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**How to Resolve the Partiality-
Impartiality Puzzle Using a Love-
Centered Account of Virtue Ethics**

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How to Resolve the Partiality-Impartiality Puzzle Using a Love-Centered Account of Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

Some have argued that modern ethical theories do not allow an adequate role for intimate relationships. Nowhere has this problem been illustrated as well as Bernard Williams's example of the husband who encounters two drowning people one of whom is his wife. According to Williams if the husband even seeks a justification for rescuing his wife first he has 'one thought too many' and commits an offense against the relationship. He goes on to conclude that partial relationships are necessary for life itself and that, ". . . unless such things exist, there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself." Therefore, any moral system that undermines such relationships is problematic.

However, most traditional ethical theories value a kind of moral impartiality. According to these theories all persons must be granted some sort of equal consideration. The kind of impartiality required differs from theory to theory, whether it is equal weight in the utilitarian calculus, or impartial consideration required by obedience to the moral law expressed within the categorical imperative, or some other type of impartiality.

I argue that a love-centered account of virtue ethics provides an attractive solution to this puzzle. I proceed by describing a love centered account of virtue ethics inspired by Thomas Aquinas and go on to show how this account can resolve the partiality-impairality puzzle while doing justice to both moral intuitions.

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It has long been argued that a weakness of many modern ethical theories is their rejection of an adequate ethical role for intimate relationships. Nowhere has this problem been illustrated as well as Bernard Williams's famous example of the husband who encounters two drowning people one of whom is his wife. According to Williams if the husband even seeks an ethical justification for rescuing his wife first he has had '*one thought too many*' and has committed a serious offense against the relationship.¹ He goes on to conclude that such partial relationships are incredibly important to life and that, '*. . . unless such things exist, there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself.*'² Therefore, he argues that any ethical system that undermines these sorts of relationships is deeply problematic. While Williams might be accused of overstating his point, there is something fairly absurd in any suggestion that the husband in this scenario should have flipped a coin or should have been preoccupied with treating both drowning victims 'equally.' The whole concept of committing to a 'spouse' entails promising some types of partial treatment.

In contrast, many traditional modern ethical theories value some kind of moral impartiality. According to such theories, all persons need to be considered equally regardless of how the agent feels about them. The kind of impartiality needed differs from theory to theory, whether it is equal weight in the utilitarian calculus, or an impartial consideration of a person's value as required by obedience to the moral law expressed within the categorical imperative regardless of one's own inclinations, or some other form of impartiality.

As a solution to this dilemma between two important central moral intuitions, I argue that the most important aspects of both moral intuitions can be fulfilled by a love-centered account of virtue ethics. This solution portrays the ideal moral agent as one who has loving desires towards all persons, thus fulfilling the intuition that an adequate moral theory requires impartiality towards all. Yet, this theory will depart from many ethical theories by portraying the type of relationship the agent has with others as a morally relevant consideration that ought to shape the specific ways that love is expressed. Thus, I proceed by describing an account of virtue ethics centered upon love inspired by the views of Thomas Aquinas and go on to show how this account can resolve the partiality-impartiality puzzle while doing justice to both opposing moral intuitions.

I. An Account of Love

Any love-centered account of virtue ethics needs to offer an account of the virtue of love. While there are various competing accounts of love,³ I define the virtue of love as *a disposition towards relationally appropriate acts of the will, consisting of a disinterested desire for the good of persons and a disinterested desire for unity with*

¹ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18.

² Bernard Williams 1981, 18.

³ For four competing accounts of love see: Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), David Velleman, 'Love as Moral Emotion,' *Ethics* 109 (1999), Niko Kolodny, 'Love As Valuing a Relationship,' *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), and Hugh LaFollette, *Personal Relationships*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). I have critiqued these accounts elsewhere.

persons, held as final ends.¹ This account accepts any desire that the agent is reasonably justified in viewing as beneficial to the beloved as genuinely loving and therefore is not committed to any particular account of the good.² This flexibility applies both to what the agent views as constitutive of the good as well as what means are viewed as likely to bring about that good.

