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Author(s): John Cottingham

Source: *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 144 (Jul., 1986), pp. 357-373

Published by: Blackwell Publishing for The Philosophical Quarterly

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2220190>

Accessed: 01/02/2009 00:04

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PARTIALITY, FAVOURITISM AND MORALITY

BY JOHN COTTINGHAM

Many philosophers are impartialists: they maintain that morality requires us to allocate our time and resources without according special preference to our own goals and interests and without displaying favouritism or partiality towards those to whom we happen to be in some way specially related. Despite its widespread support from various versions of utilitarianism, socialism, Christianity and other creeds, impartialism is untenable. First, the practical feasibility of impartialism is very much in doubt. All of us accord massive priority to our own plans and projects, careers, families, loved ones, friends; it is not easy to see how any normal human being could seriously attempt to set about dividing up his time and resources in a way which ignored self-referential categories such as 'mine' and 'ours'. Second, and more important, reflection reveals that it is very doubtful whether we should even *try* to adopt an impartialist ethic; for when applied to actual cases, impartialism, so far from being a shining ideal at which to aim, is exposed as morally suspect. To choose to save one's own child from a burning building when an impartial consideration of the balance of general utility would favour rescuing someone else first, is *not* (as impartialists must claim) a perhaps understandable but nonetheless regrettable lapse from the highest moral standards; on the contrary, it is the morally correct course – it is precisely what a good parent *ought* to do. A parent who leaves his child to burn, on the grounds that the building contains someone else whose future contribution to the general welfare promises to be greater, is not a hero; he is (rightly) an object of moral contempt, a moral leper.¹

This much has been established in recent attacks on impartialism.² But if impartialism is untenable, are there not equal problems with its contrary, partialism? That is the subject of this paper. I shall argue that the partialist faces serious difficulties but that these can be overcome. As a crude first shot, I define partialism as the thesis that *it is (not merely psychologically*

¹ The phrase 'moral leper' suggests that the parent who fails to save his own child is in breach of a moral duty. I believe we are sometimes under such positive duties to be partial; but in what follows I shall restrict myself to the lesser claim that partiality is sometimes morally correct (i.e. at least permissible).

² See J. Cottingham, "Ethics and Impartiality", *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983) 83–99; A. Oldenquist, "Loyalties", *Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1982) 173–94.

understandable but) morally correct to favour one's own. By 'one's own' is meant those to whom the agent has some special relationship or personal tie (though this will need refining shortly).

NEPOTISM AND CORRUPTION

To say without qualification that it is morally correct to favour one's own clearly will not do. A civil servant who in placing a contract shows favouritism to his friends or relations is (rightly) liable to be dismissed. Nor is the case of the public official the only type of case where partiality is impermissible.³ The personnel manager of a privately owned company may be censured for cronyism or nepotism even though he has sworn no oath of office to serve the public impartially. The reason why the manager is not permitted to show partiality seems to derive from the fact that he is, in view of his job, obligated to do all in his power to promote the interests of the company. So if, in deciding promotions, he passes over an able candidate in favour of his own indolent and inefficient nephew, he is failing in his duty – a duty that requires him to appoint staff on their merits (given the premise that a merit-based system serves the company's interests best). A similar case is that of an examiner in a school or college (whether public or private). The nature of the examiner's job imposes a duty to assess students' work fairly, in accordance with the appropriate criteria ('he's produced a well-argued term paper' is a relevant consideration; 'she is my cousin's niece' just isn't). The situation in these various different cases, then, is that *either*, in what I shall call the "direct" case, (such as that of the public official) the agent is under a specific duty to be impartial; *or*, in the "indirect" case (such as that of the personnel manager) the agent is under a duty to perform an activity or job the requirements of which involve a duty to make non-biased assessments based on a range of objectively determined criteria. To take account of these complications, we need to redefine partialism as the thesis that *unless one is under a direct or indirect duty to be impartial, it is morally correct to favour one's own.*

FAVOURING OUR OWN: CIRCLES OF PREFERENCE

But what exactly is meant by the vague phrase 'one's own'? The phrase implies that those picked out for special treatment are specified not in terms of some descriptive (and therefore universalizable) quality or feature that they possess, but in terms of some particular relationship which they have to the agent. Thus, in the fire case, my decision to favour my child is based

³ This (erroneous) impression was given by the exclusive focus on "public" examples in Cottingham, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

simply on the fact that she is *my* daughter: there is a non-eliminably particular, self-referential element in my rationale for selecting this child rather than some other.

