

# In Relationship

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This is an early draft. Please don't circulate. Comments are very welcome. Feel free to email me: oded.naaman@mail.huji.ac.il

## *Abstract*

Relationship accounts of justified partiality are appealing but they face a hitherto unacknowledged dilemma. The dilemma emerges once we see that these accounts tend to equivocate between two notions of what *being in a relationship* involves. Sometimes relationship accounts assume that being in a relationship is not constituted by partiality to the other participant, while other times they assume that it is. The idea that friendships and romantic relationships are not constituted by partiality is implausible. If I'm not partial toward you in any way, I'm not your friend; if you're not partial toward me in any way, you're not my romantic partner. But the alternative, that partiality is constitutive of being in a relationship, leads to a bootstrapping problem for relationship accounts. How can the partiality constitutive of relationships explain *its own* reasons, permissions, and obligations? I consider this dilemma and argue that it can be avoided because relationships are processes. In particular, I propose that relationship-types—such as friendships or romantic relationships—are ways of being together with another person that unfold over time according to a trajectory that includes mutual partiality.

## 0. Introduction.

You don't need a philosopher to tell you that relationships are important, but for contemporary moral philosophy the significance of relationships is a relatively recent discovery. 20<sup>th</sup> Century moral philosophy has been primarily concerned with impartial principles and with our obligations to strangers, or to persons as such, despite the fact that in the normal course of our lives we are mostly preoccupied with our reasons and obligations to individuals we love and share relationships with. However, in the last few decades, philosophers have started to pay attention to the ethical significance of relationships. In particular, it has been suggested that relationships play a central role in explaining why we are sometimes justified in being partial toward specific individuals. And yet there is little discussion of what relationships are and what being in a relationship involves. This shortcoming leads to difficulties for views of partiality.

The views of partiality I wish to consider start from the following, rather uncontroversial observation: we often cite our relationships to justify our emotional reactions and practical commitments to specific individuals. "I worry about her because she's my mother", "I'm helping him because he's my friend", etc. This truism then leads to the proposal that relationships explain many of our reasons, permissions, and obligations of partiality. The special status and treatment we give some individuals at the expense of others who are equally valuable and deserving is not arbitrary and unreasoned, according to these views, but rather justified by the relationships we share with those we are partial toward. This is the fundamental idea behind *relationship accounts of partiality*.

Relationship accounts of partiality are appealing but they face a hitherto unacknowledged dilemma. The dilemma emerges once we see that these accounts tend to equivocate between two notions of what *being in a relationship* involves. Sometimes relationship accounts assume that being in a relationship is not constituted by partiality to the other participant, while other times they assume that it is. The idea that friendships and romantic relationships are not constituted by partiality is implausible. If I'm not partial toward you in any way, I'm not your friend; if you're not partial toward me in any way, you're not my romantic partner. But the alternative, that partiality is constitutive of being in a relationship, leads to a bootstrapping problem for relationship accounts. How can the partiality constitutive of relationships explain *its own* reasons, permissions, and obligations? I will consider this dilemma and argue that it can be avoided because relationships are processes. In particular, I propose that relationship-types—such as friendships or romantic relationships—are ways of being together with another person that unfold over time according to a trajectory that includes mutual partiality.

The structure of the paper is simple. In the first section I describe the different views about justified partiality and explain what I take to be the mark of relationship accounts. In the second section I describe the dilemma for relationship accounts. In the third section I offer a solution.

## 1. Relationship Accounts of Justified Partiality

Consider the following two data points.

### First datum: The Phenomenon of Partiality

For each one of us, there are some specific individuals who are profoundly more important than most other people. Their importance to us is manifested in the things we do for them, the attention we give them, the thought we devote to them, and our emotional vulnerability to them. We do not only care about these special individuals, and about their good, but mind how and whether they care about us, we wish to be significant in their lives in ways that are compatible with their significance in ours. We thus attribute to them vastly greater significance than the significance we attribute to mere acquaintances, not to mention strangers, but we need not think they are better or more deserving than all the rest, nor do we expect others to attribute to them the same significance as we do. In short, in action, thought, and emotion we are partial toward some individuals and (hopefully) they are partial toward us. These individuals are our parents, siblings, children, friends, romantic partners, etc.<sup>1</sup>

### Second datum: The Justifiability of Partiality

We often have *normative reasons* to be partial, partiality is often *permissible*, and there are also *obligations* of partiality. In short, our partiality can be, and often is, justified.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this description doesn't exhaust the objects of our partiality. In particular, we are not only partial toward people but also toward projects, places, cultures, activities, etc. I want to focus on our partiality to persons, but a theory of partiality that can explain all forms of justified partiality is, other things being equal, superior to a theory that can only explain our partiality to persons. I do not consider here whether each of the theories I examine can explain other forms of partiality, but the family of views I go on to describe as projects views, which have a harder time explaining partiality to persons, are most at home, unsurprisingly, in explaining partiality to inanimate objects. For more on the scope of projects, relationships, and individual views, see Lord (2016).

Some people deny the data. The phenomenon of partiality is difficult to deny, but perhaps partiality is unjustified (Kagan 1989; Crisp 2018). I will put such views to the side and consider views that purport to accommodate the data. Such views are commonly divided into three categories: views according to which reasons to be partial are provided by facts about the agent's *projects*; views according to which reasons to be partial are provided by facts about the agent's *relationships*; and views according to which reasons to be partial are provided by facts about the *individuals* the agent has reason to be partial toward. Thus, there are *projects views*, *relationships views*, and *individuals views*.<sup>2</sup> Each family of views differs from the others in where it locates the facts that give us reason to be partial toward certain individuals. Projects views look to the agent for reasons, relationships views look to the relationship, and individuals views look to the person we're partial toward. All views purport to explain, in addition to reasons of partiality, also permissions and obligations of partiality. This is important because permissions and obligations are crucial elements of the phenomenon of partiality, but for simplicity I will continue to speak of reasons, assuming, with many in the literature, that permissions and obligations can be explained in terms of reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Now that we have the three families of views on the table, consider a somewhat simplified summary of the current state of the debate between them. Individuals views claim that other views give our partiality the wrong *focus*. When we act for someone's sake or feel sad or happy for someone, we take ourselves to be responding neither to the relationship with the person nor to our projects, but to the person herself. The person we are partial toward is the focus of our partiality, which is to say that facts about this person — the fact she needs our help, the fact she is suffering, etc. — give us our reason to respond as we do. Individuals views seem to do justice to the focus of partiality and correctly identify the reasons we respond to in being partial. By contrast, relationships and projects views give the wrong reasons for our partial responses and therefore the wrong focus. This implausible result is *the problem of focus*. That they avoid this problem is a major point in favor of individuals views.

