

The Importance of Being Constant¹

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All virtues, to some degree, incorporate a presupposition of constancy or reliability. A generous person is not just generous on occasion or even frequently, but rather is reliably so: one can count on her to help others. The virtue of loyalty seems to amplify this demand for constancy while adding another element to it: a kind of partiality toward certain particular parties. If we have to choose between saving the life of a loved one and a stranger, the loyal among us would save the person we love; for that matter, if the choice is between spending a few thousand dollars on a surgery that would alleviate a family member's chronic pain or spending a few thousand dollars to save a stranger's life that would otherwise be lost, the loyal family member would choose the non-life-saving surgery. In general, the people, causes, and countries to which we are loyal in some way count for more in our practical deliberation.

Loyalty, then, involves constancy in a more directed sense than other virtues do: to be loyal is to be steady in our commitment *to* a particular object, the object of loyalty. Benedict Arnold's changing sides in the Revolutionary War is a paradigm of disloyalty. To suddenly stop attending to a dear friend for no reason would likewise be disloyal. To be loyal involves a disposition not to "flipflop."

Does this combination of constancy and partiality really constitute a *virtue*? As Simon Keller has persuasively argued, different loyalties—to country, to an abusive spouse, to a dedicated friend—have different normative statuses (2007). Attempting to render a normative judgement on loyalty *tout court* is a mistake.

But we can say this with confidence: at least *some of the time*, loyalty *is* virtuous. Partiality and constancy towards those we love can be virtuous. Granted, there are limits. Perhaps we shouldn't help our murderous sister bury the body—to be so constant in our commitment as to be blinded by her immorality may go too far. And to be so partial to the few that we fail to meet our obligations to the many is likewise an error. But much of the time, when we manifest the constancy and partiality constitutive of loyalty towards those special few whom we love, we act well.

Why? Why, when being partial and constant is virtuous, are they virtues? *In virtue*

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of what do these two elements of loyalty go together to make up virtues at all? Asked in a different key: what *makes* partiality and constancy permissible, admirable, and sometimes even required? To answer, we need to attend to the interaction between these two constitutive elements of loyalty. I will argue for two primary theses. First, that partiality is a virtue *when and because* constancy is. And second, that constancy itself is a very general requirement of practical rationality. We are all under a *diachronic* requirement to be constant in our principles of practical reasoning, all else being equal.² Roughly, once one starts reasoning a certain way, there is a kind of rational inertia—to change the way in which one reasons requires some reason, and in its absence is irrational (and potentially vicious).

Put another way, my claim is that we are permitted to be partial to our loved ones—to weight them “extra” in our practical deliberation—when and because a failure to do so would be *inconstant*. Inconstancy is a moral failing, and its most extreme manifestation in personal relationships—betrayal—is a vice.³

My defense of this account of loyalty, partiality, and constancy proceeds in three steps. First, I’ll argue that extant theories of partiality are lacking. Faced with a tension between motivational and normative desiderata on a theory of partiality, current views do justice to one only at the expense the other. Second, I’ll argue that an appeal to *constancy* as a diachronic rational requirement resolves this tension; we can understand partiality by seeing it alongside its fellow constituent of loyalty. I will end by suggesting that we have good reason to accept constancy as a general requirement of rationality. The upshot is that there is good reason to think that constancy and partiality, and thereby loyalty, towards loved ones constitutes a kind of virtue.

1. Partiality

First, a bit of ground clearing. Any discussion of loyalty or partiality threatens to be complicated by the question of *when* loyalty and partiality are permitted. The tension between partiality and the demands of impartiality is one with which we are familiar, and which will stand in the background of all that is said here. But I will put that debate largely to the side and focus on a *good* species of loyalty, partiality and constancy: the

² cf. Roberts 1984.