This account of love includes a universal scope for the persons who are appropriate recipients of love. Personhood is the value to which love is the appropriate response. Yet, personhood is never encountered in abstraction, but only within particular individuals with whom we have various kinds of relationships. Therefore, the fully loving agent has these desires towards the self, close friends and relatives, and more distant persons as well as any non-human persons that may exist. However, the desires of love ought to be expressed in differing ways dependent upon the nature of the lover's relationship with each individual.³

While a full defense of this account of love over alternative contemporary views would take too much space to be practical,⁴ this account has at least the following philosophical advantages. First, this account of love is relationally flexible and applicable to the full range of human relationships. Unlike many theories of love that are only applicable to romantic relationships and close adult friendships this conception of love is applicable to the full range of impersonal, personal, intimate, and internal relationships. It identifies the essential similarities and differences between loving desires in these various contexts.

Second, this view provides criteria for evaluating individual's attestations of love thereby distinguishing ideal or true love from mere sentiment, infatuation, or delusion. While the stalker may be fully convinced of his love for the stalked, he is not justified in viewing his obsessive interest as good for the stalked. Any account of love that lacks the conceptual resources to distinguish between such obsessive behavior and genuine or ideal love leaves much to be desired.

Third, this account of love has explanatory power concerning the typical normative experiences of love including the tenacity of love, the non-fungibility of the beloved, the strong feelings associated with love, etc. Love is tenacious on this account because it is based upon personhood and shaped by the nature of the type of relationship between lover and beloved. In contrast, competing accounts that find a basis for love in the lover's non-relational attributes have difficulty explaining why love should not change as these attributes change or when the lover meets someone whom possesses these attributes in superior degrees. Similarly, the beloved in closer personal and

¹ This interpretation of Aquinas's account of charity is influenced by conversations with Eleonore Stump. Cf. Eleonore Stump, 'Love, By All Accounts,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 80 (2006): 25-43.

² This claim represents a notable departure from Aquinas's views, who held to an objective account of the good. While I am ultimately optimistic that Aquinas's views concerning the good are correct, I do not have space or interest in defending those views here. Instead, I hope to sketch a broadly acceptable love-centered account of virtue ethics that acknowledges that those who do not share Aquinas's view of the good as 'loving' in some important sense of the word. For now, I leave defending Aquinas's view of the good to others.

³ Thomas Aquinas's account of charity is the historical source that has most influenced my view of love, though time will not allow me to demonstrate the relationship between our accounts. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II 23-46.

⁴ I have given a full defense of this account elsewhere. See Eric Silverman, *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield's Lexington Books, 2010).

intimate relationships is non-fungible since such relationships are unique within the lover's experience. This explains why substitution cannot be made without loss of value in the lover's eyes. Furthermore, the intensity of feelings associated with love is explained in terms of the varying strengths of desires that are appropriate for varying types of relationships. The most intimate relationships ground stronger desires than impersonal relationships thereby explaining the strong feelings typically associated with love in the most intimate relationships.¹

II. A Love-centered Account of Virtue Ethics

What does a love-centered account of ethics entail? This account accepts many typical features of contemporary Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. These features include a focus on the agent's character dispositions rather than her particular actions apart from the dispositions they stem from, a portrayal of virtues as excellence in human dispositions, an emphasis on the need for practical wisdom (*phronesis*), a view of virtue as a threshold concept, and an emphasis on the importance of moral psychology.² In addition to such common features of Neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, a love-centered account of virtue ethics includes at least the following claims that distinguish it from other virtue theories including Aristotle's.

