, then your reason to keep a promise is on a par with your reason to make sure that others keep theirs. This premise is only justified on the assumption that your reason to keep your promise is based on a reason to bring it about that your promise is kept. Keeping a promise, however, is not equivalent to bringing it about that a promise is kept. And so, if we dispense with the teleological assumption about reasons, then there is no inconsistency in holding that (1) your reason to keep a promise is much more stringent than your reason to bring it about that a promise is kept, and (2) this does not hold in virtue of the fact that the promise kept will be yours as opposed to someone else's. There will be a different explanation of our initial data point that our own promises have a special significance for us, namely, that it is not actually possible for us to keep promises other than our own. The best we can do for other people's promises is bring it about that they are kept.

§4. Derivative reasons and Broome's objection

Suppose, then, we accept that the reason to keep your promises is agent-neutral rather than agent-relative, although it is a reason only you can act on. Does it make any practical difference? It does. This is because reasons for action generally entail reasons to promote conditions that are conducive to the successful execution of the action as well as reasons not to do things that will interfere with its performance. If you have promised to deliver a sack of potatoes to me on Tuesday, then you have reason to make sure you have a sack of potatoes ready to go by Tuesday, as well as reason to fasten the potatoes securely to your motorbike so that they don't fall off on the way to my house. And you have reason not to give them to my neighbor instead of me.

If there are these derivative reasons to do what will help ensure that you can successfully perform the actions you have reason to perform, as well as reasons not to set up obstacles to your so acting, the agent-neutrality thesis entails that, where you have reasons for action, others have reasons not to interfere with your action and to promote the conditions necessary to its success. This is so even where, as in the case of promises, your primary reason for acting (from which the others are derived) is not a reason others can act on directly.

This point suggests a reply to an objection that John Broome has raised against attempts to apply the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction to reasons that are not reasons to promote events or states of affairs.¹⁰ Broome points out that an egoist might endorse the following principle:

For all persons A and acts X (if X gives an expected benefit to the agent of X, then

¹⁰ John Broome, "Skorupski on Agent-neutrality," *Utilitas*, 7 (1995).

A has reason to perform X).

Here, the reason-giving feature that is predicated of the act—viz., that it gives an expected benefit to its agent—contains no occurrence of the agent-variable (A). So, by Nagel's criterion (shorn of its teleology), the reason would count as agent-neutral. But Broome thinks this is absurd. Surely egoism, of all views, is agent-relative.

But, given the points made above, we can see that Broome's suggested principle is not, in fact, a representation of egoism as it is normally understood. This is because, though it is not built into the formal specification of the reason, it will follow as a matter of substance that everyone will have reason not to interfere with, and even reason to help ensure the success of actions that benefit their agents—no matter who those agents are. This is not egoism.¹¹

On the other hand, if we do acknowledge as a consequence of the agent-neutrality thesis that, for instance, everyone has at least derivative reason to help a person keep his promise, we run into a different problem. For it just seems to highlight the further ways in which this thesis is counterintuitive. The original problem was the apparent absurdity of thinking that I have just as much reason to see to it that you keep your promises as you do. This problem was supposed to be alleviated by denying that an agent-neutral reason to keep your promise was itself a reason to promote the event that consisted in your keeping that promise. We have, however, just seen that your promissory obligations support reasons to promote the conditions that best enable you to keep your promise. And won't this make trouble for the agent-neutrality thesis? True, taking these sorts of derived

¹¹ Even if this argument were mistaken, though, I think there would still be reason to doubt that the principle Broome cites accurately reflects egoism. The valuable property of actions expressed by the principle seems to depend on the fact that benefits to a person are secured by her own agency. This is not itself something an egoist should necessarily care about. Broome's principle seems to better fit the (neutral) ideal of a kind of rugged individualism. I take it this is not the same ethical ideal as egoism.

reasons to be agent-neutral will not entail anything like the view that we should maximize promise-keeping (which was the original objection). Still, it does seem to show that an agent-neutral understanding of promissory obligations—even if given a non-teleological formulation—requires too much concern for promises one did not make oneself and that one has no stake in.

This is of a piece, in fact, with the objections raised in regard to the reasons given by personal projects and relationships. Even in non-teleological form, taking these reasons to be agent-neutral seems at odds with the special practical relation we have to our own chosen aims, our own families, and so on. Some of these reasons, it seems, must depend on whether or not one actually stands in these special practical relations. If so, then not all reasons can be agent-neutral.

§5. Comparative justification

The underlying intuition here, I take it, is that we are justified in giving special consideration to those concerns that are central to our own lives and that our reasons should reflect this. Whether a certain course of action will affect my career or my health or the interests of my friend will normally be factored into my decision in a distinctive way in light of my first-personal relation to these things. It may be that I would be wrong not to agree to help a close friend move this weekend, given that I have nothing much else going on. And yet I assume there would be nothing wrong in declining to help a distant acquaintance with her move. Doesn't this show that one has reasons to help one's friends that one does not have to help just anyone? These are reasons that hold only in virtue of one's friendships and thus do not apply to others, who are not friends with these

people.

In fact, to keep things simpler, let's forget about friends for a moment. Focus just on fact that I might be justified in declining to help an acquaintance who could very much use the help, simply so I can enjoy a relaxing Saturday at the beach. It can seem that this alone must show that the reasons stemming from my own life and interests have, for me, a greater weight than the reasons stemming from the similar interests of other people.

There is, however, a second assumption at work here. There seems to be an implicit demand that I be able to justify my choice to spend my afternoon at the beach by citing reasons for doing that which are sufficient to override whatever reason I have to help my acquaintance haul boxes across town. Surely the fact that, by helping my acquaintance, I would make things much easier for her gives me some reason to do that. So if I don't, I ought to have a better reason for spending my afternoon in some other way. This is to assume a strong requirement of comparative justification.

More generally stated, the assumption is that if there is some reason, R, that counts in favor of doing X, then one is justified in *not* doing X only if (a), one has some other reason, R', that counts against doing X (or counts in favor of doing something that is incompatible with doing X); and (b) either R' is sufficient to override R, or R and R' cancel each other out.

With this assumption in place, it does seem hard to explain how I could be justified in deciding to spend the day at the beach, rather than help my acquaintance move, assuming also that reasons are agent-neutral. The reason to save a person several hours of back-breaking work seems weightier, when considered impartially, than the reason to provide for a couple hours of relaxation at the beach. It may, though, seem that

relaxation has greater weight for *me*, given that I'm the one who will be enjoying the beach. And so, in order to understand how my choosing the beach could be justified, we must be able to say that—at least when evaluated from my point of view—my interest in going to the beach gives me a reason to do so that is sufficient to outweigh the reason given by the other person's interest in being helped.

But without the assumption about the comparisons that need to be in place for one's action to be justified, this way of motivating the thought that a person's own interests and attachments must provide him with agent-relative reasons loses its intuitive support. If there were no need to justify my going to the beach by showing how my reason to go to the beach was capable of competing with the reason to help my acquaintance move, then we would not need to make any claims to the effect that the former reason is stronger in virtue of the fact that the interest at stake is mine rather than someone else's. So we need to ask whether the underlying assumption is warranted.

In deliberating about what to do, do I need to ask how the option I am considering compares with all the alternatives available to me? Suppose I choose, for certain reasons, to do X (say, go to the beach). Should we think that, if these reasons are to provide adequate justification for my choice, they need to be good reasons for choosing *X rather than Y*, for any Y that describes a possible action for me at the time (including, for instance, helping my acquaintance haul boxes)?

I think the comparative principle is questionable. If we reflect on the variety of ways in which we normally explain and defend our actions I think we'll see that any requirement of comparative justification we are actually inclined to accept is much more limited. When pressed as to why we did X, when we could have done Y instead, we

sometimes give reasons explaining that, in the circumstances, it was better or more appropriate or made more sense to do X as opposed to Y. But in other cases, different forms of response appear to be more apt.

§6. Justly ignored opportunities

What I want to look at are cases where we seem to rule out certain options as, in a sense, irrelevant to the question of what we have good reason to do. That is, we rule them out in a way that does not rest on a prior estimate of the reasons for and against those options as compared with the alternatives.

Here is one kind of case: Ask yourself why you don't drop what you're reading, pack a suitcase and take the next flight out to Helsinki. After all, there is plenty that might be said in favor of heading off to Helsinki this weekend. It is, after all, a city that's trendy and rich in culture, characterized by flavors of both East and West.

Of course, there will be plenty of countervailing considerations too. A last minute ticket to Helsinki is going to cost a lot of money; rearranging your schedule for the next week will take some doing and so on. Helsinki may not seem worth these costs. But in the normal run of things, such considerations seem beside the point, insofar as they suggest that you are or should be taking the possibility of dropping everything and flying off to Helsinki seriously. A more typical response to the suggestion that you take the next flight to Helsinki would simply be to cite the fact that you're in the middle of doing something else, that you're not going to change your plans at the drop of a hat, or just to balk at the very idea. Obviously, these responses would not serve the purpose of justifying a decision not to drop everything and head for the airport. They seem instead to

be ways of refusing the demand for this sort of justification. And there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with such a refusal. One doesn't normally need to explain—even to oneself—why one doesn't just pack up and head for Finland.¹² If the intuition here is correct, then the fact that a person *could* do this is not sufficient to make this option relevant to the justification of what she is doing in the way that the comparative principle implies.

To sharpen the point, consider a particular type of answer I think many of us would be inclined to give were we asked to consider taking off for Helsinki tomorrow. You ask me, “Why not take a trip to Helsinki this week? You'd have a great time, you'd be doing something spontaneous for a change, and you can afford it.” And let's suppose I respond, “I can't; I'm revising a paper this week.” We say this sort of thing often enough. But if we accept the comparative principle then it will seem unresponsive, at least if taken at face value. It's true that, if I stay home to revise a paper, I can't also go to Finland. But, if we assume the comparative principle in the background, then we should understand the question being asked as really something like, “What is it you take to count in favor of staying home to revise your paper over going to Helsinki?” It won't answer *this* question to say that I just am going stay home to work on the paper.

One suggestion would be to hear my initial answer “I can't go to Helsinki...” as obliquely referring to reasons I take myself to have to revise my paper rather than take a European vacation. Perhaps I think it should be obvious to you what my reasons are and that they clearly outweigh whatever might count in favor of Helsinki. But it is certainly

¹² This might reflect a conviction that it is so *obvious* that the balance of reasons tilts in favor of continuing your day as planned rather than jetting off to Finland that you need not give the matter any thought. We might wonder what reason you have to be so confident. In any case, one needn't be this confident in order for it to make sense to balk at the suggestion of flying off to Helsinki.

not *evident* that this is what is going on. It would, I think, strike us as beside the point were you to start pointing out reasons for going to Helsinki you think I might not have been aware of, and which might affect my assessment that revising my paper is the better of the two courses of action. It's beside the point because I've made clear that I am not now treating it as an open question whether to spend this week revising my paper. And since this is incompatible with jetting off to Helsinki, I'm regarding that option as off the table. If we reject the strong comparative principle, then we can, in cases like this, take at face value explanations of the form "I can't do X because I'm doing (or planning to do) Y, and I can't do both." If we reject the comparative principle, then such explanations will not automatically beg the question, "Yes, but what reason do you have for doing Y rather than X?"

§7. Reasons and responsibilities

Let me turn now to a different kind of case. In justifying the decision to do X, despite the fact that one could have done Y instead, we sometimes say things like, "It's not my responsibility to do Y," or, "That's A's business, let her do Y if she wants." Saying that it is not my responsibility to do something, however, does not generally amount to citing a positive reason for not doing it. That is, the fact that something is not my responsibility does not necessarily *count against* acting.¹³

¹³ Let me make explicit that I have in mind Scanlon's characterization of practical reasons as considerations that count in favor of (or against) acting in a certain way. See T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard, 1998), Ch. 1. Sometimes reasons are characterized more broadly. Pamela Hieronymi, for instance, takes practical reasons to be considerations that bear on the question of what to do. See Pamela Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason," *Journal of Philosophy*, (2005). Now, many considerations will have some bearing on the question of what to do in a given situation that are not naturally thought of as reasons *for* or *against* performing some action. Thus, it may *bear* on the question of whether to raise my arm above my head that I am physically capable of doing this, though this by itself is not a reason to do it; nor is it a reason not to do it. Because Hieronymi's reasons for departing from Scanlon's formula are not

This justificatory phenomenon is familiar from the assignment of responsibilities to particular social or institutional roles. The responsibility to enforce parking restrictions in Los Angeles falls to the Parking Bureau's enforcement officers. This is why I don't have to account for my failure to call in illegally parked cars and have them towed, even if I happen to notice them and have my cell phone on me. I need not view my time as more valuable than the strict enforcement of the parking ordinances or justify myself in such terms. That is, we need not deny that there is agent-neutral reason to make sure that cars are not parked in fire lanes or blocking driveways. Indeed, I might take it upon myself to act on such a reason and report the violation. But we can also acknowledge the point of instituting a division of municipal labor, which allows the response to that reason to fall outside the purview of my personal responsibility. This then permits a different kind of justification for walking right by an illegally-parked car. Even if I don't take myself to have particularly good reason for *not* calling it in, I can nevertheless rely on the fact that parking enforcement is someone else's responsibility.

Though the phenomenon shows up fairly clearly in the case of social and institutional roles, the idea that one may rely on what is and is not one's responsibility in justifying one's actions has more general application. Your neighbor's car may need to be washed. But we would ordinarily think this was his responsibility, not yours. What do we mean by this? One thought is just that you do not have any obligation to wash his car. But this does not really clear anything up. First, it is unlikely that your neighbor has any *obligation* to wash his car. So this cannot be the difference between the two of you with

relevant to the present discussion, and because the breadth of her formulation would require unnecessary complications in the presentation of what I want to say, I will stick to talking about reasons in the narrower sense that Scanlon characterizes.

respect to who has responsibility for the car. Second, we are not just interested in morality (or other sources of obligation, e.g., the law) but, generally, in what you should be doing and how you should go about deciding what to do. The fact that you do not have an obligation does not mean you have no reason to wash your neighbor's car. It would make your neighbor very happy if you washed his car, for instance. Under normal circumstances, it seems that this would, at least to some extent, count in favor of doing it. The example suggests, then, that to say something is not one's responsibility is not merely to deny that one has obligations with respect to it. But such a claim does seem to make a difference to the kind of justification one can be expected to offer for certain aspects of one's conduct. Were the question to arise, for instance, as to why you don't just go ahead and wash the car, it seems legitimate simply to reply that the car is your neighbor's to deal with—whether it needs a wash is, as you might put it, not your problem.

I think it would be a mistake to hear this as a denial that washing your neighbor's car would be, on balance, good or worthwhile. To think that his car is his responsibility and not yours is consistent with claiming that his interest in having his car washed grounds an agent-neutral reason, and hence gives you a reason to wash it. Were you to go ahead and wash his car, because of the benefit to your neighbor, this would, I think, be perfectly intelligible. But to claim that the cleanliness of your neighbor's car is not your responsibility is to deny that it is in place to expect or insist on a certain type of justification for not attending to the car. That it would be nice for your neighbor to have a clean car is not a consideration you *must* incorporate into the overall balance of values and interests that you ultimately take to support your decision to spend the afternoon lounging on the couch.

If this is right, then it suggests that we do not, in fact, accept that a person owes a substantive justification for not doing something simply because it is in her power to do it. Certain options can legitimately be treated as irrelevant, not because there are no reasons that support them, but because one has no responsibility to consider them. This appears, at any rate, to be a familiar way in which we explain and defend various things we do and do not do. And it amounts to a rejection of the strong principle of comparative justification that forced us to posit agent-relative reasons. That principle was sweeping in its requirement that one be able to provide substantive reasons for not doing anything one might have done. If we reject this, then we might accept that reasons for action are generally agent-neutral while also maintaining that whether an available course of action is relevant to a particular agent's conduct may depend on factors specific to that agent and her relations to others. This is because, in order to establish the legitimacy of a demand to justify not performing some available action, it is not enough that there be something to be said for the action. For it may be that, for one reason or another, it was not one's responsibility to take account of the particular values served by the action.

§8. Normativity beyond reasons

Looking at these examples where it seems counterintuitive to insist on the application of a strong principle of comparative justification makes it clear that we need to distinguish between two different kinds of normative question. There is, first, a set of questions centrally concerned with the principles that govern how one is to deliberate and decide between alternatives that are taken to be in some way relevant. These are questions about reasons for action, considered in some abstraction from contexts of

actual, situated deliberation. They concern, for example, what kinds of consideration are to be taken into account (should one just worry about the consequences of one's actions or are there, e.g., facts about the past that are intrinsically relevant to what one should do?), how one is to weigh these considerations in coming to a decision (should one attempt to maximize along some dimension of value? should one discount benefits one expects to gain only in the distant future?), what should take priority over what (are moral considerations paramount?) and so on.

But once we have determined whether a particular consideration would, given the type of situation one is in, qualify as a reason to perform some act, there is still a further question we can ask: under what conditions must one take that consideration into account in order for one's action (or inaction) to be justified? The principle I have been criticizing, according to which all practical justification requires comparison of all the options, supplies an extreme answer to this second question. For it holds that we are required to take into account every reason that supports any course of action it is in our power to perform. On such a view, the assessment of one's reasoning and choice is almost exclusively focused on the reasons that favored or disfavored various alternatives.

By describing how, in justifying our conduct, we often seem to rely on the limits of our responsibilities, as well as on the perceived irrelevance of certain options, I have attempted to build an intuitive case for rejecting this narrow focus on reasons alone. A more sensible view would, I think, hold that the rational assessment of particular episodes of deliberation and choice will depend on factors other than the reasons favoring a given choice as compared with the alternatives. It will also depend, for instance, on how the choice was framed—that is, how the person understood (albeit, perhaps, only implicitly)

the practical question on which she was deliberating. We don't just ask ourselves, "What shall I do now?" and then proceed to compare alternatives. Normally, the question from which we start deliberating is much more specific: "What should I have for dinner tonight?" "Should I finish this chapter now or give it up and go to bed?" How one frames the question is itself part of the broader reasoning process and is subject to norms of rational assessment. Such norms will not themselves specify the considerations that provide reasons for different actions. Instead, they will help to specify the possible courses of action that are relevant in a given situation—relevant in the sense that one needs to take into consideration the reasons for performing those actions. If this is right, then *reasons* for action will depend for their full normative import on a complex of other deliberative norms. Some of these will be norms allocating responsibility for different concerns to different people. Such allocations of responsibility will be the primary focus of later chapters. But the important point for now is just that, if it is generally correct to admit this sort of variety in the factors that are relevant to the assessment of practical reasoning and justification, then it seems we should not assume the strong principle of comparative justification I outlined above.

This, then, brings me back to the main claim of this chapter. If we reject the assumption that our reasons must be capable, in themselves, of showing our action to be preferable to all the alternatives, then we will have gone a long way toward undermining the intuitive case for insisting that many of those reasons must be agent-relative. That case appealed to certain ordinary phenomena, such as that I seem to have greater reason to devote resources to my mountain-climbing expedition than to your dance lessons, though the opposite is true for you.

Thus, the case for agent-relativity relied on the following sort of argument. First, begin with the ordinary intuition that, for instance, I'm justified in dedicating myself largely to the achievement of my ends and projects, even if this means that yours will flounder—and that the same goes for you as well; you are justified in dedicating yourself to the realization of your ends and projects, even if this prevents you from helping me succeed in mine. Second, assuming I'm fully informed, I will be justified in dedicating myself to the success of my projects only if my reasons for doing this are sufficient to override whatever reasons I might have to dedicate myself to the success of your projects. However, third, if our reasons for pursuing our projects are agent-neutral, then I have just as much reason to dedicate myself to your projects as you do, and vice-versa. And so, fifth, if I *am* justified in dedicating myself to the pursuit of my projects, you will not be justified in dedicating yourself to the success of yours when you could instead devote yourself to mine. And that seems absurd. Hence the need to treat project-given reasons as agent-relative.

I have argued, though, that the second premise of this argument lacks support. The fact that there are reasons for me to take some alternative course of action is not sufficient to show that those reasons bear in this way on the justification of my decision to do something else. It is natural, for instance, to think that a person has a kind of responsibility for successfully realizing her ends that others lack. Indeed, as I will argue in chapter four, it may itself be a valuable thing that we do not have to justify ourselves to one another for all aspects of how we choose to live our lives. And this would allow us to account for the special role that our own ends and projects play in our lives, without treating these as sources of anything but agent-neutral reasons.

Up to this point, then, we have looked at two broad classes of considerations—deontological moral requirements, and personal attachments—which are typically thought to ground agent-relative reasons. I've argued that this thought relies on two background assumptions—one regarding the basic teleological form of practical reasons, the other involving a very strong principle of comparative justification. And I have offered some reasons to think both of these assumptions should be rejected. The view that many of our reasons are agent-relative therefore does not deserve the kind of default status it is often given in practical philosophy. If I am right, then certain common-sense views about what we have reason to do in various circumstances do not force us to deny that our reasons are agent-neutral, and thus that they are reasons for others to act as well.

In the chapters to follow, I will attempt to provide an account of and justification for certain common-sense differences in the kind of attention we pay to our own lives and interests and to those of people with whom we have special ties, for instance, our friends. My aim will be to show that we do not have the same responsibility for others' lives and well-being as we do for our own. Nor do we have, in general, the same responsibility for the well-being of strangers as we do for that of our friends. What I have tried to do here, at the outset, is to make clear that to defend such an account is not equivalent to defending the thesis that one's own needs and interests, and those of one's friends, give one reasons to act that are merely agent-relative—reasons that others do not share. This difference in the kind of account to be offered is important for at least two reasons.

The first is that, as I will argue, merely insisting on agent-relativity in the reasons stemming from one's personal concerns does not, in fact, sufficiently answer to the underlying value I believe provides the moral basis for one's distinctive concern for one's

own life and happiness. This value, a kind of autonomy or authority with respect to what one does with one's life, requires each person to take responsibility for how her life goes in a sense that is different from simply treating her one interests as weightier or more pressing than other people's.

The second reason this difference is important, though, is that it may be more expensive, theoretically, to posit agent-relative reasons than is generally recognized. Accordingly, I want to end this chapter by looking at a context in which the essential agent-neutrality of reasons appears to serve an important function.

§9. Agent-neutrality and reasonable cooperation

Christine Korsgaard has pointed out that ordinary cases of cooperation and joint decision-making seem to depend on the agent-neutrality of the reasons that the cooperating parties rely on to support their decisions about what to do. She gives an example of a teacher making an appointment to meet with her student and trying to find a time that is good for both of them.¹⁴ The teacher asks her student to stop by her office after class. But the student says he has another class he has to get to right away. So the teacher suggests an alternative.

