Personal Relationships in Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

This chapter argues that virtue ethics offers a promising framework for understanding the nature and value of personal relationships. Unlike consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethics prioritizes the agent's own perspective, focusing on human flourishing, the importance of emotional life, and the development of moral character. In particular, I argue that, especially when supplemented by the idea of relational virtues—such as filial piety and the virtue of friendship—virtue ethics offers a plausible account that captures the unique ethical significance of personal relationships. Additionally, I argue, the idea of virtuous relational activity helps justify partiality towards one's intimates from a virtue-ethical perspective. I conclude by suggesting how virtue-ethical approach, supplemented by the idea of relational virtue, can further enrich our understanding of ethics in personal relationships. Overall, this chapter aims not only to survey existing approaches but also to structure and extend the emerging virtue-ethical discourse on the normativity of personal relationships.

Keywords: Virtue ethics; Personal relationships; Relational virtue; Friendship; Partiality; Differentiated virtue

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Philosophers have long attempted to find the right spot for personal relationships in ethics. Consequentialists and deontologists have tried to reconcile the value of these relationships with their respective commitments to impartiality. However, both have been criticized for their difficulties in capturing the normative significance of personal relationships.[1]Consequentialism, particularly utilitarianism, struggles with the tension between maximizing overall outcomes and the non-fungible nature of personal relationships.[2] Deontology, particularly the Kantian version, struggles with its emphasis on universal moral principles and the primacy of duty and often downplays the particularistic demands of personal relationships and the importance of appropriate emotional attitudes.[3] These limitations

[1] See, e.g., Blum (1980), Williams (1981), Wolf (1982), Annas (1984), Sherman (1987), Kapur (1991), Jeske (1997), Cottingham (1998), Oakley & Cocking (2001),

[2] For recent attempts to defend consequentialism against such criticisms, see, for example, Railton (1984), Mason (1998), Conee (2001), Card (2004), Upton (2008), Woodcock (2010), and Maquire (2017). See also chapter 12 in this volume.

[3] These are some of typical challenges against deontology, especially Kantian ethics. For recent attempts to defend Kantian deontology against such criticism, see, for example, Herman (1983, 1991, 2008), Baron (1988, 1991), Velleman (1999), Bramer (2010). See also chapter 13 in this volume.

motivate the search for an alternative framework—one that takes the particularity, emotional depth, and co-constitutive nature of personal relationships more seriously.

This chapter argues that virtue ethics offers a promising framework for understanding the nature and ethical value of personal relationships.[4] Unlike consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethics prioritizes the agent's own perspective, focusing on human flourishing, the importance of emotional life, and the development of moral character. In particular, I argue that, especially when supplemented by the idea of relational virtues—such as filial piety and the virtue of friendship—virtue ethics offers a plausible account that captures the unique ethical significance of personal relationships. Additionally, I argue, the idea of virtuous relational activity helps justify partiality towards one's intimates from a virtue-ethical perspective. I conclude by suggesting how the virtue-ethical approach, supplemented by the idea of relational virtue, can further enrich our understanding of ethics in personal relationships. Overall, this chapter aims not only to survey existing approaches but also to structure and extend the emerging virtue-ethical discourse on the normativity of personal relationships.

I. The Advantages of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics has several advantages over its rivals—consequentialism and deontology—in making sense of the normativity of personal relationships. Let me introduce

[4] While there are various versions of virtue ethics, here I focus mainly on the (neo-)Aristotelian version, the prevailing view in the contemporary literature.

some key aspects of virtue ethics that make it more holistic, context-sensitive, and psychologically realistic than its rivals.

First, virtue ethics starts from the *first-person*, "autocentric" perspective, asking how *I*, as a particular being embedded in relationships, should live well (Cottingham 1998). Unlike theories that begin with impartial principles or utility-maximizing calculations, virtue ethics starts from the perspective of the agent and their concrete, lived relationships. This first-personal, relationally attuned starting point allows virtue ethics to treat personal relationships as paradigmatic sites of ethical activity. Virtue ethics captures agent-relative goods—goods that are normatively significant because they are meaningfully tied to the agent's own life and commitments (Dreier 1993; Oakley 1996; Stocker 1992). It understands that personal relationships like friendship are valued as *mine*—rooted in shared histories, emotional bonds, and mutual recognition.