[This last point perhaps needs filling out, lest the contrast between particularity and universalizability should mislead here. The reason for my selecting this child is not some universalizable feature that she possesses, such that I ought to prefer any child with this feature; for any child descriptively similar to this one will not do, if she is not related to *me*. But note that although there is a non-eliminable reference to a singular term involved in the specification of the reason for action here, the partialist's principle of action is, of course, universalizable in the sense that he may be perfectly prepared to prescribe that any parent in a similar situation ought to favour his own child. So there is nothing inherently contra-rational in the partialist's position: he need not be open to the charge of arbitrarily claiming for himself some privilege that he would not be prepared to grant to others.]

The above remarks about self-referentiality still leave the *scope* of the phrase 'one's own' very unclear. My child counts as one of "my own" whom I may legitimately favour, since she is one of my family. But if X's belonging to my family is a legitimate reason for my favouring X, what about X's belonging to my nation? What about X's belonging to my race? Suppose, walking down the street, I come across two beggars, both equally in need of assistance, and I have only a single banknote, so that I cannot assist both. (Assume that there are no complications connected with my job or professional duties: I am merely a private citizen, going for a walk in my spare time, so that there are no *ex officio* duties of impartiality upon me.) May I, in such a case legitimately give the money to X because X is, like me, a Caucasian? Or, if one of the beggars is an Anglo-Saxon, and one a Hispanic, may I legitimately favour the Anglo-Saxon on the grounds that he is one of "my lot"? These questions suggest that partialism has a serious challenge to meet. It appears to license chauvinist and racist behaviour of the kind which most serious moral thinkers would unreservedly condemn. Partialism appears to lead us down the road to accepting all sorts of arbitrary and unfair patterns of discrimination.

With this difficulty in mind, let us draw up a list (not intended to be complete) of various forms of partialism:

- (1) Familism (S favours X over Y because X is a member of S's family.)
- (2) Kinshipism (Wider than familism: S favours X because X is related to S by some bond of kinship.)
- (3) Clanism (In the two beggars case, a Scotsman might favour a member of his own clan, e.g. give to a MacDonald if he was himself of that clan.)

- (4) Patriotism
- (5) Racism
- (6) Sexism
- (7) Planetism (S favours X because X is a creature from S's own planet.)

The final item in the above list belongs in the realm of science fiction, but in a futuristic setting one might imagine having to make a choice between an earthman and a creature such as one of Asimov's "Chloros" – repulsive looking creatures who have stalk-heads (their brains are in their abdomens) and breathe chlorine gas, but who are intelligent, sensitive and respectful of others, and thus from an impartial standpoint as worthy of moral consideration as we are. In Asimov's story, an Earth-patriot known as Colonel Windham displays unashamedly "planetist" behaviour. He has little time for "the blasted green fellas", and when a member of his party agrees to mount an attack on them, hails him as a fellow patriot: "Dash it, let me shake your hand. I like you. You're an Earthman, by heaven. Do this and, win or die, I'll bear witness for you."⁴

Even planetism does not exhaust the scope of ever widening partialisms. One could presumably imagine "galaxism" – the policy of giving preferential treatment to members of one's own galaxy. Or one could go even wider. A well known joke-button worn at astronomy conferences reads 'Support your local group'. The term refers not to some particular faction of astronomy departments, but to what astronomers, with mind-numbing matter-of-factness, refer to as our "local" group of galaxies (the group to which our own Milky Way galaxy and the Andromeda galaxy belong).

In the above list of partialisms, racism is the "leading" term: it controls the dynamic of our moral response, functioning as a paradigm of moral indefensibility. It is striking, for example, that the liberation movements of recent history – the Women's Movement and the Animal Rights Movement – have been able to exert great pressure by comparing the male chauvinist and the speciesist with the racist. The central argument of the liberationists here is that for me to favour X over Y just because he's one of "my lot" (my gender, my species, my race), is, in the absence of some further morally relevant difference between X and Y, a piece of purely arbitrary, and hence improper, discrimination. The case of patriotism at first sight seems rather different from that of speciesism and sexism. For one thing, the two latter "isms" have never in the past been regarded as virtues; the terms were coined to denote unconscious, or at least unreflective, patterns of conduct which had largely gone unchallenged. To challenge them, to exhibit them as cases of arbitrary discrimination, was *eo ipso* to expose them as vices. 'Patriotism', by contrast,

⁴ I. Asimov, "C Chute" in *Nightfall One* (London, 1971), p. 161.

so far from being a label coined by a liberation movement to tag a lurking vice, was and still is widely regarded as denoting a positive virtue; to have a special preferential concern for one's own nation is probably taken by most people to be a good thing, and the label 'patriotic' has, on the whole, favourable connotations. But even here there are increasing doubts. The horror of two world wars, both embarked on with considerable nationalistic fervour, has to some extent checked the traditional extolling of *amor patriae*; and, more recently, doubts about the legitimacy of patriotic partiality have been generated by the rise of ecological awareness and the recognition that the fate of all the inhabitants of our planet is inextricably linked. In this more reflective climate there have appeared a number of "globalist" writers,⁵ who have cast serious doubt on the extent to which, in distributing our resources, we are morally entitled to favour our own fellow countrymen (at least to the extent that we normally do).