It is natural to imagine this interaction as one involving what Korsgaard calls shared deliberation. The student cites what is, for him, a reason not to meet with the teacher at the suggested time. The teacher takes the fact that her student has reason to find some other time to meet as directly supplying her with reason to try for an alternative. Meeting immediately after class is not good for the student and the teacher

¹⁴ Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, (Oxford, 2009), p.192.

takes this fact by itself to show that that is not, after all, the best time to meet. The teacher might still think that meeting immediately after class is the best time *for her*. But this is not the issue she is presently trying to settle. She is trying to settle (along with the student) the time that's best for both of them. Moreover, once the teacher and student have settled this question, there is presumably no further question about what either of them is to do. They have reached a decision about when to meet.

Two features of this sort of cooperative activity are especially relevant here. The first is that the deliberative process aims at an outcome that is best supported by the total set of reasons the parties offer for wanting things to go one way rather than another. The second is that this outcome constitutes a practical commitment of each person to acting as they have decided. If the parties are reasonable, they will not regard it as a further, open question as to whether each will do what they have jointly decided to do. These two features combined require that the cooperating parties deliberate and act only on reasons they both take to bear on their decision. The student, for example, will not appeal to reasons for meeting at certain time if he thinks these are reasons only relative to him.

It seems to me that we do, frequently, interact with others in just this way. When cooperating with another person to achieve some common aim, we typically offer reasons why it would be better for us to go about things one way rather than another. We expect the other person to take these reasons seriously and we resent it if he doesn't. Then again, we allow the reasons we've offered to be rebutted by comparable reasons the other has for preferring some alternative. Moreover, once we've settled on a satisfactory course of action, it is natural to cite not only the reasons given by our own interests, but those given by the other's as well, in explaining why we've adopted that plan rather than some other

one. I go with a friend to see the new Woody Allen movie, instead of the Terrence Malick film I would have preferred, because my friend has already seen the latter. If asked for some further explanation as to why I didn't just insist on the Malick film, knowing my friend probably would have caved in and seen it again, it seems I may just reject the propriety of the question. I have already explained why I agreed to see the other movie.

It seems the rationality of such a mode of interaction can readily be accounted for on an agent-neutral conception of reasons. Each party takes the other's interests, ends, and so on, to be relevant to the decision in just the same way that her own are. Yet, if we add to the mix of reasons each person needs to consider reasons that are relative only to that person, then we face certain problems. For if there are further, agent-relative reasons that the parties must take into account, then it seems that the results of their shared deliberation will always only be provisional. For it is left to each party to weigh her further, private reasons against these results and make up her mind on this additional basis. The co-deliberation of the interacting parties won't then be sufficient to reach a joint decision about what they should do. One might try to avoid this conclusion by arguing that, in contexts of cooperation with others, one should not take into account reasons that are merely agent-relative. But we would need some explanation of how cooperation could make it rational to ignore considerations that, by hypothesis, do genuinely favor some alternatives over others.

Perhaps such an account is possible. My point, however, is this. It seems that a structural feature of ordinary cooperation is that a certain impartiality is called for among the cooperating parties. An agent-neutral conception of reasons easily and

straightforwardly accommodates this feature. If this is, in general, the form that our practical reasons take, then a person's own reasons for wanting to proceed in a certain way, while they may be overridden, will not themselves present any obstacle to the conclusiveness of the jointly arrived at decision.

This aspect of impartiality in reasonable cooperation may therefore plausibly rest on the agent-neutrality of the reasons that apply to the participants. But there is a further aspect of normal cooperation between people that I want to consider. It seems that, where two people are cooperating with each other in such a way that they are aiming to arrive at a joint decision about what to do, they will generally also take each other's interests and concerns as having a special status in their deliberation. If you and I are trying to find a time to meet, it seems the fact that it would be better for you to meet earlier in the week should matter in our deliberation in a way that it does not much matter that someone else, who is not party to our interaction, has some reason for wanting us to meet later in the week.

It might now be objected that if it's the agent-neutrality of reasons that makes this sort of collaborative interaction possible, there will be some tension with this additional aspect of cooperation. If reasons are agent-neutral, why should the fact that you and I are interacting make any difference to *whose* interests we should be especially concerned with in coming to a decision about what to do?

This objection however, rests on something like the strong demand for comparative justification that I criticized earlier. If we reject that assumption, then a different picture begins to emerge. First, the agent-neutrality of practical reasons does not automatically make it the case that, if you and I are deciding when to meet, we are

required to aim for a time that is, as it were, best for everyone who might possibly have some reason to care. It is consistent with agent-neutrality to think that it is nevertheless reasonable for us to aim primarily at finding a time that works well for the two of us.

But second, there are the seeds here of an explanation as to why interacting with another person might require that one give special attention to that person's interests. If I understand my particular deliberative situation as one in which you and I are together trying to figure out when it makes sense for the two of us to meet, it is natural to think that it will be particularly relevant to this question that we have available certain options that are especially good for one or both of us. It will make sense, here, to expect a reason for deciding on one time rather than another, given that while the former was good for me, the latter was better for you. By contrast, it may be that a third alternative, which turns out to be good in some way for someone with whom we are not currently interacting, is not one we need to worry about in this way.

The picture we get then is not that of a fully agent-neutral ethics. For certain norms of good practical reasoning—for instance, those that concern the role in deliberation of framing particular questions and taking certain options, though not others, to be directly relevant—these are liable to take account of an agent's relation to her own life and interests, as well as her relations to other agents. Yet, on this picture, we should also subscribe to a strictly agent-neutral conception of reasons for action. So, while there has been a tendency to assume that our ordinary ethical experience suggests that we accept agent-relative practical reasons, careful reflection on the phenomena may in fact lead us to conclude just the opposite.

CHAPTER TWO
RESPONSIBILITY AND THE DEMANDS OF MORALITY

§1. The intuitive issue

In thinking about what morality requires of us—especially in terms of beneficence—we seem to be pulled in different directions. On the one hand, we are not egoists. We recognize that the needs and interests of other people matter—indeed, that at some level they matter just as much as our own needs and interests. Hence we are not indifferent to the misery and suffering of other people nor to the ways in which we might help them. On the other hand, there is the sense that if morality required us to aid those worse off than ourselves whenever possible, it would require too much. And it is a common objection to moral theories that incorporate extremely demanding requirements of beneficence (utilitarianism being the prime example) that they are too demanding to be plausible.

In this chapter, I take up the issue of how we should understand this “demandingness” objection, and whether it is a good one. Several questions arise. One is the question of what it means for a theory to be demanding in the first place. What, in other words, is the nature of the demands we are concerned with and that, intuitively, we think must be limited? This is the main question I attempt to address in this chapter. How we answer it will make a difference to how we go on to address two other important questions. First, what are the underlying philosophical grounds for thinking that morality is itself sensitive to the demands individuals face in virtue of the obligations they have to others? And second, what are the possibilities for incorporating limits on what morality

can demand into moral theory? It seems to me that the philosophical significance of such questions clearly goes beyond the issue of whether there is a persuasive objection to this or that moral view. Assuming, then, that there is something to the intuition that morality cannot be extremely demanding, it seems worthwhile to try to understand more specifically what we are concerned with in thinking this—even if one is not particularly interested in the argumentative role the notion of demandingness might play in, say, a criticism of utilitarianism.

Let's begin, then, with a couple of cases meant to provoke the intuition that utilitarianism is overly demanding.¹⁵ Imagine, first, a relatively affluent person—your typical middle-class American, for instance. She earns a decent salary and donates a sizable portion of it to worthwhile charities. But she is unhappy with her career and has always dreamed of being a novelist. She has enough savings to make it feasible for her to quit her job and make a go at a writing career. However, we can plausibly suppose the utilitarian calculation recommends against it. She can contribute more to the total welfare if she remains in her hateful job and gives away most of her salary. In fact, we can further suppose the utilitarian would have it that what she is morally required to do is work longer hours and take fewer vacations and give up seeing first-run movies and live music, etc., etc. At this point we may be inclined to ask: Is it really reasonable to ask this person to give up so much for the sake of helping others? Shouldn't she be allowed some space

¹⁵ Utilitarianism is not the only theory subject to the objection. Any number of theories or principles—whether or not they are consequentialist—may intuitively appear excessively demanding. I focus on utilitarianism—and indeed, a relatively unsophisticated version of it—because it has generally been treated as a theory paradigmatically subject to the demandingness objection. Since I'm interested in whether it ever makes sense to object to a moral theory on the grounds that it is excessively demanding, it seems wise to raise the question in relation to the theory most likely to draw such an objection.

to live her own life?

David Sobel offers a different sort of case that is meant to provoke a similar intuition.¹⁶ He tells us about Sally, who needs a kidney transplant in order to live. Joe has two healthy kidneys and is the only person present who is a match for Sally. If Joe doesn't give Sally one of his kidneys, she will die. Sobel assumes that, in this situation, Joe will maximize aggregate welfare by giving one of his kidneys to Sally (who, we might as well add, is a total stranger to Joe). According to utilitarianism, then, Joe is morally required to do so. But again, we may feel that this demands too much of Joe. It seems unreasonable to suppose that, in this situation, it would really be wrong of Joe to keep both of his kidneys.¹⁷

Now I think that in these cases utilitarianism does seem to demand more than we feel is really required of the individual agents involved. But what exactly is the problem? We need both an interpretation that provides some way of establishing that a theory is very demanding, as well as some explanation of why this should matter to us in our thinking about morality.

§2. The High-Cost-of-Compliance Interpretation

The most straightforward way of measuring the demands associated with a particular theory would seem to be in terms of the costs imposed on individuals who

¹⁶ David Sobel, "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection," *Philosophers' Imprint* (September, 2007).

¹⁷ Another way to make the same point would be to say that, if Joe were to give Sally his kidney, his action would be supererogatory. We would naturally credit him with doing far more than simply meet his basic obligations. Donating an organ to a stranger—even if she needs it to live—is surely to go above and beyond the call of duty.

comply with the theory's requirements.¹⁸ A theory will thus be seen as excessively demanding if, under normal circumstances, an agent must sacrifice a great deal of her own well-being in order to act as the theory says she ought to act.

In Sobel's example of Joe and Sally, and in my example of the hopeful novelist, it is natural to think that the welfare costs imposed by compliance with what utilitarianism would require are simply too great. It is not reasonable to demand that one give up one's dreams or one's organs, even if doing so would benefit others a great deal. Or so the objection goes.¹⁹

Is it a good objection to a theory that compliance with it is extremely costly in terms of agents' overall well-being? I think it is not. There are three outstanding questions about how the high welfare-costs of compliance with a theory could constitute a real objection to that theory. None of these questions appear to have satisfactory answers.

The first question is whether the demandingness objection applies only to the claims a moral theory makes about our positive duties to aid others and to promote their well-being, or whether it also applies to other kinds of moral requirements—requirements against assault, theft, murder, and so on. As Liam Murphy has pointed out, compliance with these negative duties—prohibitions against the use of violence, for example—may after all be very costly for a person.²⁰ Perhaps one's best opportunity to extract oneself from very unhappy circumstances is to threaten an innocent person's life, or falsely accuse someone of a crime. And yet, the fact that forbidding such acts may require real

¹⁸ See Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford, 2000).

¹⁹ Of course, one line of response offered by utilitarians is that utilitarianism is not as demanding as it may initially seem to be. See, for example, Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, (Dover, 1966); Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (1984). But, since I'm interested in what sort of objection it would to a theory that it is extremely demanding, I will assume for the sake of argument that utilitarianism is extremely demanding.

²⁰ See Murphy, *Moral Demands*, p. 37.

sacrifice seems not to raise any serious objection. The concern that a moral requirement not be excessively demanding—in the sense of imposing very high welfare costs on compliant agents—appears, therefore, not to be a concern that arises for just any moral requirement. There must be something special about beneficence in particular.

Now, it might be claimed that, in assessing moral principles, it really is the level of demandingness itself that we care about. It is just that, when it comes to prohibitions against, say, deception or violence, it is unlikely that compliance with such principles will be all that detrimental to a person when considering his or her life as a whole. Not so with a very demanding principle of beneficence.

This does seem plausible for many of us in our present circumstances. To the extent that the claim is correct, however, it seems to be a purely contingent fact. And it hardly explains why, in particular cases where it would be very costly to a person to abide by prohibitions against fraud or coercion, this seems to be, by itself, no challenge our conviction that such actions are wrong. It thus appears that our intuitions are narrower than we might initially have supposed. It is not demandingness per se that we find objectionable about a moral theory or principle. Rather it is the demandingness of beneficence in particular that we object to. And yet this restriction on the force of the objection remains mysterious.

The second question concerns our narrow focus on the costs incurred by compliant agents. If we are evaluating the acceptability of a theory in terms of its effects on persons' well-being, what justifies us in ignoring, for instance, the benefits the poor and desperate will receive through the compliance of those better off than they are? Why shouldn't we think it objectionable to ask those who are very badly off to accept that, as a

matter of moral principle, their misery and suffering and poverty do not generate a claim on others, who are already much better off, to make very significant sacrifices in order to help them out of their desperate circumstances? After all, theories that do not require very much in terms of beneficence will thereby permit people to refrain from helping others who may very much need the help. However, if we take into account the costs that a theory permits as well as those that it requires, then we are no longer in a position to claim that utilitarianism is especially demanding when compared with other moral views.²¹

In order to vindicate the demandingness objection then, we need some justification for discounting the burdens that the less fortunate would be left to bear themselves were we to adopt a less stringent principle of beneficence.²² Obviously, one cannot reply at *this* point that it would demand too much of individuals to insist that they consider the needs and interests of those they might aid as being on a par with their own. For there must be some independent argument against this if we are to get the demandingness objection off the ground in the first place.

One response here is that the focus on the costs associated with what a moral principle requires is justified by a more basic concern with what is motivationally realistic for most people. Thus, Samuel Scheffler has argued that, in thinking about what to do, we are naturally inclined to privilege our own interests over others. We will

²¹ On this point, see Sobel, "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection."

²² Sobel, *Ibid.*, argues that if there is an argument establishing a morally significant distinction between the costs a theory requires and the costs it permits, then this argument will itself already imply that consequentialism is false. Sobel claims that any such argument will itself provide grounds for rejecting consequentialism. If he is right about this, then the demandingness objection can serve to support non-consequentialist moral views over consequentialist views only if it is based on some other argument that entails consequentialism is false. If he is right about this, then the demandingness objection can serve to support non-consequentialist moral views over consequentialist views only if it is based on some other argument that entails consequentialism is false.

therefore face serious motivational challenges when it comes to any requirement to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of enhancing others' well-being.²³ This sort of motivational challenge will not be an issue for those who suffer due to lack of beneficence from other people. Their unwillingness to accept such burdens will not affect whether they in fact have to bear them. This, then, may seem to provide a basis for focusing solely on the burdens agents are required to actively take on in a way that may raise some question as to whether they will be sufficiently motivated to do so.

The question, though, is why it should matter morally that people are likely to find themselves unwilling to make certain sacrifices in order to benefit others. When presented with a claim that one should do something, it is not in general an adequate reply that one is not *going* to do that thing. And in any case, this does not seem to warrant a complete shift of attention away from the plight of those who would then be left to their misery. For we could take up their point of view and ask whether seeking to accommodate such motivational tendencies is a morally justifiable response to their possibly quite desperate situation. And here again, at this stage in the dialectic, it would simply beg the question to charge that a failure to make such an accommodation would objectionably demanding.

Let's turn now to the third problem. Reflection on the distinction between costs morality requires and costs morality permits in fact raises a further issue when it comes to thinking about how demanding morality can reasonably be. Let's assume that there is something especially problematic about the costs one is required to bear according to a particular moral view. The question I want to consider at this point is whether there

²³ Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford, 1992), Ch. 7.

should therefore be a *limit* to what morality demands

I suggest we face a dilemma here. Suppose that there is a strict limit to what any reasonable moral view will require people to do for others. This implies that what one is morally required to do for others is insensitive, at least beyond a certain point, to how much people actually need and how much one could do to help given the circumstances. This is an odd result. The demandingness objection loses much of its plausibility if it forces us to accept that how dire others' straits are could make *no* difference to what it is reasonable to demand of those in better circumstances.

On the other hand, if we adopt a view that attempts to make the obligations of beneficence sensitive to the situations of those we are required to help, this will fundamentally alter the nature of the demandingness objection in a way that also robs it of its intuitive force. Suppose we do think that what we are morally required to do for others, by way of providing aid or preventing harm, and thus what we are required to sacrifice of ourselves, depends on how badly off others are—or will be without our intervention. Our sense that a particular theory is too demanding will now need to take a specific form. We can no longer object that this or that theory simply asks too much—that is, requires complying agents to sacrifice more than it is reasonable for a person to have to sacrifice. Rather, the objection will have to be that a theory requires a sacrifice that is disproportionate to the benefit provided. In other words, a theory will appear overly demanding inasmuch as it requires individuals to make sacrifices that do not seem worth the resulting benefits to others.

This form of the objection, however, has considerably less appeal. It requires us to make certain comparative assessments of gains versus losses that lack a good deal of the

plausibility of the initial idea that a theory like utilitarianism is too demanding to be correct.²⁴ Should one be permitted to buy a new pair of shoes, or go to first-run movies, when one could instead contribute that money to help someone get life-saving medicine they would otherwise not have access to? Perhaps we think that morality would demand too much if it never permitted one to buy a new pair of shoes for oneself. But if we reject a strict limit on what can reasonably be demanded of us in favor of more flexibility, we will have to construe the objection differently: it would be too much to require a person to forgo a new pair of shoes merely in order to help someone get the medicine she needs to live. The objection would have to be construed in this way because, having rejected the idea of a limit, we must be prepared to say that in some circumstances a person should *not* be permitted to spend her money on new shoes, given the good she could otherwise do with that money. Thus, our objection must amount to the judgment that, in the actual circumstances, the benefit to others her money could provide (e.g., the medicine) is not sufficient to offset the sacrifice of living without decent footwear (or without first-run movies, or beach vacations). It seems to me, though, that such judgments hold little intuitive appeal.

We're left then, with serious problems in attempting to articulate a coherent objection to moral theories to the effect that compliance with what the theory requires is likely to involve great sacrifice on the part of agents. For one thing, we seem to lack a way of explaining why the objection applies specifically to principles that concern the

²⁴ Much of the force of Peter Singer's famous article, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (1972). for instance, stems from the way he focuses the reader's attention on such comparative assessments of the worth of what might be sacrificed and what might be gained. The principle he defends and elaborates in that article will surely strike most of us as excessively demanding. And yet the sorts of comparative assessments of worth that Singer suggests we are committed to by our current practices do seem hard to justify.

duty of beneficence and not other moral principles. For another, we lack an explanation as to why the costs that persons are made to bear because of what a theory requires of them should matter more to us than those costs that persons are made to bear because of what a theory permits others to do. And finally, it seems that the demandingness objection remains compelling only as long as we do not specify whether or not it implies that there should be a limit to what morality can demand of us.

§3. Murphy's Argument

The problems discussed in the previous section do not, at least for me, dislodge the intuition that a moral theory or principle that makes extreme demands is for that reason objectionable. I suggest, therefore, that we should look for a different interpretation of the objection. I think the arguments I've rehearsed indicate that if a moral view like utilitarianism is objectionable for being overly demanding, this is not simply because the cost of complying with its requirements is likely to be very high.

Now, there are two different routes we might take to a more satisfactory interpretation of the demandingness objection. One is to develop a different account of what makes a moral theory demanding. According to this approach, the problem with the high-cost-of-compliance interpretation is that it focuses on the costs of compliance—the negative effects on the well-being of agents who act in accord with the relevant principle. A second approach would not challenge this way of measuring what morality demands of us but would instead offer a different interpretation of what is objectionable about the demands made by a particular principle. Here the problem with the high-cost-of-compliance interpretation is not that it focuses on the costs of compliance but that it

raises the wrong objection to those costs. The problem is not merely that the costs are too high; the real objection lies elsewhere.

In this section, I discuss a prominent version of this second approach developed by Liam Murphy. The criticisms I raise against Murphy's argument strongly suggest that we would do better to take the first route I mentioned above. To understand what is objectionable about very demanding moral theories, we will need an interpretation of what morality demands that does not simply refer to the effects of compliance on agents' well-being. I develop such an interpretation at the end of this chapter.

As we have seen, compliance with the utilitarian principle of beneficence (Murphy calls it the “optimizing principle”) would likely be very costly for many of us in present circumstances. But, according to Murphy, this is not what is absurd about the demands of utilitarianism. Rather, the absurdity is due the difference in the levels of sacrifice the optimizing principle requires in conditions of partial compliance versus conditions of full compliance. The problem is that the demands the principle makes on complying agents increase as overall compliance with the principle decreases. That is, in circumstances (like those at present) in which not everyone engages in a full time effort to promote aggregate well-being, those who do will have to do more and take on greater burdens than they would have to if everyone complied with the principle. This, Murphy says, is unfair. One should not be assigned a greater responsibility for promoting overall well-being simply because other people fail to act as they should. In general, Murphy thinks, a moral principle should not increase the demands it makes on agents merely because, over all, compliance with that principle has decreased.²⁵

²⁵ This is what Murphy calls the “compliance condition.” See p. 77. For the official version of the condition, see p 85.

Murphy's argument for this “compliance condition” is as follows.

- 1) If the total effects of compliance with a principle of beneficence are fairly distributed in circumstances of *full* compliance, then the allocation of individual responsibility for promoting well-being in those circumstances is fair.
- 2) One's fair share of responsibility for promoting well-being just is the share of responsibility assigned to one in a fair allocation of individual responsibility under full compliance.
- 3) One should not be required to take on more than one's fair share of responsibility.
- 4) By (1) and (2), any principle of beneficence that allocates responsibility fairly in conditions of full compliance but increases its demands on individuals in conditions of partial compliance will require people to take on more than their fair share of responsibility under partial compliance.
- 5) So a principle must not demand more of individuals in circumstances of partial compliance than it does in circumstances of full compliance.

§ 4. Criticism of Murphy's Argument

One might wonder, first, why we should think that what constitutes a fair share of responsibility in conditions of full compliance should imply anything about what counts as a fair share in other situations (premise 2). But I won't press this question. The question I want to raise is why, if we accept premise 2, we should accept premise 3. That is, why shouldn't one be required to take on more than one's fair share in situations of partial compliance?

The answer may seem obvious. One shouldn't be required to take on more than one's fair share of responsibility because to require this would be unfair. But this is not necessarily so. It may be that, if one is required to take on more than one's fair share of responsibility for something, this implies some unfairness somewhere. It need not imply that the requirement itself is, in the circumstances, unfair.

