CHAPTER 4

In Search of an Ethics of Personal Relationships

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Although it's been ten years, I can still see the student, hands on her hips, as she brought my beautiful lecture on Kant's ethics to a grinding halt: "Is Kant saying," she demanded, "that if I sleep with my boyfriend, I should sleep with him out of a sense of duty?" My response: "And when you're through, you should tell him that you would have done the same for anyone in his situation." What could I say?

We do not search for what we already have. Thus my title commits me to the thesis that we do not yet have an ethics of personal relationships. And that is in fact my view, a view grown out of incidents like this one.

More specifically, I believe that for at least the past 300 years or so, philosophers thinking about ethics have tacitly presupposed a very impersonal context. They have unconsciously assumed a context in which we mean little or nothing to each other and have then asked themselves what principles could be invoked to keep us from trampling each other in the pursuit of our separate and often conflicting interests. Consequently, I contend, what we now study and teach under the rubric of ethics is almost entirely the ethics of impersonal relationships.

Various explanations might be offered as to why philosophers have thought in terms of impersonal relationships. Philosophers have historically been almost exclusively males, and males have generally believed that the public realm where impersonal relationships predominate is much more important and worthy of study than the private and personal dimensions of life. Or perhaps the assumption that we are talking about impersonal relationships reflects the growing imperson-
ality of modern society or an awareness of the increasing ability given us by our technology to affect the lives of people quite remote from us. However, even if philosophers were not thinking about personal relationships when developing their ethics, it might seem that an ethics adequate to impersonal relationships should work at least as well in personal contexts. For in personal relationships there would be less temptation to callously ignore or to ride roughshod over each other's interests, owing to the greater meaning each has for the other. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that the principles constituting the ethics of impersonal relationships will work satisfactorily in personal contexts as well.

But this assumption is false. An ethics of personal relationships must, I try to show, be quite different from the ethics of impersonal relationships. Traditional ethics is, at best, significantly incomplete, only a small part of the story of the ethics of personal relationships. Often it is much worse: basically misguided or wrong-headed and thus inapplicable in the context of personal relationships. In fact, much of traditional ethics urges us to act in ways that would be inappropriate in personal contexts; and thus traditional ethics would often be dangerous and destructive in those contexts.

We do not search for what we already have. I do not have an ethics of personal relationships, though I offer some suggestions about what such an ethics would and would not look like. Since my views about the ethics of personal relationships depend, naturally enough, on what I take a personal relationship to be, I begin with a brief discussion of the nature and structure of personal relationships.

But I'm going to cheat some. Throughout, I speak of personal relationships as if they were static. Although this is obviously a gross oversimplification, limitations of space and understanding preclude a discussion of the beginnings and endings and dynamics of personal relationships.

I

So what's a personal relationship? Personal relationships, as opposed to impersonal relationships, are of course relationships such as love, being lovers, friends, spouses, parents, and so on. But these sorts of relationships aren't always very personal, since there are all sorts of marriages of convenience, Aristotle's "friendships of utility," Hobbesian power alliances, and many varieties of quite impersonal sexual relationships. Consequently, we need to distinguish what are commonly called personal relationships (love, friendship, marriage) from personal relationships in a deeper sense. Even when they are not personal in the deeper sense, relationships like love, friendship, and marriage are not exactly impersonal relationships either. So I use the phrase "quasi-personal relationships" to cover such cases, reserving the term "personal relationships" for those relationships which are personal in the deeper sense I hope to explicate. I thus work with a threefold distinction between personal, quasi-personal, and impersonal relationships.

Let us begin with the distinction between personal and impersonal relationships. I want to say two things by way of characterizing personal relationships: (1) If I have a personal relationship with you, I want you. You (and your well-being) are then one of my ends. This would seem to be part of what it means to care for or care about another person. (2) If my relationship to you is to be personal, this end must be you precisely you and not any other person. The persons in personal relationships are not substitutable, saepe affecte. Now, I need to explain these two points. But a full explanation of either would take at least a paper. And the first point raises all sorts of issues in action theory; the second, all sorts of metaphysical problems about what persons are and how they are individuated. Thus my strategy in this section is to say no more than necessary and to try to make this as susceptible to latitudinarian interpretation as possible. Hopefully, what I have to say will be acceptable to a broad spectrum of action theorists and metaphysicians. Ideally, all would be able to agree that there's something right and important about what I've said, and the familiar disputes could then be rejoined, including discussion of the presuppositions and implications of my statements.

