

Reason and Respect

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If you're like me, you seldom bother to hold open the door any longer than you need to when you pass through a doorway; you simply let the door fall shut behind you once you yourself are clear. Should anyone be following you or me when either of us goes through a doorway, they had better think quick, for there's a real chance that they'll wind up with a sore nose. Now I realize, as no doubt you do in your own case, that the person following me will, at the very least, be inconvenienced by the closing door and annoyed at the thoughtless fellow who let it swing free. But why should any of that matter to me? I *could* look behind me, I guess, and then pause a moment to ensure smooth sailing should someone be at my heels, but I don't care to. I'm not *happy* that my habits inconvenience and annoy others, though I'm not unhappy about it, either. I don't behave the way I do in order to inconvenience and annoy others. Indeed, I freely acknowledge that my ways of doing things have effects others find obnoxious, and I agree they are right to find those effects obnoxious; I just fail to see how any of that gives me any reason to reform my ways.

I also lie to people when lying serves my purposes well and I can get away with it. You can trust me on important matters, of course, for you know that I know that you are vigilant and will catch me should I attempt to hoodwink you, and I am fully aware that your catching me in a lie will have unfortunate consequences for me, consequences that I desire to avoid. But if I want to end the conversation we struck up when we passed on the street, I will tell you I have to be

somewhere else soon, though in fact the reason I want to end it and move on is that I find you dull. I readily lie to salesmen or proselytizers who come to my door when I want them to leave, and if I can dream up some excuse to get me out of hot water, dream up I will. I don't think twice about telling white lies. Again, it is not that I enjoy lying, but rather that I enjoy what I find I accomplish by lying. You might as well also know that I cheat, scheme or backstab whenever cheating, scheming or backstabbing seems the best way for me to secure my ends.

Well, actually, I'm not as I've described myself above at all. That was just to introduce the philosophical issue I mean to discuss here. Really I'm very good at holding doors open. As well, I try to be honest, and rarely if ever do I cheat, scheme or backstab. I admit that I've told my share of white lies, but I feel that I should try hard, harder than I have tried, not to do so, to avoid telling even useful and harmless lies. But now, I wonder, who in fact has the clearer vision of things, me as I am or me as I was imagining myself to be? Should my alter-ego be more like me, or me more like him? Does my alter-ego have good reason to reform his ways? Or—horrible thought!—, do I have good reason to reform mine?

Let's give my imagined alter ego a name, so that we can continue to think of her as a real person. It's important that we think of her as a real person, for we are asking not whether her behaviour is good or bad or harmful or harmless, but whether she herself has reason to reform her behaviour. That means that we will need to ask questions about her psychology, about her values, her motivations, and what, for her, could be a reason for doing something, or for doing it in one way rather than another. We'll call her "Sally."

Sally need not be a wastrel or even, in the ordinary sense, selfish. Her ends and goals need not be ignoble. We can assign her both personal and social ideals, ideals with which we are

in sympathy, and we can hold that she conceives her particular ends in acting in light of these noble ideals. One of her personal ideals is philosophical insight. She is hard at work on a project to demonstrate that nonreductive physicalism not only can accommodate the claim that the mental properties of events are causally efficacious, but in fact is the context in which that claim can best be expressed and defended. (Of course, she will follow the argument where it goes. If she happens to find that nonreductive physicalism makes mental properties epiphenomenal, then that is what she will conclude, despite her desire to conclude the opposite. In either case, she will experience a moment of philosophical insight.) One of her social ideals is universal health care. She is right now putting the finishing touches on a a single-payer, federally funded health care plan for the country, one that combines traditional American values of competitive capitalism, self-reliance and small government with excellent and accessible health care for all.

