Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children*

(Roughly 12,900 words)

We have, or at least we take ourselves to have, reason for patterns of action and emotion toward our parents, siblings, friends, spouses, children, and others with whom we have significant ties.1 This partiality involves seeing to it that both these relatives and our relationships to them fare well, as well as respecting both in our decisions. It also involves feeling certain positive emotions (e.g., joy, relief, gratitude) when they fare well or are properly regarded, and feeling certain negative emotions (e.g., grief, anxiety, resentment) when they fare poorly or are not properly regarded. Famously, these reasons for partiality are agent-relative. I have reason to be partial to my relatives, whereas you do not, and you have reason to be partial to your relatives, whereas I do not. Less often noted, these reasons support requirements that are owed to our relatives. When we breach these requirements, we wrong our relatives, if not morally, then in some other sense. We give them claim, which others lack, to privileged kinds of complaints, such as resentment.

This presents a puzzle, however. Although we have countless interpersonal relationships, we have reason for partiality only in some. Why is this? Why is there reason for friendship and love of family, but not for racism or omertà?2 Without an answer, without a principled

* [Identifying note 1]

1 Throughout, I make certain claims about what “we” take to be true of ourselves. I don’t mean to presume somehow that every reasonable or decent reader will agree with every such claim. The hope is only that enough readers will agree with enough of these claims for the attempt to make sense of them to be of interest.

distinction between the relationships that support partiality and the relationships that don’t, a creeping skepticism sets in about partiality as a whole.

My hope is to make some progress toward a principled distinction, or set of distinctions. In section 1, I clarify the challenge. The challenge would be easy to meet, I observe, if reasons for partiality were not, in a certain sense, “basic.” The problem is that some reasons for partiality are basic, in that sense. In section 2, I discuss a neglected form of normative explanation, “resonance,” which might help us to meet analogous challenges about other domains, such as the moral emotions. In section 3, I apply resonance to our challenge. Using friendship as a programmatic example, I suggest how it might explain why certain relationships support partiality. In section 4, I try to push the program a bit further, by distinguishing various reasons for familial partiality, with a focus on the relationships between parents and children. In particular, taking seriously the deep and widespread view that genetic relationships matter, I conjecture that reasons for partiality to genetic children and genetic parents may be yet another instance of resonance. In a companion paper, “Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases,” I discuss resonance at greater length and explore how it applies to relationships of other kinds, including problematic relationships, such as shared race.

1. A Request for Explanation

Think of the challenge this way. Imagine the exhaustive List of partiality principles: of all of the true normative claims of the form:

one has reason for parental partiality toward one’s children,

one has reason for spousal partiality toward one’s spouse,

and so on. We need not imagine the List fully enumerated. It is enough to imagine it including relatively uncontroversial cases, like parental and spousal partiality, and excluding relatively uncontroversial cases, like prison-gang and blood-type partiality. Our challenge is then to explain the List: to explain why all and only the partiality principles that it contains are true.

To be clear, the challenge is not to provide reasons to believe the List. This latter challenge might be met with abductive arguments to the effect the List best explains our particular judgments about reasons for partiality. But the challenge to explain the List cannot be met in this way. Nor is the challenge is to explain how any partiality principle could be true. Such a challenge might be raised, for example, by philosophers who find agent-relative reasons, in general, inexplicable. Rather, granting (at least for the sake of argument) that partiality principles are not otherwise problematic, the challenge is to explain why only those partiality principles on the List, and no others, are true.

I assume that all normative claims, which, by stipulation, are of the form “One has reason...”, are explained only by other normative claims and claims with no normative or evaluative content. Given this assumption, it may seem that the explanation of any normative claim must take one of two forms. The first form, instantiation, derives a normative claim by universal instantiation from a normative principle, say, of the form:

For all X, persons Y, if R(X,Y), then Y has reason to phi(X) or feel E(X), and some nonnormative fact, say, of the form R(A,B). For example, the explanation why I have reason to admire Twain may be that Twain is a great author, and that for all persons X, Y, if X is

[^3]: Christopher Heath Wellman, “Relational Facts,” in particular, seems to confuse the challenge to explain the List with this latter challenge to provide reasons for believing it.

[^4]: I relax this assumption in “Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases.”
a great author and X is not Y, then Y has reason to admire X. The other form of explanation, *facilitation*, exploits Joseph Raz’s “Facilitative Principle”:

that for all actions *phi* (but presumably *not* emotions *E*), persons *X*, if *X* has reason to *phi*, then, because of this, *X* has reason at least as strong to take some sufficient means to *phi-*ing.

Thus, the explanation why I have reason to travel to New York is that I have reason to be in New York, and travelling there is part of any sufficient means to being there.\(^5\)

Can we explain the List by appeal to just instantiation and facilitation? Yes, say *reductionists*. They hold that no partiality principle is, in a certain sense, basic: more precisely, that every partiality principle:

one has reason to be partial in ways *P* to people with whom one has an interpersonal relationship of type *R*,

can be explained, by instantiation or facilitation, from normative principles that are not partiality principles.\(^6\) Instead, reductionism appeals to a normative principle of the form:

one has reason to *phi* (or to feel *E*)

and a nonnormative *response equivalence* of the form:

being partial in way *P* to people with whom one has *R* is an instance of, or facilitates, *phi-*ing (or feeling *E*).


\(^6\) This discussion of reductionism is indebted to Samuel Scheffler, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1997): 189–209. However, Scheffler defines reductionism as the position that reasons for partiality ‘actually arise out of discrete interactions that occur in the context of… relationships’ (p. 190). For present purposes, this definition is, in one way, too narrow, and, in another way, potentially misleading. Too narrow, because some reductionist explanations (such as the one below that appeals to well-being) need not appeal to any discrete interactions between relatives. Potentially misleading, because a nonreductionist might hold that although reasons for partiality arise from relationships and not discrete interactions, some of the relevant relationships (such as the histories of encounter discussed below) are *constituted* by discrete interactions. The whole provides reasons that the parts do not.
For example, the reductionist might seek to explain the partiality principle:

one has reason to be parentally partial to one’s children,

by appeal to the normative principle that:

one has reason to maximize well-being,

and the nonnormative claim that:

being parentally partial to one’s children is an instance of, or facilitates, maximizing well-being (because, e.g., one knows their needs better than others do).

Or the reductionist might seek to explain the partiality principle:

one has reason to be spousally partial to one’s spouse,

by appeal to the normative principle that:

one has reason to fulfill expectations, that one has voluntarily and intentionally, or voluntarily and negligently, led others to form, that one would perform morally permissible actions

and the response equivalence that:

being spousally partial is an instance of, or facilitates, fulfilling such expectations.

Reductionists thus have at least a clear strategy for explaining the List. They can claim that there are relevant response equivalences for all and only the partiality principles on the List. For example, they can claim that being gang-partial to one’s fellow Aryan Brothers, or being blood-type-partial to fellow O positives is not an instance of, and does not facilitate, maximizing well-being, or fulfilling expectations of morally permissible actions.

