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## *Preface*

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This book is about the ethics of special relationships, or the ethics of partiality. It is about why you should treat someone differently if she is your friend, your spouse, your parent, or your child, or if she shares with you some other kind of special relationship. Special relationships appear to generate a special set of evaluative standards; they make a difference to what you do, what you think you should do, and how you judge what others do. The evaluative standards generated by special relationships are taken very seriously; nobody wants to be a bad friend or a bad parent, and people whom we judge to fail in their responsibilities within their special relationships are the objects of some of our harshest moral criticism. On face value, partiality appears to be a distinctive and significant part of our ethical lives.

While partiality appears to be a significant ethical phenomenon, our most influential theories of morality do not give it a central place. Our most influential moral theories are mostly impartialist; they are about how we can make the world better, as seen from an impartial point of view, or about what rules or basic rights exist for all people at all times and places. Any claims about why we should be partial to our friends and loved ones, on such moral theories, are derived from deeper impartialist commitments.

As many philosophers have noticed, there are good reasons to doubt that impartialist moral theories can do justice to the ethics of partiality. It is frequently argued that utilitarianism, or consequentialism in general, or Kantianism, or deontology in general,

cannot give a plausible account of friendship, or of love, or of special obligations between parents and children. Defenders of impartialist moral theories have responses to make, and it is in the context of the debate about the prospects of impartialist moral theories that many philosophers come to the ethics of partiality. For many, the main question about the ethics of special relationships is whether it yields a telling objection to impartialism in ethics.

I began working on this book with the conviction that philosophers have been better at arguing about whether partiality poses a problem for impartialist moral theories than at providing positive accounts of the ethics of partiality. My hunch is that if we consider the ethics of partiality in its own right, not as a problem case for impartialist moral theories, then we will arrive at an account that looks quite different both from accounts derived from impartialist theories and from accounts gestured at by philosophers as alternatives to impartialism.

I begin by trying to regiment the various philosophical approaches to the ethics of partiality. I suggest that there are three basic views: the projects view, the relationships view, and the individuals view. Of the three views, the individuals view looks at first as though it is the least promising, but if the arguments to come are successful, then it turns out to be correct. The idea of the individuals view is that we should give different treatment to people with whom we share special relationships as a response to the value held by those individuals in their own rights. In developing the individuals view, the crucial move is to show how you can find good reason to give special treatment to someone with whom you share a special relationship, in response to that person's self-standing value, while at the same time seeing that other people are no less valuable, objectively speaking, than her.

My preferred version of the individuals view, which I develop in the last two chapters of the book, draws together elements from each of three different traditions of thought about how we should respond to the value of persons: the consequentialist tradition, the Kantian tradition, and the particularist tradition. If this sounds messy—well, the view that results is not as messy as you might imagine on the basis of that description, but neither is it

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especially elegant. To say why we ought to give special treatment within certain special relationships, I argue, we need to understand, first, what it means to respond to the value held by a particular person in her own right, not in comparison to the value of other people; and we need to understand, second, why our ways of constructing special relationships make sense for us, as a society or a species—we need to explain why we accept particular ideals of friendship, for example, or why we have particular expectations about who will take responsibility for raising children. To understand what you should do for someone with whom you share a special relationship, you need to appreciate his value in isolation, but you also need to see him as a participant in a relationship that has a certain social significance and function. The two needs create conflicting theoretical pressures. But neither can be discounted, and neither can be fully explained in terms of the other, so some theoretical messiness is unavoidable.

My main goal in writing the book is to provide a broad account of the ethics of partiality, but there are two other things I hope to achieve. One is to provide some support for the view that ethics is ultimately about the good of individuals; to understand the ethics of partiality, I suggest, we do not need to grant basic ethical significance to other kinds of entities, like relationships. The other is to show that there is something to be gained from examining our experience as we act within our special relationships: an experience that I rather grandly call the “phenomenology of partiality.” The phenomenology of partiality, properly examined, involves evaluative commitments, which I think should be granted a great deal of authority. The best argument for the individuals view, in my opinion, is that it makes the norms of partiality look much as we experience them to be.

I owe thanks to my editor at Princeton University Press, Rob Tempio, for his support and patience. The book was greatly improved by the penetrating and constructive reports of two reviewers for PUP; I now know that those reviewers were Diane Jeske and Sarah Stroud. I am also grateful for comments provided by my friends and colleagues at Victoria University Wellington and at the University of Melbourne, and by many others. I would especially like to thank Nick Agar, PJ Ivanhoe, Andrew Moore, and

Kieran Setiya. In preparing the final manuscript I received valuable research assistance from Felice Marshall. I have been encouraged all the way by my wife Maree Henwood. It is a book about partiality, so let me also mention my adored children, Tait and Quentin.