All these considerations appear to point towards the conclusion that the careful and reflective moral thinker ought to regard our list of partialisms as something of a black list. It begins to look (as indeed is suggested by Asimov's caricature of the blinkered "Earth-patriot") as if adherence to these partialisms is the mark of a narrow, unliberated mind. Familism, it is true, does not arouse such reactions, but in the light of the doubts now raised about the other members of the list, it appears that it will not do to adopt the strategy of one recent philosophical defender of patriotism who proposes to "defend the easier case of family loyalty and assume that . . . whatever we can conclude about the one case we can conclude in principle about the other".⁶ Rather, the boot seems to be on the other foot: the onus appears to be on the defender of familism to show how it does not bear the taint of arbitrary discrimination that seems to infect the other kinds of partialism.

TWO STRATEGIES

The partialist seems to have two possible ways of meeting this challenge. One would be to try to construct a blanket defence of all the members of the list, by arguing that we are within our rights as free moral agents in according preferential treatment to the members of any group we choose to favour. The other strategy would be to provide some principle of selectivity for differentiating between various types of partialism and explaining why some could be defensible even though others are unacceptable.

⁵ See, for example, J. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth, 1977) ch. 7; and P. Singer *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 1979) chs. 1, 2.

⁶ Oldenquist, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

The argument from bald preference

The first of these strategies, I will argue, cannot succeed. Indeed, it may appear offensive even to discuss the possibility of a justificatory strategy wide enough to include, for example, racial partiality within its ambit. As Stephen Clark has observed, in another context, “to pretend to debate with proper detachment questions which hardly seem open to debate . . . seems more than foolish, it seems disgusting”.⁷ Nonetheless, it is possible to find cases where a “bald preference” for one’s own (one’s race, one’s country, one’s sex) seems at first sight to be at least permissible. Returning to the two beggar case, if one of the mendicants is white and the other black, may not a black passer-by legitimately choose to give his banknote to the latter, for no other reason than “he’s one of my race”? Perhaps; but our intuitions here are complicated by a past history of oppression and discrimination: we are not, surely, so ready to accept that a white man may legitimately favour a white over a black beggar. But take a slightly less emotive case. Suppose our passer-by is a British emigré to the U.S., and he recognises from the accent of one of the beggars (“Spare the price of a cup of tea, Guv?”) that he is being asked for money by a fellow expatriate. May not the Englishman legitimately favour his fellow-countryman? Does he have to justify his conduct by searching for some non-self-referential characteristic which entitles the recipient to favourable consideration? (American readers are invited to consult their intuitions with regard to the case of an American expatriate in Europe: may he not legitimately favour a fellow expatriate in need?)

It may be thought that favouritism in such cases (in the absence of some universalizable difference between the two recipients) can only be based on sentimentality and caprice, not on sound morality. But to maintain that such capricious “bald preference” could not be the basis of a morally defensible choice may be question-begging. Assuming an agent is under no direct or indirect duty to be impartial, is he not morally entitled to exercise his preferences as he wishes? Can he not justifiably say, with the character in the parable, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”⁸

This argument, which hinges on the notion of individual autonomy, has, I think, a certain persuasiveness; but it will not ultimately do the work that would have to be done to provide a blanket defence of partiality. The fact that “it’s my money” does indeed provide a strong *prima facie* case for saying that the rationale for the distribution of the money should be decided on by *me*, rather than imposed on me from outside. But this does not entail that my choices, and the reasons that I provide to support them, are immune from moral criticism. True, from the legal point of view, a bestower of charity is

⁷ S. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford, 1977, rev. 1984), p. 1 (adapted).

⁸ The Labourers in the Vineyard: Matthew 20:14.

entitled to specify quite arbitrarily and capriciously who should be the beneficiaries of that charity; but from the moral point of view her choice may still be open to censure. The old lady who leaves her entire million dollars for the promotion of an institute for the raising of tailless cats with blue eyes may legally be entitled to have her bequest upheld; but morally she is open to criticism that she should have left her money to some worthier cause. Even the free bestowers of charity have some duty to reflect on the moral consequences of their bequests and the worthiness of alternative recipients. The upshot is that the autonomy argument, though creating a presumption in favour of people's being allowed to distribute their resources as they wish, is not strong enough to guarantee the partialist immunity from moral censure if his choices turn out to be based on arbitrary and capricious criteria; and the charge against him is, precisely, that "X belongs to *my* group" is, in the absence of further argument, an arbitrary and capricious reason for favouring X.