Consider this example. You share a common kitchen with four other tenants in your building. The practice is that every couple of weeks you all devote a Sunday to giving the kitchen a thorough cleaning. The responsibilities have been divided up so that everyone has about the same amount of work to do. Between the five of you, the whole task gets done fairly quickly and without too much pain. This Sunday however, one of the other tenants decides he can't bear the thought of cleaning today and so wakes up early and takes off for the beach. The rest of you, after realizing that Bill has skipped out on his chores and after some time spent cursing his name, get to work cleaning the kitchen. (It really can't go another week without a cleaning.) Let's suppose that, this week, Margaret is in charge of assigning the various jobs that need to get done. Since Bill isn't there, Margaret assigns everyone a share of his responsibility. Now, it seems to me that we can grant that you now have to do more than your fair share of kitchen-cleaning duties while denying that it was unfair of Margaret to assign you that share. It was Bill who acted unfairly and caused you to have to take on more than your fair share of the responsibility for cleaning the kitchen, not Margaret. Premise (3) of Murphy's argument, as applied to this situation, seems to be false.

But perhaps we need to take more seriously the claim that Margaret, in assigning you more than your fair share of the cleaning, is herself being unfair. Perhaps the

appropriate thing for her to do would be to assign each of you your normal duties and leave the rest for Bill to do when he gets back, whenever that might be.

There is at least one type of situation where this is not what Margaret should do, one where it would in fact be *unfair* of Margaret to assign each of you only your normal share of the kitchen chores. Suppose we add the following details to the example. While you and your fellow tenants make approximately equal use of the kitchen over the course of the week, not everyone cooks at home every night. In particular, because of her work schedule, Lynn tends to use the kitchen far more at the beginning of the week, while the rest of you don't normally get your home-cooking in until the end of the week. Let's assume, further, that Bill, our slacker, is not likely to get his act together and do his share of the cleaning before midweek. So if Lynn wants to cook in a clean kitchen, she'll have to do Bill's share herself; or else she'll have to live with a messier-than-usual cooking space. This is not so for the rest of you. It seems to me that Lynn here can complain that the decision on Sunday to leave Bill's chores undone is unfair to her since the burden of this decision falls disproportionately on her.

Notice that Lynn's position is analogous to anyone who would stand to benefit from a principle of beneficence (like the optimizing principle) that fails to meet Murphy's compliance principle. If there is less than full compliance with a principle of beneficence, then obviously some people will be less well-off than they would have been under full compliance with the principle. One possibility is that some people will not be helped in ways they should have been. Another possibility is that some will have to undertake greater sacrifices in order to help those who need it. A principle of beneficence that meets Murphy's compliance condition and does not increase its demands in conditions of partial

compliance will, it seems, allow these additional burdens to fall disproportionately on those who need the help rather than requiring others who are better positioned to make sacrifices in order to provide that help. It appears, then, that principles that meet the compliance condition are themselves subject to a charge of unfairness. At any rate, we have further grounds for rejecting the third premise of Murphy's argument. That is, we should not think that a principle that requires persons to do more than their fair share is for that reason unacceptable.²⁶

I conclude that Murphy has not in end succeeded in explaining why the demands of the optimizing principle are absurd. If there is an objection to a principle that increases its demands as compliance decreases, it is not an objection grounded in concerns about fairness.

§5. Lessons

What the kitchen example shows is that, in determining whether a given principle of beneficence unfairly distributes costs to some, we cannot neglect the fact that alternative principles may simply shift these burdens onto others, in a way that will ground similar charges of unfairness. There is thus an analogy between the problem facing Murphy's fairness-based objection and the problem with earlier high-cost-of-compliance objection to utilitarianism. Whether we think that the costs of complying with

²⁶ Murphy offers a response to a related objection on p. 92: He claims that the objection "assimilates a concern with the fairness of the way a principle of beneficence imposes responsibility on agents to a general concern about the fairness of the distribution of well-being." He goes on to explain that "though the collective principle of beneficence [his preferred principle] leaves the victims of noncompliance worse-off than they would be if the compliers took up (some of) the slack, it cannot be said that the victims have been required to take on (either actively or passively) responsibilities that rightly belong to others" (p. 92). However, this does not answer the objection in the text, which is not about whether the "victims" are required to take on more than their fair share of responsibility. Rather, it concerns the unfairness to the victims of not requiring those who are better off to take on more responsibilities.

the optimizing principle are objectionable because they are unfairly distributed or because they are simply too great, our objection will seem decisive only if we focus solely on the situation of those who incur costs through compliance with the principle. We need to ignore the effects on those who stand to benefit from such compliance. But neither a concern with the severity of the effects on persons' well-being nor a concern with fairness in the distribution of costs and benefits could warrant such a lopsided focus. (The moral objection to suffering is the same for potential beneficiaries as for benefactors.)

Let's step back, then, and take stock. The general intuition we are after is that there is something objectionable about the demands that utilitarianism makes on individual agents. According to one way of spelling out that objection, the demands associated with a moral principle are interpreted as the negative effects on an agent's well-being that result from compliance with that principle; and the problem with the demands that utilitarianism makes of individuals is that they are excessive.

Murphy, on the other hand, offers a different objection to the demands associated with utilitarianism. The problem, in his view, is that they are unfair in conditions of partial compliance. But he ultimately interprets the demands in the same way as the original objection, in terms of the negative effects on complying agents' well-being.

We have seen that neither version of the objection succeeds. We are now in a position to see that there is an underlying structural problem common to both, which is due to the way we have been measuring demandingness. Whatever objection we have to the costs borne by some people, it is arguably countered by consideration of benefits to others that are correlated with those costs. Given this, it is unsurprising that debates about

the demandingness of utilitarianism seem so intractable. If we are to make good on the demandingness objection, what we need is a different interpretation of the demands associated with utilitarian morality.

§6. Too Much Responsibility

If the problem with utilitarianism's demands is not a matter of the sacrifices it insists people may be required to make, does this show that our initial intuitions were off-base—that there is no real problem here at all? We should not be too quick to draw this conclusion. In thinking about the limits of what can be morally demanded of us, what we appear to be responding to is the peculiar significance for a person of her own life and well-being. But this does not by itself imply that the thing to be limited is simply the degree of sacrifice agents may be required to make. I want to suggest an alternative that seems to me plausible and that avoids the problems of trying to understand demandingness in terms of welfare-costs.

A theory of what our moral obligations are will have implications regarding the costs one may be required to bear in certain circumstances. But it will also, typically, have implications regarding what one may be held responsible for. So, for example, we might think that lifeguards have obligations to rescue struggling swimmers that average beach-goers do not have. And it is plausible to think that, because of this, a lifeguard who declines to rescue someone who is drowning is responsible for the death in way that others who were present are not.²⁷ The death can in some way be attributed to the

²⁷ If you disagree with this judgment, ask yourself whether this is because you believe that an ordinary beach-goer does have some obligation to act once she realizes that the lifeguard is failing to respond.

lifeguard, but not to the others.

Let's ask, then, what utilitarianism—or at least certain versions of it—might imply about our responsibility for various states of affairs. Given one fairly straightforward construal of utilitarian morality, if one adopts utilitarianism as a guiding moral principle, one will then see oneself as being obligated to choose, of the options available, the act whose expected consequences are optimal in terms of overall well-being. One will therefore regard one's actions as morally justified only if the consequences of those acts are expected to be better, on the whole, than the consequences of anything else one might have done instead.

Now, let's say that, in general, a person is *answerable* for her conduct if the person may be required to account for or justify her conduct by citing the considerations that counted in favor of that conduct. In order for one's conduct to be justified in utilitarian terms, one must accept a certain form of answerability for what one does. Namely, a person must be able to justify a course of action by explaining how the considerations that counted in favor of it defeated all the considerations counting against it, where the latter includes anything that might have been gained by doing something else.²⁸ And if one is answerable in this way for one's actions or their effects, then it is always at least possible that a certain form of criticism is valid. There is always the potential to criticize or rebut the justification of one's action on the grounds that one could have done something else and that this would have been a better thing to do given the relevant features of the situation. Therefore, in order for a person to adequately

²⁸ Of course, in the specific case of utilitarianism, the relevant considerations will simply be the ways in which one's conduct either enhances or detracts from aggregate well-being. Other theories will include other considerations as mattering in this way to the justification of conduct.

defend her behavior, she must in principle be able to defend the claim that her choice was superior (or at least not inferior) to all the things she might have done instead.

Utilitarianism thus imposes on agents a kind of responsibility I'll refer to as "negative answerability." A person is negatively answerable for conduct insofar as she is answerable for what she does not do. And she is negatively answerable for a state of affairs insofar as she is answerable for not doing what she could have done to alter that state of affairs.

This implies that the utilitarian ought to see herself as being, in this sense, responsible for the lives and well-being of other people to an enormous extent. This is because one is to answer for all the ways in which one could have acted so as to improve another person's life, but did not do so. One is thus on the hook for justifying anyone's level of well-being insofar as one had the power to affect it in some way. To take on such vast responsibility for the way things are—for all the pain and unhappiness one could have conceivably devoted oneself to relieving—would be a significant burden. It seems plausible that this is a burden we should be sensitive to in formulating a theory of what morality requires.

To recognize this as a burden, however, we have to see it as credible that one might not be responsible for states of affairs one knew it was in one's power to alter or prevent. I will begin, therefore, by arguing that we have independent reasons to think that what we should take ourselves to be responsible for is more limited than what we have the power to affect through our conduct (even given an awareness of such power).

§7. Responsibility for What Others Do

Let me start by noting that, in spite of the criticisms of Murphy's view I presented in §4, there is something appealing about his insistence that people not be required to take on additional responsibilities simply because others are failing to meet theirs. As I argued, however, its appeal cannot be based on conceptions of fairness in the distribution of benefits and burdens associated with meeting one's responsibilities.

What does seem true, though, is that there are situations in which we may, in deciding what to do, rely on the fact that we need not take responsibility for certain states of affairs, since that responsibility properly belongs to someone else.

Imagine that a man picks up a bowling ball and threatens to drop it on his foot. He wants a free game and so tells the manager of the bowling alley that if she doesn't let him bowl for free, he'll crush his own toe. After a few initial attempts by the manager to dismiss the man and pass the whole thing off as a joke and a waste of time, the man has managed to convince her that he is serious and that he might in fact carry out his threat.

One question here is whether the manager should succumb and give the man his free game, given that she's by now pretty sure (and, we can suppose, reasonably so) that if she doesn't, he'll drop a bowling ball on his toe. But before getting to that, I want to raise the question of whether, if she refuses his demand, and he drops the ball, the man could legitimately criticize or raise a complaint against her.

It seems absurd to think this would-be bowler could have any legitimate objection to the manager's refusal to let him bowl for free. And yet, doesn't he have some grounds for complaint? The manager could foresee that if she didn't let him bowl a free game, a bowling ball would crush his toe. Can't he object to this as a greedy disregard for his

welfare? Intuitively, it seems that were the bowler to take this as grounds for complaint, it would constitute a real failure to take responsibility for his own actions.

The claim is that it would be illegitimate for the man to object to the manager's decision on the grounds that she did not properly take into account the fact that his toe would be flattened by a bowling ball as a result of her refusal to let him bowl for free. To do so would be inconsistent with seeing himself as responsible for his intentional actions. But again, why should this be? It is true that, as we might say, he behaved irresponsibly in dropping the ball on his toe. That is, he did something he shouldn't have done. But this doesn't mean the manager didn't *also* do something she shouldn't have done in refusing him his game. And if she did, why can't he criticize her for this, given that it has so negatively affected him?

The answer, I think, has to do with the attitude the man would have to take toward his own actions were he to object that the manager had failed to show adequate concern for his welfare. Let's assume that the man rests his objection on broadly utilitarian grounds. Thus, he claims that, given the relevant welfare interests that were at stake in the situation, the state of affairs in which he bowls a game with his toes intact, though without paying for it, is obviously preferable to a state of affairs in which he drops a bowling ball onto his toe, crushing it. Since the manager could foresee that these were the (likely) outcomes between which she had to choose, she was wrong to choose the course of action that led to his crushed toe.²⁹

The problem is that in raising his objection that the manager acted wrongly—that her act cannot be justified on utilitarian grounds—the man simply takes his own actions

²⁹ Of course, in the specific case of utilitarianism, the relevant considerations will simply be the ways in which one's conduct either enhances or detracts from aggregate well-being. Other theories will include other considerations as mattering in this way to the justification of conduct.

as given, as events that were simply going to happen. It is in this respect that his complaint against the manager—his claim that he was somehow wronged by the manager's conduct—constitutes a failure to take responsibility for his actions. The question of whether his own actions were justified, of whether he maybe shouldn't have made some different choices, does not seem to him relevant to the legitimacy of his complaint. He sees his own choices and actions just as facts the manager should have taken into account.

If this criticism of our would-be bowler is right—that given his responsibility for his actions, he can have no legitimate complaint against the manager—I think it raises further problems for a utilitarian account of how various factors bear on the justification of action (problems that are independent of the issue of over-demandingness). Two features of above the example are relevant. The first is that the bowler is responsible for not dropping the ball on his toe in a way that seems different from whatever responsibility the manager has to make sure he doesn't do this. The second is that this special responsibility that the bowler has vis-a-vis his toes seems to actually to bear on the manager's own justification for her decision not to give in to the bowler's demands. The manager should be able to say, in defense of her decision, that it is the bowler's responsibility to ensure he doesn't drop a ball on his foot, not the manager's. This is a very different sort of defense of what the manager did than one that attempts to show that the expected beneficial consequences of her action outweighed the risk to the bowler's well-being. The utilitarian, however, cannot accept this kind of justification. This is because, according to utilitarianism, the manager's responsibility for seeing to it that the man doesn't drop the ball is fundamentally no different than the man's own responsibility

for the same thing.³⁰ Given the circumstances, they are both negatively answerable in just the same way for the man's actions and their consequences.

It would seem, however, that if the manager sees herself as answerable for what the bowler does in the way that utilitarianism demands, then in an important sense she fails to relate to him as one who must take responsibility for his own actions. For she will not treat it as being relevant, in and of itself, that the man can and should respond to the reasons bearing on what he should do in the situation. All that she takes to be relevant to her decision is that he is *going to* act in a certain way. Were she to take this sort of attitude toward her *own* actions, she would certainly fail to relate to *herself* as a responsible agent. I suggest that the bowling-alley example brings to light an interpersonal version of this claim. One who takes such an attitude to another person's actions—regarding them merely as more or less probable events—fails to relate to that other person as a responsible agent. If the manager, having refused to give the man his free game, were to offer a justification of her refusal in utilitarian terms (“yes, you hurt your foot, but the long-term consequences of giving in to your threat would have been even worse”), she would in effect be inviting the man to see his actions from her perspective, as events that were bound to happen. The success of such a justification, then, seems to depend on the appropriateness of the man coming to see himself and his actions in this way. It is not, however, appropriate for him to regard his actions in this way: to do so would be an abdication of responsibility. This, then, should raise doubts about any theory that makes individual agents answerable for what other agents do to the degree that utilitarianism does. Such a theory seems to distort the moral relations between

³⁰ This is so as long as we assume that utilitarianism has something to say about the reasons that are capable of justifying action.

persons.

These considerations provide independent support for the idea that we should not be seen as answerable for all that we could potentially have some influence over. For even if our actions affect what other people do, we should not necessarily assume responsibility for their conduct and its consequences.

It might be thought that the example does not establish that the manager is not required to assume responsibility for the would-be bowler's injury. An alternative would be to say that, given these circumstances, the fact that the man will be hurt simply provides no reason at all for the manager to give him the game. The idea is that, while she is answerable for his injury—in the sense that, if she is to justify her action, she must be able to cite a reason to insist on payment good enough to defeat any reason to prevent the injury—this is easy to do since, in this situation, she had no reason to act in the relevant way to prevent the injury. The man's relation to his own injury, one might say, entirely undercuts the reasons that would normally stem from the prospect of such a harm.

But this seems too strong. The manager *might* take the prospect of the harm into consideration and decide on that basis to let the man bowl for free. Such a decision would not be unjustified or unreasonable. This seems to indicate that there is some reason to prevent the man from harming himself, a reason the manager might act on without any irrationality. If so, then it seems the right thing to say, given the argument above, is that while there may be some reason to let the man bowl so as to prevent the harm to his foot, this is not a reason the manager needs to take into account or rebut in order to justify refusing his demand. She may legitimately disavow responsibility for the harm he brings upon himself.

To avoid confusion, it may help here to distinguish between a wider and a narrower sense in which we can ask whether a person should take responsibility for something. In the wider sense, the question is whether it is appropriate to insist that the person be able to offer some justification for her conduct, where this is opposed to supplying an excuse (e.g., that she did not realize what she was doing). The more specific question, though, is whether it is appropriate to insist that the justification take a specific form—namely the form of showing that one's reason for acting as one did was sufficient when compared to the reasons for taking some specified alternative. What we can properly be held responsible for in this second sense is more limited than what we can be held responsible for in the first sense. In at least some cases, I am not to be held responsible, in the narrower sense, for the harms caused by another's actions, even though it was in my power to prevent those harms by getting the person not to act as he did. While it may be appropriate to ask me to provide some justification of my conduct in such a case, it seems that, in defending my choice, I can rely on the fact that the other person is responsible for his own actions and their effects.³¹ This fact about the other's responsibility, however, should not be seen as a reason that I took to count *against* my intervening—a reason that might be weighed against the reasons that favored intervention (like the fact that it would prevent harm). This is not the role that the other person's responsibility plays in my defense of my conduct. Rather, its role is to circumscribe my own responsibility in the sense of what I may be required to answer for.

³¹ I do not claim that this is always an adequate justification. One may be required in some cases — particularly those involving harms to third parties — to prevent others from acting in harmful ways despite the fact that they are themselves responsible for what they do. (I think it is likely, for instance, that had the man in my bowling-alley example been threatening to crush someone else's toe, the manager would have been obliged to give in to his threat.) My point is just that there are *some* cases in which this type of justification will be successful.

§ 8. A Return to the Demandingness Objection

I now want to suggest that we should understand the demandingness objection in terms of this narrower notion of responsibility. A central way in which our own lives and well-being have special significance for us is that we seem to need to take responsibility for our lives, and we do so in ways that go well beyond what we normally hold others responsible for in this regard. And, in turn, we typically do not assume the same level of responsibility for others' lives as they themselves do. It seems then, that there is an important respect in which a theory will be overly demanding if it insists that we take into account, in deciding what to do and how to live our lives, all the various ways in which we might act to enhance the well-being of other people. To be clear, I am not denying that we have significant responsibilities with respect to how others' lives go. But I suspect that the intuitions underlying the demandingness objection reflect our sense that there are certain limits and that a person's answerability for her own well-being is more extensive than what she may appropriately be held to answer for when it comes to the lives of others.

A simple example may help to make the point. Consider the claim that you are responsible for the state of your garage (i.e., it's your responsibility). We can usefully understand this sort of claim in terms of what you are answerable for in the negative sense discussed above. Thus, your garage is your responsibility in that it is appropriate, in principle, to ask you to answer for its current state of disarray. This is different than saying that you have an obligation to keep your garage clean, or that you ought to do so. Perhaps you have good reasons for not bothering to clean it up. But it is *in place* to ask

for those reasons.

Contrast *my* relation to the state of your garage. Were the question to arise between us as to why *I* don't spend my Saturday afternoon cleaning your garage, I think I can legitimately reply that the mess in your garage is not mine to deal with—it's not my responsibility. Now, this does not imply that I think that your interest in having a tidy garage does not matter, or even that it is a less compelling interest than the interest I have in cleaning my own garage, or in relaxing on my couch watching a "Behind the Music" marathon on TV. It's simply that the tidiness of your garage is your responsibility, not mine.

As this example suggests, we do frequently appeal to what we see as the limits on our responsibilities in order to justify our conduct. Reflection on this practice provides a way of articulating the intuition that certain views of morality are excessively demanding. Moreover, we can see that to object to a moral theory on the grounds that it makes individuals answerable (negatively) for others' well-being beyond a point that is reasonable is quite different than simply objecting to the actual costs or sacrifices a person is required to take on in complying with the theory.

Recall the hopeful novelist I introduced at the beginning of the paper. This case was meant to elicit the intuition that utilitarianism is overly demanding. We can now say more clearly what the problem is. The problem is not that she would not get to pursue her writing career. The problem is that it would be incumbent on her to justify her career choice in light of all the ways alternative career paths might have benefitted others.

Similarly, if we think that a theory is too demanding if it implies that, in all likelihood, one is never permitted to buy a new pair of shoes for oneself, or go to first-run

movies, this is not because we think there is something deeply important, even from one's "personal point of view," about having new shoes and seeing movies (and why would we have thought that?). It is rather because we think that, in considering whether, say, to buy a pair of shoes, one is not always required to take into account everything else one might do with that money instead and compare all of these alternatives to the new-shoes option. Though one is not permitted simply to ignore it, one is also not always required, at every moment, to treat all of the suffering and need in the world as one's own responsibility.

This is, at any rate, how I suggest we understand the thought that a strict utilitarian morality would be too demanding. If this is right, it is easy to see why it is only positive duties of aid and beneficence that raise concerns about demandingness. Negative duties—such as the duty not to harm others—normally imply that one must take responsibility for the (foreseeable) harmful consequences of one's action. If one acts in a way that harms others, one needs some special reason for doing so—a reason sufficient to override the reasons not to cause harm. But such answerability for harms applies only to the limited range of cases in which one foreseeably causes harm through one's actions. Thus, while compliance with negative duties may, in certain circumstances, be very costly, such negative duties do not impose the level responsibility for others' welfare that very demanding positive duties do.

Moreover, this account makes it clear why we are focused specifically on the burdens associated with obligations rather than with permissions. Different principles of beneficence may have differential effects on the well-being of those who are better off versus those who are less well off, depending on the degree to which such principles allow people to pay special attention to their own needs and interests. But the burdens of

responsibility associated with a given principle of beneficence will not vary in this way according to individual circumstances. Even a very unfortunate person, whose welfare would likely improve under general compliance with the utilitarian principle, would also be required to take responsibility for any other pattern of action and benefit she might have effected rather than benefiting as she in fact did.

§9. Implications

I will close by highlighting two implications of the account I have given. The first concerns the scope of the demandingness objection. Critics who have found utilitarianism overly demanding have tended to treat the objection as an across-the-board indictment of all versions of act-utilitarianism—indeed, of act-consequentialism more generally. However, on the construal of the demandingness objection I have offered, its application may be more limited.

If I am right that we should think of the demandingness of a moral theory in terms of its implications for what people ought to assume responsibility for, then the objection obviously can make sense only for theories that have such implications. I have relied on the premise that, if one has a moral obligation to do something, and this fact plays a role in determining whether a certain course of reasoning is or would be sufficient to justify one's action, then the obligation will be relevant to what one may be held responsible for. However, a utilitarian may wish to separate the question of which act would be morally right in a given situation from the question of whether one has reason to perform it. On such a view, one will not necessarily be required, in coming to a decision, to choose the act that is best in utilitarian terms. If a theory is meant only to provide the criteria by

which to classify acts as morally right or wrong, or to say which acts would be better or worse, but does not purport to offer guidance in practical deliberation—or if it supplies entirely different principles for this purpose—then it will not be subject to the demandingness objection as I have interpreted it.³² Such a theory does not represent morality as making the kinds of demands that the most plausible version of the objection is concerned with.³³

The second implication I want to discuss—more interesting for my purposes—concerns the options for developing an account of the ways in which morality's demands might be limited. In particular, one especially influential way of dealing with intuitions about demandingness—the incorporation of an “agent-centered prerogative”—turns out to be inadequate.

