

# Partiality to Charities<sup>1</sup>

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Many of us give to charities that are close to our hearts rather than those that would use our gifts to do more good, impartially considered. Is such partiality to charities acceptable?

## Partiality to People

Nearly all of us have close personal relationships. We have friends and loved ones. We characteristically care deeply about these people in particular. We have rich histories with them that we do not have with strangers. Often those close to us have done kind things for us that they would not do for others, and us for them.

We tend to *favour* the particular individuals we are close to over strangers. By this I mean that, both in our concerns and in deciding what to do, we tend to give greater priority to their well-being than that of strangers. I favour my mother over strangers. Suppose she and five strangers are trapped inside a burning building. She is in one room, the five strangers together in another. Unfortunately, not all six people can be saved. It's either my mother, or the five. I would prefer my mother be saved over these strangers. If I were brave enough to enter the building myself, I would save her rather than them.

Is my favouring my mother in this way morally defensible? I cannot defend favouring my mother over strangers by pointing to the fact that I and other relatives would be very sad if my mother died, for we can suppose this is equally true of the relatives of the five strangers. Nor can I defend favouring my mother by pointing to the fact that, since I know my mother, I know that she would want to be saved, for we can again suppose that this is equally true of each of the five strangers. We can add that each of the five strangers is no less saintly than my mother, no more responsible for their plight, and so on.

Many philosophers claim that morality is *impartial*, in the sense that each individual's well-being is of equal moral priority. They can nonetheless offer a defence of my favouring my mother. Just as I might take more pleasure in going for a hike if I focus on the trees and birds, rather than on my own pleasure, so I might do what's better from an impartial point of view if I routinely favour my nearest and dearest in deciding how to act, rather than always deciding on the basis of what would be impartially best.<sup>2</sup> This is a contentious claim, since it seems obvious that there are some occasions when it is clearly not best from an impartial point of view to favour my nearest and dearest.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, I here assume the intuitive view that often *partiality to people* is morally acceptable. That is, I assume you are justified in favouring your friends, your loved ones, and indeed yourself, over strangers – even when this is indefensible from the standpoint of what's impartially best. Though it is wrong to save one *stranger* over five strangers, other things being equal, it is not wrong to save *your mother* over five strangers.<sup>4</sup> Some go further, claiming that partiality to people is in some cases not merely justified, but morally required. They might claim that it is wrong to save five strangers over your mother.

I do not assume that you are justified in prioritizing your friends, your loved ones, or yourself, over strangers to *any* degree you wish. It seems unreasonable for me to prefer

getting another pair of shoes over preventing a stranger's child from dying a painful death. It does not seem unreasonable for me to prioritize my mother's life over the lives of five strangers. Is it unreasonable for me to prefer that her life be saved over the lives of hundreds, or even millions, of strangers? Many of us will undoubtedly find this a difficult question. Arguably if the number of strangers were sufficiently large, I would be morally required to save the lives of all these strangers over my mother's.

### **Partiality to Charities**

Different people have different motivations for giving to charity.<sup>5</sup> Some give out of a sense of justice, to help rectify local or global injustices.<sup>6</sup> Some give out of gratitude, to 'give something back' to their communities. Some give to improve public relations or gain other social advantages. Many people give to particular charities that are close to their hearts, based on personal connections. Many give out of a general altruistic desire to help others. Indeed, there is a growing number of so-called *effective altruists*, who use evidence and reason to figure out how to help others most effectively, and take action on that basis.<sup>7</sup>

Recall that partiality to people consists in favouring particular individuals, such as your friends or loved ones, over others. Such favouring departs significantly from what someone with the sole impartial aim of helping others in general would do. Analogously, *partiality to charities* consists in favouring particular charities or charitable causes, such as those that are close to your heart, over others (i.e. giving to them out of proportion with what can be defended impartially).

Partiality to charities departs from fully impartial giving, where the latter would in practice involve being guided by the findings of effective altruist organizations like GiveWell.<sup>8</sup> GiveWell provides scientifically rigorous rankings of charities in terms of how much they help others per dollar donated (for example, how many lives they save, cases of blindness they prevent, illnesses they treat, and so on, per dollar donated).<sup>9</sup> While a perfect effective altruist would not engage in less than fully impartial giving, one needn't be a perfect effective altruist to be an effective altruist.<sup>10</sup> Occasionally running slower than you are able to does not disqualify you from being a fast runner.

