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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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Deep personal relationships, value, merit, and change

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Abstract

A paper of Roger Crisp's four years ago contained arguments that seemed to imply that having deep personal relationships does not constitute an element of well-being. The lesson to draw from that paper of Crisp's, according to a recent journal article of mine, is that one's having a deep personal relationship does constitute an element of one's well-being on condition that one's affection for the other person is merited. Crisp's paper earlier in this issue of *Ratio* responds to my arguments. Here I reply to new questions that Crisp poses or provokes.

KEYWORDS

deep personal relationships, intrinsic value, merit, pro tanto benefit, well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

Friendship and other deep personal relationships can be sources of the most profound joy. They also can provide protection, comfort, and enlightenment. The instrumental value of having deep personal relationships is so immense as to be hard to overstate. But is having deep personal relationships *in itself* an element of human well-being? Are personal relationships beneficial to you only insofar as they bring you distinctive pleasures, provide you with knowledge, or are helpful to you in achieving your goals (among which might be the goal of having deep personal relationships)? Or is having a certain kind of personal relationship like pleasure, knowledge, and achievement in constituting a separate, non-instrumental element of your well-being?

My questions are about the elements of *human* well-being. I think answering these questions is difficult enough without hoping that our answers will extend to the well-being of non-humans.

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Roger Crisp's Lindley Lecture, "Against Partiality" (2018) has powerful arguments suggesting that having deep personal relationships has only instrumental value (see also Crisp, 2021). Crisp's arguments induced me to write Hooker, 2021. Crisp (2022) responds to my earlier paper. Here I reply to further questions raised by Crisp's response.

Let me clarify straightaway that the question is *not* whether having deep personal relationships is so important that any life without them would be worthless in self-interested terms. A life without deep personal relationships might be rich enough in other ways to be on balance beneficial to the person who lives it.

Nor is the question at issue whether developing a deep personal relationship must always increase well-being, *all things considered*. The issue is whether having deep personal relationships constitutes a pro tanto benefit in the first place, as opposed to whether some particular person's life is improved, all things considered, by adding a deep personal relationship to it. A deep personal relationship can constitute a non-derivative pro tanto benefit even if its addition to someone's life somehow leads to other losses that outweigh the benefit. For example, the pleasure of eating the toffee apple would constitute a benefit to me; but if this pleasure could be obtained only at the cost of the later pain and inconvenience of dislodged fillings, then the benefit constituted by the immediate pleasure would be outweighed by the pain and inconvenience I would have later. Likewise, perhaps the benefit to me constituted by having a particular deep personal relationship might be outweighed in the scales of self-interest by the extent to which this relationship would get in the way of my pursuit of achievements, or knowledge, or other relationships.

There are cases in which a valuable personal relationship, one that is a pro tanto benefit to the parties involved, ends badly, with the result that bitter feelings scar both parties. Was it better *overall* "to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all"? The answer will be different in different cases. But questions of overall benefit are not my focus here. Before we weigh up benefits and harms in order to reach a judgement about overall benefit, we need first to ascertain what counts as a benefit in the first place!

How can we ascertain that? Hooker (2015, pp. 28–29) posed a thought experiment in which two possible lives for someone would have the same amounts of pleasure, knowledge, and achievement but one of these possible lives would contain deep personal relationships and the other would not (see also Hooker, 2021, pp. 9–11). This thought experiment tries to isolate one variable—namely, the presence of deep personal relationships. If we think that the possible life containing deep personal relationships would contain more personal good than the possible life devoid of deep personal relationships where all other things are equal (i.e., the two possible lives would have the same amounts of pleasure, knowledge, and achievement), then we must think that deep personal relationships *do* constitute an element of personal good. On the basis of that line of thinking, I concluded that having deep personal relationships is like pleasure, knowledge, and achievement in constituting an element of well-being.

2 | CRISP'S ARGUMENT THAT DEEP PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE ONLY INSTRUMENTALLY VALUABLE

Crisp (2018) amusingly and persuasively drew on plot lines from the Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to ridicule the idea that personal relationships are good in themselves, as opposed to merely instrumentally valuable. Crisp outlines a plot in which Titania falls in love with the unsuitable Bottom because of magic juice that Oberon has sprinkled in Titania's eyes. Is a relationship between Titania and Bottom valuable if Bottom has no admirable qualities and Titania loves him only because of Oberon's magic juice?

