

Partisanship as Moral Duty: An Agent-Centered Deontological Analysis

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on the ethical phenomenon of partisanship through the lens of agent-centered deontology. Specifically, it seeks to address the question whether individuals have genuine moral duty to engage in partisanship as part of societal participation. To address this, I first define the act of choosing and abstention to elaborate on its semantic and practical significance. Then, I dissect partisanship and choosing through several examples to highlight its key processes and technicalities. Second, I define agent-centered deontology to specify its ethical nuances in contrast to other branches of deontology. Third, I examine the unique interactions that occur between the agent, social movements, and society as a whole in the context of the moral duty of partisanship, locating both the sources of choosing and abstention. Lastly, I integrate the findings of the previous chapters to formulate a conclusion on the central question of this paper. In what follows, I argue that agent-centered deontology is compatible with the moral duty of partisanship, but only in cases where the agent deems it an important personal priority. This is of great relevance because it helps us navigate through a fundamental ethical dilemma that individuals face in traversing a world characterized by a multiplicity of contrasting, and often conflicting moral beliefs and narratives. Most importantly, it engages with the ongoing phenomenon of partisan decline, which has been an ongoing discussion in the past fifty decades.

Keywords: *partisanship, agent-centered deontology, choosing, abstention, moral obligation*

Introduction

Participation comes with the presupposition of individual and autonomous choice. Since time immemorial, society has recognized the act of participating as a *conditio sine qua non* to enable all social processes and interactions among individuals. Over time, this foundational principle of participation has been institutionalized through various systems (e.g., social, political, and economic), and otherwise, was designed to regulate and facilitate collective engagement *in toto*. However, one can observe the gradual, although subtle, intensification of the demand for participation in these systems. The concept, once primarily tied to personal identity, has become increasingly associated with our public identity and societal attachment so much so that in the 21st century, the very act of choosing between two polarizing options in public discourses have frequently become a catalyst for public outrage and social ostracization.¹ This is further supported by the exponential growth of systems in history that championed public consensus over more authoritative forms of civil regulation, i.e.,

¹ See Noam Lupu, "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2015): 332.

democracies, blockchain technology, and the dissolution of hierarchical systems such as the Apartheid and the Caste system. Simply put, partisanship has only amplified throughout the years.²

Having said this, it is essential to recognize that this phenomenon remains at an ocular and often intangible level. It primarily oscillates within the complexities of our everyday interactions whether with peers, family, and individuals extending beyond our proximate environment. This renders it challenging to identify and analyze the phenomenon at hand with precision.³ Whether a definitive name for this phenomenon can be coined is a question that falls outside the scope of this paper and will be left for other researchers to ponder. Thus, while the phenomenon's name is still up for debate, its spirit is not. To capture this spirit best, we can turn to three recent political conundrums that compel individuals to choose between varying sides, often between two opposites. First, the political tension between liberals and conservatives; second, the ongoing crisis between Israel and Palestine; and third, on a less binary, yet equally polarizing choice, the tension between which presidential candidate to support during elections. In these scenarios, the immediate question that arises is on the personal stance or choice of the individual. "Are *you* a liberal or a conservative," "Are *you* team Israel or Palestine," "Who will *you* vote for in the next elections?" Take note of the italicized word *you*, which subtly underscores the presumption of personal involvement and, by extension, an expectation of partisanship. As such, these questions often function as implicit demands of partisanship that steers the receiver of the question towards confessing a stance or making a choice. The normalcy of such inquiries is evident that many of us would not be surprised to encounter them in everyday discourse. Yet, this raises an important question: *Should this expectation of partisanship continue to be regarded as purely normal and without controversy?*⁴

Thus, this paper aims to advance the discussion on the moral duty of partisanship by examining its ethical implications both theoretically and, to some extent, practical implications. To fulfill this, I examine the issue through the lens of agent-centered deontology. The first section defines key terms and concepts before analyzing the ethical implications of the phenomenon. In analyzing the problem through the lens of agent-centered deontology, I adopt a first-person perspective to ensure efficiency in discussing the nuances of the deontological branch utilized similar to how deontological questions are engaged with. To further nuance the ideas on partisanship, I elaborate on the act of choosing and abstention by first contextualizing its causes and considerations on a societal level. This is done through the perspectives of W.D. Lamont, Ravi Dhar, Larry Alexander, and Michael Moore. Then, the second section of this paper focuses more on the structural process and the consequences of both moral partisanship and abstention on an agent-centered basis. Additionally, I further explore the causes of choosing and abstention by analyzing the nuances of intent, motive, commitments, and

² Noam Lupu, "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2015): 333-335.

³ Not only is it difficult to point at the phenomenon in isolation, but it is also difficult to measure its scale as it operates within the crevices of the socio-political fabric. In other words, the challenge at hand is not merely in identifying it exclusively but also in calculating its severity. For further insights on this, See Philip E. Converse, and Roy Pierce, "Measuring Partisanship." *Political Methodology* 11, no. 3/4 (1985): 143-146.