Can partiality to charities be justified?

### **A Case Study: Cancer Versus Malaria**

Many people – like me – will have lost a loved one to cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes, ALS, or some other dramatically life-shortening disease. Those of us who have suffered this misfortune may in turn have a personal connection to charities that aim to prevent or treat *the particular disease* that killed the particular person to whom we are partial. Many of us give to these charities on this basis. To examine whether this is acceptable, let us focus on a hypothetical case.

*Cancer Versus Malaria:* You lost a loved one to cancer, whose suffering and death you witnessed first-hand. You are now contemplating giving a large sum of money to charity, and are deciding between *Cancer Charity* and *Malaria Charity*. You correctly

believe all of the following: if you give this sum of money to Cancer Charity, you will prevent one person from dying of cancer; if you instead give this sum of money to Malaria Charity, you will prevent five people from dying of malaria; each of the six people would, if saved, go on to live equally happy lives; each would, if not saved, die in an equally painful way; each equally wants to be saved; the death of each would equally negatively impact the respective colleagues, friends, and families; each is equally innocent and equally not responsible for their plight; each is an equally morally good person; and you will never meet any of the six, nor learn their identities.

About this case, many would claim both that you are justified in giving the sum of money to Cancer Charity over Malaria Charity, and that this is so because you have lost a loved one to cancer.

Notice that, in this hypothetical example, Malaria Charity saves five times as many lives as Cancer Charity, for a fixed donation size. In the real world, the cost-effectiveness gap is wider still. Both research and care-based cancer charities operating in affluent nations are already well-funded. This dramatically reduces the difference one can expect to make by giving to them. Cancer charities that offer donors the best bets for making a difference focus on preventing cancer in developing nations. The likely best of these on average prevent one death caused by stomach cancer per \$19,000 donated. By contrast, GiveWell's top-ranked charity, the Against Malaria Foundation, on average saves one life per \$3,000 donated. The best cancer charities are therefore likely to be significantly more than five times less cost-effective than the best malaria charities.<sup>11</sup> However, presumably even if we adjusted the example by making Malaria Charity ten times more cost-effective than Cancer Charity, many would still claim that you are justified in giving to Cancer Charity over Malaria Charity.

But isn't partiality to charities importantly different from partiality to people? After all, the beneficiaries of your donation to Cancer Charity are not your deceased loved one(s), but currently living people who are prevented from dying of cancer. Though cancer victims, these beneficiaries are strangers to you. In the discussion of partiality to people, I assumed that you are justified in favouring your loved ones over strangers, and not that you are justified in favouring some strangers over other strangers.

Can partiality to charities be defended nonetheless? In what follows, I will continue to focus on the specific form of partiality to charities in which one gives to prevent or treat the particular disease that killed one's loved one, but much of the discussion below applies to many other forms of partiality to charities as well.

## Sympathy

Having been closely acquainted with the sort of pain and loss cancer brings, you tend to have *greater sympathy* for cancer victims. Could this justify you in favouring cancer victims over the victims of other diseases, and giving to Cancer Charity over Malaria Charity? Assuming you have a choice about which of these charities to give to, and are able to give to either, it is unclear that sympathy alone could provide such a justification.

One might have greater sympathy for one person than another for various reasons. You might have greater sympathy for one child than another because one child is more expressive, or cuter, or because you have seen a video of one child but instead merely read a

short description of the other. Even if understandable, it does not seem justifiable, particularly in matters of life and death, to favour more expressive children, or those you have seen via video recording, merely in virtue of your greater sympathy toward them. That would seem unfair and arbitrary.<sup>12</sup>

One response is that, if you have significantly greater sympathy for one person than another, it would be psychologically painful for you *not* to actively favour the former. So, on the basis of the justifiability of favouring *yourself* over others, we can defend your favouring those to whom you have greater sympathy over others.

But there are at least two problems with this response. First, while it may be justifiable for you to prefer saving your own life over the lives of several others, it is somewhat harder to see how it is justifiable for you to prefer your avoiding psychological pain over saving the lives of several others. For this to be true of Cancer Versus Malaria, the psychological pain of giving to Malaria Charity rather than Cancer Charity would have to be very severe. This pain would have to be much more severe than a migraine headache, as avoidance of the latter would not justify you in failing to save several lives, or so it seems to me.