Yet, setting aside whether it explains why the List excludes what it does, I doubt that reductionism explains why the List includes what it does. First, consideration of some familiar proposals suggests that reductionism does not explain reasons for many of the partial actions that we take ourselves to have reason to perform. For one thing, I may be no more efficient than strangers at promoting my relatives’ well-being. If my mother became senile, it might not matter
to her whether I or a stranger cared for her, and it might be clear enough to a stranger what her care required. For another, I may be no more efficient at promoting my relatives’ well-being than strangers’ well-being. Some children are much worse off materially than my daughter, and a deranged stalker might be no less emotionally vulnerable to me than my wife. Some reductionists may reply that the difference is that I did not voluntarily and intentionally (or negligently) lead the stalker to become vulnerable to me. But a voluntary act cannot be necessary, since I have reason for partiality to family members, such as my parents and siblings, regardless of any such act. And voluntarily and intentionally (or negligently) leading someone to become vulnerable to my failing to be partial to her cannot be sufficient, as the familiar phenomenon of “leading someone on” confirms. Someone might voluntarily and intentionally encourage me to form the mistaken belief that she has the attitudes constitutive of being my friend or lover, thereby leading me to become vulnerable to her not treating me as her friend or lover. We would all agree that she has reason to “let me down gently.” But no one believes that she has reason to treat me as a friend or lover, precisely because there is no relationship that would make sense of such partiality.7

Next, even if reductionism explained some reasons for partial actions, these are not the reasons on which people, in being partial, act. When moved to do something for my daughter or my wife, for example, it would be oddly estranged to view her claim on me as merely that of a stranger whose well-being I could promote, or whose expectations I have raised. Finally, reductionism does not explain reason for partial emotion. Even if, on occasion, I have reason to do the same for a stranger’s daughter as for my own, I do not have reason to feel the same way about the stranger’s daughter.

It is natural to react to these last two points with the thought that the motivations and emotions distinctive of partiality have nothing do with reasons. “Those motivations and emotions are simply love itself, and love is not a response to reasons. Indeed, it cannot be: Love is focused on a particular, e.g., Jane, and something’s being the very particular that it is is not a reason for anything.” To take this view, however, is to misunderstand ourselves. As I have tried to argue elsewhere, it is false to the lived experience of love, rendering it an unintelligible urge; it is contradicted by our reflective judgments that love is called for by some objects (such as our own children) and not by others (strangers’ children); and it fails to explain a variety of other facts about love, such as the prediction that I would cease to love my wife if I lost all memory of our history together, even if I retained memories of what preceded that history that allowed me to recognize her as the very particular she is (whatever that comes to). To love someone, I think, just is, in part, to see one’s relationship with her as providing reason for partiality to her.⁸

My aim here is not to make a conclusive case against reductionism, which the foregoing no doubt fails to do. It is only to say enough about the apparent limitations of reductionism to motivate interest in the alternative, nonreductionism. This is the view that some partiality principles are not explained via instantiation and facilitation from normative principles that are not partiality principles: that some partiality principles are, in this sense, basic. If so, then our question is how nonreductionism can explain the List. Clearly it cannot explain the List as reductionism does: by showing that all and only the partiality principles on the List follow by instantiation or facilitation from normative principles none of which are partiality principles. What alternative is there?

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⁸ [Identifying note 2]
Nonreductionists might propose, with reductionists, that all and only the partiality principles on the List follow by instantiation or facilitation from other normative principles, but, against reductionists, that some of these principles are partiality principles. In particular, they might appeal to a Generic Partiality Principle:

One has reason for Generic Partiality toward people with whom one has a relationship of the Generic Type.

And they might seek to derive all other partiality principles on the List, by instantiation or facilitation, using response equivalences of the form:

- being parentally partial to one’s children is an instance of, or facilitates, being Generically Partial to people with whom one has a relationship of the Generic Type,
- being fraternally partial to one’s siblings is an instance of, or facilitates, being Generically Partial to people with whom one has a relationship of the Generic Type.

The explanation of List would then be that relevant response equivalences obtain for all and only its entries. But this approach seems hopeless. There seems no way to specify the Generic Type, other than by a disjunction of all of the relationships on the List, which would hardly meet the challenge. Moreover, there is no one kind of Generic Partiality. Parental partiality, for example, is quite different from fraternal partiality.

So the challenge to explain the List remains. All that we have settled so far is that if we are to meet it, we need to find another kind of normative explanation, beyond those that we have already discussed.

2. Resonance

To illustrate what this kind of normative explanation might look like, consider a similar request for explanation about the moral emotions: responses—most notably, guilt, resentment, gratitude, and indignation—to attitudes, expressed in decisions, toward certain people and things. Why do I have reason to feel a given moral emotion toward some decisions, but not others? For example,
why do I have reason to resent it when, say, a pediatrician expresses in his decisions a lack of concern for my child, but not when he expresses a lack of concern for the parasite that threatens her health?

“Because,” one will say, “you have reason to care about your child, whereas you do not have reason to care about the parasite. That is, you have reason to feel certain natural emotions in response to how she fares: positive natural emotions (e.g., hope, relief, joy) when she fares well, and negative natural emotions (e.g., anxiety, fear, grief) when she fares poorly.” But what is the nature of this “because”? This answer, namely that:

I have reason to feel negative natural emotions at my child’s faring poorly, but not at the parasite’s faring poorly,

does not explain by instantiation or facilitation why:

I have reason to resent lack of concern for my child, but not lack of concern for the parasite.

The necessary response equivalence:

resenting lack of concern for my child is an instance of, or facilitates, feeling a negative natural emotion at her faring poorly,

does not obtain. First, the responses themselves differ. The negative natural emotions—such as anxiety, fear, grief, loss—lack resentment’s distinctively communicative register. Because resentment concerns how another person regards what we care about, it lays claim to responses from that person: apology, acknowledgement, respect, and so on. Because natural emotions concern simply what happens to what we care about, by contrast, they do not demand anything from anyone. They merely celebrate or lament the course that events take. Second, they are responses to different things. If some malevolent no longer has the power to harm my child, then I have reason for resentment, but not for anxiety. And if good intentions, or mindless nature, harm her, then I have reason for grief, but not for resentment. One might put the point this way:
the natural emotions and the moral emotions are addressed to different dimensions of importance. It matters to us not only that certain people and things *fare well in nature*: that they escape harm, flourish, and so on. It matters to us also that they be *properly regarded by others*.

Why, then, do we take the fact, that I have reason to care about my child, but not about the parasite, to explain why I have reason to *resent* lack of concern for my child, but not lack of concern for the parasite? Because, it seems, we accept the more general principle that:

one has reason to *resent* decisions that aim at, or fail to prevent, events or conditions about which one would have reason to feel *negative natural* emotions.

