# Role Attachment and Receptivity

Luke Brunning – University of Oxford

## 1. Introduction

We have many social roles. Most of them are Janus-faced with behavioural and subjective aspects. In this essay I consider how these aspects relate. Some, like Christine Korsgaard, think roles are *constituted* from norms.[1] I adopt this standpoint. I begin by looking at Erving Goffman's distinction between norms of conduct and our subjective orientation to roles in thought and feeling. I then argue, first, that our thoughts and feelings about some roles are normatively structured, and not 'up to us'. Second, I argue that some of these seemingly merely subjective aspects of certain roles are actually constituent norms of the role. That is, necessary conditions of being in the role.[2] I then explore some ethical implications of these arguments.

## 2. Commitment & Attachment

Erving Goffman describes our having of social roles in terms of two categories: commitment and attachment. By "commitment" Goffman describes how someone's "doing or being" a particular role:

> …irrevocably conditions other important possibilities in his life, forcing him to take courses of action, causing other persons to build up their activity on the basis of his continuing in his current undertakings, and rendering him vulnerable to unanticipated consequences of these undertakings.[3]

[1] Korsgaard suggests that, "one might think of a particular practical identity, if a little artificially, as a set of principles, the dos and don'ts of being a teacher or a citizen, say" (2009, p.21) of a practical identity as a "role with a point" (ibid). In an earlier work she argued, "normativity is built right into the role" (Korsgaard, 1996, p.101).

[2] I will not consider whether norms that regulate thought and feeling alone could be *sufficient* conditions of being in some roles. Perhaps 'sagehood' is an example.

[3] Goffman, 1961, p.89

When we are committed to a role we are "locked into a position and coerced into living up to the promises and sacrifices built into it."[4] Commitment captures the normative pressure of a role's obligations and responsibilities, and its wider implications. For instance, in being committed to lecturing you acquire duties that are reflected in the behaviour and expectations of your colleagues. You face recrimination if you ignore these norms. Goffman thus shares Korsgaard's conception of roles as constituted from norms.

Attachment describes our attitudes towards the "self-image" made possible by a role. Goffman suggests we are attached to a role if we are "affectively and cognitively enamoured" of it and "desiring and expecting to see [ourselves] in terms of the enactment of the role and the self-identification emerging from this enactment."[5] Thus attachment is an opportunity to view oneself positively.

Goffman shows how attachment and commitment diverge.[6] He envisages parents who are giving their child up for adoption. Beforehand they are committed to the role as the progenitors of the child within a contemporary legal regime. They have obligations and responsibilities, and can be appraised under the role-description "parent." But they may be unattached to the role (which can explain why their child is being adopted). The converse case of childless couple seeking to adopt a child illustrates attachment to a role without commitment. They have strong feelings and thoughts about the role, yet they are not committed to it in lacking legal responsibility for the child.

The 'basic picture' of roles I draw from considering Goffman's view has several features. First, roles are primarily defined by the normative demands they make on someone who holds them (their commitment). If someone knowingly fails to *behave* in the right ways, they will be removed from the role. However, we also think and feel things about our roles. Thus, second, there is a degree of voluntarism to this attachment; it can be absent. Third, attachment is usually positive.

On the basic picture, commitment appears to be the ethically relevant dimension of our roles. We want to know what the demands of our roles are, and how those duties and norms relate to moral values. Our contingent thoughts about the role seem less relevant.

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid, p.79

This gulf between socially circumscribed actions and private feelings and reflection reflects the intuition that whilst we often have to behave in prescribed ways in our roles, we can freely rebel in our thoughts and feelings, "so long as the job is done."

The basic picture is incomplete as a conception of all roles and their constitutive norms. In what follows, I will show how the basic picture cannot account for the particular character of some roles, roles that may have a significant place in our lives.