Unlike consequentialist or deontological theories, which often demand impartial abstraction, virtue ethics affirms that personal relationships have normative significance *because* of their particularity. It treats such relationships as central to ethical life itself. By grounding moral value in the lived experiences and emotional bonds of particular individuals, virtue ethics captures the deep normative pull of the relationships that help constitute who we are. It recognizes that our ethical lives are shaped *through* them—and that partiality in intimate relationships is a genuine expression of moral excellence on its own.

Relatedly, virtue ethics regards personal relationships like family relationships and friendship as themselves an *intrinsic* good that constitutes human flourishing (Annas 1993; Cooper 1980; Hursthouse 1999; Oakley & Cocking 2001). It plausibly explains how and why they are ethically central in a distinctive way. Virtue ethics sees them as constitutive of moral character and flourishing itself. On this view, relationships like friendship and family life are

among the primary contexts in which virtues are formed, exercised, and realized. For Aristotle, friendship is a central arena of ethical activity, where character is refined through shared life and mutual recognition (Aristotle 1999). Nancy Sherman deepens this insight by arguing that friendship "extends the self": in genuinely virtuous relationships, one's own flourishing comes to include the well-being of others—as part of what it means to live excellently (Sherman 1987). Virtue ethics thus treats personal relationships as sites where virtues are paradigmatically expressed.

Virtue ethics also has an advantage in dealing with appropriate attitudes in personal relationships because it emphasizes the non-instrumental value of appropriate *inner states* such as emotions and motives (Bommarito 2017). This is particularly important in personal relationships, where the quality of a person's attitudes—such as affection, loyalty, and gratitude—often determines whether the given relationship is a good one. What makes a good friend is partly constituted by special care and concern for one's friend. Consider Michael Stocker's famous example of visiting a friend in hospital (Stocker 1976). The friend's motivation in Stocker's example seems inappropriate because his impartial benevolence appears to lack the special concern we expect from a good friend. Virtue ethics is well equipped to make sense of this intuition. It values not just doing the right thing but doing it *for the right reasons and from the right inner state*. The moral appropriateness of one's inner life is important part of what makes someone a good friend, sibling, or partner in the first place.

In virtue ethics, emotions and motives are central constituents of what it means to live well. While this emphasis is not unique to virtue ethics in the sense of acknowledging emotions as ethically relevant, it is distinctive in treating emotional dispositions as cultivated traits of character that are themselves objects of ethical evaluation. As Nancy Sherman argues, while we cannot always control our immediate emotional responses, we are responsible for shaping

the emotional patterns and sensitivities that guide our moral lives, at least to some degree (Sherman 1999, 2005). This long-term cultivation of emotion and motivation is part of the work of becoming virtuous—which is part of the moral ideal itself. Action-centered theories like consequentialism and deontology tend to treat emotions and motives instrumentally, as ethically relevant only insofar as they lead to right actions or desirable consequences. Virtue ethics, by contrast, holds that the appropriateness of one's emotional attitudes toward others is itself an essential measure of moral excellence.

Moreover, virtue ethics can offer a distinctive account of how personal relationships contribute to moral development as normatively significant arenas in which character is actively shaped and co-constructed. Virtue ethics sees them as sites in which virtues are cultivated through shared experience, emotional attunement, and mutual learning. As Kristjánsson and Volbrecht argue, family relationships and friendships are dynamic projects in which individuals influence each other's character over time (Kristjánsson 2020, 2022; Volbrecht 1990). Aristotle's concept of virtue friendship—friendship between morally excellent individuals—already emphasizes the reciprocal role of friends in fostering self-knowledge and ethical refinement (Aristotle 1999). But Kristjánsson takes this even further, arguing that even imperfect friendships between non-ideal agents can function as moral apprenticeships, offering opportunities for growth, correction, and relational self-understanding (Kristjánsson 2022 Ch. 5). This developmental view of relationships is not only psychologically realistic but ethically powerful: it highlights how the practice of being a good friend, child, or parent is a means through which virtue is formed. In this way, virtue ethics integrates moral development and relational life in a way that is not easily captured by more outcome- or principle-oriented approaches.