We have no criticism of Sally's ideals or the projects or ends she conceives under them. What bothers us is Sally's manner in acting, how she goes about furthering her projects and securing her ends. Sally, we can say, in order to summarize what it is we object to in her manner, fails to treat people with respect. She treats them merely as means to her ends, laudable though those ends might be, never also as ends in themselves. She manipulates people into serving her ends by lying and cheating to them. When she is honest with others she is so not because she holds that others deserve or merit her honesty so that they can decide as rational and autonomous agents whether to join with her, but because she judges honesty at that time to be an effective means of getting them to join with her. She lets doors fall in people's faces because the fact that others have goals, interests and feelings of their own simply and plainly does not matter to her.

Should Sally mend her ways? Should Sally treat others with respect? Here are some proposals as to why Sally should mend her ways:

1. Sally herself will eventually come to grief should she continue to manifest disrespect for others.
2. Sally's lack of respect for others is making the world a worse place than it needs to be.
3. Sally wouldn't like it were others to treat her as she treats them.

1. It might well be true that Sally will eventually come to grief should she continue to manifest disrespect for others. Others might wake up to the fact that she abuses them, and, in reaction, they might seek to thwart Sally whenever they can safely do so. But, then again, they might not wake up, or not react against Sally. Sally can recognize from her own perspective that she should be careful. Sally, then, has a good practical reason to be judicious in her treatment of others, but that is not in itself a practical reason for reforming her attitudes such as to care to respect others. Indeed, depending on the circumstances, more dissembling and prevaricating might be what's most in order to ensure that she continues to ride smoothly. By itself, then, this first proposal gives Sally no practical reason for changing her ways.

2. Certainly Sally's manner is making the world a worse place than it needs to be. The level of resentment, spite and enmity in the world is as high as it is partly because Sally does not care to manifest respect for others in her actions. It might be true, though, that the good effects of Sally's ways outweigh the bad. It might, that is, be the case that Sally's projects will have far reaching positive effects on the general well-being and happiness, and that a good dose of indifference to the rational autonomy of others is necessary to see those projects through successfully. But let's suppose Sally can fulfil her designs just as well through actions that don't

manifest disrespect for others as through actions that do. Does the fact that her manner makes the world worse than it needs to be constitute for Sally a reason to mend her manner?

It depends on Sally's attitude toward the world. If it matters to her that the world be a better place than it is, then she has a reason to change her ways.

But instead of the world, perhaps we should speak of Sally's own life. Perhaps her attitude toward others is indirectly making her life less pleasant or productive than it could be. Sally's behaviour causes the levels of resentment, strife and enmity in her own neighbourhood to increase daily. The backdrop against which Sally goes about her business, then, is marked by more ill feeling and ill will than it need be. Even should people's rancor be no more directed toward Sally than toward anyone else, still, that people feel rancor means that Sally herself will find less enjoyment in carrying out her tasks than she would in a kinder, gentler world. It also means that she confronts a greater risk of failure than she would in that other world.

Sally, then, does have two good practical reasons for treating others with respect. Treating others with respect will decrease levels of stress and ill will, and will promote the general happiness. It will change the backdrop against which Sally pursues her own projects. Sally will, then, on the one hand, have a more pleasant time in pursuing her projects, and, on the other hand, will more likely meet with success. Of course, this is to suppose that Sally would like not to live and work amid sour people, or rather that she would prefer to pay the price in effort and time that changing her ways would demand to living amid sour people. This supposition we might not have any right to make.

One might think that our discussion of this proposal has, at least so far, missed the point. The point is that, objectively speaking, an ethically sound goal of social organization, maybe the

only ethically sound goal of social organization, is maximizing the general happiness; there are arguments, one might say, to prove that the general happiness is the sole ethical good. Thus, since Sally's preferred style of comportment tends to frustrate this goal, Sally is behaving unethically. That she is behaving wrongly is why she should straighten up and fly right.