First, it holds that love is the greatest, the most important, and the most central virtue.³ This view portrays love as a more central excellence than other virtues. Since love pertains directly to the agent's will in the form of a person's desires, this virtue is foundational in shaping the proper expression of other virtuous traits. If we truly desire the good of persons and unity with them, these desires will shape the way other traits are expressed. Many other traits, even good traits in themselves, can be misused. For example, courage in the narrowest Aristotelian sense is the tendency to experience and react to fear in proportion to the actual danger in a situation.⁴ However, the ends one might pursue with such courage might be laudable, neutral, or deplorable. The deplorable criminal or the egoistic athlete may display 'courage' alongside laudable figures such as the altruistic fire fighter or dutiful police officer.⁵ Yet, the love-centered model identifies love as a more central human excellence than courage and therefore entails that the most virtuous form of courage will be directed by love. Other good traits are only fully excellent as they are directed by the ends of love. Even the kinds of reasons other traits provide for action must be revised by the motivations provided by love. The ideal courageous, temperate, just, or clever person is not courageous primarily for the sake of courage or temperate for the sake of temperance,

¹ These problems with traditional 'attributes based' accounts of love are well documented by Eleonore Stump. See Eleonore Stump, 'Love, By All Accounts,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 80 (2006): 25.

² There are numerous sources where discussions of these traits can be found, but a partial list includes: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, G. E. M. Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy', Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Christine Swanton's *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ See ST II-II 23:6-8

⁴ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, BK. III.

⁵ Aquinas is among the earliest thinkers to identify this problem with many virtues. He claims that even the thief displays something like courage by controlling his fear, but that this trait is not a genuine virtue because it is used in ways contrary to love. See ST II-II 23:7-8

but rather for the sake of love. Therefore, any excellence displayed by agents without love does not instantiate that which is most important to character.

This insight is similar to Immanuel Kant's observation that, '*It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.*'¹ While this view stops short of endorsing Kant's full claim, it agrees that perfection of the will is the most important, foundational, and central human excellence since it both directs the use of other virtues and cannot be misused for some morally evil purpose. Therefore, the cultivation of love is a higher moral priority than other virtues.

One implication of love's centrality is that any time competing character traits dictate actions or attitudes incompatible with love, the dictates of love should be followed instead. If the virtue of 'thrift' demands cutting expenditures, but the virtue of love demands increasing or maintaining generous amounts of giving it is the dictates of love that ought to be followed.² This pattern applies to any instance when competing virtues direct actions in ways contrary to love. Thus, other virtues are modified by love's direction. This principle is at least part of what Aquinas refers to as love serving as the 'form' of all virtue.³

Another important implication of this view is that there is considerable unity to the virtues centered in love. An essential trait of all other virtues is that they must be compatible with love in order to qualify as *bona fide* virtues. In these virtues' ideal expression they will simultaneously embody love as well as whatever other excellence they display. Any action that genuinely expresses virtue will at least be compatible with love. Conversely, any inherently unloving trait or action will be viewed as vicious regardless of whatever other positive aspects it may possess.

III. A Love-centered Response to the Partiality-Impartiality Puzzle

One of the more striking claims concerning the partiality-impartiality puzzle is offered by Elizabeth Ashford. She claims, '*...in the current state of the world, any plausible moral theory has difficulty in showing how agents' impartial moral commitments and their personal commitments can be harmoniously integrated.*'⁴ It is this type of claim I will now seek to address. How can a moral theory provide a structure that allow for harmony between personal and impartial moral commitments?

The love-centered account addresses the tension between the moral importance of impartiality and partial personal relationships by emphasizing that the ideal loving agent has the same two types of loving desires, responses, and attitudes towards all of humanity,⁵ but that they are expressed in ways that are shaped by the agent's relationship with each person. Thus, it is impartial in that the ideal agent has the same two broad types of desires towards all, in that the relationships that shape the proper

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, H. J. Paton (trans.), (New York, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. 1964), 4:393

² I do not mean to imply that there is no situation when giving might need to be curtailed, I only mean to suggest that prudent spending ought to ultimately promote the goals of love. Therefore, thrift is not an overriding goal on its own.

