**Partiality, Deference, and Engagement**

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Abstract

The partiality we display, insofar as we form and sustain personal attachments, is not normatively fundamental. It is a byproduct of the deference and responsiveness that are essential to our engagement with the world. We cannot form and sustain valuable personal relationships without seeing ourselves as answerable to the other participants in those relationships. And we cannot develop and sustain valuable projects without responding to the constraints imposed on our activities by the nature and requirements of those projects themselves. More generally, we cannot engage with the world without meeting it on its terms, and we cannot meet the world on its terms without responding differentially – or displaying partiality – with respect to the objects of our engagement. Partiality is thus a byproduct of engagement. We cannot engage with the world at all without exhibiting forms of partiality.

Some people regard partiality as morally suspect because they take it to represent to a kind of favoritism in the distribution of benefits and burdens. In their view, we should have equal concern for all people, and it is morally unacceptable to be partial toward or biased in favor of those with whom we have close personal relationships. My own view, by contrast, is that the partiality we display toward our intimates is not, in general, a form of objectionable bias or a presumptively unjustified departure from an authoritative norm of equal concern. It is essential to social life, and social life is not simply a vehicle for achieving distributional aims.

Of course, distributional considerations are of great importance in many social contexts, especially in institutional settings, and they have a central role to play in our thinking about social and political justice. Moreover, the partiality that is a feature of valuable social relationships does have distributive implications and these raise genuinely difficult questions. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to take distribution as the paradigm for all social relations or to suppose that the normative significance of such relations is best understood in fundamentally distributive terms.

I have made similar arguments in the past,[[1]](#footnote-1) as have many others, so in rehearsing these arguments I will be covering relatively familiar ground. But I do so in order to pave the way for the development of a point that has less often been emphasized. Partiality is not the only normatively significant aspect of our personal relationships and attachments. There are other features that are just as important and more fundamental, and we are likely to neglect them if, because of a preoccupation with distributive issues, we focus exclusively on questions about partiality. We also misunderstand partiality itself if we consider it in isolation from those other features.

Let me begin, however, by reviewing the reasons partiality is an inevitable feature of our attachments. In speaking of our *attachments*, I mean to include not only our relationships with particular individuals but also our wider social relations and our membership in groups and organizations, as well as our engagement in extended purposeful activities of the kind that philosophers, following Bernard Williams, have come to call “projects.”[[2]](#footnote-2) All these count as attachments in a broad sense, and all of them are sources of partiality. I will first discuss interpersonal relationships, then forms of group membership, and finally personal projects. Along the way, I will refine the notion of attachment that I will be using.

Consider first interpersonal relationships, which most of us regard as being among the most important constituents of a good life. We hope that the people we care about will succeed in forming and sustaining such relationships, and our own close relationships are among the aspects of our lives that we value most dearly. But what does this mean? What is it to value a personal relationship? In general, valuing as I understand it involves a complex syndrome of attitudes and dispositions.[[3]](#footnote-3) This syndrome includes a belief that the thing one values is indeed valuable. It also includes a liability to experience a wide range of context-dependent emotions depending on what happens to the thing or how it fares. One may be distraught if it is harmed or damaged, delighted if it flourishes, anxious if it is in danger, and so on. Emotional vulnerability is one of the constituents of valuing. Finally, the syndrome includes a disposition to see considerations pertaining to the valued item as providing one with reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts. Although everyone has generic reasons to treat valuable things in certain ways solely in *virtue* of their value, those who *value* a thing, in my sense, recognize additional reasons in addition to these generic reasons. They see themselves as having reasons with respect to the particular item they value that they do not have with respect to other valuable items of the same kind.

To value something, then, is not merely to regard it as valuable or to believe that it has value. Valuing something also involves a kind of attachment or engagement or investment. This kind of attachment or engagement comprises the other elements of the syndrome. It comprises a form of emotional vulnerability and a certain practical orientation: a disposition to treat considerations pertaining to the thing that one values as providing one with distinctive reasons for action. Because it is mediated by a conviction that the object of one’s attachment is valuable, we may speak of this kind of attachment as *evaluative attachment*. Evaluative attachment is value-laden and is not to be understood as a brute causal phenomenon. It is, instead, an attitudinal phenomenon that is a feature of all valuing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

