PRETENDING NOT TO NOTICE: RESPECT, ATTENTION, AND DISABILITY

Karen Stohr
Georgetown University

Published in *Disability in Practice: Attitudes, Policies and Relationships*, ed. Adam Cureton and Thomas Hill, 50-71. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

Accepted Manuscript

This paper is about a category of social conventions that, I will argue, have significant moral implications. The category consists in our conventions about what we notice and choose not to notice about persons, features of persons, and their circumstances. We normally do not think much about what we notice about others, and what they notice about us, but I will argue that we should. Noticing people is a way of engaging with them in social contexts. We can engage in social noticing more or less respectfully, more or less benevolently. The conventions of noticing are thus something we should take seriously from the standpoint of morality, considered both theoretically and practically.

It is particularly important that we take them seriously when we recognize that our standard conventions about noticing often have disparate effects on different groups of people. To be noticed appropriately is to have one's moral and social standing affirmed; conversely, to be denied notice or to be noticed inappropriately is very often to be denigrated or objectified. Persons with disabilities have, of course, long been subjected to disrespectful forms of notice, ranging from unrestrained stares to circus freak shows. Persons with disabilities are also not uncommonly denied notice—treated as if they are not present or not fully present in social situations. Now this is hardly breaking news, and the morally objectionable nature of such inappropriate conventions of noticing is easy enough to see. But it is one thing to say that all persons should be noticed appropriately, and something else to explain just what it means to

notice a person appropriately. In this paper, I take up the latter subject—first in a general way and then in a way specific to social interactions involving persons with observable disabilities.[1]

In the background of my discussion is a picture according to which ordinary social interactions can carry significant moral weight.[2] On this view, the social norms that govern our day-to-day interactions with others, whether friends or strangers, do morally important work insofar as they serve as vehicles through which we communicate and express moral attitudes toward those others and toward ourselves. They are capable of upending, reinstating, and maintaining moral relationships with others. In abiding by (or violating) social norms, we can effectively affirm or deny the standing of members of the moral community.

My aim in this paper is to unpack these moral dimensions of conventions of noticing and discuss their implications for how people engage with each other in a particular kind of social exchange. I will proceed in three steps. In Part I, I explain what I mean by the conventions of noticing and how they operate in social interactions. I show that although we do not always attend to them, these conventions are thoroughly embedded in our everyday social life. In Part II, I argue that these conventions have important moral dimensions and as such, should be governed by moral principles and values. I employ a Kantian framework of duties of love and respect in order to show how moral concerns should shape the way we use conventions of noticing and respond to their use by others. In Part III, I draw out the implications of this picture for social

[1] Two qualifications are in order. First, the concept of disability is obviously complex, and my usage here falls prey to standard problems. I will say more about these problems later in the paper, but I do not pretend to have resolved them. Second, because I write this paper as someone who is not currently disabled, I obviously lack the perspective on these encounters that someone with a visible disability might have. This is an inevitable limitation of writing on this topic, but I hope it will not impede my main line of argument which, at any rate, seeks not to impose any single perspective on persons with disabilities.

[2] I have argued for this view in *On Manners* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

interactions among strangers when one or more of the parties involved has an immediately visible disability.

PART I

Let me begin by setting out what I have in mind by noticing, since the term itself has multiple senses. As I am thinking of it here, to notice something is to become aware of its presence in one's immediate environment in a way that generates a comparatively robust form of uptake. If I notice something in this way, I am conscious of what I have noticed. I attend to it in a manner that enables me to draw it into my ruminations or deliberations. Suppose I am on a train; I notice that there are dark clouds gathering outside my window, or that there is a power outlet near my seat, or that the person in the seat across from me is typing furiously into his laptop. If I am noticing these things in this robust way, then I am actively aware of them in my environment. This does not mean that I think to myself, "There is an outlet near my seat," but it does mean that the presence of the outlet is available to my attention in a way that would allow it to become part of my conscious thought process.