The argument from "bald preference", then, does not seem enough to provide a moral justification for the acts of favouritism of racists and other partialists. Hence, if some partialisms (e.g. familism) are to be defended, we are thrown back on the second strategy mentioned above: instead of trying to construct a general justification of any and all partiality, the aim will be to provide some principle which will drive a wedge between acceptable partialisms, such as familism, and unacceptable partialisms, such as racism.

The argument from the life-plan

The starting point for developing such a principle is the thought that ethical judgements are not simply arbitrary prescriptions. It does not suffice, in order to make an ethical judgement, that I simply ordain some course of action for myself and others (e.g. that one should twiddle one's thumbs five hundred times a day). Moral judgements cannot be isolated "fiats" of this kind; if I am to count as making a moral judgement I must be prepared, at least in principle, to show how my prescription contributes to some overall blueprint for the good life – how it forms part of, or connects with, my vision of how life should be lived if it is to be worthwhile. This requirement is simply a consequence of putting the point, familiar from Aristotle, that the object of ethics is *eudaimonia*, generally translated 'happiness', but perhaps better explicated in terms of the notion of a fulfilled or "flourishing" life.

[A brief digression. The connection between ethics and *eudaimonia* is sometimes, wrongly, taken to show that the supposed logical "gap" between description and evaluation does not after all exist. This is a confusion which has been amply disposed of elsewhere,⁹ so here I will simply note that while the connection between ethics and *eudaimonia* does indeed put certain

⁹ See J. Cottingham, "Neonaturalism and its Pitfalls", *Philosophy* 58 (1983) pp. 445–70.

systematic constraints on what can count as a good action or an acceptable prescription, it still leaves open the possibility that two equally rational people may disagree, “after all the facts are in and agreed”, about what it is right to do. Thus if *A*'s conception of human welfare involves an essentially organic vision of social cooperation, he may condemn prayer and fasting as a case of self-indulgent timewasting; *B*, on the other hand, may have a blueprint specifying detachment and withdrawal as the key to fulfilment, in which case he may extol prayer and fasting as virtuous practices. There may well be a large number of plausible recipes for the good life. Thus, in the thumb-twiddling case, the constraints under discussion do not entail that ‘twiddle your thumbs five hundred times a day’ could not under any circumstances count as a moral judgement; the point is simply that, for it so to count, there would have to be some explanation of how and why it is good (e.g. perhaps it soothes tension, or promotes a contemplative attitude which is the first step to Nirvana.)]

Returning now to the partialist, it will follow that if partialism is to be a plausible ethical stance, it cannot simply consist of the bald assertion that certain kinds of self-referential favouring are permitted or “good”. Rather, the partialist must show how the principle of favouring those to whom he is related in a certain way contributes to a fulfilled life. And as soon as this dimension – which may be called the dimension of the “life-plan” – is in play, it becomes possible to make important moral distinctions between various kinds of partialism.

AGENT-RELATED PARTIALISM

Perhaps the simplest and clearest case of a kind of partiality that may be defended by reference to the notion of a life-plan is the partiality which all human agents accord to their own plans and projects. Legitimate preference for one's own projects, or “agent-related partialism”, involves the notion that in deciding whether to support *X*'s goals or *Y*'s goals, the fact that I am *X* may legitimately carry a certain degree of moral weight. (Note: a *certain* degree, not an overwhelming or an infinite degree. It is quite compatible with the principle of agent-related partialism to recognise that on many occasions my own projects, even when accorded suitable extra weight because they are mine, may rightly be overridden because they conflict with more important projects of others.) Now the fundamental point is this: the principle of according a special extra weight to one's own concerns just because they are one's own, is not only a principle which all of us as a matter of fact follow; it is one which seems an essential prerequisite for thinking of oneself as a human agent, as an individual, as a person with a distinctive identity. To be a person – one who has continuing desires, plans, projects –

is to have commitments, to be *involved*; and this in turn necessarily entails that, in our evaluations, we accord a certain threshold weight to the particular plans and projects that we have decided to pursue. If each day I was to consider how each moment could best be spent furthering, for example, global utility, without according any special priority to the fact that certain projects are the ones in which *I* am involved, it seems that I would disintegrate as an individual. For I would be obliged to drop any activity or project in which I was engaged whenever another project presented itself whose contribution to the general utility was marginally greater. In such a case, it seems that I would have no real character – there would be no distinctive pattern to my life. I would simply be, to adapt a phrase of Bernard Williams, a cog in a “satisfaction system” which “happened to be near certain causal levers at a certain time”.¹⁰ Thus, agent-related partialism is not a matter of arbitrarily or capriciously favouring the projects of a particular individual – me; rather, a degree of preference for one’s own projects turns out to be an essential prerequisite for any plausible blueprint for human welfare. It seems that any ethic which requires people to be agents, to pursue any plans or projects – and that means any ethic whatsoever – must on pain of absurdity permit agent-related partialism.