Another distinctive strength of virtue ethics lies in its emphasis on practical wisdom

(*phronesis*), which can play a central role especially in navigating the moral complexity of personal relationships. Virtue ethics recognizes that good moral judgment requires sensitivity to the particular context, character, and relationship-specific dynamics. Lives are generally complicated; but personal relationships, in particular, often present morally charged situations that are too nuanced, emotionally entangled, or historically layered to be resolved by general rules. As Blustein aptly puts it, "What is required of intimates above all is attentiveness to the particularities of context, relationship, and personality, and this cannot be captured by rules or principles" (Blustein, 1999 p. 476). Practical wisdom, as emphasized in virtue ethics, enables agents to discern what matters most in specific circumstances. What loyalty demands in one friendship may differ from what it demands in another; what respect calls for in a parent-child relationship may shift over time depending on history and emotional climate. This emphasis on discernment, guided by character and emotional attunement, allows virtue ethics to account for the moral demands of intimate life as central sites for the exercise of ethical judgment.

II. Limitations of Traditional Virtue Ethics

As we have seen, virtue ethics has several advantages in explaining the normative significance of personal relationships. However, traditional virtue ethics still faces some challenges. First, it lacks the notion of virtues specific to personal relationships. It often focuses on general virtues—such as honesty, courage, and justice—without sufficiently addressing the distinctive normative demands of specific relationships. It describes virtues in general terms but does not distinguish relationship-specific virtues that apply to family, friendship, or romantic partnerships. Blustein aptly points out:

> People who possess the virtues of love or friendship respect their intimates as individuals and do not overlook, minimize, or undercut personal autonomy, and their judgments of autonomy do not abstract from the particular circumstances and history of the relationship or the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the individuals involved. (Blustein 1999: 483)

While Aristotle hints on a virtue specific to personal relationships when he said, friendship (*philia*) "is a virtue; or it involves virtue" (Aristotle 1999: 1155a4), he does not adequately explain what friendship as a virtue would be like. Aristotle mentions that the virtuousness of each person makes the friendship among them complete, thus showing the value of a desirable form of friendship, but he does not go far enough to analyze what it takes to be a good friend. What is required to be a good friend is not the same as what is required to be a good person.

Moreover, traditional virtue ethics, while recognizing the importance of personal relationships, has yet to adequately explain the moral legitimacy of partiality. Impartialist moral theories see partiality as morally problematic, and virtue ethics has not fully countered this challenge. It is true that virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of personal relationships as necessary for one's own flourishing and a place for developing one's moral character. However, it needs to justify partiality towards one's family and friends in a way that is not excessively self-centered.[5]

[5] For debate about whether virtue ethics is too self-centered and thus self-effacing—even more so than its rivals—, see, for example, Keller (2007), Annas (2008), Martinez (2011), Pettigrove (2011), Clark (2016),

There have been a few attempts to address the limitations of traditional virtue ethics with respect to the normativity of personal relationships. Christine Swanton's idea of differentiated virtue is one such attempt (Swanton 2016, 2021). Differentiated virtue, according to Swanton, refers to a specification of "basic" virtues—like honesty, generosity, or courage—into more context-sensitive forms that are appropriate to particular roles. In Swanton's view, virtue ethics need not remain abstracted from the normative significance of roles and relationships. Instead, virtues must be *differentiated* or *contoured* to fit the particular social and institutional contexts in which people act. Differentiated virtues, according to her, are shaped by the specific functions, expectations, and moral demands of roles we occupy in our lives, including personal roles such as being a friend, sibling, parent, or spouse. For example, while caring (see chapter 27 in this volume) is a basic virtue, the way one expresses care *qua* parent is distinct from how one ought to express it *qua* human being.

Importantly, Swanton argues that differentiated virtue remains anchored in basic virtue and is subject to its constraints. That is, the particular demands of a role or relationship do not override basic morality in a way that licenses vice or wrongdoing. Instead, the proper function of differentiated virtue is to articulate how general moral ideals are lived out within the real, complex roles we take up. Thus, for example, a virtuous parent does not simply express generic care or fairness but does so in a way that reflects the narrative particularities of given individual's life.