On the other hand, relationships views claim that individuals views cannot explain why we are justified in being partial toward some individuals and not toward others. After all, the fact that Molly is in need does not explain why I am justified in helping her rather than Conny, who is in greater need still. Individuals views also face a trading up problem: they seem to imply that our partiality should shift whenever a more deserving or valuable individual comes along. And, finally, individuals views have a substitution problem: they seem to imply we should be willing to substitute the person we're partial toward with any other person who has the same relevant features. Giving a label to these three related issues, we can say that while individuals views avoid the *focus problem*, they have a serious *persistence problem* in that they fail to justify partiality's

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<sup>2</sup> Projects views are defended by Williams (1981), Wolf (1992), and Rorty (1997). Individuals views are defended by Blum (1980), Friedman (1993), and Velleman (1999) Keller (2013), and Murdoch (2013). In debates about reasons of love, individuals views are defended by Jollimore (2011) and Setiya (2014). I say more about adherents of relationships views below.

<sup>3</sup> Although some maintain that duties and permissions of partiality are basic and cannot be accounted for in terms of reasons, the point is not crucial for my purposes. I believe, though I don't have the space to argue for this here, that the process view I propose is compatible with such formulations of the relationship account. See Raz (1975), Gert (2004), and Hurka and Shubert (2012).

persistence. Relationships views claim to explain partiality's persistence. According to relationships views, the relevant difference between those we are justifiably and persistently partial toward and other, equally or more deserving individuals, is that only with the former we share special relationships — such as friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. Projects views seem inferior to both individuals and relationships views because they fail on both counts: they seem to face both the focus problem and the persistence problem.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions of these different views have led some authors to suggest hybrids. We want a view that combines the phenomenological adequacy of individuals views with the extensional adequacy of relationships views. To do this, we need to distinguish between the reason for partiality and the full normative explanation (or the full justification) of partiality. Normative reasons are given by facts that *favor* certain actions or attitudes, but facts can be relevant to the justifications of actions and attitudes in other ways, without themselves being favorers. For example, facts can *enable* other facts to favor an action or attitude, *disable* other facts from favoring an action or attitude, and facts can *modify* the weight of favorers, i.e. the weight of reasons other facts provide (Dancy 2004; Keller 2013; Bader 2016; Lord 2016). Consider an example of an enabler, which I take, with some alterations, from Dancy (2004). The fact you promised to help me move gives you reason to help me move. Had you given the promise under duress, the promise would not give you reason to help me move. The fact you did not give the promise under duress is not itself a reason to help me move, but it *enables* the fact you promised to give you a reason to help me move. Now consider an example of a modifier. The fact you will enjoy Iggy Pop's concert is a reason to go to the concert. The fact that tonight might be your last chance to see him perform live strengthens your reason to go, but it does not seem like an independent reason to go. For instance, the fact that tonight is also your last chance to see the K-pop band, BTS, live (because they are breaking up) is not a reason for you to go nor does it intensify a reason for you to go since you don't enjoy their music at all. So the fact this is your last chance to see Iggy Pop perform *intensifies* or adds weight to the reason given by the fact you'd enjoy the show. The basic idea here is that the full justification of various actions and attitudes goes beyond the immediate reasons for them; reasons often obtain on the basis of certain *background conditions*. So when a justification is asked for, it may often involve both reasons and background conditions.

Drawing on these ideas, several philosophers have argued that our reasons of partiality are normally given by facts about the individuals we are partial to, as individuals views hold, but the explanation of why these facts give us such reasons, and why these reasons are as weighty as they are, involves the relationships in which we stand to these individuals (Keller 2013; Lord 2016; Löscke 2017). So relationships enable and/or intensify our reasons regarding certain individuals, thereby justifying partiality without distorting its focus; relationships are not, or rarely, the reason for partial responses. Such hybrid views seem to get us the best of both families of views: phenomenological *and* extensional adequacy. Some think of such hybrid views as individuals views because of their contention that the reasons for partiality are given by individuals (Keller 2013; Lord 2016). But for my purposes, any view that appeals to

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<sup>4</sup> See Keller (2013) for a detailed and helpful discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each family of views.

relationships to justify partiality is a relationship view, whether it invokes relationships as enablers/intensifiers, or as reasons.<sup>5</sup>

A further important mark of relationships views is that they take relationships to be explanatorily basic, i.e. they maintain that relationships' explanatory role cannot be reduced to further normative principles or considerations. By contrast, a *reductionist* view would hold that our partiality toward people we are in relationship with can be justified by impartial principles and reasons, such as our reason to maximize well-being, or our reason to fulfill promises, or our reason to fulfill expectations that we voluntarily led others to form, or some other impartial commitment that is instantiated by our relationships to our friends, family members, or romantic partners.<sup>6</sup> Relationship theorists insist that the role of relationships in justifying partiality cannot be fully reduced in this way. They normally object that reductionists accounts of partiality are extensionally inadequate—they fail to account for important cases of justified partiality—and even where they get the cases right they give the wrong reasons for partiality, which is to say that they, too, suffer from a problem of focus.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, under the rubric of *relationship accounts* I include all accounts of partiality that attribute a basic (non-reducible) role to relationships in the justification of partiality, whether they maintain that relationships themselves provide reasons for partiality or that relationships are enablers or intensifiers of reasons for partiality. This includes the views of Raz (1989), Scheffler (1997; 2010), Scanlon (1998), Jeske (2008), Kolodny (2010a; 2010b), Wallace (2012), Keller (2013), and Lord (2016).

