

The Folly and Wisdom of Ethical Commitment

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To be committed to act in ethically sound ways is to be concerned either to treat people with respect or to promote impartially the good of others. Is it wise to be committed to act in ethically sound ways? Is it wise to be as strongly committed to act in ethically sound ways as one is? (Perhaps wisdom favours instead being more strongly or being less strongly committed.)

One's commitment to act in ethically sound ways can have one or both of two sources. 1) One can be committed to act in ethically sound ways out of a concern to secure ends that one wants for their own sakes. 2) One can be committed to act in ethically sound ways out of a love of justice or kindness or decency, or out of an impartial concern for others, for its own sake. Whether one is wise to be committed to act in ethically sound ways (or to be committed to the degree one is) will first of all depend on the source of one's commitment.

A person committed to act in ethically sound ways out of a concern to secure other ends he or she wants for their own sakes is a person who treats ethically sound behaviour as a device or instrument. He or she acts well in order to achieve some end. That end might be to obtain the respect or affection of others, something he or she might want for its own sake. Or that end might be something else the person values only as an instrument to another end—to promote a safe or pleasant environment, for instance, or simply to stay out of trouble.

A person committed to act in ethically sound ways for the sake of justice, kindness, decency, the good of others, and so on, and not (merely) out of a concern to further other ends he

or she has, has some strong positive affective attitude toward justice or decency or the well-being of others. A person committed to act in ethically sound ways for its own sake likes or loves or respects justice or decency or the well-being of others. He or she acts well as an expression of his or her love of justice or decency or the general welfare.

Let us, just for the sake of simplicity, choose one object of commitment, and when the commitment to that object is a commitment for the object's own sake, one sort of affective attitude that one can have toward that object. Let us speak of a commitment specifically to justice—a commitment, that is, to doing the just thing and to having the just thing done to oneself and to others. And when that commitment is sustained by a strong affective attitude toward justice, let us speak of loving justice for its own sake, or simply of loving justice. (We could just as well speak of kindness or decency or the general welfare, and just as well of liking or respecting.)

Given that a person can be committed to justice either out of an appreciation of the usefulness of such a commitment or out of a love of justice, our question whether it is wise to be committed to justice becomes two questions. 1) Is it wise to undertake or maintain a commitment to justice as a means to attain certain ends one has, ends toward which one has some strong positive affective attitude? (Is it wise for Sally to be committed to justice to the degree that she is, given that her commitment is based on her concern to attain this or that particular end? Would Sally do better were her commitment to justice stronger, weaker, or absent?) 2) Is it wise to love justice for its own sake? (Is Roger wise to love justice as much as he does? Would Roger do better to love justice more or to love it less? If Roger happens not to love justice for its own sake, would he be wise to acquire a love of it? If he presently does love it with some degree of passion, would he be wise to cease loving it altogether?)

A person is wise to the extent that she organizes her life around the things, many or few, that she likes or loves in such a way that she manages to enjoy as many of them as she can as often as possible, given her circumstances, talents, and prospects. Wisdom, then, is a faculty that promotes living a happy life, since a necessary ingredient for happiness is frequently doing what one likes doing while confidently expecting that one will continue along the road frequently to be doing what one likes doing. A person is foolish to the extent that he or she pursues ends he or she cannot attain, or to the extent that by pursuing one end she prevents herself from attaining another, more important, end, or to the extent that she pursues an end ineffectively. These are the easier cases. It is also possible that a person is foolish for pursuing certain ends when her talents or temperament would favour her pursuit of different ends. These are harder cases, for the question is whether *Sally* would be wise to pursue different ends, and not whether a person Sally could be would, if things went well, be a happier person than Sally herself is or could be. But there's much room for change before Sally, in changing important features of her life, stops being Sally and becomes someone else.

