

Citizenship as a Partial Relationship: A Thesis Proposal

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In the realm of moral theory, there is a debate between those who maintain that strict impartiality is necessary for morality and those who argue that some level of partiality is permissible in a moral theory. There are countless situations in which people confer partiality on those they care about or associate with most. Partiality can be seen on very personal levels as well as on larger social levels. For instance, most people are likely to favor their own family members over strangers. You might buy your mother flowers, for example, to cheer her up after a bad day instead of sending that money to famine relief efforts abroad. Partiality is, however, also very present on a more structural level. For example, granting one group the privileges that accompany a classification of citizen while denying another group those privileges involves a partial consideration for the wellbeing of one group over another. The partiality supporter must give an account of the grounds that justify partiality in order to determine what kinds of relationships warrant partiality.

The main tension in common thought is between the commitment to equality and the idea that some relationships should be given more weight in moral considerations. Many people would argue that people should be treated equally, and yet we live in a social structure that gives partial consideration based on myriad classifications that are both deeply personal and broadly institutional. This partial consideration that is so present goes unquestioned by most people. The systems in place seem natural, and are thus taken for granted. Examining the philosophical question of permissible partiality, then, can have wide implications by questioning the seemingly most natural practices we have.

My aim in this honors thesis is to discuss this tension between equality and partiality on a structural level in today's society. Specifically, I ask whether the relationship of "fellow citizen" constitutes a morally permissible grounds for partiality. In the current social structure, citizens of a country are given benefits by virtue of their classification as citizen, while non-citizens are denied these benefits. The issue extends beyond the bestowal of benefits, however. In many cases, the fact that an individual is not a citizen of a certain country means that he or she is denied rights, actively disadvantaged, and often put in danger (either by being deported back to dangerous situations or because of structural disadvantages against non-citizens that prevent them from seeking assistance, etc.). By virtue of a classification as "citizen," certain individuals are treated differently than others. Whether this differential treatment is morally allowable depends on a framework of permissible partiality.

In answering the main question asked in this project, I will discuss three other subsidiary questions. First, what grounds permissible partiality? Second, what does it mean to be a citizen of a country? Finally, does the answer to the second question fulfill the requirements established by the answer to the first question? I will thus explore whether there is a conception of citizenship that can ground partiality.

I will first defend a moral framework that allows for partiality. In establishing this framework, I will discuss the arguments of many prominent philosophers who have written on the issue. As Thomas Nagel notes in the introduction to *Equality and Partiality*, there is a conflict between a personal and an impersonal point of view, or "reconciling the standpoint of the collectivity with the standpoint of the individual".¹ It is essential, he says, that these two standpoints can be reconciled within a moral framework. I will discuss the importance of

¹ Nagel, Thomas. *Equality and Partiality*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. (p. 3) Print.

acknowledging and allowing for a reference to an individual, or personal, point of view in moral theory, as explained by philosophers like Nagel, Samuel Scheffler, and Bernard Williams among others.² In reviewing arguments for allowing partiality in morality found in the literature, I hope to construct a convincing explanation for how the tension between equality and partiality can be syncretized.

Once I have discussed the arguments defending partiality, I will turn to the question of on what grounds partiality is permissible. Without limits on partiality, the implications can be incredibly harmful. As James Rachels points out, partiality can involve “dividing people into groups and saying that the interests of some groups count for more than the interests of other groups.”³ This can function as a justification for ideologies of racism, xenophobia, and harmful “othering.” The aim, however, is to find a *permissible* level of partiality.

Suggestions for what grounds partiality have been made in the literature. Some accounts appeal to an “agent-centered prerogative,” where the agent’s own interests provide reason for partiality.⁴ Another suggestion broadens this to a system of “agent-centered permission,” where the interests of those important to the agent, rather than only the interests of the agent herself, are also given greater moral consideration.⁵ A third suggestion, given by Bernard Williams, is that anything within an agent’s ‘S’—what she “care[s] about, prefer[s], or value[s]”—is given partial moral consideration.⁶ A final suggestion given by Sarah Stroud is that partial moral consideration

² For instance: Samuel Scheffler’s “Morality and Reasonable Partiality” and Bernard Williams’s *Moral Luck*.

³ Rachels, James. “Ethical Egoism.” *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. By Russ Shafer-Landau. 2nd ed. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 199. Print.

⁴ Stroud, Sarah. “Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency.” *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World*. By Brian Feltham and John Cottingham. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010, P. 137. Print.

⁵ Ibid, p. 138.

⁶ Ibid, p. 139.

be based on the “shared projects” of agents, which includes their shared goals and aims.⁷ I will consider these, as well as other, suggestions for acceptable grounds for partiality.

After discussing the suggestions for the grounds for partiality, I will turn to the question of what it means to be a citizen of a country. This question aims to identify what kind of relationship “fellow citizen” is and what it is based on. Answers to this question can be found in the work of Michael Walzer and John Rawls.⁸ In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer suggests that citizenship can be seen as a relationship of membership, but that this membership can be analogous to belonging to a neighborhood, a club, or a family.⁹ Some argue that citizenship is based on a shared history or culture. Others appeal to a shared experience of citizenship. Still others conceive of citizenship as based on a shared project to protect the values that a certain country stands for.

All of these conceptions of citizenship attempt to link a group of people together. The question that concerns me in this project is whether these linking factors are sufficient to justify partiality, and I will turn to this question next. Based on my initial research for this proposal, I find the shared projects view the most promising. Frameworks that appeal to the individual’s ‘S’, preferences, or network may work to ground individual partiality, but there is too much variation among a group of citizens to satisfactorily use these suggestions to justify citizenship-based partiality. The projects view, however, appeals to a broader shared characteristic. I also think a case can be made that this view is the most inclusive because people can cultivate a shared project without sharing racial or ethnic characteristics. Appeals to a shared ethnic or racial background frequently lead unacceptably to racist and xenophobic exclusion.

⁷ Ibid, p. 141.

⁸ For instance: Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* and John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*

⁹ Walzer, Michael. “Membership.” *Spheres of Justice*. New York: Basic, 1983. 31-63. Print.

I would also like to explore the idea of extending projects to include global projects, which would involve expanding the way that citizenship is defined. I think this could be a promising way to reconcile the idea of citizenship and partiality with the importance of equality. I will argue that a much more inclusive system of citizenship can be maintained on a partial moral theory, which will allow me to avoid an unacceptably revisionist solution. I do, however, suggest that the dominant conceptions of citizenship should be scrutinized carefully using an ethical framework.

In the process of researching and writing this honors thesis, I hope to show the complexity of the issues of partiality and citizenship, and the importance of investigating the interrelationship of the two issues. The institution of the nation-state is taken for granted, but it is becoming very clear in today's political debates that there are many questions about what it means to be a citizen and the morality of borders. In analyzing the arguments related to permissible partiality and the justifications for citizenship relationships as worthy of partiality, I hope to delve into the philosophical issues that arise when the question is deconstructed to its base assumptions. The question of what it means to be a citizen in today's global structure is incredibly important to understand fully, and my hope is to learn as much as I can about these issues.

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