But what explains this principle? Why shouldn’t one have reason to resent decisions that aim at events about which one would have reason to feel *positive* natural emotions? The underlying thought, as I will put it, is that moral emotions should *resonate* with natural emotions.

*Resonance of moral emotions*: one has reason to respond to a *decision* by which someone expresses an intention (or a lack of concern to prevent) that X fare a certain way with a *moral* emotion that is similar to the *natural* emotions with which one has reason to respond to X’s *actually faring that way*, but that reflects the distinctive importance of how others regard what one cares about.

Moral emotions should be “similar” to natural emotions at very least by sharing their

“valence.”

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9 “Importance” is meant here as broad covering term. Something is important if it is something of value or disvalue, or if it affects reasons for positive or negative responses.

10 There is more to it than this, of course. First, the action must lack a certain kind of justification. Second, the events and conditions must involve things that are specially related to oneself: things that one has *agent-relative* reason, which others lack, to feel certain natural emotions about. Otherwise, one would have reason to feel indignation, not resentment. Finally, one can also have reason to resent decisions that do not aim at any natural event or condition, such as decisions to treat one unfairly. The point is only that, where there *is* a corresponding natural event or condition, it is one about which one has reason to feel *negative* natural emotions.

11 I do not have a general account of the difference between “positive” and “negative” responses to offer. I am here just relying on our shared intuitive grasp of the difference. The similarity is not restricted to valence. For example, note 13 and the preceding text describes more substantive ways in which the responses called for by a discrete encounter are similar to the responses called for by a shared history of encounter.
when something bad happens to my child, I likewise have reason for negative moral emotions, such as resentment, when someone’s decision aims for that bad thing to happen (or does not take care to prevent its happening). Since I have no reason for negative natural emotions when something bad happens to the parasite, I have no reason for negative moral emotions when someone’s decision aims for it to happen.

The suggestion is that this is an instance of the general phenomenon of:

*Resonance:* one has reason to respond to $X$ in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to its counterpart in another dimension of importance, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the dimension to which $X$ belongs.\(^{12}\)

A deeper explanation of resonance is elusive. One might suggest that if natural emotions were not to resonate with moral emotions, then our normative outlook would be, in a certain way, incoherent. We would thank those who deliberately sought to destroy what we most cherished, while resenting those who came to our aid. However, I wonder whether appealing to “coherence” in this way gives us any deeper explanation. Our sense that such a normative outlook would be “in a certain way, incoherent” may simply be our expectation of resonance under another description.

3. Resonance and relationships

In any event, our aim is not to explain why there is resonance, but to appeal to it to explain the List: why we have reasons for partiality in some relationships, but not in others. To do this, we first need a clearer view of what “relationships”—that is, relationships of the sort with which the debate about partiality is concerned—are.

Consider what we might call *histories of encounter.* One person has an encounter with another person when the actions, attitudes, or reasons of one affect, or are about, the other.

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\(^{12}\) For other instances, see “Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases.”
Histories of encounter are temporally extended patterns of encounter involving the same people. Such histories of encounter include, for example, the relationships between spouses, friends, and siblings.

The suggestion, then, is that the proper responses to a history of encounter should resonate with the proper responses to the discrete encounters of which it is composed. Take friendship. I share a friendship with someone when we share a history of encounters of certain kinds: aiding one another, confiding in one another, pursuing common interests, and so on. A discrete encounter of one of these kinds might occur outside the context of a friendship. For example, a stranger might aid me, intentionally, disinterestedly, and respecting my autonomy. This encounter would give me reason for gratitude, consisting in reciprocating, or in expressing my thanks, in some way proportional to the help received, with like disinterest and respect. Friendship is a history of, inter alia, encounters of aid. And friendship calls for, inter alia, feelings and actions that might naturally be seen as resonant with, inter alia, the gratitude that discrete encounters of aid call for.13

The natural worry is that this is really a reductionist explanation, by instantiation, from a normative principle that is not itself a partiality principle. “Friendship is just a series of encounters of mutual aid, and the partiality of friends is just the discharge of the sum of the debts of gratitude thereby incurred. In other words, the partiality principle:

one has reason for friendship toward one’s friends,

is derived by instantiation, from the normative principle:

13 I have focused on encounters of aid, but friendship is, of course, also constituted by encounters of other kinds, such as sharing confidences and pursuing joint interests. Discrete episodes of sharing confidences elicit trust, albeit limited. Discrete episodes of pursuing a joint interest elicit cooperation, albeit instrumental. According to resonance, therefore, friendship should provide reason for more open-ended trust and noninstrumental cooperation.
one has reason for gratitude toward people who have helped one,

and the response equivalence that:

one’s friends are people who have helped one many times, and friendship is gratitude many times over.”

This is false to the phenomenon, I think, in ways that at first may seem overly subtle, but on reflection appear fundamental. Imagine a lone traveler, of a bygone age, making his way west. Along the way, he helps and is helped by the people dwelling in the places he passes through, creating and incurring various debts. Contrast him with a different traveler who helps and is helped in the same ways, but by one and the same companion throughout. The companioned traveler has reason for responses that are not simply the sum of the responses for which the companionless traveler has reason, but just re-focused, as it were, on a single person. The companionless traveler has accumulated a series of debts that he might repay and then move on. But things are not like that for the companioned traveler. He has reason for a concern for his friend’s interests that is open-ended: that keeps no ledger and that asks only that like concern be reciprocated. And he has reason not to move on, but instead to sustain his friendship going forward. Their history together roots an expansive loyalty, in a way in which no string of encounters with a changing cast could. Such is the distinctive kind of importance that only a shared history with another person can have.

Our present proposal, generalizing a bit, is:

*Resonance of histories of encounter*: one has reason to respond to a *history of encounter* in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to the *discrete* encounters of which it is composed, but that reflects the distinctive importance of a history shared with another person.
It is hard to say, in general terms, what “reflecting the distinctive importance of a shared history” is, because in any particular case it will depend on the responses called for by the particular discrete encounters of which the particular shared history is composed.

4. Parents and children

Our question, again, is whether resonance explains why there is reason for certain kinds partiality, but not for others. So far we have seen only how it might explain why one partiality principle is on the List. In “Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases,” I ask whether resonance can explain why certain other (possible) partiality principles are on or off the List. In the rest of this paper, I focus on partiality principles involving family relationships. From the start, I have been assuming that there are reasons for partiality within such relationships. Even if this is true in some sense, however, it is far from obvious that there is the same reason for partiality within every relationship that is, in some recognizable use of the terms, a relationship between “parent” and “child,” “sibling” and “sibling,” and so on. The challenge, “Why do we have reason for partiality in some relationships, but not in others?” seems to recur within kinds of relationship that, loosely understood, call for partiality. To keep things manageable, I focus on relationships between parents and children.