There are decisive reasons for thinking it rarely wise to be committed to justice out of an appreciation of the benefits such commitment can bring. To have a commitment to justice is to forswear any unjust means to the benefits one is after, even should some unjust means be more efficient than just means and without risk. Well, perhaps unjust means are never without risk. To have a commitment to justice, though, is to abjure by policy estimating the risk and calculating the expected utility of transgression. It can never be wise to be ignorant. But perhaps one has a conscience, and just means are the only way to satisfy it. Even in the absence of risk, it cannot pay for a person of conscience to use unjust means. That one has a conscience is, then, regrettable

if not ignoble; it's too bad, from the point of view of one's life, that one cannot or does not rid oneself of it.

And so, if it is ever wise, or at least not regrettable, to acquire or maintain a commitment to justice, it can be wise to acquire or maintain that commitment only out of a love of justice for its own sake.

To love justice for its own sake is to experience doing and receiving justice (and hearing of or seeing justice done) as part of one's happiness. The first answer a person who loves justice for its own sake must give to the question why he wants to do and receive the just thing is that it is his pleasure. It is his pleasure to pursue justice and to accept just treatment at the hands of others, even when he instead could bring about an outcome favouring other ends he has.

This first answer, though, does not answer the question whether it is wise of him to love justice for its own sake. It is his pleasure to do and receive justice. But *should* it be his pleasure to do and receive justice? If it is ever wise for one to love justice for its own sake, or to love it as much (or as little) as one does, it is wise because loving it enhances the quality of one's life as a whole. If it is foolish for a person to love justice for its own sake (to love it as much as she does), it is foolish for her to love it in virtue of the pain and woe her loves brings her. If it is foolish for a person to love justice for its own sake, it is foolish because loving it diminishes the quality of her life as a whole as she experiences it—or even perhaps because loving it merely threatens to diminish the quality of her life.

The love of justice for its own sake is not unlike the love of anything else for its own sake. It is not unlike the love of playing the piano, or the love of philosophy, or the love of kung-fu movies, or the love one has for one's spouse, or the love of gambling, or the love of eating fried

foods.... It is best compared to loves of *styles* of making one's way in the world. Few of us ever set out to do the just thing, as one might set out to study philosophy or to watch a kung-fu movie or to be with one's spouse. Rarely does a person, even one who loves justice for its own sake, seek out occasions on which to be just. Rather, in going about one's daily business, in attempting to realize whatever ends one is attempting to realize, one encounters other people, other people who will be affected by one's actions or towards whom one will express one's attitudes in one's behaviour. In her encounters with others, a person who loves justice for its own sake finds occasions for expressing that love. The best analogies are to such loves as the love of competition for its own sake, the love of team-work or cooperation for its own sake, the love of independence for its own sake, the love of elegance or grace or efficiency for its own sake. These are not loves of particular tangible objects; they are, rather, loves of ways or manners or styles of comportment, of ways in which one carries oneself as one attempts to realize one's other particular ends. A person who loves elegance for its own sake and a person indifferent to elegance might both love tennis or philosophy or their spouses, and both might pursue their love just as ardently. But they will pursue that love in different ways, with different bearings. Likewise, a person who loves justice for its own sake and one who does not can both love their chosen fields of work just as ardently and pursue their careers just as intensely. But they will do so differently, the man who loves justice for its own sake not taking or not considering or even not noticing routes that the man who doesn't love justice notices, considers, and sometimes takes.

Evaluating whether one should love justice for its own sake, or love it to the degree that one does, involves discovering the place of that love, in that degree, among the other loves and affective attitudes one has, and asking whether without that love, or with a stronger or weaker

love, one's life would be generally more happy or more satisfying than it is now. For most of us, there are many things that we love for their own sakes, many ends that we pursue as ends in themselves, many ends in which we take pleasure. Sometimes we can pursue simultaneously two or more different ends, sometimes we cannot and we must make a choice. Pursuing one end or one set of ends, then, sometimes means leaving aside some other ends. Moreover, sometimes pursuing or attaining one end makes pursuing another more difficult. Finally, whether it is easy or hard to attain an end, and whether pursuing it is itself pleasant or not, or whether it is even possible for one to attain that end, are matters that depend both on the material resources one commands and on one's temperament and talents. One's love of farming is going to remain unrequited should one live on rocky, infertile ground. And one will feel frustrated in one's pursuit of the ends of farming should one be temperamentally impatient to see the results of one's labours. A love that must remain unrequited is a foolish love, as is a love the pursuit of which is constantly trying and unpleasant. Such loves cannot but bring one grief and sadness.

