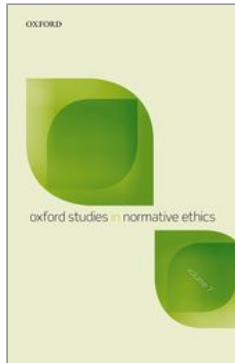


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## The Centrality of One's Own Life

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### Abstract and Keywords

We are all, to some degree or other, self-centered; we tend to concentrate on our own needs and interests to the relative exclusion of most other people's. This chapter explores the prospects for justifying such partiality on grounds of individual autonomy. Two versions of this approach are considered. The first develops the idea that, to be autonomous, an agent must have available a significant range of morally permissible options. This approach is rejected in favor of a second, according to which a strong duty of impartial beneficence would objectionably render an agent subject to the wills of other agents. That is, insofar as a person is entitled to a special authoritative status in relation to what she does, that person will bear the primary responsibility for how well her life goes. The chapter concludes by considering the implications for our understanding of morally required beneficence.

*Keywords:* partiality, impartiality, self-concern, autonomy, beneficence, responsibility, agent-centered options, imperfect duties

Most of us act in ways that persistently favor some people over others. We concentrate on the needs and interests of a few people, and do so largely because we stand in some special relation to them—they are our friends, our loved ones, ourselves. Is such differential treatment morally defensible? In deciding how to act and how to live, it seems we *could* concern ourselves more with impartial assessments of the good we could do for various people. Is there some principled justification we might offer for instead focusing our efforts on our own select group—in particular, a justification that others outside of our circle might recognize and accept? What form might such a justification take?

This challenge to justify what we can term, broadly, and without prejudice, our “self-centeredness”<sup>1</sup> takes it for granted that one should, morally, have some concern for others simply as people, or as human beings. Most of us would find it morally objectionable to treat those with whom we have no special relationship as if their welfare were a matter of indifference to us. And this raises the question: Isn't there a similar objection to our *relative* neglect of their welfare in comparison with others'? Taking this question seriously calls for an affirmative defense of the ways in which we allow our practical concern for the well-being of different people to vary depending on the different relations we have to those people.

Intuitively, of course, we do not take the fact we are obligated to have some concern for others' well-being to imply that we should have the same degree or kind of concern for everyone. A strict duty of impartial beneficence is strongly counterintuitive. But is there a way to explain **(p.230)** what is wrong with it? Can anything more be said in defense of the special regard and attention we pay to our own interests in contrast with the interests of strangers? We have reason, I think, to want a positive account. This is not just because we have grounds to be suspicious of brute intuitions in this area, given their self-serving nature. Without an understanding of the moral basis of legitimate self-centeredness, we cannot hope for a clear sense of its boundaries—for the points at which concern for one's own happiness turns into selfishness or objectionable indifference to the interests of others.

My aim in this paper will be to explicate and defend a particular way of understanding the moral credentials of self-centeredness. The line I will pursue is that a strict duty of

impartial beneficence—one that required us, say, to use our time and resources as we imagine a benevolent but disinterested spectator would direct—would in some way interfere with our ability to determine for ourselves the shape that our lives will take. Such a requirement, that is, would be an affront to our autonomy as individuals with our own lives to lead.<sup>2</sup>

There is something intuitive about the idea that the value of living an autonomous life is in tension with the requirement to act from a strictly impartial concern for everyone potentially affected by one's actions. But the claim is an obscure one. What exactly is the sense of autonomy that is at issue? And how is it supposed to be undermined by a system of *moral* obligations—particularly since moral obligations as such have force only through the will and judgment of the moral agent herself?

In what follows, I will compare two different interpretations of this autonomy-based defense of self-centeredness. According to the first, the relevant notion of autonomy is thought to imply that impartial moral obligations themselves amount to restrictions on one's freedom. I will argue that this rests on a confusion, and that the sort of autonomy we should take seriously has no such implication. Genuine autonomy in leading one's life does not directly require a "zone of moral indifference."<sup>3</sup>

The second version of the autonomy approach I want to consider rejects the notion that moral requirements directly constrain one's freedom and **(p.231)** focuses instead on the connection between autonomy and the absence of subjection to an alien will. What I will ultimately argue is that, if we are to avoid a requirement to subject ourselves to the wills and judgments of others, we must accept that we each have a responsibility for our own lives and well-being that others do not in general share. If I am right about this, it establishes a legitimate form of self-centeredness or partiality by an indirect route, since it would then follow that we do not generally have the same kind of responsibility for others' lives and well-being as we do for our own.

## 1. Two models of self-centeredness

First, some preliminaries. The question here is about what I have called, broadly, our self-centeredness. I will start by narrowing the focus to the special concern each of us has with our own needs and interests as compared with a normal altruistic concern for persons with whom we have no special ties.<sup>4</sup> At a general level, we can describe this special concern for ourselves as involving, first, the tendency to notice and pay attention to threats to our own interests, as well as opportunities to further them, in ways we are not disposed to attend to similar threats and opportunities to promote the interests of just anyone. And second, we are more disposed to take up opportunities, when we become aware of them, to act in the service of our interests (or prevent damage to them) than we are to take up such opportunities to further the interests of strangers. In this sense, we exhibit a general tendency to view our own needs and interests as more pressing on our attention and as having a certain priority with respect to our deliberation and action, as compared with the interests of persons with whom we have no close ties.

