

Attachments ¹

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Persons and Human Beings

Do those to whom an agent has particular attachments have a greater claim to that agent's ethical attention than do strangers? Or is it the case that having an ethical disposition depends on an agent's being prepared to attend, circumstances permitting, to the well-being of any person whether friend or stranger? For Kant, respect, rather than attention, is the fundamental ethical attitude which is owed to each in view of being a person; that is, in view of being a self-determining agent who is capable of following the commands of practical reason. Accordingly, a person's attachments have no more bearing on whether he or she is owed respect, than does rank or wealth. So, for Kant, any ethical disposition is exercised impartially with no special consideration given to the particular attachments which an agent has with others.

The ethical requirement of impartiality is connected to Kant's formal and abstract conception of a person. Such a conception is free of those biological, psychological, and social features of human beings, which not only serve to differentiate one human being from another, but have often been the basis upon which differences in treatment have been justified. Of all the features that may be regarded as necessary to being a person, Kant's conception fastens on just those which are presumed to provide whatever counts as a person with his or her moral standing in the eyes of others. Since, for Kant, morality is centrally concerned with imperatives which are categorical, his conception of the person is correspondingly concerned with those features which endow one with a dignity which is unconditional. Empirical features of persons, including the particular attachments which they happen to form, being contingent, are ruled out as providing such grounds. However, for Kant, being a self-determining agent who is capable of following the commands of practical reason, can indeed meet the categorical requirements of morality.

Although Kant's conception of the person is ethical in that its defining features are selected in terms of their fit with the categorical demands of morality, underlying it is a certain metaphysical view that the concept "person" sorts out one kind of thing in terms of defining characteristics which enable us to distinguish persons from those sorts of things which are not persons. Otherwise asking whether such-and-such a thing is a person would involve nothing more than asking whether such-and-such a thing ought to be treated in a certain way. So, for example, asking whether the fetus is a person presumably is done in order to see whether it falls within a category which exempts things within that category from being killed. But if the concept of a person does not have this classifying function, then perhaps we should bypass its use altogether and directly ask whether or not fetuses should be killed.²

If the concept of a person enables us to distinguish persons from non-persons, an obvious question is whether all and only human beings are persons. Singer distinguishes between two senses of the concept "human being" which "overlap but do not coincide."³ One of its senses is biological in that the concept marks out an individual as a member of a particular species of animal.

For this purpose, he says, "human being" should be replaced by "the cumbersome but precise expression 'member of the species *homo sapiens*'." The second sense of "human being" is closer to our ethical interests in that the defining features are those which are said to make one a "real human being" or whose possession exemplifies "truly human qualities." Such features may include items such as self-determination, rationality, self-consciousness, and so on. This second sense is not, continues Singer, the same as the first, for being a member of the species *homo sapiens* does not mean that the member is also self-determining, rational, self-conscious, and so on. Indeed, fetuses, newborn infants, and the senile, though members of *homo sapiens* lack some or all of the defining features involved in the second sense of being human. Singer proposes that, for this second sense of "human being," we substitute the concept "person" whose chief characteristics he takes to be rationality and self-consciousness.

Returning now to our original question about whether all and only human beings are persons, we see that under Singer's recommendations it gets transformed into a question about whether all and only members of the species *homo sapiens* are persons. And for Singer, "there could be a person who is not a member of our species" and there "could also be members of our species who are not persons."

The difficulty I want to raise is not over what should or should not be selected as the defining features of being a person, but rather over the presumptive classificatory function ascribed to that concept. For the various items which often stand as candidates for the defining features of a person (e.g., self-determination, rationality, self-consciousness, self-control, responsibility, and so on) are characteristics which occur in degrees.⁴ Thus, insofar as one or several of these features which occur in degrees enter into our conception of a person, we cannot classify things as being either persons or non-persons. Insofar as a "person" does not operate as a classificatory concept, it cannot successfully be used to distinguish between those kinds of things which are objects of ethical attention and those which are not objects of this kind of attention.