## 2. A Dilemma for Relationship Accounts of Justified Partiality

Relationship accounts maintain that we have reasons, permissions, and obligations of partiality because we share certain kinds of relationships with those we are partial toward. That I share a friendship with Ram explains why I have an especially strong reason to be there for him in times of need, that I am Sam's partner explains why I have reason to rejoice in her success, and that I am Dan's sibling explains my reason to hope his new project proves successful. But now consider what is involved in *sharing a relationship* with someone or *being in a relationship* with them (I use the phrases interchangeably). In particular, consider whether being in a relationship is partly constituted by mutual partiality. Relationship theorists have two options—either relationships are partly constituted by mutual partiality or they are not—both lead to problems. Let us start with partiality-excluding views of relationships.

### 2.1. Relationships *are not* constituted by mutual partiality.

The view that relationships are *not* constituted by mutual partiality is implicit in some relationships views. I will give two examples. Samuel Scheffler argues that “to value one's

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<sup>5</sup> Kolodny (2003) doesn't use the language of enablers and intensifiers, but he in fact holds a hybrid view of love that is analogous to these views.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of reductionist views, see Railton (1984), Goodin (1985), Sommers (1986), Jackson (1991), Simmons (1996), and Wellman (2001).

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of non-reductionism and arguments against reductionism, see Scheffler (1997; 2010), Jeske (2008), Kolodny (2010a), Wallace (2012).

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, reasons that one would not have had in the absence of the relationship" (Scheffler 2010, 103). Scheffler claims that taking oneself to have such special reasons with regard to the other person in the relationship "is part of what valuing one's relationships involves. If there are no contexts whatsoever in which I would see your needs and interests as giving me reasons of this kind, then it makes no sense to say that I value my relationship with you, even if I profess to do so" (ibid 104).

Partiality, Scheffler says, is necessary for *valuing* a relationship non-instrumentally; he does not say that partiality is necessary for *having* a relationship at all. Indeed, his view seems to imply the contrary. The claim that in valuing a relationship non-instrumentally I treat the relationship as "a source of reasons that I would not otherwise have" (104), implies that the relationship exists independently of my valuing of it. So Scheffler's view seems to entail that relationships are not constituted by mutual partiality; partiality is only constitutive of *non-instrumentally valuing* relationships. The idea that a relationship can obtain in the absence of partiality might seem to make sense when we think of family relationships (though I raise doubts about this later on), but it is difficult to understand when applied to friendships and romantic relationships. Can we be lovers without being partial to those we love? Scheffler does not say much about what relationships *are* constituted by, so it is difficult to tell whether his positive view of relationships is a plausible one. For a positive account of what relationships are, I now turn to a second example.

In two complementary papers, Niko Kolodny offers a normative explanation he calls "resonance" for why certain relationships justify partiality while others do not (2010a, 2010b). According to Kolodny, relationships are histories of encounter between specific individuals. A history of encounter justifies partiality when partiality "resonates" with the responses that each discrete encounter gives reason for. Consider a discrete encounter in which a person aids me. In response to her aid, I have reason to feel gratitude and express my thanks. My reasons to do so are agent-relative; other people don't have the reason I have to be grateful for what this person did for me. But my reason to be grateful is not a reason of partiality, because it is derived from principles and reasons that apply to all agents in these circumstances. However, when I share a history of encounters of mutual aid with a specific person, Kolodny claims, that gives me reason to respond to our shared history in a way that resonates with the gratitude justified by each encounter but that reflects the distinctive importance of a shared history of mutual aid. This is a mouthful, but Kolodny's example is instructive:

Imagine a lone traveler, of a bygone age, making his way west. Along the way, he helps and is helped by the people dwelling in the places he passes through, creating and incurring various debts. Contrast him with a different traveler who helps and is helped in the same ways, but by one and the same companion throughout. The companioned traveler has reason for responses that are not simply the sum of the responses for which the companionless traveler has reason, but just re-focused, as it were, on a single person. The companionless traveler has accumulated a series of debts that he might repay and then move on. But things are not like that for the companioned traveler. He has reason for a concern for his friend's interests that is open-ended: that keeps no ledger and that asks

only that like concern be reciprocated. And he has reason not to move on, but instead to sustain his friendship going forward. Their history together roots an expansive loyalty, in a way in which no string of encounters with a changing cast could. Such is the distinctive kind of importance that only a shared history with another person can have. (Kolodny 2010a, 183)

Encounters of mutual aid are not themselves instances of partiality.<sup>8</sup> Neither the companionless traveler nor the companioned traveler exhibit partiality to those who help them and are helped by them along the way. The actions and reactions are all justified by impartial normative principles. But according to Kolodny, the relationship between the companioned traveler and his companion is a friendship nonetheless. This friendship gives the traveler reasons of partiality to care about his shared history with his friend and about the friend himself. These are reasons the companionless traveler lacks with regard to the various people he interacted with in his travels. So a series of encounters between two individuals, where each encounter justifies certain non-partial reactions, gives rise to reasons of partiality that *resonate* with the non-partial reactions to discrete encounters. The difference between relationships that justify partiality and those that don't is in the nature of the discrete encounters that constitute those relationships. When the encounters are trivial or bad in some way, they do not resonate with reasons of partiality, but friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships are made of encounters that resonate with partiality.

Kolodny's explanation of justified partiality is insightful, but his notion of what being in a relationship involves is implausible. Let us grant that the companioned traveler's history of encounter with his companion gives him reason for partiality. Still, as described, their shared history does not amount to friendship. To be sure, Kolodny acknowledges in a footnote that a friendship is not constituted merely by mutual aid, but also by sharing confidences and pursuing joint interests (Kolodny 2010a, 182 n19). But a history of non-partial mutual aid, shared confidences, and joint pursuits does not amount to friendship unless it involves mutual partiality.<sup>9</sup> What kind of aid is possible, permissible, or obligatory itself depends on whether the persons in question are friends or not. There are forms of aid that friends are required to provide but can only be supererogatory when it comes to strangers; there are requests that can be made to friends but would be completely out of place when directed toward strangers; and there are kinds of interventions in another's decisions that would be permitted and even required from friends but forbidden for strangers.