So far this is a general characterization. It applies no matter what kind of thing one values. Before turning to the question of what is involved in valuing a personal relationship in particular, there is one lesson to be learned from the general account. The lesson is that valuing is a selective or contrastive notion. There is no limit to the number of things whose value one can recognize, but the fact that valuing comprises emotional investment and a distinctive practical orientation means that one cannot value everything. In part, the reasons for this are practical and psychological. We do not have the time or the psychological capacity to be emotionally invested in the fate of every valuable thing. But the reasons are also conceptual. To form an evaluative attachment is to make a selection: to invest something with differential significance in one’s life and psychic economy. Someone who was attached to everything would be attached to nothing. This has implications for norms of personal neutrality which require that we display equal concern for all people and hold that it is morally unacceptable to be biased in favor of those with whom we have close personal relationships. There are indeed contexts in which we are duty-bound to treat each of a number of people with equal concern, at least with respect to a certain range of issues or goods or decisions. However, to adopt a stance of equal concern as a thoroughgoing attitude toward all persons in all contexts would be incompatible with valuing one’s relationships with anyone. Displaying differential concern for the people with whom one has close personal relationships is not a form of bias. It is part of what valuing such relationships consists in. That much follows simply from the nature of valuing in general.

This brings us to the question of what is involved in valuing a personal relationship in particular. What forms of emotional vulnerability and reasons-responsiveness are characteristic of such cases? When one values a personal relationship, one’s emotional vulnerability has a dual character. One’s emotions are sensitive to what happens both to the person with whom one has the relationship and to the relationship itself. You may be sad or anxious or concerned if your friend is injured or becomes ill, and delighted if she recovers. But you may also be sad or anxious or concerned if your friendship with her seems to be in jeopardy, even though both of you are in perfect health. Valued personal relationships involve an attachment both to the person with whom one has the relationship and, although it may sound awkward to put it this way, to the relationship itself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Consider next the kind of reasons-responsiveness that is part of valuing a personal relationship. In general, to value one’s relationship with another person non-instrumentally is, in part, to see that person’s needs, interests, and desires as providing one, in contexts that may vary depending on the nature of the relationship, with reasons for action that one would not otherwise have, and with which the needs, interests, and desires of other people do not provide one. If I have a relationship with you, and if I attach non-instrumental value to that relationship, then I will see myself both as having reasons to do things in your behalf that I have no comparable reason to do for others, and as having reason to give your interests priority over theirs in at least some cases of conflict. This is part of what valuing one’s relationships involves. Of course, these *relationship-dependent reasons* need not be seen as absolute. They may instead be seen as defeasible reasons that can be outweighed or undermined or silenced by other considerations in particular cases. But if there are no contexts in which I would see your needs and interests as giving me reasons of this kind, then it is not true that I value my relationship with you.

The dual character of one’s attachment is evident here too. In addition to seeing your needs and interests as giving me reasons, I will see myself as having reasons to sustain the relationship: to ensure that it continues to flourish and to try to repair it if it has been damaged. I may, of course, decide that I want a previously valued relationship to end but, if I do so, that means I no longer value it the same way. If I profess to value a relationship but see no need to take steps to preserve it if it is in jeopardy, then, absent some special explanation, I do not value it, however favorable my attitude may be toward the person with whom I have the relationship. This means that there is a diachronic dimension to valuing a personal relationship; to value such a relationship normally involves wanting to sustain it going forward.

Despite what I have been saying, some people doubt that personal relationships feature prominently among the types of thing that we value. The truth, they suggest, is quite different. What we value, when we participate in a close personal relationship, is the person with whom we have the relationship. To suppose that it is the relationship that we value is to construe our evaluative attitudes as oddly self-referential. It is to suppose that we value others only insofar as they have something to do with us. But, the objection runs, it’s not all about us. If one participates in a close personal relationship, one loves or values the other; one does not love or value one’s relation to the other.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, valuing a relationship is not best thought of as an alternative to valuing the person with whom one has the relationship. Part of what it is to value a *relationship* is to see the needs and interests of the *person* with whom one has the relationship as giving one reasons for action. In addition – and not as an alternative -- one sees oneself as having reasons to sustain the relationship. Similarly, one’s emotions, when one values a relationship, are sensitive to what happens both to the person with whom one has the relationship and to the relationship itself. This is what I mean when I say that the attachment we exhibit when we value a personal relationship has a dual character. One is attached to the person with whom one has the relationship but one is also attached to the relationship.

Granted, it may sound odd to speak of being attached to a relationship. But the fact that we value our relationships, and not solely the people with whom we have them, is a familiar one. What contributes to a good or successful life is not the mere existence of people one admires, but one’s relationships with (some of) those people. Consider how much emotional energy people devote to thinking and worrying about their relationships with their children, their parents, their friends, and their partners, and how much people suffer when they are estranged from someone with whom they once had a close relationship. One’s child or one’s friend may be flourishing, but that does not make the pain of estrangement disappear. Estrangement is a misfortune. On the other hand, consider the extent to which flourishing relationships are sources of contentment and satisfaction for those who have them. It is both because they are sources of contentment and because estrangement is so painful that people make such efforts to sustain their relationships and to repair damaged relationships when that is possible. It goes without saying that the people with whom we have close relationships matter a great deal to us, but so do our relationships with those people. They affect our reasons and our emotions in precisely the ways that are characteristic of valuing. Whether we tend to put it this way or not, we value and are attached to the relationships as well as to the people with whom we have them. Nor is there anything self-referential about this. A personal relationship is a joint human creation or construction. To suppose that valuing a relationship is self-referential is to elide the distinction between this joint creation and oneself. And to suppose that we value only our fellow creators and not the thing we have together created is to ascribe to us an unduly atomistic view of human interaction and its fruits.