But does the fact, if it is a fact, that she is behaving wrongly, insofar as her behaviour fails to promote the general happiness, give her a reason to change her behaviour? Is the wrongness of her behaviour a reason for her to stop and desist? It is hard to see how it is, at least so long as she has no desire to act rightly. If ethical facts, facts about what is in itself good or worthy of being desired, do indeed exist, then they are no more in themselves motivating or action guiding than any other facts. Sally can cheerfully acknowledge that what she is doing is ethically wrong, while continuing to do it. She need not care any more about acting rightly than she does about her present position relative to Disneyland.

The first two proposals, then, fail for similar reasons. Each takes Sally's acceptance of some fact about the world to be a reason for her acting one way rather than another, independently of her specific motivations. What we seem to need to do, then, if we are to find that Sally should change her ways, is to find a practical reason, one that includes a motivation such as an affection or a desire, that Sally already has that is expressed or served by her acting out of respect for others. We need to find a way to say that Sally is failing to be rational by her own standards in manifesting disrespect for others, that she is making some sort of mistake in reasoning or perception. The final proposal attempts not to convict Sally of unethical behaviour, at least not at first. It attempts to convict her of irrational behaviour, of being, by her own lights, unreasonable in her treatment of others.

3. Sally would *not* like it were others to behave toward her as she behaves toward them. That's certainly true. Others, at least so far, are not behaving toward her as she is behaving toward them, and perhaps in fact they will never treat her poorly, but that point is irrelevant to the proposal in question. Sally would not just not like it, this proposal goes, but would actively resent it, and find it an affront to her dignity. Sally is a rational, autonomous agent, with feelings and emotions, preferences and desires, and plans and projects, and she conceives of herself as such. For another to fail to respect her, she understands, is for that other to treat her not as a centre of valuation in the world, not as an end in herself, but as a mere means to that other's end, in the way that person would treat a non-rational object. But that is precisely to fail to treat her as a person, and she certainly is a person. Now Sally herself is clearly aware that she is but one person in the world among many others. But if it is wrong for others to treat her with disrespect, then it must be wrong for her to treat others with disrespect. Persons are owed respect in virtue of their being rational and autonomous agents. Sally can know this, and indeed she *must* know this, as any reflective agent would. Thus Sally, in treating others disrespectfully, is violating a norm that she herself recognizes as binding on her and accepts. To think or act against one's own norms is to think or act irrationally. Therefore, Sally is acting irrationally in treating others disrespectfully. And that means that she has a practical reason, one stemming from norms of behaviour she herself accepts, to treat others with respect.

It's hard not to be attracted to this line of reasoning. I think that something like it lies in back of the force we feel in the question "how would you like it if someone did that to you?" That we have reasoned this way might very well explain why we do in fact try to manifest in our actions respect for others, and reproach ourselves when we lie, cheat or scheme. But that it is

attractive does not mean that it is cogent. Properly understood, I think it expresses a commitment to treat others respectfully; I don't, though, think it justifies that commitment.

Let us consider it in regard to Sally. Sally herself wishes to be treated with respect by others. Not to be treated with respect offends her sense of herself and her dignity. Sally knows that others must also wish to be treated with respect by her, for she understands that they experience just the same feelings when treated poorly as she does. But Sally, by hypothesis, is indifferent to the feelings of others. That she understands what they must be feeling when she treats them poorly, and that she understands what they are feeling on the basis of her knowledge of what she herself feels when treated poorly, does not in itself make her indifference a violation of any norms of thought or behaviour she accepts. After all, she is not indifferent to her own feelings when treated poorly because they are her own feelings, she is experiencing them. Thus, since she does not herself experience the feelings of others when she treats them poorly, her knowledge of how they feel is not for her a practical reason to refrain from treating them poorly.

One step in the argument that Sally is out of keeping with herself in treating others poorly was that Sally recognizes in her own case that it is wrong for people to treat her poorly. Perhaps that is the bridge from the description of her understanding of the nature of disrespect to the conclusion that she has a reason to treat others with respect. If she recognizes that it is wrong for others to treat her poorly, she must recognize that it is wrong for her to treat others poorly, and that realization must be for her a practical reason to reform her ways.

