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## Relationships and Responsibilities

How do we come to have responsibilities to some people that we do not have to others? In our everyday lives, many different kinds of considerations are invoked to explain these “special” responsibilities. Often we cite some kind of interaction that we have had with the person to whom we bear the responsibility. Perhaps we made this person a promise, or entered into an agreement with him. Or perhaps we feel indebted to him because of something he once did for us. Or, again, perhaps we once harmed him in some way, and as a result we feel a responsibility to make reparation to him. In all of these cases, there is either something we have done or something the “beneficiary” of the responsibility has done that is cited as the source of that responsibility.

Not all of our explanations take this form, however. Sometimes we account for special responsibilities not by citing any specific interaction between us and the beneficiary, but rather by citing the nature of our relationship to that person. We have special duties to a person, we may say, because she is our sister, or our friend, or our neighbor. Many different types of relationship are invoked in this way. Perhaps the person is not a relative but a colleague, not a friend but a teammate, not a neighbor but a client. Sometimes the relationship may consist only in the fact that we are both members of a certain kind of group. We may

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belong to the same community, for example, or be citizens of the same country, or be part of the same nation or people. In some of these cases, we may never have met or had any interaction with the person who is seen as the beneficiary of the responsibility. We may nevertheless be convinced that our shared group membership suffices to generate such a responsibility. Of course, claims of special responsibility can be controversial, especially in cases of this kind. While some people feel strongly that they have special responsibilities to the other members of their national or cultural group, for example, other people feel just as strongly that they do not. Nevertheless, it is a familiar fact that such ties are often seen as a source of special responsibilities. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to find any type of human relationship to which people have attached value or significance but which has never been seen as generating such responsibilities. It seems that whenever people value an interpersonal relationship they are apt to see it as a source of special duties or obligations.<sup>1</sup>

However, although it is clear that we do in fact cite our relationships to other people in explaining why we have special responsibilities to them, many philosophers have been reluctant to take these citations at face value. Instead, they have supposed that the responsibilities we perceive as arising out of special relationships actually arise out of discrete interactions that occur in the context of those relationships. Thus, for example, some special responsibilities, like the mutual responsibilities of spouses, may be said to arise out of promises or commitments that the participants have made to each other. Others, like the responsibilities of children to their parents, may be seen as arising from the provision of benefits to one party by the other. And in cases like those mentioned earlier, in which two people are both members of some group but have not themselves interacted in any way, it may be denied that the people do in fact have any special responsibilities to each other. As already noted, claims of special responsibility tend to be controversial in such cases anyway, and it may be thought an advantage of this position

1. In this paragraph and at other points in the next few pages, I draw on my discussions of special responsibilities in the following papers: "Individual Responsibility in a Global Age," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 219–36; "Families, Nations, and Strangers," in *The Lindley Lecture* series (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1995); "Liberalism, Nationalism, and Egalitarianism," in Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan eds., *The Morality of Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

that it sees grounds for skepticism precisely in the cases that are most controversial.

Clearly, the view that duties arising out of special relationships can always be reduced to duties arising out of discrete interactions is compatible with the view that the relevant interactions, and hence the relevant duties, may be of fundamentally different kinds. Indeed, to some philosophers it seems clear that the relationships that have been seen as generating special responsibilities are so heterogeneous that the responsibilities in question cannot possibly have but a single ground. Nevertheless, one of the greatest pressures toward a reductionist position has come from those who believe that all genuine special responsibilities must be based on consent or on some other voluntary act. These voluntarists, as we may call them, are not hostile to the idea of special responsibilities as such. However, they reject the notion that one can find oneself with such responsibilities without having done anything at all to incur them. Different voluntarists disagree about the types of voluntary act that are capable of generating special responsibilities. Some insist that such responsibilities can only arise from explicit agreements or undertakings. Others believe that one can incur special responsibilities just by voluntarily entering into a relationship with someone, and that no explicit agreement to bear the responsibilities is required. Still others believe that one's acceptance of the benefits of participation in a relationship can generate responsibilities even if one's entry into the relationship was not itself voluntary. Obviously, then, voluntarists will sometimes disagree among themselves about the specific responsibilities of particular people. And different versions of voluntarism will be more or less revisionist with respect to our ordinary moral beliefs, depending on which types of voluntary act they deem capable of generating special responsibilities. For example, voluntarists who believe that special responsibilities can only be incurred through an explicit undertaking or the voluntary establishment of a relationship may deny that children have such responsibilities to their parents. But those who think that the voluntary acceptance of benefits can also generate special responsibilities may disagree, at least insofar as they think it makes sense to regard children as voluntarily accepting benefits from their parents. What all voluntarists do agree about, however, is that the mere fact that one stands in a certain relationship to another person cannot by itself give one a special responsibility to that person. In order to have such a

responsibility, one must have performed some voluntary act that constitutes the ground of the responsibility.