To avoid confusion, let me offer two points of clarification. First, I have said that, if we are evaluatively attached to something, then we will see that thing as valuable and see ourselves as having distinctive reasons with respect to it. But, of course, it does not follow just from the fact of our attachment that we actually have those reasons. We have them only if we are correct in thinking that the thing to which we are attached is valuable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Second, evaluative attachment is a feature of all valuing. It is an attitudinal phenomenon which consists in having a certain emotional and practical orientation toward something that one regards as valuable. As we have seen, some of the things that we value are complex items that give us dual objects of attachment. In valuing a personal relationship, we are evaluatively attached both to the person with whom we have the relationship and to the relationship itself. Yet even in these complex cases, evaluative attachment remains an attitudinal phenomenon. Sometimes, however, when I speak of “our attachments,” I am referring not to our attitudes but to their objects: to the things that we value or to which we are evaluatively attached. Similarly, when I speak of “different types of attachment,” I usually mean attachment to objects of different types, such as projects, relationships, and membership in groups. To complicate matters further, I occasionally treat the phrase “attachment to a person” as equivalent to “relationship with a person.” Although colloquially unimpeachable, this usage may be confusing in the wider context of my discussion, given my insistence that we can be evaluatively attached to our relationships in addition to the persons with whom we have those relationships. Combining these two uses of ‘attachment’ yields the seemingly absurd conclusion that we may be evaluatively attached to our attachments. Suitably disambiguated, however, this claim merely reiterates that we may be evaluatively attached to our relationships. I hope that contextual cues will suffice to make my meaning clear and to prevent these varieties of usage from creating undue confusion.

Let me turn now from personal relationships to membership in groups. People value their membership in groups and associations of various kinds. Although it is possible to value one’s membership in a group in a purely instrumental way, people sometimes value their membership in groups non-instrumentally. They find membership rewarding in its own right. What is involved in valuing non-instrumentally one’s membership in a group or association? As in the case of personal relationships, and as with valuing more generally, valuing one’s membership in a group is partly a matter of recognizing certain considerations as reason-giving. In the case of groups, I’ll call these considerations *membership-dependent reasons.* In general, these are reasons for doing one’s share, as defined by the norms and ideals of the group, to help sustain it and contribute to its purposes. Most groups and associations have formal or informal norms of individual conduct that are meant to define the responsibilities of members. To value one’s membership non-instrumentally is, in part, to see these norms – provided they are neither gravely unjust nor irrational – as giving one reasons for action in a way that the norms of other worthy groups do not. As in the case of *relationship*-dependent reasons, membership-dependent reasons are defeasible; they can be outweighed or defeated or silenced by other considerations. But if I never see myself as having such reasons, then it is not true that I value my membership in the group non-instrumentally.

Why, though, do membership-dependent reasons take the form of reasons to comply with the group’s norms? In the case of relationship-dependent reasons, the idea was that to value one’s relationship with another person non-instrumentally is to see the person’s needs, desires, and interests as providing one with reasons for action. Why should the group’s norms play the role in this case that the needs, desires, and interests of the individual play in the case of personal relationships?