The first problem in this argument, though, is that it is not clear why the thought that it is wrong for others to treat her poorly should ever cross her mind. That she doesn't like to suffer poor treatment at the hands of others does not imply that it is wrong that she suffers poor treatment

at the hands of others. At least, it doesn't imply that it is wrong so long as saying that it is wrong isn't simply another way of saying that she doesn't like it. The concept of wrongness at play here is an ethical concept, and thus an answer needs to be given to the question why she cannot but generate that concept from the concepts of liking, disliking, resenting, and so on.

Still, in any case, even if she must hold that it is ethically wrong for others to treat her poorly, this does not imply that she must hold that it is ethically wrong for her to treat others poorly, even though she recognizes that she is one person among others. This is the second problem. The thought that she is one person among others does not imply that she is to treat others as she would have them treat her. She in her own case is an individual agent, with her particular likes and dislikes. From her point of view she is special. She understands, of course, that from any other person's point of view, that person might find that he himself is special. So each of us thinks in our own case of him- or herself as special. But there is no point of view of the community of rational agents, or of the universe, that requires Sally to make the values of impartiality or equality of consideration her own. These are, again, substantive ethical values. Commitments to these values are not norms of practical reasoning. In understanding her place among others, in understanding that she herself possesses dignity and that others do too, she need not, on pain of irrationality, find herself committed to respecting the dignity of others.

Partisans of the argument we have just criticised might respond that we have been assuming all along a particular conception of practical reasoning, and in doing so have begged the central question whether practical reason itself generates ethical norms or underwrites the imperative of respect. It is true that we have been assuming a Humean conception of practical reason. On that conception any reason a person has for acting will have both a cognitive

component, that is, a belief or suspicion, and a pro-attitude, that is, a desire or want or fear (actually, a single practical reason will include many beliefs and desires). A belief by itself cannot generate an action, for beliefs are motivationally inert. Moreover, from a set of beliefs one cannot conclude to a desire or any other motivation. To this point, our critic reminds us, we have been asking of Sally whether from a set of beliefs she could find herself with a practical reason to change her ways, given that she has no present motivation to change them. It's hardly surprising that we have answered that she couldn't. That answer is inevitable on a Humean conception of practical reason.

That Humean conceptions of practical reasoning fail to provide the whole story is suggested, critics say, by the fact that on such conceptions, that we desire what we do, that our pro-attitudes are what they are, is just a plain fact about us, like our natural haircolour is. There is no justifying or criticising our desires or preferences or feelings or emotional reactions. Rational criticism is, on the one side, limited to the beliefs from which certain preferences or feelings stem, and on the other side to finding the most efficient means for fulfilling our desires. But we think that our desires are evaluable, that some are worthy and some not, that some are ignoble, that some are such that we ought not act on them. We ask whether we should be as given to bursts of temper as we are, whether we have really earned the feeling of power and self-importance we get from the minor acts of cruelty we perform, whether we should enjoy Serge Gainsbourg as much as we do. The thought that we can ask these questions is strong in us; we clearly do think we engage in rational criticism and justification of goals and values. Since this thought is contradicted by the Humean account of practical reasoning, we would do well, critics say, to re-evaluate that account.

That we do engage in the rational criticism of our own values and goals is undeniable; but it is not clear that Humeans must deny that it is possible for us to do so. Humeans can ask how well a desire, a pattern of emotional reaction, a feeling of affection, or whatever, fits with the rest of our cognitive and conative attitudes. We can find ourselves with good practical reasons for altering our attitudes. A person who does not want to suffer heartburn but who loves heavily spiced food might come to have a practical reason to cool his love, or to become indifferent to heartburn. Sally, we noted, might find that her behaviour increases the levels of stress and enmity in her environment, and should her own projects suffer because of those levels, she would have a practical reason to cultivate in herself a desire to treat others with respect. Of course, weeding out our bad motivations and encouraging good ones in their stead is not an easy job, and there is no guarantee of success. We do not choose our desires, no more than we choose our beliefs.