Voluntarists are sensitive to the fact that special responsibilities can be costly and difficult to discharge, and thus quite burdensome for those who bear them. It would be unfair, they believe, if people could be saddled with such burdens against their wills, and so it would be unfair if special responsibilities could be ascribed to people who had done nothing voluntarily to incur them. In effect, then, voluntarists see a form of reductionism about special responsibilities as necessary if our assignments of such responsibilities are to be fair to those who bear them. Voluntarism is an influential view, and many people find the voluntarist objection to unreduced special responsibilities quite congenial. At the same time, however, there is another objection that may also be directed against such responsibilities. According to this objection, the problem with special responsibilities is not that they may be unfairly burdensome for those who bear them, but rather that they may confer unfair advantages on their bearers. And for the purposes of this objection, it does not matter whether the source of those responsibilities is understood voluntaristically or not.

Suppose that you have recently become my friend and that I have therefore acquired special responsibilities to you. Clearly, these responsibilities work to your advantage, inasmuch as I now have a duty to do things for you that I would not previously have been required to do. At the same time, there are at least two different ways in which my responsibilities to you work to the disadvantage of those people with whom I have no special relationship. First, in the absence of my responsibilities to you, I might have done certain things for them even though I had no duty to do so. Now, however, discharging my responsibilities to you must take priority over doing any of those things for them. Second, there may also be situations in which my responsibilities to you take priority over the responsibilities that I have to them simply as human beings. For example, there may be times when I must help you rather than helping them, if I cannot do both, even though I would have been required to help them but for the fact that you too need help. Thus, in both of these ways, my special responsibilities to you may work to the disadvantage of other people. In one respect, moreover, they may also work to my own disadvantage, since, as the voluntarist objection points out, such responsibilities can be quite burdensome. At the same time, how-

ever, my responsibilities to you may also confer some very important advantages on me. For, insofar as I am required to give your interests priority over the interests of other people, I am, in effect, called upon to act in ways that will contribute to the flourishing of our friendship rather than attending to the needs of other people. So my responsibilities to you may work to my net advantage as well as to yours, while working to the disadvantage of people with whom I have no special relationship. Furthermore, if you and I have become friends, then, presumably, not only have I acquired special responsibilities to you but you have acquired such responsibilities to me. And, just as my responsibilities to you may work both to your advantage and to mine, while working to the disadvantage of other people, so too your responsibilities to me may work both to my advantage and to yours, while working to the disadvantage of others.

Now the objection that I have in mind challenges this entire way of allocating benefits and burdens, on the ground that it provides you and me with unfair advantages while unfairly disadvantaging other people. Why exactly, this "distributive objection" asks, should our friendship give rise to a distribution of responsibility that is favorable to us and unfavorable to other people? After all, it may be said, the effect of such a distribution is to reward the very people who have already achieved a rewarding personal relationship, while penalizing those who have not. In addition to enjoying the benefits of our friendship itself, in other words, you and I receive increased claims to each other's assistance, while other people, who never received the original benefits, find that their claims to assistance from us have now become weaker.<sup>2</sup> The distributive objection urges that the fairness of this allocation must be judged against the background of the existing distribution of benefits and burdens of all kinds. Providing additional advantages to people who have already benefited from participation in rewarding relationships will be unjustifiable, according to the distributive objection, whenever the provision of these advantages works to the detriment of people who

2. If it is ultimately to be convincing, the distributive objection will need to provide a fuller accounting of the various advantages and disadvantages that special responsibilities may confer both on the participants in interpersonal relationships and on nonparticipants. I consider the implications of such an accounting in "The Conflict Between Justice and Responsibility," in L. Brilmayer and I. Shapiro eds., *NOMOS XLI: Global Justice* (forthcoming).

are needier, whether they are needier because they are not themselves participants in rewarding relationships or because they are significantly worse off in other ways. And it makes no difference, so far as this objection is concerned, whether special responsibilities are thought of as voluntarily incurred or not. Either way, the distributive objection insists that unless the benefits and burdens of special responsibilities are integrated into an overall distribution that is fair, such responsibilities will amount to little more than what one writer has called a "pernicious"<sup>3</sup> form of "prejudice in favor of people who stand in some special relation to us."<sup>4</sup>