³Much of what I argue here is compatible with Kleinig’s arguments, XXX in this volume, that betrayal often involves distinct normative failings. But I will argue inconstancy more generally is a vice in and of itself, not just because of the harm it does to individuals and relationships, and not only when it involves essentially self-centered motivations.

kind we direct to a friend or loved one. I do this for two interrelated reasons. First, that if ever loyalty and its constitutive elements of partiality and constancy are virtues, it is here. Second, because I will assume that an agent who acts virtuously out of love is motivated by that which in fact justifies (or requires) her action. Whether or not one accepts some *general* virtue-theoretic thesis, e.g., that normative reasons just are the considerations which would move a virtuous agent, this domain-specific connection between the moral psychology and ethics of *loving action* has served as common ground in discussions of partiality, and virtually all parties to the debate considered in this paper have accepted it.⁴

A theory of partiality should explain two things. First, the normative structure of partiality: what makes it the case that an agent may or must act partially? And second, the moral psychology of partiality: what motivates an agent who virtuously acts partially? Imagine Patricia must save either her husband, Bernard, or a stranger, who are each drowning on opposite sides of a pier. And suppose further that though she is filled with regret at the loss of a life she could not save, Patricia acts virtuously: she saves her husband. Why was Patricia's choice permissible and moreover required? And insofar as she acts virtuously, what *moved* her to act?

Our theory must answer to these explanatory demands—the normative and the motivational—in a coherent, unified way. The trouble is that these two desiderata seem to pull in opposite directions. On one hand, relationships seem like an essential part of the normative story. Bernard and the stranger are (in some sense) equal; Bernard's life is not inherently more important. The reason Patricia should save him *instead of* the stranger surely has everything to do with the fact that Patricia loves Bernard, that he is her husband, etc. It is these *relational facts* that make a normative difference. On the other hand, the thought “Bernard is my husband” or “I love him” is, if not one thought too many, one more than necessary. There is a certain kind of direct, unmediated loving action that lacks any thought of the relationship, and such action is virtuous. Assuming a virtue-theoretic connection between a virtuous agent's motivating reasons and justifying reasons, we have a dilemma: Patricia's relationship to Bernard seems necessary to justify her action, even though when she acts virtuously, she need

⁴ The connection was given canonical voice in and Stocker 1976 and Williams 1981. The contemporary authors to whom this paper objects all rely on or at least endorse a connection between an agent's treating a relationship as a source of reasons (or as reason) and its actually being a source of reasons (or a reason): Scheffler 1997, 2010; Kolodny 2003, 2010a,b; Jeske 2008; Keller 2013; Pettit 1997; Setiya 2014a; Velleman 1999. On reasons being the sort of things that good reasoners take into account, see Schroeder 2007; Setiya 2010, 2014b; Way 2017; Paakkunainen 2017.

not be motivated by any relational fact. As I'll develop in the following section, there is a tension between the normative and motivational desiderata.

2. Relationships Views

"Relationship views" of partiality⁵ claim that relationships are the reasons that ground partial permissions and obligations: It is to our friends, our partners, our colleagues, etc., that we should be partial, and that is so, they say, because of the relationships we bear to them.⁶ Returning to our case of Patricia and her husband, relationships views make the seemingly incontrovertible claim that Patricia is justified and moreover required to save him due to their relationship: the fact that she loves him, that they are married, etc. It is because the relationship is not valuable enough that Patricia would be forbidden from saving Bernard at the expense of many thousands of lives. And it is something about the difference between (say) being a *partner* with and being a *co-citizen* with that explains why the former justifies and requires far more partiality than the latter.

With respect to moral psychology, relationships views claim that a thought about the relevant relationship ought to feature in an agent's practical deliberation as the content of some motivating attitude. The relationship might make an appearance in a belief that the agent shares a special relationship with the patient, where that belief serves as (part of) the basis of the agent's decision to act partially. The attitude might be more complex, e.g., valuating the relationship as a source of reasons or as good. The point is that on a relationships view, the relationship itself figures as some kind of *basis* for the virtuous agent's partial behavior.

When it comes to the *ethics* of partiality, something about a relationship-based approach to partiality—and love in particular—almost *has* to be right. But despite these strong presumptions in favor of some kind of relationship-based view of partiality, thoughts about the relationship do not seem necessary when acting out of love. As Derek Parfit observed in commenting on Williams (1981), "It's odd that Williams gives, as the thought that the person's wife might hope he was having, that he is saving her because she is his wife. She might have hoped that he [would save] her because she was Mary, or Jane, or whatever. That she is his wife seems one thought too many."⁷

⁵ I take the terminology of "relationships views" and "individuals views" from Keller's insightful taxonomy (2013).