³ See ST II-II 23.8.

⁴ Elizabeth Ashford, 'Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97 (2000): 434.

⁵ See ST II-II 31.3

expressions of love must be in principle open to all, and in that all relationships must be compatible with genuine love towards those outside of the relationships. The types of relevant relationships include one's relationship with one's self, close personal relationships, and distant impersonal relationships. In each case, the loving person desires both the good of and union with the beloved. The loving person is involved in morally appropriate expressions of self-love, morally appropriate close partial relationships, and a loving disposition towards distant impersonal relationships. While the same broad desires are held towards all people relationships serve as a foundational consideration for shaping the proper expression of loving desires. However, unlike many accounts of ethics, this view recognizes the existence of relational bonds as morally relevant circumstances requiring us to treat people differently from one another.

This account, like Aquinas's,¹ allows that many expressions of self-love are morally acceptable or even obligatory when balanced with the love of others. For example, there are ways of benefiting the self that only the self can pursue. Other people simply cannot exercise, learn, develop our psyche, invest into our relationships, or cultivate discipline in our place. To suggest that self-love is morally problematic is to claim that these activities have no direct moral standing, thereby leaving a substantial void in moral theory. Therefore, I reject criticisms of moral duties towards the self such as those recently presented by Michael Slote:

Our common moral thinking treats it as sometimes obligatory to do good things for others and almost always obligatory to refrain from harming them. But there is no similar moral obligation in regard to benefiting oneself or refraining from doing damage to one's prospects or even one's health....it makes no sense to suppose there is an obligation to do things we are already inclined to do and can naturally be expected to do. Since we naturally and expectably do care for our own interests, there can't be—there is no moral need for—an obligation to do so.²

At least two claims within Slote's argument are simply false. First, there are activities that we 'naturally and expectedly' perform that we also have an obligation to do. For example, it is natural and very common that we care for our own children and do not intentionally harm them. Yet, only someone who was skeptical about ethics altogether would suggest that there is no moral obligation to refrain from intentionally harming one's own children. Similarly, even if we accept the claim that humans naturally and expectedly care for their own interests, it does not follow that there is no obligation to do so.

Second, it is also false that humans are consistently inclined to care for their own interests; at least if we are using an adequately complex long term account of what it means to 'care for' our own interests. While it is correct that everything one does is endorsed by the self in some important way, it is quite contentious to claim that everything, or even most things, chosen by the self is motivated by self interest. In fact, people do sometimes make extreme sacrifices for others. On December 4, 2006 Pfc. Ross McGinnis sacrificed himself by jumping on a grenade to protect four other

¹ See ST II-II 25.4

² Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-12.

soldiers. Similarly, in a Nazi concentration camp, Maximilian Kolbe voluntarily died in the place of another captive. In addition to great acts of self sacrifice, many other decisions are simply not made according to a prudent long term strategy of benefiting the self.¹ Some individuals commit suicide when years of pleasant life were quite likely. Others choose to overindulge in short term pleasures such as fatty foods, nicotine, or other drugs to a degree that shortens their life span thereby acting against their self interests. And plenty of ethical systems, including mainstream utilitarianism, Kantianism, and even egoism, do judge that in failing to care for themselves properly such people fail in their moral duties. Therefore, Slote's criticisms against the possibility of moral duties towards the self fail.

Just as the self is uniquely positioned to benefit the self, other types of close relationships allow unique opportunities for beneficence. For example, the existence of an ongoing parent-child relationship with a history that includes the development of trust, intimacy, and mutual knowledge over time allows goods to be brought about through the relationship that are impossible to replicate outside of such a long term, intimate relationship of mutual dependence. Consider the claim that a good parent ought to read at least an occasional bedtime story to her own young child. Why is this partial treatment appropriate when there is likely a worse off child within a short distance? One obvious consideration is that the intimate setting of having a story read at bedtime to the child entails that having a stranger read it is a very different experience than having a trusted long term caretaker do so. And it is the existence of that kind of long term particular relationship that this account of virtue ethics recognizes as a moral significant. Accordingly, the close proximity within certain intimate relationships allows unique kinds of valuable goods to be brought into existence that are not possible outside of such partial long term relationships. These facts justify some, but certainly not all possible types of partial treatment within close relationships.