However, in asking what could justify such self-centeredness, and what its limits might be, we need to be more precise about how exactly to interpret the kind of partiality or self-concern in question. To this end, I will contrast two general schemas.

The first is what I'll call the "discount rate" model. On this model, legitimate (self-regarding) partiality is a matter of assigning extra weight<sup>5</sup> **(p.232)** to one's own interests in contexts where one is in the position of choosing between furthering one's interests as opposed to doing something else—including promoting the interests of some other person or persons.

The second is the "divided responsibility" model. The model here is of a division of (forward-looking) responsibility, such that the task of seeing to it that a person's life goes well falls primarily to that person herself. Legitimate self-centeredness on this view takes the form of recognizing that one need not see oneself as responsible for others' interests in the same way that one is for one's own.

To see the differences between these two views, consider a simple case. You decide to go to the movies by yourself. When you get to the box office, you see another person in line to buy a ticket. You could purchase the ticket for her. Let's assume

that the financial cost of the movie is more burdensome for her than for you. (You can easily afford the extra cost; she's down on her luck.) Nevertheless, let's grant that you do not act wrongly in leaving the person to pay for her own ticket, instead using the money you could have spent on her to, say, buy popcorn and soda for yourself, or perhaps a cab ride home after the movie.

The discount rate view offers a straightforward explanation of this permission. Although it may be that the stranger would have benefited more from your purchasing her ticket than you do from saving the money for yourself—spending it on popcorn or whatever—you are allowed to give greater weight to your own interests as such in deciding what action to take. You may, in other words, discount the reasons you have to promote the other's interests relative to the reasons you have to promote your own.<sup>6</sup>

The divided responsibility model provides a different type of justification for the verdict in this case. The idea here is that the possibility of furthering the person's interests by buying her movie ticket for her is not a possibility you would be expected to take into account or treat as relevant to your decision about whether, say, to buy popcorn for yourself. This marks a clear contrast with the discount rate model. On that model, you may weight your own interests more heavily than the other person's, but the opportunity to promote the other's interest in enjoying **(p.233)** a free movie is relevant to your deliberation. On the divided responsibility model, however, the fact that you had this opportunity to benefit this person does not automatically raise any question about the justification of your conduct. Asked why you don't buy the stranger's ticket, on this view, it makes sense to answer that you are not responsible for looking out for the financial- and entertainment-related interests of people you happen to be in line with at the movie theater. As I understand it, such an answer does not offer a positive reason not to buy the stranger's ticket for her. Rather, it rejects the presupposition that any such reason is called for. In other words, it rejects the assumption that your not paying for the stranger's ticket amounts to an omission that you are required at the very least to answer for and justify.

More abstractly, the divided responsibility model of partiality can be characterized as follows. A person is generally responsible for her own well-being in a way that she is not for just anyone's well-being. This is, in the first instance, a forward-looking sense of responsibility.<sup>7</sup> It implies that one is expected both to look out for opportunities to further one's interests and to take those opportunities into account as relevant to one's decisions about what to do. Combining these two factors, we can say: there is a normative presumption that one will take opportunities to promote one's interests unless one has good reason not to.

This presumption should not be construed too strongly. First, the claim is not that one *ought to* take every available opportunity to promote one's self-interest. One ought to take such opportunities only if one lacks sufficient reason to do something else instead. Second, the presumption itself is defeasible. One might, for instance, be innocently ignorant of a given opportunity to promote one's well-being. In that case, one cannot be expected to take it into account.

Even with these caveats, the model of self-centeredness as divided responsibility holds that one is not similarly responsible for everyone's well-being. In particular, there is no general presumption that one will take a given opportunity to promote another's interests unless one has good reason not to do so. On the contrary, the default presumption is that others are responsible for looking out for their own interests.

**(p.234)** We can think of these two models or forms of self-centeredness as two different ways of departing from the following, fully impartial conception of morally required beneficence. On this strong impartialist conception, first, each person's well-being would be equally everyone's responsibility, in the sense that everyone would be (normatively) expected to act on any available opportunity to aid or benefit anyone else, unless she had some positive justification or excuse for not doing so. Call this the *presumption of mutually shared responsibility for well-being*. Second, given the presumptive deliberative relevance of opportunities to benefit others, one would, in addition, be required not to place any more weight on one's own interests in deciding which of the available opportunities to act on. The discount rate model rejects this second component, allowing that extra weight may be given to

one's own interests. The divided responsibility model rejects the first, the presumption of shared responsibility.