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<sup>8</sup> Kolodny comes close to saying so explicitly, and more generally, toward the end of the paper: "Proper responses to shared histories of encounter, I have suggested, resonate with proper responses to discrete encounters. And the proper responses to discrete encounters are largely the province of impartial morality" (Kolodny 2010a, 193). However, in a companion piece, Kolodny writes at one point: "You and I are friends only if I have been partial to you in the past, and you have been partial to me. Suppose I am a stalker, and I claim that, because we are friends, you have reason for partiality to me. It is enough for you to reply that, because you have not responded partially to me in the past, we are not friends, and so you have no such reason" (Kolodny 2010b, 58). These claims are in tension and suggest that Kolodny slides back and forth between the view that partiality is necessary for the existence of a relationship and the view that it is not.

<sup>9</sup> In his paper about love, Kolodny claims that the interactions that initially justify love fall short of a loving relationship because they don't include mutual non-instrumental concern (2003, 161, 169). I discuss this different version of his view below.

Moreover, Kolodny says that due to the shared history with his companion, the companioned traveler has reasons for a concern that keeps no ledger, he has reason to sustain the relationship going forward, and he has reason for expansive loyalty. But these seem to be the stuff that friendships are made of. If such attitudes and actions are not already part of the travelers' relationship, how can their relationship be a friendship? In other words, the partiality Kolodny describes as justified by these friends' history is itself a necessary condition for the existence of friendship. Insofar as Kolodny's argument requires that the histories of encounter that he identifies as justifying partiality are recognizable kinds of relationships, the argument fails. Indeed, if the point of the view Kolodny presents is to defend the intuition behind the relationships account—namely, that we appeal to recognizable relationships to justify partiality—then the view fails.

To be sure, there might very well be forms of partiality that are justified by relationships—we will consider this in the next section—but my current point is that *some* partiality is necessary for the very existence of a relationship. Indeed, some partiality is required from both participants in the relationship, so *mutual* partiality is a necessary condition for the existence of a relationship because the existence of the relationship is partly *constituted* by mutual partiality. The assumption that relationships are not constituted by mutual partiality is the first horn of the dilemma for relationship accounts: it is implausible. Let's turn to the second horn.

## 2.2. Relationships *are* constituted by mutual partiality

In light of the previous section, it seems plausible that relationships are partly constituted by some forms of mutual partiality, so that partiality is a necessary condition for the existence of relationships. An example of this view can be found in Raz, who claims: “the relations between friends, the relationship which constitutes friendship, cannot be specified except by reference to the duties of friendship” (Raz 1989, 19). Presumably those duties are instances of partiality. Others are less clear about whether the relationship can be said to exist independently of its reasons and obligations. For instance, Jay Wallace writes: “Friends have claims against each other, just in virtue of standing in this relationship to each other; we might say that it is constitutive of friendship that these relational obligations obtain and are honored” (Wallace 2019, 145). Here friendship is both *that in virtue of which* friends can make claims against each other and that which is *constituted by* friends' relational obligations to each other. This raises the bootstrapping worry that haunts the second horn of the dilemma for relationship accounts, namely: if relationships are partly constituted by mutual partiality, how can they justify the partiality that constitutes them? Here is the worry in argument form:

1. Relationships are partly constituted by mutual partiality. (plausible view of relationships)
  2. Relationships explain the reasons for mutual partiality. (the relationship account)
- C: Mutual partiality explains the reasons for itself.

The conclusion seems to be an objectionable form of bootstrapping. Our friendship cannot justify my partiality toward you since it partly consists in my partiality toward you, which requires its own justification.



In response, one might adjust premise (2) in the following way. It is not the existence of particular relationships that explains reasons for partiality, one might suggest, but the value of having the relevant kinds of relationships. For instance, since friendships are important for a good and meaningful life, we have reasons to have friends. And since having friends and sharing friendships involves being partial toward our friends, we have reasons to be partial in the ways constitutive of friendship. There is no bootstrapping here because this justification does not rely on any instance of friendship to justify the partiality of the very same instance of friendship. Rather, this justification relies on the value of friendship, or on our reasons to have friendships, to justify the partiality that constitutes an instance of friendship.

Bootstrapping is avoided but we are nonetheless left with an unsatisfying account. First, this version of the account denies the observation that motivates relationship accounts, namely, that it is our actual, particular relationships that justify our partiality. Second, this version of the account faces a problem similar to the problem of persistence that plagued individuals views. If the justification of our partiality depends on the value of our friendship, the force of our commitments to our friends would have to shift with the value of the friendships they make possible as well as the possibility of attaining other valuable friendships. To be sure, having friends involves appreciating the value of our relationships with them and their contributions to our lives. But we may have reason to remain partial to our friends even as circumstances change and the value of our friendship oscillates. Third, though the current proposal does not maintain that realizing the value of friendship is *our reason* to be partial, and therefore it does not crudely instrumentalize friends, the proposal nevertheless maintains that our partiality is justified only insofar as it contributes to the value of friendship. This still seems objectionably instrumental. Our commitments to our friends, romantic partners, parents, siblings, and children, do not seem to be grounded wholly in the values they realize and the contributions they make to our lives. Scanlon summarizes these points well:

A person who was loyal to a friend simply to have the benefits of friendship would not be a true friend. A true friend has to see loyalty as in itself sufficient reason to bear a burden. On the other hand, a person who did not regard friendship as a good to him, did not enjoy it and see it as an important ingredient in a good life, would not be a real friend either, but only following a strangely cold imperative. Being a friend involves both feeling friendship's demands and enjoying its benefits. (Scanlon 1998, 162)

Although recognition of the benefits of friendship is essential to being a friend, the demands of friendship cannot be wholly justified by its benefits.