⁶ See Kolodny 2003, 2010a, b; Scheffler 1997, 2010; Jeske 2008.

⁷ Parfit as quoted in Murphy 2000, p. 140, n. 36.

Harry Frankfurt puts the point even more strongly, “I cannot help wondering why the man should have even the one thought that it’s his wife. Are we supposed to imagine that at first he didn’t recognize her? Or [that] he didn’t remember that they were married, and had to remind himself of that? It seems to me that the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero” (2004, p. 36, n. 2).

While Frankfurt’s claim may be a bit overstated, he and Parfit are on to something important. When Patricia saves Bernard, it seems that she need only be motivated by a singular thought about *Bernard*. Bernard could hope that in her love, Patricia is moved solely by thoughts about *him*, without thoughts about how he relates to *her* or about the relationship itself.

Philip Pettit writes:

It is doubtful whether I could claim to be properly a lover, if it was my recognition of the fact of loving her... which explained my action: if all that needed to be said in explaining how I behaved was that I saw I loved her or saw that I bore a relation to her which, as it happens, means that I loved her.... To act out of love, as we might put it, is to be moved by love and not by the recognition of love. (1997, pp. 155-56)

Perhaps Pettit puts the point too strongly. There may be some cases in which a person dwells explicitly on the value of a relationship in order to find the necessary motivation yet still acts lovingly (e.g., “I did it to save the marriage...”).

But there is a further kind of acting out of love—the kind of action out of love through which (I submit) we most purely express our love and by which we most clearly feel loved—where the beloved’s needs, interests, and preferences *alone* suffice as motivating reasons for the agent. It is a kind of love that is expressed when an agent is wholly directed at and moved by her beloved, rather than by the fact of her love or relationship. When Parfit writes that “[she] might have hoped that he [would save] her because she was Mary, or Jane, or whatever,” he is giving voice to something like that thought—that the beloved is enough without any further condition. Put another way, if Patricia saves her husband without being moved by their relationship, she is not *missing a thought*, the absence of which renders her motivation in some way deficient. Relationships views claim—falsely—that one who so acts without any thought of the relationship is acting on *insufficient reason*.

The objection can be put more or less stridently—we can think (as I do) with Parfit and Pettit that such unmediated, loving action is not just permissible but preferable. Or

more modestly, we can claim that it is *at least virtuous* to act in this unmediated way; directly loving action is not a manifestation of a character flaw. While there is more to be said on the matter,⁸ either version of this “one thought too many” objection poses a serious problem for relationship views. We must find some other means of incorporating what *is* right about relationships views, *viz.*, that the rationality of partiality turns somehow on the significance of special relationships, without taking relationships themselves to be a necessary *basis* of partial action.

3. Individuals Views

Defenders of “individuals views” offer theories of partiality that do without an essential appeal to relationships.⁹ They claim that to act out of love does not necessarily involve being moved by thoughts about one’s relationship to the beloved. Loving agents can be moved solely by thoughts about the beloved himself. Accordingly, they try to make sense of the idea that non-relational facts, e.g., that Bernard was in need, suffice to justify and (virtuously) motivate partial action, e.g., Patricia’s saving him over the stranger.

Does that mean relationships are entirely absent from the picture? Even considering the motivations of Patricia, that would be implausible. After all, if we asked Patricia why she saved Bernard and not the stranger, she might naturally respond, “he’s my husband” or “I love him.” Likewise, if Patricia explained her action by citing Bernard’s need, it would be natural to challenge her with “but the stranger had the same need!” The obvious rejoinder on Patricia’s behalf is that Bernard is her husband.

Does the fact that we *explain* action with such appeals to the relationship tell against individuals views’ motivational claims? No. There is a difference between a reason why someone acts and the reason why something is a reason why. Consider an analogy. Though we might explain a courageous person’s action by citing her virtue of character, it does not follow that she acted *on the basis* of her virtue. Her courage is not the reason why she jumped into the lion pen; instead, citing the virtue is a way of saying why the facts that moved her (e.g., that child was in danger) did move her (McDowell, 1998;

⁸ For an excellent defense of a relationships view in light of these kinds of objections, see Kolodny 2003, §6. For a decisive response to Kolodny and further objections to relationships views, see Keller 2013, and Setiya 2014a, whose defense of an individuals view rests on the rationality of unconditional love, of love at a distance, and of love that survives loss of belief in the relationship, e.g., through amnesia.