It is, of course, possible to ride a train without noticing any such things. We are genuinely oblivious to a great deal of what is in our environment. It is also possible for me to register something like the presence of the outlet without becoming actively aware of the fact that I have registered it. In the latter case, we might still say that we notice the outlet, but it is a much less engaged form of notice than what I am thinking of here. Importantly, the absence of notice or of engaged notice is not always morally innocuous. The fact that something does not work its way into my conscious thought process does not preclude the possibility that it is influencing me in morally significant ways.[3] Moreover, it seems plausible to say that at least sometimes we are

[3] This is certainly obvious in the literature about implicit bias.

culpable for neglecting to notice what we should or to notice it adequately. Inattentiveness can be a moral failing in circumstances where fulfilling our moral duties requires that we pay a certain amount of attention to what is happening around us. I will return to this in Part II. For the moment, though, I will focus on this more robust form of noticing.

We should note as well that it is possible to notice something through a variety of mechanisms—because one sees it, hears it, smells it, touches it, and so forth. In this paper, I will be primarily concerned with visual methods of noticing in face-to-face encounters, but certainly this is not the only way of coming to notice things. Moreover, even in face-to-face encounters, one can notice the same thing through different mechanisms. I may notice that my friend has arrived because I have seen her, because I have heard her voice, because I have caught the scent of her favorite perfume, or some combination of these. While the focus of this paper is on visual notice and disabilities noticed through visual mechanism, much of what I has to say applies readily to other forms of notice.

Thus far, what I am describing as these various forms of noticing may seem like features of individual experience and hence, not something readily subject to governance by social conventions. This, however, would be missing something crucial. Noticing very often has an interpersonal dimension, particularly the more robust forms of notice. When I become consciously aware of someone or something in my environment, my awareness is often apparent to others. Others notice *that* I notice. My noticing gets uptake. It may be apparent to others either because I am communicating my notice in some way or because other people can reasonably infer that I have noticed whatever it is. I will refer to this kind of notice as interpersonal notice. When noticing takes an interpersonal form, it is subject to social conventions governing how the notice is expressed and how others respond to it.

Returning to the train example, suppose the person typing furiously into his laptop is sitting right next to me. It is possible for me to be so absorbed in what I am doing that I don't even notice what he is doing. Or I may notice it, but choose to act as if I don't. Alternatively, I may both notice and also communicate my notice to him by, say, frequently glancing over and perhaps leaning sideways to get a look at what he is doing. In the latter case, he may in turn act as though he does not notice what I am doing, or else he may decide to call me out and ask me to stop being so nosy. The appropriateness of these various options depends a great deal on the conventions in place in those circumstances. On trains and airplanes, we tend to think of an individual seat as enclosed within a zone of individual privacy, albeit one with permeable boundaries.[4] I am not supposed to act as though I notice what my seatmate is doing, but my seatmate should assume that I might nevertheless notice. The proximity of train passengers makes expectations of actual privacy unreasonable, since it is not always possible to prevent myself from noticing what the person sitting next to me is doing. For instance, the screen of an open laptop will naturally draw the attention of those sitting nearby, particularly if what is on the screen is especially eye-catching. The same holds true for sounds, smells, and other sensory stimuli. The standard social conventions about noticing the activities of seatmates reflect both the reality of the physical circumstances and the understandable desire to be able to conduct comparatively personal business in close quarters. If you are using your laptop in such circumstances, your social obligation is to use it in a relatively unobtrusive and innocuous manner. My social obligation as your seatmate is to try not to notice what is on your screen and barring that, at least to give the impression that I have not noticed it.

[4] This account of train travel reflects the conventions of broadly North American and Western European train travel. Of course, these conventions can and do vary from place to place.

It is a striking feature of many of the conventions of interpersonal noticing that they involve a kind of mutual pretense. We both know that I can see your screen, but politeness directs us to act as though I cannot see it. I notice, you are aware that I notice, and I am aware of your awareness. And yet, we carry on as if no one is noticing anything.[5] The pretense in this case is non-deceptive; we both know what is happening and neither of us aims to mislead the other about our motives, plans or actions. So why do we bother to engage in it? I suggest that it serves an important purpose by enabling us to jointly remove something from the social space in which our interaction occurs. Social conventions delineate the boundaries within which our interactions with other people occur. The conventions of pretending that we do not notice certain features of our circumstances enable us to mark those features as lying out of bounds for purposes of the interaction. The mutual pretense in which we engage on the train serves as a kind of unstated agreement that the content of your laptop screen will not play a role in any subsequent conversation or activity that we undertake.

