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REASONABLE PARTIALITY TO DOMESTIC ANIMALS

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ABSTRACT. The paper deals with partiality flowing from special relationships. Two main problems are discussed. The first concerns the relationship between partiality and genuine moral obligations. If partiality can bring about such obligations only if it is reasonable, what requirements should it meet in order to be reasonable? The second problem is one of animal ethics. Can the concept of reasonable partiality help us articulate what is morally at stake in a current discussion about the treatment of domestic animals, viz. the European discussion about the castration of pigs?

KEY WORDS: reasonable partiality, special relationships, animal welfare, duties towards animals, pig castration, Nagel, Frankfurt

1. INTRODUCTION

In the debate on impartiality in ethics many contributions reminded us that a powerful demand for universal impartiality is of vital importance for ethics. A striking example is the norm that everyone’s life matters, and no one is more important that anyone else. It was said that if the demand for impartiality would be neglected, ethics would cease to exist. There would only remain the clash, compromise, and occasional convergence of individual perspectives (Nagel, 1991, p. 5, 11). On the other hand, it was brought to the fore that ethics should take account of a partiality that figures in much of moral life. Ethics should in particular pay attention to the partiality which flows from special relationships such as friendship. There should, for instance, be a place for the claim that it is morally right to give a higher priority in one’s actions to the good of those to whom we stand in certain sorts of relationship than to those to whom we stand in no relationship (Blum, 2000, p. 208).

The present paper deals with partiality of that kind. It discusses two questions about partiality flowing from special relationships. First, what requirements should this partiality meet in order to be reasonable? Second, can the concept of reasonable partiality help us articulate what is at stake in a current moral discussion about the treatment of animals?

Let me at the beginning explain why inquiring into the reasonableness of partiality is important. Let me do this by means of practical examples. What
situations may give rise to the question as to whether partiality is reasonable or not? One answer is: those situations in which acting partially, that is with bias, comes into conflict with demands of impartiality. Remember the above claim that it is morally right to give a higher priority in one’s actions to the good of those to whom we stand in certain sorts of relationship than to those to whom we stand in no relationship. Consider the well-known predicament that there are very long waiting lists for some sorts of medical treatment. Imagine that there is a doctor who is able to pull strings to schedule treatment for a close friend next week rather than keep him waiting for several weeks. Ought the doctor to pull strings? Doing that would come into conflict with a demand of fairness which implies that the allocation of resources ought to be impartially regulated. There is such a thing as the proper bias of a close friend, but we are faced with the question of whether the doctor’s partial action would be reasonable.

The question of whether partiality is reasonable may also rise in another kind of situations worth mentioning: situations where there is disagreement about which moral angle on a matter is the right one. Consider one of the current discussions about food policy. Many consumers fear that novel foods, genetically modified foods, and foods with meat additives will soon oust traditional, natural, and vegetarian foods from the market. One of the tasks of the authorities is consumer protection. But opinions differ as to what protection should be demanded of the authorities. From the point of view of some consumers’ organizations, the authorities ought to be enjoined to guarantee that traditional, natural, and vegetarian foods will continue to be available on the market. From the angle of advocates of an open market, however, the authorities ought to confine themselves to forbidding foods that are undisputably dangerous, and to taking care that a fair competition of foods will not be superseded by for instance power concentration on the market. This difference of opinion can be regarded as a difference between two moral perspectives. The perspective of the consumers’ organizations is one of partiality. Their claim flows from their special relationship to those vulnerable consumers on behalf of whom they speak: The availability of traditional, natural, and vegetarian foods ought to be guaranteed because these foods suit the lifestyle of the consumers in question, and a nutrition in accordance with their lifestyle is important for their self-esteem and identity. The perspective of the advocates of an open market is different: The authorities ought to take measures to protect consumers from undisputably dangerous foods and from distortions of competition, because the authorities have the duty to defend the consumers’ freedom of choice, but this duty does not imply that the authorities ought to take corrective measures in order to maintain certain lifestyles. Which perspective is the right one? For a deliberate judgement we need to know whether the partiality of the consumers’ organizations is reasonable.