⁴ The prevalence of partisanship-based identification consequently results in the demand to seek for alternatives. While behavioral researchers currently attempt to seek the cause-and-effect relationship between identity-based issue engagement and socio-political issues, there yet remains to be a satisfying conclusion to the quest for a superior alternative. Perhaps this research will bear fruit in the near future, but for now it remains the case that a gap in such solutions prevails. See Benjamin Highton, and Cindy D. Kam, "The Long-Term Dynamics of Partisanship and Issue Orientations," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 1 (2011): 204-206.

even socio-political factors such as epistemological constrictions, and social norms. Crucially, this study does not endeavor to suggest that there is a singular, definitive moral side or narrative that individuals *must* choose, but rather simply to analyze whether a moral duty of partisanship exists under the purview of agent-centered deontology and whether the act of abstention is ethically valid when examined under the same philosophical viewpoint as the former. It simply attempts to extend on the discussion of agent-centered obligation particularly in contemporary time and setting. Moreover, this paper does not concern itself with justifying its conclusion in the face of other moral frameworks such as moral relativism, subjectivism, conventionalism, and so on; its scope is limited only to the agent-centered deontological model, as resolving each framework would require a significantly broader scope that extends beyond this paper and will likewise be left for others to ruminate on. Most importantly, this is of great relevance because it helps us navigate through the fundamental ethical dilemma that individuals face in traversing a world characterized by a multiplicity of contrasting and often conflicting moral beliefs and narratives. Most importantly, this paper engages with the ongoing phenomenon of partisan decline, which has been an ongoing discussion in the past 50 decades.⁵

Choosing, Partisanship, and Duty

What does it mean to 'choose'?

The crux of partisanship is the act of choosing, for choosing constitutes the willingness and deliberate decision of an individual to be a “part” of something, in this case, a social cause or specific social narrative. To understand how the moral obligation of partisanship, which fundamentally revolves around the act of choosing, interacts with agent-centered deontology, we must first define the act of choosing itself. While an agent is not required to respond to every call-to-action or engage with all the possible options to support a cause to be considered part of it, the minimum expectation is that they choose a cause and express that choice outwardly through actions, verbal speech, or similar manifestations. Therefore, the act of choosing being described is inherently human. It presupposes that decision-makers are rational beings with a general interest in maximizing utility and, thus, capable of comprehending the implications of their decisions.⁶ To put it simply, the alternative we choose must align with what we believe is best for us, a principle echoed by the philosophies of Socrates and Aristotle. Their dictum, often interpreted to mean that we choose with our best interests in mind, continues to resonate in contemporary ethical thought.⁷

Several studies similarly emphasize that the act of choosing is guided by personal preferences. For example, Edna Ullman-Margalit notes that “we speak of choosing among alternatives when the act of taking (doing) one of them is determined by the differences in one’s preferences over them.”⁸ It is for the same reason that Ullman-Margalit distinguishes between *choosing* and *picking*.⁹ For Ullman-Margalit, *choosing* involves decision-making based on specific aims or preferences, while *picking* means selecting one option over another without any specific aim or preference. For example, when we

⁵ Larry M. Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996.” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (2000): 36.

⁶ Michael F. Altfeld and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, “Choosing Sides in Wars,” *International Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1979): 89.

⁷ T.F. Daveney, “Choosing,” *Mind* 73, no. 292 (1964): 516.

⁸ Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, “Picking and Choosing,” *Social Research* 44, no. 4 (1977): 758.

⁹ A key distinction must be made between a synonymous term with ‘picking, that is ‘selecting’. The latter will be utilized as a general term for the act of taking an option encompassing both ‘choosing’ and ‘picking.’

“choose” a political candidate, we may do so because we prefer their policies or personality over other candidates. In contrast, when we “pick” a bottle of Coca-Cola at the grocery store, we typically do so with minimal thought and opt for the nearest bottle instead. Although there may be a way to determine which specific bottle of Coca-Cola we prefer if we compare the bottles more carefully, most people find this unnecessary for such trivial decision. This distinction between *choosing* and *picking* highlights an important ethical point: some decisions lack significant moral relevance and, therefore, do not demand careful deliberation. Ethics, as a discipline, focuses on the decisions we actively engage with and consider meaningful as opposed to actions that are passive, almost involuntary. Thus, choice understood in an ethical discussion refers to the active and purposive act of selecting an option based on specific aims, personal preferences, and other similar determining factors.

Lastly, we define the act of non-choosing. Non-choosing or *abstention* is the conscious and informed decision not to choose, represent, and/or support a particular stance. In this context then, when one abstains, they actively choose not to support in any way, shape, or form any social movements or social narratives. In the later sections, we discuss the implications of abstention in this paper’s ethical case and distinguish it from the ethical implications of actively choosing a side. In either case, such choices are both an advantage and a disadvantage of any social formation, particularly when confronted with opposition. This raises the critical question: what role does choice truly play within the larger context of collective conflict?

How do we choose in a collective setting?