The conclusion Crisp (2018) drew is that love and, by implication, deep personal relationships are not intrinsically valuable, though any pleasure they produce is. People who want to resist the conclusion Crisp drew from the case of Titania and Bottom might try to argue that the spoiler in the Titania and Bottom plot is the introduction of magic juice. We are familiar with the trouble for philosophical accounts that "deviant causal chains" can cause. Someone who agrees with Crisp that the deep personal relationship induced between Titania and Bottom is not

in itself valuable might think that it is not in itself valuable because a magic trick played a pivotal role in the relationship's gestation. From the proposition that a deep personal relationship resulting from a deviant causal chain is not intrinsically valuable, it does not follow that deep personal relationships that are caused in "normal ways", rather than by deviant causal chains, lack intrinsic value.

On reflection, however, I think we should not accept that the spoiler in the Titania and Bottom plot is the introduction of magic juice. To do so seems to me to commit the genetic fallacy—the fallacy of thinking that because the genesis of X has some property, X itself must have that property. True, if you are descended from Abraham Lincoln, then so are your children. But there are many properties that can be had by earlier stages of a causal chain that are not had by later stages. Titania's initial affection for Bottom (the affection she had for him as soon as she awoke after Oberon sprinkled magic juice in her eyes) was neither autonomous nor rational. But by the time their affection for one another has lasted long enough for them to qualify as having a deep personal relationship, the artificiality of the origin of that affection might not matter. Many of us have relationships and other passions sparked by quite artificial, completely coincidental, or otherwise non-vindicatory origins. To quote Thomas Hurka, "What's valuable in love is the desires and emotions it involves once it's developed, and those are largely independent of its origin." (Hurka, 2011, p. 150; cf. Hooker, 2021, p. 19).

The conclusion Crisp (2018) drew from the example about Titania and Bottom was that deep personal relationships do not have intrinsic value. I have just discussed the alternative possible conclusion that deep personal relationships do not have intrinsic value *when they are a result of deviant causal chains*, a conclusion that leaves open whether deep personal relationships have intrinsic value when they are caused in the "normal" ways. I turn now to different alternative conclusion about Crisp's example.

This alternative conclusion about Crisp's example is that what determines whether a deep personal relationship is valuable in itself as opposed to being merely instrumentally valuable is (not how the affection was sparked but rather) whether this affection involves deep commitment. On this view, for Titania's relationship with Bottom to be valuable in itself, she must care greatly about his well-being and her relationship with him, and she must take these as generating high-priority reasons for her to do various things. Indeed, Titania and Bottom might manifest their commitment to one another by orienting their life plans around each other. However, even if their commitment to one another is manifest in their behaviour, their commitment to one another might never be verbalized. It might even be something they have never recognised. Sometimes people *discover* commitments in themselves. When they do, the commitment was there before the discovery. (For ideas that might be taken to imply this line of thinking, see Chang, 2013, 2021.)

I accept some of the ideas in this line of thinking. Deep personal relationships necessarily contain deep mutual affection. This affection will have attitudinal, motivational, interpretative, and dispositional components (Hooker, 2021, p. 4). I can accept that commitment is a necessary part of deep personal relationships, as long as this commitment is understood as nothing more than these attitudinal, motivational, interpretative, and dispositional components of affection.

Deep personal relationships include not only romantic ones but also deep friendships and some familial relationships. Now if your relationship with someone is so central to your life that you are building your life around the other person's life, presumably you are aware of this fact. Yet, to have deep personal relationships with people, we need not be committed to going so far as to build our lives around theirs. In order to have a deep personal relationship, our heads and our hearts must have certain configurations, but we do not have to be aware of these configurations. What is in our own hearts, even a very strong affection, can be opaque to us. The kind of commitment in a deep personal relationship *might* not be explicit, or even self-conscious.

Although I have here accepted that strong affection is a necessary component of a deep personal relationship, I do not accept that commitment is a sufficient condition for having a *valuable* deep personal relationship. If Crisp had added to his example that Titania and Bottom are committed to one another in addition to having the requisite mutual understanding and affection, my reaction to the example would not have changed. What Crisp's example seems to me to show is that a qualification needs to be added the idea that having deep personal

relationships constitutes a benefit to us. The qualification is that having deep personal relationships is an element of our well-being *only when these relationships are with people who merit our strong affection* for them. (That was the central point of Hooker, 2021. See also Abramson & Leite, 2011; Hooker, 1999; Howard, 2019; Jollimore, 2011; Keller, 2000, 2013; Raz, 2001.)