First, then, the idea of having you as one of my ends is to be contrasted with both sides of the Kantian dichotomy between respecting you as an end in yourself and treating you as a means to my ends. Kant would have me respect you as a person, just as I would respect any person, simply because you (all) are persons. To respect you as an end in yourself is to recognize that you have value apart from whatever use I might be able to make of you. It is, moreover, to recognize that your goals and purposes have validity independent of whatever goals and purposes I may have and to acknowledge in my action that your goals and purposes have an equal claim to realization. Although respect for you and your goals is a part of a personal relationship, it is not what makes a personal relationship personal, valuable, or even a
relationship. Instead, having you as one of my ends is valuing you in relation to me; it is seeing you and the realization of your goals as part of me and the realization of my goals. This is not, of course, to reduce you to a means to my ends. On the contrary, I want you. You are one of my ends.

The second characteristic of a personal relationship—that I want precisely you—serves to highlight the difference between this kind of relationship and impersonal relationships, and also to further elucidate the difference between seeing you as one of my ends and seeing you either as an end in yourself or as a means to my ends. The characteristic intensions in personal relationships are different from those in impersonal relationships. It is the difference between:

- wanting to get something (T) and wanting to get T from you.
- wanting to give T and wanting to give T to you.
- wanting to do T and wanting to do T with you.

The first set of intensions or desires structures impersonal relationships; the second, personal relationships. There is a big difference between wanting to be loved, for example, and wanting to be loved by you; a crucial difference between wanting to go to bed (with someone) and wanting to go to bed with you. This difference seems to retain its significance whether "T" ranges over relatively inertistic things like taking a walk, having your breakfast made, sharing a ride to a party, and going to a movie, or over crucially important things like baring your soul, receiving love and emotional support, sharing your living space, and having children.

If I want something (as opposed to wanting something from you), I depersonalize you, reducing you (in my eyes) to an X who is a possessor or producer of certain goods. For it's these goods I want, not you; anyone who could and would deliver these goods would do as well. The language captures the depersonalization nicely: I want "someone who . . . ." It is when I want something and you become for me a "someone who" is the possessor or producer of this good that I reduce you to a means to my ends. This kind of desire and the intensions it gives rise to structure an impersonal relationship, though many of what are usually called "personal relationships" are structured by precisely this sort of impersonal desire.

By contrast, in personal relationships of the deeper sort, "someone who . . . ." will not do; the specific person who is the object of my desire or intention cannot be substituted for or eliminated without altering the characteristic desire or intention. I see no way to explain how it could be important to me not only to receive some of the things I want, but to receive them from you unless we say that I see some sort of bond between you and me. I must value you over and above my valuing of whatever good things you are the possessor or producer of. The desire to receive from you to give to you to do with you thus structures a personal relationship, a relationship that does not reduce you to an X who is the bearer of goods and services. And this, it seems, is one clear sense of what it would mean to have you as one of my ends.

The possessiveness that often occurs in personal relationships can be seen to be closely analogous to the structure I have laid out here. If you are one of my ends, not only will I typically want your well-being, but I will also want to create your well-being. And if I want to give something personal to you, I will characteristically want you not only to receive it, but to receive it from me—not from just anyone. There may be nothing harmful in this, but it can easily slide into possessive jealousy. The structure of possessive jealousy seems to be this: I desire that only I give T to you; I want you to give T only to me; I want you to do T only with me. I can be said to be possessive with respect to all those Ts, and jealousy will be aroused in me by the fear that these desires will not be fulfilled.

Let us now turn to quasi-personal relationships. These are the relationships that are commonly called personal, but that are not personal relationships in the deeper sense I have discussed. Quasi-personal relationships can be analyzed along similar lines. Suppose that it's important to me to have the kind of friend or the kind of wife who will help me with my work. In such cases, my desire or our relationship is not simply impersonal, for it won't do for me just to get help with my work—I want help from a friend or from a wife. In this intermediate case, the kind of relationship you have to me (wife, lover, loved one, friend, child) is essential to the structure of my desire; a certain kind of relationship is one of my ends.