To begin, it is best to analyze moral partisanship within its most immediate application—in politics and community. Political and social partisanship can be understood as the public manifestation of an individual’s moral and personal beliefs, reflected in their tendency to favor one cause over another. Existing research such as W.D. Lamont’s “Politics and Culture,”¹⁰ as well as Ravi Dhar’s “Beyond Rationality: The Content of Preferences,”¹¹ demonstrates a direct correlation between partisanship and factors like moral judgment, culture, upbringing, and tradition significantly shape individual preferences. These political and social causes encompass societal issues that affect large populations worldwide, such as environmental concerns, decisions on war and peace, and debates on human rights. However, the specific social causes with which individuals align may also depend on their geographical location. For example, someone living in the Philippines may face issues unrelated to those living in Hawaii. Yet, the physical distance between individuals and certain social issues does not necessarily diminish the ethical importance of addressing these underlying causes. It does not prevent individuals from forming opinions on said issues. In fact, with the advent of modern technology and information exchange, people can now stay informed of social issues around the world, regardless of proximity.

Therefore, one cannot¹² dismiss social causes that affect individuals who are not geographically close to us as irrelevant or alienable. To say, “I have no opinion on the people dying in the war between Ukraine and Russia since I have no moral obligation to care about them nor to have an opinion in the first place,” or “I have no opinion about the prisoners of war that my government

¹⁰ W. D. Lamont, “Politics and Culture,” *Philosophy* 20, no. 75 (1945): 39.

¹¹ Ravi Dhar, and Nathan Novemsky, “Beyond Rationality: The Content of Preferences,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2008): 175.

¹² “Cannot,” since this is realistically impossible for anyone that is a product of today’s time.

holds unlawfully since they are not citizens of my nation,” reflect a troubling moral detachment. Such an attitude negates the shared humanity regardless of our political affiliation or social status. Thus, when faced with multiple social and political causes, “partisanship” is the deliberate choice of only one among them. This choice reflects an individual’s values and priorities, engaging both their personal identity and their moral obligations within a shared social world.

On the question of our moral obligations to others

Philosophers like Locke have defined duty in terms of the consent that individuals give to the government they are governed by, which forms the basis of the social contract that builds up the body politic.¹³ Others, such as Hobbes, simply define duty more broadly as the collective consent of all subjects within any government.¹⁴ This paper, however, will focus on duty in a more ontological sense rather than a political one, which will be discussed more extensively in the succeeding sections. Thus, for the purpose of this discussion, “duty” is defined as a task created by a moral obligation, wherein the individual must act in a specific way or risk going against certain ethical principles. It is important to note, however, that not all decisions entail a moral duty. When it comes to decisions that are a matter of indifference, such as choosing between two very similar options, there is no moral obligation or “ought” to be attached with it. This is because the consequences of choosing one option over the other has no significant moral impact insofar as it hardly makes any difference at all. Since there is no sufficient moral bearing, a duty cannot be derived from the decision. A moral duty presupposes a decision with significant moral bearing, which requires adequate moral substance. Without this, a duty cannot arise, as it lacks the necessary moral substance.

Then, what does “moral duty” mean when it concerns taking a moral stance through a social cause, and how is it different from other forms of moral obligation? Arthur John Simmons in *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, uses the terms “duty” and “obligation” interchangeably. For Simmons, moral duties are essentially the same as obligations, and vice versa.¹⁵ This paper will adopt a similar approach. Simmons identifies two forms of moral duties related to our political and social obligations as individuals under a state: “positional duties” and “natural duties,” which he sourced from John Rawls. Similar to Rawls, Simmons holds that positional duties are obligations tied to certain societal positions, while natural duties are duties that humans possess by their nature. For example, a security guard may have a positional moral duty to do midnight checks in a particular restaurant every night. Failing to do so would rightfully lead to the frustration of the restaurant owners, since the security guard accepted the position knowing this task was part of their responsibility. However, the same moral frustration would not be valid towards a regular restaurant customer, who has no special duties placed on them, unlike with the security guard.

In contrast, natural duties, as Rawls argues in a very similar fashion to Rousseau, are those that are binding on individuals without the performance of previous voluntary acts and are geared towards the common good.¹⁶ These duties are not contingent on prior voluntary acts but are aimed at promoting the common good. Hence, natural duties include actions such as helping others, respecting

¹³ Rex Martin, “Political Obligation,” in *Political Concepts*, eds. Richard Bellamy and Andrew Mason, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ John A. Simmons, “The Natural Duty of Justice,” in *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 152.

¹⁶ Kent Greenawalt, “The Natural Duty to Obey the Law,” *Michigan Law Review* 84, no. 1 (1985): 9.

human dignity, being honest, and so on, all of which could produce valid moral distress from others in society if the duties were not fulfilled. Thus, this paper will focus primarily on the ethical case under the light of natural duties. Nonetheless, the question of whether a given duty should be considered a positional duty instead of a natural one will be addressed in later sections.