Whenever we value an interpersonal bond, whether it is a personal relationship or a form of group membership, we recognize reasons to act in ways that manifest our responsiveness both to the value of the bond and to the value of those with whom we have created the bond. In the case of personal relationships, one important way in which such responsiveness is manifested is through our recognition of the needs, desires, and interests of the people with whom we have formed those relationships as considerations to be taken into account in our deliberations. Furthermore, it is manifested in our deference, across a wide range of cases, to *their* understanding of their needs, desires, and interests. This is not merely a matter of abstaining from paternalistic intervention in their behavior. It is also a matter of allowing their desires and interests, as they understand them, to shape *our* reasons. For example, the fact that they love some type of activity that leaves us cold may give us reasons, not only to avoid interfering with their engagement in the activity, but also to facilitate their engaging in it, to join them in engaging in it, or even to try to cultivate a taste for it ourselves.[[8]](#footnote-8) Of course, the presumption of deference to their understanding is defeasible, especially in cases where we regard it as profoundly misguided. But if, as a routine matter, we simply substitute our understanding for theirs, then we are not genuinely responsive to *them*: to their status and value as the independent agents with whom we have formed a common bond.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the case of groups, we again recognize reasons to respond to the value both of the social bond we have formed and of those with whom we have formed it. But here what we see as called for is not direct pairwise responsiveness by each individual member of the group to the needs and desires of every other individual member. In large groups, the individual members will in most cases not know one another, and their responsiveness to the other members is mediated through their responsiveness to the needs, desires, and interests of the group of which all are members. But how does the group express its needs, desires, and interests? As I have argued elsewhere, this is the role of group norms.[[10]](#footnote-10) Provided certain conditions are met, these norms play the role of communicating to members what it is that the group wants and needs of them. And if one values one’s membership in the group non-instrumentally, there is a presumption of deference on the part of individual members to the group’s understanding of its needs and desires, as reflected in its norms. To be sure, there will be times when individuals must act on their own understandings instead, especially if they are convinced that the group’s norms are seriously unjust, manifestly irrational, or profoundly misguided. And, of course, individuals may try to bring about changes in the group’s norms. But if, as a routine matter, one simply substitutes one’s own judgment about the group’s needs and interests for the judgments of the group itself, as expressed in its norms, then one is not responsive to the group and its members as sources of value independent of oneself.

This means that, if one values one’s membership in a group, one will see oneself as having reasons to do things that one would not otherwise have done and even, on occasion, things that one regards as ill-judged on the merits. Much the same thing is true in personal relationships. If I value my friendship with someone, then I will see myself as having reasons to do things with or for my friend that I would not otherwise have chosen to do, and on occasion I will see reasons to assist my friend even though I regard what he is doing as silly or ill-judged or unwise.[[11]](#footnote-11) As a general matter, to value one’s ties to individuals and groups is to concede to them a measure of authority over the content of one’s reasons for action.

It is clear from what has been said that to value one’s personal and social relationships is inevitably to display certain forms of partiality. If one values one’s relationship with another person, for example, then one will see that person’s desires and interests as giving one reasons for action in a way that other people’s desires and interests do not. That is part of what it is to value the relationship. One will also see that person’s desires and interests as taking priority over the desires and interests of others in at least some cases of conflict. That too is part of what it is to value the relationship. In these respects, one will display partiality toward the person with whom one has the relationship.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that partiality is the only normatively significant upshot of our attachments. Consider first the case of membership-dependent reasons. If one values one’s membership in a group, one will see the norms of that group as giving one reasons for action in a way that the norms of other groups do not. In this respect, one will be partial toward the group and its members. In explaining what this form of partiality involves or amounts to, we might say that one distributes the benefits of one’s compliance to this group and its members in preference to other groups and their members. But that is not all there is to it. As we saw, one’s responsiveness to the group’s norms also involves a posture of deference. In treating those norms as reason-giving even if one disagrees with them, one concedes to the group a degree of authority over the content of one’s reasons. Deference, no less than partiality, is involved in valuing one’s membership in a group. In fact, the relevant form of partiality cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of deference. Part of what it is to be partial to the group is to defer to its norms.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Much the same thing is true in the case of valued personal relationships. Although valuing such relationships involves responsiveness to the desires and interests of those with whom we have the relationships, this is not simply a matter of distributing benefits to these people rather than to others. It is not simply a matter of displaying distributive partiality toward them. It also involves deference, inasmuch as it involves a willingness to defer to their understanding of their desires and interests, and so to concede to them a degree of authority over the content of one’s reasons. Here again partiality and deference go hand-in-hand. And here too the relevant form of partiality cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of deference. The partiality one displays toward the people one loves consists in part in a willingness to defer to them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In general, the personal relationships and social groups we most value are joint human creations in which people shape and share one another’s reasons and, to one degree or another, their lives. They are not simply distributional arrangements in which each person takes up a distributive position with respect to the other, nor is the aim of the participants to implement a mutually advantageous distribution of benefit. It is, after all, a criticism to say that someone’s attitude toward others is “transactional.” To value one’s relationship with another person or one’s membership in a group is to inhabit and try to sustain a shared practical and emotional environment which gives one’s life part of its shape. One’s aim in doing this is not to confer benefits on some while withholding them from others, still less to implement a biased distribution of relationship-independent goods.

Of course, this is too simple, both because distributive issues arise within personal relationships and social groups and because the establishment of such relationships and groups affects the wider distribution of benefits among participants and non-participants even if that is not its organizing aim. That is why questions about the deontic force of relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons, and about the extent to which they take priority over other reasons, are persistent sources of controversy. But this does not mean that having a personal attachment simply consists in, or amounts to nothing more than, having biased distributional preferences or displaying distributive partiality. That view misunderstands what personal relationships and other forms of attachment are, and leaves it looking mysterious why anyone should see them as fundamental constituents of a good and successful life.