Since morally appropriate partiality must be simultaneously compatible with love towards those outside the relationship and compatible with similarly situated persons engaging in similar types of loving partiality, there are many morally inappropriate expressions of partiality. Using influence at one's job to get an unqualified friend a position is unloving both to one's employer and to other job candidates. Caring for one's children so much that the needs of distant others are completely ignored is similarly unloving. When preference in partial relationships leads to unloving attitudes in more distant relationships, such preference is vicious rather than virtuous.

Someone might mistakenly object that this theory has too large of a role for personal preferences and inclinations. For example, the Kantian tradition has long distrusted the moral worth of inclinations.² However, it is important to realize that relationships are not reducible to preferences and inclination. The fully loving person

¹ Someone might mistakenly think that I have been unfair to Slote's viewpoint. Since, I have demonstrated that many people do not act with their own long term interests in mind, while Slote might be misread as claiming only that 'people care for their own interests' in the most general sense. Yet, a careful look at the quotation demonstrates that he wants to use the premises: 'people care for their own interests' and 'there cannot be a moral obligation to do that which we naturally and expectedly do', to conclude that 'there is no moral obligation against damaging one's long term health'. Since Slote clearly applies the claim that 'there are no moral obligations to the self' to such long term issues such as one's own health, whether we are in fact inclined to promote our own interests in such long term ways is quite relevant to the discussion.

² See Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:393-397.

has the same general internal loving desires towards all people, not just some, not just those relationally close to her, and not just those she finds likeable or those whom she is naturally inclined to enjoy. The lover may find himself with a troublesome relative, an uncooperative colleague, or an unfriendly neighbor. Yet, these relational circumstances do not eliminate the virtuousness of possessing loving desires towards them. These circumstances may be relevant in shaping loving external actions in some way; for example, it is probably vicious to lend money to a known drug addict no matter what sort of relationship the lover has with them. Yet, the same underlying principles apply in each set of circumstances; external actions are to be directed by the same internal loving desires that are wisely applied to a specific set of external circumstances including relational circumstances.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that the existence of a relationship is an objective fact about the world. While certain relationships are established due to subjective preferences or inclinations many relationships are involuntary. We do not choose our parents or children. Other types of relationships are only indirectly chosen such as those with neighbors, colleagues, and fellow citizens. There are also relationships that might be desired that one fails to obtain. So, we should be hesitant to view relationships as simply a subjective inclination or preference. The truly loving father does not treat one child as a favorite while neglecting others. Similarly, the unpleasant uncle ought to be cared for much like the likeable aunt.

IV. Conclusion

I have outlined the essential features of a love centered account of virtue ethics and argued that it provides an attractive way to simultaneously address both the moral intuition that morality ought to be impartial and the intuition that we have special commitments within close relationships. It starts by recognizing the importance of grounding ethics in the moral value of all persons. All persons are appropriate objects of love. And that love is constituted by the same two types of desires towards all persons: desires for their good and desires for a type of unity with them.

Yet, the love centered account of virtue ethics proceeds by recognizing that certain types of goods can only be produced within certain kinds of relationships. A moral theory that fails to recognize the moral significance of these relational circumstances will inevitably neglect these important goods. Furthermore, such theories undermine personal harmony by demanding we treat distant strangers in ways identical to our most intimate relationships. In contrast, by using the nature of specific types of relationships to shape the way love ought to be expressed, this account of virtue ethics allows close relationships a greater role in moral theory without allowing mere inclination, sentiment, or preference to shape morality.

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