4.1 Collective Responsibility

I take it that the:

Genetic Claim: The fact that a child developed from the ovum or sperm of some adult itself provides that adult—the child’s “genetic parent”—with reasons for parental partiality to it, and provides the child—that adult’s “genetic child”—with reasons for filial responses to him or her

does not provide a complete explanation of the reasons of partiality that parents have toward children. This is because:

(1) adoptive parents have reasons for parental partiality to their adopted children, and adopted children have reasons for filial responses to their adoptive parents.

So let us set aside the Genetic Claim for the time being. For we need, at very least, other resources to explain the reasons of partiality that parents and children have.

I believe that some of the other resources are, in fact, reductionist. We have a collective responsibility to care for those unable to care for themselves, such as the very young and the very old. Shares of this collective responsibility must somehow be assigned to those of us who can fulfill it. In some cases, a particular child becomes counterfactually dependent on one of us, in the sense that unless she cares for it, no one else will. In these cases, Nature, so to speak, makes the assignment. In most cases, however, it is not true of any of us that if she does not care for this child, no one else will. In such cases, we need a practice to assign shares of this collective responsibility in a fair and efficient way. Assigning a specific adult care for a specific child is plausibly one such way. In many cases, the assignment will be fair because the adult performed some voluntary and intentional (or negligent) act (such as having sex, consenting to a medical procedure).

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15 See Jeffrey Blustein, Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Pt. II.

16 Compare Henry Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics: “[L]et us suppose that I am thrown with my family upon a desert island, where I find an abandoned orphan. Is it evident that I am less bound to provide this child, as far as lies in my power, with the means of subsistence, than I am to provide for my own children?” (346–47). As far as Collective Responsibility is concerned, the answer is no. But History of Responsibility and perhaps also the Genetic Claim, below, would imply that if providing for this child would prevent one from providing for one’s own, one has reason to give priority to them. Compare McMahan, The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 374.

17 If more than one practice would be fair and efficient, then one’s share of the collective responsibility may depend on which practice is actually established in one’s society. In this way, reasons for partiality toward one’s family may depend on social expectations. Compare Christina Hoff Sommers, “Filial Morality” Journal of Philosophy 83 (1986): 439–56.
procedure, or signing adoption papers). But it might be fair for other reasons: because, say, the adult is compensated, or because everyone else bears a similar burden. Assigning genetic parents care for their genetic children may be efficient, because typically they are “first on the scene” and strongly motivated to care for their genetic children. Assigning parents who volunteer to adopt a child care for that child may be efficient because their volunteering is a reliable signal of their ability and motivation.\(^\text{18}\)

However, this explanation—call it \textit{Collective Responsibility}—is insufficient, for reasons reminiscent of our earlier discussion of reductionism. First, I don’t view my reasons for partiality to my daughter as simply the reasons I have for discharging my share of a collective responsibility. They have to do, instead, with something between her and me. Second, I see myself as having reasons for partiality to my daughter \textit{in particular}. Suppose that my wife and I are approached by another couple, who propose, for our mutual convenience, swapping our children. \textit{Collective Responsibility} does not explain why we ought to refuse. We can suppose that our children would continue to be cared for in at least as good a way as before, and the burdens on us parents would be no less fair. Surely, it would be acceptable to redistribute shares of any \textit{other} collective responsibility in this way. But parental responsibility is different. Finally, I have reasons for responses that there is no collective responsibility to give. I have reason for partial emotions toward my daughter now, and I will have reason for partial actions to her even after she comes of age.

\subsection*{4.2 History of Responsibility}

So we need some nonreductionist supplement: some relationship between parents and children that provides reasons for these further partial responses. Some have claimed that the necessary supplement is a *friendship*, or something like it, between parent and child.\(^{19}\) According to this *Assimilation to Friendship*, familial relationships, like friendships, are “response dependent.”

You and I are friends only if I have been partial to you in the past, and you have been partial to me. Suppose I am a stalker, and I claim that, because we are friends, you have reason for partiality to me. It is enough for you to reply that, because you have not responded partially to me in the past, we are not friends, and so you have no such reason.

The problem is that familial relationships are not response dependent. From the fact that I have never responded partially to my daughter or mother until now, it does not follow that I am

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Jane English, “What Do Grown Children Owe their Parents?” in Onora O’Neill and William Ruddick, *Having Children* (Oxford: 1979), pp. 351–56; and perhaps Brewer, “Two Kinds of Social Commitment”; and Lionel McPherson, “The Moral Insignificance of “Bare” Personal Reasons” *Philosophical Studies* 110 (2002): 29–47 take similar views. At times, McPherson seems only to deny that biological or “metaphysical” relations are reason giving, which is compatible with much of what I say here. At other times, he seems to claim, more restrictively, that only relationships constituted by “belief, intention, and choice” and “interactions, experiences and expectations” between the participants are reason giving. This is incompatible with my claim that some reasons for partiality are response independent.

In part, the Assimilation to Friendship is motivated by what Scheffler, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” labels the “voluntarist objection”: that participants should not be burdened by partial reasons that arise from relationships into which they did not chose to enter. However, as Scheffler observes, the objection is highly elusive. After all, it is not in general objectionable that unchosen conditions should give rise to reasons. Jeske replies that unchosen relationships differ because they are not “intrinsic features” of the object of the partial responses. But this suggestion is itself rather elusive.
not her father or son. Nor does it follow that I have no reason to be partial to her. What seems to follow, instead, is that I am open to criticism for having failed to be partial to her in the past. In defense of the Assimilation to Friendship, Diane Jeske acknowledges that although I cannot be criticized for failing to respond to a responsibility provided by a relationship, I can be criticized for failing “to avail [myself] of a good opportunity to develop” a relationship. “After all, family situations are often very conducive to the development of intimacy, and intimacy is objectively valuable.”

According to Jeske, the criticism that might be made of me for failing to care about my mother or daughter is the same criticism that might be made of me for failing to cultivate a potential friendship. While Jeske suggests that this latter criticism is “moral censure,” it is not clear that it really has this character. The criticism is, at most, that I have imprudently passed up an opportunity for something that I might have found fulfilling, and if anyone has special standing to complain about this, it is myself. Moreover, if there are many other things to fill my life, my declining to cultivate another friendship is not even vulnerable to this criticism. By contrast, the criticism that might be made about my failing to care about my daughter or mother goes beyond a charge of mere imprudence, and it is clear that someone else has special standing to complain about it: namely, my daughter or mother. Moreover, I can’t escape this criticism simply by entering into enough relationships with other peoples’ daughters and mothers.

The necessary supplement to Collective Responsibility, therefore, must be response independent:

(2) Parents have reason for parental partiality, of the kind that Collective Responsibility does not explain, to their children even if those parents have not responded partially to them in the past. Children have reasons for filial responses, of the kind that Collective Responsibility does not explain, to their parents even if those children have not responded partially to them in the past.

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As mentioned before, in light of (1), this response-independent relationship cannot be the genetic relationship. So what is it?