The same sort of difficulty does not, however, arise with respect to the concept "human being" since it is clearly classificatory especially when functioning with the sense of "is a member of the species *homo sapiens*." The difficulty here, of course, is how such a biological classification can provide a basis for making normative claims about the life of human beings, while also avoiding accusations about committing the naturalistic fallacy. In this paper, I claim that regarding members of *homo sapiens* as social animals can serve as a basis for regarding human virtues as dispositions which are acquired only under conditions of attachment. In using the term "attachment," I want to capture two things. The first is that one is attached to others in the sense of having some sort of social relationship to them; for example, being a father, colleague, citizen, and so on. The second thing I wish to capture concerns those affective ties which are either enhanced or broken within these social relationships. Stressing the role of attachments within the acquisition of virtues of character no doubt runs counter to the Kantian emphasis on impartiality. However, my main point will be that in granting significance to human attachments within moral development, we also grant educational functions to public institutions and practices.

Virtue Related Appraisals

A member of *homo sapiens* is social in that he or she lives together with certain other members of the species. If we apply Kant's abstract notion of a person to each member of *homo sapiens*, then each human being, as a moral agent, is to be understood independently of his or her attachments to others. On the Kantian view, the moral relationships which are formed with others are to be seen as voluntary associations so that the obligations which such connections bring are due to mutual consent rather than to antecedently established custom or tradition. Of course, some of the relationships which individual human beings have with one another are not matters of choice. So, for example, standing in a certain family relationship to others, or being a citizen of a particular polity, is not, initially at least, an instance of a tie which an agent has chosen. From the Kantian perspective, however, such ties have no special moral force as such, unless an agent chooses to maintain them. Accordingly, although social relationships may be regarded as ontologically prior to the self-determining agent in that no human being is likely to survive outside of all social ties, in matters of moral judgement it is the self-determining agent who is prior in that the worthwhileness of any particular relation is dependent upon whether such a tie would be chosen by a morally rational agent.

Wiggins distinguishes between valuations and directive judgements.⁵ Examples of valuations would include such items as "x is good," "bad," "beautiful," "ugly," "ignoble," "brave," "just," "mischievous," "malicious," "worthy," "honest," "corrupt," "disgusting," "amusing," "diverting," "boring," and so on. Examples of directives would be "I ought to X," "I must X," "it would be best, all things considered, to X," and so on. Although prescriptivism would no doubt find fault with this distinction, I shall accept it without argument since I wish to focus attention on a certain subset of valuations which I call "virtue-related appraisals."

Virtue-related appraisals are valuations which characterize situations as being of a kind which bring them within the scope of the virtues.⁶ As valuations, these appraisals take the form "this is a that" (e.g., this act of giving money to a customs official is identical to the act of bribing him). Appraisals may apply not only to actions, but to character (e.g., "There was at times a silent intensity, or ferocity even, about the man that alarmed those who came close to him. . ."), emotions (e.g., "His gay cynicism had turned into something very like despair,"), motives (e.g., "She was still, behind the mask of a young matron, a calculating child. . . tormented by an implacable discontent.") and so on.⁷ Within a deliberative context, an agent, in making a number of appraisals, is trying to size up the situation he finds himself in, so as to determine what, all things considered, is the best thing to do. Situations, however, can be given multiple and mutually consistent appraisals. Nevertheless, agents do not construe particular situations in terms of all the appraisals that may apply to them, but only in terms of some of them. The actual appraisals an agent does use sets up the deliberative context and are, thus, logically antecedent to directives as to what is the best thing to do.⁸