⁹ See Velleman 1999; Setiya 2014a; Pettit 1997.

Foot, 2001). Likewise, citing a relationship identifies a practical principle which, like a virtue, makes clear why the reason at play (Bernard's need) moved the agent: because an agent with a practical principle of loving Bernard will be *especially* moved by individualistic facts regarding him.¹⁰

An individuals theorist, then, can claim that the relational element appears in Patricia's moral psychology in the same way a virtue does. To love Bernard is like being generous. A generous person is not moved by the fact that she or some action of hers would be generous; she is moved by the needs of others. So, too, an agent who loves Bernard is not motivated by the fact that her action would be loving, but by his needs, choices, and interests. To act on the basis of the love, or relationship itself, is like acting on the basis that doing so would be generous, an analogue to continence, not virtue: it displays "a commitment to love rather than a lover's commitment" (Pettit, 1997, p. 156).

The relational fact that Patricia loves Bernard appears alongside the virtues, appears not as a premise but as a *principle* of Patricia's practical reasoning. Rival conceptions of practical reasoning will understand that differently. A loving principle of practical reasoning might just be a disposition to notice reasons involving the beloved and take them as weighty,¹¹ or might involve seeing the beloved's needs under a distinctive normative guise (e.g., as reasons for you). Perhaps it involves deciding to take the beloved's needs, choices and interests as reasons,¹² setting them as an end,¹³ or even the construction of a practical identity *as a friend*.¹⁴ I'll use the term "practical principle" or "principle of practical reasoning" as neutral between these various conceptions. What is crucial for individuals theorists (and the view I will defend) is that motivationally, these principles are function like courage—as an essential element of an agent's reasoning but not as a premise within it.

Motivationally, individuals views are on good footing. But normatively, they are in trouble. Partiality involves special *permissions* and *obligations* to a select few. A theory of partiality must explain the difference for Patricia between strangers and Bernard. She is permitted to do more for him than for strangers; moreover, she is obligated to do for him that which she need not do for strangers. Individuals views cannot explain either. They don't even seem to try.

¹⁰ Cf. Stocker 1981.

¹¹ Setiya 2010, 2014b.

¹² Bratman 1999

¹³ Bratman 1987.

¹⁴ Korsgaard 1992, 2009.

If non-relational facts are what make the normative difference, then whatever an agent is permitted to do for a loved one, she is permitted to do for a stranger to whom she bears no special relationship. After all, the relational facts are motivationally irrelevant. But that's implausible. We are permitted to be partial towards our loved ones over the many where we are not permitted to be partial to one stranger over the many. To hold otherwise, as the individuals theorist seems forced to do, is to accept that to a shocking degree, the numbers *don't* count in ethics (Setiya, 2014a). For whatever value of n I may save my beloved over n strangers, so, too, could a stranger save one life over n .

The obligations problem is much the same: without an appeal to relationships, individuals theorists cannot explain the special ways in which we are obligated towards loved ones and not towards strangers. Perhaps in light of the challenge posed by anti-partialist arguments like Singer (1972) and Unger (1996), many discussions of partiality have aimed to show why it is that we are *permitted* to favor our loved ones and other special relations. One could be forgiven for thinking that the defender of partiality need only establish that we have a prerogative to favor a special few at the expense of what is impartially best. But if we reflect on our ordinary practices of love, it is clear that many of the norms of partiality are obliging. We owe our friends, partners, etc., all sorts of things. If Patricia's pier were flanked by two *strangers*, she would be permitted to save either; but it isn't. Given that one of the drowning people is Bernard, she is not merely permitted to save him, she *must*. But in the absence of an appeal to relational facts, there is no way to explain Patricia's *special* obligations: any possible *non-relational* fact that could oblige Patricia would oblige a stranger.