Second, most of those who believe their partiality to charities is justified would resist the idea that the justification rests on their own pain avoidance, however severe their pain might be. This sort of justification lacks something important.

## Projects

Can the mere fact that you *want* to give to Cancer Charity rather than Malaria Charity justify you in doing so? Presumably not, as in general merely wanting to save one stranger rather than five would not justify you in doing so. But you might more than weakly desire to give to Cancer Charity. Your desire to give to Cancer Charity might be very strong, as well as very central to your life. Fighting cancer might well be a *ground project* of yours in that it is central to who you are and what you are all about, and gives meaning to your life.<sup>13</sup> It does seem plausible that you would be justified in not abandoning such a project even if doing so were needed to save the lives of several strangers.

None of the above commits us to the implausible thought that you are justified in maintaining your projects, regardless of what they are or how they were acquired. It is wrong to acquire projects that seriously harm, disrespect, or infringe the rights of others, and there is very little if any justification for maintaining such projects once acquired. Fighting cancer through charitable donations is a rather kind thing to do, and is neither harmful nor disrespectful, but it does depart from the fully impartial project of helping others as much as possible.

It seems at least sometimes justifiable, however, for you to acquire and maintain projects that are less than fully impartial in this sense. This may be especially plausible insofar as these projects are linked to particular people toward whom you are justified in favouring. Suppose, for example, that the very reason you acquired the project of fighting cancer is that it was one of your lost loved one's projects. Indeed, even if your lost loved one did not have fighting cancer as one of their projects, you might have acquired it as one of yours out of respect and concern for them. Moreover, while the projects-based defence of favouring Cancer Charity is still based on the claim that you are justified in favouring

yourself (*your* ground projects), it is less self-centred than the psychological pain-based defence. After all, the project in question is itself altruistic.

But this defence of favouring Cancer Charity, like the psychological pain-based defence, applies in only a relatively narrow range of cases. Very many people would give to Cancer Charity over Malaria Charity, and regard themselves as justified in doing so, even if fighting cancer were not one of their life projects.

## Honour

There appears to be a wide range of cases in which partiality to charities is not justified by appeals to sympathy, psychological pain, desires, or ground projects. Is there some other type of justification that could fill in the gap?

Perhaps the most widespread justification for giving to Cancer Charity is that it is a way of *honouring* your lost loved one. This of course raises difficult questions about the moral status of dead people, including whether we have reasons to honour them.<sup>14</sup> There are further difficult questions about how being justified in favouring your loved ones over strangers relates to the more specific claim that you are justified in prioritizing honouring your lost loved ones over saving the lives of strangers.

I will here bypass these questions and assume that it is justifiable for you to honour your lost loved one (at least in some way, on some occasion), even if this means you will fail to save the lives of five strangers. This assumption is not enough to establish the conclusion that you are justified in giving to Cancer Charity *as a way of honouring your lost loved one*. There are at least two obstacles between the assumption and the conclusion.

First, it is not clear that giving to Cancer Charity is the best way of honouring your lost loved one, on any plausible account of what honouring consists in. There are *many* things you can do to honour them: host a celebration of life, talk to their friends, write a memoir, create a slideshow, plant a memorial tree, retrace their footsteps (and put yourself in their shoes), complete their projects, and so on. Arguably many of these activities would honour your loved one to a greater degree than giving to Cancer Charity, given the richer role you would play in them than simply filling in your credit card details on Cancer Charity's website. If you took one-fifth of the money you would have given to Cancer Charity, and spent it on a celebration of life, slideshow, and memorial tree, you could take the remaining four-fifths and give it to Malaria Charity. Arguably then you would *both* honour your loved one to a greater degree *and* save more strangers than if you spent all the money on Cancer Charity.

