In “Practice of Partiality,” Friedman wrote in three sections; this is a comment on the second, entitled “Partiality and Inadequate Resources.”

In this section Friedman engages the impact of partial relationships in social environments of high resource inequality. Social norms typically assign care duties to those in certain close partial relationships, particularly among family. In an environment in which neighbors have adequate resources, partiality does not threaten the well-being of one’s neighbors. However, in an environment in which some are in “extreme material need” (828,) “partiality, while it might be necessary for my integrity and fulfillment, is hardly sufficient” (829.) Partiality in such contexts contributes to reducing the number of people “who can achieve well-being, integrity, and fulfillment through close relationships” (829.)

The inability of normal partial relationships to meet such people’s needs creates a moral demand on others not in partial relationships with them to meet their most basic needs. Citing an argument by John Cottingham regarding the Christian second greatest commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” Friedman noted that the commandment “is actually a criticism of a certain form of partiality and not an attack on the impartiality thesis” (828.) Friedman continues by arguing for a redistributive polity to provide for those for whom the partial relationships of social norms cannot meet their needs.

In many ways I find myself in agreement with Friedman. Partial familial relationships are a means of normatively allocating care duties; were a strict impartiality the norm, with everyone impartially responsible for everyone else, this disincentivizes caring for anyone, as no one will want to do more than their fair share for any given individual. I agree in broad principle with Friedman that those with sufficient resources have a moral duty to aid those who are in dire need; I differ with her recourse to a redistributive polity to aid the poorest.

There are many reasons why people are short on resources. Some may not be able to find work; some may be disabled; some may choose to live self-destructively; some may be severely ill. As part of preserving the integrity and fulfillment of all for whom it is possible – a concern I share with Friedman – understanding the particular causes of poverty in each instance seems important in formulating a proper response. Replacing assistance from close partial relationships with impartial assistance from the public purse is not simply to change the source of funds; the absence of the partial relationship fundamentally alters the economic relationship.

Economists have long recognized the role of individual incentives in economic situations; with this in mind I would argue for aid that requires some incentive from those aided. This should not be done in a way that requires more of the person than is possible for them to give in their particular situation; some, such as the mentally disabled or severely ill may not be able to contribute much, if anything. However, contributing what one can is an important component of retaining one’s integrity and sense of personal fulfillment through accomplishing something.

I am aware of the difficulties and dangers of entrusting such evaluations to public officials who may not have a partial relationship to those aided; without the personal understanding integral to close partial relationships there is ample occasion for error and even abuse. A response is beyond the scope of this response; here I can but recognize the problem.

*This is adapted from a series of responses I wrote for an independent study in analytic ethics of partiality and consequentialism.*