To explain both special permissions and special obligations, we must appeal to relationships. But it seems impossible to do so without running headlong into the motivational problems with the straightforward appeal employed by relationships theorists. Relationships must make a normative difference without showing up in the content of a motivating attitude. But what could make a difference to what is rational to do other than the attitudes that motivate us?¹⁵

¹⁵ Keller 2013 is instructive on this point. Keller claims relationships are normatively (and so motivationally) necessary, but as *modifiers*, not reasons. Granted reasons and modifiers are normatively distinct; on a relationships-as-modifiers picture, the relationship is nevertheless a fact that must be recognized by the agent to justify partial actions, whatever subtly and importantly different normative role it plays. Thus, Patricia would still need to have her relationship with Bernard form (part of) the basis of her motivation. Were she to lack this thought, the attitudes that motivate her (a belief in Bernard's need) would, on this view, be insufficient to justify or obligate partial behavior—saving Bernard instead of strangers. But this clearly won't do. The objection wasn't that Patricia had "one reason-thought too many," it was that she had one thought—of any kind!—too many (or one thought more than necessary). Keller faces the same

We can consider one last attempt: might the fact that Patricia's practical principle reflects the relational fact of her love for Bernard do the work? Pettit argues that because a loving practical principle is constitutive of love, and *love* is valuable, such principles are rational (1997). Patricia's love for Bernard both explains and justifies her partiality. But this seems circular. We are seeking to explain why Patricia may, and sometimes must, be more strongly motivated by facts about Bernard; the fact that she has a practical principle according to which his needs and preferences are especially weighty cannot adequately explain *why* she may and moreover must be so motivated. Still, the fundamental insight of Pettit's proposal is worth pursuing: is there something about an agent's *practical principles* which makes a normative difference?

4. Constancy to the Rescue

Here things seem to be at an impasse. But I will argue that we can identify and reject an assumption all parties to the debate have taken for granted: that the rationality of partiality (and so of loyalty) is an essentially synchronic matter, i.e., that the only things that could make a difference to what it is rational to do at some moment are facts about an agent's psychology *at that moment*.¹⁶ Though we've run out of plausible strategies that appeal to an agent's psychology at a time, we can look elsewhere: to the (ir)rationality of an agent's attitudes *over time*.¹⁷

To love another is not to jump off a pier to save them once. Life serves up piers of various sorts daily, and we must constantly choose whom to favor. To love, to be loyal, involves choosing our loved ones repeatedly. It is to see and treat her as significant *over time*; and there is something wrong with failing to be constant in one's love across time. Partiality must be understood alongside constancy—by recognizing it as a constituent element of a virtue of diachronic agency: loyalty.

objection as relationships views: the fact of the relationship is what makes the normative difference, and an agent is reasoning well only insofar as she bases her action on the facts that justify them, which include the fact of the relationship.

¹⁶ Relationships theorists, of course, think history matters; but they claim it is inasmuch as an agent is motivated by a *current* thought about a historical relationship that partiality and loyalty are rational.

¹⁷ Cf. Jollimore's critique of the "ahistorical" picture of rationality under-girding most theories of love and partiality (2011, Ch. 4).

To see this, consider a case of irrational *impartiality*. Imagine that after years of loving Bernard, Patricia is faced with the choice between Bernard's life and a stranger's, and she gives Bernard no extra weight in her deliberation, instead just flipping a coin and saving the stranger. Something has gone wrong; what? One explanation is that Patricia has failed to take account of her relationship with her husband; but that solution has been rejected already. Patricia's *shift* in her reasoning seems like its own issue. *Why* would she just stop caring about Bernard? If there is no *reason* for a shift, Patricia's behavior would seem erratic, crazy, and irrational.¹⁸ Nor is the switch irrational only when Patricia saves the stranger. Suppose she flips the coin and saves Bernard. We would still wonder why she stopped reasoning about Bernard as she used to; her inconstancy itself would still call out for both explanation and justification.

Imagine two variants of this case. In the first, Patricia's inconstancy comes after a few weeks of their dating; in the second, the inconstancy follows years of partnership. The latter seems *worse*; in that case, we would need a *stronger reason* to justify Patricia's switch. Likewise, we get that kind of variation in the felt degree of irrationality (or strength of the reason necessary to justify switching) depending on how central the relationship is to the agent. Consider the contrast in our reactions to Patricia's inconstancy towards a casual acquaintance versus inconstancy toward a committed partner. These are all data a relationships theorist would point to: the kind of relationship (its history; its importance) varies the strength of the reason to be loyal to the beloved. But we have ruled out a direct appeal to a relational fact as a motivating thought. My proposal tries to achieve their normative results without their motivational commitments, i.e., without forcing a relational fact into the content of the agent's motivating thought.