The points I have been making can be extended if we consider, in addition to personal relationships and group membership, the patterns of purposeful activity I have been calling personal projects. What is it to value a project, as opposed to an interpersonal attachment like a relationship or membership in a group? One complication, in trying to answer this question, is that some projects have an essentially interpersonal character. For the members of a comedy duo, their personal projects may be inseparable from their relationship with one another. In such cases, it may be impossible to isolate the normative significance of the personal projects alone. Not all projects are like this, however, and, for the sake of clarity, I will focus on “purely personal” projects that do not have an essentially interpersonal character.

At the most general level, valuing a project comprises the same three elements as the other types of valuing we have considered. It involves seeing the project as valuable or worthwhile, being vulnerable to a range of emotions depending on how the project fares, and seeing oneself as having reasons (“project-dependent reasons” in this case) that one would not otherwise have. There are also differences, however, between valuing a project and valuing a personal relationship or membership in a group. One difference concerns the perceived deontic character of project-dependent reasons as compared with relationship-dependent (and membership-dependent) reasons, although the difference is subtle. Reasons of both kinds may strike one as having the force of practical necessity. One may feel that one *must* care for one’s aging parents or one’s small child, but one may also feel that one *must* finish writing one’s novel or planting one’s garden. Yet most of us experience the character of the necessity differently in cases of the two kinds. We are apt to feel that we have an obligation to care for our parents or children, and that these obligations are owed to them. By contrast, we may well feel that we must finish writing our novel, but unless the novel is being written collaboratively, or unless we have made a contractual commitment to deliver the manuscript to the publisher by a certain date, we are less likely to feel that we have an obligation to finish it, let alone an obligation that is owed to someone in particular. Although reasons of both kinds may strike us with the force of practical necessity, there is normally nobody to whom we see ourselves as answerable or accountable if we fail to act on a purely project-dependent reason. By contrast, the feeling that we are answerable to someone is a normal part of the experience of recognizing relationship-dependent reasons.

This experiential difference corresponds to a familiar moral distinction. It is often thought that, whereas we have moral duties to act on our relationship-dependent reasons, we are morally permitted but not required to act on our project-dependent reasons. Whereas relationship-dependent reasons represent obligations or duties that are owed to certain individuals, we areentitledto pursue our projects but have no duty to anyone to do so. If I neglect my child, I violate a moral duty. If I fail to finish my novel, I do not.

This view is not universally accepted. Some philosophers believe that we have duties to *ourselves* to complete our projects, and that, morally speaking, there is no deep deontic distinction between projects and relationships. Both are sources of duties. And despite what I have said, this view may coincide with the way some people experience the force of their project-dependent reasons. Insofar as they feel they must complete their projects, they may find it natural to say that they owe it to themselves to do so. The experience of practical necessity, for them, is always an experience of accountability or answerability. In the case of relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons, it is an experience of owing something to someone else. In the case of project-dependent reasons, it is an experience of owing something to oneself.

For our purposes, it doesn’t matter which way we characterize the relevant experiential distinction. We may describe it as a distinction between those forms of practical necessity that are experienced as involving obligation or answerability and those that are not, or we may describe it as a distinction between those forms of practical necessity that are experienced as involving answerability to others and those that are experienced as involving answerability to oneself. Either way, there is a significant difference between cases of the two types. For our purposes, that is what matters.

It matters partly for negative reasons. It confirms that partiality does not exhaust the normative significance of our attachments. It is true that, if we value our relationship with someone, we will see that person’s desires or interests as giving us reasons that other people’s desires and interests do not. And if we value a personal project, we will see it as reason-giving for us in a way that other people’s projects are not. Attachment does involve partiality. But we experience the deontic force of relationship-dependent and project-dependent reasons differently. Both may strike us with the force of practical necessity. But relationship-dependent reasons are associated with deference and answerability to others, whereas project-dependent reasons are associated with imperatives that derive not from other people but from patterns of purposive activity to which we are committed and around which we have organized our lives.

This difference points us in a more positive direction. By focusing our attention on the kind of practical and emotional orientation our evaluative attachments require, and on the character of the perceived necessities associated with such attachments, it invites us to reflect on what it is about our attachments that makes them such central elements of the lives we aspire to lead. The deference and answerability to others that are associated with interpersonal attachments and the responsiveness to the demands of a purposive activity that are associated with personal projects are evidently things we seek out. We *want* to lead lives that are marked by these forms of deference, answerability, and responsiveness. What does this tell us about ourselves?