An agent-centered prerogative is conceived of as a permission to give more weight to one's own aims and interests than to those of other people in determining the best course of action to take.³⁴ There are limits, of course, to how much more weight one is allowed to give one's own interests. But if one exercises this option, one may justify acting in a way that is better for oneself than if one were required to do what is best, considered wholly impartially.

If the problem of what morality demands were simply the problem with having to sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of the common good, positing an agent-centered prerogative would be a plausible response. Such a prerogative would allow one to sacrifice less than one would otherwise have to.

³² Nor will such a theory be subject to the high-cost-of-compliance version of the objection, since, if my earlier arguments are correct, this form of criticism does not make sense.

³³ Nor will such a theory be subject to the high-cost-of-compliance version of the objection, since, if my earlier arguments are correct, this form of criticism does not make sense.

³⁴ The idea of an agent-centered prerogative is due to Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*.

However, if our central concern should not be the costs agents must bear, but the level of responsibility they must assume for how others' lives are going, then having an agent-centered prerogative will not help. This is because the prerogative does nothing to reduce the extent to which one may be held to answer for others' well-being. Even assuming such a prerogative, one would still be required to justify oneself by explaining how acting in one's own interest is preferable to acting in ways that would have various benefits for others. It is just that, in providing the explanation, one is allowed to cite the fact that one's interests are one's own, and thus have more weight for one than the interests and needs of other people. But one must, nonetheless, see oneself as responsible for countless people being worse off than they otherwise would have been, given the variety of things one could have done, but chose not to. Insofar as we think that a person's distinctive relation to her own life and well-being is a matter of what she is specially responsible for, granting that we have an agent-centered prerogative to favor ourselves simply misses the point.

§10. Conclusion

I have attempted to offer a plausible account of the intuitions underlying the demandingness objection, one that does not reduce to a concern over the costs associated with meeting our obligations. The idea of responsibility as negative answerability gives us a way to articulate our sense that a viable moral theory cannot be overly demanding on individual agents that is coherent and appears not to beg any questions. My aim in this chapter, however, has been somewhat limited. I have attempted only to spell out and render intelligible our common sense intuitions and reactions. In the next chapter, I will

try to show how these intuitions, couched in terms of responsibility, might be vindicated. In doing so, I hope to make some progress toward a deeper understanding of the special significance our own lives have for us and how this impacts our moral relations with other people.

CHAPTER THREE

LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE

§1. The Impartialist's Challenge

Most of us act in ways that persistently favor some people over others. And we typically think there is nothing essentially objectionable about this. By and large, one focuses one's attention and resources on a select group of people—including, centrally, oneself. Most of us are prepared to stand behind such patterns of action and preference although we can, on reflection, recognize that other patterns are available to us. We could, in deciding how to act and how to live, concern ourselves more with impartial assessments of the good we could do for people, largely setting aside whether they stand in some special relationship to us—as friends or loved ones, for example. In this sense, more "even-handed" uses of our time and resources are possible for most of us.

Some will think that these common facts do not raise any particular moral issues. The idea that this generic form of preferential treatment for ourselves and those we are close to is somehow questionable will seem to them an artifact of prior commitments to theories, such as utilitarianism, that embody conceptions of impartiality that are too strict and should be abandoned. This view, however, fails to do justice to the underlying ideas that drive such strict notions of impartiality. Accordingly, I would like to begin by attempting to understand how we might come to see certain strong conceptions of impartiality attractive.

The fact that we tend to concentrate on the needs and interests of a few people, and do so largely because of their special significance to us and our lives—they are the

people we love or the people we are—raises the following questions. First, is this type of preferential treatment morally arbitrary? Or is there some principled defense or justification each of us might offer for focusing our efforts on our own select group—in particular, a justification that others outside of our circle might recognize and accept? And second, if it does turn out to be arbitrary, is this morally problematic? Do we need a positive defense for the kinds of partiality we exhibit? Or is it rather that we should take the burden of proof to fall to those who would question such common features of human life as prioritizing oneself, and one's friends, family, and community over strangers? Perhaps we should be asking what exactly is supposed to be objectionable about these patterns of concern?

It seems to me that this sort of burden-shifting posture is unsatisfying. To appreciate the place of impartiality in modern ethics, we need to acknowledge the presumptive force of the charge of arbitrariness. Our concern really should be with the possibility that the normal practice of concentrating on the needs and interests of a few people, largely to the exclusion of others, lacks justification. To acknowledge that, at the very least, some justification is needed here seems to me what is required by the more basic moral conviction that one ought to recognize and act in light of the fact that everyone's life and happiness matters. Granted that one should, morally, have some concern for others simply as people, or as human beings, this seems enough at least to raise questions about the special regard and priority one grants to oneself and one's friends. This is the first step toward a strong requirement of impartial concern. If there is a moral objection to treating those with whom we have no particular relationship as if their welfare were a matter of indifference to us, then, similarly, there would be an objection to our relative

neglect of their welfare in comparison with others' if this turned out to lack any sound moral basis. Allowing, then, that the antecedent is true, we need to supply some positive defense of the ways in which we allow our practical concern for the well-being of different people to vary depending on the different relations we have to those people. Call this the Impartialist's Challenge.³⁵ In what follows, I will take up the Challenge only as it applies to the relation of identity. That is, I will focus just on what might be said in defense of the special consideration we give to our own lives and interests.

§2. Two Opposing Views

It will be useful to begin by looking at the two most obvious ways of responding to the Impartialist's Challenge. The two approaches, broadly construed, may seem to exhaust the space of possibilities. What I hope to show is that appearance stems from a particular interpretation of the Challenge that takes the problem to be essentially a question of how to justify individual decisions about the allocation of benefits and burdens. In section 3, I will present a very different kind of account of the moral importance of one's relation to one's own life and well-being, one that requires a rejection of this “allocative” interpretation of the original Challenge.

a) The first approach is to opt for a purely instrumental justification of the central place we give to our own interests. The rough idea, which may be developed in more or

³⁵ For perhaps the most notorious version of such a challenge, see Godwin, (1793). In the recent literature, Samuel Scheffler serves as a good example of someone who rejects any strict requirement of impartiality, while taking the challenge seriously. See the essays collected in Scheffler (2003), especially his discussion of what he calls the “distributive objection,” in the essay entitled “Relationships and Responsibilities.”

less sophisticated ways, is that focusing one's efforts and attention on oneself is generally more efficient than attempting to make strangers' lives go well. If the problem is that we need to show how the centrality, for us, of our own lives and interests amounts to something other than a predictable but morally unjustified bias, this sort of instrumentalism will seem to offer a natural response. For it seems clear enough that, at least in many circumstances, an acceptable basis for focusing one's resources on one person rather than another is that this use of resources is more efficient in serving the interests and meeting the needs of everyone involved. Whatever the explanation of this (e.g., differential access to information about what a given person needs at a given time) and however we determine the standard that provides the measure of efficiency (whether, for instance, we're trying to ensure that the most urgent needs are met first), the justification of securing one person's interests at the possible expense of another's seems not to rely on facts about who one is, as opposed to general facts about properties or characteristics one possesses, but which might be (or might have been) possessed by others.

The centrality of one's own life, on the instrumental view, comes down to the fact that, because of the causal and epistemic position one is likely to find oneself in, one has, in effect, reason to act as if one were specially entitled to or deserving of one's own attention and concern. But, on this view, there is no basic (non-derivative) reason to prefer one's own good to that of anyone else. And were it the case that one found oneself able to advance the interests of a perfect stranger just as effectively and with as much certainty as one could advance one's own, one should not in that case take oneself to have any special claim to one's own efforts.

The underlying conception of impartiality, which requires that any seemingly “preferential” treatment be instrumentally justified, does have a certain abstract appeal. It results from the combined convictions that first, to favor ourselves and those close to us over others would be objectionable if shown to be arbitrary (not susceptible to positive justification), and second, that the facts merely concerning *who* one is, without further information, do not provide a non-arbitrary basis for the difference in treatment.

Indeed, such a view will perhaps seem to be the logical extension of certain intuitive arguments against egoism. Consider, for instance, Hooker's argument, which Locke relies on in *Second Treatise of Government*:

If I cannot but wish to receive good, even as much at every Man's hands, as any Man can wish unto his own Soul, how should I look to have any part of my desire herein satisfied, unless my self be careful to satisfie the like desire, which is undoubtedly in other Men, being of one and the same nature? To have any thing offered them repugnant to this desire, must needs in all respects grieve them as much as me; so that if I do harm, I must look to suffer, there being no reason that others should shew greater measure of love to me, than they have by me shewed unto them: my desire therefore to be loved of my equals in nature as much as possible may be, imposeth upon me a natural duty of bearing to themward fully the like affection.³⁶

Expressed here is the idea that in recognizing that there is no reason to think of oneself as fundamentally more deserving of special treatment than other human beings, one is thereby committed to extending one's concern for oneself to all persons. But, if this is how the argument goes, there appears to be no justification for limiting one's concern for others on the grounds that they are other than oneself. At some basic level, what seems required is *equality* of concern. If this concern expresses itself in differential attention to the needs and interests of a particular person, this must itself be justified on

³⁶ Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk. 1 ch. viii, as quoted in John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, (Cambridge, 1988).

grounds that do not make reference to the bare fact that this person is oneself as opposed to someone else.

There are, of course, familiar difficulties with the instrumental view. One issue is whether it is plausible that there really is an instrumental justification for a person's focusing on herself up to the point we would ordinarily allow as reasonable. This seems to me doubtful, at least for those of us who presently enjoy relatively high material standards of living. It is likely that many of the ways in which we in fact tend to favor ourselves and our friends—ways that do not, intuitively, seem objectionably selfish—could not be justified if we were forced to defend our conduct while abstracting away from the fact that, so to speak, we are ourselves the ones involved in our own lives.

But, further, putting oneself in the mindset of trying to figure out whether one's normal attempts to keep oneself alive and reasonably happy could admit of the kind of justification the instrumental account requires merely serves to bring out the real difficulty with the view. This is just that it is very hard to accept that the instrumental view could possibly do justice to the distinctiveness of our moral relation to ourselves. There is something crazy about the idea that we can and should regard our own lives and happiness as being relevant to us, fundamentally, in the same way that anyone else's is—as if we were expected to be, to ourselves, just another person. It is fanatical to suppose that you should, at a basic level of concern, react to the news that you are about to receive a crushing blow just as you would react to the news that some person (any person) is about to receive one—and to regard it only as a matter of derivative practical importance that it is you and not someone else who is in jeopardy.³⁷

³⁷ Of course, there are further moves the instrumentalist can make: for instance, distinguishing sharply between justification and motivation. Setting aside difficulties with drawing this distinction in the first

b) Diametrically opposed to instrumentalism, there is what I will call partialism—which we might just as well label “egoism plus.” The intuitive, albeit inchoate, problem with instrumentalism is that it does not do justice to the distinctive way a person's life has significance for that person herself. Partialism, as I will understand it, responds to this problem in a straightforward way. It holds that, where one acts in ways that tend to favor a particular person over others, then—within certain limits, and unless special circumstances obtain—one may justify this simply by citing the fact that the person being favored is oneself. One has reason to prefer one's own good to (at least) that of strangers'. According to partialism, in order to do justice to what we intuitively feel is a morally important relation between a person and her own life and interests, we must acknowledge that “it's me” is, in Bernard Williams's phrase, a morally comprehensible reason.³⁸ In this sense, if one acts in a way that benefits oneself more than others—despite there the availability of more even-handed alternatives—the fact that this is to one's *own* benefit, as opposed to some other person's, is itself sufficient to show that such favoritism is not merely arbitrary—again, unless circumstances are in some way special.

What are the special circumstances? There certainly seem to be contexts in which we should suppress the fact that something is to our benefit in particular, if it is also to the detriment of others. And this is not just to say that we should take into account the interests of others, and act on their behalf if the difference it would make to them, in comparison with the difference it would make to us, is great enough. That much is just a reminder that what I'm calling partialism is not pure egoism. What I mean to draw

place, I think, however, it will still seem to many people that even at the level of justification, or theory, a person's special attachment to her own life is of more than just instrumental benefit.

³⁸ Williams, (1973).

attention to is that there are circumstances in which the kind of strict impartiality that motivates the instrumental view is called for. In these circumstances, the fact that something would benefit oneself in particular, as opposed to others, is not a “morally comprehensible” reason at all—and not just one that is outweighed by the great benefits to others.

There are a variety of such circumstances: for example, where the issue is the application of publicly propagated rules (judges rendering impartial rulings), or, relatedly, where one is carrying out the responsibilities associated with one's official role. I will focus, however, on what I'll call allocation problems—problems of dividing up among a number of people goods which everyone present has reason to want but which no one has any prior claim to.

Take the following allocation problem. Members of a farming village attempting to agree about how much water each will be entitled to divert from a stream in order to irrigate his or her plot of land. Each has similar interests in being allowed to divert more rather than less water to her land (they all have about the same amount of land and prefer crops that require the same amount of water) but the stream will not supply enough water for all to take as much as they want.

We can suppose that the villagers are suitably motivated by mutual concern for one another's interests. Each is willing to consider alternative water-distribution schemes if others have reason for preferring those schemes. And each is careful to avoid exercising any undue influence she potentially has over others as a result of background power differentials in order to force an agreement in her favor. We can then imagine the villagers attempting to persuade each other that this or that scheme should be adopted by

appeal to various considerations—some are physically larger than others and require more food to be healthy, so they should get to use more water; some enjoy crops that require more water more than others do, so they should get more, and so on.

What is clear is that arguments of the form "such and such irrigation scheme is better for me than the alternatives; so let's implement that scheme," will get nowhere. All the other villagers will be able to make similar arguments, with exactly the same force, for the alternative schemes. They will simply cancel each other out. Such an argument thus cannot serve as an interpersonal basis for agreement.

So, here we have an example of an allocation problem whose resolution seems to call for impartiality among the potential beneficiaries—there would be something wrong or unfair about an unequal water distribution that lacked a specific justification, such as the consideration of the different physical sizes of the villagers. And we have an account of this impartiality requirement that a proponent of partialism could happily put forward, namely, that because the resolution of the allocation problem depends on an agreement among symmetrically situated parties, the reasons each has for preferring his own benefit as such will be cancelled out by the similar reasons others have for preferring their benefit. The only arguments, then, that *could* provide a basis for agreement will be those that appeal to impartial considerations—considerations whose force does not depend on the identity of the person putting them forward.

So far so good for the partialist. We have a principle that “self-identity” facts, such as that *I am, myself, the person who will benefit*, can provide basic reasons that have a morally legitimate role in decision to act one way rather than another. And we have a principled explanation for why they do not play that role in cases like the above example,

in which impartiality is intuitively demanded of the actors involved.

There is a difficulty, however, for the partialist approach in accounting for cases where impartiality seems to be morally called for but the explanation offered above is unavailable. The difficulty is not insuperable, perhaps. But it does raise doubts about whether partialism is ultimately a satisfying way of answering the charge of arbitrariness leveled against our normal exercise of partiality toward ourselves.

The explanation of impartiality just considered appealed to the practical need for agreement among the different parties. This need posed a *practical* barrier to the application of self-favoring reasons—reasons which would otherwise be valid on the partialist account. But suppose we remove this barrier. We do not, I think, necessarily remove the demand for impartiality.

Let's return to our farming village. Except, consider now a situation where, rather than aiming to reach mutual agreement, there is a particular person who has the power to unilaterally implement the irrigation scheme of her choice. Perhaps she lives upstream of the others and so can at least decide, without the agreement of anyone else, how much water she diverts to her own crops. Is it now legitimate for her to rely on the mere fact that such and such a scheme would be better for her? How can this be other than a case in which pure power is claimed to establish legitimacy—a case where might alone purports to make right?

I want to make a couple of points about this case and how a proponent of partiality might respond to it.

First, I assume that this alteration to the allocation problem—namely that its resolution does not now depend on mutual agreement between all the villagers—does not

in this case change the fact that impartiality is what is required for a just resolution. The lucky, upstream farmer, it seems to me, should either submit to a jointly arrived at agreement about the best irrigation scheme to implement, or, at the very least, should rely only on an impartial assessment of everyone's interests in determining how much water to divert to her own crops. Someone who advocates partiality will therefore need an account of why, in this circumstance, the farmer should ignore or suppress the otherwise relevant self-identity fact that *she*, as opposed to some other villager, would be better off under this or that scheme. One cannot here, in contrast with the previous example, rely on the basic futility of taking self-identity facts to weigh in the decision. But if the claim is that there are features of this situation that raise special issues of, say, fairness or equal concern, we will need to know what distinguishes this sort of allocation problem, which brings such values into play, from the more usual contexts in which we go about deciding how to spend our time and exercise our powers. For we could just as well conceive of these decisions as allocation problems concerning who is to benefit from our agency, effort, and attention. Of course one might reply that, in the above examples, it was stipulated that none of the potential beneficiaries had any prior claim to the goods and resources to be distributed, whereas this is not true with regard to our individual exercises of agency. But it is clear that, in the present context, that would either beg the question or reveal partialism to provide at best a woefully incomplete—and at worst an entirely superfluous—basis for the kind of partiality we tend to show toward ourselves.

Second, a comparison of the two farming village cases above makes a certain argument for impartiality in the second case very natural, though it is one that is hard to square with partialism. The argument, which I have already alluded to, is this. In the first

version of the example any self-centered argument that a villager might offer in favor of the scheme most favorable to her can simply be countered by similarly self-centered arguments put forward by others in favor of different alternatives. And this is, as I've noted, due to the fact that the implementation of any particular alternative depends on the parties mutually agreeing on how much water each should be allowed to use. But the situation described in the second version of the example differs from the first only in that one of the villagers now has the power to implement a partial scheme on her own, without the agreement of the others. Given that this is so, there is, I believe, no real difference between this lucky farmer's appealing to her own self-interest in order to justify a scheme particularly favorable to her and her citing the fact that she has the *power* to actually implement such a scheme. For consider: the other, downstream villagers may still regard their own self-centered arguments for alternative irrigation schemes as carrying just as much weight as the upstream villager's; that a particular scheme is better for her would not make any difference to them were it not that she has, while they lack, the power to unilaterally affect the allocation of water. But if, in this context, one's citing the fact that a particular solution to an allocation problem is in one's *own* interest as a reason for selecting it is substantially the same as citing the fact that one has power in this area that others lack, then it would seem that a preference based on a self-identity fact ("I am the person who benefits from this scheme") is morally arbitrary in just the way that consideration of who happens to be in a position of power is arbitrary.

Here, then, we have an argument that morality or justice requires impartiality in this type of situation that passes through an argument that it would be *arbitrary* to resolve an allocation problem in one's own favor on the grounds that this would be good for

oneself in particular. But this is not an argument that appears to be available if one adopts the partialist view. To accept that view requires a quite different form of argument, not to the effect that, in these sorts of contexts, citing one's own self-interest is at best an arbitrary assertion of one's power to ignore the similar but conflicting claims of self-interest on the part of other people, but rather there is some other value or consideration that requires one to ignore the otherwise important fact that one stands in a special relation to one's own interests.

One reply here is that the argument given above depends on conceiving of the situation as one in which the parties affected—the villagers—are each owed some justification for the way in which the allocation problem is resolved. The argument implicitly relied on this feature of the context in appealing to the fact that the upstream villager's self-centered argument would make no difference to the others were it not for the fact that she was in a position of power in relation to the rest of them. Her self-interest could not justify her favored scheme in a way that could be acceptable to the others affected, anymore than the mere fact of her greater power could. But here it might be said, on behalf of partialism, that this feature of the situation is unusual and that in other contexts, where there is no similar call to justify to others the use of one's resources and powers, self-identity facts can provide an appropriate and non-arbitrary basis for certain kinds of preferential treatment toward oneself.

It should be clear, however, that this reply serves to highlight, once again, the incompleteness of the partialist view. The view, as I've been describing it, holds that self-identity facts can themselves be appealed to, in non-derivative fashion, as reasons for actions or patterns of action that promote the good of certain people more than, or instead

of, others. It looks, then, to be a view about what sorts or considerations can, in principle, serve to justify different ways of allocating benefits or burdens to different people. One might, of course, hold that self-identity facts can serve as valid reasons only in contexts where justification for one's decision is not in some strong sense owed to others who may have an interest in how the decision comes out—where it is not, for example, a condition of the adequacy of a justification that it be acceptable to others. And one might hold, further, that the ordinary decisions one makes day to day about how to focus one's activity and resources typically meet this condition. But we will need to go beyond a defense of partiality to make good on that last suggestion. This is because the partialist story is simply that one does have good reason to prefer one's own good as such, and that therefore first-personal considerations like “this is best for me” can have legitimating force that does not reduce to or derive from any considerations expressible in the third-person.

What I hope to have brought out, in contrasting the instrumental approach with partialism, is that neither view seems to respond adequately to the concerns that motivate the other. The instrumental account, if it can be made to work, may permit one to focus more on oneself and act in ways that tend to advance one's interests more than others. But even if we could justify much of our everyday behavior as the most efficient use of our activity and resources, this will not satisfy someone who thinks that it is perfectly reasonable for a person's life to be of special significance for her because it is hers.

On the other hand, in considering how a decision about how to allocate certain goods or burdens among several interested parties might be justified, there are certainly

contexts in which the self-interest of the one in a position to make and implement the decision should not, as such, be allowed to play any special role. Indeed, consider situations where it seems natural to speak of an allocation of some good among different parties, each of whom has some *prima facie* claim to the good being distributed. What should we think if the chosen distribution largely favored those who had the power to decide the matter? It hardly seems that this fact would have any tendency to legitimize or contribute to the validity of the resulting allocation. It is this type of consideration, perhaps, that gives rise to the impartialist's suspicion that "it's me" is not the kind of explanation that can serve as a justification with respect to choices about how to allocate one's attention and resources among the various interested parties.

I suggest we step back, then, and examine more closely how we got here. Our starting point was the presumed agreement that we should not be indifferent to the welfare of other people, even if they are strangers to us. From this, it seems to follow that we should not be indifferent to the fact that there are people whose lives would be happier if we were to focus more on their interests and less on our own. The question, then, is whether proper attention to this fact won't force us to admit that our self-centeredness lacks any sound moral basis and that we *should* focus less on ourselves and more on the welfare of others. This is what I initially referred to as the Impartialist's Challenge.

I suggest that the two basic responses to this Challenge that I have considered, and the seeming intractability of the opposition between them, results from a specific interpretation of what the issue is. Both the instrumentalist and partialist approaches work from the assumption that the challenge is to explain the following: When it comes to the

choices we make (whether on a particular occasion or over a lifetime) concerning whose interests and needs to focus on, what is supposed to justify choosing our own over others'?