Such unstated agreements, whether involving pretense or not, are pervasive in our social interactions, and they depend heavily on conventions for their effectiveness. It through the conventions that we signal our willingness or unwillingness to participate in whatever interactions are standardly practiced or expected of us in a given social setting. We might describe these networks of mutually understood and practiced conventions as a kind of social practice, although in a rather looser sense than what people often mean by a practice.[6] The

[5] Of course there may be good reasons to ignore this convention and object, such as if one's seatmate is engaging in flagrantly obscene or offensive activity on said laptop.

[6] In "Two Concepts of Rules," John Rawls describe a practice as "any form of activity specified by a system of rules which defines offices, roles, moves, penalties, defenses, and so on, and which gives the activity its structure." (p. 3, ffn 2.) Although what I am describing as the practice of noticing resembles this in some respects, it probably falls short of this sense of a practice. John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," *The Philosophical Review* 64, no. 1 (January 1955): 3-32.

noticing behaviors are rule-governed, even if the rules themselves are never explicitly stated. They involve a kind of interplay of actions and expressions through which we indicate to others our intentions, plans, and attitudes with respect to them. Moreover, there are sanctions (albeit unofficial and unevenly applied) for violations of the rules. If I lean over into your seat so as to see what you are doing on your laptop, I am flouting well-established conventions about personal space. I am invading your "zone" both through my physical intrusion into your space and through my nosiness into your business. According to these conventions, such a flagrant violation entitles you to respond in some way, whether by giving me a perturbed look, asking me to move back, ostentatiously removing your screen out of my line of sight, or even calling on others for assistance if I persist.

It is natural to consider my intrusion into your space as rude. In Part II I will argue that it is also (and not unrelatedly) disrespectful and hence, connected to recognizably moral attitudes. The social conventions attached to interpersonal noticing are not merely superficial niceties, nor is their value entirely pragmatic. Rather, they serve as tools with which we accomplish tasks, and some of the tasks are quite morally significant. One of the central tasks of the social practice of interpersonal noticing, as I have described, it is to establish, communicate, and maintain the boundaries of our interactions with other people. Those boundaries are a very important part of our social relationships.

The idea that we use social conventions to create and sustain boundaries in our interactions appears prominently in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. In his 1963 book, *Behavior in Public Places,* Goffman describes a phenomenon to which he gives the name 'civil inattention.' Civil inattention is a minimalist kind of interpersonal noticing that, according to

Goffman, is a courtesy that we extend to others, particularly in crowded public spaces. Here is how he defines it:

> What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.[7]

On Goffman's account, the visual notice of civil inattention is very specific and highly scripted.[8] Excessively long-lasting or pointed visual notice can constitute staring. A total lack of visual notice can amount to what we often call looking straight through a person. The visual notice of civil inattention must also be distinguished from meeting someone's eyes, which produces a different and more intense kind of engagement. With civil inattention, "the eyes of the looker may pass over the eyes of the other, but no 'recognition' is typically involved."[9] That recognition, which is what is produced when we meet someone's eyes, initiates what Goffman calls 'face engagement.' Face engagement is a different kind of interpersonal notice than civil inattention, and one that may or may not be appropriate in the circumstances. Whether interpersonal noticing should take the form of civil inattention or face engagement in a given situation is itself a matter of social convention. An example—again from transportation—will help make this clear.

