

# Identity and Social Bonds

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*Abstract:* I first argue that there is no problem about how to justify partialities (though there is a difficulty in justifying impartialities). Then I consider the role of consent in justifying rights and duties, using voluntary associations as a case in which consent has an important but limited role in doing so, a role determined and circumscribed by evaluative considerations. The values explain why consent can bind and bind one to act as one does not wish to do and even as one judges to be ill advised. That opens the way to an explanation of how value considerations relate to non-voluntary membership in socially constituted groups, generating rights and duties that to a considerable extent are independent of the individual's aims and preferences.

*Key words:* identity, partiality, impartiality, voluntary-association, consent, non-consensual duties, social groups.

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It is not my habit to offer advice about what we should do; how we should behave. I do have views about how one should behave ... at least sometimes. But I do not believe that my professional training and expertise, such as they are, give my views any special weight. I do not believe that philosophy is a discipline that qualifies one to – as we say – preach any particular moral views. True, the time may come when things are so bad that anyone with decent views should never pass an opportunity to air them, for they are so badly needed. But I do not think that that is so for me today.

I intended to make my talk explain why philosophy should not preach morality. Or, at least I intended to explain why political philosophy should not do so. But, I will not give

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that talk. I will offer an explanation which falls within a domain in which philosophy can be helpful. I will reflect on why social identity may bind. That belongs with explaining how to think about moral matters, or about practical issues more generally. While the conclusions of such explanations, if correct, should guide us in thinking about what we should do, how we should behave, it is a long way from having a guide, to having answers to practical questions. Most importantly, the answers depend on much additional knowledge of human life and human societies, which philosophy may help us think about, but does not itself provide.

## 1. Why it is not a problem of partiality

My topic belongs within a large problem in practical philosophy, often identified as the question of the possibility of justified partiality.<sup>2</sup> We tend to be partial towards our children, and not only in our affections, but in practical support. We tend to do more to protect them than to protect a similar number of strangers, and more to promote their interests than to promote the interests of a similar number of strangers. And most people think not only that that is permissible, but that it is required of us, that there is something wrong, or perhaps just weird, with a person who is not partial to his or her children, convinced that one should not be partial to one's children. Many people also believe that morality is impartial, meaning that it requires people to behave impartially. Indeed, some people think that that is the mark of morality, the feature that distinguishes it from other concerns. In many matters people are allowed to act as they will, to pursue their self-interest (itself often taken to be a form of partiality, but one that I will not discuss today), to give preference to their likes and dislikes. But, where moral considerations apply they ought to act impartially.

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<sup>2</sup> See for a wide-ranging discussion of identity Kwame Anthony Appiah *THE ETHICS OF IDENTITY* (Princeton University Press, 2007). He identifies the fact that being a member of a group is taken to be a reason to favour other members as typical of group identities.

If this is taken to be part of the definition of morality, i.e. if people think that of course one has reasons to be partial, say towards one's children, but they are not moral reasons, because moral reasons are impartial, then I have neither a quarrel nor an interest in discussing the view. I am concerned with the reasons we have, and am indifferent as to various ways of allocating them to different boxes, classifying them under different rubrics. If, however, as is sometimes alleged, we have reasons to be partial, e.g. to our children, only if these reasons derive from impartial reasons, I am willing to argue that that is a mistake.<sup>3</sup>

How does one expose such a mistake? It is not practical to chase all the arguments that can be given in support of the mistaken view and bring out their errors. There is an indefinite number of arguments meeting this condition. A less demanding way is to explain mistakes that are likely to lead to the mistaken view. For example, it may be thought that since all reasons are universal in character, i.e. they apply to any instance of an open class, they cannot establish a case for doing more for one person than for another. Now, this argument, if such it is, is based on a simple fallacy. The fact that my reason to be partial to my child (which depends on him being my son) would apply to anyone who was my child does not show that given that only one person qualifies (as being my child) I may not be partial to him, and of course had I three children I would have been partial to all of them.

But how about what appears to be a more common argument: we ought to respect persons for being persons, and since the reasons to respect all persons are the same (i.e. that they are persons) they can only warrant equal respect for all.