There are other possible responses to the bootstrapping problem. Niko Kolodny considers a version of the bootstrapping problem as an objection to his theory of love (Kolodny 2003). According to Kolodny's theory, love involves, roughly, valuing one's relationship and on the basis of the relationship valuing the other participant in the relationship. Both the beloved and the relationship are the foci of love, on this view, but love's ground, or source of reasons, is only the relationship. Kolodny considers an objection according to which his relationship theory makes love a reason for itself. Relationships (or at least friendships and romantic relationships) are constituted by emotional vulnerabilities: "one is not in a friendship or romantic relationship unless one has non-instrumental concern for the other person and this concern is reciprocated"

(Kolodny 2003, 161). So if relationships are reasons for love, and love involves non-instrumental concern, then love seems to be a reason for itself.

Kolodny offers two replies. First, he says, love involves more than concern and emotional vulnerabilities, it consists also in certain beliefs about the relationship, so even if emotional vulnerabilities are partly constitutive of both love and relationships, relationships can still give reason for the parts of love that are not constitutive of relationships, namely, the relevant beliefs. Similarly, someone might maintain that even if some partiality is constitutive of relationships, relationships give reason for other forms of partiality that are not constitutive of them. This amounts to a different modification of premise (2) above: relationships explain only *some* reasons for mutual partiality. While some (relationship-constituting) partiality is not justified by relationships, according to this response, its existence is partly constitutive of relationships that justify other forms of partiality. The problem is that this response significantly deflates the relationship account. It implies that all relationship-constituting partiality is not justified by relationships. Kolodny himself considers this response “concessive” (161).

However, Kolodny offers another response to the bootstrapping objection. He claims that having a relationship involves having a history of shared concern, activity, and emotional vulnerability. This history, together with the other participant’s present concern, constitutes the relationship at present, which then gives reason for one’s *present* concern, activity, and emotional vulnerability. For example, our shared history of mutual concern and vulnerability and your present concern for me is our present friendship, which gives me reason for present concern for *you*, a concern “that sustains the emotional vulnerability that constitutes the relationship going forward” (162). Let us add to the idea of shared concern and activity the idea of mutual partiality.<sup>10</sup> The view then is:

#### Kolodny’s Historical View of Relationships

A is in a relationship with B at time  $t$  if and only if A and B have a history of shared concern, activity, and mutual partiality and B is presently concerned and partial toward A.

According to this view, at  $t$ , a relationship can give A reasons for concern, activity, and partiality, which do not constitute the relationship at  $t$  but would constitute the relationship at  $t+n$  and thereby sustain the relationship going forward. In other words, relationships are rationally self-sustaining: their past gives reason for their continuation through, among other things, present mutual partiality.

Note, first, that this response, like the first one, amounts to a qualification of premise (2), so that relationships do not justify all partiality, nor do they justify all relationship-related partiality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In this paper, Kolodny seems to think of emotional vulnerability and shared concern as instances of partiality. They certainly seem to be. However, if they are, then the view of relationships offered here is in tension with the account he offers in other work, and which I reviewed in the previous section, according to which relationships can be constituted by impartial discrete encounters (2010a; 2010b).

<sup>11</sup> Addressing the question of what justifies the initial non-instrumental concern that constitutes the relationship, Kolodny suggests: “the non-instrumental concern that establishes friendship and romantic love is a response to the reasons constituted by a past pattern of shared interaction and the future prospect of a relationship” (Kolodny 2003, 171). This suggestion is in line with the proposal I go on to make in the next section, only I propose that even the past pattern of shared interaction can be part of the relationship.

This is because the account does not explain how mutual partiality might be justified in the absence of a history of mutual partiality. Thus, like the previous response, this response also concedes that a considerable amount of relationship-related partiality cannot be justified by the relationship it constitutes. However, in another way, this response goes further than the previous response. It purports to explain how relationships can be rationally self-sustaining by justifying the mutual partiality that constitutes them without falling into objectionable bootstrapping.

The idea that relationships are rationally self-sustaining is important and I will return to it in the next section, but Kolodny's historical view of relationships faces at least four significant objections. First, the account implausibly splits relationships in two. Since, according to this account, A's relationship with B consists of B's present concern and partiality but not of A's present concern and partiality, and there is no relevant difference between A and B, then B's relationship with A consists of A's present concern and partiality but not of B's present concern and partiality. In other words, your present care for me is part of *my present friendship with you* but not part of *your present friendship with me*. Similarly my present care for you is part of your friendship with me but not part of my friendship with you. It follows that there are two relationships: my friendship with you, which includes your concern but not mine, and your friendship with me, which includes my concern but not yours. But we don't have two friendships, we have one: your friendship with me is identical to my friendship with you; A's relationship with B is identical to B's relationship with A. Since the conclusion is false the account that entails it should be rejected.

Second, contrary to Kolodny's account and in line with the previous objection, A's present concern and partiality toward B is clearly part of A's present relationship with B. When I care for my friend and act for her sake today, I am not merely feeling and doing something that will make us friends tomorrow, though I'm doing that too; I am primarily *being her friend today*. Indeed, in being partial to her and fulfilling duties of friendship I am being her friend right now. So our friendship at the present moment is constituted by my present concern and partiality. This might seem to bring back the bootstrapping problem. The problem might still be avoided if the relationship account is understood as maintaining that partiality is justified not by one's present relationship but by one's *relationship history*. This solution is still not entirely satisfying, however, because the compelling observation behind the relationship account is that in justifying partiality we often appeal to *present relationships*: I'm helping her because she is my friend, I care because he is my husband, etc.

Third, contrary to Kolodny's account, there are various ways in which failures of mutual concern and partiality, past and present, may be compatible with the persistence of a relationship. After all, relationships suffer and occasionally survive various kinds of violations, betrayals, and wrongs. We often continue to have relationship-based reasons of partiality when our relationships are less than perfect and even when they are on the brink of disintegration. To understand what being in a relationship involves we must understand how one's concern and partiality constitute the relationship but we must also understand how failures of concern and partiality may be compatible with the continuation of the relationship.