Abstention and the Moral Duty of Partisanship

Deontology is a moral and philosophical theory that emphasizes the inherent moral duty and obligation of individuals to act in specific and non-negotiable ways, irrespective of the consequences of said actions. This duty is based on universal ethical principles such as respect for persons, rational autonomy, and human dignity. It, therefore, presupposes an “ought” in man, which man cannot alter or influence since it is fundamentally outside his control, but that man must follow. The concept of choosing a moral belief among others is particularly evident within deontological philosophy. At its core, this theory presupposes that man, as a thinking and conscious being, must act rationally by universal laws designed to protect the welfare of everyone and promote the flourishing of mankind. Deontology outlines courses of action to achieve these ends through the principles it provides for its followers, such as non-maleficence (that individuals should not cause harm to others), beneficence (that individuals must promote the well-being of everyone), autonomy (that individuals should have the freedom and responsibility to make their own decisions based on personal moral reasoning), universalizability (that ethical rules must apply to everyone), and respect for persons (that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves).¹⁷

More specifically, for agent-centered deontology, agents have “agent-relative” obligations and permissions that justify their actions. These obligations are relative to the agent and do not necessarily indicate for others to support the same action. However, it does not mean that other agents can’t hold similar obligations in their respect. Despite all this, it is crucial to note that agent-relative reasons remain objective, much like agent-neutral reasons, and should not be confused with relativistic reasons of relativist meta-ethics.¹⁸ The reasons are objective, albeit relative to the agent. Furthermore, agent-centered deontology can be categorized into three branches.¹⁹ First, it follows a similar thought pattern to Thomas Aquinas in that the determinant of our agency is our intended means and ends. The second kind of agent-centered deontology focuses on actions instead of mental states. This branch emphasizes the nature of specific actions such as killing, lying, helping, etc. The third and last kind of agent-centered deontology blends the previous two, resulting in the equal consideration of intent and action as determinants of moral agency. This paper adopts the third kind for the following reasons: (1) by requiring both intention and action, this view avoids the overextension of obligations that may arise if either intention or action alone determine moral agency; (2) in discussing moral partisanship, it is necessary to consider external variables that implicate an agent’s actions such as knowledge, geography, culture, and so on, which require both intent and action on the agent’s part for him to engage with said variables; and (3) the very act of abstention consists of a multiplicity of intents and reasonings on an agent’s part, which directly influence its causation, thus, to be substantial, it is imperative to cover both. In this chapter, we have defined all the pertinent terms underpinning agent-

¹⁷ Greenawalt, “The Natural Duty to Obey the Law,” 3-12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-10.

¹⁹ Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, “Deontological Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/ethics-deontological/>.

centered deontology. The subsequent sections will focus on the assessment of the central problem of this paper in light of these definitions.

What does it mean to choose in the moral duty of partisanship?

There exists a positional duty of partisanship within agent-centered deontology, particularly concerning abstention. Partisanship reflects a wide-scale manifestation of the universal principles upheld by deontology and the inherent binding principles argued for by ethicists like Rawls. This paper elaborates on how pre-existing dominant moral duties, established by current deontological norms within society, do not preclude the moral duty of partisanship in all instances. To begin, we must clarify whether partisanship can itself be considered a moral duty. If moral duty is agent-relative, then moral partisanship may manifest as a moral duty for some agents depending on their personal reasons. When one “chooses” a social stance, they do so because they believe there are sufficient, convincing reasons support it. Though the act of choosing a social stance that one believes is right and ought to be supported could be viewed as an a priori good, particularly under the assumption that all humans possess the capacity for reason and conscience in their decisions, at least under deontology, must act with cognizance of the society around them. However, within agent-centered deontology, it does not follow that every agent must subscribe to the same decision. Therefore, partisanship could constitute a moral duty for some, but this varies from agent to agent. It is equally valid for one individual to affirm partisanship as a matter of grave moral consideration, as it is for another to deny it. This apparent flexibility raises concerns about leniency in defining moral duty. Yet, this approach remains consistent with the principles of agent-centered deontology.

Regardless of positional or natural duties, an individual can freely determine the duties they choose to uphold, for reasons that are uniquely their own. Nevertheless, this does not negate the moral duty of partisanship as a legitimate possibility, even if it denies its universal imposition. The duty of partisanship may be regarded as morally binding for some agents while not obligatory for others, irrespective of societal consensus. Moreover, the extent to which an individual follows through with their decision to take a stance is also irrelevant to the paper’s central thesis. This is because matters beyond the act of choosing a stance and are either extensions of the initial decision taken or are entirely different decisions altogether with consequences that may affect the agent and others involved, but cannot reverse, affect, or contradict the initial act of taking a stance. The tangible implications of this subsequent actions will be explored through specific examples, wherein the decision to take a stance presents itself to an agent sheds light on how agent-centered deontology addresses the moral duty of partisanship

Notably, since any reasonable person would likely agree that there are a priori right and wrong actions, even if only to them, it means that they can be informed and convinced of their choice otherwise. This acknowledgment implies that individuals can be informed or persuaded to reconsider their stance. However, such persuasion influences the agent’s internal reasoning rather than the external circumstances they face. Therefore, we can conclude that the moral duty of partisanship can be observed in society, even under the generously flexible, albeit crude, limitations of agent-centered deontology.