In making virtue-related appraisals of situations, an agent has at his or her disposal an ethical vocabulary which is diverse and highly nuanced. The ethical

concepts found in the language of virtue and vice are, as Bernard Williams says, "thicker" (i.e. more specific) than concepts such as good, right, or ought.⁹ Applying these thick concepts to situations is to engage in both evaluating and describing them. But to characterize, for example, an action as cruel rather than tactless, or as spiteful rather than arrogant, is to say slightly different things about that action. A Kantian conception of morality with its emphasis on imperatives which are categorical would require a logical separation of the evaluative and descriptive elements found in the thick ethical concepts used in virtue-related appraisals. Accordingly, to appraise an action as cruel is to evaluate it as being of a certain describable kind which ought not to be done. Since cruel and tactless actions are evaluatively the same, appraising an action as cruel rather than tactless must be due to differences in the separable descriptions which apply to each action.¹⁰

Such an interpretation of the thick concepts used in virtue-related appraisals presupposes that there could be made available to us a range of ethically neutral descriptions which would allow differentiations to be made between those cases which fall under one thick ethical concept rather than another. One criticism of this interpretation correctly questions the availability of separable descriptions which could be understood and mastered independently of understanding the ethical point behind using one ethical concept rather than another.¹¹ On this latter view, appraising an action as cruel rather than tactless involves understanding the action so appraised as connected with the point of avoiding needless suffering rather than with the point of avoiding wounding sensibilities.¹² Correctness in applying a thick ethical concept to a situation is not just a matter of determining whether a descriptive element applies, but it also and inseparably involves grasping the evaluative perspective that gives that concept its point. So, for example, if I tell my wife something that I know will deceive her in order to prevent the collapse of a surprise party being planned for her, the thick ethical concept "lying" does not apply since the evaluative interest which gives that concept its point (i.e., the avoidance of actions which makes it difficult to maintain the trust necessary to living together) is in no way threatened.

Attachments and Moral Authority¹³

As we have already seen, from the Kantian perspective any morally rational agent stands outside of his or her social ties in that such ties in themselves, exercise no particular moral authority over the agent. But with the introduction of virtue-related appraisals whose concepts are inseparably descriptive and evaluative, we arrive at a different picture concerning the moral authority of social ties.

Because virtue-related appraisals are inseparably descriptive and evaluative, when such appraisals are true, they also provide reasons for the pursuit or avoidance of the appraised object. Thus, to use an earlier example, if it is true that this act of giving money to a customs official is identical to the act of bribing him, then one has reason to reject giving him the money. In coming to understand the meaning of the thick ethical concepts used in such appraisals, a child is not given a separable descriptive definition of a class of actions to which is added "and you ought (ought not) to do actions of that (descriptive) kind." Rather one comes to understand these concepts gradually, though perhaps never

completely, by being provided with samples of appraisals in which the relevant concepts are correctly applied and whose point is grasped. These samples, however, are not just samples of a community's linguistic practices, for insofar as they reflect what the community takes to be reasons for pursuit and/or avoidance, they are also samples of its ethical practices. Or, perhaps more accurately, the linguistic practices governing the use of a variety of thick ethical concepts, are inseparably a part of a community's ethical perspective on its life together.

Consider the case of an anthropologist who is studying the ethical life of another culture. Such an anthropologist may become as capable as his or her subjects in mastering the variety and range of thick ethical concepts used by members of that culture to appraise situations. But to do so our anthropologist is required to accept the word of competent members of that culture that the sample-appraisals being provided are both accurate and representative. Also, he or she needs to accept the word of these others as to how the various appraisals function in the life of the culture being investigated. In one respect, the anthropologist's need to accept the authority of others is temporary in that once he or she becomes fairly familiar with another culture's system of appraisal, then he or she no longer has to rely on the word of others as to how a situation is to be appraised. Yet, in another respect, this appeal to the authority of others is a logically necessary one. After all, it is the linguistic community which has the authoritative voice as to what its standard linguistic practices are. So, in order to become intelligible when using the language of a particular culture, a learner has to accept the say-so of competent users of that language as to whether he or she is proceeding correctly. So, when an anthropologist learns the appraisal language of another culture, he or she is logically required to take the word of others as to what counts as a reason within that culture.