Finally, contrary to the historical view, it seems that, at least sometimes, the very first occurrence of shared concern, activity, and mutual partiality can establish a relationship. For instance,

long-time acquaintances who are not friends can become friends the very first time they go roller-skating together, have great fun, and feel, also for the first time, non-instrumental concern for one another. They lack the relevant history and yet, on that special day, they become friends.

Before moving on, a short recap. Both horns of the dilemma for relationships views of partiality seem to lead to dead ends. If relationships justify mutual partiality they are not partly constituted by it, and if relationships are partly constituted by mutual partiality they cannot explain it. Relationships indeed seem to be partly constituted by mutual partiality. It follows that relationships cannot justify mutual partiality and relationships views should be rejected. In the next section I offer a solution: an account of what relationships are that explains how a relationship can justify the mutual partiality of which it is constituted.

### 3. Solution: Relationships Are Processes

The dilemma I have presented to relationships views of partiality relies on a dubious assumption.

#### THE DUBIOUS ASSUMPTION

If mutual partiality is partly constitutive of a relationship then at each moment the relationship exists it includes mutual partiality.

This assumption leads to the bootstrapping problem. For if a relationship token  $r$  justifies mutual partiality at  $t$ , then to avoid bootstrapping  $r$  must exist prior to  $t$  without mutual partiality. But given The Dubious Assumption and the fact that mutual partiality is partly constitutive of  $r$ , at any moment prior to  $t$  in which  $r$  exists, it includes mutual partiality. It follows that  $r$  cannot justify mutual partiality at  $t$ . Luckily, The Dubious Assumption is dubious. A relationship can be partly constituted by mutual partiality and yet exist at a given time without mutual partiality. This is possible if relationships are processes.

To get a handle on what processes are, it is useful to contrast them with continuants. How to draw the distinction is a matter of heated debate, but there is a natural if somewhat naïve way of drawing it that is useful for our purposes.<sup>12</sup> Tables, horses, and human persons are thought to be continuants because they are wholly present at each moment of their existence, they *endure*. By contrast, football matches, philosophy seminars, and folk songs are not wholly present at each moment of their existence, they *perdure*.<sup>13</sup> Things that perdure are said to have temporal parts, such as the beginning and ending of a song. Things that endure are said to lack temporal parts, e.g. a table does not start at one moment and end at another.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For two papers that are helpfully explain what is at stake in these debates, see Stout (1997) and, more recently, Steward (2015).

<sup>13</sup> The position known as “four-dimensionalism” maintains that material objects such as tables and horses also perdure: they are not wholly present at each moment of their existence, they have temporal parts. See Russel (1927), Lewis (1976, 2002), Sider (2001).

<sup>14</sup> Hofweber and Velleman (2011) argue that the idea that things can lack temporal parts is incoherent and the distinction between endurance and perdurance should be recast in terms of whether an object’s identity is fully determined at each moment of its existence.

If relationships are continuants—that is, if they endure—then all their constitutive parts exist at each moment of their existence. This leads to The Dubious Assumption. However, if relationships are processes—that is, if they perdure—then their constitutive parts do not exist at all moments of their existence. Mutual partiality can be partly constitutive of a relationship and yet absent at the earlier stages of a relationship, the way the climax of a musical piece is partly constitutive of the piece but absent from its beginning. If the earlier stages of a relationship do not include mutual partiality, then they can, in principle, justify the mutual partiality that is constitutive of the relationship at later stages. Both earlier and later stages are constitutive of a single relationship, but the relationship unfolds over time and the mutual partiality of its later stages would not be justified unless it followed the earlier stages. So the earlier stages *enable* the reasons of partiality at later stages in the relationship.

We have not escaped the dilemma yet, but we have a strategy. The dilemma is avoided *if* relationships are processes, and *if* the earlier stages of a relationship may lack mutual partiality and be part of the justification of mutual partiality at later stages of the relationship. I think these conditions obtain, most clearly with regard to friendships and romantic relationships but also, I believe, with regard to family relationships. In what remains, I try to render the process view of relationships plausible, fill in some details, and show how it satisfies the explanatory tasks of relationship accounts of partiality. I begin by making several observations that draw on the discussion in previous sections and move beyond it.

First, individuals' views of partiality, which we considered in the first section, emphasize a crucial insight: as participants in loving relationships we are primarily concerned with the other person as the particular person he or she is. We do things for this person in particular and we are emotionally responsive to this person in particular. We are concerned with the person's point of view on the world and on us, with her state of mind, with her experiences and opinions, and with her well-being, but we are not only concerned with these things. Knowing that the other person is happy and feels great affection for us would not keep us from heartbreak if we can never meet her again or spend time together. In other words, we are not merely concerned with *how the other person is doing*; we also want *to do things with her*, we want to be together.<sup>15</sup>

What doing things together and being together amounts to in each case depends on the kind of relationship we have with the person. Different kinds of relationships—friendships, romantic relationships, family relationships of different kinds—are different templates for *ways of being together*. Each particular relationship is a highly specific version of a relationship-type, molded

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<sup>15</sup> The fact relationships involve being together and doing things together (as well as an inclination to be together) is oddly missing from prominent relationship accounts. For example, Scheffler says that valuing a relationship non-instrumentally involves seeing the other person as a source of special claims and being disposed to see the person's needs, interests, and desires as, in themselves, providing one with reasons for action one would not have had in the absence of the relationship (Scheffler 1997, 196). But consider A and B. A and B satisfy Scheffler's description: both see each other as sources of special claims, and each is disposed to see the other's needs, interests, and desires as providing her with reasons for action she would not otherwise have. However, A and B don't meet each other and they lack any desire to be together or do things together. As long as B makes no claims on A and her interests and needs are provided for, A is happy not to be in touch; and as long as A makes no claims on B and her interests and needs are provided for, B is happy not to meet. They don't miss each other and are not inclined to communicate. In this case, A and B do not seem to be friends at all; they seem to have an oddly moralized and alienated attachment to each other, which includes duties to support each other but no inclination to enjoy each other's company.

over time by the participants as well as by circumstances beyond their control. Relationship-types are socially and culturally constructed ways of being together that we find valuable and compelling and take ourselves to have reasons to engage in. We can therefore say, somewhat metaphorically, that while particular persons are the *content of partiality*, our relationships are *forms of partiality*.