It may be protested that it is misleading to represent special responsibilities as providing additional rewards to people who have already secured the advantages of participation in a rewarding relationship. Part of what makes a relationship rewarding, it may be said, is that there are special responsibilities associated with it. So any rewards that special responsibilities may confer on the participants in such relationships are inseparable from the other rewards of participation. This reply raises a variety of issues that I have discussed elsewhere<sup>5</sup> but which cannot be dealt with adequately here. For present purposes, suffice it to say that the reply is unlikely, by itself, to persuade proponents of the distributive objection. They are likely to question whether special responsibilities—as opposed, say, to the *de facto* willingness of the participants to give special weight to each other's interests—are genuinely necessary for the achievement of a rewarding relationship. They are also likely to argue that, even if it is true that special responsibilities help to make rewarding relationships possible, this only confirms the fundamental point of the objection, which is that such responsibilities work to the advantage of the participants in rewarding relationships and to the disadvantage of nonparticipants. Thus, they are likely to conclude, it remains important that, so far as possible, these advantages and disadvantages should be integrated into an overall distribution of benefits and burdens that is fair.

As we have seen, the voluntarist objection asserts that the source of our special responsibilities must lie in our own voluntary acts. Other-

3. Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

5. In "Families, Nations, and Strangers," Section IV.

wise, it claims, such responsibilities would be unfairly burdensome for those who bear them. Thus, according to this objection, fairness to the bearers of special responsibilities requires a version of reductionism with respect to such responsibilities. The distributive objection, on the other hand, challenges the fairness of special responsibilities whether or not their source is thought of as lying in the voluntary acts of those who bear them. And its claim is that such responsibilities, far from imposing unfair burdens on the people who bear them, may instead provide those people with unfair advantages. If a nonreductionist account of special responsibilities is to be convincing, it will need to address both of these objections.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, I will sketch the rudiments of a nonreductionist account. My discussion will remain schematic, inasmuch as I will be concerned with the abstract structure of a nonreductionist position rather than with a detailed accounting of the specific responsibilities that such a position would assign people. Nevertheless, I hope that my sketch may suggest a new way of understanding nonreductionist claims of special responsibility and that, in so doing, it may make nonreductionism seem less implausible than it is often thought to be. In any event, I believe that the type of position I will describe merits careful consideration. As is no doubt evident, questions about the status of special responsibilities bear directly on a number of the liveliest controversies in contemporary moral and political philosophy. For example, such questions are central to the debate within moral philosophy between consequentialism and deontology. They are equally central to the debates within political philosophy between liberalism and communitarianism, and between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Thus the way that we think about special responsibilities may have far-reaching implications, and it would be a mistake to dismiss nonreductionism without attempting to understand it sympathetically.

Nonreductionists are impressed by the fact that we often cite our relationships to people rather than particular interactions with them as the source of our special responsibilities. They believe that our perception of things is basically correct; the source of such responsibilities often does lie in the relationships themselves rather than in particular interac-

6. I have discussed both objections at greater length in "Families, Nations, and Strangers" and in "Liberalism, Nationalism, and Egalitarianism." I have discussed the distributive objection most extensively in "The Conflict Between Justice and Responsibility."

tions between the participants. A nonreductionist might begin to elaborate this position as follows. Other people can make claims on me, and their needs can provide me with reasons for action, whether or not I have any special relationship to them. If a stranger is suffering and I am in a position to help, without undue cost to myself, then I may well have a reason to do so. This much is true simply in virtue of our common humanity. However, if I have a special, valued relationship with someone, and if the value I attach to the relationship is not purely instrumental in character—if, in other words, I do not value it solely as a means to some independently specified end—then I regard the person with whom I have the relationship as capable of making additional claims on me, beyond those that people in general can make. For to attach noninstrumental value to my relationship with a particular person just is, in part, to see that person as a source of special claims in virtue of the relationship between us. It is, in other words, to be disposed, in contexts which vary depending on the nature of the relationship, to see that person's needs, interests, and desires as, in themselves, providing me with presumptively decisive reasons for action, reasons that I would not have had in the absence of the relationship. By "presumptively decisive reasons" I mean reasons which, although they are capable in principle of being outweighed or overridden, nevertheless present themselves as considerations upon which I must act. If there are no circumstances in which I would see a person's needs or interests as giving me such reasons, then, according to the nonreductionist, it makes no sense to assert that I attach (noninstrumental) value to my relationship with that person. But this is tantamount to saying that I cannot value my relationships (noninstrumentally) without seeing them as sources of special responsibilities.<sup>7</sup>

If it is true that one cannot value one's relationship to another person (noninstrumentally) without seeing it, in effect, as a source of special responsibilities, then it hardly seems mysterious that such a wide and apparently heterogeneous assortment of relationships have been seen

7. The nonreductionist recognizes, of course, that it is possible for me to regard relationships in which I am not a participant as valuable. The nonreductionist's claim, however, is that valuing one's own relationship to another person is different, not because one is bound to see such a relationship as more valuable than other relationships of the same type, but rather because one is bound to see it as a source of reasons for action of a distinctive kind.