More needs to be said about role commitment. That task could occupy a separate paper. Here it suffices to distinguish between *core* and *peripheral* norms of commitment. There is room for interpretative arguments and changes in understanding about what someone must do in order to 'have' their role.[7] Additionally, many roles have particular enabling conditions. To be a doctor you must be legally recognised. To be a mother, you have to bear legal or biological relations to a child.

## 3. Our Attachment to Roles

My argument has the following shape. First, I provide a brief analysis of attachment and commitment. Second, in developing the basic picture, I argue that, like commitment, our *attachment* to some roles is normative. Third, I consider the interesting possibility that being attached to some roles in a particular way is a necessary condition of having them.

### 3.1. Analysis

Commitment labels our receptiveness, in action, to reasons that refer to and rely upon the existence of a socially recognised role. We cannot be committed to defunct or historical roles (we may pretend). In being committed to roles we face reasons that do not bear on other people. Similar actions, not for these reasons, are not actions under the auspices of the role. Roles provide reasons akin to the reasons we heed when we act on the basis of a personal relationship, or group membership, i.e. reasons of partiality.[8] Attachment, in contrast, refers to our attitudes which take a role as their object, or which take ourselves-as-our-role as their object.

[7] Cf. Korsgaard, 2009, p.21

[8] Cf. Scheffler, 2010a

Goffman chose unfortunate language to introduce the notion of attachment because it would be unduly restrictive to account for the general fact that we have thoughts and feelings about our roles in terms of the single attitude of love.[9] Most of us have negative attitudes towards some of our roles.

## 3.2. Attachment can be Normative

Often our attachment to roles is itself normatively constrained in a socially mediated way, and in a manner that contrasts with general moral norms. We can be critiqued for the way we think and feel about some roles from the standpoint of the social understanding of those roles themselves. Certainly, occasional deviations form these norms are fine. But occupancy of some roles requires *patterns* of thought and feeling to be sustained. We can understand these patterns in terms of being appropriately *disposed* to think and feel in broadly recognisable ways about the role in relevant contexts.

This observation seems obvious. We can be 'too into' some roles, or fail to care enough about others. We can reason about what to do in explicit reference to a role, or never think about one at all. We are concerned by a riot-policeman who relishes clashes with protesting citizens, a mother who hates motherhood, or an ex-general who struggles to adjust to civilian life. The basic picture, which conceives of attachment in positive terms, cannot accommodate these kinds of thought or feeling.

Moreover, these norms are often reasonably central to a role. Zealot riot-policemen or unreflective philosophers worry us because those patterns of attitudes are contrary to what is involved in the role. We expect the policeman to manifest a degree of sanguinity when in combatting the citizens he ostensibly projects and the philosopher to remain open-minded about the demands of her role.

Like most norms, the norms of role-attachment are best observed in contexts where they are violated. Mothers who profess not to care, democratic politicians who despise the public, philosophers who are unreflective about their own behaviour, lead us to see how we ordinarily expect people to think and feel, as a consequence of the roles to which they are committed.

[9] Goffman would resist this flat-spirited reading.

Conversely, sometimes a person's enthusiasm for a role indicates that something has gone awry, as in the riot-policeman case. Thus Goffman's observation about his time, 1961, taken to hold of ours too,[10] that "currently, it is felt to be sound mental hygiene for an individual to be attached to the role he performs, especially if he is a committed and regular performer of it"[11] only holds of *some* roles.

### 3.2.1. Meta Norms?

It might be thought that the normativity of attachment to roles can be understood in terms of general moral values. Goffman appears to support this view in appealing to a "moral norm" in his *en passant* suggestion:

> An appreciation can grow up concerning how attached an individual properly ought to be to a particular role, giving rise to the possibility that, compared to this moral norm, a performer may be over attached to his role, or alienated from it.[12]

Thus you might think that the riot policeman lacks politeness, or is cruel, and that these general vices explain his inappropriate attachment. Some roles may have a closer connection to norms of politeness, or conviviality. But the norms of attachment are particular, not generic moral norms. In this respect, they can be as particular as role-commitment norms; norms that are not regarded as general because they govern highly specific conduct. We have to be careful not to beg the question against the view that attachment norms can be necessary conditions of *being in the role*. To accurately describe some roles, we need to see that our failures to think and feel in certain ways jeopardise our claim to the role. Finally, note that the norm of attachment can have the similar content to a general norm or virtue (compare a doctor's 'bedside manner' and politeness). My claim here is only that attachment norms can be constituents of a role.