The core of the proposal is this: inconstancy in the principles of practical reasoning constitutive of loving partiality violates a diachronic requirement of rationality. We must not abandon such principles, at least not without a good reason. These principles enjoy a kind of rational *inertia*. Of course, our past does not bind us; the diachronic requirement not to abandon one's practical principles is defeasible. If Bernard turns out not to be a great guy, that's a good reason for Patricia to give up her practical principles

¹⁸ This resonates with claims made by Broome 2013; Bratman 2018, Brunero 2021 and others that there is an essentially diachronic requirement on intention persistence..

that treat him as a source of weighty reasons. But she needs *some* such justification to do so, and more of one the greater her history of so reasoning and the more central this reasoning is to her agency as a whole. Constancy in our principles of practical reasoning—in our character—is a virtue; inconstancy a failing.¹⁹

How does this appeal to constancy help us meet the competing desiderata of partiality? Recall that relationships views get the ethics of partiality exactly right: once we find a way for relationships to make a normative difference to an agent's practical situation, we can solve the problems about special permissions and obligations that individuals views could not. We have effectively gotten relationships into the picture without locating them as a reason or anything else that would see them featured as the content of a motivating attitude. A principle of practical reasoning that recommends treating one's friend, partner, child, etc., as special is not an attitude about a relationship. It is constitutive of being *in* a relationship; it is part of the agent's psychology in virtue of which she really is a friend, partner or parent. (We should remember, of course, that such a practical principle is a necessary constituent of being in a relationship, not a sufficient one.) A diachronic requirement to be constant with respect to those principles allows relationships to make a rational difference directly. On this proposal, Patricia's normative situation is not changed by her belief in some historically extended relationship but directly by the fact that she has a history of so relating. There is something irrational about her motivations *across time*: that once she was partial and now, for no reason, is not.

5. Special obligations, special permissions, and ratcheting

Let us consider how a requirement of constancy would explain special obligations, e.g., why Patricia is *required* to save Bernard in a case where it's his life versus one stranger's. Just considering the facts that motivate Patricia *at the moment*, i.e., the non-relational facts that Bernard is in need and the stranger is need, Patricia is justified in saving either. Put another way, a qualitative duplicate of Patricia in the moment of decision, an agent who has no history of reasoning at all, really would be justified in

¹⁹ In correspondence, Keller helpfully objected that on my view, action out of love will be too self-centered, likening my view to what he criticized as “projects views” of partiality. On such views, Keller objects that Patricia should save her beloved “with thoughts of being true to [her]self or of retaining [her] own identity” (2013, 42). But the worry does not apply, at least to my view and possibly to some of his original targets. Patricia's love for Bernard is not in the content of any motivating attitude; it is not a thought that moves her. It is rather part of her character; it is why the thought that does move her—“Bernard is in need”—is so powerfully motivating. The courageous person does not act so as to preserve her identity or to be true to herself and neither does Patricia.

saving either person. But the requirement of constancy introduces a diachronic element to the picture: given Patricia's history of reasoning in such a way that weights Bernard's needs as extra, she should *continue to do so*. This likewise explains why, in a given moment, Patricia would be justified in saving Bernard over two strangers (adjust numbers as needed).²⁰ Because she *has reasoned* in a manner that is partial to Bernard, it would be a practical error for her to stop (absent a good reason).

Note that this view does not suffer from the circularity of a *synchronic* appeal to practical principles *à la* Pettit (1997). That Patricia may and must count Bernard's needs more strongly than strangers' is not justified by the fact that she *does do so now*, but that she *has done so*.

Put in these terms, one might worry that I have traded a problem of circularity for one of regress. In the last paragraph, I assumed Patricia already reasoned in a way that was partial to Bernard; but what justified *that initial* partiality? Put another way: granted that some partiality is rational, a diachronic requirement of constancy might well explain why impartiality would be a mistake; but what explains that rationality of the partiality in the first place? Constancy looks like it can solve a worry about special obligations only if it can also explain special permissions.