as giving rise to such responsibilities. Nor, given that different people value relationships of different kinds, does it seem mysterious that some claims of special responsibility remain highly controversial. For if one disapproves of a certain kind of relationship, or of the tendency to invest relationships of that kind with significance, then one is likely to greet claims of special responsibility arising out of such relationships with skepticism. Thus, to take three very different examples, although the members of street gangs, fraternities, and nations often attach considerable importance to their membership in those groups, and although, in consequence, they often have a strong sense of responsibility to their fellow members, someone who disapproves of such groups, or of the tendency to invest them with significance, may be unwilling to accept these claims of responsibility. On the other hand, someone who values his own participation in a relationship of a certain kind is likely to ascribe special responsibilities to the other participants in such relationships, even when they themselves do not value those relationships or acknowledge responsibilities arising out of them. Thus, on the nonreductionist view, differences in the kinds of relationships that people value lead naturally to disagreements about the assignment of special responsibility.

The nonreductionist position as thus far described takes us only so far. It asserts that relationships and not merely interactions are among the sources of special responsibilities, and it claims that people who value their relationships invariably see them as giving rise to such responsibilities. As so far described, however, the position says nothing about the conditions under which relationships actually do give rise to special responsibilities. Now there is, of course, no reason to expect that all nonreductionists will give the same answer to this question, any more than there is reason to expect that all reductionists will identify the same types of interactions as the sources of special responsibilities. In this essay, however, I wish to explore the specific suggestion that one's relationships to other people give rise to special responsibilities to those people when they are relationships that one has reason to value.<sup>8</sup> For ease of exposition, I will refer to this view simply as "nonreductionism,"

8. On some views, membership in a group may give one special responsibilities *to the group* that transcend any responsibilities one has to the individual members. The view I am exploring is agnostic on this question.

but we should remember that this is just an expository device, and that other versions of nonreductionism are possible.

Several features of the formulation I have given require comment and clarification. First, the term "value," as it occurs in that formulation and in subsequent discussion, should be taken to mean "value noninstrumentally," and the term "reason" should be taken to mean "net reason." In other words, if a person only has reason to value a relationship instrumentally, then the principle I have stated does not treat that relationship as a source of special responsibilities. And if a person has some reason to value a relationship but more reason not to, then again the principle does not treat it as generating such responsibilities. Furthermore, although the formulation I have given does not presuppose any particular conception of the kinds of reasons that people can have for valuing their relationships, reasons that are *reflexively instrumental*, in the sense that they derive from the instrumental advantages of valuing a relationship noninstrumentally, are to be understood as excluded. In other words, if attaching noninstrumental value to a certain relationship would itself be an effective means of achieving some independently desirable goal, the principle I have stated does not treat that as a reason of the responsibility-generating kind.

Second, there is a perfectly good sense of "relationship" in which every human being stands in some relationship to every other human being. However, as far as the view that I am presenting is concerned, only socially salient connections among people count as "relations" or "relationships"—two terms that I use interchangeably. Thus, for example, if you happen to have the same number of letters in your last name as John Travolta does, that does not mean that you have a relationship with him. Nor does the fact that you admire Travolta suffice to establish the existence of a relationship in the relevant sense, for the fact that one person has a belief about or attitude toward another does not constitute a social tie between them. On the other hand, two members of a socially recognized group do have a relationship in the relevant sense, even if they have never met, and if they value their membership in that group they may also value their relations to the other members. Thus, the fact that you are a member of the John Travolta Fan Club means that you have a relation to each of the other club members, and if you value your membership you may also value those relations.

Third, valuing my relationship with another person, in the sense that

matters for nonreductionism, means valuing the relation of each of us to the other. So if, for example, I value my status as the Brutal Tyrant's leading opponent but not his status as my despised adversary, then I do not value our relationship in the sense that the nonreductionist principle treats as relevant. Similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to having reason to value a relationship.

Fourth, nonreductionism as I have formulated it is not committed to a fixed view either of the strength or of the content of special responsibilities. It is compatible with the view that such responsibilities can be outweighed by other considerations. It is also compatible with the view that the strength of one's responsibilities depends on the nature of the relationships that give rise to them, and on the degree of value that one has reason to attach to those relationships. As far as the content of the responsibilities is concerned, we may assume that this too depends on the nature of the relationships in question, but that, at the most abstract level, it always involves a duty to give priority of various kinds, in suitable contexts, to certain of the interests of those to whom the responsibilities are owed.

Fifth, the nonreductionist principle states a sufficient condition for special responsibilities, not a necessary condition. Thus the principle does not purport to identify the source of all such responsibilities. In particular, it does not deny that promises and other kinds of discrete interactions can also give rise to special responsibilities. It merely claims to identify conditions under which interpersonal relations give rise to responsibilities that need not be fully accounted for in reductionist terms.