Swanton's concept of differentiated virtue provides an important innovation in virtue ethics by adapting basic virtues to role-specific contexts. However, it still faces limitations in explaining the normativity of personal relationships, mainly because her framework

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and Woodcock (2022).

presupposes that the moral demands of relationships are primarily functions of one's role within a pre-defined institutional or social structure. As Hugh LaFollette rightly emphasizes, a relationship is "personal inasmuch as each person relates to the other as a unique individual" and "the other does not merely fill a *role* or satisfy a *need*" (LaFollette, 1996, p. 4; emphasis added).

Differentiated virtues adapt basic virtues to role-specific contexts. Even when Swanton attempts to "differentiate" virtues to fit specific roles (e.g., loyalty *qua* defense lawyer, caring *qua* teacher), these differentiations often depend on externally imposed institutional ends rather than on the internal goods of unique personal relationships. Thus, Swanton's idea of differentiated virtue, which seems to be shaped by the telos of institutional roles, risks reducing relationships to their structural or functional dimensions. While it might be well-suited for professional or institutional contexts where roles like 'doctor,' 'lawyer,' or 'manager' come with relatively stable, teleologically defined expectations, personal relationships, especially those within families or friendships, cannot be so readily captured. That is, Swanton's view struggles to explain why, say, a particular *friend* matters—why this person is irreplaceable, or why we remain emotionally invested in ways that go beyond what a generalized role-based model would predict. Their normativity is not merely institutional but deeply *interpersonal*—emerging from the ongoing co-authorship of a life together.

For example, in a doctor–patient relationship, the normative expectations are largely determined by the institutionally grounded function of 'doctorship': to promote the patient's health. The character of this relationship remains relatively stable regardless of the doctor's narrative particularities or the personal history shared with the patient. In contrast, personal relationships like those between parents and children or close friends evolve over time and are shaped by their shared history and mutual responsiveness. The normative demands in such

relationships cannot be fully captured by role labels like ‘parent’ or ‘friend’ alone, since being a good parent or a good friend is not simply a matter of performing certain generic roles. Rather, it involves ongoing revisions and adjustments in how best to respond to the needs and wants of *this* parent, *this* child or *this* friend, shaped by one’s personal relationship based on shared history and mutual responsiveness. This is why the norms of personal relationships resist full explanation in terms of differentiated forms of more basic virtues.

III. Relational Virtue

An alternative to the idea of differentiated virtue is that of *relational virtue*, which attempts to capture the normative significance of personal relationships in virtue ethics by emphasizing the relationship-specific virtues necessary for desirable version of intimate relationships (Um 2021b). A relational virtue is a virtue required for an individual to be an excellent participant in a given kind of intimate relationship—such as filial piety in the parent–child relationship, parental virtue, or the virtue of friendship (Um 2021b: 96). Unlike general virtues such as honesty or benevolence, which apply broadly to people in general, relational virtues are indexed to particular relationships and to particular individuals within those relationships. One cannot be a filial child or a good friend to just anyone; these virtues are inherently relational and presuppose a meaningful ongoing bond with the relevant other.

This account marks an important departure from traditional Aristotelian frameworks by rejecting the idea that all virtues are generalizable and instead insisting that certain virtues are intelligible only within the context of a specific relationship. The relational virtue approach highlights how these virtues are not simply context-sensitive instantiations of general virtues

but are distinct excellences cultivated and exercised only within the given intimate relationship. For example, filial piety involves more than general respect or care; it entails a distinctive emotionally and normatively charged responsiveness to one's parent as one's parent. This responsiveness is shaped not just by the social role of parent, but by the relational history and personal significance of the particular parent–child bond. Similarly, the virtue of friendship demands not only general kindness but particularized care and concern for the friend in question.

There are several distinctive merits to the concept of relational virtue in explaining the normative significance of personal relationships. First, it captures the special emotional and motivational profiles that distinguish our treatment of intimates from that of people in general. Relational virtues are not simply instances of general virtues applied in specific contexts but are distinct in kind. For example, filial piety involves attitudes and motivations—like gratitude for being and special kind of love—that are not reducible to general care or justice (Um 2020, 2024). A person who acts kindly toward a friend solely out of generalized benevolence or love for humanity lacks something normatively significant as a friend: a special kind of attitude toward one's friend, with whom one shares a history, emotional bonds, and mutual recognition. Likewise, a filial child does not merely fulfill a duty to care for their parents but acts out of special attitudes that reflect the personal significance of the relationship. Such examples suggest how virtue ethics, with the idea of relational virtue, can ethically affirm personal partiality without undermining moral seriousness.