One can imagine different ways of justifying either or both departures from strong impartialism. A more moderate form of impartialism, for instance, might seek to justify a discount rate or a division of responsibility for well-being on instrumental grounds, arguing that concentrating on one's own interests (or perhaps a moral system that permits this) is the most effective way to promote well-being overall.<sup>8</sup> On other, more fundamentally *partialist* views, it may be argued that some form of self-centeredness follows from the internal requirements of the "personal point of view," a point of view that is structured by projects and commitments that are in some sense essentially first-personal.<sup>9</sup> The argument I will put forward in this paper is an argument specifically for the legitimacy of self-centeredness interpreted on the divided responsibility model. It is moderately impartialist, in the sense that it aims to justify this kind of self-centeredness by appeal to what is fundamentally an impartial value or concern, though the value in question is not aggregate well-being, but rather an impartial concern for personal autonomy. Moreover, the justification is not instrumental or consequentialist. Instead, what I hope to show is that a basic division of responsibility for individuals' well-being is a **(p.235)** constitutive condition of everyone's enjoying a valuable form of personal autonomy. I begin with some remarks about the notion of autonomy I will be relying on.

## 2. Two conditions of autonomy

Following Joseph Raz we can say that, "An autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life."<sup>10</sup> As I will interpret this idea, what it requires is that the shape that one's life takes should reflect, to a significant degree, one's convictions about what is worth doing and pursuing. So interpreted the idea does not require any strong metaphysical assumptions about the nature of free will. Nor does it assume that the will is in any robust sense the source of value or of the principles that govern it. Rather, one is autonomous to the extent that one is able to implement one's (evolving) conception of the good through one's actions and choices over the course of one's life.

The two autonomy-based arguments against impartial beneficence that I distinguish below are respectively focused on two different, and fairly uncontroversial, conditions that must be met for an individual to be autonomous. The first is that one must have available an adequate range of options to choose from. These options need to be different enough in kind so as to give one a genuine opportunity to exercise one's judgment concerning their merits.

The second condition is that one's thought and decisions must be sufficiently independent of others' wills so as not to be controlled or dictated by what others want from one. I do not mean to suggest that one must be self-sufficient or that dependence on others is necessarily in tension with one's autonomy. Nevertheless, one needs to have opportunities to reflect on and critically assess the relations of dependence in which one stands to others. And to the extent that one finds *particular* relations of dependence or deference unacceptable, one should have some opportunity to extricate oneself from them.

These conditions of autonomy or self-determination should be relatively uncontroversial. This is in large part due to their vagueness. **(p.236)** In what follows, my aim will be to see how more determinate renderings of these conditions might bear on the justification of some form of self-centeredness.

## 3. Does autonomy require a zone of moral indifference?

Let's turn then to the first way of developing the idea that a strict requirement of impartial beneficence would interfere in some way with an agent's ability to live a life of her own choosing, and so with her autonomy. According to this view,



being subject to pervasive moral requirements is itself the threat to the agent's autonomy that we need to worry about. In order to be autonomous, one needs a significant range of *morally permissible* options when it comes to shaping the course of one's life—a range that is broad enough to include possibilities that rule out certain forms of attention to the needs and interests of other people.

The claim is that, if we are required always to attend to the overall balance of needs and interests belonging to everyone whose lives we might affect, then the variety of options open to us that are morally acceptable will be severely limited. Think, for example, of the ways in which one's career choices would be restricted if one were required to pursue whatever career would be maximally beneficial overall. Even what we think of as deeply personal choices—whether to marry or have children, where to live—would be largely dictated by morality. If, however, one's range of permissible options is so restricted, one's choices cannot be fully autonomous. A life made up of such morally limited choices is not an autonomous life. Or so the argument goes. If it is sound, then in order to make adequate provision for autonomy within our moral theories, we will need to relax the demands of impartiality.<sup>11</sup>

The main question then is whether it is plausible to identify freedom from moral constraint as a condition of genuine autonomy. Is there any **(p.237)** genuinely problematic form of unfreedom implied by a purely moral constraint? It is important here to distinguish the way in which moral principles themselves are binding from their enforcement by way of external sanctions. The latter, of course, may be coercive, even oppressive. But morality, as such, can constrain only through assent to its principles. And this makes it very different from the kind of external constraints that typically count as limits to one's freedom.<sup>12</sup>

Suppose a person has access to a variety of options to choose from. A college student, for example, is contemplating different career paths. She will rule out various options in the course of deliberating about what to do. This, of course, does not imply that she is less free to choose those options—just that she does not think she has good reason to choose them. It is not clear why it should make any difference if she rules out various options for *moral* reasons.

Suppose our student decides that, given her talents and opportunities, she can do the most good by going into medicine and working in an underserved, rural community, and that she is therefore morally required to do so. She has perhaps given up pursuing some things she would have liked to pursue. She might have a deep interest in studying literature; or she might wish she could work as a doctor in a large metropolis. Nevertheless, she chooses to go where she believes she will be of the greatest use, and does so, let's assume, because she believes it would be wrong—objectionably selfish—not to do so. There is no denying that (her view of) morality is burdensome in ruling out various options the student might have significant interest in pursuing. But that is not the issue at stake here. The question is whether the student's choice to practice medicine in a rural setting is less *autonomous* because it is dictated by moral concerns. And this does not seem to be the case. She may find it a hard choice to make but this does not mean it is not a free choice. In general, when assessing a plan or decision as autonomous and expressive of one's values and commitments, there seems to be no reason to distinguish morally relevant factors, such as the rights and well-being of other people, from other kinds of values (prudence, for instance) that enter into one's deliberation.