But our relationship is still abstract or impersonal in a sense. I want something from you because you are my wife (lover, friend, child). I'd want the same from any wife (lover, friend, kid). Thus you are not important to the structure of my desire, you are not one of my ends. In such cases, the relationship I want must be defined (by me) in terms of roles and rules for those roles. I call these relationships quasi-personal. They are important for an ethics of personal relationships, for we often get hurt in precisely these sorts of relationships, especially when we believe we are involved in a personal relationship.

Two additional points about personal relationships are important for the ethics of personal relationships. First, although I talk mainly
about positive, healthy personal relationships, it is important to recognize that hatred, as well as love, can be a personal relationship. As can resentment, anger, contempt. Hatred is personal if I hate you, not just some of the things you are or do or stand for, not just "anyone who. . . ." In cases of personal hatred, I may well desire your overall ill-being. Hatred that is personal rather than impersonal is much more thoroughgoing and often more vicious. Good sense suggests that we should get out of or depersonalize relationships dominated by intractable hatred, anger, or resentment. Interestingly, however, haters often don't get out of personal relationships with those they hate. And this calls for explanation. Such explanation must acknowledge that if I continue to hate you and to have your ill-being as one of my ends, there must be some sort of bond between you and me. You are important to me or I wouldn't devote my life to making you miserable. The opposite of love is not hatred; the opposite of love is not a relationship. A second point important for the ethics of personal relationships is the possibility of one-sided personal relationships. Suppose I want you and you simply want to be loved and protected or to have a certain kind of marriage. Do I then have a personal relationship with you while you have an impersonal or quasi-personal relationship with me? Perhaps. But this surely is not the kind of relationship I will normally want. Such relationships are ripe for exploitation and tragedy. They are, in any case, almost always deeply disappointing, for we usually want mutually personal relationships. This means that not only do I want you and not just some producer of certain goods and services, but I want you to want me, not "someone who. . . ."

Although the logical structure of personal, quasi-personal, and impersonal relationships seems quite distinct, there can be tremendous epistemic difficulties facing those of us who would know what kinds of relationships we have. Do I want something (from you)? Do I want a relationship with you or do I want a kind of relationship with "someone who. . . ."? Even if I think I want you, is it because I'm picking up on something that is you, or is it because you happen to resemble my childhood sweetheart, perhaps, or because you are so successful? If I cannot fathom my desires and intentions enough to make these discriminations accurately, it would be possible for me not to know whether I have a personal relationship with you, much less whether you have a personal relationship with me. These epistemic difficulties notwithstanding, it may be critically important—both ethically and psychologically—to know what kinds of relationships we actually do have. Relationships are often made or broken by the issue of whether I want you or "someone who. . . ."

Despite the distinct logical structures, it's probably also true that most of what are usually called "personal relationships" contain elements of all three—impersonal, quasi-personal, and personal relationships. (In fact, the best personal relationships may contain elements of the impersonal in them: Clearly, it is crucial to a healthy relationship that I not want to get from you everything that I want. You would be smothered by endless demands in such a relationship.) Nonetheless, we can sort actual relationships into these three types if we can talk about the dominant or characteristic kind of intention involved in a given relationship. Or if we consider personal and impersonal relationships to be ideal types marking the ends of a spectrum, the points along this spectrum will be determined by how centrally personal desires and intentions figure in various relationships.

Obviously, these characterizations of personal and quasi-personal relationships are based on my own intuitions, with which others may not agree. Fortunately, my argument does not require that my characterizations be accepted as necessary conditions, much less as necessary and sufficient conditions, for a personal relationship. It is enough for my purposes if it is admitted that many very healthy and beautiful personal relationships have the structure I have ascribed to them and that the reasons we often have for wanting personal relationships are expressed in my formulations.

II

Now for the ethics of personal relationships. My main contention and basic principle is that ethics must not depersonalize personal relationships, for doing so does violence to what these relationships are; to what is characteristically and normatively going on in them; and to the intentions, desires, and hopes we have in becoming involved in them. Particular persons figure essentially in personal relationships. But most ways of thinking about ethics invite or require us to treat ourselves or our loved ones as a "someone who. . . ." And this leads to many difficulties, both on the level of metaethical theory and on the practical level of ethical or moral prescription.