To answer that question, consider again the case of interpersonal attachments. The hallmarks of these attachments are accountability and deference to other people and emotional vulnerability to their fates. Insofar as one values one’s relationships with other people, one sees oneself as accountable to them for one’s conduct; one is prepared to defer to their understanding of their needs and interests; and one is vulnerable to feelings of sadness, loss, and grief if they are harmed. More generally, the personal relationships and social groups that we value are joint human creations in which we shape one another’s reasons and through which we seek to construct a shared practical and affective environment. Our interpersonal attachments have a social character not merely because they involve other people but because they involve mutual answerability and deference, shared practical authority, and the joint authorship of a genuinely social creation.

Consider now the case of personal projects. In valuing a project, we manifest a responsiveness to the demands of a purposive activity that compels us. If our project is to learn to speak Italian or to master the guitar or to plant a garden, the reasons for action we recognize are fixed by the nature of the language we wish to speak, the instrument and the music that we wish to play, or the flora that we wish to cultivate. In all these cases, as in the case of interpersonal attachments, we respond to the demands of something outside ourselves, and it is, in part, the sustained responsiveness to such demands that we find rewarding.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Insofar as we seek to develop and sustain interpersonal attachments and personal projects, then, and insofar as we view such attachments and projects as being among the most important constituents of a good life, we reveal something significant about ourselves, namely, that what we find rewarding is to engage with the world around us.[[16]](#footnote-16) And part of what such engagement involves is submission to constraints and requirements that originate outside ourselves. We are, and we want to be, responsive to needs and requirements we did not invent, whether these are the needs and requirements of other people or groups or instead of the worldly activities in which we wish to participate or at which we wish to excel. The idea that the world simply supplies us with materials that we use to satisfy our pre-existing desires is a distortion of our actual relation to the world. One might call it “the infantile model,” except that this would be unfair to infants, who exhibit forms of sensitivity and responsiveness to other people and to the world around them almost from the beginning.

Of course, the kind of responsiveness to external demands that we find rewarding is not sought just for its own sake but for what it makes possible: a friendship, knowledge of another language, a flourishing garden. But this does not mean that such responsiveness has purely instrumental value. Manifesting sufficient responsiveness to the vocabulary and grammar of the Italian language isn’t a means to acquiring knowledge of Italian. It is what knowing Italian consists in. Similarly, suitable patterns of mutual accountability are not instruments for the establishment of human relationships but part of what human relationships consist in. Although we do not want responsiveness for its own sake, neither do we want it for purely instrumental reasons. We want it because it plays a constitutive role in forming and sustaining the types of relationship and activity that we find most compelling.

These points have a bearing on debates about the nature of the individual good. It is common for philosophical theories of “well-being,” or of what is good for an individual, to be divided into three categories: hedonist theories, desire-satisfaction theories, and objective-list theories. Crudely: hedonist theories hold that what is good for a person is pleasure and the absence of pain; desire-satisfaction theories hold that what is good for people is the satisfaction of their actual or informed desires; and objective-list theories hold that what is good for people is to achieve certain objective goods, such as knowledge and friendship. None of these theories does justice to the importance of personal attachments or the role they play in our lives. Neither hedonist nor desire-satisfaction theories assign attachments any special status. Hedonist theories take note of them only insofar as they must be included among the many possible sources of pleasure and pain. Desire-satisfaction theories take note of them only insofar as they must be included among the many possible objects and sources of desire. Neither of these interpretations does justice to our conviction that personal attachments are among the central constituents of a good and successful life.

Objective-list theories can in principle do better, because there is room for such theories to treat personal attachments as items on the list of objective goods whose achievement enhances individuals’ well-being. But even this gets the emphasis wrong. Personal attachments are not simply items we hope our lives will contain. An old criticism of utilitarianism holds that it treats people as mere containers of valuable experiences. The theories of well-being I am discussing, including objective-list theories, suffer from a related deficiency. They take the idea of an individual’s life for granted, and hold that its quality depends on what it contains: pleasure, satisfied desires, or items from some objective list. We might call this, uncharitably, the shopping-cart view of life. One’s life, according to this view, is like a shopping cart, and how well it goes depends on which items end up in the cart. But one’s life is not a shopping cart, and personal attachments are not simply items that may or may not end up in the cart. Instead, it is largely through the cultivation and development of such attachments, and the (sufficiently) willing submission to their demands and requirements, that we lead our lives in the first place. Although it may be possible to lead one’s life without any emotional investment at all in personal relationships, social group membership, or participation in extended purposive activities that one finds compelling, such a life will tend toward aimlessness and accidie. We lead our lives through the exercise of our agential powers and, as a matter of human nature if not of logic, we organize the exercise of those powers through the cultivation and development of personal attachments: through engaged participation in personal relationships and social arrangements and patterns of purposive activity. A person who never sought to do any of these things would not merely be missing out on important goods but would barely be leading a human life at all.