Let it be agreed, *per arguendum*, that the value of people as people is a reason to respect them. It does not follow that I should respect my grandmother or that I should respect a great novelist [replace 'just' by 'only'] just as much as I should respect a complete stranger who accomplished little in his life. I should respect all of them equally as persons, but not as great artists or as my grandmothers. How much should I respect each of them all

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<sup>3</sup> In 'Attachments and associated reasons' [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1956026](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1956026), I discussed partiality that involves a favourable emotional attitude to the person or object towards which we are partial. Here I use partiality in the sense explained, without presupposing any emotional attachment. Given that attachments manifest partiality, the observations in that paper apply *mutatis mutandis* to the matters discussed here, though for the most part they are not repeated.

told? Respect does not always aggregate, but sometimes the reasons for respect that I have towards some people would require me to do more for them than for the others. By way of contrast we can expect that in some other contexts the cumulative strength or importance of reasons to respect some people will not be greater than the strength or importance of the most important of these reasons. So that taken together, so long as the strongest reason applies to each of the people, the cumulative force of all the reasons will yield reasons for the same kind of conduct regarding each of them, namely to act as the strongest reason requires.

Some may object that I have misrepresented the principle that all persons count and count equally. It is not to be understood as saying that apart from their other evaluative properties: being (or not being) beautiful, generous, wise, conscientious, and the like, people also have value simply in virtue of being persons. Rather the principle states that persons enjoy a special status, that of beings that count.

How does that differ from saying that they possess worth in virtue of being persons, as well as worth in virtue of being creative, funny and the like? Is it that having this moral status is a precondition to be met before any of the other value properties can apply to them? This may be true of some properties. One cannot be a good mathematician without being a person, for example. But there are beautiful, loving, creative and funny animals that are not persons. Could it mean that even though non-persons can have those evaluative properties they do not provide reasons for actions relating to them because they are not persons? I see no justification for such a view, and will continue on the assumption that the value-based approach is so far intact.

But further objections lie in wait: One is the uniqueness problem, and the other – the wrong reason problem. The wrong reason problem dissolves once the other difficulties are removed, and I will not discuss it. The problem of uniqueness is more troubling. Not all partialities raise the uniqueness problem. But some do, and as they are important, let me say something about it. We can take any friendship as an example, or make the issue more transparent by thinking of loving a person. So, let us assume that you love Jerome because he is your son and you love Anabel because she is beautiful, and funny, imaginative, with penetrating intelligence. The problem is that these are universal properties, that others can have, and even have in that combination. But you do not love others who have the same

properties. Are you irrational? Or, imagine that you do love others for you have and love more than one son, and you love Arabella and your reasons are rather similar to your reasons for loving Anabel. Yet, and this is the crucial point, each love is unique. Your love for Anabel is not a replica of your love of Arabella. It may share some properties. But it is unique to her.<sup>4</sup> How can that be?

Your reasons for loving the person you love do not require loving that person. They are what makes loving him intelligible, but the explanation of your love includes other factors that are not normative reasons, or do not function as such. In fact, in all cases of incommensurability and equality of reasons there are other factors which are not your reasons (some of them could have been – they just are not – others cannot be normative reasons at all) but which contribute to the explanation of the action or attitude. It could be that Jerome was your first child, or that Anabel was the first person with those qualities you ever met, and once you loved them, through the history of your relationship, that love became different from any other love you can have. It was made unique by significant features of its history. Of course, in a sense it is only *de facto* unique. Other loves could have had these features had this one not acquired them first. But this kind of *de facto* uniqueness is sufficient to explain the uniqueness of attachments of this kind. They are made unique by the person's history. Given his or her history, they are necessarily unique to them.<sup>5</sup>

One can go on deflecting misguided arguments against the possibility of justified partiality. But perhaps we had enough for today. I have not examined directly the view that partiality is justified only if it derives from, is an application of, impartial reasons. On the one hand there is an easy way of making it true about everything, thus denying it any role in

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Margalit tells about Edna, her mother: 'Once, when I asked her whom she loved more, my [identical twin] sister or me, she answered, simply, "You." Incredulous, my sister posed the same question. "Who do you love more, Ima? Ruth or me?" "You," my mother said. We tried again. Each time, my mother invariably told whoever asked that she loved her more. "This doesn't make any sense," we finally said. She smiled and told us, "Sure it does. Don't you see? I love you more and I love you more." This was her sense of fairness: no kid wants to hear that she is loved the same as her sister.' (New Yorker May 9, 2014). I think that it was her sense of uniqueness: no love of a loved child, is comparable to another. Each is the greatest in its own way.