Does my expression of my love of justice compromise my ability to secure other things that I love for their own sakes? To what degree does it compromise that ability? How much do I love the things my love of justice makes more difficult for me to attain? Is pursuing justice frustrating and unpleasant for me? Are there things I now possess that I possess unjustly? Does my love of justice put them at risk? How much grief and sadness do I experience because of the injustices around me of which I am aware? Can my own efforts appreciably decrease the amount of injustice around me? How much does it matter to me that others love justice along with me and appreciate my efforts on behalf of it? Does the indifference of others toward justice and toward my efforts cause me sadness? —These are among the questions that a person who loves justice for its own

sake must ask and answer if she is to discover whether it is wise for her to love justice for its own sake or to love it with the passion with which she loves it. What she seeks to discover is whether, overall, she would be happier, or whether her prospects for happiness would be improved, were her affective attitude towards justice weaker or different than it is.

Is Sally wise to love efficiency for its own sake as much as she does? Sally loves Roger, and Roger is indifferent to efficiency. Roger is apt to pause and to hesitate, to go the long way, to let his attention wander, to set a thing down before he is done with it and take up another. Roger's habits irritate Sally. Sally is short with Roger, which makes Roger sad, which makes Sally sad. Perhaps were Sally to become less fond of efficiency, her life would be happier. Or perhaps she should be less fond of Roger, so that her moods are not so much affected by his moods. Perhaps Sally can organize her life with Roger so that their attitudes towards efficiency less often create tensions and conflicts in her life.

The answers to questions relevant to determining the place of one's love of justice in one's happiness and one's prospects for happiness depend on the psychic economy, the temperament, the talents, and the material circumstances of the individual about whom these questions are asked. The answers to them, then, will differ person to person. And thus the question whether it is wise to love justice for its own sake has no general answer. Some people would be wise to love justice more strongly than they do, others to love it less strongly, some people would be wise to acquire a love of it, and some to lose their love of it.

That the love of justice is not usually or even often a foolish love would seem to follow from what we have said. We've compared the love of justice for its own sake with the love of efficiency for its own sake, and with other loves of ways of going about things. If the comparison

is apt, then the love of justice for its own sake need, in general, be no more often or deeply foolish than the love of these things for their own sake. But is the comparison apt?

A first significant difference one might suspect to exist between the love of justice for its own sake and the love of, say, efficiency for its own sake is that a person's love of efficiency will rarely be the source of conflicts and unhappiness in that person's life. A person's love of efficiency can, as the example of Sally above illustrates, prevent one from realizing one's ends and, thereby, cause conflict and unhappiness, but typically a commitment to doing things efficiently brings one success. A commitment to justice, on the other hand, always threatens to increase one's troubles. We've already noted that a commitment to justice can interfere with one's efficient realization of one's other ends, for a person committed to doing the just thing will not lie or cheat or pilfer, even when lying, cheating, or pilfering will best serve her ends. More significant, though, are these two facts about the world: 1) the world is marked by much injustice and cruelty; and 2) there is little anyone alone can do to make the world more just. That the world is marked by much injustice and cruelty is immediately troubling to a person who loves justice for its own sake, and that there is little she can do to change things means that she will be disappointed and dispirited by the limited results her efforts achieve. Were she instead lukewarm or cold toward justice, she would be less troubled.