**(p.238)** One might object, however, to this way of construing the argument linking autonomy to the availability of a range of morally acceptable options. The problem, it could be said, is not that actions are less free because they are obligatory. Rather, the problem is that, if we do not have an adequate range of permissible options, then moral considerations will pervade every aspect of our lives. And this would seem to inhibit the development and expression of our capacities to appreciate and respond to non-moral values and reasons. Opportunities to pursue a fuller and wider-ranging conception of the good life, a conception that encompasses more than just a sense of what is morally required, will not be available to us as long as we conform to the standards of morality.

Seana Shiffrin, for example, writes that, absent a variety of morally permissible options, “morally compliant agents are deprived of the opportunity, given their moral commitments, to create the content of their lives and to exercise their full capacity for choice, a capacity which encompasses much more than just the capacity for moral decision and action.”<sup>13</sup>

Shiffrin's thought seems to be that an important component of autonomy is the ability to give "content" to one's life in a way that is not dictated solely by moral concerns. We might see an analogy here between the moral impartialist, whose overarching aim, in nearly all her actions, is to fulfill her moral obligations and Raz's example of the hounded woman, whose every waking moment is dedicated to keeping herself from being torn apart by the wild beast that is hunting her.<sup>14</sup> Both people are making choices in light of what they take to matter (morality, survival), but they have no chance to make choices concerning other things that might matter beyond the single value that dominates their lives. This appears to contribute to our sense that their lives are not really theirs to do with what they will.

In response to this argument, we can begin by calling into question the analogy between the "hounded woman" and the moral impartialist. The problem is that in Raz's example, the determining factor governing the woman's choices is always the same *determinant* end—namely her physical survival. The question for deliberation is not what constitutes the successful realization of that end—what *counts* as staying alive—but merely *how* to achieve it. The end of fulfilling one's moral obligations, **(p.239)** however, is not like this. Rather, it is, to use Rawls's terminology, an inclusive end.<sup>15</sup> The attempt to live and act as morality demands does not exclude meaningful consideration of other ends and values. Instead it bears on the *way* in which they are taken into consideration and pursued. What one takes to be morally required in a given situation depends on one's interpretation of other things that are of value, and how one prioritizes these things.

This raises doubts about the claim that, in order for a person to (permissibly) exercise the full range of her evaluate and agential capacities, there must be significant aspects of her life that are not governed by positive moral requirements. This is because what is required by an impartial assessment of the various interests that are at stake in one's situation is a function of the different values that underlie these interests—values that are not themselves strictly moral values. One's sense of morality is not something separate from one's sense of, say, the importance within a person's life of family, or religion, or personal privacy. It is therefore misleading to distinguish between the capacities for moral vs. non-moral evaluation and choice, and to suggest that strict requirements

of impartial concern will only allow for the exercise of the former. If considerations of autonomy provide a basis for a defense of self-centeredness, it is not, I think, because autonomy is only possible within a zone of moral indifference.

4. Impartial responsibility and subjection to others' wills  
Is there another sense in which a life dominated by obligations of impartial beneficence is less than fully autonomous? The argument of section 3 focused on the condition that, to be autonomous, an agent requires an adequate range of options from which to choose. The question was whether we should interpret this condition specifically as requiring a significant range and variety of *morally permissible* options. I want to turn now to consider a different sort of threat to autonomy. The idea here will be to locate the core of our concern for autonomy not in freedom from morality, but in freedom from subjection to the wills of other agents.

**(p.240)** Certain aspects of morality are concerned, not so much with how things go—with how well people do for themselves and others—but with who gets to decide how things go. Thus, for instance, there is an anti-paternalistic strain in our commonsense moral thought. We are prohibited from intervening in certain ways in a person's life without his or her consent, even if the intervention would be for the person's own good. We take ourselves to have considerable discretion with respect to what we do with, and what happens to, our bodies and minds, even if there are others whose judgment concerning what is good for us is superior to our own. The argument I now want to consider for the moral legitimacy of a kind of self-centeredness is in this space of moral norms which concern, not so much the objective values or reasons on the basis of which moral agents should choose, but who has the authority to make the relevant choices.

My central thesis is this: If, and to the extent that, a person is entitled to enjoy a special authoritative status in relation to what she does with her life, then that person will bear the primary, default responsibility for how well her life goes. The major premise of the argument for this conclusion is that, insofar as one is entitled to expect others to share the (forward-looking) responsibility for one's well-being, including the successful realization of one's ends and projects, one ought to allow those others a say in how one lives one's life. This, I will argue, is called for if one is to respect others as autonomous persons with their own distinct points of view, while at the same time relying on them to take responsibility for one's well-being.