Consider the discrete encounter that consists in an adult being assigned, for a limited time, or in a limited way, part of the collective responsibility for raising a particular child. Discrete encounters of this kind might take place in an orphanage with a rotating staff, or in a village of the kind that Hillary Clinton says it takes. If Nature or convention so conspires, an adult may come to share a history of such encounters with a specific child. This relationship is response independent. One not need have been partial to a child in order to have a history of bearing the collective responsibility for raising it. And this relationship might account for the kind of parental partiality that Collective Responsibility fails to account for. According to resonance, having this history of responsibility, or being a historical parent, calls for responses that are similar to those that an episode of bearing part of the collective responsibility for raising a child calls for, but that reflect the distinctive importance of sharing a history with one child in particular. Resonance thus suggests that I would see my reasons for partiality to my daughter as arising not only from the collective responsibility, but also from my shared history with her; that I would have reason to be loyal to her in particular, there being no other child with whom I share this history; and that I would have reason for responses of a kind that there is no collective responsibility to give, such as emotions toward her now and partiality to her even when she becomes an adult.

When we turn from the reasons of parents to the reasons of children, however, this explanation—call it History of Responsibility—appears to have a worrying implication. It seems to suggest that a child has reason for filial partially to any adult who has had a history of responsibility for it. Granted, a child may have reason for filial partiality to an adult who was
willing to fulfill his responsibility. But it does not seem true that a child has reason for filial partially to an adult who was not willing: to a neglectful or abusive historical parent.

(3) Children have reasons for filial partiality, of a kind that Collective Responsibility does not explain, to their parents, only if their parents were willing to fulfill their responsibilities.²¹

If we look more closely, however, we see that resonance does not imply otherwise. Consider again discrete encounters in which an adult bears some share of the collective responsibility for raising a child. Such an encounter gives the adult reason to fulfill the responsibility. But what it gives the child reason for depends on whether the adult is willing to fulfill the responsibility. If the adult is willing to fulfill the responsibility, then the child has reason for trust and gratitude,²² as well as, perhaps, for relevant cooperation and obedience. But if the adult is unwilling to fulfill the responsibility, then the child has reason for distrust and resentment. Resonance thus implies that children of neglectful or abusive parents have reason for responses quite different from the responses that children of loving parents have reason for.

4.3 The Genetic Claim

At the outset, I observed that the Genetic Claim does not completely explain reasons of partiality between parents and children, because it does not explain (1): the reasons for partiality between adoptive parents and children. We then proposed to explain (1) by appeal, on the one hand, to

²¹ As its proponents often note, the Assimilation to Friendship explains (3). An abusive or neglectful parent is not his child’s friend, so the child has no reasons for friendship to him. Again, however, the Assimilation does not explain (2), and by the very same token. An abusive or neglectful parent is not his child’s friend, so the parent has no reasons for friendship to it, and an abusive or neglectful child is not its parent’s friend, so the child has no reasons for friendship to him.

²² To be clear, the claim is that the responses of children toward their historical parents resonate with responses of gratitude for discrete performances, not that they can be reduced to them. For a fair-minded discussion of the difficulties with the reductionist claim, see Mark Wicclair, “Caring for Frail Elderly Parents: Past Parental Sacrifices and the Obligations of Adult Children,” Social Theory and Practice (1990) 16: 163–89.
Collective Responsibility and, on the other, to History of Responsibility. It is still possible, however, that the Genetic Claim is part of a complete explanation of reasons for partiality between parents and children.23

Deep and powerful reactions suggest that that genetic ties matter. Of course, it is possible that genetic ties matter, but not in the way that the Genetic Claim suggests: not by providing parents with reason for parental partiality, of the kind that History of Responsibility

23 David Velleman, “Family History,” *Philosophical Papers* 34 (2005): 357–78 and “Persons in Prospect,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 221–88 argues, along reductionist lines, that we have special reason to raise our genetic children because we are specially placed to provide them with knowledge of their genetic capacities and with the fruits of our experience of coping with similar capacities. In “Persons in Prospect,” Velleman emphasizes the latter, and brings it in only to explain why the obligations arising from something similar to Responsibility for Creation (with a notion of “predicament” importantly replacing that of harm), below, cannot be transferred. I wonder whether Velleman does not overstate the importance of such information, particularly when he claims that genetic donation is wrong, because existence is too costly for the children created from it, because they are deprived of the information that (at least) one genetic parent would provide. (For example, would parents, if given the option, really have special reason to create genetically identical siblings, staggered in age, who would provide one other with much better information about their genetic capacities than anyone else could? Is having an identical twin such a boon? One might reply that there are diminishing marginal returns to genetic information. But this would tend to undermine the idea that it is a great loss to be deprived of the information of a second genetic parent.)

At any rate, this seems not to exhaust the significance of genetic relationships. At least in theory, if not in practice, information about our genetic capacities could be gained without any interaction with our genetic relatives. Indeed, it could be gained without any information about our relatives, other than that they had similarly related genetic capacities. Complete information of this kind would still leave something out. We don’t just want to know what our genes allow. We want to know our family history itself: what actually happened, or happens, to our genetic relatives. And we want to know this, it seems, because what happens to them means something to us.

It is not clear how far, if at all, Velleman would disagree with this. He suggests other ways in which genetic relationships matter: for example, that they link us “to humanity, the realm of life, the causal order” (‘Persons in Prospect,” p. 265) and that they help us “come to terms with our bodily selves” from which we are susceptible to alienation (“Persons in Prospect,” p. 260). It is not clear to me whether these justifications are also supposed to be based on our interest in knowledge about our genetic relatives, albeit knowledge about something other than their genetic capacities. It is also worth noting that Velleman explicitly forgoes, for the purposes of argument, other considerations about “mythic and symbolic significance” that he “sees as genuinely meaningful” (“Family History,” p. 362).
describes, to their genetic children and genetic children reason, of the kind that History of Responsibility describes, for filial responses to genetic parents. But I will explore the Genetic Claim for two reasons. The first, methodological reason is that the Genetic Claim is a limit case; it seems the strongest version of the idea that genetic ties matter. By identifying ways in which the Genetic Claim is too strong, we may home in on a more accurate view. The second, substantive reason is that some reactions suggest that we actually accept the Genetic Claim. Consult your reaction to the stories, which appear every so often, about newborns sent home with (as we are apt to think of them) the wrong parents. Why are these stories irredeemably tragic? Or imagine that you learn that your genetic child, about which you never knew, is languishing in an orphanage, when you are well equipped to care for it. Could you respond to this news as you respond to your standing knowledge that other children are languishing in orphanages?