<sup>5</sup> I should have been more precise and said that you believe the attachment to uniquely possess the features that make it unique. You may be wrong, and such mistakes may well lead to emotional confusion and conflict. I have discussed the notion of contingent uniqueness in *VALUE, RESPECT AND ATTACHMENT* (C.U.P., 2001) Ch. 1.

distinguishing justified from unjustified partiality. All that is needed is slightly to rephrase statements of reasons (or duties or rights). E.g., instead of the principle 'one ought to respect one's parents', we will have the principle 'One ought to respect every person provided he is your parent'.

It is clear by now why I said that the problem is misunderstood when presented as a problem of justifying partiality, suggesting that impartiality is the standard case, and only deviations from it are problematic. There are two contexts in which we tend to invoke the need for impartiality. One is to underline the importance of following reasons rather than some unjustified inclinations (such as to prefer one's cousin when there is no good reason to do so). The other context is almost the precise opposite. Certain office holders have to be and to act impartially, meaning that there is a range of good reasons that they should ignore when acting in their office, though they are valid reasons that should guide them in other cases. E.g. it may happen that a thoroughly immoral and unprincipled person holds high office. Other officials have reason to ignore that he is immoral and should not hold the office he has. They, other officials, have to treat him as though he is worthy of his high office. Though, of course, when acting as private individuals they should express the same attitudes that we should all do. My uncle, a teacher, once taught a class which included his son. As teacher he had to act impartially and ignore various reasons that should have guided him in relations with his son when he was not acting as his teacher.

When impartiality is a matter of following reasons, it draws no distinction between reasons that favour few or many. Invocation of impartiality has special force when it is an exceptional need to ignore certain otherwise valid and relevant reasons. In such contexts there is the problem of how to justify impartiality. Partiality as such is never a problem.

## 2. Justifying attachments and social bonds

The issue we are discussing, it turns out, is not the justifiability of partiality but the justifiability of reasons that people may have in virtue of special bonds they have with other people or groups. It is a normal philosophical task to explain how it is that we can have reasons of a certain type. Our type is important and problematic in certain respects, which is why we are looking at it. I dubbed it 'the reasons we have in virtue of our social bonds'

because I know of no good name for it. What I, and everyone who reflects on it, has in mind is a narrower class than the name may imply. Any reasons whose existence presupposes a culture of some kind or another involve social bonds. The kinds of social bonds I have in mind are those that identify us as members of an identity-forming group: You know the usual suspects: members of the same gender, sexual orientation, same racial, ethnic, religious group – and so on. I am gesturing towards something vaguely familiar. I will not try to identify it in a way that minimises the vagueness, for arguably the vagueness is an important part of our thinking about these matters. This means that while it may be useful to call them ‘identity-forming bonds’, the term is useful only in virtue of some of its common associations. Nothing that I will say will draw on the meaning of ‘identity’, beyond that being a member of one of these groups **may** be significant to the way one thinks of oneself or is thought of by others. So is the fact that one dislikes living in a basement apartment, though that is unlikely to be thought of as constituting an identity-forming group, and my reflections are not very relevant to it.

Let me introduce my question through two examples, which I borrow from John Skorupsky’s comment on a lecture by Scanlon<sup>6</sup>

To start from a very stock example, suppose I have a choice between rescuing my mother from a shipwreck or a blaze, and rescuing another person. Is not the fact that I am her son in and of itself a specific reason to rescue her? Does this reason have to be derived from other reasons? On the face of it, it makes no sense even to ask about reasons to ‘accept’ or ‘reject’ the identity of being her son. However, this is perhaps not obvious. Suppose, though I know that she is my biological mother, I also know that she abandoned me at birth, that as a result we hardly know each other etc. Doesn’t it make sense, in those circumstances, to ask whether I should adopt the identity ‘her son’? Couldn’t I answer in the negative? ‘I don’t think of myself as her son,’ I might say. But another view finds this response evasive, or self-deluding. Even in the described circumstances the brute fact that I am her son gives me a reason – though one much weaker than the overall reason I would have if in fact she had spent time, feeling and effort bringing me up, as a result of which we were emotionally close. .... Next, suppose I am a successful asylum seeker, established in Britain having fled some oppressive regime. Out of the blue, the son of a cousin turns up on my doorstep seeking support. Of course, there may be ... reasons to aid anyone in that situation who requests aid. But should I regard the family relationship itself, which of course I did not choose, as a reason to provide