The solution lies in an appeal to a degree of permissivism about practical reasoning. Consider the start of Patricia's relationship with Bernard. She could have allocated her time and attention in any number of ways; and she was justified in singling out Bernard for her attention just as much as she was anyone. That is, treating Bernard (or anyone else) as *very slightly special* was always already rational, even before a relationship began. Our reasons to allocate our time, attention, and emotional energy to one stranger are *on a par* with reasons to do so with others.²¹ Having adopted a partial practical principle, constancy kicks in: it would be irrational for her *not* to weight the reasons stemming from Bernard as slightly weightier than that of strangers (unless she had good reason to abandon that principle).

But something further follows. If it would be irrational for Patricia *not* to weight reasons stemming from Bernard slightly more than those stemming from strangers, then for Patricia, those reasons now *just are weightier* than they once were. Put another way:

²⁰ If you think that it is wrong for an agent to save a loved one over two strangers, you can consider groups, e.g., Patricia can save either a group of 4 or a group of 5, where Bernard is among the 4.

²¹ To say that reasons are on a par as opposed to equal means that neither reason is stronger than the other, and moreover that even if one reason were made slightly stronger, it would not necessarily outweigh the other. Put another way, parity between the reasons is not necessarily broken by small or even medium-sized adjustments to the strength of the reasons Chang 1997, 2002.

because inconstancy is a vice, the reasons she must weight more heavily on pain of inconstancy *really are weightier reasons*. Constancy in effect *ratchets up* the strength of the reasons that Patricia permissibly took as weightier. But with their ratchetted-up strength, they are now *on a par* with weightier reasons than they once were. And this process can iterate. If Bernard's needs are now on a par with slightly weightier reasons, Patricia can weight his reasons as weightier still.

A requirement of constancy thus functions like a ratchet. Having begun to (rationally, virtuously) reason in a way that treats someone as special, one is permitted to treat them as yet still more special (so far as parity allows), and is required (absent some justification) to at least stick to that baseline. And this matches our intuitions about how loving relationships *should* develop: incrementally (even if those increments happen in quick succession), with backsliding requiring some kind of justification.²²

Here, I suspect, some will object that some mistake (or heavy-weight assumption) has been made. So let me review the assumptions I have been relying on. First, I have assumed a tight connection between reasons and rationality: for it to be irrational to underweight some consideration means (or at least entails) that that consideration is a weightier reason. One way to defend that is via a more general commitment, common among virtue theorists, that reasons just are the bases of good practical reasoning (Foot, 2001; Setiya, 2010). But we can make do (with a bit of translation) with even less than that. So long as one accepts that it is (im)permissible to do what it is (ir)rational to do (under conditions of relevant true belief), the main conclusion follows: that because *inconstancy is irrational*, partiality is both permitted and required of agents who already have a history of reasoning partially.

Second, I am assuming that the ratcheting mechanism can *iterate*. Of course, one might object that while constancy might explain why the *first* bit of extra weighting is binding, it could never iterate so much as to explain the extent of our special permissions. But this follows from fairly modest assumptions about the nature of parity. To illustrate how, I'll make some horrifically crude assumptions. I can't emphasize enough that this is just to illustrate the structure of the view; accepting the argument does not require valuing lives so flat-footedly. But just suppose that the parity of reasons is such that a stranger may permissibly save one stranger over two strangers, but not one over three. By contrast, suppose Patricia may permissibly save her husband over even three strangers. At first, when strangers, Patricia permissibly weights Bernard's life such that it would be no lesser in strength than that of any other stranger; then

²² cf. Kolodny's account of the start of a relationship (2003).

having weighted it extra (say as no less than that of the lives of two strangers), Bernard's life really does have a rough, imprecise weight not less than those of two strangers. But by parity, something of such a weight is going to be imprecisely on a par with the lives of three strangers (or 2.5 strangers or whatever).

(Note that I am not presuming that parity is transitive; I am *not* claiming that if the weight of reasons p and q are on a par and q and r are on a par, that p and r are on a par. The claim is instead that if p and q are *initially* on a par, and *then rationality requires that one weight p more greatly than q* , i.e., that in virtue of a rational requirement p is no longer on a par with q but decisively weightier, it will be on a par with things weightier than q .)