One might object that Responsibility for Creation explains these reactions just as well. This reductionist account proposes to derive parental responsibility from the normative principle that:

one has reason (indeed, a responsibility owed to them) to protect people from, or compensate them for, the harms that one has voluntarily exposed them to,

and the response-equivalence-supporting fact that:

causing a child to exist exposes it to harm.25

24 Jeff McMahan, The Ethics of Killing, p. 376, suggests that something weaker than the Genetic Claim may be true.

While responsibilities for creation of this kind are important, I doubt that they fully account for our reactions. Those reactions stubbornly remain, I think, even when we imagine that the genetic parents did not voluntarily cause their genetic children to exist: even when we imagine the intercession of love potions, or rogue geneticists. (Contrast your reaction to discovering that your blood, which you donated ten years ago expressly for medical research, had been used instead to prevent the miscarriage of a genetically unrelated embryo, with your reaction to discovering that your genetic material, also donated for medical research, had been used instead to create an implanted embryo, which then developed into a child, now eight years old.)


Responsibility for Creation is resisted along two main lines. The first is that more than mere voluntariness—some intention to create or failure to take reasonable precautions to avoid creating—is necessary for such responsibilities. Taking reasonable birth control measures, therefore, would insulate parents from them. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defence of Abortion,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1971): 47–66. McMahan, The Ethics of Killing, p. 365; and Shiffrin criticize this view persuasively. However, there remain, to my mind, some difficult cases, such as voluntary sexual intercourse between parties who are non-negligently ignorant that it might create a child. The second line of resistance is that the creation of a child does not give the parent reasons to provide protection or compensation beyond that which is necessary to ensure that the child was benefited, on balance, by his creation (or, noncomparatively, that his creation was a good thing for him). This is typically motivated by analogy to permissible, non-responsibility-generating, actions that (i) harm a victim, or expose him to harm, (ii) are necessary to prevent him from suffering (or being exposed to) a more serious harm, and (iii) so, even without protection or compensation, leave the victim better off overall. See McMahan, The Ethics of Killing, pp. 362–72, 375. Shiffrin argues persuasively that this analogy fails, for a reason that McMahan acknowledges at the end of his discussion: namely, that it is not necessary to create a child to prevent it from suffering a more serious harm.
Moreover, genetic parents have reason for partiality of a kind—emotional responses, desires for connection—that Responsibility for Creation cannot explain.\(^{26}\)

Since the Genetic Claim asserts that genetic parents have reason for parental partiality, it implies that a genetic parent wrongs\(^{27}\) his genetic child by failing to raise it, at least in certain circumstances: when he can do so, when doing so would not be too costly for his child or himself, when doing so would not wrong his child or others, and so on. This does not mean that a genetic parent, any more than a historical parent, always wrongs his genetic child by giving it up for adoption.\(^{28}\) His caring for the child might be too costly for it, or for him.\(^{29}\) Nor does it mean that a genetic parent, any more than a former historical parent, ever owes it to his genetic child to wrest it from its present historical parents. Again, doing so may be too costly for it.

Moreover, the genetic parent also owes it, not only to the child, but also to the present historical parents, to respect the relationship that has arisen between them. However, the Genetic Claim may well imply the genetic parent owes it to his genetic child to do other things, which are not too costly for it or him, and which respect its relationship to its present historical parents.

\(^{26}\) Furthermore, Responsibility for Creation cannot explain the responses of children to their genetic parents, or of genetic siblings to one another, since neither enters such relationships voluntarily. The responses of children to their genetic parents, however, are often complicated by the fact that their genetic parents were not willing to fulfil their responsibilities to them, a point I return to below. And, in order to have a manageable focus, we are not considering siblinghood.

\(^{27}\) It is worth recalling here a point made in the introduction: that reasons for partiality are, in general, owed to one’s relatives, so that one can wrong one’s relatives by failing to respond to them.

\(^{28}\) If a foetus (at a given stage of development) is not a person, or lacks some other status that would give one reason not to abort it, then, I assume, the genetic “parent” of that foetus does not have reason to be partial to it (any more than he or she has to be partial to his or her sperm or ova). So the Genetic Claim does not affect the argument that it is permissible to abort a foetus (at that stage) because it is not a person, or lacks some other status that would give one reason not to abort it.

\(^{29}\) And even if these conditions are not met, there may be good reason for the law to allow genetic parents to give their children up for adoption. It is sometimes the case that the law ought to allow people to do what they ought not do.
If the Genetic Claim implies that, at least in some circumstances, a genetic parent can wrong his or her existing genetic child by giving it up for adoption, it might seem to imply similarly that that a prospective genetic parent can wrong his or her future genetic child by donating sperm or ova, because this is something like giving it up for adoption in advance. Indeed, in one way, genetic donation might seem more likely than normal adoption to wrong the child. The genetic donor cannot claim that the alternative would be more costly for the child, whereas the parent of an existing child can. So, our question is whether, because of the Genetic Claim:

(4) a genetic parent wrongs his or her genetic child when he or she both supplies genetic material that will be used to create it and, by giving the child up for adoption in advance, prevents him- or herself from fulfilling (at least some of) the responsibilities that the genetic relationship would otherwise provide.

Of course, doing this can wrong the child in ways that have nothing to do with the Genetic Claim. Most importantly, it can wrong the child because coming to exist is excessively costly for it (e.g., because it comes into the world with a painful and debilitating congenital disorder).30 But set these other possibilities aside.

I do not think that the Genetic Claim implies (4).31 My choice whether or not to supply genetic material has the following form. If I $\phi i$ (e.g. supply), then (i) I am unable to $X$ (e.g., care for my genetic child) and (ii) I come to be in a situation (e.g., being my genetic child’s parent) such that, if I were able to $X$, I would wrong someone (e.g., my genetic child) by

30 Indeed, Velleman, “Family History” argues that the child will bear excessive costs because one will not raise it (and so it will be deprived of information about its genetic capacities). Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life” at least raises the possibility that any cost is excessive. See note 25.

31 Another, fairly obvious, argument for this conclusion is available if one accepts the controversial ideas (i) that we greatly benefit people by causing them to exist and (ii) that we may give our children up for adoption not only to save them from costs, but also to provide them with benefits.
refraining from $X$-ing. If I do not $\phi$, then I am in a situation such that I neither wrong this person by refraining from $X$-ing, nor would wrong them, if I could $X$, by refraining from $X$-ing. In general, when I face a choice with this structure, I need not wrong anyone by $\phi$-ing. An example with much lower moral stakes: On Sunday, my broker, en route to his remote Alaskan getaway, invites me to join him for the week. There is only one flight in, on Monday, and one flight out, on Friday, and no other links to the outside world. Right before he passes out of cell phone reach, he tells me that he has little-known, although not privileged, information about probable, major movements in WidgetCorp stock in the coming week. My friend is heavily invested in WidgetCorp, but he is abroad, and can be reached only by phone. I know that, if I spend the week with my broker, I both will be unable to contact my friend and will learn something such that, if I could contact him, I would wrong him by not telling it to him. I do not think that I wrong my friend by accepting my broker’s offer.