It is not that anyone supposes that most of us make choices about how to live or what to do on a day-to-day basis in exactly these terms—that is, in terms of who, among those who could potentially benefit from one's time and resources, one should choose actually to benefit. Rather, this way of posing the challenge makes sense given a further assumption. The assumption is that a moral requirement of concern for others' welfare is sufficient to establish a presumption that, where one has the ability to promote another's welfare in some way, one can be expected to do so—unless, that is, one can find some better reason for not doing so that is consistent with a morally adequate regard for the other. This is what I will call an assumption of jointly held responsibility for welfare.

One would normally expect you to take responsibility for your welfare in the sense that one would expect you to further your interests where you have a clear opportunity to do so unless you have some specific reason for not taking advantage of that opportunity (for instance, that you have reason to do something else instead). Failure to meet such an expectation typically opens you up to certain types of criticism: that you behaved irrationally, or stupidly, or imprudently.

To assume that we are jointly responsible for your welfare is to assume that I am basically responsible for your welfare in just this same sense. Were I to fail to take advantage of an opportunity to further your interests in some way, I would owe some account of my reasons for this. And the inability to provide an adequate account would leave me open to criticism.

The claim that, in this sense, we basically share responsibility for one another's welfare will support the interpretation of the Impartialist's Challenge described above, and presupposed in the debate between instrumentalism and partialism about the right response to the Challenge. The disagreement between these two camps is about the types of considerations that can be advanced in support of a choice to focus on one person's interests over another's— in particular, whether self-identity facts are among the morally relevant considerations. The debate is about whether, in offering some account of my reasons for not taking up various kinds of opportunities to promote the welfare of others, and for doing other things instead, I can sometimes put independent weight on the fact that doing those other things is doing what is good for *me*, as opposed to someone who is not me. The debate over this issue thus presupposes that such an account is indeed owed—that in this sense, at least, the well-being of others is my responsibility as much as it is theirs.³⁹

We can move past the stalemate if we can find good reason to reject the assumption of joint responsibility. To reject impartial concern for the welfare of ourselves and others does not simply require being partial toward our own interests. These will seem to be the only options if what is thought to require justification is the stance of privileging oneself over others in choosing whose welfare to promote. But to impute such a stance to a person assumes that the person is, or ought to be held, jointly responsible for the welfare of others in the same way she is held responsible for her own.

A person's focusing on her own life does not by itself warrant imputing to her any

³⁹ Although, of course, I don't mean to imply that accepting this commits anyone to thinking that I should ultimately take *action* to promote another's welfare just as often as that person herself should, or that my reasons for not doing so will in some sense match her reasons for not doing so. The instrumentalist will perhaps want to accept a version of this latter claim, but the partialist will not.

decision to privilege or favor her interests over others in the way that both the partialist and instrumentalist views presuppose. For a special self-regard may instead reflect a certain conviction that her responsibility for her life and happiness differs from the responsibility she has with respect to others and that that they have with respect to her. Her stance, as expressed in her normal patterns of attention and behavior, may be that each person bears a special responsibility for his or her own well-being that other people do not generally share.

I propose to take this up and ask what could justify *that* view of one's relation to one's own welfare. But it should be clear that this involves, not so much rejecting the strict impartialist's answer to the question she poses—opting instead for some sort of partialism—as it involves rejecting the idea that the impartialist's question is generally in place to begin with.

§3. Autonomy-Based Views: a first pass

With respect to the question of justification, then, we should not assume that the distinctive regard one has for oneself and one's own interests necessarily takes the form of viewing oneself as a privileged beneficiary of one's actions. We need not accept that a justification of a special focus on oneself must take the form of justifying such a privileged status for oneself *qua* beneficiary among many potential beneficiaries.

I want to consider, then, a different kind of account, one that attempts to explain morality's recognition of the centrality for a person of her own life, not in terms of a positive reason one has for preferring one's own good as such, but in terms of some further good that can be secured or realized only through the absence of a pervasive

moral requirement to concern oneself with the lives and interests of others. On this approach, we can make better sense of our moral convictions and the role they play in our lives once we see what might be gained by rejecting the idea of jointly held responsibility for welfare and instead adopting a position that accords the primary responsibility for a person's well-being to that person herself.

What I will suggest is that such a division of responsibility for welfare is motivated by a concern for individual autonomy. It forms part of a conception of morality that recognizes and leaves open certain domains within which individuals may govern themselves and set ends and priorities that appropriately reflect their own judgments about what kind of life is worth living.

One version of this approach holds that the autonomy afforded to individuals to the extent that they are free from moral constraint is itself the value that justifies this view of morality.⁴⁰ The thought is that it should be up to one what one does with one's life, at least within certain broad limits. But in order for this to be so, there needs to be a range of permissible options when it comes to shaping the course of one's life—a range that is broad enough to allow for the development of projects and relationships whose dedicated pursuit over time may rule out certain forms of attention to the needs and interests of other people.

What is interesting about this approach is that, unlike the partialist account, it appeals to a value that is not agent-relative. Nor is its role in explaining the legitimacy of self-regard agent-relative. It is not, for instance, that certain patterns of action and concern enhance or protect my autonomy and therefore provide me with reasons for

⁴⁰ See, for example, Slote (1985).

engaging in them. This would merely be a species of partialism according to which I have reason to prioritize my interests (in this case, my interest in autonomy) over others'. But this is not the role the value of an autonomous life is suppose to play in the account. For it is not the *actual* pattern of behavior—the actual way in which one engages one's attention and resources—that serves or promotes one's autonomy. It is rather the fact of there being a range of permissible options that “promotes” this value—indeed, is constitutive of it. The permissibility of a certain course of action, or the pursuit of a certain end, is not on this view secured by the moral or other credentials of the reasons one has to pursue that action or end as compared with other things one might have done. And this would imply, in particular, that we do not have a general, *pro tanto* claim to have others advance our interests when they are able to do so.⁴¹ There is thus no presumption, in general, that where one has an opportunity to provide a benefit to someone else, one will do so unless one has good reasons that support (count in favor of) not doing so.⁴²

The main question for the present view is whether it is plausible to identify a morally valuable form of autonomy with the sort of freedom from moral constraint that might leave room to depart from strict impartiality in the way in which one attends to different persons' well-being.⁴³

Is there any genuinely problematic form of unfreedom implied by a purely moral

⁴¹ N.B., the lack of such *general* claim does not imply that we have no specific, situation-dependent claims to have others advance our interests or act on our behalf. But further conditions will have to be met beyond merely having the opportunity to benefit.

⁴² Here I'm relying on a distinction I drew in the previous chapter between *reasons for* an action—which I take to be considerations that count in favor of the action or show it to be in some way good or desirable—and other factors, such as the moral permissibility of an act, which play a different role in its overall justification. The intuitive idea is that just because there would be nothing morally *wrong* with doing something doesn't mean that one has any reason to do it.

⁴³ Cf. Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, who criticizes Slote's view along these lines. For further discussion, and a response to Kagan, see Seana Shiffrin, “Moral Autonomy and Agent-Centered Options,” *Analysis*, (1991).

constraint? We are not, after all, talking about the coercive enforcement of moral requirement. Of course, it may be that very restrictive moral systems, especially when their demands are difficult to meet, carry prospects for guilt and shame that could be regarded as oppressive. Nevertheless, the way in which morality as such constrains one's choice is through one's assent to its principles. And this makes it very different from the kind of external constraints that typically count as limits to one's freedom.

Freedom of choice, as ordinarily understood, consists in access to a range of options one is able to choose among. One might rule out various options in the course of deliberating about what to do. But this does not imply that one is less free to choose those options—just that one does not think one has good reason to choose them. But it is not clear why it should make any difference if one rules out various options for *moral* reasons. And if the problem is supposed to be with the idea that reasons of obligation could rule out all options but *one*, why should this be thought any worse—any more constricting—than the general claim that in deliberating we aim to arrive at a conclusion about the thing we have most reason to do? In assessing a plan or decision as autonomous and expressive of one's values and commitments, there seems to be no reason distinguish morally relevant factors, such as the rights and well-being of other people, from other kinds of values (prudence, for instance) that may enter into one's deliberation.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is still something appealing about the intuitive idea behind this third approach. This is the idea that the central importance of one's own life consists, not so much in placing a thumb on the scales when it comes to the assignment of benefits and burdens, but in a domain over which one has a special kind of authority—a space within which one can set ends that are expressive of oneself and what

one takes to be of value. The problem with the version of the account under consideration is that the relevant sense of autonomy was simply identified with the absence of moral obligation. We can now see why this was not an adequate development of the intuitive starting point. Freedom from moral obligation cannot extend the domain over which one has authority to shape the course of one's life as one sees fit. It merely rules out a basis for determining how that authority is to be exercised. This mistakes freedom for license.

In what follows, I will argue for a different development of the intuitive starting point. We should locate the core of our concern for autonomy not in freedom from morality, but in freedom from subjection to the will of another.

Bernard Williams, in his famous critique of utilitarianism, objected to utilitarianism on the grounds that “[A person's] own decisions as a utilitarian agent are a function of all the satisfactions which he can affect from where he is: and this means that the projects of others, to an indeterminately great extent, determine his decision.”⁴⁴ And this may suggest a version of an autonomy-based objection, one not so much concerned with freedom from moral obligation *per se*, as with freedom from determination by the projects and choices of other people.⁴⁵

Such an objection could be raised against theories other than utilitarianism. It could, I think, be pressed against any view that held, first, that we should promote well-being and do so impartially, and second, that how well a person's life goes depends at least in part on her success in pursuing her projects and ambitions. Were we to accept such a moral system, then what we would be required to do in any particular situation

⁴⁴ Williams, (1973), p. 115.

⁴⁵ Though of course, this was not the line Williams himself took.

would depend, in part, on whether another had some claim to our assistance in pursuing a project they had chosen for themselves. How much we would have to do for them, and the degree to which we would have to put on hold, or give up altogether, our own ambitions, will be a partly a function of what exactly they need to pursue their aims—which obviously will depend on what their aims are—and partly a function of the priority and significance they assign to various aims in determining the shape of their lives. If you make it the central goal of your life to sail around the world, then what due consideration for your well-being will require will be different from what it would have required had you decided to dedicate yourself to poetry. Thus, insofar as it is up to you what ends you adopt for yourself, and how you prioritize them, then where there is an obligation to promote your well-being, it will effectively make what others are permitted to do with their lives subject to your will.

As it stands this objection is unconvincing. But before assessing this as an objection to moral views that leave no room for a distinctive sort of self-regard, let me note that, insofar as it points to a genuine concern, allowing for simple partiality toward oneself—the attaching of greater weight to one's own interests because they are one's own—is not wholly responsive to the problem. For although this may imply that one will be required actually to act in the service of another's ends less of the time, it will still be the case that what one is permitted to do will be contingent in the same way on the choices of other people.

As I said, though, this is not, by itself, a convincing basis on which to ground a departure from strict impartiality. This is so for a couple of reasons. The first is that it seems to rely on the suggestion that what one is required or permitted to do in a given

situation should not depend at all on the choices that others make. This is obviously too sweeping a demand to be plausible. Simply moving about in a world in which we are not isolated from other persons guarantees that, if we owe them anything at all, *what* we owe them will to some extent be determined by decisions they make for themselves. This is so even if we confine our attention to the duty not to do others gratuitous harm. What we can do without harming others will in large part depend on what others are doing themselves.

Secondly, it is not yet clear in what sense our autonomy is compromised by the fact that others' choices affect our moral obligations and permissions. If we understand autonomy here to mean the ability to govern oneself in view of what one takes to be important or worth doing, then surely (and along the lines argued above) governing oneself in light of what one sees as the morally appropriate concern for another's well-being qualifies. If we are to motivate an account of appropriate self-regard by appeal to the value of autonomy, or the need to preserve some space for a person to develop her plans and projects according to her own conception of a good life, we will need move beyond this flat-footed objection to our decisions being determined in part by other people's projects.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Williams raised a different and influential objection to utilitarianism, namely, that the requirement to take into account the projects of other people in the way utilitarianism requires must undermine the agent's integrity. See Williams, (1973). One might think that Williams argument from integrity deserves mention in a discussion of impartiality. Unfortunately, however, this line of attack on utilitarianism will not help with present purposes.

As I understand his central argument, the problem is that the utilitarian agent is supposed to base his decisions solely on consideration of aggregate human happiness, including his own. And this has implications for how he is to view his own projects and commitments—viz., as items whose importance consists in their status as preferences or desires whose satisfaction contributes to his happiness. But, when it comes to many of the significant projects we pursue, those whose realization would perhaps make the most meaningful contributions to a successful and happy life, we do not see their value as consisting solely in their being objects of satisfaction to us. Indeed, if we did conceive of our projects like this, they would cease to be meaningful to us in the way required to make any significant contribution to our well-being. But if our projects' value to us lies in something *other* than their contribution to our happiness, then, as

§4. Autonomy and Responsibility for the Success of One's Life

What I will suggest is that there is an important connection between assuming a distinctive sort of responsibility for one's welfare and a concern for autonomy in leading one's life. The connection has to do with the extent to which we may be required to defer to the judgments and opinions of other people in order to adequately justify our choices to them.

I think we normally operate on the assumption that, for the most part, we do not owe just anyone an explanation for how we choose to live our lives—why we have adopted certain (permissible) ends and not others, why we have prioritized this project over that one, etc. And I think we generally take this to be a good thing. This is because there is a sense in which regarding oneself as *owing* another person some justification for how one has chosen to act requires that one not be wholly indifferent as to whether or not the person will accept that justification—will judge it to live up to the relevant standards.

Williams claims, an agent who simply ignored this or pretended otherwise in actually deciding what to do would seem to lack integrity.

On this interpretation of Williams critique, the problem is not fundamentally with utilitarianism's *impartiality* as with its exclusive focus on human happiness as its sole object of pursuit. Utilitarianism reduces the value of any activity or pursuit to the satisfaction someone might get out of it. One way of understanding what Williams is saying is that the single-minded pursuit of happiness as such can no more succeed at aggregate level than it can at the individual level.

But if this is the right way to understand the objection from integrity, then the right way to respond may not be to incorporate greater scope for partiality into one's moral theory, but rather to allow that ends and activities can have (impartial, agent-neutral) value in themselves, apart from their contribution to someone's happiness. Of course, the happiness of other people, and the role that their projects play in securing their happiness, will be something we will have to take into account in pursuing our own projects. But it won't be the only thing we will need to take into account. In particular, we can take the independent value we find in the ends we are committed to play a role in adjudicating conflicts between our interests and the interests of other people. This, it seems to me, is sufficient to accommodate the notion of integrity as it is expressed in a genuine commitment to one's ends. It does not, for instance, require giving additional weight to our own interests in view of the fact that they are our own—although it may support a variant of the instrumental justification for focusing on our own interests, insofar as they are necessarily bound up with ends we take to be of independent value. It seems to me, therefore, that autonomy rather than integrity remains a better candidate for a source of justification for genuine partiality.

There are, of course, contexts in which we do feel we have to explain ourselves to others, or that they are entitled to ask for or demand an explanation. And in such contexts, the practice of justifying ourselves to one another involves not merely, as it were, reporting what we took to be good reasons for our choices—as if offering an anecdote—but rather submitting the account for their approval. In this sense, for one person to owe another an explanation for her actions—to have to justify herself to the other—implies that the latter has some degree of authority with respect to whether the rationale behind the choice was in fact a good one (i.e., whether it succeeds as a justification for the act chosen). This is why we often resent the suggestion that there is some need to explain ourselves—how we have chosen to live—to others. Inasmuch as owing a justification to others calls for a kind of partial deference to their opinions and judgments concerning our choices, our own considered judgments will be less than fully authoritative with respect to what we have most reason to do. A pervasive requirement to justify ourselves to others would thus pose a real threat to our autonomy.

However, if it is *not* generally to be the case that one owes others a justification for how one chooses to live one's life, then one must take on the primary responsibility for one's own well-being and success. Accepting that it is mainly one's own responsibility to see to it that one's life goes well is a condition of being free of the obligation to explain oneself to others. Why is this? My argument will be that it is a condition that is in fact derived from the requirements of respecting the autonomy of others. If the argument is sound, it yields the upshot that taking responsibility for one's own life and happiness, in a way that precludes holding others jointly responsible for one's welfare, is necessary in order to respect others' autonomy while at the same time preserving one's own.

In general, there are at least three ways that one's pursuit of an end might make a difference to another person's interests. First, pursuing the end could be directly beneficial or detrimental to someone's interests. One might, for example, have the aim of helping a person obtain a good education, or the goal of driving one's rival out of business. Second, there are opportunity costs, with regard to other people's interests, of pursuing any goal or project. If I am to succeed in writing the Great American Novel, I will need to spend a lot of time writing, time I could have otherwise spent helping others to meet their needs and reach their goals and so on.

Third, there is the fact that, because the successful realization of one's (worthwhile) ends is a component of one's well-being, which ends one adopts for oneself will make a difference to the ways in which others might help to improve one's life. If I make it my project to sail around the world, you might be able to do me a great deal of good by lending me your sailboat. This, of course, would prevent you from using it yourself. In considering what responsibilities you have to promote my well-being, we should remember that your living up to this responsibility would have affected your interests differently had I adopted a different end. As noted above, my ability here to affect the specific content of your obligations through the exercise of my will should not be regarded as necessarily objectionable, if only because, granted we are not pure egoists, it is unavoidable. The point here is just that this way of affecting your welfare is itself something I will need to take into account in deciding which ends to pursue. My personal projects and goals will not live up to standards of moral justification unless they are in some sense worth the resulting claims I will be entitled to make on others' assistance,

given how this will impact their ability to lead the lives *they* wish to lead.

Suppose, then, you are considering whether to pursue some end. You make certain predictions about the conflicts you are likely to encounter with respect to others' pursuit of their own ends and ambitions,. Whether or not you regard the choice of this end as a good one will in part depend on your assessment of the potential conflicts. These can be direct or indirect, and come in the varieties noted above. The pursuit of your aim may interfere in various ways with others' attempts to pursue their own. It may also detract from your ability to effectively promote others' welfare, at least in some respects. It is left to you to then ask whether, in view of the different ways your meaningful engagement with a particular project is likely to detract from the happiness and success of others, that project is nevertheless worth pursuing.

What I want to suggest is that this way of taking account of how your projects impact other people would be sufficient if you only had to consider the first two effects noted above—namely, how your pursuit might actively prevent or frustrate the achievement of another's aims, and how it might take up resources that otherwise might be used to assist others. But once we introduce the effect that goes by way of the claims you are entitled to make on others, this way of thinking about others' interests and concerns becomes problematic. For it treats as irrelevant the question of whether or not others share your evaluative judgments concerning the worth or merit of the various ends different people have.

Why should you treat this as relevant? Consider first, what is involved in setting priorities for yourself. In determining whether a certain project is feasible, you do not just take into account the effects on others as described above, you must also take into

account the impact on your prior projects and plans. You need to find some way of integrating new projects into your life given the other things you are committed to. How you do this will partly depend on how much you can rely on others for various kinds of assistance. If you can expect to be provided with a place to stay, you can take a trip you would not otherwise be able to afford without giving up other things you care about more. One thing that will be relevant in this regard will be what claims you are entitled to make on others.

Of course, in thinking about what sorts of assistance you can expect from others, the question that is relevant to the reasonableness or justification of your aim is not merely what you think you could *get* others to do for you. The fact that you could coerce someone into helping you will not typically be relevant, since it is typically not a *legitimate* way of getting someone to do something. Something similar is true of the claims you predict you will be able to make on others in various circumstances. The fact that in a certain situation you may be entitled to another's aid, because of the impact on your well-being of going without it, does not imply that you were entitled to put that person in a situation in which he had such an obligation. What is relevant, therefore, to the reasonableness of an end is not merely the assistance you predict others will have an obligation to provide if certain situations arise. It is only appropriate to rely on such expectations if such obligations will not themselves be imposed on others illegitimately.

Now, whether the foreseeable claims you will be entitled to make on others are in this sense fully legitimate will often depend on the value of the end you are pursuing. To see this, consider an example. Say a group of us decide to protest some new city ordinance and decide to use our bodies to block traffic downtown. Here, in assuming that

drivers will stop, we rely on their living up to obligations to avoid causing serious harm, and perhaps we rely as well on the positive protection of others, such as the police.

Though others have these obligations, and it is not in general illegitimate for us to demand that they meet these obligations, this is not by itself sufficient to justify our reliance, in forming our plans, on the expectation that they will do so in this case.

Suppose someone were to raise doubts about the permissibility of our actions on the grounds that the protest would hold up traffic for blocks, interfering with many people's ability to go about their affairs. Obviously it would be inadequate merely to cite the fact that people are under an obligation not to cause grievous bodily harm and assert, on this basis, that it is perfectly reasonable to demand that they put up with a little traffic jam to ensure that people are not run down by cars. If our group is to justify the imposition on others whose proximate cause is the assertion of our rights to bodily integrity, we must justify it not just by reference to the importance of this right, but by reference to the importance of the cause for which we have put ourselves in harm's way.

Something analogous is true insofar as our claims to others' assistance in the pursuit of our projects are grounded on the obligation others have to promote our well-being. The question is about how one might justify the demands placed on others in virtue of (a) what one would be likely to need from them in order to pursue some particular end, and (b) what they would be required to provide by way of assistance in light of their obligation to promote one's well-being. One could not justify these demands merely on the grounds that the successful realization of one's ends is a central aspect of one's well-being and thus one has some moral entitlement to assistance in the pursuit of one's ends. Even if this is true, it would be to take too passive or complacent an attitude

toward one's ends and projects. It is to treat them too much as fixed objects in one's life. This is so even if we grant that one has taken seriously the other kinds of effects one's projects might have on the well-being of other people. So here, too, in justifying the sorts of imposition one might make on others in the course of pursuing one's projects, it cannot simply be a matter of one person's happiness versus another's.

This suggests that one needs to arrive at some assessment of the independent value of a given project or activity and ask whether it is the kind of thing that is worth the potential disruptions to other people's lives. The problem is that, in offering this type of justification, one is not appealing to a moral value one has a right to expect others to recognize in the way one may have a right that others acknowledge the equal value of one's being able to lead a decent life. One will instead be appealing to the value of a particular project or aim, in comparison to the projects and aims other people have made central to their own lives. What if such a comparative assessment should prove controversial? This is a possibility I do not think we should ignore insofar as we ought to respect the value of one's living a life that significantly reflects one's own conception of the good.

How is one supposed to take this possibility into account? It depends, I think, on the extent to which, in general, we hold others responsible for our success and well-being.

Suppose that, in forming and revising one's ends, one proceeds on the assumption that others share the responsibility for trying to ensure that one is able to meaningfully engage in one's (permissible) projects. Suppose, that is, one assumes that where one could benefit from another person's help or support, this is sufficient to establish a *prima*

facie claim to that support. The claim is only *prima facie* because the burdens it would place on the other person's own projects may be significant enough to warrant her in refusing to offer her assistance. One may then legitimately be asked to accept some frustration of one's pursuits for the sake of the other person. We cannot expect others to share responsibility for our happiness without at the same time being willing to share responsibility for theirs.