Some of the points I want to draw attention to have already been made by Michael Stocker (1976) and Bernard Williams (1976). But they bear repetition in this context. It is instructive in that Stocker and Williams turn to examples of personal relationships to illustrate their points. Though both want to make general points about ethical theory, I would contend that many of their points are plausible and defensible only or primarily in the context of personal relationships.
The main thrust of this section of the paper is critical, outlining some of the ways in which most approaches to ethics are not appropriate to personal relationships. The next section offers more positive suggestions about what an ethics and metaethics of personal relationships would have to look like. Obviously, it goes without saying that in a paper that proposes to reject all major ethical traditions and then to suggest an alternative to them, none of the arguments can be conclusive. I can only hope to point toward a different perspective, inviting you to examine your experience and your sense of personal relationships to see whether there is anything in what I have to say.

Kantian ethics depersonalizes all personal relationships. Since Kant generally recognizes no community except the kingdom of ends, he leaves us with the false idea of choosing to pursue our own atomistic goals and reducing others to a means thereto or of promoting the kingdom of ends in which we respect others because they are instances of moral agency. In other words, Kant fails to recognize that, in addition to being a means to my ends or an end in yourself, you can be one of my ends.

It is personal affirmation that one wants from a personal relationship, not respect as a moral agent or even respect or admiration for one's immoral qualities. Thus respect of a kind that is due to anyone is not sufficient to generate an ethics of personal relationships. Nor can such an ethics be generated by adding consideration of the special obligations generated by the kind of relationships we stand in—lovers, friends, spouses, or whatever. Rather, desiring a mutually personal relationship, I want you to want me, not "someone who. . . ." I certainly do not want you to want me simply because I am a moral agent, or even primarily because I am a responsible moral agent.

The difficulties extend beyond Kantian ethics. Any ethics that is formulated in terms of what "one would have done for anyone in a certain kind of situation" or that talks as if there could be moral situations involving different agents that are "the same in all morally relevant respects" depersonalizes personal relationships. Thus if rights, duties, and obligations must be impersonally or quasi-personally defined—as I think they must be—they depersonalize relationships, reducing those involved in the relationships to a "someone who. . . ."

The concept of a rule is so very general that I hesitate to say that no rules are applicable in personal relationships. But I would claim that no set of general rules or principles will adequately describe personal interaction (in the deeper sense) or adequately prescribe an ethics of personal relationships. The ethics of personal relationships will not be primarily an ethics of rules. And the rules or norms there are must be contextually defined; instead of striving to achieve a universally valid viewpoint, one strives to understand and be moved by the particular point of view of the specific other. And one hopes for the same understanding in return.

Moreover, even if it should turn out that rules are an essential component of the ethics of personal relationships, they will standarly differ from the rules that apply in impersonal contexts. If we are close and I know that you care for me and will keep my interest in mind, you don't have to obey the rules for impersonal relationships. You can, for example, invade my privacy by cross-examining me about my personal life, disrupt what I'm doing for no better reason than that you're at loose ends and want someone to talk to, or fail to respect my private property by taking $20 from my wallet, removing a book from my office, or borrowing my car without permission. All of that is fine, so long as I am convinced that you care for me.

In fact, it would be insulting or deeply troubling (if not ludicrous) if you did obey the rules for impersonal relationships, for freedom from those rules is one of the signs by which we show that we appreciate that the relationship is personal. Imagine finding out that a close friend has been depressed for some time and has wanted to talk with you, but hasn't called because he didn't want to interrupt what you were doing. Or imagine returning from a summer in Europe to find that a friend had been seriously hampered in her attempt to write a paper because she didn't feel free to take a copy of a book she knew you had in your office.

Because act utilitarianism is not an ethics of rules, it seems closer to the mark than rule utilitarianism. But both forms of utilitarianism tend to reduce personal relationships to a means to more ultimate goods—happiness, for example. Nor will it do simply to include friendship or love as one part of the good, for that is still a kind of relationship, not our relationship. This distinction is not trivial or academic: Consider how it would feel to discover that your loved one just wanted love, not you or your relationship.

Moreover, because an impersonal ethics like utilitarianism or Kantianism asks us to abstract from consideration of our particular relationships, it generates an impartiality that makes it difficult for us to justify our decisions within personal relationships. And even if it can justify those decisions, its way of doing so would depersonalize us, our partners, and our relationships. Suppose that as she climbed into bed, my wife told me that she'd faced a difficult moral decision about coming home to sleep with me because there were many men who were much more lonely and who would have benefited so much more
than I, if she’d slept with them, instead. However (she continued), on utilitarian grounds she decided that the institutions of love and marriage produce more happiness than alternative arrangements, so she decided it was right to come home in order to support these institutions. Wouldn’t that be splendid!