Insofar as an anthropologist logically needs to defer to others in order to learn how another culture's thick ethical concepts work, he or she resembles a child undergoing one aspect of ethical habituation. One crucial difference, of course, is that a child, in being habituated into becoming a competent member of a culture to which he or she already belongs, learns to accept that culture's appraisals as his reasons for pursuit and/or avoidance of the appraised objects, whereas the anthropologist need only accept the linguistic authority of competent language users from an alien culture, not their moral authority. But with the child, the logical necessity of accepting the linguistic authority of those adults responsible for his or her upbringing, includes accepting, if only temporarily, their moral authority as well. One element in the difference between the anthropologist and the child is that the latter has social ties to those whose moral authority is acknowledged, where the anthropologist lives outside these ties.¹⁴

The Kantian picture of the morally rational agent treats such an agent as somewhat akin to an anthropologist who surveys and understands the ethical life of various alien cultures before deciding which culture (or cultures) he or she has reason to join and which one (or ones) he or she has reason to avoid. Notice, however, insofar as such reasons are reasons in being virtue-related appraisals of these various cultures, the thick ethical concepts employed by the anthropologist must be his though not necessarily those of the culture being appraised.¹⁵ But the inseparability of the descriptive and evaluative elements in

such concepts suggests that such concepts cannot be *his* except through his continuing to accept the linguistic and, through this, the moral authority of those to whom our anthropologist had social ties in the course of learning the language of virtue and vice. So, too, the morally rational agent, in continuing to appraise situations with a certain array of thick ethical concepts, also continues to accept the linguistic and moral authority of those to whom he or she has had social ties. In this respect then, a morally rational agent cannot stand outside his or her social relationships. The latter are necessary to becoming and remaining morally rational in the making of virtue-related appraisals.

Normally, the social ties which, initially at least, mediate the linguistic and moral authority of a community over a child, are those formed in the institution of the family. Of particular importance is the linguistic-moral authority of a child's parents. The sample-appraisals from which such a child begins to learn the language of virtue and vice do not occur as isolated lessons in vocabulary since such samples usually occur in the context of a set of practices which constitute a family's life together. So, if a family is not given to committing gratuitous acts of cruelty on one another, the parents' admonition to one of the children to stop pulling his sister's hair because it is cruel serves as providing that child with a sample description of what he is doing which is also a reason for not doing it. In accepting the word of his parents as to what he is doing and why he should not do it, this child is manifesting a disposition to attend to their appraisals. No doubt, one of the factors which leads him to accept the judgement of his parents where the protests of his sister did not have the same effect, is his (tacit) belief in their competence in such matters, and his (tacit) disbelief in his sister's competence. However, from the point of view of the role of attachments within a child's moral education, a more important factor is the existence of a strong affective tie between the child and his parents. Whether such a tie is love, or trust, or respect, or admiration, or some combination of these does not much matter at this point.¹⁶ My point is that without any mutual affective link between children and parents, children would have no more inclination to take in their parents' appraisals than those of anyone else. Moreover, if parents are indifferent to the well-being of their own children, then an important source, whereby their children learn to think of family situations in terms of as well as act from virtue-related appraisals, is lost. More generally, without affective ties between children and competent adult authority, children would have no particular inclination to prefer the appraisals of such adults. So, I take it then that the human virtues cannot be acquired except under conditions of attachment; that is, within social relationships in which affective ties are maintained.

Civic Attachments

While membership in a family is normally the first set of social ties through which children can acquire a disposition to think of situations in terms of and act from virtue-related appraisals, it is by no means the only one. Indeed, throughout the span of a single life a particular human being may undergo significant changes in his or her character because of the extra-familial ties which have been formed and maintained. In addition to family ties, other formative influences often include personal relationships as well as those ties to others as citizens of a common polity. The argument so far, however, has only

claimed that the acquisition of a virtuous disposition cannot occur outside of human attachments; it has not yet said anything about what kind of attachments these must be. Are family ties, personal relationships and membership in a polity somehow necessary to acquiring the virtues? Are they replaceable, circumstances permitting, by other forms of human attachment? Suppose we consider the case of citizenship within a polity.