This is not a point about autonomy. My thought is not that valuable personal attachments must be autonomously chosen if they are to contribute to our well-being. I am instead making two different points. The first is that such attachments, rather than just being items that one’s life may or may not contain, are the characteristic products of the type of sustained exercise of one’s agential powers that constitutes the leading of a life. The second point is that the value of personal attachments depends on the fact that they require us to submit to the demands and requirements of people and activities outside ourselves. There is an important difference of spirit and emphasis between this view and those that emphasize the value of autonomous choice. Those views, as they are often formulated, point us inward. They emphasize the value of self-creation: of governing oneself through the choice of one’s ends and attachments. By contrast, I have argued that the value of our attachments depends in part on the fact that they orient us toward practical necessities whose source lies outside ourselves and whose content is fixed independently of our wishes and choices. Our attachments point us outward rather than inward, by requiring us to account for ourselves to others and to submit to the requirements of activities we find compelling. We achieve good lives not simply by ruling ourselves but by focusing our attention on the world around us and by developing a practical orientation that enables us to engage in ways we find rewarding with items drawn from the rich array of valuable activities and social forms that the world has to offer.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I do not mean to deny the importance of autonomy. But in thinking about the relation between autonomy and attachment there are two mistakes to be avoided. The first is to fall prey to an exaggerated voluntarism, in which one supposes that our attachments are valuable only if they are freely chosen as such. Many valuable attachments are formed or develop gradually and do not result from any single act of will. A relationship, once superficial, may deepen imperceptibly over time. A personal project, initially undertaken without much conviction, may gradually come to matter to one a great deal. A group to which one was assigned, or which one joined for purely instrumental reasons, may slowly come to play an important role in one’s life. Family or other social affiliations may be cherished, and may help to define how one sees oneself and one’s life, without one’s ever having chosen those affiliations, let alone having chosen to cherish them. To the extent that the value of an attachment depends on its satisfying the standard of autonomy, that standard must be understood in such a way as to be compatible with these facts.

The second mistake is to suppose that, insofar as considerations of autonomy bear on the value of an attachment, it is always the autonomy of the person whose attachment it is that is in question. But this is not so. The value of one’s attachment to another person depends, not solely on whether one’s attachment was formed or embraced autonomously, but on whether it is conditioned by one’s recognition of the other person’s autonomy. If I do not accept that you are an independent agent with your own needs, desires, and interests, and that your exercise of your agential capacities is as important to you as mine is to me, then the value of my attachment to you is compromised by considerations having to do with your autonomy, not mine. Properly understood, considerations of autonomy also point us outward and not only inward.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Of course, the need to respect the autonomy of the other person does not arise if one’s attachment is to a project or activity that does not involve other people. Yet, as we have seen, an outward-looking orientation is required in these cases too. If my project is to plant a garden or to learn to speak Italian, I must be sensitive to the constraints imposed on my activities by the things I hope to achieve. I must be alert to the need of the plants for the right kind of soil, for nutrients, for shade, for sunlight, for water. I must be sensitive to the grammar and vocabulary of the Italian language. In these ways, I must respect the objects of my attachment, or else my project will fail. Indeed, it will scarcely count as a project at all. It follows that the outward-looking orientation is more general than, and does not have its source in, a concern for the autonomy of the other. It has its source, as I have said, in our desire for engagement with the world. And part of what such engagement requires is that we meet the world on its terms.

The importance we assign to personal attachments suggests that this is something we find it deeply rewarding to do. We *want* to meet the world on its terms, to respect its demands and requirements. This does not mean that we are passive in the face of the world as we find it. Respecting the world and the constraints it imposes is rewarding because it makes active engagement possible. In planting my garden, I am active and not passive. I even change a little part of the world. In general, I defer to the pertinent external constraints, not because I am attracted to deference for its own sake, but because it plays a constitutive role in some achievement to which I aspire, whether it is the establishment of a personal relationship or the cultivation of a garden or the mastery of a skill or a body of knowledge. My achievement may be a creative one and it may change the world on a smaller or larger scale. Or it may be more humdrum. But the personal attachments we value all involve engagement: we interact with the world on its terms and, in so doing, we seek to establish or to create or to achieve or to sustain something of value.

These considerations shed additional light on the normative significance of partiality. I have argued that, although personal attachments do give rise to forms of partiality, such partiality is not best interpreted in distributive terms and does not exhaust the normative significance of those attachments. We misunderstand the significance of our projects and relationships if we view them solely as occasions for the display of partiality or as morally dubious departures from a presumptively authoritative norm of equal concern. And we misunderstand partiality itself if we fail to appreciate its connections to the deference and responsiveness to external constraints that are hallmarks of personal attachment. We can now go further. The partiality we display, insofar as we form and sustain personal attachments, is not normatively fundamental. It is a byproduct of the deference and responsiveness that are essential to our engagement with the world. We cannot form and sustain valuable personal relationships without seeing ourselves as answerable to the other participants in those relationships. And we cannot develop and sustain valuable projects without responding to the constraints imposed on our activities by the nature and requirements of those projects themselves. More generally, we cannot engage with the world without meeting it on its terms, and we cannot meet the world on its terms without responding differentially – or displaying partiality – with respect to the objects of our engagement. Partiality is thus a byproduct of engagement. We cannot engage with the world at all without exhibiting forms of partiality.