Sixth, nonreductionism makes it possible to claim both that people sometimes have special responsibilities that they think they lack, and that they sometimes lack special responsibilities that they think they have. For it is possible to think both that people can fail to value relationships that they have reason to value, and that they can succeed in valuing relationships that they have no reason to value. We may think, for example, that a neglectful father has reason to value his relations to the children he ignores, or that an abused wife lacks any reason to value her relation to the husband she cannot bring herself to leave. Similarly, we may feel that an ambitious young woman has good reasons to value her relationship with the devoted immigrant parents of whom she is ashamed, and little reason to value her relationship with the vain and

self-absorbed classmate whose attention she prizes and whose approval she craves.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, however, our ability to sustain claims of this kind is clearly dependent on a conception of reasons, and, more specifically, on a conception of the conditions under which people may be said to have reasons to value their relations to others. The more closely a person's reasons are seen as linked to his existing desires and motivations, the less scope there will be for distinguishing between the relationships that he has reason to value and the relationships that he actually does value. On the other hand, the less closely reasons are thought of as tied to existing desires, the more room there will be to draw such distinctions. As I have indicated, nonreductionism does not itself put forward a conception of reasons. Its claim, rather, is that many judgments of special responsibility are dependent on the ascription to people of reasons for valuing their relations to others, so that any substantive conception of such responsibilities is hostage to some conception of reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Nonreductionism of the kind I have described makes possible the following simple defense of unreduced special responsibilities. We human beings are social creatures, and creatures with values. Among the things that we value are our relations with each other. But to value one's relationship with another person is to see it as a source of reasons for action of a distinctive kind. It is, in effect, to see oneself as having special responsibilities to the person with whom one has the relationship. Thus, insofar as we have good reasons to value our interpersonal relations, we have good reasons to see ourselves as having special responsibilities. And, accordingly, skepticism about such responsibilities will be justified

9. Of course, since the nonreductionist principle does articulate only a sufficient and not a necessary condition for special responsibilities, the fact that one has no reason to value one's relationship to a particular person does not by itself show that one has no special responsibilities whatsoever to that person—only that one has no responsibilities arising under the nonreductionist principle.

10. This means that it would be possible for a reductionist to argue that people's reasons for valuing their relations to others derive exclusively from discrete interactions that occur in the context of those relations. Even if this argument were accepted, however, it would remain the case that, according to the principle under consideration, the source of the relevant responsibilities lies in the relationships rather than the interactions. Furthermore, it may not be possible without loss of plausibility to translate reductionism about special responsibilities into reductionism about people's reasons for valuing their relationships. For some of the types of interaction that have been seen as generating such responsibilities do not seem plausibly construed as generating reasons for valuing relationships.

only if we are prepared to deny that we have good reasons to value our relationships.

It may seem that this argument is fallacious. For consider: even if I have reason to promise that I will meet you for lunch on Tuesday, and even though I would be obligated to meet you if I were so to promise, it does not follow that, here and now, I actually have such an obligation. On the contrary, I acquire the obligation only if I make the promise. Similarly, it may seem, even if I have reason to value my relationship with you, and even if I would acquire special responsibilities to you if I did value our relationship, it does not follow that, here and now, I actually have such responsibilities. On the contrary, I acquire the responsibilities only if I value the relationship. However, the nonreductionist will resist this analogy. In the promising case, I have reason to perform an act which, if performed, will generate an obligation. But the nonreductionist's claim about special responsibilities is different. The claim is not that, in having reason to value our relationship, I have reason to perform an act which, if performed, will generate responsibilities. The claim is rather that, to value our relationship *is*, in part, to see myself as having such responsibilities, so that if, here and now, I have reason to value our relationship, then what I have reason to do, here and now, is to see myself as having such responsibilities. In the promising case, the promise generates the obligation, and no obligation arises in the absence of the promise. But the existence of a relationship that one has reason to value is itself the source of special responsibilities, and those responsibilities arise whether or not the participants actually value the relationship. Or so the nonreductionist claims.

Even if the disanalogy with the promising case is conceded, it may nevertheless be said that the nonreductionist argument stops short of establishing that we really do have special responsibilities. As we have seen, the nonreductionist claims that, insofar as we have reason to value our interpersonal relationships, we also have reason to see ourselves as having such responsibilities. But, it may be said, even if we have reason to see ourselves as having such responsibilities, that is compatible with our not actually having them. This seems to me misleading, however. If the nonreductionist argument establishes that we have good reason to see ourselves as having special responsibilities, then that is how we should see ourselves. There is no substantive difference, in this context, between the conclusion that we do have special responsibilities and the

conclusion that, all things considered, we have good reasons for thinking that we do.