Second, Kolodny's idea that relationships are rationally self-sustaining helpfully draws our attention to the fact that relationships are not things that exist independently of our engagement in them. I can stand to you in the relation of 'being shorter than' or 'having the same shirt as' without actively sustaining these relationships, but these are not relationships in the relevant sense the term. Being in a relationship is also unlike *being at a football match*, which one can observe and enjoy but need not contribute to. It is, rather, like *playing in a football match*, where the existence of the match depends on one's continued participation. Being in a relationship is being engaged in an ongoing joint-activity which requires various skills and capacities and has its own intricate norms and conditions.

Third, relationships do not arrive on the scene fully formed. The beginning of friendship has only some of friendship's ingredients. Similarly, the beginning of a romantic relationship, no matter how intense and enthralling, lacks the weight and commitment of a mature romantic relationship. More specifically, friendships and romantic relationships normally do not start off complete with duties of practical and emotional partiality; those come later. However, it may seem that at least some family relationships are different. Parents are partial to their children from the moment they arrive into the world and are arguably obligated to be so. But the problem of justifying early partiality does not arise in the case of family relationships because attitude-independent social and biological facts determine the onset of the relationship and give rise to obligations of partiality.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, like friendships and romantic relationships, the parent-child relationship is not established in the first instance through mutual partiality, though it calls for it immediately. Moreover, as in friendships and romantic relationships, we find that partiality and concern change and grow as the parent-child relationship progresses: the time spent attending to the child's needs and the devotion and perseverance this requires create and merit bonds of partiality that do not and cannot exist immediately upon the child's arrival into the world. Similar things hold of other family relationships: partiality to family is often grounded in a history of living together as a family. Thus, although family relationships include some duties of partiality from their very beginning, they also give rise to various, weighty reasons and obligations of partiality, which constitute the relationship going forward.

Fourth, for a person to be in a relationship is for her to instantiate what Karen Jones calls, a *trajectory-dependent property* (Jones 2008). According to Jones, a trajectory is an ordered, temporally extended sequence of states or events, and trajectory-dependent properties are properties that apply in virtue of something's being a trajectory (271). When a

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<sup>16</sup> Kolodny calls family relationships 'attitude-independent relationships' because their existence does not require a historical pattern of concern (Kolodny 2003, 149). Though it is true that these relationships can begin without a historical pattern of concern and partiality, it seems to me that they are nevertheless partly constituted by concern and mutual partiality. A person is not a parent to a child if he is never partial to the child and has no concern for the child, even if social and biological fact determine him to be the child's father and even if the person's lack of partiality and concern is a failure to meet his obligation to be a father to this child. So I am reluctant to describe family relationships as 'attitude-independent'.

trajectory-dependent property applies to states or events, “it does so in virtue of the location of those states or events within the broader, structured, temporally extended whole” (ibid.). Whether a hammering of a nail is a building of a desk is determined by events that happen at other times according to the trajectory of desk-building. The same is true of ‘being a journey’ and ‘being a successful career’. Jones argues that ‘being in love’ is also a trajectory-dependent property: “particular thoughts, feelings, and actions count as the thoughts, feelings, and actions of lovers only in virtue of their assuming a place in a broader unfolding entity with the right structure” (274).

Since whether a trajectory-dependent property obtains depends on whether the trajectory required to support it in fact unfolds, such properties are vulnerable to future-contingencies. This means that some of our current properties depend on future events beyond our control, but it also means we can sometimes bring about the future that will determine our present properties. By recognizing the trajectory upon which the property in question depends, we may set out to realize it. Whether my hammering of the nail is a building of a desk is partly up to me and what I do next. If I don’t conceive of my action as a building of a desk it is unlikely to be one, though it might: maybe I’m blindly following instructions which, unbeknownst to me, are instructions for building a desk. But I am more likely to be building a desk if I intend to build a desk, which means following the trajectory of desk building.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing mysterious about this, no “backward causation”. We encounter future-dependent properties all the time. Whether this drink in front of me is my last drink tonight is yet to be determined—the night is young.<sup>18</sup>

The observations made so far support the idea that relationships are processes that have typical trajectories. Each relationship-type is constituted by a distinctive trajectory, which may be instantiated in a wide and complicated variety of ways. Whether two people are in a relationship at a time depends on whether they are engaged at that time in a relationship trajectory. Here is a succinct formulation of the view:

#### The Process View of Relationships

A is in a relationship with B at time  $t$  if and only if A and B are engaged, at time  $t$ , in a process that satisfies a relationship-trajectory.

Unlike football matches, musical pieces, and PhD programs, the beginnings of friendships and romantic relationships are often ambiguous and indeterminate, not explicitly marked by certain

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<sup>17</sup> Jones calls trajectories whose unfolding is sensitive to the interpretations we accept of them “interpretation sensitive trajectories”. The example of building a desk is relatively straight forward, but Jones discusses examples of more complicated, non-instrumental trajectories, which are not merely defined by the end state they are meant to produce. E.g. a quest. Jones writes:

Quests are journeys that involve sustained effort in the face of setback or obstacle in search of a sought after object (the Holy Grail) or goal (the destruction of the ring). The searching must be motivationally central in the sense that, to some variable but significant degree, the agent organizes her other activities around that search. One can be on a quest without conscious awareness of the object one seeks ... Nevertheless, seeing one’s activity under the description “quest” can make all the difference to whether or not the trajectory one is embarked on has the features it needs to be a quest-trajectory. (Jones 2008, 273)

<sup>18</sup> Though ‘being the last drink of the night’ is not an example of a trajectory-dependent property, only of a future-dependent one.

agreed upon rules.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, some relationship trajectories can evolve without anyone noticing, not even the participants themselves.<sup>20</sup> At some point, however, recognizing the unfolding trajectory and endorsing it becomes crucial for the continuation of the relationship. When the endorsement is reciprocated the relationship is no longer accidental but intended. Indeed, shared recognition of the relationship by the participants is often itself an element of the relationship-trajectory and therefore a constitutive part of the relationship. Thus, by reflecting on our reactions to another person, realizing that we care about them more than we had expected, and asking ourselves whether our caring is justified, we might come to recognize that we have become friends—we have been realizing a friendship-trajectory—and it is our friendship that justifies our reactions.