However, given this assumption of shared responsibility, there seem to be just two options. The first is to press one's claims to aid and support, and likewise assess the legitimacy of others' claims on one, ignoring altogether other people's views concerning the merits of one's chosen projects. The second is to take into account others' judgments as to the value of one's pursuits—in effect, to give others a say in one's choice of ends.

Neither option is, in general, a good one. The first seems to me to ignore something that is of genuine significance. Even if we disagree with another's evaluation of the various things we might dedicate ourselves to, we should still be able to appreciate their objection to their agency and resources being enlisted in support of ends they view as not worth the efforts or risks involved. It is one thing to be asked to give up on something one wants, for the sake of a cause one recognizes as more important. One may be sorry that the circumstances forced this choice, while nevertheless standing, wholehearted, behind the choice as expressing one's sense of what finally matters in life. But it is another thing to be required to give up on something one cares about for the sake, ultimately, of something one does not see as worth it. Here, it is not merely that one has given up something one values; there is the additional burden of feeling that one's deepest evaluative judgments are at odds with what one sees oneself as having to do. I am

not suggesting that one should never have to bear this sort of burden. It is the price of living on decent terms among others who are free to make up their own minds about what kinds of things are worth doing. I am only suggesting we acknowledge that it is a burden we run the risk of imposing on others and that this is not something we may treat as irrelevant in deliberating about what projects and goals to pursue.

This may mislead, however, insofar as it suggests that autonomy is fundamentally a quality-of-life issue. It might be seen this way if the concern was just to ensure that people have a significant range of options among which to choose. But the concern is, more basically, a matter of respect for others as persons capable of setting ends for themselves and what this implies for the kind of authority one may presume to have with respect to others' choices. This is evident in considering fairly mundane cases where, so to speak, the quality-of-life issue is minimized.

Suppose, for instance, I am thinking about going to a Dodgers game with you. You live near the stadium; I live clear across town. I can catch a ride with you to the game. The question for me is how I will get home. Let me stipulate that by far the best option for me is for you to give me a ride home after the game. I decide that, if I can count on you to give me a ride, it will be worth it to go to the game. But otherwise, it will be too much of a hassle. Now I take it we would ordinarily think the thing for me to do, before making my decision, would be to *ask* you if you will give me a ride home. I hope you will agree to do so, but I should be ready accept a “no” answer if you decide you do not have time to drive all the way back across town after the game.

But if, in considering my options, I am reasoning from the assumption that we jointly share responsibility for my interests, then it seems I may conclude that I need not

ask for the ride ahead of time. For I may be confident (a) that once the game is over, you will recognize my need for a ride home and be motivated, out of concern for me, to provide one; and (b) that the enjoyment I will get out of going to the game minus the hassle of taking the bus back across town is sufficient to outweigh the inconvenience to you of having to give me a lift. Asking for the ride ahead of time might help to bolster my confidence in either (a) or (b). But if I believe I have sufficient information already—for instance, I have independently come to know enough about your schedule for the evening to know that an extra trip across town will not be more than a minor inconvenience—then it seems I may just go ahead and plan on going to the game and getting a ride home with you afterward. Asking, in this case, would make sense only as a sort of reminder of what is otherwise expected—just as one might ask someone, who is using an expensive piece of equipment that belongs to one, to please be careful.

But it seems to me that there is something objectionable about proceeding in this way. In particular, what is objectionable here is that, in forming my plans—plans that involve you—I have given no consideration whatever to what you think about the matter. Reasoning in this way from the assumption of joint responsibility for welfare to a particular end or plan of action thus appears to display a lack of respect for your autonomy.

This brings us, then, to the second option. Let's grant that we should acknowledge and take into account the impact of our projects on the ability of others to lead their lives in light of what they themselves judge to be worth doing. It seems we are left with no other avenue than to allow the evaluative judgments of others to play an independent role in our own deliberations about what ends are worth adopting. Operating on the

assumption that we jointly hold responsibility for one another's welfare in the sense outlined above thus requires us, if we are to respect the autonomy of others, not merely to determine to our own satisfaction that we have sufficiently good reason to pursue some end, but to concern ourselves with whether, in addition, our reasons could satisfy others, given their ideas about the good.

From the point of view of our attempt to accommodate the value of autonomy, however, this second option appears equally problematic. For it attempts to reconcile joint responsibility with respect for others' autonomy by insisting that we be able to justify our ends to others in terms which they have some say over. We take into account their autonomy by allowing them mutual authority or input with respect to whether our choice of ends is adequately supported. But to insist on this would itself generally be inconsistent with valuing our autonomy—that is, our ability to shape the course of our lives in light of our own judgments concerning what is of value.

Consider, for example, a person deliberating about whether to take up, say, a career in smooth jazz. On the present proposal, she must not only take into account the different ways in which this will affect others' interests, and form a judgment as to whether, in light of these effects, such a career is ultimately worth pursuing. The person must also take into account others' views on this same question—namely, whether smooth jazz is the kind of thing that is worth the the expected strain on our collective resources, time, etc. To be able adequately to justify the pursuit to others, then, she will need to do so at least partly in terms that appeal to *their* assessments of that pursuit. If our would-be musician is deliberating responsibly, according to this view, then her decision whether to go for a smooth-jazz career will depend, not primarily on her own assessment

of the objective merits of such a career, given her circumstances and talents, but rather on whether, for instance, she finds that there are a lot of Kenny G. fans around. But to be beholden to this extent to the judgments of others when it comes to how one is to lead one's life seems clearly unacceptable given the value to us of preserving our autonomy.

The prospects for responding coherently to the value of autonomy thus appear dim so long as we maintain the assumption of joint responsibility for welfare. What I wish to argue, however, is that to forego this assumption that others are jointly responsible for how one's life goes, and to instead assume primary responsibility for the advancement of one's ends and interests, is itself a way of showing regard for others' autonomy. This yields an intuitive conception of a person's relation to her own well-being that is not centrally about partiality or favoritism: namely, that the job of seeing to it that a person's life goes well falls mainly to that person herself. If one accepts this in one's own case, it will of course influence the considerations that go into the decision to take on this or that project. The claim, then, is that a rational concern for others' autonomy will manifest itself in a willingness to bear the primary responsibility for one's well-being.

In considering the feasibility of pursuing a given end, it is of course rational to take into account the degree to which one can expect to be able to rely on others' assistance. We have been assuming that, where there is an opportunity for another person to aid one in one's pursuits, this is enough to establish, at least *prima facie*, a claim or (normative) expectation that the person will provide that aid. The presumption is that, given such an opportunity, the person may refuse only if she has a good reason or excuse for failing to promote one's well-being. The degree to which one can (or at any rate, ought to be able to) rely on others' assistance, given that such a presumption is in place,

will be determined, at least roughly, by the following two variables. The first is the degree to which other people are likely to have available to them the possibility of advancing one's interests. And the second is the extent to which, given the interests at stake on both sides, one's claims to assistance are sufficient to outweigh the competing reasons others have to refuse that assistance.⁴⁷ The result then figures into one's calculations about how risky a given pursuit is likely to be and what else one is likely to have to give up in order to realize one's aim. (If you give up a lucrative job to spend more time with your family, will this mean having to move to a smaller house?) But it is this mode of deliberation about the degree to which one can expect to rely on others that gives rise to the difficulty in according proper weight to their autonomy. For it is essentially to view the activities and capacities of other individuals as potential resources to which no one has any prior claim, and any occasion of conflicting interests as a new problem of resource allocation. But since the particulars of the allocation problems one will involve others in will depend on the ends one adopts for oneself, the question is how to assess the fairness of imposing this or that problem, with its expected resolution, on those other people. One can either ignore the interest others have in leading their lives by their own lights or one can give the evaluative judgments of other people independent weight in one's choice of ends. And neither of these options is satisfactory.

But suppose one were willing to give up the assumption that the demands one can make on others for aid are established on the basis of how the competing welfare interests are evaluated on each occasion of conflict. One would, for instance, forego any reliance

⁴⁷ There are obviously numerous other complicating factors, such as the extent to which other people can be expected to *know* that they have certain opportunities to provide aid; whether they will in fact *do* what they have an obligation to do, and so on. But we can set these complications aside and just take the simplest case.

on a supposed right to assistance whenever assistance from another would benefit one more than it would burden the other. Doing so would affect how one deliberates about one's ends in a way that opens up space to respect the ability of others—one's potential benefactors—to freely set their own ends, while nevertheless preserving the distinctive authority of one's own evaluative judgments with respect to one's own ends. Let me explain.

We have been concerned with how one is to respond to a potential benefactor who objects that a certain project does not warrant the kind of assistance she will be required to give if one makes this project central to one's life. But there is now room to offer what in many contexts seems a very natural response. For one may say, in effect, “Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it myself—even if it means having to make sacrifices.” But one may say this only if one gives up the assumption that others share the primary responsibility for one's happiness and well-being.

Imagine, for instance, you are considering whether you should go vegetarian. Your community is largely made up of meat-eaters and there aren't many restaurants that cater to vegetarians. Your friends and family are mostly non-vegetarian. So one thing to consider is the difficulties involved for a vegetarian in your situation of eating well. Still, you might think that your enjoyment is not worth the animal suffering and environmental degradation that makes it possible. Others may disagree with this outlook, though. You may imagine that your friends, for instance, will object to having to “work around” your vegetarianism. Their sincere concern for your happiness and enjoyment will now take the form of giving up a host of what they view as perfectly good options—where to eat, what to serve in their homes—when you are around. Although they may be willing to adapt

their behavior—they will recognize, we can assume, that what they can get at the one vegetarian place in town is still better than what you can get anywhere else—they may nevertheless resent having to make these sacrifices for what they consider a trivial or hopeless cause. One option here is to ignore (what you imagine will be) your friends' sense of being imposed upon, on the grounds that you are right, and they are wrong, about the merits of vegetarianism. On the other hand, you might take their views into account, not by giving up on being a strict vegetarian, but by attempting to lessen the imposition—accepting, for instance, that lousy meals at your friends' restaurant of choice will be a frequent price you have to pay for the sake of a worthy end—at least until you can persuade your friends to give up meat as well.

The first response merely dismisses whatever resentment your friends might feel, on the grounds that it presupposes the wrong values. But this is to ignore that aspect of their resentment that is directed, not so much at the specific burdens associated with the ends you have chosen, but at your failure to acknowledge that they have formed their own judgments and opinions about the relevant values and that these do not correspond to yours.

The point of the second response is to signal your recognition of this fact through your willingness to give up the right to complain when your interests sometimes lose out to the lesser interests of others—a willingness, in other words, to bear certain of the burdens associated with your choices.

If assuming primary responsibility for one's ends is the proper way to display respect for the fact that others have the right to make up their own minds on questions of value and govern themselves accordingly, then one will also, of course, be entitled to

expect *others* to take responsibility for their own lives and projects. The argument therefore establishes, by an indirect route, a different type of justification for the kind of special self-regard or focus that was the object of the Impartialist's Challenge. One may focus largely on one's own life because one is not, in general, responsible for the lives and well-being of others in the same way that they are themselves. Responsibility for how a person's life goes falls primarily to that person herself. One may rely on this division of responsibility in devoting one's attention and resources to the projects and relationships that make up the core of one's life.

5.. Two Objections

It will help, in developing this picture, to consider some objections. First, one might reasonably wonder whether, in the above argument, I haven't overstated the objection to a person's being required to aid someone's pursuit of a project when he disapproves of that project. Indeed, one could continue, if we respect others' autonomy, then we should just accept that we will have to assist others in living the lives they have chosen for themselves, whether or not we agree with those choices. I have suggested that we ought to take responsibility ourselves for the realization of our ends out of a concern for others' ability to shape their lives in light of their beliefs about the good. But perhaps we should not be so concerned. We should, instead, think of ourselves as entitled to expect others to assume responsibility, to the extent they can, for our success as well as their own. The claim is that they should accept this responsibility, without insisting on having any say as to the content of our ends, out of respect for *our* autonomy. Though, of course, we would be required to reciprocate and accept that others may claim assistance

and support for projects they choose themselves, whenever we have the opportunity to provide it. A general obligation of impartial concern for everyone's success and well-being looks to be consistent with individual autonomy after all.

In response, let's begin with the claim that there is no objection to being asked to assist in a project that one disapproves of and about which one had no say. Within certain broad limits, people have a right to make up their own minds concerning what to do with their lives, and part of acknowledging this is helping them with what they need in order to realize the ends they adopt in the exercise of this right. Let's grant that this is so. But, as any sane version of this objection will allow, there *are* limits to this right. And it is really the nature of these limits, and how they come into play, that is the issue here, in a way that is obscured by the objection as stated.

Suppose I acknowledge that, in our present circumstances, you have a valid claim to my assistance—I have a duty to provide it—even though providing it will set me back in the pursuit of my own interests. Recall that this does not necessarily imply that your claim to my assistance is itself justified or legitimate. This is because you may have decided to engage in some activity, knowing it was likely to require my aid, without properly considering what kind of imposition this would be for me.

You decide to go explore the abandoned mine shaft near my house, leaving word for me that, if you are not back in two hours, it means something has gone wrong and I should organize a rescue mission.

Now you are trapped in the mine and I have to spend the rest of the day trying to get you out.

The point, of course, is not that what I had planned for my afternoon was so

important that I shouldn't have to give it up in order to rescue you from an abandoned mine shaft. The point is that the fun of exploring some old tunnels is not worth the disruption to my day or the hardships associated with organizing a mine rescue. Or so I might reasonably think.

Suppose you do not see it this way. It wasn't that you had simply failed to consider the impact on me. In your view the excitement of the adventure more than justifies the risk of interrupting whatever dull pursuits I had lined up for myself. How should I react? Should I accept your justification for heading down into the mine, in spite of everything, chalking it up to a valid exercise of your right to make up your own mind about what kinds of things are worth doing, and at what cost? Well, it certainly seems that I cannot accept that your judgments here are *correct*. In this sense I must remain convinced that your interfering with my life in this way is unjustified.

Well, then, should I be willing to live with unjustified interferences in my life, so long as those who would impose on me do not do so in bad faith? This in fact seems to be a somewhat unstable attitude to take toward such interferences. Insofar as I take them to be unjustified, my attitude seems to be that I should not have to live with them. Of course, I might accept that in a sense I *do* have to live with them—in much the way one might accept that one will just have to put up with a certain amount of political corruption. But this hardly seems adequate as a way of showing *respect* for another's autonomy. The suggestion that the objection here relies on does not seem to me tenable.

The instability in this way of attempting to acknowledge others' autonomy will remain so long as any opportunity to benefit is thought to generate a demand for justification between the parties (the potential benefactors and beneficiaries). If they hold

one another mutually accountable for one another's well-being, then the request for justification—"Why pursue this in a way that requires my assistance?" "Why not help me with what I need to achieve my end?" will always be in place. Where the evaluative judgments of the parties diverge, the parties then face a problem: how each of them is to acknowledge that her judgment does not have authority as such over the thoughts and actions of the others, without at the same time giving up her view that the others are wrong, or that they are having a meaningful disagreement about something that matters. It is, in a sense, a characteristically political problem, but one without the availability of a political solution.

The problem dissolves, however, if we relinquish (so to speak) our entitlement to hold others responsible for providing assistance with our projects where we could benefit from it. Roughly put, the reason is that if one does not make demands on others, one does not incur any obligation to be able justify making those demands in terms that others would find acceptable. And this is what gave rise to the problem in the first place. For where one's views about the worth of one's ends diverge from the views held by other people, one will not be able to justify making such demands in terms acceptable to others without at least to some extent revising one's ends in ways contrary to one's convictions regarding their ultimate value.

This may give rise, however, to a second objection, insofar as the argument seems to imply that we ought to give up any claim to aid or assistance from others. If there is a valid objection to helping others pursue ends we do not think are worth pursuing, is it not the case that the only way to accommodate this objection is to jettison any requirement of beneficence or concern for others' well-being from morality?

This is not an implication of the argument, however. One reason is that the autonomy-related difficulties associated with the presumption of joint responsibility for welfare all stem from the tight connection established by this presumption between the following items: (a) the ends and projects that different people adopt for themselves; (b) the possibilities that actually exist for one person with respect to aiding another; (c) the degree to which persons rely on one another for their well-being in light of those possibilities; and (d) the justifications available for thus relying on others as well as for disappointing such reliance. But there is nothing in the argument to rule out the possibility that we might have positive obligations of aid that are determined to some extent in abstraction from the particular interests and aims of the persons who come under the obligation.

Consider, for instance, a different model, on which your obligations to others are not made determinant solely, or even mainly, by an assessment, on each occasion, of the costs and benefits to each of you of your offering helping in various ways as opposed to not. Instead, we might allow social practice and convention to play a role in creating more or less determinant obligations and expectations. While such conventionally specified obligations presumably should be grounded in generic information about needs and vulnerabilities that are typical of people who belong to the communities in which the obligations have force, they would largely float free of the particulars of specific situations.

This is, I think, how we generally understand most of our ordinary run-of-the-mill obligations to strangers we encounter in daily life.⁴⁸ The norms governing what you can

⁴⁸ I focus on strangers here. Things are more complicated with respect to people with whom we have personal relationships. For discussion of the latter, see chapter four.

expect others to do for you seem to fix these expectations in ways that are geared toward standard types of assistance and are not particularly sensitive to the importance of the purposes toward which the help might be put by particular persons on particular occasions. It is reasonable to expect a fellow coffee-shop patron to watch your things. But only for a fairly short period of time. Whether and for how long you can reasonably require someone to watch your things does not seem to depend, at least under normal circumstances, on *why* you need someone to watch your things. If you need someone to guard your property for a longer period of time, you might ask if someone is willing to take on this burden. But it is only right that you make clear that here you would be relying on the other's generosity and that, were the person to beg off, this would warrant no resentment on your part. The conventional norm, rather than the importance of your project, sets the boundaries of the other's responsibility to help. Anything offered beyond this can only be regarded as, in a sense, a piece of good luck.

The second point to make is that the autonomy-based argument for a division of responsibility for welfare does not in any way call into question a duty of beneficence if this is conceived, as it traditionally has been, as an imperfect duty. If, as Kant thought, the basic obligation is an obligation to adopt others' happiness or well-being as one of our ends, then we ought to care about others' interests, and seek to promote them. But the obligation to adopt an end does not itself determine which actions are required in furtherance of that end.⁴⁹ Thus, there is scope to retain the authority of our own judgments about the worth of various kinds of projects we and others are engaged in determining when and how we will act so as to promote others' interests. Outside of

⁴⁹ See Kant, (1996)(1797).

socially or legally established public expectations and requirements, there is no presumption that one will take any *particular* opportunity to aid another in furtherance of their ends and pursuits.

One might object that this version of a duty of beneficence is not much better than no duty at all. If the idea were merely that we have to be willing to *something*, that we violate our duty only if we do nothing at all, then this objection would have some force. Can one really just drop a dollar into the Salvation Army bucket, or help an old lady across the street, and be satisfied that one has done enough?

But this is the wrong way to think about what it means to have something as one's end.⁵⁰ Consider an analogy. Suppose you adopt the end of learning art history. Now, on the one hand, it will not be the case that having this as an end requires that you take into consideration, as being relevant to what you should do at the moment, every possible avenue or opportunity to gain some art-historical knowledge. On the other hand, you cannot be said to have knowledge of art history as an end if you merely look up the Wikipedia entry on the Mona Lisa and stop there. For if your project is learning art history, then even if you're not pursuing this at all times or in all the ways you might, it will be in the back of your mind that there is always more to learn. And this will inform your activities going forward. Moreover, you will be responsive to opportunities that are in some way special or unique. If you find out that some eminent art historian who rarely speaks in public is giving a lecture in your town, one would expect you to attend unless you judge that there is some important reason why you should not.

Similarly if you have the end of promoting others well-being. It will not be a

⁵⁰ For an argument that this is not how Kant understood the imperfect duty of beneficence, see Barbara Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement," in Herman (2007).

matter of indifference to one that there is always more to do, that this is not the kind of end that can ever be fully achieved or realized.⁵¹ And moreover, part of your morally obligatory concern for the needs and interests of others will express itself in a responsiveness to opportunities to aid which are in some way marked as special. Even apart from conventionally marked (and delimited) opportunities to provide aid it is natural to expect that one who had the well-being of others as one of her ends—who saw the well-being of persons generally as the kind of thing that provides reasons to act—that such a person would be sensitive, as a result, to certain features of her situation. For example, that she has in some way contributed to harms she is now in a position to alleviate; or that she is for some reason in a unique position to offer assistance (the only doctor on board the ship).

These are merely some examples of the kind of thing that make an opportunity to benefit someone salient to one who regards the welfare of others as an end for the sake of which it is worth acting. If we accept that primary responsibility for a person's welfare is to be taken up by the person whose welfare it is, then the question of what makes an opportunity to help others especially salient—or what makes an opportunity such that failure to act on it would call into question whether one is genuinely committed to the required end—does not just come down to questions about what one is in fact in a position to do and how much it will cost one to do it. But the fact that answers to these latter questions do not serve to make the obligation determinate (or “perfect”) does not mean we must dismiss the idea of morally required concern for the well-being of others.

⁵¹ Cf. Marcia Baron, “Kantian Ethics and Supererogation,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, (1987).

CHAPTER FOUR

OBLIGATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

The focus of the previous chapter was the special regard or consideration we show ourselves—how this might be justified against a background of morally required concern for the well-being of other people generally. In this chapter I take up the issue of special consideration for our friends. Here the question is not only one of the permissibility of treating some people differently than others. It is not just that we care about our friends and tend to be responsive to their interests and welfare in ways we are not when it comes to others. Our friendships give rise to special obligations. We *owe* our friends forms of consideration we don't owe to just anyone. I wish to take up the question of what explains why we have obligations to our friends we apparently don't have in relation to just anyone. What sort of difference does being in this type of relationship with a person make, such that it would be wrong to treat that person in ways it would be fine to treat others?

I take it to be obvious that the moral justification of special consideration I offered in the last chapter will not straightforwardly apply here. If my argument there was sound, then taking on the primary responsibility for how one's own life goes is a condition of properly relating to other persons as independent autonomous beings. But I see no reason to think that, in order to respect the autonomy of other persons, one must take greater responsibility for one's *friends'* well-being.

Although the special attention and regard for one's own life and projects is often treated together with personal relationships like friendship under the general rubric of

partiality, this tends, in my view, to be misleading. The morality of friendship raises a distinct set of questions and concerns. I argue for this point, and take up some of the different questions in the first half of this chapter (§§1-4).

Still, the argument of Chapter Three does bear on the question of why we have special obligations toward our friends. Indeed, I will argue that to fully understand the distinctive moral significance of being related to another as a friend, we need to presuppose the autonomy-based account of the significance of one's relation to oneself.

