

Personal relationships such as friendships, filial relationships, spousal relationships, and the like affect the normative profiles of their participants in various ways. Taking obligations as a central case of this phenomenon, the aim of this talk is to clarify and evaluate the alternative between two competing ways of explaining how relationships matter normatively.

According to a recently popular “non-reductionist” view, suggested by writers such as Samuel Scheffler, Joseph Raz, Jay Wallace, Niko Kolodny, David Owens, and others, relationship-based obligations (so-called “special obligations”) cannot be explained in terms of more general obligations owed to all persons, but are in some sense “*sui generis*”. Philosophers who defend such an account of special obligations thereby reject a “reductionist” account according to which these obligations can be explained in terms of obligations that make no mention of relationships, but merely lead to special deontic patterns when applied to the dense histories of interaction and mutual expectation that characterize many personal relationships.

It turns out that properly articulating the alternative between these two ostensibly competing explanatory approaches – reductionism and non-reductionism about relationship-based obligations – is no trivial task. It involves clarifying what makes obligations “general” or “*sui generis*” in the relevant sense, what sort of explanation is at issue, and how exactly to characterize the shared explanandum. The first part of the talk discusses these questions and makes explicit the respective theoretical commitments of reductionism and non-reductionism about special obligations. The second part of the talk offers an argument for the conclusion that relationship-based obligations are always capable of being explained in terms of general normative principles, defends reductionism against the main objections leveled by non-reductionists, and shows how reductionism can accommodate the main concerns that motivate non-reductive explanations of special obligations. The arguments in the second part of the talk amount to a case for skepticism about special obligations, if (as a number of non-reductionists do) by “special obligations” we understand those relationship-based obligations that are incapable of being given a reductive explanation.