What does it mean to abstain in the moral duty of partisanship?

Now, we turn to the general act of abstention in political voting during local, divisional, regional, and national elections. While this discussion will not focus on a singular real-world example of abstention, it will address a case common across democracies worldwide. This approach ensures the case study remains both broadly relevant and ethically representative. Furthermore, the discussion distinguishes between two types of abstention: 1.) Abstention from voting in political systems that are directly proximate to you; 2.) Abstention from voting in political systems that are distant to you. The reason for utilizing two variations of the ethical case of abstention is to exhaust the discussion, which can only be done by considering the factor most likely to influence the agent's decision. In this case, proximity, is due to how significant it is to an individual's feelings and sentiments on a particular object, idea, or person. Further elaboration on the details and implications of this distinction will be laid out in the following paragraphs.

At first glance, the notion of a moral duty of partisanship within the framework of agent-centered deontology may seem implausible. However, this branch of deontological ethics posits that the moral obligations of any agent, as per this deontological branch, are based on the relative personal obligations that they have towards other agents proximate to them.²⁰ Hence, a father may have a higher moral duty to his children than the children of other fathers because of the intimate and proximate relationship they share. If so, then it would be natural to assume that a moral duty of partisanship with distant social causes would be beyond the scope of agent-centered deontology as it contradicts the notion of autonomy that an agent is entitled to and is a right that other agents must duly respect. However, this interpretation is not a clear-cut case upon closer inspection. Simply, agent-centered deontology merely suggests that each agent has within them a personal right to prioritize specific moral duties over others by the nature of their relationships and circumstances in life. This does not, however, preclude an agent's moral duty to every other individual in society.²¹ In other words, agent-centered deontology does not reject the capacity for the coexistence of a moral duty of partisanship and other agent-relative obligations.

To illustrate this further, let us take the first ethical case. For this, imagine an agent who is a mother residing in China, with the opportunity to vote for her preferred candidates in an upcoming election. This mother has a personal history marked by significant environmental challenges: she lost a loved one to carbon monoxide poisoning, suffers from chronic pulmonary disease, and has experienced a stroke. Moreover, the mother was raised by a family that frequently participated in environmental protests locally and regionally, which massively influenced her views on the importance of ecological awareness and affirmative action. As such, she developed a strong belief that pollution is the nation's most pressing issue. In the upcoming elections, her choice is between two candidates: one advocating for the further construction of more factories within certain cities that will undoubtedly contribute to further environmental degradation and a candidate who conversely supports ecological sustainability and reduce carbon emissions.

The case provided presents two existing social stances: the first is economic driven, while the second is environmentally driven. Although simplified for the sake of analysis, this scenario suffices to explore the interplay of intentions and actions in ethical decision-making. Yet, it is unnecessary to

²⁰ Greenawalt, "The Natural Duty to Obey the Law," 4-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

involve every potential context and detail that would compel the agent to act a certain way since it is enough to conclude by only recognizing an agent's intention and, consequently, the action resulting from it. It is more realistic to assume that people generally do not dive into exhaustive deliberation of their every decision and most likely act on sufficient convincing reasons that provide them with the desired outcome. Thus, focusing on a limited set of factors is adequate to analyze the agent's intentions and subsequent actions. In a real-world sense, even with the growing number of considerations a voter must make, they will all weigh the necessary considerations and align their votes with the candidates they think will champion their values. However, note that this context assumes that the agent has adequate knowledge about the political sphere they are voting in and a sufficient understanding of their justifications for who to vote. In a later portion of this chapter, we will ruminate on the instances where agents do not possess either.

In this case, the mother decides to vote for the environmentally driven candidate. Here, her personal obligations to her child did not deter her from making a choice; rather, they reinforced her decision to choose the latter over the former out of believing the need to protect her child from the dangers of pollution. This demonstrates that contrasting stances do not necessarily paralyze an agent from choosing, proving that partisanship is possible. Furthermore, her decision aligns with the first characteristic of partisanship in relation to deontology: the element of "good intent." In other words, assuming that the mother has good intent for choosing the latter over the former, that is, to protect her child, her action already satisfies one-half of the pre-requisites of a morally valid action under the third kind of agent-centered deontology. Conversely, suppose the mother was to choose the economically driven candidate to ensure greater national economic stability so that her family can live in a more stable economy. In that case, it will still lead to her intent of being "good." Remember that "others need not agree upon agent-relative" justifications to be valid. So, while another voter might disagree out of personal prejudices, this does not affect the moral quality of the other agent's intent. Thus, in this case, though some may disagree with the mother's intent, it does not invalidate it.