Nor does this “ratcheting” mechanism eventually permit or even require a partial agent to weight a loved to a seemingly vicious degree. For every ratcheting up, it is true both that ratcheting down requires a reason and that *some* degree of further ratcheting up is rational. But it doesn't follow that the permissible weighting will increase beyond a given point, e.g., justifying (or requiring) saving the beloved over a million (or a hundred or ten—whatever the point of viciousness is). Why? Because weights can increase asymptotically. Whatever our first order theorizing tells us about the limits of partiality, this view can accommodate it.

The picture that emerges is a conservative one. While a defeasible requirement of constancy does not bind us to our past, it does hold that with time comes a rational pressure to stick to the approaches to decision-making that we've already adopted. If practical principles make up our practical identity—if they are part of what makes us who we are²³—then this just says that we are under a diachronic requirement to stay true to ourselves (cf. Cohen 2011). Having gone down a path, it is (all else equal) irrational to deviate; taking some other path through life is no longer as open an option as it once was.

One more worry should be briefly addressed. If rationality requires constancy, does it follow that we should stick to our guns, even when have begun in error and committed ourselves to bad principles? Do we have reasons to be constant in vicious principles of practical reasoning—e.g., to be cruel, or to prefer those with white skin, if we've started reasoning thus? No. Constancy requires only that we have some good reason to give up a practical principle. But we of course have *very* good reasons to give up any vicious or otherwise irrational principle; that follows from the principle's being

²³ cf. Korsgaard 1996.

irrational. The requirement defended has always been one to be constant in principles rationally adopted in the face of parity, not to be constant in one's practical principles regardless of their normative status. Racism was never on a par with anti-racism, nor cruelty with kindness.

6. Conclusion

My argument for constancy as a rational requirement has been two-fold: first, it alone of the views considered has squared the circle, achieving the desiderata related to both the moral psychology and the ethics of partiality. Second, inconstancy seems like a good description of what is wrong when an agent fails to be partial, i.e., is inconstant. Together that amounts to a defense of loyalty as a virtue within the domain of loving relationships.

But I suspect that many of the arguments on offer have broader application. As Garrett Cullity has observed, there is a structural parallel between loyalty to those we love and constancy in one's commitments to things like career, life projects, and other choices between mutually exclusive activities which are on a par with one another (2021). Cullity defends something like a relationships view, wherein loyalty and constancy are the virtues of taking one's prior decisions (to be with Bernard, to study philosophy, to take up chess) as reasons to stick with one's prior form of reasoning. Only thus can we manifest a kind of narrative coherence in our lives. But for reasons suggested above, I think that this is a mistake. Suppose that before graduate school you could have studied philosophy or literature—the reasons (fleeting moments of understanding vs appreciation of literary beauty, say) were on a par. Six months into your studies in philosophy, there are costs to switching; but those costs may not be so great as to decisively outweigh the reasons to study literature; parity resists minor sweetening (or souring).²⁴ Yet switching requires a reason; inconstancy here, too, seems like a vice. But, *pace* Cullity, an agent who feels the rational pressure to stick to her studies need not do so for the reason that she so chose in the past. That would be oddly fetishistic; it is one thought too many, or at least one more than necessary. A constant agent would see the reasons to study philosophy (those fleeting moments of understanding) as especially weighty, requiring her (all on their own) to stick to her studies.

²⁴ See note 21.

Much more would need to be said to defend this extension of the proposal. But it seems to me plausible to think that constancy is a virtue not just within the context of loving relations but perhaps more broadly: whenever we are faced with choices which are on a par and choose one, that choice exerts a kind of rational inertia. Something like this has been defended by Broome, Bratman, Brunero and others who articulate a diachronic rational requirement on the persistence of our intentions (2013; 2018; 2021, respectively). But perhaps that, too, can be seen as species of a more general requirement be constant not only with respect to our intentions but also in our principles of practical reasoning, i.e., the *ways in which we form* our intentions. On this picture, loyalty would be a virtue exactly because it is a species of a more general virtue of constancy—of integrity in one’s agency across time. And that should be no great surprise—we are persisting agents, and the shape of our agency both within and outside the context of loving relationships has an essentially diachronic element. The excellency of our agency should involve coherence across time, within our loving relationships and in general.

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