The qualification, or extra condition, does *not* imply that a relationship in which at least one party lacks sufficiently good qualities to merit strong affection must fail to qualify as a deep personal relationship. First of all, there are cases of "misdirected love". Second, there can be deep personal relationships motivated by duty. In both kinds of case, the relationships involved might well be deep ones, but they are not relationships that constitute an element of well-being (Hooker, 2021).

3 | CRISP'S "DEEP PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING"

Crisp's "Deep Personal Relationships and Well-Being: A Response to Hooker" (2022) poses intriguing questions about the views I expressed. One question is: how much mutual understanding is needed? I think this is a good question. I also think the answer to it is imprecise. You need to know *a lot* about other individuals' personalities and characters to have enough understanding of them to pass the threshold for having a deep personal relationships with them. But you can have enough understanding of someone's personality and character to have a deep personal relationship with this person without knowing some extremely important secret about this person, such as his longstanding desire to have children (Hooker, 2021, p. 16).

A second question is: how much mutual affection is needed? This also a good question.

We must *not* get sidetracked, however, in wondering about how much mutual understanding or mutual affection is sufficient to benefit the parties *instrumentally*—by, for example, bringing them pleasure. I confess to being the sort of person who gets quite a lot of pleasure out of having a friendly acquaintance with the people whom I pass regularly in my village. But I do not have deep personal relationships with these people, since the degree of our knowledge about one another is far too low for that.

Crisp raises further questions, such as whether the value of deep personal relationships is an *organic whole*. This is the question of whether the value of the *combination* of mutual understanding and mutual affection is greater than the intrinsic value of mutual understanding alone *plus* the intrinsic value of mutual affection alone. I should have addressed this question in my earlier paper.

My answer is that deep personal relationships can have great intrinsic value, much greater than the sum of two negligible amounts. As I will explain in the following paragraphs, the two components of deep personal relationships—mutual understanding and mutual affection—taken separately, have negligible intrinsic value. Hence, the intrinsic value of deep personal relationships can be much greater than the intrinsic value of mutual understanding taken by itself *plus* the intrinsic value of mutual affection taken by itself.

To see why the intrinsic value of mutual understanding, taken by itself, is negligible, consider an example in which two villains understand one another well, although they do not like one another. There might be instrumental value in their knowledge of one another, but is there any intrinsic value in it? Admittedly, I do think that knowledge is intrinsically valuable and constitutes an element of well-being. But, in general, more general and explanatory knowledge is better than particular knowledge, so that knowing basic truths about the universe is much more valuable than knowing some particular fact (Hurka, 1993, chs. 8–10; 2011, ch. 4; Ross, 1930, p. 147). The exception here is that your knowledge about *yourself* might be intrinsically valuable, even if this knowledge is extremely particular rather than general. Now, knowing a lot about some *other* person's character and personality does not seem *intrinsically* valuable.

And what is true here of one person's knowledge of another seems to me true even if the knowledge is mutual. Think again about the two villains who have a deep understanding of one another. Is there significant *intrinsic* value in these bits of highly particular knowledge? I think not.

Perhaps the example of two villains' knowing each other well is an unfair example, since, in this case, each person's knowledge is presumably of lots of bad qualities in the other person. Therefore, let us switch our thought experiment to an example where two *good* people have a high degree of mutual understanding. Certainly, there is likely to be tremendous *instrumental* value in their knowledge of one another's good qualities. For example, these two people might be able to trust one another hugely and thus be happy to engage in diachronic cooperation. But is there *intrinsic* value in their mutual understanding, value that is not instrumental and does not depend on whether these people merit affection? I am willing to accept that there is some, but I think that the amount of this value will be negligible, because the knowledge involved is highly particular.

Now let us turn to cases where two people have mutual affection but not much knowledge about one another. Think of cases where two people become infatuated with one another without really knowing one another. To have a deep personal relationship, the parties need not only mutual affection but also a deep understanding of one another's personality and character, something that cannot be obtained in a short time. And mutual affection that is not based on mutual understanding seems to me to have vanishingly little intrinsic value.