## 3.3. Can Norms of Attachment be Necessary Conditions of Having a Role?

If attachment can be normative we can raise an interesting question; namely, can proper attachment be a *necessary* condition of having a role? Recall that a role's norms of commitment are more or less peripheral; we can argue about which duties

[10] Cf. Korsgaard, 2009, p. 23

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, p.79

accompany teaching, or psychoanalysis and so on. But can the norms of attachment to some roles be so central to them that they partly constitutive the role?[13]

To properly occupy a role, we may need to refrain from certain patterns of thought, or actively feel and think in a particular way, for instance, the riot policeman should not enjoy his confrontations with the public in an ongoing manner. However, someone who polices riots in this way, who loves themselves in virtue of their role, would still be considered to 'have' the role. Their commitment (in Goffman's sense) is not jeopardised, indeed, perhaps their commanding officer values their zeal. Instead, we might say that this person is simply a *bad* riot policeman.

There is a general difficulty dividing bad instances of something from instances of not being that thing. Consider vegetarianism, for example. If your friend avows that she is a vegetarian, with her past behaviour reflecting this, but you then encounter her eating meat, is she still a vegetarian? She might profess that it is a momentary relapse, something that challenges her persisting aspirations towards vegetarianism. We could say she is a vegetarian, just a bad one. However, if these 'relapses' become more frequent or habitual then we would question whether she is a vegetarian at all.

Drawing the line between being a bad X, and not being an X, is complex. Some roles, such as motherhood, rest on other relations that often have the same name as the role. In those cases, the question of whether someone is a good or bad X tracks the social role, not the independent relation. Someone's neglect of their child does not mean that child is not biologically theirs (biological mother) but it means they are bad mother (role).

In considering commitment to roles, it is clear that someone's failure to heed the normative requirements of a role, in action, undermines their claim to the role. If someone ignores all their obligations they have the role in name only; little distinguishes their position from a fantasist.

Can the same be said for attachment to a role? I think the answer is yes. Some roles have a central place for our thoughts and feelings about them. In this sense, they are like friendship. Evidently friendship is a complex relation between individuals. It is not

[13] Most roles have other norms and conditions that constitute the role, and which must be satisfied to 'have' the role.

simply a relation circumscribed by particular duties and behaviours (although it may involve these). Significantly, being someone's friend also generates expectations about how we are attached to that very fact; how we think and feel about being a friend.

Consider two purported friends, Peter and Lucy. There are many ways that Peter's attachment to his apparent friendship can go awry. First, he might be emotionally averse to being called Lucy's friend. Second, he might find this purported friendship repulsive. Third, he might think, more generally, that being the friend of Lucy is not to be valued. Finally, and more complexly, he might act on the basis of reasons that explicitly reference his-friendship-to-Lucy in an abstract manner, at the expense of reasons that reference *Lucy*.

In all these instances, Peter's attachment to his friendship is troubling. If we insert caveats about the absence of social conditions that make it hard for Peter to *express* his friendship, we would think Peter is not Lucy's friend. Although he might make various attempts to behave as if he were, he is not attached to the friendship in the right way. This is sufficient to undermine his claim to be Lucy's friend, because those demands of friendship are so central to the relationship; what it is to be a friend is to be exposed and susceptible to certain kinds of thought and feeling about that relationship.

Some of our roles are like friendship. If we violate their norms of attachment, then despite appearances we do not have them. Parenting, the priesthood, and psychoanalysis strike are possible examples of such roles. I will consider the latter, because it is an example of a role with complex norms of attachment.