§1. Framing the issue

The question of special consideration for friends is often framed as a question about the relation between morality and partiality. When and where is partiality morally acceptable? As the question is applied specifically to personal relationships like friendship the assumption is often that, *prima facie*, such relationships are in potential conflict with morality. They are seen as parts of our lives that exert important non-moral claims that moral systems must make room for. Morality and its demands are thus set over and against the personal concern we have for our friends.⁵² It is agreed that, as moral agents, we must somehow integrate into our lives the recognition of each individual's equal moral worth and standing. Friendships, then—along with personal goals and projects and the natural concern for one's own well-being—are understood to pose a challenge to the interpretation of the moral demand not to act in ways incompatible with the basic moral equality of all persons. Framed in this way, the specific question about personal relationships is how far the special concern we have for our loved ones is

⁵² See especially Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Williams* (1981); also Susan Wolf, who argues explicitly for this way of conceiving the relation between moral requirements and the demands of personal relationships in Wolf (1992).

compatible with what morality demands.

Much of the recent discussion in this area has been devoted to criticisms of prominent moral theories for the excessive impartiality they allegedly demand of individuals. Critics charge that these theories—particularly those of a Utilitarian or Kantian inspiration—do not leave space for valuable forms of partiality toward others, in the sense that, if a person acted as the theory says she should and deliberated according to its principles, she would be unable to engage in meaningful relationships. Defenders of this or that theory disagree, claiming that it does not, for instance, make friendship and other valuable relationships morally impossible. The common assumption, on both sides of the debate, is that no plausible moral theory will imply that leading a morally decent life is (normally) incompatible with pursuing, in a serious way, relationships that occupy a special place in one's life and that may require special attention and concern for the people involved. If morality's claims on us have the authority we tend to think they have, it must be that morality leaves sufficient room for the things that make a person's life worth living from her own point of view.

The general picture is that there are significant areas of human life in which individuals are morally free to conduct their lives as they see fit, so long as they abide by certain constraints. Friendships and other personal relationships are then treated as among these zones of liberty. The boundaries of these zones are set by moral principles—principles derived in some way from the appropriate interpretation of the equal worth and standing of all persons. But within these circumscribed areas a person's choices are properly determined by personal motives rather than moral principles. This seems, at any rate, to be the sort of picture that is in the background of debates about the proper role of

partiality in the moral life.⁵³

If we do look at things this way, there is a certain pressure toward the conclusion that the various forms of partiality must not only be permissible but also, in a sense morally optional. If one's personal commitments and relationships are thought of as private spheres in which one is free to work out and pursue one's conception of a good life, then the standards or guiding principles that one subscribes to within these various domains will in a sense be morally discretionary. Failure to live up to the standards one has committed oneself to in these areas may profoundly affect how one sees oneself—whether one judges oneself to be a success or failure, for instance—as well as open one up to the judgments and criticisms of others. But however we may judge the effects on one's success or well-being, such failures will not be understood as instances of wrongdoing. The thought that one has behaved in a morally impermissible way will seem out of place. A writer may be determined never to compromise her artistic vision for the sake of book sales. Nevertheless, we would not think it *impermissible* for her to set aside her Modernist sensibilities for a spot on the best-seller lists. This would just not be the appropriate sort of criticism.

Though this outlook may capture, at least roughly, the relation of one's discretionary projects to morality, it is at odds with the way we normally think about personal relationships. According to the conception set out above, moral principles merely set the limits within which we pursue various optional projects and relationships. But this does not seem to be the case with many of our personal relationships.

⁵³ See, for example, Scheffler's discussion of the possibility of modifying traditional consequentialist theories by including a "personal prerogative." According to such a hybrid theory, individuals are permitted, within certain limits, to opt for courses of action which, from their point of view, would be preferable to the alternatives despite not being best overall. See Scheffler (1994).

Friendships may be optional, in the sense that you are not morally required to become friends with anyone. But if you have friends, it seems you owe them special forms of consideration that you don't owe others. And you are supposed to take their interests into account in ways you need not with strangers. According to our usual understanding of what it means to be friends with someone, the sort of responsiveness that would be expected, in a given situation, to facts about what would be good for your friend is quite different than what would be expected in relation to a stranger or mere acquaintance. What would be considered acceptable in the latter case may warrant feelings of resentment and betrayal in the former. It appears, then, that our friendships give us reasons for action we are not at liberty to ignore. Thus, the idea that friendship, given its importance to a normal and happy life, is a domain in which the demands of morality are relaxed is at best misleading. Our friendships make a difference to the responsibilities we have toward certain people. And this means that how we treat our friends cannot lie outside the purview of moral principle.

§2. Obligations within friendship: the very idea

This last claim may itself strike some as contradicting many of our intuitions about friendship and the sorts of motives and attitudes that are appropriate to it. Thus, it is sometimes thought that concepts like *duty*, *responsibility*, and *requirement* are quite out of place in discussions of friendship.

When people are friends, we are often reminded, their special concern for each other is "natural" or "spontaneous" and at any rate does not arise in response to a perceived duty. Talk of duty and responsibility implies constraint and constraints are

burdens, things we want to be free from. And this conflicts with the phenomenology of friendship. We don't think of it as burdensome. We're happy to help our friends out. We don't do it begrudgingly, feeling that this is something we *have* to do (as opposed to something we *want* to do).

This case against special obligations, based as it is on the phenomenology of friendship, is overstated. First, while we do not generally feel put upon when we recognize that our friends need something from us, we are not *always* so happy to lend our support. You can probably remember a time when you felt you had to do something for a friend you'd really rather not do – go see her perform in some excruciating play, for example, or give up a Saturday night to talk her through some hard times, or (a classic) help her move. Thus, the fact that generally speaking we are easily moved to help our friends is compatible with being occasionally apathetic or exasperated by friends' needs. To the extent that the objection denies this it paints a rosy and unrealistic picture of people and their relationships. Yet, even on such occasions as we feel burdened by friendship, we typically recognize that what our friends want and need bears in a special way on what we should do.

Second, the objection to special obligations assumes an overblown phenomenology of obligation or responsibility. Surely it cannot be that we necessarily experience our obligations as constraints or burdens. Nor does the fact that our concern comes naturally mean that it would not be wrong to fail to do the things we want to do anyway. Think of a parent's love for his child. The fact that this is a natural and loving relationship does not mean that parents have no *duty* to care for their children. And so, although it may be necessary to friendship that one is not normally inclined to harm one's

friends or let them down, this does not imply that one will *never* experience such inclinations, nor does it imply that to do so would not be wrong.

To reject the notion that we have special *obligations* to our friends—to treat, for example, the heightened regard for their interests and well-being as supererogatory—produces a distorted understanding of the moral relations between friends. It seems to me that this tells against a conception of friendship according to which the various reasons for action that friendship provides are, morally speaking, discretionary, in the sense that failure to act on such reasons would not be *wrong* (even if it would perhaps be destructive of one's happiness).

One who thinks this conception of friendship is basically correct, however, may contend that we can explain why it seems that friends have special responsibilities to one another while nevertheless holding that moral demands are importantly external to friendship *per se*. Such a person will want to remind us that becoming friends with someone—especially close friends—has certain consequences, consequences that are themselves of moral significance. Thus, we lead our friends to expect certain things from us and to depend on us in various ways. Friendship also makes people particularly vulnerable to each other, both physically and psychologically. We thus tend to rely on the goodwill of our friends in ways we don't with others.

Moreover, many of the factors that create vulnerability between friends—trust, emotional attachment, intimate knowledge—positively contribute to one's ability to help and support a friend, both through hardship and in the ordinary pursuit of her ends. Perhaps, then, the special responsibilities we have toward our friends simply reduce to the responsibilities and obligations we have toward those who depend on us, or are

particularly vulnerable to us, or whom we are in a special position to help, and so on.

This is, I think, a powerful suggestion, and one that many philosophers have found attractive. Such reductive accounts do capture something of the intuition that talk of duty and responsibility is out of place when it comes to friendship, while still explaining how we can have special responsibilities to our friends. This is because the reductionist attempts to ground the special responsibilities of friendship in moral principles that have nothing essentially to do with friendship *per se*.

No one will deny, for example, that even friends have an obligation to keep their promises to each other. It is not counterintuitive to apply the notion of obligation to the context of friendship in this way. This is because, I take it, the obligation to keep one's promises is perfectly general and is not really about the specific relationship that exists between friends. The obligation is not "internal" to friendship. A crude reductive account that tried to explain the special responsibilities of friendship by showing that they are the result of promises we make to our friends may, in this respect, seem to offend less against our intuitions that friendship is not about having obligations to one another. The reductionist could say that, although friends have certain responsibilities to each other, these are explained by reference to the ordinary obligation of promise-keeping and have nothing to do with the distinctive attitudes and motivations of friendship. The same goes for other, more plausible reductionist views, such as might appeal to special forms of dependence or vulnerability people have in relation to their friends.⁵⁴ A reductionist who rests her theory on, for example, the principle that one should not deliberately disappoint the expectations one has created in others may capitalize on the way in which such a

⁵⁴ See, for example, Goodin (1986).

principle is in a sense external to friendship *qua* friendship. Thus, she may see herself as capturing the core of our intuition that responsibility and obligation are somehow out of place when thinking about the nature of friendship while preserving, on the other side, our sense that we do in fact owe our friends things we don't owe other people.

I think, in the end, reductive accounts cannot do justice to our intuitions about friendship-based responsibilities at all. But in order to see why, I'll need to make somewhat clearer the form that such accounts take. I'll try to do this by taking up a couple examples. I'll then raise an objection that I believe applies to any account that takes this form.

§3. Rejecting reductionist accounts

Consider, first, how some Utilitarians have thought about the responsibilities friends have to one another. Sidgwick, for example, notes several ways in which people are well situated to promote the happiness of their friends.⁵⁵ They are, for one, in a good position to know what their friends want and need. By regularly interacting with each other, as well as through sharing information about their cares and concerns, plans and goals, friends tend to have a great deal of knowledge relevant to one another's happiness and well-being. Moreover, one is usually in a much better position to gauge the effects of one's actions on a friend's happiness than a stranger's. The basic Utilitarian aim of achieving the greatest happiness overall is, therefore, likely to be more efficiently realized if people for the most part concentrate on friends and family rather than expending resources attempting to promote the well-being of those they know very little about.

⁵⁵ Sidgwick (1907).

These efficiency considerations are compounded when we take into account other aspects of the situation that obtains between friends. As Sidgwick points out, people usually *expect* to be treated specially by their friends.⁵⁶ This is relevant in two ways. First, a person may take risks and incur various costs in the expectation that her friend will do certain things for her. The Utilitarian calculus will (it is supposed) normally require the friend to meet these expectations so as to prevent the losses that would otherwise result. Second, there are often psychological or emotional costs associated with disappointing a friend's expectations and failing to treat her specially. We usually care more about how our friends treat us than we do strangers. Our pain is worse when it caused (or ignored) by a friend than by someone else. In these ways, too, special treatment of one's friends may be recommended from the Utilitarian point of view.

Finally, it is perhaps less psychologically taxing to undertake the effort to aid a person if one has a genuine affection for him. And since we can develop such strong ties of affection for only a small number of people, it will be less costly overall to concentrate our efforts on them.

Notice that the fact that one is friends with a person matters only in a derivative or secondary way. One's fundamental duty is to act so as to maximize the total happiness, taking into account all persons. One's friendships matter insofar as they bear on the specific actions one ought to take in order to achieve this fundamental moral goal. One is to have (assuming relatively normal circumstances) a kind of special concern for one's friends. But even where this is the case, the fact of one's *friendship* with this or that person is, in a sense, incidental. It's at least conceivable that one's relation to the person might have had, by Sidgwick's lights, the very same *moral* significance without one's

⁵⁶ See *ibid.* p. 243

being *friends* with the person at all. Thus, one might have had, for a variety of reasons, an intimate knowledge of the person's interests and of how to best realize them. One might have, in addition, led the person to expect special treatment, etc., all in the absence of any real friendship.

Of course, Utilitarian accounts like Sidgwick's are open to familiar objections. Such accounts rely on empirical assumptions about the efficiency of contributing to the general welfare by treating one's friends specially. In real or imagined circumstances where these assumptions do not hold, the theory yields unacceptable results. Could it really be true that, in a situation where I could contribute slightly more to the general welfare by betraying my close friend than by remaining loyal to her, I should betray her?

Rather than rehearsing the various replies and rejoinders one might make, I'll simply note that one could develop a reductive explanation of friendship-based responsibilities that emphasized some of the same elements as Sidgwick's account, but interpreted the significance of these considerations in a non-utilitarian way. It matters, for example, that our friends *expect* us to treat them in certain ways. And indeed, we more or less actively encourage such expectations in our friends. One need not be a Utilitarian to think these facts are significant. It's plausible that one has more reason take into account another's beliefs about what one will do when one has voluntarily encouraged the person to form such beliefs.⁵⁷ On this sort of account, we can explain many friendship-based responsibilities in terms of principles concerning what we should do in circumstances where we have led others to have certain expectations about what we *will* do. Friends come to have special responsibilities, on this view, by willingly encouraging each other's

⁵⁷ For a general account of such principles, see Scanlon (1998), Ch. 7. Scanlon here attempts to explain promissory obligations by reference to a family of principles concerning what we owe to others when we have caused them to form expectations about our future behavior. One could perhaps imagine a similar story about the obligations of friendship.

expectations of special treatment.

This expectations-based approach agrees with Sidgwick in taking it to be significant that we normally expect our friends to treat us specially. We come to depend on them to give our interests, aims, and needs a certain priority in their deliberations about how to conduct themselves. When they fail to do this, we feel let down, even betrayed by our friends.

In general, a reductionist theory, whether it is consequentialist or not, has the aim of showing that, fundamentally, the special responsibilities we have to our friends are not really so special after all. These accounts appeal to principles about how one should treat anyone, regardless of whether the person is one's friend, so long as certain conditions are met. The relevance of friendship is that, in becoming friends with someone, one normally brings it about that these conditions are satisfied. But in the reductionist's view, the conditions of application for the relevant principles do not themselves make any essential reference to friendship. More precisely, an account is reductionist if it cites certain factors or considerations as grounding the responsibilities characteristic of friendship, where the presence of those factors or considerations does not actually entail the existence of a friendship.

Now, a view of friendship which understands its norms as essentially non-moral is rendered far more plausible when combined with a reductive account of the responsibilities or obligations of friendship. The result of this combination is an overall conception of friendship according to which on the one hand, there are certain motives and dispositions that come with being friends with another person and that, because of the importance of friendship in a normal human life, must be allowed, within limits, to persist and influence action. But on the other hand, we find that, in the course of

developing friendships, we normally also come to stand in some relation to our friends that affects the duties or responsibilities that we have to them, not as friends of theirs, but simply as persons. The characteristic motives of friendship, which include, for example, the desire for the other's good, will normally lead one to act in ways that are, for other reasons, morally required. The *friendship*, which grounds or even partly consists in dispositions to aid and benefit the other, is conceptually and metaphysically distinct from the moral relation that supports special *duties* toward the other. The normal desire to help one's friend simply because she is one's friend is, in a sense, optional. Being a decent friend of course contributes to the fullness of one's own life, but failing in this respect is like failing to achieve one's career goals. It is not a failure of due regard for others. However, such a personal failure is normally accompanied by a genuine moral failure—e.g., the failure to recognize or care about another's vulnerability to one's behaving in a certain way. The two failures go together but are nevertheless distinct. We might compare someone who has the personal goal of saving enough money to buy a nice home in the suburbs and who has, in addition, promised her spouse that she'll do this. If she then blows her savings on hang gliding lessons and trips to Vegas, we can isolate two separate failures, one personal and one moral.

Given that reductionist theories take the form they do, the substance of the different explanations does not much matter. They will all encounter the same problem. One way to see this problem is to imagine situations in which the reductionist's principles apply with respect to two different people, one of whom is your friend, while the other is a stranger.

For example, we can suppose that both your friend and another person are counting on you to help each of them overcome some difficulty. You know all that is

relevant to each of their situations, including that they are equally susceptible to feelings of hurt and disappointment if you let them down. You can thus, let us suppose, promote overall happiness equally well by helping either of them. One kind of reductionist will say that, where these are the facts, your friend has no better claim to your help than the stranger. And this may seem like a counterintuitive result. Where the conditions of the reductionist's favored principle are satisfied with respect to more than one person, it still seems relevant to how you should consider the matter that you are friends with one of those people but not the others.

This begins to get at my concern that reductionism cannot adequately account for the way in which friendship is relevant to our practical lives. But I realize that not everyone will be moved by the intuitive considerations above, at least at this abstract level.

Another way to get at the problem is to notice how we tend to think about even those instances where our responsibilities to our friends are clearly founded on aspects of the relationship with more general moral significance—as, for example, when we make explicit promises to friends. In such cases, failing to live up to our obligations (e.g., by breaking promises or telling lies) seems to be wrong in a way that would not be at issue absent the friendship. Suppose, for example, that Vandelay and Pennypacker are coworkers in competition for a promotion and that Vandelay deliberately misleads Pennypacker about what some upcoming project entails. The point is to get Pennypacker to mess up his end of the project and be denied the promotion, thus ensuring Vandelay's advancement. Now, it's clear that Vandelay has wronged Pennypacker. But if we suppose that Vandelay is Pennypacker's friend, the wrong seems more egregious. It takes on a different character. We want to say to Vandelay: "Sabotaging a coworker is one thing

(and awful enough!). But Pennypacker is your *friend*."

In merely pointing out that, in the above case, Vandelay has violated a duty he would owe to anyone in Pennypacker's situation, we do not adequately capture the wrong he commits against Pennypacker, given that they are friends. It will not do to respond by saying that, if the two are friends, then the difference is that there is not just a sabotage but a breach of trust as well. For we can suppose that, whether or not they are friends, Pennypacker trusts Vandelay to tell him the truth about what the project involves, and even trusts that he will do so for the right reasons (and not, e.g., merely because he thinks he will inevitably be caught in the lie). If one replies that the trust between friends is of a different sort, and involves a susceptibility to an altogether more serious kind of betrayal, then we will want to know what kind of attitude this is. If it is somehow inseparable from or constitutive of friendship, then we will have just returned to my claim that the wrong the one does to the other can only be understood in light of the recognition that the relationship the two have is a friendship.

It should, I hope, be clear how this bears on reductionism as an approach to friendship-based responsibilities. My hypothesis is that the point made above about the career-sabotage of Pennypacker will generalize. If this is right, then when there is a wrong between friends that is specifiable without reference to the fact that the people involved are friends, that specification will normally be incomplete. It will leave out a crucial element of the wrong that has been committed.

What is left out we can indicate in a flatfooted way by saying that the one person was a *bad friend* to the other. To say that A let B down *as a friend* is to say more than that A broke a promise to B, or misled him about her intentions, or whatever. Even if, in the circumstances, what constituted A's being a bad friend was some independently

specifiable moral wrong (e.g., A's lying to B) something is still added by saying A was a bad friend to B over and above saying (e.g.) A lied to B. It seems, therefore that one has an independent responsibility to be a *good friend* to one's friends that is not reducible to other moral obligations.

§4. The internal relation between morality and friendship

We can return now to the general conception of friendship and its norms that provides the compliment to reductive views about the special responsibilities between friends. If it's true that there is a distinctive wrong involved in failing to be a decent friend to someone—in mistreating a person *as* a friend—then I think we have to regard it as misguided to draw any stark line between the demands of morality and the concerns of friendship as such.

Recall the basic problem raised by the tension between, on the one hand, the self-directed focus needed to set and pursue the kinds of ends that contribute to a full human life and, on the other hand, the recognition that everyone's life is equally important. At a basic level, the way we conduct our lives must be consistent with the equal moral standing of each person and the acknowledgment everyone has an equal claim to a good and happy life. Yet, at the same time, there must be room enough to lead our own lives and pursue discretionary ends we find worthwhile.

If, however, we understand moral principles merely as setting the limits within which our more personal motives and attachments have free reign, and therefore as principles whose content does not depend on whether, say, we are friends with a given person, we will be unable to capture what is distinctively wrong with, for instance, betraying a friend. Morality should not be understood as a set of norms or principles that

merely define the limits of acceptable partiality. Rather, what it is permissible to do within a relationship is partly determined by norms internal to that relationship.

The tendency to ignore this point, and to make a theoretical separation between morality and relationship-based norms or standards, stems from a failure to make certain distinctions among the subjects that are usually treated under the rubric of partiality. My relationships and my personal projects and goals are all taken as examples of the same basic phenomenon: the partiality I display, in the course of leading my life, toward the things I most care about. The people I care about, my projects and ideals and commitments—these are the things that make up my life and give it its shape. It may seem, then, as if one is warranted in devoting special attention to one's friends for the same reason that one is permitted to devote attention to one's personal projects and goals. It may seem that the value to each person of being able to lead her own life and devote herself to the things she cares about is what justifies partiality toward one's friends despite the fact that their lives do not matter more, objectively speaking, than anyone else's.

When one sets a goal for oneself, or embarks on some project, these pursuits come to define sets of interests and needs, which figure into the measure of one's well-being. If you decide to become an artist or a farmer or a surfer, and this becomes a significant aspect of your identity, then what you need and what you have an interest in will be partly determined by what you need in order to be an artist or surfer, as the case may be. If you fail to do what these things require—if you cannot spend that much time at the beach without, for instance, failing to meet your other obligations, or simply because you can't muster the effort—then at least as long as you're committed to surfing, you will be left worse off. Your projects and goals are of general concern as determinants

of your well-being. We should thus be wary of placing demands on individuals that would make it difficult or impossible to do what's necessary to carry out meaningful projects and personal pursuits.

Now, one's relations to other people can in certain ways be analogous to one's own goals and projects. It is certainly true that pursuing friendships with others is an important aspect of living one's own life, just as pursuing one's career is. One has interests and needs that are defined by one's friendships with others. One needs to do certain things with and for others in order to maintain these relationships—to be a good friend. If one fails, one will thereby be made worse off. We should thus be wary about placing demands on people that would make it impossible to be involved in such relationships.

But it is important to be attuned to the disanalogies between personal relationships and personal projects.⁵⁸ The question about special consideration for friends goes beyond the problem about when a person is justified in acting in ways that are good for *her*, despite being less than optimal for others.

Besides the fact that we seem to have special responsibilities to our friends that cannot be reduced to more general obligations, consider the way in which a friendship can affect how we evaluate the actions of the people involved in it. What would have been considered an appropriate degree of attentiveness to one's own interests over a stranger's may be considered selfish in relation to a friend. Similarly, what counts as a kind action or a cruel one will depend on whether we are considering it in the context of friendship or some other relationship.