If this argument is correct, it is a very powerful one, since it suggests that the principle of agent-related partialism is not just defensible but is an essential pillar of any conceivable ethical system. But the very sweepingness of this conclusion may give rise to certain misgivings. Can one not imagine possible ethical systems – certain kinds of Buddhist ethic perhaps – that attempt to transcend the notion of individual agenthood, and even to eliminate the very sense of ‘self’?

Such an ethic does indeed seem conceivable; but without in any way denigrating it, one may observe that it has the following paradoxical feature. Although the Buddhist type of ideal proposes an eventual endstate where all sense of self will be eliminated, it seems that embarking on the road to such an endstate requires determination and tenacity. Thus the aspiring novice must resolutely hold on to certain aims which he *makes his own*, and to which he assigns a certain priority, refusing to be distracted from them by other demands, worthy though they may appear, that may claim his attention. So the very pursuit of the Buddhist goal appears to require, at least in its early stages, a considerable degree of agent-related partialism.

But however that may be, and even if it turned out that the claims of agent-related partiality to a universal place in all lifeplans had to be abandoned, any lifeplan that dispensed with agent-related partialism would still be subject to a number of more mundane objections. First, even if

¹⁰ B. Williams *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 4.

conceivable, the life devoid of agent-related partiality is one which only very few will ever find psychologically feasible. For the vast majority of mankind, to live as a human being simply *is* to live with continuing agent-related commitments and projects. Second, there is a sense in which a life without agent-related commitments has something parasitic about it. In pursuing his goal of detachment from self, and cutting himself adrift from all agent-related ties, the wandering monk in search of nirvana relies for food, shelter and other necessities on others who are *non-detached* – who are determinedly engaged on exactly those continuing personal projects (e.g. food growing, house building) and determinedly committed to exactly those continuing personal ties (to their families, to their fellow workers) which he himself rejects. Hence it seems that the life devoid of agent-related partiality must necessarily remain a blueprint for a fairly small minority.

SELF-DIRECTED PARTIALISM

It is important to realise that the principle so far introduced, that of agent-related partialism, relates merely to the general structure of our concerns as human agents; it says nothing specific about the *content* of those concerns. Human agenthood may indeed require the identification of certain concerns to which the agent must assign some special weight, but it does not of course follow that the content of such concerns must be specified in narrowly egocentric as opposed to altruistic terms. To be a person I must choose certain projects which I make “my own”; but my own projects need not necessarily involve the assignment of special weight to my own personal welfare. This *latter* kind of weighting is much more controversial: it involves the idea that I may assign special weight to my own private interests and satisfactions (as against those of others) simply because they are mine. For convenience we may call this the principle of self-favouritism or “self-directed partialism”.

The claim that the principle of self-directed partialism can be justified ethically is a complicated one which I shall not attempt to defend exhaustively here. I will merely make what seem to me to be a number of strongly suggestive points in its defence. First, though impartialists often crudely equate self-favouritism with selfishness, it is far from clear that to accord a certain special weighting to my own interests and satisfactions is automatically to be condemned as selfish. The selfish person accords an *excessive* weight to his own satisfactions and pursues them regardless of the harm he does to others; but there may be a legitimate level of self-preferential weighting that falls short of this. For Aristotle, *philautia*, or affection for oneself, can, if not carried to excess, be a genuine ethical virtue; it involves

that natural and perfectly proper sense of special concern and regard for oneself that is essential to human flourishing.¹¹

The second point to be made about self-favouritism is that some degree of self-directed partiality is so deeply ingrained into the psychological make-up of most of us that it is not easy to see how any ethic which outlawed it completely could survive. How many times does each of us, every day, give special preferential attention to his own private interests? Consider the cost, in terms of time and resources, merely of our everyday recreational and leisure activities. If we weighed our own interests no higher than anyone else's, could we justify such activities? From a strictly impartial standpoint would not these resources be better devoted to more deserving or more needy recipients? If the impartialist replies that indeed we *should* eliminate such self-favouring uses of time and resources, then he would seem to be proposing what Mackie called a "fantasy" ethic – an ethic which people may pay lip service to as a shining ideal, but which they do not and will never in practice subscribe to, in the sense of incorporating it into their actual strategy for living.¹²