Contract theories (Hobbes, Locke, Rawls) don’t fare much better; it is not clear that they can be extended beyond the impersonal contexts for which they were formulated and in which they are at home. Indeed, the whole point of contract theory is to try to get us to abstract from our particular characteristics, wants, goals, and values, in order to ascertain what any self-interested, rational being would want and, given those wants, would agree to. Not surprisingly, such depersonalized contracts agree only to principles for impersonal and quasi-personal relationships. Stripped of all particular characteristics, it is impossible to tell whether you’d want personal relationships at all (some people do not), though it might be prudent to make allowances just in case you did. Stripped of all particular characteristics, it is clearly impossible to tell whether you would want me and our relationship. Only impersonal and quasi-personal relationships are visible behind the veil of ignorance.

There is an even deeper difficulty. Contract theory asks us to see ourselves as atoms. If I see myself as an atom, I see my own well-being as separate from the well-being of others— separate, to be sure, not in the sense that there are no causal relationships between my well-being and that of others, but in the sense that I do not see their well-being as part of mine. Those who see themselves as atoms are not necessarily selfish or immoral—they can be impartial, benevolent, even generous in their actions. But they bestow benefits as they receive them—on “someone who’s” who are not essentially related to their own well-being.

Contract theory thus tacitly reduces all relationship between us to trade relationships. And trade relationships cannot provide an adequate model for personal relationships. If I do not see you as part of me and my well-being, I do not want you. I can only want something from you. And if I only want something, as opposed to wanting something from you, for me you are only a means to my well-being. If you (also seeing yourself as an atom) also only want something, ours becomes what I call a “trade relationship.” This is true, even if we trade very intimate and personal things like sex, companionship, emotional support. Even love (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) can be traded—if we both want love, not each other. Then we use each other and we become means to each other’s ends.

Finally, consider an Aristotelian ethics of virtue. An ethics of virtue may be closer to meeting the requirements of an ethics of personal relationships. But the fact that the girl next door is virtuous does not ensure that she will be a good friend, much less a good friend to me.

- Virtue theory also threatens to depersonalize persons—a good person is a kind of person, a “someone who . . . .” And thus virtue theory may also miss the personal attraction and affirmation that are the core of personal relationships. (Remember when your mother or father used to tell you that you should be interested in someone because he or she is “such a good person”?)

This is not, of course, to say that good relationships are possible with those totally devoid of virtues. But even if virtue theory would give us the kind of metaethics we want, the ethics of impersonal relationships will still be critically different from the ethics of personal relationships. For the virtues required in personal relationships are different from those required in impersonal contexts. They may, in fact, not even be wholly compatible with the impersonal virtues.

Consider, for example, impartiality and impartial justice, which are a virtue in an employer, but a vice in a father, mother, or spouse. Thus the dilemma posed by nepotism: qua employer one should treat all applicants impartially, but qua parent one is defective if one is not willing to provide special advantages to one’s children. I believe closer examination would reveal that even those virtues that seem applicable in both personal and impersonal contexts—care, honesty, fairness—have different meanings in personal and impersonal contexts. Compare the care of one who devotes a lifetime to the work of Oxford with the care of a mother for her child.

In addition, insofar as virtue theory specifies virtues in terms of social practices that must be defined by a society larger than a couple, development of the requisite virtues could yield only a quasi-personal relationship—a kind of relationship, at best. And the personal affirmation we desire from marriage, for example, would be missing in a virtuous husband or wife as much as it would in a Kantian universalizer, a utilitarian calculator, or a rational contractor.

Thus all our major traditions in ethics strike me as inadequate to an ethics of personal relationships. And inadequate not simply by virtue of incompleteness. Rather, they seem fundamentally wrong-headed. Granted, someone ingenious enough might be able to devise a system of epicycles that would harmonize existing ethical theories with the ethics of personal relationships. But my own sense is that the errors lie much deeper and that something basically different is required.
III

"I don't want you to take me out," my wife exploded. "I just want you to want to go out with me. If you don't want to go out, let's just forget it." Motives, intentions, and reasons for acting play a much larger role in the ethics of personal relationships than they do in the ethics of impersonal relationships. In fact, the motivation of those who are close to us is often more important than the things which result from it. And even when actions are important in personal relationships, it is often because they are seen as symbols or symptoms of underlying feelings, desires, or commitments. Thus actions often seem worthless or even perverse if the motivation behind them is inappropriate.