That the value of deep personal relationships is an organic whole is not the only point that Crisp's response convinces me I should have put in my earlier paper. Crisp suggested I might hold that, "for mutual understanding to contribute to a valuable deep personal relationship, it must be the case that affection is based on properties of the other person that warrant affection—that is, one's love of a person will be grounded in love of the good in that person". Ascribing to me this view is a perfectly reasonable inference from what I wrote. But I should have made clear that in fact I do not hold this view.

Imagine that our two characters Titania and Bottom have enough knowledge of one another to pass the threshold of mutual understanding needed for a deep personal relationship. And imagine that they each have enough affection for one another to pass the threshold of mutual affection needed for a deep personal relationship. Finally, suppose that they *do* each have qualities that merit such strong affection. And yet, suppose that, if we asked them each why they love the other, each would mention qualities that do not actually merit affection, or qualities that the other does not in reality have. For example, Bottom might sincerely report that he loves Titania for her ambition. Titania might sincerely report that she loves Bottom for his insight. Actually, however, she is not ambitious, and he is not insightful. To take another example, suppose he loves her because she has an extremely and unrealistically low opinion of herself, but having an unrealistically low opinion of oneself is not in fact an admirable quality.

I could go on offering other possible examples, but I fear we would get caught up in discussing the examples—and maybe disagreeing about the examples—even if we *would* agree about the *general* point that it is possible for two people to have enough mutual knowledge and mutual affection to share a *valuable* deep personal relationship even though these two people are either unaware of, or unappreciative of, the qualities of the other person that really do merit affection for that person. This *general* point about what is *possible* is what matters here. If we agree about this general point, then I think we agree that what is necessary for a *valuable* deep personal relationship is *not* strictly that each has strong affection for the other *because of* qualities that both (a) the other person really does have and (b) really are qualities that merit such affection. What is necessary for a *valuable* deep personal relationship is merely, I think, that there is the requisite mutual understanding and affection and sufficient good qualities, even if the affection was neither ignited nor sustained by these good qualities.

Here is an illustrative example. Suppose that what I find especially appealing about my friend Ruth is (what I think is) the effortlessness of her performances. We have been friends a long time, and I know many things about her, but, partly because so little of her conversation is about herself and she never brags or moans, what I fail to learn until some decades into our friendship is how *determined* she is to perform as close to perfectly as possible no matter what the circumstances, how *rigorous* she is about practicing, how *carefully* she studies other people's performances and compares them with her own in order to find ways she can improve, how *perceptively* she analyzes the difficulties she has to overcome, and how *sagacious* she is in grasping the principles underlying her success. These qualities of her character, which fed into the development of her talent, are very admirable, indeed

endearing, even if I was ignorant of them for a long time. These qualities of Ruth's character merit my affection for her, even if in fact I had spent many years admiring her for an amazingly natural and unpractised talent, which I falsely believed she had. We had a *valuable* deep personal relationship even before I really understood the qualities of her that warranted my affection for her. And our relationship would have been a valuable deep personal relationship even if I died without having discovered these meritorious qualities.

4 | CHANGES IN MERIT OVER TIME

I will finish by discussing some complexities. Suppose X and Y are in their 20's when they get to know one another well and form strong mutual affection. As already mentioned, the extensive knowledge need not be complete. Thank goodness, since complete knowledge would probably be impossible anyway, especially since people's personality and character are not fixed. Now suppose X's and Y's mutual *knowledge grows* during their 30's, 40's, 50's, and 60's, and their mutual *affection persists*. I hold that X and Y thus do have a *deep personal relationship* that starts in their 20's and lasts through their 60's.

A further question is whether this deep personal relationship constitutes a benefit to them, as opposed to being merely instrumental in bringing them pleasure, knowledge, achievement, and so on. As Crisp (2022) pushed me to clarify, I do *not* hold that whether their deep personal relationship constitutes a benefit depends on whether *what attracts X and Y to one another* are good qualities that X and Y really do have. Instead, whether their deep personal relationship constitutes a benefit to them depends on whether they have really have good qualities.

The complexities I want now to address arise from changes over time. I set out some possibilities in the table below. Rows 1–8 set out different possibilities about whether, in different decades of their lives, X and Y really do have qualities warranting affection. The table below refers to qualities that X and Y either really have or really do not have, not to qualities that X or Y *think* the other has.