But if that is right, it in turn gives rise to its own autonomy-based concern. To be under such a general requirement to submit one's choices to the approval of others seems not to be compatible with living an autonomous life oneself. There will clearly be a range of contexts in which one cannot enjoy genuine autonomy if one is required to show substantial deference to others' opinions concerning what one is to do and how one is to live. In order, then, for one's own evaluative judgments to have the right kind of authority with respect to one's decisions about what to pursue, one must accept that the primary responsibility for seeing to it that one's life goes well belongs to oneself. And since the same goes for everyone else, one is also free from having to regard oneself as being, in general, just as responsible for others' well-being as one is for one's own.

**(p.241)** What, then, is the motivation for the main premise—namely, that an entitlement that others share the responsibility for one's well-being in accordance with a principle of impartial beneficence carries with it a requirement to give others a say in how one lives one's life? Why should we accept that?

To make the case for this, I want to begin with a point Bernard Williams made against utilitarianism. Williams complained that “[A person's] own decisions as a utilitarian agent are a function of all the satisfactions which he can affect from where he is: and this means that the projects of others, to an indeterminately great extent, determine his decision.”<sup>16</sup> Though Williams was concerned with what this might mean for the agent's integrity, it may also suggest a version of an autonomy-based objection—one not so much concerned with freedom from moral obligation *per se*, as with freedom from constraints imposed by the projects and choices of other people.

Such an objection could be raised against theories other than utilitarianism. My claim is that, in general, something like this problem will arise for any theory insofar as it implies that one person's pursuit of her own private ends is liable to substantially affect the projects and ends others are able to pursue consistently with meeting their moral obligations. Granted that how well a person's life goes depends at least in part on her success in pursuing her projects and ambitions, the worry is then about any principle of beneficence that

involves a presumption of mutually shared responsibility for well-being.

To see why this is so, consider first that, given such a presumption of shared responsibility, how much one would have to do for others, and the degree to which one would have to put on hold, or give up altogether, one's own ambitions, will be partly a function of what exactly others need to pursue their aims. And this, obviously, will depend on what their aims are. If you make it the central goal of your life to sail around the world, then what is required by due consideration for your well-being will be different from what it would have been had you decided to dedicate yourself to slam poetry. This is both because the successful realization of your ends is a constituent of your well-being, and because the nature of your projects will affect your ability to satisfy **(p.242)** your other interests and even your basic needs.<sup>17</sup> The choice of international sailing versus spoken-word will for these reasons make a difference to the forms of aid and assistance others may be called upon to provide. And it will also make a difference to the level and types of aid others may expect of you, given the effect of your choices on your resources, abilities, and needs. There is thus a sense in which, if your welfare is everyone's responsibility, then what others are permitted to do with their lives is subject to your will.

This is not the end of the story, of course. Rather, we can think of this respect in which others are subject to your will as presenting you, as a moral agent, with a problem that needs to be confronted. For the way in which your choice of ends imposes on others is not something you may simply ignore in working out what to do. If you have reason to believe that your choice of ends is likely to substantially impact the ability of others to permissibly pursue their own ambitions and projects, you have some moral obligation to consider this in setting your ends. The difficulty emerges once we ask how, exactly, you are to take this into account.

The solution might seem straightforward, at least in principle. In considering whether to adopt some end, *E*, one might think that the issue is whether the reasons that show *E* to be worthwhile are sufficient to counter the expected costs to oneself and others, including the opportunity costs. This may not be easy to resolve in practice, but it is a problem we

regularly and inevitably face. According to this response, the presumption of shared responsibility for one another's well-being is not itself cause for any special concern.

There are two problems with this response, however. Both have to do with the kind of scrutiny one's choices would be open to under a system of impartial responsibility. Insofar as the burdens others are required to bear vary according to our individual choices and ambitions, these will naturally be taken as legitimate objects of scrutiny by any potentially affected party. The first problem, then, is that this fact is not easily ignored or set aside in working out for ourselves what is worth pursuing. For most of us, merely being aware of our decisions as the appropriate targets of approval or disapproval by relative strangers is liable to distort our sense of being free to make up our own minds. And indeed, the constant awareness that, so to speak, our business is everyone's business, **(p.243)** is bound to make it considerably more difficult to hold ourselves to our own standards—those we would stand behind.

This first problem rests on certain assumptions about normal human capacities for authentic, autonomous deliberation. The idea is that our sense of ourselves as free to pursue goals and relationships we think worthwhile, as well as our ability to stick to our convictions about such things, is often impeded in the face of outside scrutiny and judgment. But there is a second problem with the above response, one rooted in a more basic normative claim. If the level of sacrifice others will be required to make in order to promote your well-being depends on the specific ends you adopt, then it is not just that it will likely be *difficult* for you to come to an independent, autonomous judgment as to whether a particular project is worth the resulting impositions on others. The problem, rather, is that to *succeed* in this—to act on the basis of your own evaluative convictions and standards, without giving any weight to whether others agree or not—is in tension with the respect you owe to others as autonomous agents, who are themselves entitled to shape their lives in light of their own views about the good.