A civic association differs from a civic attachment in that, unlike the latter, it does not assume any affective ties of a distinctive civil kind among the citizens of such an association.¹⁷ In a case where a polity is a civic association, what maintains such a polity is not the mutual regard of its citizens for one another as citizens, but rather the continuous common pursuit of certain goals for which co-operation among its citizens is necessary. In such a polity, its citizens are connected to one another as parts of a co-operative scheme aimed at securing certain goals. These goals might include traditional items such as the protection of life, limb, and property from external threat, as well as that new kid on the block, and maintaining our competitive position in the international market-place. In a polity which is a civic association, the disposition of citizens to pay attention to one another's well-being is based upon seeing one another as contributors to the goals of the polity. If such goals could be secured without associating with one another in a polity, then the foundation for citizens acting on behalf of the well-being of fellow citizens within a civic association would disappear. But for an agent who is ethically disposed towards his or her fellow citizens, virtue-related appraisals of their well-being should provide in themselves grounds for considering how these other citizens are to be treated. So, in a polity which is a civic association, the exercise of the virtues is somewhat incidental to the point of maintaining such a polity. Moreover, in such a polity, the fostering of the virtues in its citizens is not the business of its institutions and practices, for that business is the securing of the polity's goals.

Where a polity is a civic association, the fostering of a disposition to think of situations in terms of, as well as act from, virtue-related appraisals can only take place in the private sphere of life. For in civic associations, it is only within the private sphere that the affective ties so necessary for acquiring the virtues, can flourish. If, however, a polity can be more than a civic association in that there can be affective ties of a distinctive civil kind between its citizens, then the institutions and practices of such a polity can foster those affective ties and, thus, contribute directly to the fostering of the virtues in its citizens.

What I have called a civic association is analogous to a type of friendship discussed by Aristotle.¹⁸ Such friendships, which can be called "advantage friendships," are based upon an agreement to co-operate in the pursuit of shared goals. In order to maintain an advantage friendship, all that is necessary is the continuing co-operation between the partners in the pursuit of goals which they still share. It is not necessary that the partners either like, admire, or respect one another; they simply have to find one another useful. It is quite otherwise with another type of friendship considered by Aristotle called "character friendships." This kind of friendship is based upon and maintained by a mutual admiration for one another's excellences of character. When such excellences are the virtues,¹⁹ then there is necessarily a mutuality of concern with one another's well-being. Such a mutual concern, however, springs from the virtues of each and not from considerations related to the advantages such a friendship would bring to each.

In characterizing the affective ties among citizens in a polity which is a civic attachment, I wish to draw an analogy between such a polity and the Aristotelian notion of a character friendship. There are, no doubt, obvious differences between character friendships and any kind of polity. First, polities, especially modern ones, are of such a size that citizens cannot know one another's character well enough so as to be related to one another, as is the case in character friendships, in terms of mutual admiration for one another's excellences of character. Second, even in those cases in which the character of some fellow citizens is known, the emotions felt may be anything but admiration, thus making it difficult to regard any polity in terms analogous to character friendships. Despite these differences, there are some polities which are significantly like character friendships in that there is a mutuality of virtue-related regard between the citizens and the institutions and practices of the polity. Thus, in some polities, the citizens possess a strong affiliation with the institutions and practices of the polity based upon virtue-related considerations. So, for example, in a polity which can be characterized as a civic attachment, citizens may admire and trust its legal system because it reliably treats its citizens fairly. And on their part, the institutions and practices of a civic attachment treat whoever is recognized as a citizen in the way they do on the basis of virtue-related considerations.

In a civic attachment, citizens are bound together through a commonly felt admiration for the virtues of the polity's institutions and practices. If a polity is to maintain itself as a civic attachment rather than as a civic association, it needs to maintain not only the admired characteristics of its institutions and practices, but also the admiration of its citizens for these characteristics. Moreover, if it is to have a future as a civic attachment, a polity also needs to actively foster admiration for the virtues of its institutions and practices on the part of its young. Not to do this risks the disaffiliation of the young from and their indifference to the polity and how it treats its citizens. Without any sort of affective tie to their polity, the young could not acquire the civic virtues necessary to being a good citizen.