Second, relational virtues can explain the mutual dependency of flourishing within personal relationships. In contrast to general virtues like honesty or generosity, which can be cultivated and exercised independently, relational virtues depend on the co-participation of the other party in the relationship. An ideal friendship is not simply two individually virtuous

persons interacting with each other; it is a relationship grounded in a special kind of mutual responsiveness.[6] Similarly, the full realization of filial piety presupposes some measure of parental virtue. When relationships are marked by asymmetry—such as a child striving to be filial toward abusive parents—the relational ideal breaks down. This framework helps virtue ethics account for the fragility of relational flourishing: the prospect of living well in relationships is vulnerable to the character and actions of the other party.

Third, relational virtue improves upon role-based approaches like the differentiated virtue view—which begins from socially defined roles and adapts general virtues accordingly. The relational virtue approach emphasizes the actual relational history and the normative quality of the interaction between particular individuals. It focuses not on whether someone occupies the *role* of child or friend, but whether the interaction between particular individuals is marked by special kinds of care, responsiveness, and shared ethical engagement. On this view, the demand to cultivate a virtue like filial piety does not arise automatically from occupying the role of child, but from being this child in relation to this parent—where the appropriateness and shape of the virtue depend on the shared history and quality of mutual responsiveness that constitute the relationship. This makes relational virtue context-sensitive without being relativistic, and responsive to the moral contours of lived relationships.

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[6] Of course, an individually vicious person would also be unlikely to have a virtuous person as a friend. However, I believe being a good friend does not require one to be a fully virtuous person as an individual; rather, what is necessary for the virtue of friendship is what Gopal Sreenivasan calls *minimal moral decency*, which indicates "a certain minimum standard of general moral performance before any specific disposition of [the agent] is dignified with the title of 'virtue'" (Sreenivasan 2009).

In these ways, virtue ethics supplemented by the idea of relational virtue bids fair to capture the particularity, specialness, and dependency involved in personal relationships. It illustrates how ethical value is not merely the product of individual character traits but is often co-authored in relationships marked by shared activity, emotional attunement, and mutual responsiveness. As a supplement to traditional virtue ethics, the idea of relational virtue offers a richer and more psychologically realistic framework for understanding how we ought to live with and for those who are near and dear to us.

The idea of relational virtue also help us to explain why we are often permitted to and sometimes ought to prioritize our intimates and why such treatment can be ethically admirable (See the chapters by Jollimore and White in this volume.).[7] Such partiality is central to sustaining, deepening, and repairing intimate relationships—dynamic forms of interaction that constitute human flourishing.

This relationally embedded approach can ground a distinctive virtue-ethical account of the normativity of partiality. This account, which can be called the *relational activity view*, holds that the moral significance of personal relationships is best understood through the intrinsic value of virtuous activities performed within those relationships (Um 2021a). The relational activity view explains partiality by focusing on the shared activities—like caregiving, conversation, gift-giving, and mutual support—that express relational virtues such as friendship, filial piety, or parental care.

According to the relational activity view, the value of the relationship emerges from

[7] See Keller (2013), Langer (2002), and Jeske (2024) for debates on the ethics of partiality, as well as chapter 30 in this volume.

and is sustained by the quality of the shared activity—not the other way around. That is, this view explains partiality through the value of the *virtuous relational activities* between people in a specific relationship, thus capturing the lived moral reality of intimacy. A parent–child relationship marked by neglect or cruelty may not generate reasons for filial care, while a loving and responsive relationship does.

On this view, relational activities are not merely instrumental to flourishing—they *constitute* it. Activities like listening with care to a friend's story, preparing a meal for an aging parent, or writing a birthday letter to a child are not just context-specific expressions of general virtues. They are instances of relational virtue in action, and their value arises from their being embedded in particular relationships.

Moreover, relational activities transform the value of what is exchanged within them. A massage or a meal given by a stranger and one given by a loved one may be materially identical, but they differ in value. The same act acquires a different ethical value when performed as an expression of specialized love and concern. The value of a gift from a parent to a child, or of a friend's hospital visit, is not reducible to the utility of the act itself or to general benevolence. These goods are specialized by the relationship—they carry the emotional and ethical meanings embedded in the relational history and attitudes of the giver.