The issue here is about the kind of authority one may presume to have with respect to others' lives and projects. Even if you disagree with my assessment that some project you are dedicated to is not worth the resulting demands placed on me—even if you're right to disagree, right to think I have failed to



fully appreciate the value of what you're up to—you should still be able to recognize my objection to my agency and resources being enlisted in support of a project I view as largely a waste of time.

The basic issue arises even in cases where the material sacrifices required are minimal. Suppose, for instance, I am thinking about going to a baseball game with you. You live near the stadium; I live clear across town. I can catch a ride with you to the game (you've already offered). The question for me is how I will get home. Let me stipulate that by far the best option for me is that you give me a ride home after the game. I decide that, if I can count on you to give me a ride, it will be worth it to go to the game. But otherwise, it will be too much of a hassle. Now I take it we would ordinarily think the thing for me to do, before making my decision, would be to *ask* you if you would give me a ride home. I hope you will agree to do so, but I should be ready accept a "no" answer if you decide you do not have time to drive all the way back across town after the game.

By contrast, there would be something clearly objectionable about just proceeding on the assumption that, when the time comes, it will at **(p.244)** that point be obvious enough that my need outweighs the inconvenience to you, and so you will drive me back home. What is objectionable here is that, in forming my plans—plans that involve you—I have given no consideration whatever to what you think about the matter. Reasoning in this way from the assumption of your shared responsibility for my interests to a particular end or plan of action without giving you a say in it thus appears to display a lack of respect for your autonomy. It renders you objectionably subject to my will.

The alternative, in this context, is actually to give you a say over what I choose to do. I ask you if you're willing to drive me to the game, knowing that you will then have to drive me back home. This conclusion, I suggest, generalizes. If we accept the presumption of shared responsibility for well-being, so that our expected claims to aid substantially depends on which projects we decide to pursue, we are left with no other avenue than to allow the evaluative judgments of others to play an independent role in our own deliberations about what ends are worth adopting. If we are to respect the autonomy of others, we must not merely determine, to our own satisfaction, that

we have sufficiently good reason to pursue some end. We need to consider whether, in addition, our reasons could satisfy others, given their ideas about the good.

From the point of view of our attempt to accommodate the value of autonomy, however, this second option appears equally problematic. For it attempts to reconcile impartial responsibility for welfare with respect for others' autonomy by insisting that we be able to justify our ends to others in terms with regard to which they have some say. We take into account their autonomy by allowing them mutual authority or input with respect to whether our choice of ends is adequately supported. But to insist on this generally would itself be inconsistent with our ability to shape the course of our lives in light of our own judgments concerning what is of value. To be beholden to this extent to the judgments of others when it comes to how one is to lead one's life seems clearly unacceptable given the value to us of preserving our autonomy.

### 5. Divided responsibility as the solution

The prospects for responding coherently to the value of autonomy (both our own and others') thus appear dim so long as we maintain the presumption of shared responsibility for well-being. Fortunately, there is a **(p.245)** strong case to be made that if, instead, one is willing to assume primary responsibility for the advancement of one's own interests and overall welfare, this will itself be a way of showing appropriate regard for others' autonomy. This yields an intuitive conception of a person's relation to her own well-being, namely, that the job of seeing to it that one's life goes well is to be taken up, especially, by oneself. The claim, then, is that a reasonable concern for others' autonomy will manifest itself in a willingness to bear the primary responsibility for one's well-being.

Here is one way to put the question we have been concerned with: How is one to respond to a potential benefactor who objects that a certain project does not warrant the kind of assistance she will be required to give if one makes this project central to one's life? What I earlier called the divided responsibility model of self-concern makes room for what, in many contexts, seems a very natural response. If we give up the assumption that others share the primary responsibility for

one's happiness and well-being, one may say, in effect, "Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it myself—even if it means having to make sacrifices."

To illustrate, imagine you are considering whether you should become a vegetarian. Your community is largely made up of meat-eaters. There aren't many restaurants that cater to vegetarians. Your friends and family are mostly non-vegetarian. So one thing to consider is the difficulties of eating well involved for a vegetarian in your situation. Still, you might think that your enjoyment is not worth the animal suffering and environmental degradation that makes it possible. Others may disagree with this outlook, though. You may think that your friends, for instance, will object to having to "work around" your vegetarianism. Their sincere concern for your happiness and enjoyment will now take the form of giving up a host of what they view as perfectly good options concerning where to eat, what to serve in their homes—when you are around. Although they may be willing to adapt their behavior—they will recognize, let's assume, that what they can get at the one vegetarian place in town is still better than what you can get anywhere else—they may nevertheless resent having to make these sacrifices for what they consider a trivial or hopeless cause. One option here is to ignore your friends' sense of being imposed upon, on the grounds that you are right, and they are wrong, about the merits of vegetarianism. On the other hand, you might take their views into account, not by giving up on being a strict vegetarian, but by attempting to lessen the imposition—accepting, for instance, that **(p.246)** lousy meals at your friends' restaurant of choice will be a frequent price you have to pay for the sake of a worthy end—at least until you can persuade your friends to give up meat as well.<sup>18</sup>

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

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

Thus, if one is to have adequate regard for the right of other people to make up their own minds about what is of value—what is worth taking risks and making sacrifices for—even in cases where their views differ from one's own, one ought to be careful about the extent to which one holds others responsible for one's welfare or happiness. Proper consideration for others' autonomy requires, therefore, that one assume the primary responsibility both for seeing to it that one's life goes well, and for the burdens associated with pursuing ends one takes to be worthwhile.