Some may worry that the nonreductionist principle as I have formulated it focuses too much attention on the bearers of special responsibilities and too little on the beneficiaries. Sometimes, it may be said, the source of a special responsibility does not lie in the fact that the relationship is one that the bearer has reason to value, but rather in the vulnerability created by the beneficiary's trust in or dependence on the bearer. However, this suggestion is not incompatible with the principle I have articulated. For that principle purports to identify only a sufficient condition, and not a necessary condition, for a relationship to give rise to special responsibilities. Thus it no more precludes the possibility that relations of trust and vulnerability may also give rise to such responsibilities than the principle that one ought to keep one's promises precludes the possibility that there are other kinds of obligations as well.

How, then, might a nonreductionist respond to the voluntarist and distributive objections? The voluntarist objection, we may recall, points out that special responsibilities may constitute significant burdens for those who bear them, and asserts that it would be unfair if such responsibilities could be ascribed to individuals who had done nothing voluntarily to incur them. The first thing that nonreductionists may say in response to this objection is that, in addition to our special responsibilities, there are other moral norms that govern our treatment of people in general. These moral norms, they may point out, apply to us whether or not we have agreed to them. For example, one cannot justify one's infliction of harm on a person by saying that one never agreed not to harm people. There are, in other words, general moral responsibilities that can be ascribed to us without our having voluntarily incurred them. And although these general responsibilities, like special responsibilities, may be costly or burdensome, we do not ordinarily regard their imposition as unfair. So why, nonreductionists may ask, should special responsibilities be any different? If voluntarists do not require that general responsibilities be voluntarily incurred, how can they insist that special responsibilities must be? The voluntarist may reply that special responsibilities, unless voluntarily incurred, give other people undue control over one's life. If certain people can make claims on you without your having done anything to legitimate those claims, then, the voluntarist may argue, those people enjoy an unreasonable degree of authority over

the way you live. However, since general moral norms also enable people to make claims on individuals who have done nothing to legitimate those claims, nonreductionists will again want to know why special responsibilities that have not been voluntarily incurred should be objectionable in a way that general responsibilities are not.

One reason for the voluntarist's concern about special responsibilities may be as follows. Our most significant social roles and relations determine, to a considerable extent, the ways that we are seen by others and the ways that we see ourselves. They help to determine what might be called our social identities. To the extent that we choose our roles and relations, and decide how much significance they shall have in our lives, we shape our own identities. But to the extent that these things are fixed independently of our choices, our identities are beyond our control. What disturbs the voluntarist about special responsibilities may be this: if our relations to other people can generate responsibilities to those people independently of our choices, then, to that extent, the significance of our social relations is not up to us to determine. And if the significance of such relations is not up to us to determine, then we may be locked into a social identity we did not choose. This suggests that special responsibilities may be troubling to the voluntarist, in a way that general responsibilities are not, because special responsibilities may seem to threaten our capacity for self-determination—our capacity to determine who, in social terms, we are. On this interpretation, it is not wrong to suggest that the voluntarist views special responsibilities, unless voluntarily incurred, as giving other people undue control over our lives. However, the problem is not simply that others may be able to make unwelcome claims on our time and resources. That much would be true even if we had only general responsibilities. The more fundamental problem is that other people may be able to shape our identities in ways that run counter to our wishes.

Seen in this light, the voluntarist's position has obvious appeal. The ability to have our social identities influenced by our choices is something about which most of us care deeply, and which seems to us an important prerequisite for the forms of human flourishing to which we aspire. We regard societies in which one's social identity is rigidly fixed, as a matter of law or social practice, by features of one's birth or breeding over which one has no control, as societies that are inhospitable to human freedom. This does not mean that we are committed to repudi-

ating whatever communal or traditional affiliations may have been conferred upon us at birth. It only means that we want the salience in our lives of such affiliations to be influenced by our own wishes and decisions, rather than being determined by the dictates of the society at large. This is, of course, one reason why liberals insist that the legal status of citizens should be insensitive to facts about their race or religion or social class.