Of course, when a person comes to care about something, or when she adopts an

⁵⁸ Cf. Scheffler (2004).

end or goal, we will evaluate her conduct in light of this fact. This is true just as much for a person's other personal concerns—her projects and goals, for instance—as it is for her friendships. But usually the fact that a person cares about something grounds a different kind of evaluative scheme than that made appropriate by a friendship. The distinctive concerns raised by friendship go beyond issues having to do with the internal relations among a person's various commitments and motivations. Certain behaviors may be inconsistent with one's professed values. One may be chided for some form of incoherence or inconstancy, or for a lack of self-knowledge or integrity. These types of criticisms concern problems internal to the motivational and evaluative structures a person operates with. And while this kind of evaluative scheme applies also when a person cares about and is committed to another person, as in a friendship, the ways in which friendship affects the norms of evaluation regarding a person's actions and attitudes go beyond this scheme. It is not just that a person is somehow weak or inconsistent when she neglects the emotional needs of her friend, a person she supposedly cares about. We might also think she is being callous or unkind *to her friend*. This is a fault in the person's treatment of another, not incoherence among her values and motivations. The criticism is made, as it were, on behalf of the friend, not on behalf of an ideal of coherence between a person's actions and attitudes.

For these reasons, we need to rethink the standard account of friendship as a purely personal concern (though one which is causally related to relations that are of moral concern). For it appears that failure to treat one's friend according to the norms internal to that friendship is itself a failure to show proper regard for that person and her interests. We need a more unified account.

§5. Autonomy and responsibility in friendship

Accounts of friendship that take the form I've been discussing embody one approach to understanding differential attention to the welfare of one's friends. According to that approach, a person's special concern for her friends is treated as just one instance of her caring about something out of proportion to that thing's weight in the "impersonal calculus."⁵⁹ In this way, her friends are like her projects and other commitments. If a person is pursuing a career in music, then the importance to *her* of achieving success as a musician is likely to be far greater than the importance the rest of us have reason to attach to her success. Likewise, while everyone has reason to care about a person's welfare, no matter who she is, that person's welfare will be far more important to her friends.

I want to suggest an alternative way of understanding the special regard friends have for one another as compared to most other people. The account I am proposing also seeks to illuminate the basis for and moral significance of the special concern friends have for one another by connecting it to the general problem of the distinctive significance of one's own life. What I wish to suggest, however, is that concern for one's friends is not merely part of what is covered by the claim that each person has her own life to lead and must be allowed some space within which to do so. Rather, what we need to understand is how differently, in the context of a friendship, the requirement to concern oneself with the welfare of others *interacts* with the basic demand that each person be left free to live her own life in light of her conception of what a good life consists in.

The basic idea is that requiring certain forms of responsiveness to the interests and needs of another person will not put the same kind of pressure on one's claim to be

⁵⁹ This way of putting it is adapted from Scheffler (1994), p. 57.

able to lead a separate, autonomous life when one is friends with the person in question.

I argued in the last chapter that the claims arising from an impartial concern for everyone's well-being must be tempered by each person's right to autonomy with respect to the ends and projects she sets for herself. This of course raises the question of what sort of responsiveness to the needs and interests of others may be required consistently with each person's maintaining the right kind of authority over the shape her life takes. I now want to argue that this question will have a different answer when the persons with respect to whom it is asked are friends as opposed to strangers.

It is important to see that this approach is quite different than one that counts friendships (and friends) as among the personal concerns in relation to which the question is raised in the first place. On the account I'm proposing, a friendship between two people provides the background framework against which this basic moral problem must be resolved. The task of combining a proper respect for autonomy with morally adequate regard for welfare is not one that can be carried, even theoretically, in total abstraction from the more particular relationships that actually obtain between different people. In considering the obligations two people may have to one another, the extent to which an appropriate concern for autonomy requires each to take responsibility for his own affairs—relying on the other to do the same—will, for instance, vary depending on whether the people in question are friends or strangers.

One way to put the point is that the demand, on the one hand, for impartial recognition of the value of others' lives and the claim that one has, on the other hand, to be free in determining the life one is to lead, interact differently in the context of friendship than in other contexts. To explain this, I want to begin by bringing out a sense in which what it *means* to live a life that is one's own is not the same in relation to a

friend as what it means in relation to a stranger or mere acquaintance.

When two people are friends, their lives are, as it were, entangled. Friends organize—to a greater or lesser extent—their lives and activities around each other. There is a sense in which friends do not lead separate lives in the way that strangers do. And indeed, being friends with someone and valuing that friendship is incompatible with insisting on the value of keeping one's life separate from the other person's. Insofar as one is friends with another, one cannot regard one's life as a wholly distinct object of concern. And this means that a concern both to maintain one's autonomy as well as to respect the other's will have different implications with regard to one's positive obligations toward one's friends.

When two people are friends, they come to share a life together and both participate in determining the course of that shared life in light of the things they value. The metaphor of a “shared life” is not meant to suggest that people who are friends with each other do not still have their own lives to lead. But their lives are not fully separate, in the sense that to be friends with someone is, at least in part, to give joint activity with that person a special role in structuring one's projects and commitments.⁶⁰ The peculiar good of engaging in activity with friends is, I will argue, a source of connection that affects the relation between a (legitimate) focus on one's own life and the recognition that the other's life is of equal importance to one's own.

To begin with, it is commonly pointed out that within our intimate relationships, our attitudes of care and concern take as their objects particular individuals, and not features or qualities of those individuals.⁶¹ When one is friends with someone, one likes and cares about that *person* and not just her likable characteristics, such as her sense of

⁶⁰ John Cooper emphasizes this aspect of Aristotle's treatment of friendship. See Cooper (1980).

⁶¹ See, for example, Frankfurt (2004) and Kolodny (2003).

humor, or her enthusiasm for life. Nor is it that one cares about her as an individual only *insofar* as she is someone who has a good sense of humor, or whatever.

It is true that we often become friends with someone because of the qualities she possesses. I might like a person and enjoy spending time with her because she is witty or adventurous or because she enjoys the same activities as I do. But at some point—if I do wind up becoming friends with the person—it will cease to be the case that, for example, I seek out her company just because I want to spend time in conversation with *someone* who is witty. I will begin to seek her out because I want to spend time with *her*. In general, when we think of affection for a friend, we think of the object of such affection being the individual person, not a collection of qualities that the person exhibits.

This last claim is often supported by the idea that our friends cannot be replaced by others with similar qualities.⁶² That is, the love or affection I have for my friend does not simply transfer over to others with similar characteristics. Though it may be that I value Beth's enthusiasm and adventurous spirit, this does not mean that Liz, who is equally enthusiastic and adventurous, will serve as an adequate substitute for Beth as far as I am concerned. And this is because, despite their similarity, it is Beth whom I care about, not Liz.

The structure of our affections regarding our friends is further revealed in how we characterize our aims when engaging in shared activities with them. We often engage in activities with friends for the sake of doing something *with them* and not just for the sake of the ends characteristically attached to that activity.⁶³ Thus, I might go for a hike with a friend not just in order to get some exercise but also to spend time with that person. In such circumstances, I might fail to achieve my end of getting a good workout—the trail

⁶² See Kolodny (2003).

⁶³ Cf. Jeske (2003).

being easier than I'd anticipated—and still find the hike worthwhile.

The shift in one's attitudes toward one's activities with another person may be gradual. My interest in achieving an end associated with a certain activity may for a time largely govern my attitude toward the point of engaging in that activity with some particular individual. I enjoy playing racquetball, which requires another person, and James is a good match for me. Here my interest in playing racquetball with James is based on my interest in playing racquetball with someone who is around my skill level. But, over time, as James and I become friends, I develop an interest playing racquetball with James that goes beyond my interest in playing racquetball with someone—anyone—who is around my skill level. My interest is in playing racquetball-with-James.

Moreover, it is not just that I have come to recognize that James has other qualities besides those directly related to the game that enhance the experience—such as his self-deprecating sense of humor. If this were so, it would suggest that another person with similar qualities would be an adequate substitute for James as a racquetball partner. But if James and I are friends, my interest in playing racquetball-with-James does not amount to an interest in playing racquetball with someone who has certain characteristics (self-deprecating sense of humor, enthusiasm for racquetball despite lack of skill, etc.).

Of course, once we (James and I) have reached this point and begun to see our games of racquetball as not only serving the ends of playing racquetball but also of doing something with each other, it will be natural for us to expand our activities beyond our regular racquetball games. If friends value spending time together and doing things together, then this is a value that can be realized in any number of activities. There will be a point to engaging even in those pursuits one would not otherwise care about.

This does not mean that it will not matter to a person what activities she engages

in so long as she is doing it with a friend. Obviously, friends will want to take up pursuits together that they find independently worthwhile. But here's the point: when two people are friends, it will make sense for each to allow the other's judgment concerning what is valuable or worthwhile to play a role in determining what pursuits they will undertake. If I think a certain activity is worth pursuing, and you generally value spending time with me, then you need not share my assessment of the value of the activity in order to appreciate that there is a point to engaging in the activity yourself. This means that, within the context of our relationship, *my* judgment about what ends are worth going for can play a special role in *your* deliberation about what ends to pursue.

To understand this role, it will help to distinguish it from other contexts in which my value judgments might have made a difference to the ends you choose to adopt and the activities you decide to engage in.

One might take into account another's judgment about what types of activities are worthwhile because one thinks the person is a good judge about these things and so is likely to be correct. The person's judgment here plays an epistemic role, providing some indication—some evidence—that one should adopt this or that end. It should be clear that a friend's evaluative judgments often have more than just this evidentiary status. Because we are interested in cases where one is seeking joint activity with another person for its own sake, the fact that that person thinks it would be a good thing to do such and such—e.g., go see the new Woody Allen movie—does not merely provide evidence for the truth of some independent claim—viz., that it would be good to go see the movie, or that one should go see it. A friend's evaluation—unlike a movie critic's—is not independent of the truth of such a claim. Rather, her judgment can actually make a difference to whether one should see it. This is because one has reason in general to do things with this person.

This permits a certain understanding of what is going on when, in the context of friendship, we make judgments of the familiar form, “We ought to do *x*.” What is distinctive about such judgments made in reference to a friend is that they are not grounded in the prior judgments that *I ought to do x* and that *you ought to do x*. When my friend says, for example, “We should go see a ball game,” I do not evaluate his claim by forming an independent judgment about whether I should go to the game (or even about whether I should go to the game if he goes).⁶⁴ His judgment is not a hypothesis about what is true, but a kind of *practical* proposal or suggestion – one that potentially makes a difference to what I *should* do.

Because the value of joint activity for friends (as opposed to, say, business partners) does not derive solely from the aim or purpose associated with a given type of activity, people who are friends with each other will face a particular deliberative problem, namely, what to do together. We need to locate judgments like “we should do *x*” in the context of this deliberative problem. If, say, you and I are friends and value joint activity with each other for its own sake, we will not regard the problem of what to do together as depending on prior (perhaps conditional) judgments about what *each* of us should do. The question of what we should do is, as it were, fresh. It is a question that is up to *us* to decide on. Solutions to this sort of practical problem must, therefore, be matters of consensus. In coming to joint decisions about what projects we should pursue together, and in general how we should spend our time with each other, each of us will thus have a role to play in settling questions about what the other will do.

The values inherent in friendship—including the distinctive way in which joint activity is valuable within a friendship—thus make appropriate what I’ll call a mutual

⁶⁴ For general discussion of normative facts of the form *we should φ*, and their irreducibility to requirements on individuals, see A.J. Julius, “Joint Requirements,” (ms).

“agential” influence, which the individuals involved exercise with respect to one another. Since it is an open question what sorts of activities to pursue together, friends enjoy an agential influence over each other’s decisions about how to organize their lives in a fairly general sense. That is to say, the range of influence each has over the other is not limited ahead of time to specific ends or activities. Of course, being friends with someone does not mean that one will share all her aims or pursuits. But in exercising a degree of agential influence over the overall content and priority-structure of the other’s ends, one must nevertheless attend to the whole complex of that person’s interests and needs. This yields the conclusion that, from the point of view of one’s own life, it cannot be a matter of indifference how things are going for one’s friend.

We get this conclusion because in the context of a friendship we don't have the same grounds for insisting that, with regard to their welfare, each person ought to primarily take responsibility for her own, largely relying on the other to do likewise. Taking responsibility for how one's life goes is necessary to respecting the autonomy of others only insofar as maintaining one's own autonomy requires that others not have any direct input or say over the ends one should adopt for oneself. To be friends with someone, however, is to value (non-instrumentally) doing things with that person and in general spending time with her. And since this is to allow your friend a kind of agential influence in shaping the course of your life, it is consistent with governing yourself in view of your conception of the good to thus allow your friends a kind of say in regard to the ends and projects you pursue.

Let me try to make clearer the sense in which friends have some say with respect to each other's lives. I have already noted that, in relation to the joint projects and activities friends pursue together, the fact that one judges some project to be worthwhile

is something the other gives weight to independently of her own agreement with the content of that judgment. In some contexts, one may simply allow the other to decide what the two of them will do. But even where one doesn't grant the other this much authority, the other's judgment about what to do maintains an independent standing in one's practical deliberation.

Now, given that this type of mutual agential influence which friends have in relation to each other is not tied to specific aims or goals they have as individuals, there is an open-endedness to this influence that has important ramifications. There is, first, the fact that any project proposed by one will have to fit into the other's prior plans and projects. To the extent, then, that a friend's judgment about the worth of a given end is to be accorded independent weight, so is her judgment about its fit with the rest of one's life, the priority it should have, and so on.

Furthermore, the way in which this all plays out within a particular friendship—the substance and norms of the relationship itself—is an object of mutual agential influence. Thus friends manage and negotiate (usually tacitly) such things as the range of impact joint activities may have on aspects of each individual's life that are not shared with the other, what sorts of things each may ask or expect of the other in various circumstances, the extent to which advice or comment about each other's separate projects and relationships is welcomed. It is not merely with respect to the particular, first-order projects and activities friends pursue that they each have a say. For there is also the higher-order project of managing their mutual influence over these first-order projects and priorities.

None of this, of course, is to say that your friends get to decide what you do or what kind of life you lead. But their input will function in a way that goes beyond a

merely epistemic role, such as might be played by an advice column. This is due to the respects in which your ends and projects are, to a greater or lesser extent, bound up with your friend's in ways you both value. Because this is part of the good of the relationship, friendship with another person is in tension with insisting on the value of independently constructing a life for yourself solely in view of your own judgments as to what is worth doing. Friendship is in this way incompatible with demanding the sort of discretion over one's time and resources that the value of personal autonomy would support in relation to strangers.

There is, we should acknowledge, the danger that friends will overreach. I might be close with a friend in certain respects but think it out of line when he attempts to influence my choice of romantic partners. I do not see this aspect of my life as being in any way subject to his approval. Still, the issue is delicate. There is my need to maintain certain forms of independence and privacy; but there may also be questions of trust and openness that are associated, for my friend, with the ability to discuss and consult with each other on romantic involvements. So while there are familiar risks of presumptuousness and overreach, there are also risks of being too closed-off and or detached, of failing to recognize ways in which the other needs to be trusted. In caring for one's friends, one needs to be attentive not only to her welfare, but to her privacy, her need to remain her own person, and so on. What is important to keep in mind, though, is that even these values are often realized, in friendship, not by leaving each individual to decide for herself how to organize her life in relation to the other, but by supporting the conditions for collaboration and mutual influence.

§6. Explanatory power of the account

The account I am proposing is able to provide what seems to me a satisfying explanation of certain norms for action that characterize friendship. First, there is the special responsibility for a friend's well-being that is the main topic of this chapter. I am claiming that the importance of being able to develop and devote attention to one's own life and projects—the importance of this form of personal liberty—does not place the same limits on what one can reasonably be expected to do for a friend as it does on what one can be expected to do for a stranger. If this is right, then it can make sense of why we bear a greater responsibility for the well-being of our friends. It would explain why, in particular, when one becomes friends with someone, there is a shift in emphasis from noninterference to positive aid and support.

The commonsense view is that our immediate duties toward strangers (i.e., those that apply to individual conduct rather than those mediated by shared social and political institutions) are, by and large, "negative" (at least in normal circumstances). We are generally required not to interfere in certain ways with another's pursuit of her ends, not to violate another's bodily integrity, not to lie or mislead. With friends, however, there is less of a premium put on noninterference. Whereas one should generally avoid deliberately disrupting or preventing a stranger from pursuing his ends, one is more often expected to lend positive support to a friend's successful achievement of her goals.

This difference in emphasis, between positive support and noninterference, makes sense if, in the context of relations between strangers, there is a greater concern to carve out and safeguard space for personal liberty. Where this is less of an issue, as among friends, there will be less to object to in requiring that individuals take a more positive

role in the advancement of others' ends.

The account gains support, moreover, from the fact that its explanatory power extends beyond the special, positive responsibilities of friendship and covers certain other normative features of normal friendships. For instance, actions that would in other contexts be interpreted as essentially a matter of one minding one's own business, or looking out for oneself in an unobjectionable way, may, in relation to a friend, be seen as mean, selfish, neglectful, antagonistic, etc. And this is often because the normal and legitimate focus on one's own concerns is not of the sort that precludes a certain awareness of and responsiveness to the interests of one's friends. Similarly, although it is reasonable for one to seek benefits for oneself, the propriety of seeking to benefit at the expense of one's friend is a delicate matter. Think of someone who is willing to help out her friends in various ways, but regularly demands compensation. Or consider an example of Sergio Tenenbaum's.⁶⁵ Tenenbaum imagines that you and your friend are in the market for the same type of job. You come across a listing that, you realize, is an ideal fit for your friend. What would we think if you neglected even to mention the opportunity to her? Would it be the same if she weren't your friend, but just a person you once met at a job fair? Such examples, I believe, speak to the difference friendship makes to the way in which one's concern to lead one's own life interacts with the recognition that other people's lives are equally important.

There are two further aspects of friendship I want briefly to consider: the normative significance of requests and the role of consent. First: requests. On the one hand, many requests one would feel comfortable making of a friend would be altogether inappropriate to make of a stranger or mere acquaintance. Now, this is, in a way, a

⁶⁵ See Tenenbaum (2005), p. 270

peculiar thing. Assuming both parties acknowledge the legitimacy of refusing a given request (i.e., it's not really a demand in disguise), why should it ever be inappropriate to make it? If the matter is left entirely up to the recipient, the request itself hardly seems like an imposition. So why should there ever be any sort of problem with asking something—even asking a great deal—of someone else?

The inappropriateness in some cases derives from the way in which certain major requests express a lack of consideration for the fact that the other person has her own life to worry about. Indeed, even when, because of extraordinary circumstances, we are forced to ask another for something significant, we are often at pains to make it clear that we've taken into account the fact that what we're asking is an imposition: "I really hate to ask this of you but..." Although making a *request* implies that one acknowledges the other's right to refuse the request, even just the act of requesting can, depending on what's asked, communicate either a lack of regard for the fact that the other person has her own affairs to attend to.

Certain requests, moreover, seem out of place despite the fact that what is being asked for is not particularly burdensome. I might ask an acquaintance who lives in my building to help me carry a heavy package up the stairs. But it would not be appropriate for me to ask him to come by my apartment this evening to remind me to call my mother.⁶⁶ The explanation for this is not that what I am asking for is too difficult or costly. Rather, it seems to be that the request constitutes an attempt to place what is, in this context, clearly my responsibility into the hands of my neighbor.

If, however, the need to mark off one's own affairs as one's own, and to separate them from others', is in certain respects less pressing between friends, then we have a

⁶⁶ I owe the example to Barbara Herman.

kind of explanation of why it is normal and acceptable to ask things of our friends we wouldn't ask of others. The fact that it would likely be more acceptable to ask a close friend to remind you to call your mother is not unrelated to the fact that, with respect to your friend, it would probably not be accurate to label your relationship with your mother as your own private affair—something that is none of your friend's business.

Looking at the other side of the issue now, the ethics of *refusing* requests looks quite different depending on whether we're dealing with friends or strangers. It is not merely that, because one has special responsibilities to one's friends, what counts as a good *reason* for refusing is different. For it's also the case that one is more often expected actually to provide an explanation for the refusal if the person is a friend. Although it is mutually acknowledged that it is up to the recipient of a request whether she will submit to it or not, when the parties are friends, the decision is not left up to the recipient in the fullest sense of that phrase. For she must submit to the other—as it were, for approval—the grounds of her decision.

Though it's often true that some explanation is required when one refuses to do something a stranger has asked, this seems to me to be the case less often than with friends. And it seems that the sort of explanation expected—how substantial and informative it is—is different: not merely "Sorry, I have to run," but "I have an appointment to meet with my lawyer." Thus the personal freedom acknowledged in the right to refuse another's request is in a certain sense less expansive in relation to one's friends. This, of course, is not to suggest that friendship is problematic in this respect. It is merely to indicate yet another way in which friendship makes a difference to how we understand the burdens of responding to others' claims on us.

A final feature of friendship that is captured by the account on offer is the

comparative unimportance of consent between friends.⁶⁷ There are many things—e.g., some uses of another's property—which would ordinarily require one to get consent but for the fact that one is friends with the person.

The requirement to get consent is one of the more fundamental protections against incursions by others into one's life. The importance of consent to decent moral relations reflects the great significance we place on being able largely to determine for ourselves the course of our lives. We want to be able to decide ourselves when and to what purpose our resources and bodies are employed. Having this ability allows us to plan our futures and commit ourselves to relatively long-term pursuits.

Yet, the need to get another's consent in order to do certain things is often relaxed within friendship. There are times when it's acceptable to use or borrow items belonging to a friend without getting explicit consent, though this would not be the case were you not as close to the person. You might have friends whose homes you may enter without knocking first.⁶⁸ And this fact—that obtaining consent is in certain ways less important within friendship—is a good indication that this type of relationship makes a significant difference to the nature of the opposition between the concern, on the one hand, that one's own life go well and, on the other, the recognition that others' interests and projects matter in some sense just as much as one's own. The importance of being able to lead an autonomous life has a different significance vis-à-vis the interests of friends than the interests of other people. This difference shows up in the way that friendship can, by itself, alter one's right to determine how certain resources are used.

⁶⁷ N.B.: I mean to emphasize that between friends consent is unimportant only when compared to relations between strangers. The need to obtain consent in various circumstances is still obviously of great importance within friendship.

⁶⁸ Just what one is allowed to do without asking will, no doubt, as with other norms, vary from friendship to friendship.

I have argued that, to understand the nature of our special obligations to our friends, we need to rely on a certain picture of why we are entitled to devote special attention and resources toward our own lives and interests in the first place. The account I have proposed of this special self-regard finds its justification in the conditions of respecting autonomy in oneself and others generally. However, if the value of autonomy is, as Raz puts it, the value of being part author of one's own life, we might say the value of friendship, according to view I've presented, is that of having a coauthor.⁶⁹ If this is the kind of value that is set against claims to positive aid and support, we should expect the resulting principles to yield a set of responsibilities in relation to friends that is quite different from what we owe to others.

⁶⁹ Raz (1986).

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