We can now bring into full view the distinctive place and importance for one of one's own life and well-being. If assuming primary responsibility for one's ends is the proper way to display respect for the fact that others have the right to make up their own minds on questions of value and govern themselves accordingly, then one will also, of course, be entitled to expect *others* to take responsibility for their own lives and projects. The argument therefore establishes, by an indirect route, a justification for a kind of self-centeredness. One may focus largely on one's own interests because one is not, in general, responsible for the lives and well-being of others in the same way that they themselves are. Responsibility for how a person's life goes falls primarily to that person (**p.247**) herself. One may thus rely on this division of responsibility in devoting one's attention and resources to the projects and relationships that make up the core of one's life.

### 6. Duties of beneficence

I want to conclude by considering what this account implies about the obligations we do have to promote others' well-being. If I am right that a legitimate form of self-centeredness can be supported by appeal to the conditions of autonomy, how should this affect our thinking about the nature of our positive duties toward other people? At the extreme, one might worry that, if considerations of autonomy really do require each of us to accept our own well-being and success as our personal

responsibility, this will leave no space for morally obligatory beneficence or concern for others' well-being.

I will divide my answer to this question into two parts. I will first say something about general duties of beneficence—duties to promote the well-being of other persons generally, without reference to any special relationships we might have with them. I will then say something about how the argument I have been developing bears on the special obligations that arise in the context of close personal relationships. Of course, I will not be able to present a full account of these issues here. What I have to say will of necessity be programmatic and meant merely to suggest some directions for future inquiry.

First, the implications for general beneficence: The conflict between autonomy and a strict duty of impartial beneficence stems in part from the fact that such a duty would require one to give independent weight to others' conceptions of the good when adopting ends for oneself. This is because one ought to do this if the extent to which one is entitled to other people's aid—and thus how much sacrifice others will likely be required to make on one's behalf—depends on the specific ends and projects one adopts. And this will be the case under any principle according to which what one is required to do for another is a function of the good one could do for that person under the circumstances, as compared to the good one could do (for oneself or others) by acting otherwise. Since a requirement of impartial beneficence is an instance of such principle, it raises a problem for our autonomy.

**(p.248)** Notice, however, that not just any departure from impartial beneficence will avoid this problem. In particular, the discount rate model, on which one may accord greater weight to one's own interests in deciding how to allocate one's time and resources, will not help on its own.<sup>19</sup> Such a view still implies that what one is required to do and to give up is sensitive to the particular ends others have chosen to pursue. What is needed, instead, is a way of understanding our moral requirements on which, in general, the level of aid that one is entitled to expect—and how much others may be required to give up to provide it—does not substantially depend on the particular ends one adopts, but instead forms the background against which one chooses to pursue the things one does.<sup>20</sup> Under these circumstances, one may recognize that certain pursuits will be riskier, or will make life harder; but if these

facts by themselves do not substantially affect what others owe one by way of assistance, then they will not raise the specter of having to answer to the assessments of perfect strangers as to whether these would be wise choices.

This line of thought lends support to a particular interpretation of our general duty of beneficence toward others. Specifically, it supports the traditional understanding of beneficence as an imperfect duty, one that is not determinate in its application. We might follow Kant, for instance, in thinking that the basic duty is to adopt others' happiness or well-being as one of our ends.<sup>21</sup> This would allow us to recognize a moral requirement to concern ourselves with others' interests, and seek to promote them, without thereby accepting that others have a *prima facie* claim to any benefit it is in our power to bestow. The obligation to adopt an end does not itself determine which actions are required in furtherance of that end.<sup>22</sup> And this is what is required by the defense of self-centeredness on grounds of autonomy. Understanding beneficence as an imperfect duty implies discretion on the part of the agent in determining when and how to fulfill it. Thus there is scope to retain the **(p.249)** authority of our own judgments about the value of various pursuits (our own and others') and how to prioritize them. Apart from extreme circumstances (the proverbial drowning child), where failure to act would be sufficient to call into question whether one has in fact adopted the well-being of others as an end, there is no presumption that one will take any *particular* opportunity to provide aid. And this is what we need from a conception of morally required beneficence, since it was that presumption that was the source of the trouble.

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

But nothing in the argument from autonomy should lead us to expect that this is how the duty should be interpreted. The moral function, so to speak, of the indeterminacy built into the duty of beneficence is not to lessen the costs associated with

fulfilling it.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it is to provide the relevant discretion necessary to secure respect for one another's autonomy.

So far, I have been discussing general beneficence—the sort of concern for others' well-being that we owe to persons as such. But our obligations to those with whom we have close personal ties seem to go beyond this. Intuitively, we have greater responsibilities for helping to ensure that our friends and loved ones lead successful and happy lives. This seems at odds with the idea that a person's main responsibility is to herself.