The idea that relationship-types have trajectories helps rectify some of the weaknesses we identified in Kolodny's account. First, there is no need to split relationships in two, as Kolodny's historical view of relationships does. Second, mutual partiality is a constitutive part of the relationship insofar as it instantiates the relationship-trajectory. So, contrary to Kolodny's account, we don't have to exclude my present concern from my present relationships; present concern and partiality are constitutive of our present relationship by instantiating its trajectory. Third, a history of shared concern, activity, and partiality that constitutes a certain relationship-type should have a certain shape, according to the relevant trajectory. Therefore, violations of mutual concern and partiality might be compatible with the existence of a relationship if they fall within the bounds of the relationship-trajectory. Indeed, as relationships evolve they often include various violations and wrongs that serve to establish a common interpretation of their constitutive norms; often by crossing boundaries we clarify and reassert them. Even at times of serious crisis, wrongs and violations of trust might not extinguish a relationship if there is still hope that the relationship-trajectory can be realized. Finally, contrary to Kolodny's view, two people can become friends without a history of shared concern, activity, and partiality. Immediately upon meeting we might take a liking to each other and decide to be friends. Assuming the initial ingredients of a friendship trajectory are in place and we go on to realize it, we do in fact become friends the first time we meet. The process view accounts for this.

Now to our main question: how do relationships justify partiality? Relationships begin either with attitude-independent social and biological facts (family relationships) or with interactions that normally do not include partiality (friendships and romantic relationships). They then gradually progress, instantiating a trajectory of a certain relationship type that we have reason to engage in. The fact that such a relationship trajectory is underway explains why the participants have at least some reasons of mutual partiality, reasons they would not otherwise have. Thus, whether because two people are biological siblings or because they enjoy spending time together, they have initial reasons for mutual partiality. Moreover, these reasons are about the other person as the particular person she or he is, for pursuing the relationship is pursuing a way of being with that person in particular. Finally, relationship-trajectories are often such that mutual partiality is

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<sup>19</sup> However, the institution of marriage may be seen as an attempt to formulize and to make determinate and public the boundaries and structure of romantic relationships. So marriage would stand to romance as institutionally-organized sports stand to games and academic degrees stand to learning and inquiry.

<sup>20</sup> Numerous rom-coms build on the audience noticing the romance before the characters do.



rationally self-augmenting: it rationally intensifies and deepens the longer it endures.<sup>21</sup> So the earlier stages of a relationship can justify the partiality essential to later stages of the relationship. Our past partiality adds weight and explains the existence of present reasons of partiality. This is how a relationship justifies the mutual partiality that partly constitutes it.

I conclude by considering an objection. It might seem that my proposal falls back into our dilemma. At the initial stages of a relationship, the relationship trajectory has not yet unfolded so it is not yet the case that we are, say, friends. Future partiality will partly constitute our friendship and make it the case that our first encounters in fact were the beginning of friendship. However, since at its early stages the friendship has not yet been determined to exist, the existence of friendship cannot justify mutual partiality. Only with the advent of mutual partiality the trajectory of friendship is established and our first encounters are determined to be instances of friendship, but then the bootstrapping worry reappears: how can mutual partiality retroactively justify itself? Alternatively, our first few encounters might justify mutual partiality, but then they do so without being instances of friendship. We are left with a view according to which mutual partiality partly constitutes relationships but relationships do not justify the mutual partiality that is needed to get them going. Kolodny's view is similar: he holds that the initial reasons for non-instrumental concern that first constitutes friendship are given by the participants' history of interaction. But this history of interaction, according to Kolodny, is distinct from (though similar to) friendship, for it lacks non-instrumental concern (Kolodny 2003, 169)<sup>22</sup>. So a relationship of proto-friendship justifies the initial mutual concern and partiality that partly constitute friendship. Is this the view I have been proposing? Have I come full circle to Kolodny's view?

To respond to this objection it is helpful to return to the idea that drives relationship accounts of justified partiality. We often cite our relationships to explain the existence and weight of our reasons of partiality. We say that this person is our spouse, or that that person is our friend, or that these people are our parents, and we note these relationships to explain why we care, or make an effort to help, or seek to please or appease. Note, however, that while we often refer to these relationships as established facts, we also invoke them as explanations of what we are *doing*: in being partial, we are being friends, lovers, siblings, children, or parents. So even early on in a friendship, before the friendship is established, one can attempt to establish it by *being a friend*. Engagement in the process of friendship can justify partiality before the process is realized.

Suppose we are colleagues. We appreciate each other and enjoy chatting at departmental events, but our relationship never develops into a friendship: we never meet outside of work and we know very little about each other's personal lives. Then I fall on hard times. You hear about it and offer to help but I politely decline. You notice that I'm struggling to keep up with work and that I look unkempt. One evening you show up at my doorstep with dinner and beer and say you happened to pass by. I try to say no—I think it might be awkward and I'm not feeling very social—but eventually I give in and we spend an enjoyable evening together. Before you leave, I thank you and say I actually had fun. I ask why did you go out of your way to cheer me up, and you reply: "because we're friends." In saying this you do not mean to invoke an already

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<sup>21</sup> For the ideas of rationally self-augmenting attitudes and rationally self-consuming attitudes, see Na'aman (2021, 260).

<sup>22</sup> However, as noted, this view is in tension with the view he presents in Kolodny 2010a, 2010b.

established relationship. If I were to correct you by noting that we never hung out before, I'd be missing your point. What justified your partiality toward me on that evening is that you were being a friend to me—you engaged in friendship—even though we had not been friends before. And just like that, we're in a relationship.

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