The third point to be made about self-favouritism is that it may well have a valuable role to play in the promotion of non-self-interested goals. For most of us, it is very difficult to embark wholeheartedly on some committed course of action unless the chosen project, either in its fulfilment, or in the progress towards it, involves at least some element of personal enrichment. It is important not to misunderstand this point by interpreting it as a piece of cynicism. Clearly people can and do "devote their lives to the cause" without its being the case that the cause necessarily involves some reference to their own interests. But experience suggests that continuing devotion to the cause is nearly always accompanied by some degree of what may loosely be called 'ego-satisfaction'. Thus the Christian works to promote the Kingdom of God not just because of an impersonal recognition that this is a morally desirable goal, but also because he finds, or expects to find, that he can "live life more abundantly" as a result. Again, devotees of revolutionary causes characteristically report that their own lives are enriched or given meaning by the struggle on which they have embarked. From a historical perspective there seems little doubt that ego-satisfaction is the motor that has powered most moral projects, irrespective of whether the projects themselves have a self-directed content. So it seems possible that a further defence of self-directed partiality may be developed by reference to the thought that even the most worthy ideal is unlikely to gain many adherents or to progress very

¹¹ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk IX, ch. 8 (1168 b).

¹² See J. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth, 1977) pp. 129ff; cf. Cottingham, *op. cit.* (note 1) p. 86f.

far, unless it is able to draw to a greater or lesser extent on the special preferential concern which all of us as a matter of fact feel for our own wellbeing. An ethic which finds a legitimate place for such self-preference may well survive better, and hence promote its other goals far more effectively, than one which attempts to outlaw it.

PHILOPHILIC PARTIALISM

There is another and less controversial type of partialism which seems a highly promising candidate for justification by reference to the dimension of the ethical blueprint or lifeplan. A pillar of all, or certainly most, viable ethical systems is the principle of partiality to loved ones or “philophilic partialism”: the adjective is coined from the Greek *philophilos* – one who loves his friends.¹³ (The term *philos* is usefully wider than the corresponding Latin *amicus*, which survives as French *ami*, Spanish *amigo* etc. For the Latin term and its derivatives suggest merely a “friend”, whereas the Greek notion includes not just one’s friends, but one’s children, siblings, spouse – all who are beloved or “dear” to the agent.) The principle of philophilic partialism, unlike that of agent-related partialism but like that of self-directed partialism, has to do not with the logical status of our concerns as human agents, but with the specific *content* of those concerns. The principle asserts that in deciding whether to promote the interests of X or Y, I may legitimately assign a certain moral weight to the fact that X is *my* loved-one. There is non-eliminable reference to a particular – myself – involved here; but it would be a confusion to suppose (as is sometimes done) that this entails that there is some selfish or narrowly self-interested element involved in philophilic partiality. To love someone is to desire his/her happiness *for its own sake*, and in this sense the emotion involved is genuinely altruistic. A parent’s desire that his child should flourish and be happy is not just a desire for the glow of pleasure this will produce in the parental breast; for it includes, for example, the desire that the child shall continue to flourish after the parent is dead. Indeed, one of the most awesome dimensions of parental love is that the parent may actually weigh the welfare of the child higher than his own welfare. Sexual love, romantic love and marital love, though in some respects more dynamic and more significant in terms of individual development and psychological equilibrium, do not typically have this remarkable self-sacrificial element; and most people would say that it is right that they should not. But though different from parental love, these other kinds of love are nonetheless genuinely altruistic. The loving spouse desires the welfare of his or her marital partner for its own sake (and not just because happy, fulfilled

¹³ The *philophilos*, observes Aristotle, is worthy of praise. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155 a29; 1159 a35.

people are easier to live with). All genuine love, then, is altruistic; but it also has a non-eliminably self-referential aspect. As we noted earlier (p. 359), the reason for showing partiality to one's own children is not that they possess some universalizable feature or set of features that merit special recognition (otherwise we would not have an example of partialism but of impartial evaluation); rather, a parent should give extra (again: extra, not infinite) weight to his children's interests precisely because they are *his*. And the same goes for relationships with wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, close friends and lovers, and for other relationships involving what has been called "self-referential altruism".¹⁴ In each case the partiality is exercised towards the *philos*, the loved-one, precisely in virtue of the special relationship which the loved one has to the agent. (Interestingly, Aristotle calls the *philos* an *allos autos*, a "second self", implying that the agent exercises the same kind of special concern towards the loved one as he does towards himself).¹⁵

Now the principle of philophilic partiality cannot be regarded simply as a case of arbitrary or capricious favouritism. Its ethical plausibility flows from the fact that genuine love finds a place in almost all viable blueprints for human welfare. Special concern towards particular human beings is essential to the functioning of those close relationships which the overwhelming mass of mankind seek as a major source of psychological enrichment. And if such concern has a successful outcome, so that the agent is able to witness the flourishing of the loved one, and if, further, it is reciprocated, so that the parties are bound together in mutual ties of affection, then the resulting situation constitutes what is one of the principal satisfactions of human life. The justification of philophilic partialism is thus extremely simple. If I give no extra weight to the fact that this is *my* lover, *my* friend, *my* spouse, *my* child, if I assess these people's needs purely on their merits (in such a way as an impartial observer might do), then that special concern which constitutes the essence of love and friendship will be eliminated. Partiality to loved ones is justified because it is an essential ingredient in one of the highest of human goods.