To be merely lukewarm toward justice is still to have a positive affective attitude toward it, but not such a deep or strong attitude toward it that one will put justice ahead of one's advantage when the two conflict or that one will be troubled by news of the injustices that others suffer. "I'm quite fond of justice, but I am fonder still of my career, my child, socialism, my cottage in the woods, my tranquillity." Perhaps most people are merely lukewarm about justice, and

probably they are wise, from the point of view of their prospects for happiness, not to be more deeply emotionally involved with it than they are. We can conclude that unless one's love of justice is not one love among many in one's life, but one's single or overriding love, it always threatens to bring one trouble and grief, perhaps more so than does any other love of a manner of going about things. Nonetheless, there is nothing in the points we have mentioned that implies one must be foolish to love justice for its own sake, even to love it strongly for its own sake among other strong loves. It can be perfectly reasonable to accept the burdens and disappointments of having a strong affective attitude toward justice as the price one must pay in order to honour one's love. That one cannot do much about the injustices others commit does not mean that one cannot find great pleasure and satisfaction in the little justice around one, nor especially in the little justice for which one oneself is responsible.

There is, however, an even stronger critique of the idea that often it is wise, or at least not foolish, to include in one's affections a deep love of justice. At the centre of this critique is the thought that one's commitment to justice can alienate one from oneself, from one's overall project of self-creation. It is in the other-regarding nature of ethical commitment that the potential such commitment has to alienate one from oneself lies. To be committed to doing and to receiving justice is to be prepared to accept hardship from the point of view of other of one's interests and, moreover, to be prepared to accept hardship so that other people's projects not suffer. But this is to sacrifice oneself to others or to be slavish. Further, a commitment to justice is a commitment that touches all areas of one's life. There is nothing one might consider pursuing, and no means to it, that cannot be brought before the court of justice. For a person with strong ethical

commitments, this means that many otherwise attractive ends will be forgone and many efficient routes passed by in order that others not be burdened in their pursuit of their ends.

One's own life, or so continues this line of thought, is the single most important thing one has, and so resources at one's disposal are best used in service of that life, in service of making it a powerful creation. To love justice for its own sake, then, since the commitments that follow from loving justice will tend to alienate one from the projects that would make one's life fulfilling, is to deny the significance to oneself of that which should be most precious to one, one's own life.

This critique of the claim that often it can be wise to love justice for its own sake can be met only by noting that for one who loves justice for its own sake, the projects that that love engenders and supports are precisely some of the projects in which the person finds happiness and fulfilment. To that extent, then, the lover of justice is indeed acting in concert with her own flourishing and, thereby, is not acting slavishly or expressing a preference for the good of others over her own good.

At least two central points made in the critique in question cannot be denied. The first is that commitments to ethics are other-regarding commitments and, as such, can alienate one from what would make one's life go well. The second is that commitments to ethics touch all aspects of one's life and, so, could conflict with any of one's desires or likings. These points do imply that having commitments to ethics put one's happiness at risk, at greater risk than many other sorts of commitments do. But they do not imply that to have commitments to ethics is inevitably to put the well-being of others before one's own flourishing.

Let us note a final thought often attached to the above purported critique of the wisdom of loving justice for its own sake. Suppose it is true, as we have argued it is, that a commitment to

the good of others is not inevitably slavish or self-denying when it is rooted in a love of others, for then that commitment is part of one's own happiness and flourishing. Nonetheless, runs this thought, that commitment and the love that sustains it are ignoble, beneath one's dignity. A great life is organized around other values, around beauty, say, or around knowledge or power. A person capable of producing great beauty but who refuses to do so out of a concern for others is to be pitied or despised. It is at least a shame that she did not devote her life to her highest calling.

The thought here is not about the folly or wisdom of loving justice for itself, but rather about the value of doing so, the value of doing so in the eye of an observer. The partisan of beauty would rather that the person committed to ethics not be so committed, so that the latter would be free to produce what the partisan of beauty likes best. Well, to each her own. So long as the person committed to justice out of a love of justice is not unwise from her own perspective to love justice as she does, the partisan of beauty is voicing a sigh of regret, not a criticism.

It can be foolish of Roger to love justice passionately while equally foolish of Sally not to love it passionately. It can be wise of Albert to love justice passionately while equally wise of Betty not to love it at all. Whether it is wise or foolish of a particular person to love justice to the degree that she does is a matter of the totality of that person's values, preferences, and emotions, given her temperament, circumstances, and prospects. Those who are or would be wise to love justice strongly are or would be wise in virtue of the contribution such a love makes or would make to their happiness or to their sense of living a life worth living. We have found that despite the sacrifices one might have to make to serve one's love of justice, one might still be entirely wise to love justice passionately.