Membership in a polity, insofar as the latter approaches the condition of a civic attachment, offers a distinctive and irreplaceable set of circumstances under which human beings acquire the virtues. What makes such attachments distinctive and irreplaceable is that no other kind of attachment fosters virtues which are civic in character.

Civic virtues differ from those which are found in private life, in their scope and, very often, in the appraisals which are related to them. So, for example, truthfulness is a virtue in private life as well as in the life of the polity. Nevertheless, a civic official, who may be truthful to members of his family as well as his friends may, nonetheless, be disposed to be less than truthful with members of the public. Such an official lacks truthfulness as a civic virtue insofar as he or she limits the scope of its exercise to family and friends. As well, while appraisals such as lying and betraying are, for an ethically disposed human being, reasons for not doing the actions so appraised, appraisals such as perjury and treason may not be. The latter appraisals do not belong to private life but to the civil realm, and insofar as an agent has not formed civic attachments, such appraisals carry little weight. Civic attachments are necessary to the fostering of an agent's disposition to think of public situations in terms of as well as act from appraisals which are related to the civic virtues.²⁰

One final comment. At the beginning of this paper, I said that, for Kant, an ethical disposition is exercised impartially with no special attention given to the particular attachments which an agent has with others. But if the arguments of this paper are correct, an ethical disposition, when viewed as a disposition to think of situations in terms of as well as an act from virtue-related appraisals, is variable in scope. The narrowness or breadth with which a human being exercises his or her ethical dispositions, as well as the range of virtue-related appraisals which are actively used, depends upon the narrowness or breadth of the attachments which such an agent has made in the course of his or her life. A virtue is not an all-purpose, unitary disposition which an agent learns to exercise in independence of the conditions under which he or she has been raised. What kinds of human beings our children turn out to be depends not only upon their talents and good will, but also upon the character of the institutions and practices of the culture in which they are raised.

Notes

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²This sort of conclusion is reached by Mary Warnock. See her "Do Human Cells Have Rights?" *Bioethics*, 1(1), 1987, 2-3.

³Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 74-76.

⁴Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), 114. See also his article "Hylomorphism" in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 197-199.

⁵David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 95.

⁶Although I think that dispositions of character, such as wit, count as virtues, for purposes of this paper, I shall treat "virtue" in its more narrow sense, i.e., as identical to "moral virtue."

⁷The examples given here are taken from John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* (London: Paladin, 1978), 36, 72, 145.

⁸This paragraph and the two following are taken, with some modifications, from my paper "Ethical Attentiveness," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, (forthcoming).

⁹Bernard Williams, *op. cit.*, 128-130.

¹⁰R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 73-74.

¹¹Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 121-142, cf. J. McDowell "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following," in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow A Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), 144-145.

¹²See Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press 1990) 54-55; cf. Williams, *op. cit.*, 141-142.

¹³This section owes a great deal to Sabina Lovibond's *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹⁴Unless, of course, we say that accepting the linguistic authority of another is a type of social tie.

¹⁵This does not preclude the possibility that there may be appraisal concepts common to every culture.

¹⁶For a discussion of the role of parental love within the development of a child's character, see Laurence Thomas' *Living Morally: A Psychology of Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), Chapter Three.

¹⁷The distinction between civic association and civic attachment parallels the distinction made by Michael Oakeshott between an "enterprise association" and the "civil condition." See his *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1975), Chapter II; cf. John Casey, *Pagan Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 189-194.

¹⁸See his *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a 6 - 1156b 31. The terms "advantage friendship" and "character friendship" are taken from John Cooper's "Aristotle on Friendship," in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 310-340.

¹⁹It is important to remember that "virtue" is being used in its narrower sense; cf. note 5.

²⁰The extent to which moral and civic virtues overlap, depends on the extent to which good human being and good citizen overlap.