Consider the experience of getting onto an airplane midway through the boarding process. As passengers walk down the aisle toward their seats, they are facing already seated passengers, who are often looking in their general direction. Until the boarding passengers get to their assigned rows, conventions of civil inattention are in effect. The boarding passengers and

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[7] Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), p. 84.
[8] It is also, as Goffman well knows, highly tied to local customs and conventions. Certainly not all cultures treat eye contact in the same way.
[9] *Behavior in Public Places*, p. 84.

the seated passengers pass their eyes over each other, but they do not ordinarily allow their eyes to meet. (This is not to say that no one stares at their fellow passengers, but the staring is supposed to be surreptitious.) Face engagement is generally avoided until the boarding passenger arrives at her row and has to indicate to the others seated there that she will be joining them. At this point, eye contact is not just acceptable, but important for initiating the necessary connection among passengers seated in the same row. People who share an airplane row find themselves in a temporary social relationship governed by unstated, but often quite specific conventions about the use of armrests, the position of window shades, access to the plane lavatory, the passing of food and trash from the flight attendant to the window seat occupant, and so forth.[10] Face engagement is a way of signaling one's preparedness to cooperate with these conventions. To use another phrase of Goffman's, face engagement establishes "accreditation for mutual activity" among strangers who, for reasons of proximity, must be prepared to do things together.[11] Conventions of airplane travel do permit passengers to employ what Goffman calls 'involvement shields' to block excessive interactions with seatmates. Laptops, novels, and closed eyes all serve as acceptable involvement shields, although aisle seat occupants are supposed to remain open to requests from seatmates to exit the row. By contrast, window seat occupants are comparatively free from responsibility, apart from occasional attention to the window shades. Our responsibilities with respect to our fellow passengers depend on both the circumstances in which they occur and the social role we occupy in those circumstances.

My description of these conventions will likely seem familiar, though perhaps not entirely uncontroversial, to those accustomed to plane travel in North American and Western

[10] I am setting aside the interesting and highly contentious issue of reclining seat backs, since this standardly occurs between people who are not making eye contact with each other. Perhaps that is part of the problem; it is easier to intrude on the space of someone with whom you have had no face engagement.

[11] *Behavior in Public Places,* 89.

Europe. Of course the conventions are different elsewhere, but the underlying idea transcends cultures. In social interactions—particularly those that require us to be in close physical proximity to strangers—we need to find ways to set and maintain boundaries. This is partly a practical matter, since attempting to make friendly eye contact with everyone on a Manhattan sidewalk would likely result in massive impediments to movement. But there is more to it than simply finding more efficient ways to move through social spaces. The boundaries have moral dimensions to them as well. Let us now turn to those.

PART II

As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, I will employ a broadly Kantian framework to explore the moral significance of interpersonal noticing. Although this may surprise readers familiar only with the *Groundwork*, Kant took social conventions seriously and indeed, was often quite insightful about social nuances and their moral ramifications. He was well aware that abstract moral principles must be given shape through their application to real world circumstances. The categorical imperative, taken seriously as a practical moral obligation, requires the cultivation and exercise of moral judgment. This is because, as Kant recognized, the world presents us with complicated moral demands that can pull us in competing directions.[12]

The potential for conflict among moral demands is expressed in Kant's vivid description of the tension between what he calls the two "great moral forces" of love and respect: "The principle of mutual love admonishes men constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of the

[12] Here I am not referring to genuine moral dilemmas, the existence of which Kant seems to have denied. The competing moral pulls to which I refer occur primarily in the realm of imperfect duty and also prior to the agent's decision about what to do.

respect they owe one another, to keep themselves at a *distance* from one another."[13] The tension is not theoretical, since the duties of love and respect both arise out of the categorical imperative. Rather, it is a practical tension that emerges when we take both these duties seriously in application.

The humanity formulation of the categorical imperative enjoins us to treat humanity in ourselves and others as ends, and not merely as a means. Put slightly differently, it instructs us to respect ourselves and others as rational beings with value that is incommensurable and absolute. The value of rational beings requires that we refrain from treating as objects that we can manipulate for our own purposes. We do this primarily by respecting the capacity and exercise of rational agency in ourselves and others. It would, however, be a mistake to think that Kantian duties to others are limited to duties not to interfere with their exercise of rationality. Kant is adamant that appropriate regard for our fellow rational beings also requires that we concern ourselves with their welfare, understood in terms of their basic human needs and their capacities to carry out their rationally chosen ends. This morally obligatory concern is what gives rise to duties of love. We have both duties of respect and duties of love toward each other, but, as Kant noted, respect and love can pull us in opposing directions. To illustrate this, I return to my original example of seatmates on a train.