Even if the Genetic Claim does not imply that genetic donors wrong their genetic children, it does explain why people often have strong reservations about being genetic donors: reservations that remain even when they are assured that existence will not be excessively costly for their genetic children. First, even if genetic donors do not have a responsibility to raise their genetic children (because they cannot), they are in a situation, like mine at my broker’s retreat, in which they would have such a responsibility, if only they could fulfill it.\textsuperscript{32} There can be something torturous about such situations. Second, genetic donors may have responsibilities to do other things for their genetic children, besides raising them (because they can do these things): such as agreeing to meet with them and answer potentially intimate and painful

\textsuperscript{32} What prevents genetic donors from fulfilling their responsibility need not be some physical impediment, or lack of information. It may be a moral obligation, arising from a promise, or the value of the relationship between the child and its adoptive parents.
questions. Finally, even if genetic donors have no reason to *do* anything for their genetic children (because they cannot do anything for them), they still have reason to *feel* certain things about their genetic children. Granted, the less they know about their genetic children, the more abstract these feelings. At the limit, perhaps there is just the unnerving sense that some genetic child or children might be out there, whether faring poorly or well one will never know. One may have reason to accept these burdens; one might selflessly want to make an infertile couple’s dream come true. But to see nothing else on the scales is, if the Genetic Claim is correct, to be blind to a kind of meaning that is actually there.

The Genetic Claim may seem to imply that:

(5) merely genetic children always have reason for filial partiality to their merely genetic parents.

This would seem to mean, for instance, that, if a genetic child should discover the identity of his genetic donor, it would have reason to care for that genetic donor in his or her old age. But the Genetic Claim need not imply this. If the reasons of children regarding genetic parents are like the reasons of children regarding historical parents, then children have reason for filial *partiality* to their genetic parents only if their genetic parents were willing to fulfill their responsibilities to them. Some estranged genetic parents were willing to fulfill their responsibility to their children. A genetic mother might have taken an unrelated child home from the hospital, thinking that it was hers. Or she might have given up her child for adoption only in order to remove it from a war zone. Or, as in the cases documented by the Argentine Grandmothers of *Plaza de Mayo*, she might have been assassinated, with her genetic child given over to a childless couple favored by the regime. But genetic donors are not like this. They willingly prevented themselves from acquiring such a responsibility, by preventing themselves from being able to fulfill it.
Even if the Genetic Claim, so understood, does not imply that children have reason for *partiality* to genetic parents who were not willing to fulfill their responsibility to them, it does imply that they have reason for *other* responses to such parents. They may have reason for feelings of resentment or loss, for example. The Genetic Claim implies that genetic relationships still have meaning for such children, as indeed they often feel that it has.

The Genetic Claim may also seem to imply that:

(6) adoptive, historical parents have weaker or less extensive reason than genetic, historical parents for partiality to their children, and children have weaker or less extensive reason for partiality to adoptive, historical parents than to genetic, historical parents.

But this seems wrong. My aunt and uncle do not have more reason to love their younger, genetic son than they have to love their older, adopted one.33 Were I to discover that my daughter—the girl for whom I have been responsible since birth—was in fact not my genetic child, I would not take this to mean that I had less reason to love her. However, the Genetic Claim need not imply otherwise. We need not suppose that, if there is already a history of responsibility, then a genetic relationship somehow doubles the force or urgency of the reasons, or somehow amplifies what they call on agents to do. We may say instead that, when there is already a history of responsibility, the reasons that a genetic relationship provides are simply redundant. In such cases, the genetic relationship makes only a counterfactual difference. It only makes it the case that, even if there had there been no history of responsibility, there still would have been reasons for parental partiality.34

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33 To this example, one might object that, because it is important for siblings to be treated equally, my aunt and uncle have “exclusionary” reasons to ignore the additional reason that their genetic relationship provides. I find it implausible that they have extra reason that they need to ignore. At any rate, this objection does not apply to the next example.

34 Compare McMahan, p. 374. However, this conclusion sits uneasily with, if it does not strictly contradict, the belief, which many hold, that, if they are to be parents, they have at least
Although the Genetic Claim does not imply (4)–(6), it does imply two further claims, which may be uncomfortable. It implies that:

(7) there is something to be said against social arrangements in which children are raised collectively, or in which paternity is not recognized: namely, that they fail to respect the importance of genetic relationships, which may seem like cultural imperialism. However, (7) is consistent with there being much to be said in favor of such societies, such as that they promote a more egalitarian ethos. This may just be an instance of a more general truth that not everything of value can be realized within a single social formation. And it implies that:

(8) a woman bearing a child of rape has reason for parental partiality toward her genetic child, which may seem callous. As mentioned before, a genetic parent does not have responsibility to care for her genetic child if she cannot do so, or if doing so would be too costly to her or to it. The fact that the child is the product of rape likely fulfils these conditions. Still, if the Genetic Claim is true, she may have other reasons, such as reasons to have certain feelings for her genetic child. It is surely unfair that, through no choice of her own, she should have these reasons. However, the fact that it is unfair that she should have these reasons does not mean that she does not have them. The rape might give her many reasons (e.g., to report the crime) that it is unfair that she should have. This is one of the many ways in which she was wronged by it. Although the point is sometimes neglected, part of what makes many actions wrong, or aggravates their

some reason to create a genetic child that is not equally reason to adopt an existing, but genetically unrelated child. (Of course, they may also have reason to adopt an existing child (whether genetically related to them or not) that is not equally reason to create a child (whether genetically related to them or not): namely, that the former, but not the latter, saves a child from a worse fate.) This belief suggests that a genetic relationship has some importance that an adoptive relationship lacks. And if this is so, then why should a genetic relationship not provide reasons that an adoptive relationship does not?
wrongness, is precisely that they unfairly burden their victims by changing their normative situation.  

Supposing that the Genetic Claim explains our reactions, what, in turn, might explain it? Since genetic relatives need not encounter one another, genetic relationships are not histories of encounter. But one might suggest that the genetic relationship is a common personal situation: that of having genes of the same type. I share a common personal situation with someone just when she and I each have a personal situation of the same kind, involving the same thing. For example, we may have endured the same kind of trial, or been exposed to the same sort of adversity, even if we have never had any encounter. This may be another instance of resonance:

Resonance of common personal situation: one has reason to respond a common personal situation involving, a thing in a way that is similar to the way one has reason to respond to the personal situation itself, but that reflects the distinctive importance of sharing a personal situation with another person.

As before, what “reflecting the distinctive importance of sharing a personal situation with another person” comes to in any particular case depends on the personal situation in question.

One might initially object that in principle one can share more genes with someone one is less closely genetically related to, in the familiar sense. To this, it seems fair to reply that, apart from cosmic accidents, one will share more genes with one’s genetic parents than with people one is genetically related to less closely. A similar objection, however, has more force. According to resonance, the common personal situation of having genes of the same type matters only insofar as the personal situation of having genes of that type matters independently. And having genes of a given type matters, it would seem, only insofar as they give one traits or

35 This point is made by Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life,” who suggests that part of how creating a child may wrong it is by burdening it with moral duties.