Finally, this view helps us understand the *reflexive structure* of concern in desirable intimate relationships. In healthy relationships, one would take the good of one's intimate as *part of one's own good*. My spouse is not only glad to be cared for by me, but is glad that I *want to* do so. I would say, "Helping you to be happier helps me to be happier!" This mutual reinforcement of care, concern, and shared meaning makes relational activity an ethically rich site of human flourishing.

In sum, the relational activity view, grounded in the concept of relational virtue,

provides a virtue-ethical solution to the puzzle of partiality. It captures the emotional depth, moral specificity, and agent-relative significance of personal relationships, while avoiding the pitfalls of other accounts that are based on the idea of duty or role.

IV. Objections and Replies

While the relational virtue approach offers a plausible framework for understanding partiality and the normative significance of personal relationships, it is not without its own challenges. Below are some possible objections that might be leveled against the view.

One objection is that the quality of being a good intimate (e.g., someone's child or friend) cannot be a virtue. For example, Simon Keller argues that unlike standard virtues such as honesty or courage, which are consistent and predictive traits of character, the quality of being a good friend is too context-sensitive, relationally particular, and diverse to qualify as a stable virtue (Keller 2022). Being a good friend, he claims, depends on the unique dynamics of each friendship and does not reflect a unified inner disposition. Just as 'being devoted' is better understood as an emergent summary of disparate acts rather than a trait of character, so too 'being a good friend,' Keller argues, lacks the unified internal quality and explanatory power to be considered a virtue proper.

However, relational virtues like the virtue of friendship can be meaningfully informative, even if they are not universally applicable in the way general virtues are. While the virtue of friendship may not predict how someone will behave in all relationships, it does provide insight into a person's consistent disposition to think, feel, and act within the context of the particular friendship in question. Trust, emotional sensitivity, and commitment to the

particular friend's well-being are reliable marks of such a virtue. That this disposition is not equally extended to non-friends is not a weakness—it is an expression of the particularity of friendship.

Thus, while Keller is right to highlight the contextual complexity of friendship, this does not necessarily undermine the virtue status of relational virtue. On the contrary, it reveals the need for a broader conception of virtue—one that includes relational virtues as necessary for a full account of ethical life. The virtue of friendship, and relational virtue in general, is an essential form of moral excellence, grounded in the richly textured relationships that constitute much of what it means to live well with close others. Its contextual sensitivity and variability are not defects, but part of what defines it as a virtue needed for a desirable personal relationship.

Somewhat relatedly, Seyed Mohammad Yarandi (2025) has recently advanced the normative superfluity objection, according to which relational virtues such as filial piety and the virtue of friendship are not genuinely distinct virtues. On his view, their demands entirely overlap with those of more general virtues like patience, benevolence, or honesty. As such, positing relational virtues adds no new explanatory or normative insight. He develops this objection through two kinds of tests.

The first is the *qualitative difference test*: if two individuals can possess a relational virtue differently, and this difference is best explained by reference to general virtues, then the relational virtue in question is normatively superfluous (Yarandi 2025: 6-8). Consider Yarandi's example of two daughters, Amy and Mary, who differ in how they express filial piety—one is especially patient, the other especially caring in relation to their parents. He argues that since this qualitative difference is best explained by invoking general virtues like patience and care, filial piety is reducible to a cluster of such virtues.

However, this objection mischaracterizes the holistic and relational nature of the

virtues needed in the context of personal relationships. The fact that two individuals may express the same relational virtue differently—one through more care, the other through more patience—does not imply that this virtue is merely a sum of its other 'more basic' parts. Rather, the unity of a relational virtue lies in its distinctive relational aspect. What makes these daughters' responses instances of filial piety is not just that they are patient or caring, but that their responses are shaped by the particular histories and relationships each has with their parents. The demands of relational virtue like filial piety are influenced by the dynamics of recognition, dependence, and shared meaning that mark that particular parent–child relationship. Thus, the different ways Amy and Mary manifest their filial piety show that each has different personalities and shared histories with their parents, rather than that filial piety is not a distinct virtue.