In Part I, I suggested that the standard conventions of interpersonal noticing in such circumstances create and sustain boundaries around permissible social interactions. These boundaries create artificial, but important zones of privacy. Within those zones, people can carry on their activities as if they are not in fact in close proximity to other people. The boundaries of

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 449. This reference and all subsequent references to the *Metaphysics of Morals* employ the Prussian Academy page numbers.

the zones are set and maintained through everyone's adherence to conventions of mutual pretense, according to which seatmates do not acknowledge each other's activities. When I pretend as though I do not see your laptop screen, I am implicitly conveying to you my agreement that your laptop activities will form no part of our interaction. My willingness to do this is what makes the boundary possible.

It is plausible to view my adherence to the convention as an expression of respect for you. After all, you may be doing your tax returns, composing a love letter, or writing the last chapter of your highly anticipated novel, and these things are clearly none of my business. Even if you are simply losing badly at solitaire, it seems disrespectful to glean this information about you. Presumably I am not entitled to walk up to you in the train station and demand that you tell me your gross annual income. Peering at your laptop screen while we're on the train itself amounts to doing the same thing. In circumstances where proximity affects the information we happen to have about people, respect for them requires that we take measures to communicate disinterest in that information. We should endeavor not to seek it and if we acquire it anyway, we should pretend that we do not possess it. As Kant puts it, respect for others directs us to keep our distance from each other. Pretending not to notice what you are doing is a way of keeping my distance. In the case of seatmates on a train, physical distance is not possible; we both know that I am able to see what you are doing on your laptop. When, however, I pretend that I do not see what you are doing, I am acknowledging that I am nevertheless not *entitled* to know what you are doing. In that sense, it is plausible to see it as an expression of respect for you. It provides a way of keeping a respectful moral distance when physical distance is impossible.

Alas, train travel is not always that simple. Suppose now that my seatmate receives a phone call. Given our proximity, I can easily hear his side of the conversation. Between his

words and the obvious distress on his face, it becomes clear to me that he has just heard devastating news. He hangs up the phone and begins to sob quietly in his seat. Suddenly, my straightforward duty of respect has been complicated by competing duties of love, which, as Kant puts it, bid me to come closer to him. Respect gives me moral reason to allow him privacy, but compassion and concern give me moral reason to help him if I can. I am thus pulled in competing moral directions.

The moral complexity of my circumstances means that I now have to consider whether to continue to adhere to the standard conventions of interpersonal noticing for train seatmates. I could, of course, decide to stick with them and pretend I don't notice his distress at all, much as I pretend I don't notice what's on his laptop screen. At the other extreme, I may give up on the pretense entirely and ask him directly about the source of his distress and whether there is any way I can help. Alternatively, I could stake out a middle ground by glancing sympathetically in his direction and silently offering him tissues. The first option may well seem callous, given the obviousness of his outburst and the impossibility of my having failed to notice it. The second and third options both involve an acknowledgement that I have noticed his distress, but the acknowledgment functions differently. In the second option, I have explicitly brought his situation into conversational space, thereby bringing our mutual pretense to an end.[14] In the third option, I leave open the option for him to, say, attribute his red eyes and runny nose to a sudden allergy attack. If he chooses this explanation and if I accept it, the pretense is restored, albeit in a different form.

Presumably there is no single response that is universally appropriate in such circumstances. It is worth noting, though, that the difference between the second and third

[14] Sarah Buss argues that this is the preferable option in many cases. See "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners" *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 795-826.

options can be morally significant, insofar as the control of the boundary resides in different hands. In the second option, I am acting unilaterally in erasing the social boundary that existed before, something that he may or may not find welcome. In the third option, I am doing something rather different; I am expressing my willingness to erase the boundary without actually doing so. Instead, I am putting the decision about the future of the boundary in his hands by allowing him to decide whether we will give up the mutual pretense or replace it with a slightly different version. This enables him, if he wishes, to keep the real source of his distress off the table for purposes of our interaction, thereby maintaining the boundary.