In impersonal situations and relationships, on the other hand, we are much more content to allow people to do the right thing for the wrong reason and we are often even willing to provide incentives (for example, legal and financial) to increase the chances that they will do the right thing and also that they will do it for the right reason. I wouldn't, for example, be very much concerned about the motives of my congressman if I could be sure that he would always vote right. I believe that he should be well paid to increase the chances that he will vote right. But I would be deeply upset to learn that my wife is staying with me primarily for financial reasons. And I might be even more upset if her actions all along had been scrupulously wife-like. An ethics of personal relationships must, then, place more emphasis on motives and intentions, less on actions and consequences than most ethical theories have.

However, the motives that ethicists have found praiseworthy in impersonal contexts are usually inappropriate and unacceptable in personal contexts. Actions motivated by duty, a sense of obligation, or even a sense of responsibility are often unacceptable in personal relationships. A healthy personal relationship cannot be based on this sort of motivation; indeed, it cannot even come into play very often. Stocker's example of learning that your friend has come to see you in the hospital purely from a sense of duty is telling. Even more devastating would be to learn that your spouse of thirty-seven years had stayed in your marriage purely or even primarily out of a sense of obligation stemming from the marriage contract.

For similar reasons, motives of benevolence, pity, or compassion are also not acceptable as the characteristic or dominant motives in personal relationships. Acts of charity, altruism, and mercy are also, in general, out. As are sacrifices of important interests or a sense of self-sacrifice. Paternalism and maternalism are also generally unacceptable among adults in personal relationships. While it might be nice to feel yourself to be charitable, benevolent, or compassionate, who could endure being emotionally involved with someone who saw you essentially or even very often as an appropriate object of benevolence, charity, or pity? Of course, there always will be some occasions when you are an appropriate object of these attitudes, and it's desirable that they then be forthcoming... so long as they are viewed as exceptions. And yet, even in cases of great misfortune—if I contracted a debilitating disease, for example—I don't think I'd want my wife or friends to stay with me if they were motivated predominantly by pity or benevolence.

If even this much is correct, I think we can draw several lessons that point toward a deeper understanding of ethics in personal relationships. First, personal relationships between adults (and perhaps also between adults and children) are to be entered into and continued out of a sense of strength, fullness, and vitality, both in yourself and in the other, not out of a sense of weakness, need, emptiness, or incapacity... Anything other than a shared sense of vitality and strength would lead to the unacceptable motives already discussed. Moreover, if I see myself primarily as a being in need, I will be too focused on myself and my needs. I will then tend to depersonalize you into a someone who can meet my needs. And I will also be generally unable to freely and joyously give: Since I see myself as not having enough as it is, my giving will seem to me a giving up. (Does this mean that those who must need a first-rate personal relationship will be unable to have one? I'm afraid that this might be true.)

The fact that giving characteristically must be free and joyous points to a second lesson about the ethics of personal relationships: Characteristically and normatively, the appropriate motive for action in personal relationships is simply that we want to do these things. Persons pursue whatever ends they have simply because they want to (that's what it means to say that something is an end, of course). And in a personal relationship, I and my well-being are ends of yours. From this vantage point it is easy to see why motives should play such a central role in personal relationships and also why wanting to do the things we do together is often the only acceptable motivation: That motivation is the touchstone of whether or not we have a personal relationship.

Of course, this is not to imply that personal relationships must rest simply on untutored feelings, taken as brute givens in the personalities of the participants. Indeed, it makes sense to talk about doing things,
even for the wrong reasons, in order that doing those things will in time change you, your feelings, and your reasons. But it may be even more important to point out that continual attempts to create the right feelings in oneself are also not acceptable or satisfactory. If you must continually try to get yourself to want to do things with me, or for me, or for our relationship, we must at some point admit that I and my well-being are not among your ends and that we do not therefore, have a personal relationship.