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<sup>6</sup> T.M. Scanlon’s ‘Ideas of Identity and their Normative Status’ available at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/law/c-ppl/news-events/ppl-annual-lecture-thomas-scanlon-ideas-of-identity-updated-2.pdf>

help? Could I not say ‘I’m sorry, but I no longer think of myself as a refugee, with an extended family in \*\*\* – I’m trying to lead a new life’. Someone from the same culture might answer ‘I’m sorry, too, but how you think of yourself is not really the point. The fact is that you are a member of the family, and that itself gives you responsibilities’.<sup>7</sup>

One mistaken tendency that Skorupsky points to is to think that whether a relationship or membership of a group provides reasons for action or feelings, etc., depends on one’s choice, here and elsewhere often described as a choice of one’s identity. Given that “identity” is used in so many quite diverse contexts for so many different purposes I will avoid the term. But not – I hope – evade the problems Scanlon, Skorupski and many others debate. For the sake of a more natural flowing explanation I will often refer to ‘duties’ rather than reasons as I have done so far, without stopping to consider when reasons we have are duties and when not. Both reasons and duties are *pro tanto*, and can be overridden by conflicting considerations.

It is far from clear why anyone should think that relationships and membership in groups provide reasons or impose duties only if undertaken or maintained by choice. Of course, some people may think that all duties, including the duty not to murder, are based on choice or consent. I will disregard that view. But, if some duties do not depend on our choices, why do those which come with relationships and group membership?

### 3. Voluntary associations and the duties of members

Voluntary associations, whatever else they are, are sets of interrelated practices, establishing the purposes and modes of operation of the association. Members are subject to those practices, having rights and duties as determined by them. So, the question is: how could it be that a social practice, a sociological fact as many call it, can establish rights and duties that people would not have independently of it? The choice-based answer is that people have it because they choose to. After all the rights and duties apply only to and among members of the associations and by definition they are members because they choose to be.

A simple understanding of the choice-based view takes it to regard the practices, as a contingent fact of nature. There could be different practices, different voluntary

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/law/c-ppl/news-events/ppl-annual-lecture-skorupski-comment-on-scanlon-on-identity.pdf> pp. 3-4.



associations, just as there could be different rivers in one's country, and one takes advantage of them or avoids their hazards as one wills. The will binds, and once one is part of an association one is bound by the duties its practices constitute or impose, as they change from time to time, whether one would agree to them or not. One is able to leave the association, but so long as one is in it, its duties bind one because of one's choice to join. Why does one's choice, or will or consent, bind is a mystery. The mystery is not why one can do what one chooses – sometimes one can and that is not a normative question. The mystery is why one is bound to act as one does not want to because of a past choice that does not prevent one from acting as one wants, but makes it wrong to do so. The mystery is deepened by the addition of exceptions to the principle that one's choice binds one: choosing to join Murder Incorporated does not bind. Choosing to join a legitimate association does not mean that one would be bound by duties it may impose to act immorally. Choices of the very young do not bind them. Finally, choosing to make oneself a slave, i.e. to wholly subject oneself to the will of another person or association on all matters, is not binding.

In saying that these appear mysterious I do not mean that these views are mistaken, only that the more one examines them the more they appear to be an assembly of unrelated and unexplained ideas. My suggested explanation, meant to provide a framework for thinking about such duties, is that there can be value in people having the power to join, and thus bind themselves by the rules of, voluntary associations of certain kinds. When there is such value the rules bind them. There is, my example was, no value in the very young having that power to bind themselves, which is why they do not have it, and there is no value in any person choosing to become a murderer, which is why they are not bound by rules of Murder Inc. etc. You may dispute any of my examples. Indeed, I may do so myself. The proposed principle frames considerations of these and other cases. It explains why sometimes choice to join a voluntary association binds and sometimes it does not, thus setting the mode of reasoning about these issues.