There is, however, an exception to this rule. Suppose the mother intended to vote for the former because she desired more carbon pollution in the nation so that more people would suffer. In that case, her intentions are inherently "evil" in their substance and are a priori immoral under the view of deontology. It is not the external judgment of others that challenge the intent of the mother but the nature of the intent itself. One could argue that this does not constitute "partisanship" per se since the mother's reasoning is rooted in personal interests rather than collective social improvement. To this, I say that (1) it is unreasonable to dismiss her motives entirely on the basis that human reasoning is diverse and acknowledges the validity of personal and communal motives even in collective settings (2) regardless of intent, the advocacy itself still benefits others involved in the same cause and will advance the environmental agenda which shows that intent is a subsidiary concern and harkens back to my previous claim that choices can uniquely transcend geographical and political barriers; (3) as was already explained in the preceding sections, the reason for performing an act is irrelevant as long as it is morally valid in both its intent and action. Thus, whether the mother votes out of personal interests or the interests of the cause as a whole, both are ethically valid under agent-centered deontology. Then, is it proper to suggest that the duty in these scenarios where the agent has relative obligations to others is merely positional instead of natural? At first glance, a mother has a positional obligation to her family and child insofar as she opted into that familial contract. I argue that this is not wholly the case since her duty to her family may not be merely positional. This is

because any mother, being a human, also has natural duties to other human beings regardless of whether they are distant from her.

Note that our inherent natural duties towards others are not necessarily dissolved under this branch of deontology; the agent's personal duties may overrule it concerning a higher emphasis on their agency. Thus, they still maintain their natural duties to others not proximate to them: to treat them well, to respect their dignity, and so on, even if, at any moment, these can be overruled by their duties. If this is the case, then they likewise maintain a moral duty of partisanship with any social cause since partisanship is simply the external manifestation of the upholding of their natural duties to other human beings, and it does not prevent them from choosing social stances and causes that are in favor to their personal and positional obligations. So, if the mother is confronted with social causes that do not gravely affect her proximate obligations, then choosing to support a social cause is merely her upholding her natural duties, i.e., being a decent human being. If at any point, however, she must confront social causes that pose a grave threat to her personal obligations, then she has every right to choose the stance that favors her. In other words, the ethical action valid in this first example of the case is for the mother to vote for her preferred cause, depending on the nature of her obligations.

Proceeding to the second case, the mother is nowhere proximate to two or more contending social stances and yet must choose between the two. Suppose that while watching the news, the mother finds out about the war between Ukraine and Russia. For the better part of her life, the mother has been a citizen of Ukraine and now retains her voting rights as a foreign Ukrainian. The question is whether the mother, under agent-centered deontology, can uphold a moral duty to choose which of the two countries she would feel inclined to support. Notice that the agent presented has no direct moral relationship with either nation by virtue of her or her loved one's migration to China, yet this does not preclude her from choosing which of the two she believes she ought to support, let alone choose to support someone in the first place. Peter Singer hits the mark on this when he says, "The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be farther away."²² This further eliminates doubts that coexistence between positional and natural duties is possible, even though one may overlap with the other. But what about her moral duty? Where does her moral duty to choose between the two originate in the first place? Since neither of the two is necessarily close to her per se, what makes it not a mere supererogation for the mother to still care for the social conflict as a whole? Here, concurring with the opinions of Singer, we can revert to the logic utilized in the previous example with the mother: since the agent does not have a direct relationship with either the Ukrainians or Russians, she does not necessarily have positional solid obligations towards them. Although this does not diminish her natural duties to other human beings, and choosing which side to support in the war does not infringe upon her own space and interests *ceteris paribus*.²³ In the instance that it does, however, she can choose the social stance that she prefers. This explains why social movements are often global in scope and scale: the members of such movements, i.e., political candidates, organizations, and even individual supporters, implore others to partake in their causes. In this example, the natural duty of partisanship is exemplified further since voting between Ukrainian candidates upholds one's moral duties to other human beings despite not having a direct relationship.

²² See Peter Singer, *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (New York: Oxford Publishing Press, 2016), 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 15.

What are the four causes of abstention?

In the scenarios above, we have discussed the implications of personal obligations, natural duties, and overlapping decisions. Moreover, we have determined through illustration and examples how partisanship works both in a proximate and distant sense, elaborating on the possible considerations when choosing which action to pursue. Lastly, we have also clarified the central concern of agent-centered deontology regarding our moral duty to partake: that it is expected of us but is not imposed against us. However, the discussion of abstention remains, i.e., choosing not to vote. First, we must distinguish between the different possible reasons for abstention. Here, I will employ some of the most vital and most widely prominent reasons for instances of abstention and discuss them individually: (1) lack of voter knowledge, (2) valuing neutrality, (3) political and social ignorance, (4) coercion. within the discussion of each segment. I will elaborate on the nuances of the act of abstention, i.e., its moral quality, its implication to agency, personal obligations, and its correlation with others in society. Although other reasons for abstention certainly exist, they are often niche or lie beyond deontological consideration. In most cases, it would be mainly pointless to include them in the discussion as the relevance of doing so would be swiftly questioned.