Jonathan Lear writes about the complexities of being a psychoanalyst:

> …*psychoanalyst* is not simply a term like *newspaper reader* or *airline passenger*, which describe things we do, even things we do often…*Psychoanalyst* describes who we are…as psychoanalysts we are constantly in the process of shaping ourselves as psychoanalysts. As we listen to our analysands, we are also listening to ourselves…We strive to shape ourselves into people who can listen well and who can intervene in ways that are genuinely helpful to our analysands. This is a process of becoming a certain kind of person. [14]

[14] Lear, 2003, p.32

In occupying the role of psychoanalyst, you must continually question what that involves, in many contexts (even the analytic hour itself). To be a psychoanalyst and engage in therapeutic action, you cannot adhere to a rigid conception of what the role entails. If you do, you will be unwittingly suggestive to your patients, or labour under a fixed conception of what constitutes a cure (which can be thought of as the loose "point" of the role). These conceptions negatively influence the structure of an analysis, especially when they unwittingly influence your motivations, which is unsurprising given the emotional and cognitive receptivity involved in the process.[15] Certification is a necessary condition of being a psychoanalyst, amongst other duties of care, but Lear makes a strong case for the centrality of obligations concerning how an analyst *takes up* this role. The wrong kinds of sustained thought and feeling about themselves qua the role challenge their claim to be psychoanalysts. As Lear puts it:

> To put it paradoxically: to *be* an analyst one must ever be in the process of *becoming* an analyst. For anyone for whom the process of becoming is over, he or she has ceased to be an analyst.[16]

This view is fairly standard. Robert Caper, a psychoanalyst in a different tradition, expresses a similar thought in a context where he worries about psychoanalysts "maintaining fictions of themselves." He suggests, "it is the analyst's task to play no role at all." If Lear and Caper are right psychoanalysis is an example of a role with subtle attachment norms. Indeed, one central requirement seems to be that you have to avoid pre-conceptions about the range of thought and feeling that may arise. This requirement is a strong candidate for being a necessary aspect of being a psychoanalyst.

Parenting is another candidate role of this kind. If you discovered that your parents, although diligent in their actions, never loved you and their role, you would feel betrayed, and would question the extent to which they ever were parents. Their diligent behaviour is compromised by their impoverished and inappropriate patterns of thought and feeling (their lack of appropriate attachment).[17]

---

[15] Caper, 1999, p.15

[16] Lear, 2003, p.32

[17] Peter Ridley prompted this thought. This could be a contingent feature of contemporary attitudes about parenting. 'We' are more likely to think that a chronically depressed parent who failed to care well for their child, but who loved them and the role they – unfortunately – struggled to fulfill in action, is in a better position than the diligent but unfeeling 'parent', when it comes to the role. The contrary view might have been true in centuries past.

This view differs from the basic picture where roles are primarily constituted from behavioural norms, and our attachment to them is a seductive, but optional, extra. That approach is overly voluntaristic. Just as we cannot remain friends with someone whilst thinking and feeling whatever we like about that fact, so we cannot remain analysts under similar terms.

Roles of this character are interesting because they are often significant to us. As with Lear's remark about psychoanalysis, other roles constitute "ways of being a person."[18] These roles have significance because the norms of attachment to them appear to render them forms of socially mediated life that we have to *value* if we are to have them at all. That is, we cannot be mothers, or psychoanalysts if we do not value ourselves in virtue of these roles and, conversely value these roles.[19]