Nor am I claiming that actions motivated by a sense of duty or obligation, by altruism or self-sacrifice, by benevolence, pity, charity, sympathy, and so on never have a place in personal relationships. They may be appropriate in unusual circumstances. But such motives and actions are a fall-back mechanism which I compare to the safety net beneath a high wire act. We may be safer with a net, but the act is no good if the net actually comes into play very often. Similarly, the fall-back mechanisms may, in times of crisis, protect us and spare us what we want, but they do not and cannot safeguard what is central to personal relationships. Thus when we find ourselves thinking characteristically or even very often in terms of the motives and concepts I have claimed are generally inappropriate in personal relationships, this is a symptom that our relationships are unsound, unhealthy, jeopardized, decayed, or that they never did become the personal relationships we wanted and hoped for. (Compare Hardwig, 1984.)

A third lesson about the ethics of personal relationships can be drawn from these reflections: The distinction between egoism and altruism is not characteristically applicable to personal relationships. Neither party magnanimously or ignominiously sacrifices personal interests, but the two interests are not independent, not really even two. For your ends are my ends too. The distinction between giving and receiving thus collapses. In impersonal contexts, if I respect your (independent) interests, that may be all you want of me. But in a personal context, you will want me to be interested in your interests. For if I am not interested in your interests, your well-being is not one of my ends.

This does not, of course, mean that all interests will be shared, but it means I am interested even in those of your interests I do not share. (I may have no appreciation of operas, but knowing how much they mean to you, it is important to me that your life include them. Operas for you are important to me in a way that operas for others who may love them just as much simply are not.) Nor, of course, am I claiming that there are never conflicts of interest in personal relationships. But such conflicts are set within the context of the meaning each has for the other and are therefore seen and handled differently. In personal relationships, conflicts of interest are conflicts within myself, a very different thing from a conflict of interest with someone separate from me.

A fourth lesson about ethics and personal relationships is this: Because personal relationships are ends—indeed, ultimate and incommensurable ends—they cannot and need not be justified by an appeal to some higher value such as love, pleasure, utility, or social utility. Any ethics that attempts to justify personal relationships in terms of more ultimate goods depersonalizes personal relationships. It construes us as wanting these higher goods, not each other.

Nor can the relative merits of personal relationships be adequately assessed in terms of abstract values. Each personal relationship is a good sui generis. Irreducibly involving the specific persons that they do, personal relationships cannot be reduced to common denominators that would permit comparison without depersonalizing them. Although persons caught in situations requiring choices between different personal relationships sometimes talk (and probably think) about comparing them in terms of abstract common denominators, evaluating relationships in this way Platonistically reduces our loved ones to mere instantiations of forms, thus depersonalizing them and our relationships to them.

A fifth and final lesson serves to summarize and conclude these reflections. The ethics of personal relationships must see persons in nonistic terms; it must be based on a doctrine of internal relations. People see themselves in nonistic terms if they see at least some other individuals not just as means to their well-being, but as part of their well-being. As I suggested earlier, there is no way to explain why I value a relationship with you (over and above the goods I desire from you and from this kind of relationship) except by saying that I feel a bond between us. I have come to see myself as a self that can only be fulfilled by a life that includes a relationship with you. Thus I see myself, in part, as part of a larger whole that is us. This does not mean that I see you as either a necessary or a sufficient condition for my well-being. If our relationship ends, my world will not fall apart and I may know that it won't. But if our relationship does end, I will have to alter my conception of myself and my well-being.

IV

Those wedded to the traditional categories of ethics could accept most of the points I have wanted to make and yet insist that what I have called the ethics of personal relationships cannot be an ethics,
since it does not meet the criteria that define the moral point of view. Even if correct, my observations about appropriate conduct in personal relationships would, on that view, be applied psychology perhaps, or some sort of prudential reasoning about how to have better relationships. But I would claim that such a reaction would only show the extent to which we have unknowingly accepted an ethics appropriate to impersonal contexts as definitive of all ethics.

Others might object that a position such as mine faces an insuperable dilemma: Either ethics is unnecessary in personal relationships or the kind of ethics I have been advocating will not work. On this view, ethics is unnecessary where genuine care is present in a personal relationship, since we don’t need an ethics to protect us from those who understand us and care about our interests. But, it might be claimed, in unhealthy or destructive personal relationships—or even relationships that are temporarily strained—what I have been calling the ethics of personal relationships simply will not work. The conclusion of this argument would be that we need an ethics of rules and principles, rights and duties whenever real caring is absent or even obscured—especially, perhaps, in personal relationships, where anger, hatred, bitterness, and resentment are often so thoroughgoing, intractable, and . . . personal.