We shall begin by highlighting a crucial aspect of abstention: its neutral moral value. Simply put, neither abstention nor the act of voting in and of itself possesses inherent moral value, for shading circles in a paper that correspond to names has no moral effect. As such, voting, as a legal procedure, is not an inherently ethical matter.²⁴ It carries no direct moral consequence to anyone or anything. Thus, as far as deontological ethics is concerned, the act of not voting is not immoral in and of itself. Therefore, we will view abstention in this paper as the intended cause of choosing not to vote, or in other words, what an agent wanted to happen due to their abstention and why.

Lack of Voter Knowledge. The first cause of abstention is a lack of voter knowledge. It must be noted that this is a multifaceted issue. There may be multiple reasons for a lack of voter knowledge, such as a lack of reliable access to information, an insufficiency in informational awareness on the part of the government and news reporting bodies, or active ignorance on the part of the voter, which will be discussed separately later. Furthermore, the gradation of informational insufficiency also varies, and depending on how much knowledge a voter has while also considering the truthfulness of the information, a lack of voter knowledge becomes a concern that operates on a spectrum. For this paper, I operate on the assumption that the agent's voter knowledge is so inadequate, despite their efforts to obtain it, that the only reasonable option remains for them to abstain.

In the first cause, I argue that the decision to abstain is akin to being incapable of voting in general and that the act stems neither from ill intent nor ill action on the agent's part. As we have discussed earlier, not voting is not inherently an immoral action; hence, no further discussion is required. But with regards to intent, an agent that decides to abstain because they are unsure, overwhelmed, or feel estranged by the circumstances they find themselves in. As such, it is not out of a desire for something evil, but out of being paralyzed from doing anything in the first place. This argument is supported by the simple idea that voter knowledge is necessary because its epistemic value is pivotal and essential to forming a meaningful vote. In fact, voting blindly could be deemed more immoral than abstention, for the voter not only voted irresponsibly but did so with knowledge that

²⁴ Voting as in the activity of going to a voting center, taking a voting sheet, and shading circles corresponding to the candidate you chose. This is not to be confused with the societal value that results from voting.

their actions neglect the ethical implication of voting. An agent, in this case, is abstaining not because they have an immoral intended cause but because they cannot adequately determine and weigh where their obligations lie in; as such, they are doing nothing due to falling back to their other established obligations. As was previously explained, choosing refers to selecting an option out of one's preferences and desires; thus, one cannot "choose" when they first have no idea what their choices are. Therefore, it would seem that abstention, in this instance, is morally valid.

Valuing Neutrality. The second cause of abstention is valuing neutrality. While one would champion neutrality over affirmative participation for many reasons, we only need to establish a baseline for which kinds of reasons are valid under agent-centered deontology. First, let us analyze the act of neutrality. Here, a notable discussion may arise in the form of neutrality being akin to acts of omission. In other words, by remaining neutral, one fails, in a sense, to forward any change within the social issue. However, this is not a significant concern under agent-centered deontology, for obligations are often negative, i.e., we should not kill, steal, or rob. Choosing a stance that will end up in someone's death and remaining neutral about the conflict are two very different things. Even if one can take a stance, it is not an agent-relative obligation. Thus, remaining neutral is valid unless one has a special relationship with the others that will be affected by the stance taken. If one, however, were to remain neutral with the active intent of causing harm, either directly or indirectly, then it would be morally unethical and invalid. This is not to be confused with acts that may harm others but are done to preserve one's agent-relative obligations. At the same time, the former is inherently unethical, while the latter is not and would thus constitute a valid form of abstention.

Political and Social Negligence. On the third cause of abstention, we will highlight the phenomenon of political and social negligence. This kind of negligence is characterized by agents who deliberately, knowingly, and willingly decide not to care about external social issues. Notably, this is separate from ignorance, which stems from a lack of epistemic access, which would then be a concern with gaps in knowledge²⁵ as opposed to worries with intended causes. This is undoubtedly the kind of abstention seen as unethical at first sight. However, we must distinguish what kind of negligence we are discussing, for there are two kinds: (1) negligence by commission and (2) negligence by omission. When an agent is negligent by commission, it may be the same as disregarding the obligations around them, which is the same as neglecting their natural duties towards others in society. It would be rendered valid if this is done to preserve one's agent-relative obligations. For example, the actions of a husband who decides to speed through traffic to get his dying spouse to the hospital would be regarded as ethically valid. Negligence by omission, on the other hand, is when they fail to do something. Thus, a driver would be negligent by omission if they run over someone accidentally because of speeding.