It is not the only relevant principle. It explains why sometimes choice provides no case for thinking that one is bound at all. Other principles explain why even though the choice is a case for being bound that case is overridden by other considerations, like the impact of one's choice on other people. A somewhat over-simplistic account has it that the interest of

the chooser determines whether his choice is a reason for him to be bound. The interest of others may defeat the force of that reason and lead to the conclusion that he is not bound after all.

There are three points to highlight:

VALUE: First, people will be sceptical at my liberal use of “value” left right and centre. I plead guilty as charged: I am using the term in a wider meaning than its standard meaning. I use it as a common term for anything that makes something worthwhile, gives an action a point, makes it contribute some meaning to a pattern in our life, makes it good to some degree in some way. I use it that way because there is no single word or brief phrase that does that job. The charge can be made that the result is a term that is too general in application and disguises the great variety of ways in which things can be good or have a point or be worthwhile. But this charge would be justified only if ‘has value’ is taken to explain what makes the thing valuable, in what way it is valuable. That is not my suggestion. That something has some value is not an explanation of its value. It means that there is something to explain, and the explanation will bring out the great variety of ways in which things can be of value. And of course, I am not assuming that all value is fungible.

A common and foundational way of explaining how an action, or aspiration or occupation or something else, has value is to relate it to a wider context of activities or events in human life, showing how it contributes to the richness or fulfilment of that life. And it can do so in many different ways. So, my point is that choice provides reasons and duties only when it does contribute to life in some way that can be described. It denies that there is magic in choice or consent, or that they always bind. And it suggests a way of determining when they do and when they do not.

THE VALUE OF CHOOSING TO BELONG: My second point to highlight is the obvious one: the explanation of the value of belonging to voluntary associations moves the focal point from the belonging to the ability to choose whether to belong or not. Of course, there would be no value in that choice if belonging to such groups is never of value. The account I am suggesting presupposes that choosing to belong can be of value: depending on the nature of the association, and the condition of the chooser. But my account allows, as is obvious, that choosing to belong can lack value. It maintains that the ability to choose is itself valuable,

and within limits that is true even if the choice is unwise, and the association is not worth belonging to for this person or generally.

It is an inevitable concomitant of the value of choice that where it is valuable its consequences bind even when undesirable – a fundamental starting point to any explanation of why what we choose may bind us even when we no longer want the results of the choice.

THE NON-CHOICE-DEPENDENT IMPLICATIONS OF CHOICES: This brings us to the third point: the relation between wanting to do something and having a reason or a duty to do so. Some people associate duties with restrictions on a person's liberty for the sake of others. More crudely, some think that duties restrict one's pursuit of one's own interest in order to protect the interests of others. While some duties have that rationale, that is a gross distortion of the function and justification of duties generally. They are primarily factors that give shape to various aspects of our life.<sup>8</sup> For example, duties of friendship are part of the constitution of friendship. Friendship is a relationship regulated, in part, by duties regarding friends. We, generally speaking, want to be good friends, and observing the duties of friendship is an important part of being good friends. The thought is that when we wish to express our friendship we need guidance. What will express it? Should we go around telling people how wonderful our friends are? Or, should we enter their homes and clean them? Some unsocialised people may be swept by feelings of friendship to do things like that. But those who understand friendship know that such conduct could be offensive. The duties of friendship are part of the guidance of what friends should do to express their friendship. It goes without saying that when reasons and duties fulfil this function, when their role and contribution is to guide our will, their existence is not conditioned by our desire to perform the act they are a reason to perform. In some cases, whatever is the good of following such reasons is diminished or altogether negated, when they are followed reluctantly, unwillingly. In such cases the reason is not only a reason to act in a certain way, but to do so willingly. But even then, the reason is there even when the will is not. Failure to desire to follow the reason is a rational failure as much as failure to act as the reason directs.

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<sup>8</sup> I discussed this aspect of duties at some length in 'Liberating Duties' LAW AND PHILOSOPHY 8 (1989) 3 (reprinted in ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN (O.U.P. 1994)). Cf. also D. Owens, SHAPING OF THE NORMATIVE LANDSCAPE (O.U.P. 2012).