And yet, despite the value that we attach to having our social identities influenced by our choices, and despite the particular importance of protecting this value against political interference, it is clear that the capacity to determine one's identity has its limits. Each of us is born into a web of social relations, and our social world lays claim to us long before we can attain reflective distance from it or begin making choices about our place in it. We acquire personal relations and social affiliations of a formative kind before we are able to conceive of them as such or to contemplate altering them. Thus there is obviously no question, nor can the voluntarist seriously think that there is, of our being able actually to choose all of the relations in which we stand to other people. What the voluntarist can hope to claim is only that the significance of those relations is entirely up to us. However, this claim too is unsustainable. For better or worse, the influence on our personal histories of unchosen social relations—to parents and siblings, families and communities, nations and peoples—is not something that we determine by ourselves. Whether we like it or not, such relations help to define the contours of our lives, and influence the ways that we are seen both by ourselves and by others. Even those who sever or repudiate such ties—insofar as it is possible to do so—can never escape their influence or deprive them of all significance, for to have repudiated a personal tie is not the same as never having had it, and one does not nullify social bonds by rejecting them. One is, in other words, forever the person who has rejected or repudiated those bonds; one cannot make oneself into a person who lacked them from the outset. Thus, while some people travel enormous social distances in their lives, and while the possibility of so doing is something that we have every reason to cherish, the idea that the significance of our personal ties and social affiliations is wholly dependent on our wills—that we are the supreme gatekeepers of our own identities—can only be regarded as a fantasy. So if, as the nonreductionist believes, our relations to other people can generate responsi-



bilities to them independently of our choices, then it is true that, in an important respect, the significance of our social relations is not fully under our control; but since the significance of those relations is in any case not fully under our control, this by itself does not rob us of any form of self-determination to which we may reasonably aspire.

In the end, then, the nonreductionist's response to the voluntarist objection is to insist that, although the significance of choice and consent in moral contexts is undeniable, nevertheless, the moral import of our relationships to other people does not derive solely from our own decisions. Nor, the nonreductionist may add, need we fear that this is tantamount to conceding the legitimacy of systems of caste or hierarchy, or that it leaves the individual at the mercy of oppressive social arrangements. For the relationships that generate responsibilities for an individual are those relationships that the individual has reason to value. No claims at all arise from relations that are degrading or demeaning, or which serve to undermine rather than to enhance human flourishing. In other words, the alternative to an exaggerated voluntarism is not an exaggerated communitarianism or historicism. In recognizing that the significance of our social relationships does not stem exclusively from our choices, we do not consign ourselves to a form of social bondage. In surrendering the fantasy that our own wills are the source of all our special responsibilities, we do not leave ourselves defenseless against the contingencies of the social world.

Yet even if these remarks constitute an effective response to the voluntarist objection, they may seem only to highlight the nonreductionist's vulnerability to the distributive objection. For, if relationships that are destructive of an individual's well-being do not, in general, give that individual special responsibilities, then presumably the relationships that do give him special responsibilities either enhance or at least do not erode his well-being. But, as we have seen, special responsibilities may themselves work to the advantage of the participants in special relationships, and to the disadvantage of nonparticipants. And, it may be asked, why should a relationship that enhances the well-being of the participants give rise to a distribution of moral responsibility that further advances their interests, while working against the interests of nonparticipants? How can the nonreductionist respond to the charge that, unless the benefits and burdens of special responsibilities are integrated into an overall distribution that is fair, such responsibilities will them-

selves provide unfair advantages to the participants in interpersonal relations, while unfairly penalizing nonparticipants?

The nonreductionist may begin by reiterating that, as long as people attach value to their interpersonal relations, they will inevitably see themselves as having special responsibilities. And as long as they have good reasons for attaching value to those relations, we must allow that they also have good reasons to see themselves as having such responsibilities. There may, of course, be room for general skepticism about people's reasons for valuing their interpersonal relations. But it seems unlikely that proponents of the distributive objection can afford to be skeptics of this sort. For the distributive objection is animated by a concern for fairness in the allocation of benefits and burdens, and if, as the skeptic asserts, people never have reason to value their social relations, then it is unclear why considerations of fairness should weigh with them at all. Rather than providing grounds for the rejection of special responsibilities in particular, general skepticism about our reasons for valuing personal relations seems potentially subversive of morality as a whole.

Provided that the distributive objection is not taken to support a wholesale repudiation of special responsibilities, however, nonreductionists may concede that it makes a legitimate point. There are important respects in which special responsibilities may work to the advantage of the participants in personal relationships, and to the disadvantage of other people. These facts seem undeniable once they are called to our attention. That we sometimes lose sight of them is due in large measure to the influence of voluntarism, which focuses exclusively on the respects in which special responsibilities can be burdensome for the people who bear them, and sees the task of legitimating such responsibilities solely as a matter of justifying those burdens. Once we face the facts to which the distributive objection calls attention, however, we must agree that there is another side to special responsibilities: that they may also provide significant advantages for the participants in interpersonal relations and significant disadvantages for nonparticipants. Insofar as the distributive objection insists only on the desirability of integrating these advantages and disadvantages into an overall distribution of benefits and burdens that is fair, nonreductionists have no reason to disagree.