The second test Yarandi introduces is the *action-guidance test*: if a supposed virtue offers less practical guidance than general virtues, it lacks the kind of action-guiding power typically associated with genuine virtues (Yarandi 2025: 6-8). He argues that advice such as "Be a filial child" offers no more practical guidance than abstract directives like "Do the right thing." To illustrate this, he describes a case in which Amy is at her dying father's side on the battlefield and must decide whether to tell him the painful truth that he will die within hours. According to Yarandi, in such a scenario, the advice to be a filial child is no more helpful than the vacuous advice to do the right thing.

However, this case fails to show what it aims to demonstrate. The reason the advice "Be a filial child" appears unhelpful here is not because filial piety is normatively superfluous, but because it is not sufficiently relevant in this situation. The virtues in conflict in Amy's case are honesty and benevolence—not necessarily filial piety and some other virtue. The fact that she is speaking to her *father* may be contextually salient, but not normatively significant. That

is, her moral difficulty would likely remain even if she were speaking to a dying stranger. The virtue that guides her decision is not indexed to the parent–child relationship in a way that makes filial piety normatively relevant.

In contrast, when filial piety *is* normatively relevant, it can be just as action-guiding as a general virtue like honesty. Consider classic examples from Confucius or Socrates in which one must decide whether to report your father's wrongdoing to the authorities (Confucius 2003; Plato 1901). Here the conflict is between justice and filial piety. The dilemma would not even have arisen if the agent in question were not the wrongdoer's child. In such cases, "Be a filial child" gives a concrete moral directive that directly shapes how one deliberates and feels about the situation. Of course, such dilemmas are hard—but that is true of any case involving competing virtues. What matters is that relational virtues, like their general counterparts, can be meaningfully action-guiding when they are relevant. Thus, far from being normatively superfluous, relational virtues help illuminate the complex and emotionally textured demands that arise within personal relationships.

Other possible worries include the concern that grounding normative demands in relational virtues may lead to excessive partiality, privileging loved ones at the expense of broader moral responsibilities. If relational virtue justifies prioritizing one's intimates, doesn't it risk neglecting duties to strangers, the vulnerable, or the broader community? Critics may argue that this opens the door to parochialism, where concern is limited to one's circle of affection, potentially reinforcing exclusion, bias, or even systemic injustice. Proponents of relational virtue can respond that relational concern need not preclude broader ethical concern. A virtuous person would appropriately balance the demands of relational virtues with those of general virtues, guided by practical wisdom. It is one thing to recognize relational virtue as a virtue; it is another to prioritize it over other virtues. Relational virtue is to be embedded in a

broader ethical framework that includes general virtues and impartial concern, not a replacement for them.

One may also ask: What happens in cases of asymmetrical, one-sided, or abusive relationships? Can someone be relationally virtuous in a context where the other party fails to reciprocate or where the relationship in question is deeply harmful? To this question, proponents can reply by saying that relational virtues are context-sensitive. Virtue does not require blind loyalty or unconditional partiality; in fact, it demands discernment, as the above example of a filial child remonstrating her parent shows. Virtue lies in knowing when and how to respond appropriately, and this is also the case for relational virtue. A virtuous person would find the right balance between the demands of general virtues and relational ones, given the nature and history of the relationship in question.

V. Further Applications of the Relational Virtue Approach

As shown above, the virtue-ethical approach to personal relationships —especially one based on the idea of relational virtue—can offer valuable insights into how good character and personal relationships intersect in our lives. However, much remains to be explored in this area, particularly as it continues to develop in conversation with both historical traditions and contemporary concerns. Before concluding, let me suggest how virtue ethics, and specifically the idea of relational virtue, might integrate with and enrich various topics related to personal relationships that are richly addressed in this volume, such as friendship, parent-child relations, online and non-human relationships, vulnerability, emotional responsibilities, justice, and oppression.

First, the analysis of specific relationship types—including friendship (ch. 4), parent-child relationships (ch. 6), and sibling relationships (ch. 7)—can benefit from a relational virtue framework that highlights how virtues like the virtue of friendship, filial piety, parental virtue, or (if sufficiently distinct from other relational virtues) siblinghood are not merely context-sensitive expressions of general traits, but distinctive forms of character cultivated and exercised within the given kind of intimate relationship. The relational virtue approach allows us to ask: What kind of person must one be to live well as a friend, a parent, a child, or a sibling—not just in general, but in this relationship with this person?