36 For further discussion, see “Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases.”
capacities that matter. This suggests that the relevant shared situation is not similarity in genes
per se, but instead similarity in the traits and capacities that they give one. The problem is that,
in my important traits and capacities, I am often more similar to people with whom I am less
genetically related, or even with those with whom I share fewer genes. Worse, it is arguably not
the mere possession of a capacity, but instead its actualization that matters. In the actualization
of capacities, I may be even more similar to people with whom I share fewer genes.

Taken for what it is, the genetic relationship consists neither in a shared history of
encounter, nor in a common personal situation. It consists instead in the fact that the child’s
creation was, and its biological life has been, later stages of a continuous biological process (i)
that began as an episode in the biological life of the parent and (ii) that has been governed
throughout, in part, by the parent’s genetic code: or, less clinically, by the parent’s principle of
organization, or specific Aristotelian form.37 This is, I think, the literal core of the thought that
your genetic child is your flesh and blood.

Why should being linked to someone by a process of this kind matter? In my view, the
most plausible views of “egoistic concern”—concern for persons who, in normal cases, are
identical to oneself—maintain that a person at one time has reason for egoistic concern for a
person (or thing of some other kind that we essentially are, such as animal) at another time only
if the former is, or has, the same, or enough of the same, organism, or relevant organs (such as
those that support mental life), as the latter.38 And an organism, or organ, at one time is identical

37 Note that it is not simply the qualitative similarity of genetic code that matters here,
but also the historical link, through a continuous process, to an episode in the biological life of
the parent. This is why Irie Jones of Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (London: Hamish Hamilton,
2000) can meaningfully wonder whether Millat Iqbal or his identical twin Magid is the father of
the child she carries.

38 By “normal” cases, I mean, in effect, “non-branching” cases. In “branching” cases, a
single person at one time stands in the same relevant relationship to several persons at a later
with an organism, or organ, at another time only if, or just when, the life, or functioning, of the
each is a stage of a continuous biological process, governed by the same genetic code. The same
is true of the relationship between genetic parent and genetic child. Both are necessarily
constituted by continuous biological processes, governed by the same genetic code. The
conjecture is then as follows: I have reason for partiality to \textit{myself} at other times. The
relationship that provides me with these reasons—my relationship to myself at other times—is
similar to my relationship to my genetic children. So, as an instance of resonance, I have reason
for partiality to my genetic children which is similar to my partiality to myself, but which reflects
the fact that this is, like friendship, a relationship to a separate and independent person.\textsuperscript{39} The
idea is not that one has any special reason for one’s biological processes, as such, to continue:
something which might be achieved by keeping one’s gametes in suspended animation. For this
relation to one’s gametes would not be a relation to a person or anything else of importance. Nor
is the idea that one bears a relationship of the same type to one’s genetic children that one bears
to one’s later self. Since one’s genetic children do not share the same organ or organism, one
does not literally live on through them, or enjoy the sort of authority over them that one has over

\textsuperscript{39} I am indebted here to a conversation years ago with Sam Scheffler. Raymond
Belliotti, “Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother and to Thine Own Self Be True,” \textit{Southern
Journal of Philosophy} 24 (1986): 149–162, also appeals to considerations of personal identity to
explain the reasons of genetic parents and children.
oneself. The conjecture is instead that the relationship that one bears to one’s genetic children is similar enough to the relationship to one’s future self to call forth, as an instance of resonance, a similar kind of concern, modified to reflect that is a relationship to a separate and independent person.

Much more would need to be said, of course, to vindicate this conjecture. For one thing, it depends on a controversial theory of egoistic concern. According to Derek Parfit’s powerful and influential alternative, the basis for egoistic concern is “psychological connectedness,” which consists in the sort of links that in a normal case we would call the “memory of past experiences” or the “fulfillment of past intentions,” and/or “psychological continuity,” which consists in “overlapping chains” of “strong” psychological connectedness.\(^40\) Indeed, David Brink, who is persuaded by this view of egoistic concern, suggests, first, that genetic relationships do not matter and, second, that the relationships that do matter involve the same sort of psychological connectedness.\(^41\) I don’t find Brink’s proposal plausible, even when applied to the relationships, such as friendship, that seem most congenial to it.\(^42\) Granted, my friend and I remember experiencing many of the same events; his beliefs, values, and intentions have causally affected my beliefs, values, and intentions, and so on; and many of our beliefs, values, and intentions have the same contents. But, first, Brink’s proposal faces a dilemma. On the one hand, unless we place further restrictions on these events, causal relations, and attitudes,

\(^{40}\) Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Pt. III.


\(^{42}\) Even setting aside genetic relationships, there are relationships that Brink’s proposal seems, on its face, unable to account for. Some common personal situations—such as exposure to the same adversity—do not involve any particular psychology.
some negative relationships will involve as many of these connections as friendship. On the other hand, the needed restrictions would not be explained by the analogy to personal identity. For example, one might insist that there be reciprocal causal influence, or concern for the other. But my later self cannot causally influence my earlier self, and my earlier self need not have any concern for my later self (even if he ought to). Second, and more fundamentally, the “psychological connections” between friends are simply different from the “psychological connections” that can plausibly be taken to constitute the basis of egoistic concern. I may remember experiencing the event that my friend also experienced, but I do not remember (or even “quasi-remember”) his experience of it. The primary difference is that my mental states are causally related to one another in a way in which they are not causally related to my friend’s mental states. Indeed, I suspect that the relevant causal relations, when fully described, will have to refer to biological processes of the kind that account for the identity over time of an organism, or organ. Setting aside whether Brink’s view is correct, the more important point for present purposes is that it suggests that opposition to the idea that biology matters to who we care about is closely linked to opposition to the idea that biology matters to who we are. It thus indirectly corroborates the conjecture that the significance, if any, of biological relationships lies in the significance, if any, of biology to personal identity.

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43 If one wonders how negative relationships might produce similarity of content, consider the Stockholm Syndrome.


45 Compare David Velleman, “Persons in Prospect,” p. 239: “the aspect of psychological connectedness that really counts is the causal relation that establishes an informational channel to carry anticipations forward to their anticipated cadences, and to carry future-directed references forward to find their referents, including the future ‘me.’ Whether the same connections preserve any of my features is relatively unimportant.”

Next, even if this conjecture explains reason for *some* kind of partiality to our genetic children and genetic parents, it is not clear how it explains reason for *parental* partiality to our genetic children and *filial* responses to our genetic parents. Is parental partiality really like egoistic concern? Why, on this conjecture, should filial partiality to genetic parents depend on their having been willing to fulfill their responsibilities? Perhaps features of the relationship of genetic parent to child and of the relationship of genetic child to parent can explain why the former calls for parental partiality, whereas the latter calls for filial partiality. Or perhaps the Genetic Claim needs to be qualified; perhaps genetic relationships call not for parental and filial partiality as commonly understood, but instead for partiality of another kind. As I said earlier, the Genetic Claim is a limit case, chosen, in part, for methodological reasons: the strongest version of the idea that genetic ties matter that one might expect to be advanced.