A natural question to raise by way of a footnote to the above argument is whether it rests on some supposed conceptual truth about what it is to be a human being, or simply on a psychological generalisation about the way most humans are constituted. A decisive objection to resting the argument on a supposed conceptual truth is that clearly there have been human beings (hermits, wandering friars, and so on) who have managed to live without the ties of special affection. Such non-philophilic lives, particularly when they are devoted to some worthy end (helping the poor, tending the sick) are regarded as morally praiseworthy. So philophilic partiality evidently cannot

¹⁴ J. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166 a32.

be regarded as a necessary condition for *any* viable ethical lifeplan (a conclusion which accords with the point made earlier about there being many possible blueprints for the good life). But if the non-philophilic life is possible, and even capable of being worthwhile, it is none the less subject to certain practical drawbacks of an analogous kind to those we found in the case of the life devoid of agent-related partiality. First, the non-philophilic life is simply not a feasible option for most people. Monastic orders, for example, commonly report that, even from among the tiny minority who actually have some desire for the monastic life, many have to be turned away because they are simply not capable of living without the support of family love, sexual love and the other close ties on which most of us rely. Second, the non-philophilic life shares with the non-agent-related life the feature of being somewhat parasitic. Those who lead it have in the past depended on the devoted partialism of those who brought them up as children; and similarly, the future of institutions like the monastic order depends on their being able to draw recruits from the "normal" philophilic world. So the non-philophilic blueprint, though by no means an incoherent one, is, in the nature of things, an ethic that cannot provide a plausible lifeplan for most of us; and, further, its survival depends on its not being adopted by the mass of mankind.

OTHER PARTIALISMS

The following conclusions should have emerged about the partialisms so far discussed. First, the principle of *agent-related* partialism seems an essential one for all, or at least nearly all, conceivable ethical systems; further, a non-agent-related ethic, if it could exist, would be parasitic on the existence of a prevailing agent-related ethic in the world at large. Second, the principle of *self-directed* partialism appears to be deeply and perhaps ineradicably ingrained into our psychological makeup, to the extent that an ethic which finds no place for it is unlikely to survive except as a fantasy; in addition the principle may possibly have some useful subservient role to play in the promotion of other moral ideals. Third, and finally, the principle of *philophilic* partialism, has a central structural importance for the welfare of the vast majority of mankind; it is a *sine qua non* for the achievement of one of the most valuable goods which human beings are capable of attaining. All three kinds of partiality thus seem to rest on an unassailable moral foundation in so far as any ethical blueprint which attempted to eliminate them from the world altogether would be self-defeating.

It now only remains to inquire whether similarly powerful justifications can be advanced for the other partialisms on our list. In many cases the answer (a welcome one considering the character of many items on the list) seems to be firmly negative. In the case of racial partiality, for example, there

appears to be no remotely plausible case for arguing that it must find a place in all or most plausible blueprints for human welfare. And yet it must be admitted that there are racists (e.g. in South Africa) who claim that "life is better" under institutions which systematically favour one race over another; and one still hears some male chauvinists claiming that institutional bias in favour of males makes for a "better society". Might not such partialists claim to have a "lifeplan" argument to support their favouritism towards their own sex or race?

The answer to this must be that, like all ethical reasoning, such arguments are sensitive to empirical evidence. Advocates of the pro-racist and pro-sexist arguments that we are considering here must be committed to the proposition that societies and individuals which have abandoned, or moved towards abandoning, racism and sexism, will find that there is a resulting diminution in the prospects for humans to lead worthwhile lives. But all the evidence points in the opposite direction, and suggests that abandoning racial and sexual partialities leads to richer, more fulfilling human relationships and institutions, an increase in respect for persons, a greater scope for self-development – in short, greater prospects for the achievement of *eudaimonia*.