In conclusion, when the friendship is good, fulfilling its duties is also good for us, for it is a manifestation of the friendship. It is the same with the duties of voluntary associations generally.

#### 4. Non-voluntary relationships and group-membership

Why am I talking about voluntary groups when my aim is to discuss the possibility of duties of group-membership that is independent of our will? Many people are inclined to accept that we have duties in virtue of belonging to voluntary associations and having voluntary relationships. They may attribute this to the magic of choice, but perhaps they can be persuaded that the value-based account I suggested explains both why and within what limits choice matters. Regarding non-voluntary groups and relationships doubts may make some people think that that membership does not impose duties because membership is not freely agreed to. My hope is that they may revise this view if they accept that the normative impact of choice requires explanation, and that such an explanation can be provided by reflection on the value of choice and its limits. If value can explain the duties resulting from voluntary membership perhaps it can also provide the key to reflection on the normative impact of non-voluntary groups. The distinction between the two kinds of groups and relationships is not sharp: most children do not choose their parents, but some are adopted when old enough to express their consent. Most people do not consider the possibility of changing their gender but some do change it. The same goes for nationality, religion and many other non-voluntary belongings, though even when change occurs and even when it is motivated by choice it tends to be considerably more complex and gradual than change of friendship or voluntary associations.

Duties of belonging presuppose belonging. And the group to which one belongs exists only if it is socially recognised as a distinct group. Of course, the group may be defined by some natural feature: green-eyed people, for example. But a natural feature does not a group make. It is a group only if it is socially recognised as such. There is no denying that an individual may assign special significance to a feature – being green-eyed – even though no one else does. But it does not have the significance we have in mind when thinking of group membership. Forms of social recognition vary and some are more explicit and publicly known than others. In a country like Germany or the US with a Zaydi population it may not

be generally known that, say, Zaydis are a social group. And of course the group need not employ the concept 'a social group' when thinking of itself. It may classify itself under another concept (religion etc.). It may even have no general concept to apply to all its members. Social recognition may consist of no more than feeling, when encountering a person with an accent one recognises, and others generally do not notice, that that person is likely to be more friendly, approachable, interested; that there are possibilities of satisfying or rewarding interaction with him or her, more than with the average stranger.

These groups are of different kinds, but typically they have pervasive historical, cultural and emotional connotations, meaning that their members share common knowledge, common traditions, and emotional ties. And in virtue of ties they share they have expectations of one another. These too may vary. Normally they are that the common ties have left a mark on fellow members, which are manifested in their life and in their attitudes. I started this discussion with the possibility that special help, that a favouring, relative to one's treatment of strangers, is expected. That is true of many social groups, but need not be true of all. It depends on their own traditions and they may even reject the appropriateness of favouring members over non-members.

Social groups share a history, a culture and emotional connotations. But not all their members do, many may not, or may share such ties only to limited degree. Moreover, some, often significant numbers, dislike what they share, feel alienated and would prefer not to be members of the group. Significantly, however, members know, if only implicitly, that such sharing of ties is common, and expected. Those who dislike it often feel guilty about their attitude, even while they approve of it. Cases where one belongs to such a group and it means nothing to one are more familiar from stories, including self-deceiving stories, than from life.

So, here is the one feature of these situations I wanted to highlight: on the one hand, not only one's membership, but the very existence of groups of this kind is contingent. Ethnic groups and their significance, religions, genders are all historically contingent. Yet those that exist and to which we belong are not passive factors, indifferent to our life and membership, as the weather or climate are. Groups, through their members, acknowledge (or doubt) our membership, and have expectations of us as members, or non-members. We live in dynamic interactive relations with these groups and their members.