	X and Y are in their 20's	**X and Y are in their 40's**	**X and Y are in their 60's**
Row 1	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection
Row 2	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection
Row 3	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection
Row 4	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection
Row 5	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection
Row 6	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection
Row 7	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y do NOT have qualities warranting affection	X and Y do HAVE qualities warranting affection
Row 8	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection	X and Y HAVE qualities warranting affection

These possibilities laid out in rows 1–8 are *irrelevant* to the question of whether X and Y have a deep personal relationship. For the sake of argument, suppose that, in every row above, *what attracts X and Y to one* another are qualities either that they do *not* really have or that they do have but these qualities do *not* warrant strong

affection. In every one of the eight scenarios laid out above, X and Y are here stipulated to have deep mutual understanding and strong mutual affection throughout from their 20's to their 60's. That being the stipulation, I think that, even in Row 1, X and Y have a deep personal relationship. A fortiori, I think X and Y have a deep personal relationship when, during one or two rather than three time-periods (rows 2–7), X and Y do not have qualities warranting affection.

The possibilities set out in rows 1–8 are important for the *different* question of whether X and Y have a deep personal relationship that *constitutes an element of their well-being*. My idea is that their deep personal relationship does not constitute an element of their well-being when each does not have qualities that warrant the other's affection. But now I want to consider puzzles caused by change over time.

Let us focus first on scenarios in which X and Y start out with qualities warranting affection but then either permanently or at least for a significant period lack qualities that warrant affection (rows 5, 6, 7). In the scenario sketched in row 6, deep personal friendship outlives its intrinsic value, I think. In the scenario row 7 outlines, the deep personal friendship survives the demise of its intrinsic value but then regains its intrinsic value when the object of affection either develops new qualities, or resuscitates previous qualities, that merit affection.

In the scenario that row 5 poses, X and Y had meritorious qualities throughout the decades until they hit their 60's. The deep personal relationship between X and Y *did* constitute a benefit to them during the decades in which X and Y had meritorious qualities. But, by the time X and Y reach their 60's, their good qualities are gone. Could the intrinsic value of their deep personal relationship persist even when the good qualities in each of these people are gone? We are are assuming that the strong affection between X and Y remains when they are in their 60's. Does this affection that each has for the other constitute at least one quality warranting affection? If that affection is motivated by a sense of loyalty, then surely this motivation is admirable and warrants affection.

But maybe the affection is motivated in some way that does not bring merit. For example, suppose that X and Y have strong affection for one another because each is a snob or because they look so much like one another. These are terrible grounds for affection. So, even if X and Y have strong affection for one another, if what elicits this affection is not a good ground for affection, then X and Y might have strong affection for one another although in fact neither X nor Y merits the affection. When this is the case, then I think their deep personal relationship has lost its intrinsic value.

Even if the intrinsic value of this relationship has dissipated by the time these people reach their 60's, of course the relationship might still have enormous *instrumental* value. The relationship might keep memory alive and continue to be a source of pleasure, knowledge, achievement, companionship, protection, and other goods. The amount of instrumental value here can be so great as to make asking about intrinsic value seem pedantic.

Turn now to row 8, the case in which X and Y *do* have qualities warranting the other's affection. Remember our supposition that rows 1–8 describe scenarios in which what attracts X and Y to one another are qualities either that X and Y do not really have or that they do have but these qualities do not warrant strong affection. Hence, row 8 describes a scenario in which X and Y throughout have qualities warranting each other's affection, but these qualities are not the ones that ignited or sustain that affection.

I hold that in such a scenario the relationship between X and Y is indeed valuable enough to constitute a benefit to each. A striking fact about some people who have clearly had relationships that enriched their lives not only instrumentally but also constitutively is this. When asked what they liked about the other person in the relationship, they cite qualities either that are not qualities the other person really had (as in my example about Ruth) or that are not the qualities of the other person that really warranted affection. What this illustrates, I think, is that people can have enough understanding of one another to get beyond the threshold of understanding necessary for a deep personal relationship and yet fail to understand what about each other merits deep affection, without this failure preventing their relationship from being intrinsically valuable and constituting an element of their well-being.

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