The case of kinshipism is harder to assess. Kinshipists presumably maintain that one should give preferential treatment to individuals in proportion to their degree of genetic kinship to oneself – a view which might be thought to account rather neatly for family partiality, and also for the feeling, shared by many, that species which are genetically closer to us, such as apes, have a higher moral claim on our concern than say rats, or, more generally, that it is legitimate for us to favour mammals over, say, insects. Reflection reveals, however, that kinshipism has some counter-intuitive consequences. It has recently been discovered that chimpanzees are very closely related to us indeed (in terms of DNA structure); yet it is surely implausible to maintain that this fact, *in and of itself*, is enough to make a moral difference to how we should treat them. Again, in the burning building case, it is surely implausible to claim, as the kinshipist presumably must, that S has, *ceteris paribus*, less of an obligation to give preference to X if X is his adopted child than if X is his natural child (sharing half of his genetic makeup). Indeed, if genetic relationships are construed strictly and mathematically, the kinshipist seems lumbered with all sorts of bizarre results – for example that my sister is twice as entitled as my grandparent to my special consideration, (since the sister shares half of my genetic material, while the grandparent shares only a quarter). Recent sociobiological theorists have sometimes seemed prepared to embrace this sort of consequence, suggesting that it is somehow in my interests or "in my genes' interests" that as much as possible of my genetic material should survive, and that such

calculated degrees of preference are therefore quite rational. But there are manifold confusions here. My genes, not being rational nor even sentient, can have no interests. As for me, the fact that at some future date bits of DNA will be around that are approximate replicas of bits of DNA now inside me, does not of itself affect my interests or my welfare one way or the other. This is not to deny that a man or woman may legitimately desire the survival of, for example, his or her children or grandchildren, and take steps to ensure such survival. But what gives such desires and actions moral backing is the close emotional bonding which people develop towards their offspring and the role which such bonding plays in the fulfilment and happiness of those involved. It is this, not the mere fact of consanguinity as such, that provides the moral foundation for any partiality we may show to our close kin.

In the case of wider partialisms such as clanism and patriotism, assessment is more complicated.¹⁶ What seems evident is that no *one* of these can claim to have crucial importance for human welfare. Clanism, for example, has largely disappeared in many modern societies without any noticeable impoverishment of human life as a result. But it is, I think, plausible to argue that human beings, or at least most of them, find it difficult to flourish unless they can integrate their lives into at least some network of partiality, some structure of mutual dependence and loyalty, that operates on a wider scale than self-directed partiality and philophilic partiality. Complaints about “rootlessness” among modern city dwellers, and the rise of separatist movements within large nation-states or federations, provide at least some evidence that, in order to live happy lives, human beings may require, beyond self-concern and family concern, wider partialist structures of interdependence within which the concern accorded to them will not be limited to that which an impartial observer might assign on the basis of purely objective criteria.¹⁷

The question of how far partialisms such as patriotism can be justified along these lines is a complex one, and the answer would depend on careful evaluation of a mass of psychological and sociological data (much of it probably not readily available). The purpose of this paper has been the more limited one of providing a framework for evaluating the general moral status of partialism. Two results should have emerged. In the first place, a moral agent who is under no direct or indirect duty to be impartial may legitimately exercise first, agent-related partiality (giving some degree of preference towards his own chosen goals and projects); second a limited degree of self-

¹⁶ I avoid any general comments on *speciesism* since this has been extensively discussed in recent literature, and raises special issues that are beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ For a development of this point in connection with urban “alienation”, cf. Oldenquist, *op. cit.*, pp. 187ff.

directed partiality (preferential assigning of time and resources to his own private welfare); and thirdly philophilic partiality (according special favoured consideration to his loved ones). In the second place, defending such partiality need not provide a blank cheque for supporting the kinds of unfair discrimination associated with racism and sexism. To say that a moral system designed for human beings could not function without some partialist principles clearly does not entail that all partialisms are justified. And – to end on a note of concession to the impartialist – since the fact that X and Y are qualitatively similar in all respects is always a *prima facie* reason for treating X and Y alike, the onus will always be on the partialist to justify his favouring of X over Y. To sketch a route which such justification could take, is not to say that it will always be successful.

A final point. If partialists maintain that under some circumstances one may, in distributing one's time and resources, legitimately assign a certain weight to self-referential characteristics, this leaves open the question of how *much* weight it is morally appropriate to assign. Impartialists, it has been argued, are wrong to suggest that in deciding between X and Y, I should assign *no* weight to the fact that X is one of "my own"; but it may still be true that many of us assign too much weight to this fact. There is, I think, no easy answer to the problem of deciding exactly what is the right amount of weight to assign to any given self-referential characteristic. But almost every difficult moral question depends on the balancing and weighing of conflicting moral principles and values. So the fact that the partialistic ethic is subject to such difficulties is neither surprising nor an objection to partialism as such.¹⁸

University of Reading

¹⁸ I am indebted to Professor Roy Sorensen, whose valued comments on an earlier paper stimulated some of the above arguments, and to Dr Sheldon Leader and Mrs Martha Klein for perceptive criticism of an earlier version of the present paper.