This tells us something not only about partiality but also about what it is to lead our lives. I have emphasized the importance of cultivating and sustaining personal attachments, and I have called attention to the role played in the formation of such attachments by the phenomena I have called answerability, responsiveness, and engagement. These phenomena reveal something underlying our aspiration to form and sustain valuable attachments. They tell us that the perceived necessities or imperatives with which our attachments present us are imperatives associated with the creation of shared social arrangements and environments and the successful prosecution of extended forms of purposive activity. Our determination to form and sustain such attachments, and so to subject ourselves to these necessities, reflects a more general determination to find ways of engaging with the world. And in the end, it is by engaging with the world, in ways that are allowed for by our circumstances and opportunities, congenial to our temperaments and interests, and suited to our talents and abilities, that we seek to realize our deepest values and to achieve the most rewarding and enduring forms of satisfaction. It is in this way that we lead our lives.

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1. See, for example, Scheffler 2010c. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some philosophers dislike this use of the term ‘projects’, which seems to them to misrepresent the character of people’s aims, activities, and choices. See, for example, Wollheim 1984, pp. 266-7. However, I regard it as a useful term of art and will continue to employ it. For Williams’s use of the term, see Williams 1973, especially Section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here I summarize the view defended in Scheffler 2010b. It applies only to non-instrumental valuing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Evaluative attachment is to be distinguished from the kind of attachment investigated by theorists like John Bowlby. Bowlby studied the “attachment behavior” of infants and young children toward their mothers or primary caregivers. He considered attachment behavior to have an instinctual basis and to be manifested, in one way or another, in many non-human species (Bowlby 1982). It is possible that the type of attachment that Bowlby studied is the developmental precursor of the more cognitively sophisticated and value-laden phenomenon that I am calling *evaluative attachment*, but this is purely speculative. For an illuminating discussion of the relation between infant attachment and adult love, see Harcourt 2016. See also Wonderly 2016, 2017, and 2019 for the development of a theory of attachment that draws on Bowlby’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Kolodny 2003,especially sections 5 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Keller 2013, pp. 62-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Even then, we may be mistaken about either the content or the force of the reasons. Moreover, in order for us to have such reasons, we must occupy a position that is suitable for valuing the thing. I have said more about this condition in Scheffler 2010b, pp. 34-37, and Scheffler 2018b, pp. 87-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I am indebted to Evan Behrle for discussion of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a related (but more heavily moralized) discussion, see Koltonski 2016. The kind of deference I am describing here should, of course, be distinguished from the “self-abnegating deference” discussed in Westlund 2003 and exemplified by the “Deferential Wife” discussed in Hill 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Scheffler 2018a, from which this discussion of membership-dependent reasons is drawn. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Related points are made by Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett (2000), though they go further in some respects than I would. See also Koltonski 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Of course, some relationships are not valuable, even though the participants value them. If a relationship is not valuable, then the display of partiality, inevitable though it may be, lacks justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For relevant discussion of deference, see Westlund 2013, although her concerns are partly orthogonal to mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jorah Dannenberg uses similar language to describe the epistemic dimension of friendship. He writes: “If we should regard our friends as, other things equal, entitled to our trust, then friendship requires … a willingness to surrender part of one’s power to author for oneself one’s own conception of the world. In other words, we are bound to our friends in a way that involves letting them take part in making up our very sense of the world and what it is like – especially, though not exclusively, the social and emotional world we inhabit along with them” (Dannenberg 2018, p. 216). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Iris Murdoch uses a strikingly similar example to make a related point: “If I am learning, say, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality” (Murdoch 2001, p. 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My use of the concept of engagement, like my reliance on the concepts of valuing and attachment, is indebted to the writings of Joseph Raz (especially Raz 1986, 1999, and 2001). My views do not always coincide with his, and I sometimes deploy such concepts for purposes different from his, but there are significant thematic affinities, and I have been greatly influenced by the use he makes of the same suite of concepts. The concept of engagement also plays an important role in Susan Wolf’s account of the meaningfulness of lives (Wolf 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The importance of directing our attention outward is a central theme of Murdoch 2001. The bearing of Murdoch’s view on questions about partiality is contested. For contrasting views, see Blum 1986 and Velleman 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For relevant discussion of the relation between autonomy and love, see Harcourt 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)