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Review of "Partiality"

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I would like to say at the outset that I am partial to Simon Keller’s *Partiality*, but this would necessitate an explanation of my reasons that would threaten to become as complex as the book itself.

So, instead, I will have to adopt the impartialist stance that a good reviewer should take on the subject of a book review.

To be clear, there is no special relationship between Keller and myself, no knowledge of each other’s existence—just my encounter with the book he has written.

The book is his attempt to consider the ethics of partiality in its own right, not as a problem with impartialist moral theories. In other words, while impartialist moral theories (“our most influential theories of morality”) regard the ethics of partiality as a problem—a deficiency—Keller argues that “at least at face value” it appears to be “a distinctive and significant part of our ethical lives” (vii).

Impartialist theories, therefore, are thought to provide the underpinning, the ethical foundation of the special relationships that lead us to be partial to some people more than others. But “as many philosophers have noticed,” it seems unlikely that impartialist theories “can do justice to the ethics of partiality” (vii).

Keller is ambitious in his aims, by implication—if he can demonstrate that there is something that can be independently identified as “the ethics of par-
tiality,” in whatever circumstance, then he has undermined the foundations of impartialist ethics as a whole.

He might also legitimate “the ethics of partiality” as a field for further exploration in its own right, not merely as a subset of impartialist moral theory.

Keller divides the approaches to the ethics of partiality into three groups: the projects view, the relationships view, and the individuals view (viii). From the outset, he identifies his preference for the individuals view of partiality, noting that to provide support for the idea that ethics “is ultimately about the good of individuals” is one of his goals. By doing this, it is not necessary to assume that “other types of entities, like relationships,” have any basic ethical significance (ix).

To hit the high points of the argument, Keller considers whether projects, relationships or individuals best illustrate how special treatment might be extrapolated from one circumstance into a more general characteristic of how we make decisions.

The option for the ethics of partiality is that we treat people differently because this will lead to a better or more desirable outcome in whatever activity or project we are involved. As partners working toward a particular goal, consequentialist logic applies, in that we will have a better outcome if we act this way instead of another.

Similarly, looking at partiality in terms of relationships, we treat people differently because we are in a relationship with them—a kind of Kantian obligation or duty we therefore have, such as to our children or to some family member. So we act in certain ways because we are a parent and this is our child, we are a son or daughter and these are our parents, and so on.

When it comes to individuals, however, Keller notes that special status results from the inherent value we find in the person. Partiality emerges from the recognition and appreciation of that value, not what they can do for us or because of the externalities of some relationship.

The book is clearly and evenly written, using recurrent examples (like attitudes to one’s child) to illuminate different aspects of the problem and thus making it accessible to the general reader. While the logic at times might seem circuitous, he carefully signposts each step along the way and even though the road twists and turns, he leaves an appropriate trail of bread crumbs for readers to follow if they happen to miss the signs.

I do not wish to replicate his argument by virtue of an attempt at synopsis, however. Instead, I want to go straight for the core of it and challenge the conceptualization of his approach as a whole. While the reader is led along very carefully throughout the book, the trail of crumbs effectively stops at a clearing in the middle of the forest, with no obvious path forward. Keller offers a small smorgasbord of possibilities at the end of the book, but this outcome does not bear the weight of the expectations he has created from the start.
All of these expectations issue in the conclusion that we treat some people special because, to us, they are. In effect, having set out to provide a rational, methodical demonstration, Keller ends up with what is in effect an intuitive response to his initial question (even though he claims it is not).

Once people become special for whatever reason and in whatever circumstance, their specialness legitimates different treatment than we would offer, for reasons, to people who are not.

The emphasis on inherent value or values that inhere in the individual, the relationship or the project, is then offered as the reasons for partiality.

But it is not a reason. It is fundamentally indemonstrable—intuitional and not rational. The effort to uncover reasons for partiality in effect demonstrates that there are none able to be extrapolated from individual situations. We are partial to some people because we are.

Why do we perceive the inherent value in one individual more than others? Does that value we perceive need to be reciprocated in some respect, or is stalking one variant of the ethics of partiality, where value is appreciated by one party and not the other?

I said at the outset I was partial to Keller’s book, not because in the end I feel he has made a convincing case for the ethics of partiality residing in the individuals view, as he puts it, but because I want him to be right.

I have long thought that impartiality in ethics was a sham, an artifice concocted to disguise the reality that once moral theory is acted upon, all of the human elements in the actors—whether agents or patients—are irretrievably part of the situation. Impartiality thus becomes a disguise for other less noble motivations, for the view from 30,000 feet that leads us to consider all humans of equal value does not survive for long on the ground. Humans are inevitably partial creatures; only the artifice that results from denying the core of our humanity allows us to pretend otherwise for a little while.

The individuals view of partiality Keller champions, however tentative and incomplete his quest might seem by the end of the book, thus speaks to our fundamental experience of other people. Though it may be rooted in intuition, the realization that another person matters “for her own sake” is ultimately experiential—and, as Keller concludes, “it would take quite some argument to show that the experience rests on an illusion” (156).

I hope Keller continues to work on what he calls “the phenomenology of partiality”—however elusive it might be and however tentative his conclusions in this particular book, he is onto something important.