

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

# The Significance of Relationships: Partiality and Individuality

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Each one of us has a set of significant relationships with particular individuals: persons with whom we share friendships or romantic partnerships; long-term projects to which we are devoted; communities to which we belong; ideals to which subscribe; artworks we love; and places we treasure. What's more, these relationships are personal; we each have such relationships with different sets of individuals. The central theme of my research is the nature and significance of these relationships in a number of ethical domains—including the moral, the aesthetic, and the social and political.

Why might these relationships be significant? Notice two general qualities of such relationships: First, they play a major role in shaping the contours of your life. They determine what you do and where you direct your attention. Reflecting on this aspect of these relationships leads to ethical questions about partiality. The fact that one's friend needs help will usually be a reason to help one's friend. But it is also true that we usually tend to treat reasons to help our friends as weightier than reasons to help strangers. More generally, we show greater concern for those particular individuals with whom we have existing relationships than we do for those to whom we do not. Can such partiality be justified?

The second general quality of your relationships is the fact that they seem to contribute to your identity. Part of what makes you *you*—and not someone else—is the set of relationships that you in particular have. There is almost certainly no one in the world who has exactly the same set of such relationships that you do. This raises a number of questions. First, what is the relationship between your significant relationships and your identity? Is there some significant sense in which they play a role in constituting your self, or your character? Second, to what extent is such a phenomenon ethically significant? Do some kinds of relationships lead to morally dangerous developments in your character? Might others be manifestations of an aesthetically valuable taste or style?

My dissertation, *Art, Value, and Relationships of Partiality*, begins by answering a number of these questions at the general level. I first provide a general account of reasonable partiality, according to which being partial to some particular individual is warranted insofar as one's relationship with that individual realizes a set of independent values. For example, partiality to one's friend would be warranted in the case that it realizes certain more fundamental moral and aesthetic values. As a form of reductionism about the value of relationships, my view prompts investigation at the particular rather than the general level: what more fundamental values *do* our significant relationships realize, and how do they do so? It is likely that the answer will vary along with the type of relationship in question; this sets the stage for looking more carefully at individual kinds of relationships.

In the remainder of the dissertation, I focus on applying this general approach to a set of such relationships that hasn't received a great deal of philosophical attention—namely, the class of significant relationships with works of art. In particular, I argue that relationships with artworks can function as the causal mechanisms whereby we acquire new interests, new commitments, and ultimately a new practical identity. This grounds two claims about the value of such relationships: First, I argue that some of these changes may be morally significant, insofar as they contribute to the development of morally salient aspects of character. Consider, for example, claims about the contributions that fiction can make to our moral understanding, as well as claims about the damaging nature of engaging with pornography. My dissertation presents a framework for evaluating the effects

of such relationships with such artworks on our practical identity. Second, I argue that such relationships function as a means of expressing an individual sensibility or taste; they are thereby means of realizing aesthetic values of distinctiveness of character—which seem to me to be neglected virtues within traditional ethical theory. This approach to thinking about artworks has major implications for the philosophy of art, several of which I examine in my dissertation: in particular, I develop a theory of art criticism and an account of the moral value of art that takes as its starting point a close attention to the importance of such relationships with artworks.

In my future research, I will extend the approach developed within the dissertation to other kinds of significant relationships, with an eye towards the particular nature of each and the values that each realizes. Of particular interest to me is friendship. My dissertation relies on an analogical approach; I suggest that relationships with works of art are in many ways similar to friendships. In future work, I will follow this analogy in the opposite direction: what might a focus on relationships with artworks teach us about friendship? I will focus on three aspects of friendship: First, how should we characterize the attitude of love that friends have towards one another? Is love a form of valuing? If so, what is its object, and is it reason responsive? There is a vibrant literature around this debate, but it is fundamentally confused insofar as it fails to distinguish between multiple historical ideals of love within friendship. Like our engagement with the arts, our interaction with our friends has changed and adapted over time to accommodate changing social needs. Through historical investigation of these ideals, I aim to make both the object of inquiry as well as the status of claims about “love” clearer. The second area of interest concerns the status of the activities that friends engage in together. I explore the Aristotelian idea that friends engage in a shared life. I will expand on this suggestion, focusing on the idea that friends adopt joint projects, which they pursue as a kind of plural agent. Finally, I am interested in the particular values that friendships realize. In a paper in progress, I approach this topic historically: by examining differing ideas of the value of friendship in Aristotle and Nietzsche, I suggest that friendships realize values closely associated with human flourishing—although these may vary according to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of individuals at particular times. In particular, I hope to defend the claim that friendships—like relationships with works of art—can play a role in contributing to one’s distinctiveness as an individual. This aspect of friendship, which Nietzsche emphasized, is unfairly neglected in contemporary accounts of the value of friendship.

Beyond friendship, I am interested in exploring several other kinds of significant relationships. These include our commitments to personal projects, to communities, and to ideals. One particular set of relationships that I am especially interested in researching are our relationships with particular foods. Many of the same considerations of partiality seem to apply to particular foods as much as they do to personal relationships and relationships with art; our relationships with particular foods play an important role in shaping our practical identities. This may have implications for the ethics of eating: to what extent might such considerations count in favor of eating foods that are unsustainable, or which might involve causing cruelty to animals? I have already begun to work through some of these issues in teaching an undergraduate seminar on the philosophy of food, and hope to investigate these questions in future research.

The central focus of my research—the significance of relationships—leads me to engage seriously with a broad set of philosophical sub-disciplines: My research on partiality and practical identity is firmly grounded in normative ethical theory; my focus on relationships with artworks reflects my substantial background in philosophical aesthetics; my inquiry into friendship draws heavily on the history of philosophy; and my interest in commitments to particular foods has points of contact with issues in bioethics and environmental ethics. In the long term, I see my research as expanding outward from its central focus to address topics in each of these sub-disciplines in a systematic way.