All this is just an observation of their character, complementing the observation we started from, namely that membership is not voluntary. One consequential difference between these and voluntary groupings is that while there is more to voluntary associations than their formal constitution and the rules by which they are governed, they also have an ethos, a culture (broadly understood) of their organisation, as their formal rules, with the rights and duties they prescribe, and the committee structure which governs them, predominate. Not so with social groups. Whatever formal structure some of them have tends to be but one aspect of what makes them what they are. The pervasive sharing of culture and history with their connotations tends to prevail. Hence, while so long as one is a member of a voluntary grouping one is subject to duties one may no longer wish to be subject to, or even duties one never wanted to be subject to, each of the duties of voluntary associations can be individually changed, i.e. without changing the others. Sometimes individuals have the power to exempt themselves from some duties, but in general the committees, etc., that run the groups can do so. Not so with non-voluntary groups and relationships. Their existence and rules depend, as we saw, on pervasive common understanding of their history and a sharing of culture. To be sure, these change over time, partly in response to pressure for change, and besides they often allow for individual variations in one's understanding of membership and its duties. But, it is nevertheless true that they apply in bulk, with no possibility of individuals picking and choosing which to endorse and which to be exempt from.

I am sure that you see where I am leading: The existence of, and membership in, such a group may be morally valuable to its members, without being morally objectionable from the point of view of non-members. It can be enriching and meaningful for its members, framing much of their life, providing them with support and sources of fulfilment and achievement. When this is the case, happily acculturated members do have duties arising out of the membership, and while occasionally resenting or regretting that they have this or that duty, in general they are content with the situation. Note that nothing I say implies the they should be punished by law for failing to conform with their duties. Whether and when this or other punishments are appropriate is a completely separate issue, not one I discuss today.

Needless to say, the happy situation I delineated is not the only one. And we should be warned off too simplistic an understanding of the value approach.

For example, we may be tempted to say that

- (1) membership provides reasons when it is good for a member to belong to the group, and
- (2) it is good for a person to belong to the group only if the existence of the group, its continued existence, is valuable, only if it is – as we may say briefly – a good group.

Both propositions are false. Membership may be good for a person even if the group he belongs to is greatly defective. His loyalty to it may make him a campaigner for reform which he could be only as an insider, only as a member. And this is but one example. The complications are more far-reaching. They are mostly due to the differences between voluntary associations and groups like religious, ethnic, national, groups or one's gender or sexual orientation etc. Most clearly, the value of choosing membership does not dominate. The focus is on the value of the existence of associations of this kind, and the value of opportunities and relationships whose existence depends on the existence of the group. The existence of such groups generally depends less, if at all, on practices and conventions of required or appropriate behaviour, and more on complex webs of beliefs, attitudes, emotions and traditions. The practices, traditions and patterns of expectation that constitute the group and those which presuppose the group's existence tend to affect many aspects of the life of members (they affect non-members as well, but I ignore that here). It becomes difficult to pass judgement on the group and its ways as a whole. They all have more and less valuable aspects and various that are outright unacceptable. They also provide a framework for many practices that while not constitutive of the identity of the group depend on its existence.

The result of the richness, variety of aspects and depth of emotional resonance of group membership is that commonly different members are attached to different aspects of it. The variety of value also breeds ambiguities in attitudes and feelings about belonging.

Aspects of the practices associated with the group, some of which may be firmly taken to be essential to its identity, may be, or may have become over time, morally unacceptable. They may and should generate disputes and conflicts within the group, a desire by some

members to exit it, and more critical attitudes from outsiders towards members. Can one ignore and disobey just the objectionable practices? Should one follow even objectionable practices, trying to mitigate their unacceptable aspects? Or, should one reject the group as a whole? etc. etc. I will not try to delineate here the myriad situations in which people may find themselves as a result of real or believed unacceptable aspects of such groups. What is important is that these ambiguities and conflicting emotions are the result of, are made possible by, the fact that we have reasons that are there independently of our choosing, and which create the framework of attitudes and the opportunities for actions and feelings, which make these groups such a potent force in our lives

I wanted to outline a framework for deliberation on these issues. It shows how non-voluntary membership can give rise to duties. It explains why these come in bulk and cannot readily be negotiated singly, independent of the others, while the duties of voluntary associations can be. And it explains why it is that whatever the moral case for one way of dealing with one's group or another, all those that involve critical attitudes towards aspects of the group's practices, or towards its very existence, are likely to find us conflicted and agonised. The very richness of the groups, their very potential to shape and contribute so much to our life, guarantees that no certitude about one's correct response to their deficiencies will absolve one from feeling conflicted, and ambiguous about much of one's own and other people's situation regarding the groups, and responses to them.