Does our discussion presuppose psychological egoism, the thesis that all a person's other-regarding ends are actually in service to one or another of that person's self-regarding ends? We have been speaking of being foolish or wise in inculcating in oneself or maintaining a specific other-regarding end, justice, and we have found the folly or wisdom of doing so in its relation to a self-regarding end, or, rather, a set of them, one's own happiness or the sense of one's life being worth one's living it. But there is nothing in what we have said that presupposes that a person cannot have an other-regarding end except that it serves a self-regarding one. To evaluate an other-regarding end one has against one of one's self-regarding ends is not to presuppose that that other-regarding end would not exist without that self-regarding end.

Does our discussion, then, presuppose *ethical* egoism, the thesis that any other-regarding end one might have *should* serve one or another self-regarding end? No, our discussion is neutral on the matter whether all one's ends should, at least ultimately, be self-regarding. We have outlined how pursuing the other-regarding end of justice can serve and can frustrate one's pursuit of self-regarding ends such as one's happiness and one's sense that one's life is worth living. If the reader does value his own happiness, then our discussion might well be useful to him. If he values doing and receiving justice independently of his own happiness, then our discussion might be of little use to him. Surely, though, it is difficult to imagine such a person. To value something is to have a positive affective attitude toward it. But what emotional attachment could a person who values justice independently of his own happiness have toward it? It could not be the attachment of either love or respect, for having such an attachment would be part of his happiness. We make this point, though, just by the way. Whether such a person is possible or not, our

discussion does not presuppose the idea that for each person, the only thing that that person should value in itself is her own happiness.

Does our discussion imply that being just is after all merely something that one values instrumentally? We propose that a love of something for its own sake can be evaluated as wise or foolish according to the contribution that that love makes to one's happiness overall. Isn't that really to say that one doesn't value the thing evaluated intrinsically, but values it rather as a means to an end? No, for one's happiness isn't an end over and above the activities and pursuits in which one takes pleasure or satisfaction or finds fulfilment. The thing evaluated as wise or foolish is loved for its own sake or valued intrinsically. The question is simply whether it is best, all parts of one's actual and potential happiness considered, that one loves or otherwise values it in the way and to the degree that one does.

Does our discussion depend upon a subjectivist account of value, an account according to which things intrinsically valued or valued for their own sakes are never intrinsically valuable or valuable in themselves? It is true that we have not made use of the idea that justice is, or that anything can be, intrinsically valuable. But nothing in our discussion implies that a thing cannot be intrinsically valuable or possess some degree of worth in itself, that is, apart from a person's attitudes toward it. So let us suppose that justice is intrinsically valuable, that it possesses a high degree of worth in itself, whether one values it or not. What in our discussion must be altered in light of this supposition? Nothing. One might think that we need to say that since it is wise to bring one's affective attitudes into line with the intrinsic worth of things, a person is always wise to love justice for its own sake, given that justice possesses a high degree of intrinsic worth. But one who thinks we need to say this must explain why it is always wise to bring one's affective

attitudes into line with the intrinsic worth of things. Clearly it isn't always wise to do so, at least not if wisdom has to do with finding routes to happiness or fulfilment or the sense that one is living a life worth living. Justice is intrinsically valuable, let us say, but still a person can ask why that fact should matter to him, why he should value justice intrinsically. If something intrinsically valuable happens to leave one cold, then, from the point of view of one's happiness and given one's temperament and circumstances, one might be well advised to remain indifferent to it. Whatever might be the case about the independent or intrinsic value of things, when we consider what we need for our own emotional well-being and flourishing, we can make no use of objective or realist conceptions of value. When we ask what we are wise to love, we must remain within the purview of what is and what isn't, and what could and what couldn't be, an important part of our happiness, or we will never find an answer that matters to us.