In some cases, attachment norms appear similar to the conditions on valuing something. One significant difference between judging something to be valuable, and *personally valuing* it yourself, is that you are dispositionally susceptible to undergo certain patterns of emotion and thought about the valued object. For example, contrast your value of your parents with your recognition that your friend's parents are valuable.[20] We understand these patterns of thought and emotion in predicable ways. When considering the example of Peter's ersatz-friendship with Lucy, his emotional and cognitive distaste of the purported friendship indicated he was not her friend. Analogously, I have argued that having certain roles involved thinking and feeling about them in fairly determinate dispositionally mediated ways. Thus, for these particular roles, the norms of attachment may require someone to be comported to a role in a very similar way to someone who personally values the role (as opposed to simply judging it to be valuable). Thus it is plausible to think that some roles require us to value them if we are to occupy them. On this view, you cannot be a psychoanalyst if you only recognise in the abstract that the role is valuable whilst failing to value it yourself. This seems correct, and resonates with Lear and Caper's conception of what is involved in being an analyst.

---

[18] I say some, and not all roles, to distinguish myself from Korsgaard's view of practical identities in which apparently any role has this significance.

[19] We may not value *that* we came to have the role, but we may value the role. Cf. Wallace, 2013,

[20] For discussion of this point, see Scheffler, 2010b

Summary

Our attachment to some roles is normatively constrained. Failures to be appropriately attached indicate that something is awry, analogous to the case of purported friendship. More strongly, patterns of thought and feeling are central to some roles and are necessary conditions of having the role.

## 5. Roles and Receptivity

Both Korsgaard and Goffman see roles as presenting us with seductive opportunities. We can become enamoured by them, bestowing them with value despite their contingent origins. However, some roles – those where attachment norms are necessary conditions of having them – demand we resist seduction. Recall Caper's remark about analysts' refraining from having roles. But the ideal is familiar. Other examples include jaded philosophers who do not recognise other ways of thought about their favourite topic, or mothers who think too much about mothering.

We are implicitly aware of the norms of attachment to roles. This awareness manifests in the experienced gap between social expectations and our actual thoughts and feelings. Although we ought to feel certain ways to have some roles, we may not. Yet falling short is not always cause for blame. Post-natal depression renders someone unable to emote in socially expected ways, but this condition is often accompanied by frustration about its debilitating nature; the mother wants to feel affection. However there can be cases in which our attachment to some roles goes awry, in ethically troubling ways.

Many of the norms of attachment to a role can be understood in terms of a 'deeper' and more implicit concern with receptivity. Roles, by their nature, are paradigmatically oriented towards activities, goals, or persons. There is great variation here; a philosopher's reflective engagement with 'the truth' differs from an analyst's attention to her patient, but roles cannot be understood if we ignore their foci. Michael Slote argues that receptivity is an important ethical virtue.[21] His basic thesis can apply to roles: our attention – in the broadest sense of that word – ought primarily to be directed to the object, goal, or role-other of a role. When someone is alienated, they are cast adrift from that focus in some way; there are not receptive.

[21] Slote, 2013

There are two poles the spectrum of our potential alienation from our roles. First, our thought and our feelings towards a role might be too rigid (insofar as we have control over our emotions). Second, we can be too unreflective about our thoughts and feelings towards a role. Both failures centre on the aforementioned 'gap' between what is socially expected of us in a role, and the attitudes we have.

Ideally we should remain reflexive about that gap, and not close it uncritically (often unconsciously). Our failure to feel or think what is expected may indicate something is awry; that actually, we are not a friend, or psychoanalyst. Conversely, our socially contentious attitudes may indicate that the norms we 'ought' to follow should be rejected. The fact that a new mother is frustrated with her annoying and tirelessly crying child can prompt her to re-evaluate the ideal of ceaseless unambivalent maternal love.

Someone can be alienated from their role when they are too rigidly oriented to its norms of attachment. A mother, who is concerned about how to feel and think, may fail to be receptive to her child.[22] An analyst who maintains the "fiction" of herself as a powerful force for good in a patient's life may be ensnaring their patient in a stagnant web of suggestion. These alienations resemble *Bovarysme,* a defect of character in which someone lives in rigid adherence to aesthetic ideals, often regarding themselves as 'a character'. It is defined as "(domination by) a romantic or unreal conception of oneself."[23]

Edward Harcourt argues that this defect distances someone from explanations that are truth-oriented, that "fictional models militate against realistic self-assessment, only to allow it in as a last resort in a form that is both total and damning"[24] and that living in this rigid manner distorts someone's moral emotions, particularly because their emotions take the wrong objects.