But critics of Humean conceptions of practical reasoning can accept that parts of their criticism are overstated without concluding that their central contention is baseless. Can they, though, supply an argument that there is more to critical reflection on goals and desires than finding and resolving tensions within our existing sets of motivations and concerns? Here is an argument meant to show that there is much more. The Humean, according to this argument, makes the mistake of conflating practical reasons with motives. The rational person conforms his motives to his beliefs about his practical reasons, his beliefs, that is, about what his motives should be. That we can have beliefs about what our practical reasons should be, given that what our practical reasons should be oversteps what actually we currently can feel to motivate us, means that our motives can be criticised or justified apart from their relations to each other. That we can have beliefs about what our practical reasons should be is a claim that enables us to make sense of

the idea that our motives are rationally evaluable in the deep way Humeans deny is possible, and provides a sense to the claim that it is irrational of us to have, or not to have, certain motives.

Suppose you are bathing a screaming baby. The desire to drown the baby flashes through your consciousness. At that moment you have a motive for drowning the baby. But having that motive does not mean you have a reason for drowning the baby, for were you to be cool, calm and collected, you would realize that your desire to drown the baby is not a worthy desire.

Let us return to Sally to see how this is to play out in the context of self-criticism. Sally is not motivated to treat others with respect, though she is fully aware that others are persons just as she is and resent being treated disrespectfully just as intensely as she does. Taking care to treat others well would cost her time and effort, without purchasing her satisfaction or enjoyment. Is Sally irrational in failing to be motivated to treat others with respect? Does she have a practical reason to cultivate a desire to treat others with respect? First of all, Sally is not to ask these questions when she is busy attempting to secure some or another end she has. When she is making her way in the world, she is preoccupied, not cool, calm and collected. But were Sally to be cool, calm and collected, she would realize that since it is true that others deserve to be treated well, she ought to treat them well. Because the deliverances of cool reason are more normatively significant than those of hot reason when we are actively engaged in the pursuit of our ends, Sally has a reason to treat others well even when she is not motivated to do so.

Let us accept both that it is true that others deserve to be treated with respect, or at least that Sally thinks they do, and that the deliverances of cool reason have a normative significance greater than the deliverances of hot reason. Should we accept that cool reason would tell Sally that she should treat others well? Sally is reasoning coolly, yes, but she is reasoning about what she

has reason to do when in hot pursuit of her goals. This would be reasoning about how best to satisfy those goals, perhaps how best to satisfy them while at the same time not preventing herself from satisfying other goals she has. Cool reason will, then, given Sally's psychological makeup, vindicate her habit of treating others merely as means to her ends and not also as ends in themselves.

If Sally is rational in failing to treat others with respect in the pursuit of her goals, are we, then, irrational in constraining our pursuit of our goals by our concern to treat people with respect? Are we gripped by an oppressive morality we should rise above? Not at all, or at least not necessarily.

We can have two sorts of practical reason for treating others with respect, even when treating others well compromises our own projects. We saw that treating people well can have such consequences as reducing the levels of tension, resentment and enmity in an environment. This means that if we are the sort of people who find going about our tasks more pleasant when we are in a relaxed and friendly environment, or if we are concerned to keep the chances of our succeeding in our tasks high, we have an excellent reason to continue to treat people respectfully. The consequences of treating others well are to our liking. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, treating people well is an expression of the high value we place on rational agency. We recognize others to be persons just as we are, and we know that they like ill treatment no more than we do. If we do have as one of our values rational agency, then to express that value we must treat others with respect. But for us, then, this would be a baseline value, one justified only through the fact that it fits well with our other values and desires, and the fact that we find it to suit us well.