Second, unless fighting cancer was one of your lost loved one's projects, it is unclear that fighting cancer (by giving to Cancer Charity) honours them in a way that could justify you in failing to save lives. What makes their *cause of death* stand out as particularly honour-relevant, as opposed to their beliefs, aims, talents, hobbies, culture, and so on? Even if we could provide a plausible answer to this question, it is unclear how 'fighting cancer' relates to their cause of death. For example, you would not, in fighting cancer, be fighting *the particular cancer cells* that caused your loved one's death. Even if these particular cancer cells had miraculously survived your loved one's death, it is dubious you would be justified in going out of your way to destroy them if this meant failing to save the lives of several strangers. So why think you would be justified in going out of your way to fight cancer – at

most the *type* of cause of your loved one's death – if this meant failing to save the lives of several strangers? Moreover, why is the relevant type of cause of death not broader, e.g. 'terminal diseases'?

On reflection, it seems implausible that fighting cancer would, in and of itself, honour your lost loved one in a way that would justify you in giving to Cancer Charity over Malaria Charity.

## Conclusion

I have argued that, given the assumption that partiality to people is justified, we can go *some* distance toward justifying partiality to charities by appealing to psychological pain and ground projects. These defences of partiality to charities are limited, and do not cover the full range of cases in which many people claim that partiality to charities is justified. I have considered an attempt at filling in this gap that appeals to giving as a way of honouring your lost loved one. I have argued that this attempt does not succeed. I suspect that there is a general tendency to move quickly and uncritically from partiality to people to partiality to charities, and from the belief that the former is justified to the belief that the latter is too. I recommend that we proceed more cautiously, and view partiality to charities with far greater scepticism.

<sup>1</sup> For very helpful comments, I am grateful to Roger Crisp, David Edmonds, Benjamin Lange, and Hannah Pummer.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham's dictum, 'everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one' is an early statement of the conception of impartiality described here. See John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1861/1998). For an impartial defence of routinely favouring one's near and dear in deciding how to act, see: Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13:134-171 (1984); and Julia Driver, 'Consequentialism and Feminist Ethics,' *Hypatia* 20: 183-199 (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For some relevant literature, see: Susan Wolf, 'Morality and Partiality', *Philosophical Perspectives* 6: 243-259 (1992); *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World*, ed. Brian Feltham and John Cottingham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Simon Keller, *Partiality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; and Roger Crisp, 'Against Partial Benevolence,' *The Lindley Lecture*, University of Kansas (2018).

<sup>4</sup> In the final sentence of his wonderful article defending the claim that, other things being equal, it is wrong to save one stranger over five others, Derek Parfit offers the following variant of Bentham's dictum, 'Each counts for one. That is why more count for more.' See: 'Innumerate Ethics,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7: 285-301 (1978), at p. 301.

<sup>5</sup> René Bekkers and Pamala Wiepking, 'A Literature Review of Empirical Studies of Philanthropy: Eight Mechanisms That Drive Charitable Giving,' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40: 924-973 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> For a justice-based argument for giving, see Elizabeth Ashford's 'Severe Poverty as an Unjust Emergency,' Chapter 4 of *The Ethics of Giving: Philosophers' Perspectives on Philanthropy*, ed. Paul Woodruff, New York: Oxford University Press (2018).

<sup>7</sup> William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*, London: Faber & Faber (2015) and ‘The Definition of Effective Altruism,’ in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, eds. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.givewell.org/>

<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest that the rankings can be precise. For some comparisons of charities, especially those that have very different aims (e.g. saving lives versus preserving the environment), there might be no fact about whether a gift to one would do more good than the same gift to another.

<sup>10</sup> What effective altruists call ‘cause-neutrality’ consists in open-mindedly and even-handedly considering every cause area (be it global poverty, animal suffering, existential risks, or political reform) in our attempts to identify how to help others as much as possible. One needn’t be a perfect effective altruist to be perfectly committed to cause-neutrality, so defined.

<sup>11</sup> For further details, see: <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/cause/cancer/>

<sup>12</sup> For a sympathy-based view of ethics, see Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, Routledge (2007). For criticism of some implications of Slote’s view, along the lines sketched above, see Richard Chappell, ‘Overriding Virtue’ in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, eds. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of projects and partiality, see: Samuel Scheffler, ‘Projects, Relationships, and Reasons’, in R.J. Wallace, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler, and M. Smith (eds), *Reason and Value: Themes from the Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, 246-69); and Sarah Stroud, ‘Permissible Projects, Partiality, and Plural Agency’, in *Partiality and Impartiality*.

<sup>14</sup> J. Jeremy Wisnewski, ‘What We Owe the Dead,’ *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26: 54-70 (2009).