Granted, we must remember that relationships can be viciously personal as well as gloriously personal. And it does seem plausible to maintain that we don’t need an ethics for times when relationships are healthy and going smoothly. But again, I believe that the plausibility of this view reflects the limitations of the ways in which we have thought about ethics. I would contend, instead, that we do need an ethics for good times and for healthy, beautiful relationships—an ethics of aspiration that would serve to clarify what we aim for in personal relationships and to remind us of how they are best done.

Moreover, even when personal relationships become troubled, strained, or even vicious, it is not always possible or desirable to depersonalize the relationship. And an ethics must not tacitly urge or require us to depersonalize our relationships whenever personal conflicts arise. Within a personal relationship, the depersonalizing stance will often distort the issue beyond recognition. If we leave out my love for you, my turmoil over how often you drink yourself into oblivion vanishes, and with it, the issue that arises between us. For I can acknowledge with equanimity the drinking of others who are not personally related to me. My concern is simply not an impersonal concern that ranges indifferently over many possible objects of concern.

Depersonalizing (or ending) a relationship may be the appropriate final step in the face of intractable difficulties. But I would deny that depersonalizing is always the best course even here. For I think we should aspire to learn how to end relationships without depersonalizing them. If we can learn to continue to care and to care personally for our past loves, friends, and partners, we can be left happier, less bitter, wiser about the causes of the difficulties, and better able to go on to other relationships than if we end our relationships in hostility, anger, rejection, or even the kind of indifference characteristic of an impersonal stance.

What, then, is to be done? If we accept my position that we need an ethics of personal relationships and that such an ethics will have to be different from an ethics of impersonal relationships, the field of ethics opens up and ethical theory turns out to be a much less thoroughly explored domain than we might have thought. For my view implies that there are vast, largely uncharted regions beyond what we have come to know as ethics. I have tried to point to this region, but I have hardly begun to explore it.

1. We need to consider whether personal relationships are always better. If that view is correct, impersonal relationships would be only the result of the limitations of our sense of relatedness, and there would be a constant ethical imperative to personalize social contexts whenever possible and to expand our sense of connectedness. I suspect, however, that some relationships are better left impersonal and also that, because enmity, resentment, disgust, and many forms of conflict are much more bitter and intractable when they are personal, there are situations where depersonalizing is a good strategy. We must also understand more clearly exactly what depersonalizing a relationship involves.

2. We need an ethics for quasi-personal relationships (love, marriage, friendship) when these relationships are not also personal (in the sense I have been trying to explicate). For it is perhaps in such contexts that people are most devastatingly used, abused, and mistreated. Still, quasi-personal relationships have important roles to play, both when they do and when they do not involve a personal relationship: Marriage is also a financial institution; our concept of a parent seeks to ensure that children will be protected and raised, even if not loved; even living together is in part an arrangement for sharing the chores of daily life.

3. We need some way to deal with the conflicts and tensions arising in situations involving both personal and impersonal relationships. Is it moral, for example, for me to buy computer games and gold chains for my son while other children are starving, simply because he is my son and I have a personal relationship with him? The issues about the extent to which one can legitimately favor those to whom one is
personally related are, for me, deeply troubling and almost impene-
trable to my ethical insight. On the more theoretical level, we can see
the difficulties that those committed to impersonal value—such as con-
sequentialists and Kantians—have with personal commitments, and
also the difficulties that feminist ethicists—such as Gilligan (1982) and
Noddings (1984) have with conduct toward those not part of our net-
work of care as conflicts arise between the demands of personal and of
impartial ethics.

4. Then, when we have all this in view, we should perhaps reex-
amine our "stranger ethics" to see if we need to revise our ethics of
impartial relationships in light of the ethics of personal and quasi-
personal relationships.

5. Finally, we undoubtedly need a more precise understanding of
what makes relationships personal, a better grasp on the values of such
relationships, and a much more rigorous and developped account of the
ethics of personal relationships. For even if the present paper succeeds
beyond my wildest dreams, it has only scratched the surface.

Until we have done all these things, it will be premature to make
pronouncements about what constitutes "the moral point of view."

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