With regard to partisanship, it is proper to say that negligence by commission may sometimes be morally invalid, whereas negligence by omissions is always valid. For the former, this is because acts of commission are essentially acts that may *cause* harm, but these may also be acts that do not intend to cause harm, which would mean that the intended cause associated is moral. However, what about cases where negligence indirectly results in harm? As we have discussed earlier, the result of an action, even if it is a byproduct, is not the measure of an action's moral quality under this deontological branch and thus has no bearing in its evaluation. For the latter, the rationale can be likened to the

²⁵ This kind of epistemic issue could evolve into a broader problem which we have covered in the first (1) reason for abstention.

rationale formed in the discussion on neutrality; we must differentiate acts of cause and acts of omission, for the former is a pursuance of ill intent, whereas the latter equates to non-action. Moreover, if an agent were to have agent-relative obligations that conflict with their capacity not to neglect an issue, they have every right to prioritize the former. Hence, if a voter were to decide between spending the next two hours attending a rally or playing with their children, their choice of the latter over the former is valid.

Coercion. Lastly, the fourth cause of abstention is coercion, which is described as the act of persuading someone to do something using force or threats. For this scenario, abstention is valid because one's agency takes utmost priority, as is clear under agent-centered deontology. As such, the desire to prioritize oneself and one's proximate relationships from outside danger is warranted, and so a person may abstain because they were threatened with their death and the death of their loved ones if they do not comply. Moreover, actions done due to coercion are acts not done with the agent's agency to begin with since that agency was taken away and manipulated by the agent coercing them; hence, no responsibility is found in the coerced doer. Thus, acts resulting from coercion are not the agent executor's fault but the person coercing. Notably, the act of abstention may also partially extend to the coercer since the responsibility for the act lies on them. However, in a legal sense, the person who abstained was the coerced agent; it would be much appreciated, though, if there were further insights about this on a philosophical level.²⁶

In any case, it is necessary to remember that the enormous power of the agent's obligations raises the question of whether the natural duty of partisanship is merely supererogatory and should not be considered as a natural duty. However, this is not a clear conclusion when it concerns social stances since the demand from these social movements and narratives is not merely that individuals know their existence but that they act on it and actively support it. The environmental movement does not say, "Look, the trees here are burning," and stop there. They, like every other social movement and cause, advocate for action that can be taken and supported in favor of their concerns. Hence, it cannot be said that social causes are merely supererogatory. Ironically, the very formula for deontological ethics is found here as well, for when we speak of ethically valid actions, we do not only refer to an agent's intent or knowledge, but the actions they correspond to these. This is why there are legitimate calls to action that one can opt into, such as international donations, fundraisers, or charity programs. This is not to say that every individual must participate in all calls to action, but that at the very least, one is morally expected to engage with the pending problem in any way they can, as is their natural duty of recognizing their obligations to others in society. However, the decision between choosing a stance or not will ultimately lie in the agent, and due to this, it seems that partisanship, while an expected natural duty, is flexible as with all other duties as per agent-centered deontology. If, for whatever reason, an individual finds themselves in any of the above-mentioned circumstances about choosing and abstaining, then there are appropriate actions for them to follow

²⁶ It becomes difficult, on a deontological level, to trace where accountability starts and ends within acts done from coercion. The lines that separate the agent from their actions, while possible to be detached from the agent due to the presence of a coercer, may be a controversial take due to the existence of an agent's capacity to disobey the coercer and still find ways to preserve their agent-relative obligations, among other possibilities. However, in most instances, the level of coercion that extends to extreme cases of danger would more than likely compel any average individual to comply to the coercer's demands.

when making ethical actions. If the prerequisites were satisfied, then the rest of society has no right to fault them for choosing otherwise.

Conclusion

Overall, the moral duty of partisanship can be considered a natural duty with the caveat that an agent's relative obligations can override the duty of partisanship. This entails that obligations concerning agent-relative priorities occupy a higher moral ground than expected natural duties generated by the external public, including the duty of partisanship. While this does not affect the dynamics of identity-based engagement, it suggests that the way in which we associate our identity with public affairs is elastic to the extent of an agent's personal priorities and interpretations of social issues. Simply put, the arbitrary expectation to choose a side cannot be absolute in its current state since it cannot penetrate the autonomy and self-sovereignty of an agent's will and beliefs. Moreover, the act of partisanship depends its moral quality upon the actions and intents they pursue concerning the circumstances they find themselves in. This finding coincides with the general assessment we conducted in the first section, wherein we pondered on the significance of autonomous choice to the manifestation of partisanship and identity-based engagement. Similarly, we find that the act of abstention is morally permissible under specific scenarios and does not necessarily conflict with the essence of agent-relative obligations, given that these obligations fall in favor of the decision to abstain. Furthermore, the paper finds that regardless of the natural moral duty of partisanship being secondary in priority compared to positional or agent-relative duties, neither necessarily erases the other. Most importantly, the findings of this paper were also able to expand on the philosophical study of ethics by further narrowing down the applications of moral duty beyond already established research, such as the moral duty to vote and natural and positional duties. Further improvements and expansions from this paper can be made by applying the concept of the moral duty of partisanship to other deontological theories, such as Kantianism, and by focusing on how this ethical case interacts with contrasting philosophical theories, such as classical liberalism, egoism, or Nozickian philosophy.

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