Second, in domains involving new and morally complex forms of relationship—such as online relationships (ch. 9), relationships with artificial agents like robots and AI (ch. 10), and relationships with non-human animals (ch. 11)—the relational virtue framework offers a promising lens for ethical evaluation. These relationships often fall outside traditional paradigms of friendship or familial intimacy, yet they are increasingly shaping our social and emotional lives. The idea of relational virtue can help illuminate how even non-traditional or asymmetric relationships can generate norms of engagement rooted in particularized responsiveness, commitment, or care. For example, online relationships—despite lacking physical presence—can still cultivate forms of relational attentiveness, trust, and loyalty that call for ethical acknowledgment. Similarly, long-term human-robot or human-non-human animal interactions in caregiving or companionship contexts may give rise to relational expectations and patterns of emotional investment that, while not symmetric, are morally meaningful.

Third, the relational virtue approach has the potential to make meaningful contributions to broader theoretical debates in non-ideal situations—particularly those concerning justice and personal ties (ch. 21), relationships under oppression (Mackenzie), and

affective betrayal (ch. 28). For example, in contexts of oppression, the relational virtue approach can tell us how a relationally virtuous person would react differently in such a non-ideal situation. Similarly, in cases of affective betrayal, the harm is not simply the violation of a duty but the breakdown of a relational structure that had been built through mutual investment and care. In this way, the relational virtue approach deepens our understanding of when and why relationships themselves become sites of moral significance, and how their ethical assessment must attend not only to principles or outcomes but to the evolving character of the relationship itself.

Finally, many chapters in this volume explore moral phenomena that are inherently relational in character—including self-disclosure (ch. 23), trust (ch. 26), and caring (ch. 27). The relational virtue approach offers a novel perspective on these ideas by framing these phenomena as manifestations of cultivated traits of character—dispositions that can be developed, sustained, or corrupted through lived relational practices. For instance, we can examine the nature and value of self-disclosure in personal relationships from the perspective of how a relationally virtuous person would disclose herself to her intimate. Also, trust is not only a reactive stance toward another's reliability but an attitude that a relationally virtuous person would show to the intimate in question when appropriate. By emphasizing how these traits develop through mutual engagement, the relational virtue framework highlights the morally formative nature of personal relationships and shows how ethical value emerges not only from discrete choices but from the ongoing cultivation of virtuous relational activities.

In all these domains, the central insight of the relational virtue approach—that the moral significance of personal relationships is best captured through the lens of virtuous relational activity—offers a distinctive supplement to the conceptual resources already present in the volume. As virtue ethics continues to reassert its relevance in contemporary ethics, its

engagement with the complexities of personal relationships will remain a vital area of philosophical development.

In conclusion, the virtue-ethical approach to personal relationships offers a powerful alternative to traditional moral theories, which often struggle to accommodate the emotional depth, particularity, and richness of our interpersonal lives. Whereas consequentialism threatens to instrumentalize relationships within a calculus of overall utility, and deontology risks reducing them to abstract duties, virtue ethics begins from a more grounded and agent-centered perspective, asking how we live well in relationship with others.

Through Aristotle's foundational insights on friendship and more recent developments, virtue ethics illuminates how character and ethical excellence are cultivated in the context of shared lives. It provides a compelling account of why and how personal relationships are normatively significant as a constitutive part of a flourishing human life. Concepts like relational virtue deepen this account by proposing that some virtues are inherently indexed to particular relationships and are not merely contextual modifications of general virtues. This account explains partiality as a natural expression of the normative significance we place on those we love, care for, and live with.

At the same time, the relational virtue framework remains open to refinement. Questions about how virtue ethics accommodates asymmetrical or harmful relationships and how it could integrate broader moral concerns invite ongoing philosophical reflection. As virtue ethics continues to develop, its account of personal relationships will remain central—not only because such relationships are morally complex, but because they are indispensable to any credible vision of the good human life. Ultimately, refining virtue ethics' treatment of personal relationships promises not only to enrich our understanding of love, friendship, and family, but to enhance our fundamental conception of what it means to live an excellent life as

a human, who is a social animal by nature.

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