Inflexible orientation to the attachment norms of some of our roles is analogously damaging. Someone may be unrealistic in their self-condemnation because they never challenge the norms they are guided by, they may fail to be receptive i.e. oriented to what the activity or role-other actually requires, and the objects of their moral

[22] Cf. Parker, 2005; Almond, 2010

[23] O.E.D. online.

[24] Harcourt, 2011, p.274

emotions may become tangled, the role itself or me-in-my-role may become the object of thought or feeling.

Our attachment to some roles has to be 'transparent' so that we are mainly oriented towards the people who make the role possible, or who are the focus of its primary obligations, rather than the role itself. Thus, it might be part of our attachment to the role that we rarely reason about the role at all. Once again, this conclusion is supported by my analogy between some roles and friendship. Reflecting on the *fact that you are a friend* can be a form of narcissistic fixation, which prevents you from attending to your friend.

Interestingly, some roles may require us to think about the people they concern, people who are described in terms of the role – such as wives, patients, congregants, etc. – but not the role itself. An analogy with Bernard Williams' "one thought too many" situation is pertinent here.[25] In that case it seems right for the man to justify his partiality with a reason that explicitly references his wife, but not were his reasoning to detour via consideration of what 'the role of husband' requires in this situation.

The second way we can be alienated from our roles is when we are so fixated on our own thoughts and emotions that we cannot act effectively. There are many times when coarse reflection on what to do in a role is appropriate because it enables people to act and not be paralysed. Being too aware of the gap between how you feel and what is expected of you can stop you from adhering to a role's norms. If new parents, or recently qualified analysts are too self-reflective, they may be unable to do anything at all.[26]

This may seem to undermine my claim that the attachment norms of some roles are necessary conditions of having the role. Yet recall I argued that people have to manifest certain *dispositional patterns* of thought of feeling to be friends, analysts, mothers, and so on. We have to be acculturated into these patterns (as with learning to be virtuous), which often demand cruder forms of *initial* interaction. However, once someone is purportedly established in certain roles, failures to manifest the appropriate patterns of feeling and thought are problematic indicators that something is awry.

---

[25] Williams, 1981

[26] Michael Slote argues that the ability and readiness to act is compatible with possessing the (*prima facie* passive) virtue of receptivity (Ibid).

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that our attachment to some roles can be normatively constrained. Those norms can be necessary conditions of having a role, yet rigidity in their adherence, or absent or over-reflection, can be alienating or paralysing, with troubling consequences for those connected to the role.

## Bibliography


Almond, B. 2010, *The Monster Within – The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, University of California Press

Caper, R. 1999, 'Psychoanalysis and suggestion: reflections on James Strachey's 'The nature of the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis' in *A Mind of One's Own*, Routledge

Goffman, E. 1961, 'Role Distance' in *Encounters -Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company

Harcourt, E. 2011, 'Nietzsche and the "aesthetics of character"' in May, S. ed. *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality* A Critical Guide, Cambridge University Press

Korsgaard, C. 2009, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford University Press

Korsgaard, C. 1996, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press

Lear, J. 2003, *Therapeutic Action,* Other Press

Parker, R. 2005, *Torn in Two - The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, Virago;

Scheffler, S. 2010a, 'Morality and Reasonable Partiality', in *Equality and Tradition*, Oxford University Press

Scheffler, S. 2010b, 'Valuing' in *Equality and Tradition*, Oxford University Press

Slote, M. 2013, *From Enlightenment to Receptivity,* Oxford University Press

Wallace, J. 2013, *The View from Here*, Oxford University Press

Williams, B. 1981, 'Persons, Character and Morality' in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press