

# DISSERTATION SUMMARY

## Art, Value, and Relationships of Partiality

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We are often partial to a particular set of artworks—favorite films, “desert island” disks, or much-loved novels. We treasure these works particularly dearly, even though we may recognize that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of our attention. Is there any good reason for such attachment? Or is it merely an expression of one’s idiosyncratic taste, and something for which no reasons might be given? I argue that there *are* reasons for being partial to particular works of art, even if one recognizes that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of one’s attention. These reasons are intimately connected with the value of one’s historical relationship with those artworks. My dissertation presents a philosophical account of the significance of such relationships with works of art. I argue that valuing such relationships is analogous to valuing one’s relationships with one’s friends, one’s projects, or one’s ideals: each is an instance of reasonable partiality, which involves an individual’s appreciation of a set of reasons which may not warrant the same concern on the part of all other rational agents.

Making sense of partiality is nothing new in *ethics*; most contemporary approaches to normative ethics no longer confine themselves to offering accounts of only our impartial moral obligations. It’s commonly acknowledged that various relationships, projects, and commitments can provide us with reasons for action that may indeed compete with impartial moral reasons when it comes to deliberating about what we ought to do, all things considered. The same isn’t true of the philosophy of art. Much contemporary philosophy of art writes off partiality as a nonrational expression of mere taste, focusing almost exclusively on questions concerning the impartial evaluation of works of art. My dissertation shows that a philosophy of art without an account of the significance of our relationships with works of art is as deeply lacking as an ethics that does not do justice to relationships of partiality.

In the first chapter, I consider the general puzzle of partiality: what explains the fact that we take ourselves to have *reasons of partiality*, i.e. good reasons to be partial to those individuals with whom we share special relationships? I argue that, in the case of personal relationships, such reasons can be explained entirely in terms of a set of more fundamental values and reasons that such relationships facilitate and instantiate. These include: the value of personal and joint projects; the value of the individual participants in these relationships; and general moral values such as trust, care, reciprocity, and gratitude. My view is therefore a form of reductionism about reasons of partiality. This approach departs from a popular nonreductionist view—defended by Samuel Scheffler and Niko Kolodny, among others—that special relationships are normatively fundamental entities which independently give rise to reasons of partiality. I argue that, properly formulated, a reductionist account of partiality can offer a better explanation of the diversity of reasonable partiality than nonreductionism, while also answering common challenges posed by many nonreductionists.

This general discussion of partiality within personal relationships sets the stage for the second chapter, in which I argue that valuing a relationship with a work of art is in many ways similar to valuing a friendship. I first develop a framework for thinking about relationships with artworks, focusing on the example of Stanley Cavell’s writings on film. I argue that, like friendships, the value of such relationships with art can be explained by reference to a set of independent goods which such relationships instantiate, facilitate, and exemplify. I then argue that such relationships provide us with reasons to resist *trading up* to relationships with other artworks that offer us intrinsically better experiences—reasons similar in kind to the reasons one has not to abandon one’s

friends for those whose company is more entertaining. The upshot of my argument is that a popular Humean picture of artistic appreciation is mistaken. According to this view, most recently defended by Jerrold Levinson, our interaction with artworks should ideally be governed exclusively by considerations of *artistic value*—where artistic value is construed as consisting in the capacity to offer intrinsically valuable experiences to spectators. I argue that other factors besides such a capacity should play an equal if not greater role in determining which artworks one should prefer; chief among these factors is the history of one's interaction with the artwork.

Partiality to particular works of art can be explained and justified by reference to the significant historical relationships that individuals have with these works. This has implications for further topics in the philosophy of art, including our understanding of the nature of our engagement with, criticism of, and obligations to works of art. The final two chapters of the dissertation address two of these implications.

The third chapter brings my account of relationships with artworks to bear on the nature of art criticism. It is often maintained that art criticism, done properly, is impersonal and objective. On this picture, art critics engage in description and interpretation in order to provide reasons for accepting evaluative judgments of the work. A great deal of philosophical debate has focused on the question of whether the reasons proffered in art-critical discourse really do support objective artistic evaluations, especially given the difficulty of specifying general principles of evaluation for the arts. I argue that this approach misconstrues the function of description and interpretation in art criticism; rather than aiming to support a belief or judgment about value, I argue that instead such characterizations function to provide reasons *for action*. I argue that a focus on practical rather than epistemic reasons yields an understanding of criticism that better fits with our intuitions about the value of reading art criticism, and which makes room for a nuanced distinction between criticism that aims at universality and criticism that is resolutely personal. I conclude by arguing that personal criticism is valuable as art criticism: rather than offering us information about which artworks are impartially best, such criticism instead shows us what relationships with works of art can be—information which we readily apply to our own relationships with artworks.

The fourth chapter makes use of the analogy between friendships and relationships with artworks to address the issue of the moral value of art. Most contemporary discussions of the issue in the philosophy of art address the moral evaluation of the *intrinsic* qualities of the artwork: the major question occupying these discussions is whether or not a defective moral perspective constitutes an artistic flaw in the artwork. Most commentators shy away from the potential *effects* that engaging with artworks might have on particular individuals. I argue that this neglect is misguided, and argue that a framework for thinking about such effects is ready to hand: I draw on the vibrant debate concerning friendship and moral danger, and argue that in many respects the potential for moral danger in our relationships with artworks is quite similar. Like friendships, relationships with artworks can lead to changes in action and character, some of which may be morally valuable, whereas others may be morally problematic. These effects will depend largely on the identity of the individual and the features of their relationship with an artwork—and not only on the intrinsic qualities of the artwork itself. I close by arguing that there may even be reasons to value those particular relationships with artworks which lead to morally pernicious effects on character; such relationships might still be defended on aesthetic grounds.

I conclude with an attempt to situate partiality in the artistic domain within an ethical approach to partiality more broadly considered. Like other relationships of partiality, our relationships with works of art are *ethically* significant. Insofar as we take them to warrant particular actions, attitudes, and emotional responses, such relationships also make demands on what we ought to do, all things considered. But how significant are relationships with artworks, as compared to other relationships of partiality? I conclude by arguing that, at least for some individuals, relationships with artworks may legitimately be among the most significant ethical commitments in life.