In fact, however, I think the argument from autonomy I have presented sheds interesting light on the special obligations we have in virtue of our personal relationships. What we need to focus on is the fact that a person's concern to lead an autonomous life—a life that is her own—must take a different form and express itself differently in the context of, say, a marriage or close friendship. When two people share a close personal relationship, their lives are, as it were, entangled. They are not separate in the way that strangers' lives are separate. We should therefore expect that a concern both **(p. 250)** to maintain one's autonomy as well as to respect the autonomy of other persons will have different implications with regard to one's positive obligations toward one's spouse or one's friends.

In arguing above for the connection between a person's autonomy and her responsibility for her own well-being, I relied on the idea that a person's ability to shape her life by her own lights tends to be undermined if she is required to give others a say with respect to what aims and projects she should adopt. But it's not clear that this is the right thing to say of people who share close ties. Spouses and friends organize—to a greater or lesser extent—their lives and activities around each other. Indeed, valuing these relationships seems incompatible with insisting on the value of keeping one's life, and the ambitions and pursuits that give it substance, separate from the other person's. Clearly, it should and will make sense for each partner in a marriage to allow the other's judgment concerning what is valuable or worthwhile to play a substantial role in determining what pursuits they will undertake. In healthy relationships, the parties willingly accept and indeed welcome the fact that each gets to have a say in what the other does with her life. Arguably, then, this just does not pose the kind of threat to

individual autonomy that would require each party to accept that how her life goes is primarily her responsibility. The type of self-centeredness whose point is to protect the independence and autonomy of individuals who have no special ties with one another will not have the same moral function within the context of close personal relationships.

More will need to be said, of course. But it is natural to think that the general problem of how to recognize and respond adequately to one another's needs and interests in mutually autonomy-respecting ways will be solved differently in different relational contexts. I hope to have at least indicated some of the ways in which an approach that starts from this basic problem can help illuminate questions about both the form and limits of our general positive duties to others, as well as about the special obligations that arise within personal relationships.<sup>24</sup>

Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) "Self-centeredness" should not be taken in the pejorative sense that connotes selfishness. I mean it only as a label for the ordinary regard most people have for the particular projects, relationships, and causes that give substance to their own lives.

(<sup>2</sup>) Cf. the opening pages of Thomas Nagel's *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

(<sup>3</sup>) The term comes from James Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), ch. 3.

(<sup>4</sup>) I postpone until section 6 consideration of partiality toward intimates.

(<sup>5</sup>) Extra weight as compared with the weight one would be required to give to the similar interests of any arbitrary person in similar circumstances.

(<sup>6</sup>) For the classic statement of this sort of account, see Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

(<sup>7</sup>) For an illuminating discussion and defense of the idea of a division of forward-looking moral responsibility, see Henry



Richardson, "Institutionally Divided Moral Responsibility," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 218–49.

(<sup>8</sup>) See, e.g., Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981 [1907]).

(<sup>9</sup>) Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*; see also, Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

(<sup>10</sup>) Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 370.

(<sup>11</sup>) Cf. Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation*. Fishkin argues that a substantial "zone of moral indifference" is a "presupposition of a kind of negative freedom that most of us take for granted—the freedom, within outer limits set by morality, to do as we please in broad areas of our lives" (p. 22). For other examples of this type of argument, see Michael Slote, *Consequentialism and Commonsense Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), and more recently, Timothy Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Mulgan's argument is perhaps the most direct: "If my choice is determined by morality, then I do not genuinely exercise autonomy in making that choice. If I want to be moral, then I have no choice" (p. 188).

(<sup>12</sup>) A point made by Shelly Kagan against Michael Slote's appeal to "moral autonomy" as a basis for rejecting act-consequentialist views of morality. See Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, p. 238.

(<sup>13</sup>) Seana Shiffrin, "Moral Autonomy and Agent-Centered Options," *Analysis* 51 (1991), p. 251.

(<sup>14</sup>) Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 374.

(<sup>15</sup>) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 552.

(<sup>16</sup>) Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism For & Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 115.

(<sup>17</sup>) Sailing around the world is likely to put your life at great risk; slam poetry probably only your friendships.

(<sup>18</sup>) I borrow the example from Shiffrin, who employs it in a discussion of a related set of issues concerning accommodation. See Seana Shiffrin, "Egalitarianism, Choice Sensitivity, and Accommodation," in R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith, eds., *Reason and Value: Themes from the Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

(<sup>19</sup>) Cf. for example, Scheffler's influential proposal for an "agent-centered prerogative" in *The Rejection of Consequentialism*.

(<sup>20</sup>) Compare Rawls's argument for primary goods as a basis for interpersonal comparison in John Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in Samuel Freeman, ed., *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

(<sup>21</sup>) See Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

(<sup>22</sup>) "[T]he law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty," *ibid.* (6:390).

(<sup>23</sup>) For an account of the "latitude" associated with an imperfect duty beneficence that resists the interpretation of it as merely a duty to "do something sometimes," see Barbara Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement," in *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

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