Indeed, once the distributive objection is understood in this way, it may be seen as illustrating a more general point, with which nonreduc-

tionists also have no reason to disagree. The general point is that special responsibilities need to be set within the context of our overall moral outlook and constrained in suitable ways by other pertinent values. On a nonreductionist view, such constraints may, in principle, operate in at least three different ways. Some may affect the content of special responsibilities, by setting limits to the circumstances in which, and the extent to which, people are required to give priority to the interests of those to whom they have such responsibilities. Other constraints may affect the strength of special responsibilities, by supplying countervailing considerations that are capable of outweighing or overriding those responsibilities in various contexts. Still other constraints may affect people's reasons for valuing their relationships. Perhaps, for example, people have no (net) reason to value relationships which themselves offend against important moral values or principles, so that such relationships do not generate special responsibilities even if people do in fact value them.<sup>11</sup>

The upshot is that, although nonreductionism insists that unreduced special responsibilities must be part of any adequate moral scheme, it is not hostile to the idea that there are a variety of other moral values—including the values underlying the distributive objection—by which such responsibilities must be constrained and with which they must be integrated if they are to be fully satisfactory. For example, there is nothing to prevent the nonreductionist from agreeing that considerations of distributive fairness serve to limit both the strength and the content of people's special responsibilities. Of course, the mere fact that nonreductionism is open to such possibilities does not suffice to show that a single moral outlook will be capable of accommodating special responsibilities while fully satisfying the values underlying the distributive objection. In fact, I believe that there is a deep and persistent tension between these two features of our moral thought, and nothing in the nonreduc-

11. Might it be said, by someone sympathetic to the distributive objection, that relationships that run afoul of that objection violate this last type of constraint, and thus do not give rise to special responsibilities after all? This is unpersuasive because the distributive objection is not an objection to a class of relationships. In other words, it does not allege that certain relationships offend against important moral values. Instead, it claims only that considerations of distributive fairness prevent some relationships, which may be entirely unobjectionable in themselves, from giving rise to special responsibilities. But the constraint in question applies only to relationships that themselves offend against important moral values.

tionist position guarantees that we will be able simultaneously to accommodate both features to our own satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

Although this is a serious problem, however, it is no more of a problem for nonreductionist accounts of special responsibilities than it is for reductionist accounts. In fact, it is a problem for any view that takes special responsibilities seriously, while remaining sensitive to the values underlying the distributive objection. Any such view, and indeed any view that recognizes a diversity of moral values and principles, needs to ask how far that diversity can be accommodated within a unified moral outlook. Too often it is simply taken for granted either that a unified outlook must in principle be available or that any tension at all among our values means that there is no possibility of jointly accommodating them. Neither assumption seems to me to be warranted. Instead, it seems to me a substantive question, the answer to which remains open, to what extent the diverse moral values that we recognize can be jointly accommodated within a unified scheme of thought and practice.

Pending an answer to that question, nonreductionism appears to have the following advantages as an account of special responsibilities. To begin with, it has the virtue of cohering better than do reductionist accounts with our actual practice, which is to cite relationships as well as interactions as sources of special responsibilities. It also has the advantage of being able to explain, in simple and straightforward terms, why it is that people have seen such a diverse and apparently heterogeneous assortment of relationships as giving rise to such responsibilities. Furthermore, nonreductionism makes it possible to agree that our ordinary practices of ascribing special responsibilities to the participants in significant relationships are broadly correct. Like those ordinary practices themselves, however, it also leaves room for the criticism of particular ascriptions of responsibility. Admittedly, the content of the nonreductionist principle depends on some conception of the kinds of reasons people have for valuing their relations to others. Thus, given this principle, disagreements about reasons will inevitably lead to disagreements about the circumstances under which special responsibilities should be ascribed to people. Even this may seem like an advantage, however. For there are many disagreements about the ascription of such responsibilities that do seem plausibly understood as reflecting a

12. See, generally, Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

more fundamental disagreement about the reasons people have for valuing their relationships. To the extent that this is so, nonreductionism locates controversies about the ascription of special responsibilities in the right place, and provides an illuminating explanation of them. Finally, nonreductionism is sensitive to the concerns underlying the voluntarist and distributive objections, yet it provides reasons for insisting that neither objection supports the complete repudiation of unreduced special responsibilities.

Let me close by returning to a point that I made earlier. The nonreductionist position I have outlined, if it can be persuasively developed, may have implications for a number of important controversies in moral and political philosophy. Inasmuch as it offers a defense of special responsibilities that is non-consequentialist in character, for example, it points to a possible defense of at least some sorts of "agent-centered restrictions."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, I believe, it suggests some constraints that any adequate formulation of cosmopolitanism may need to respect. Detailed discussion of these implications, however, must await another occasion.

13. See *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994 [rev. ed.]), esp. Chap. Four.