The tension here between respect and love is what makes this situation difficult to navigate from a practical point of view. Employing the conventions of interpersonal noticing well in complicated social interactions requires a nuanced grasp of the relevant moral considerations and the ways in which they are likely to play out in a given setting. In this situation, I have respect-based reasons to allow him privacy and love-based reasons to offer him help. In order for me to act well, I need a good grasp on the various reasons that I have and the pathways available for acting on them. The standard conventions of mutual pretense prioritize respect-based concerns for privacy. If, however, my seatmate suddenly starts showing signs of a heart attack, then of course those concerns for his privacy should give way to concerns for his welfare. I should not just pretend I do not hear his sounds of distress in the interest of protecting his privacy. It is reasonable for me to inquire whether he is all right and perhaps also reasonable for me not to accept his attempt to explain it away as indigestion.[15] The fact that someone refuses help does not necessarily mean that we should not persist in offering it. Knowing when and how to offer help to a stranger, however, is a morally complicated task, requiring both considerable

[15] Obviously this depends on my degree of certainty that the problem in question

situational awareness and also facility with the social conventions through which the relevant moral concerns can be expressed.

Suppose that after my seatmate has ended his phone call and burst into tears, I decide to respond by dropping the standard pretense entirely and asking him if I can help. It is possible that he will appreciate my concern, but it is also possible that he will regard it as nosy or impertinent. It is also possible that my direct acknowledgment of his suffering will make it harder for him to keep himself together for the duration of the train ride, something that may be quite important to him. In that case, my attempts to console him are not helpful at all; indeed, they make his task more difficult. I cannot, of course, be expected to divine just what will make a stranger feel better. Social conventions, however, provide a variety of moral tools with which to work.

We can see this when we examine the third option more closely, the one in which I silently hand him tissues. The tissues, besides having immediate practical utility, serve to acknowledge my notice of the fact that he is weeping. It is not quite face engagement as Goffman describes it, but it functions in a similar way. In handing him tissues, I communicate to him that I am aware of what is happening and that I am disposed to help if I can. I acknowledge that our circumstances have changed and I express my openness to being called on for further assistance. In Goffman's terms, I "accredit" myself for the mutual activity of helping him. Crucially, though, I do this without explicitly stating what exactly has changed about our circumstances. I have reached through the boundary, but I have not erased it or unalterably redefined it. Instead, I have left it open for him to decide whether and how the boundary should be redrawn. If he accepts the tissues with a remark about his head cold or the bad allergy season, then I know that he prefers to retain some kind of mutual pretense. He has in effect requested me to go along with his explanation, even though we both know it isn't accurate. In acceding to his

request and adjusting my behavior to reflect our new shared pretense, I enable him to retain his privacy while still expressing my concern for him.

The point of this extended example is to demonstrate how the employment of these conventions of interpersonal notice, and the mutual pretense they often demand, can be shaped and directed by moral considerations. In this situation, the conventions are tools that my seatmate and I are employing to set the terms of our subsequent interaction. There are default conventions, but when adhering to those becomes impossible or inappropriate, moral considerations direct us in our efforts to renegotiate the social boundary between us.

Thus far, I have been focusing on interactions between people who are already in some kind of social relationship in virtue of their proximity. Interpersonal noticing, however, operates on a broader scale than this. We also adhere to social conventions in the way that we notice—or choose not to notice—people in the first place. Noticing another's presence in an interpersonal way is how we grant that person standing in a social interaction. Depending on how the noticing is done, it can also undermine or even deny standing.

Initiating interpersonal notice singles another person out as the object of social recognition. Such recognition can be either negative or positive, depending on the context. Obvious examples of negative recognition include catcalls or crude comments directed at women walking down the street. This is interpersonal notice, but of an unwelcome and demeaning sort. A man who issues a catcall at a woman marks her out for notice; however, the notice has the effect of treating her not as a fellow human being, but as an object of sexual gratification or desire. It is inappropriate notice because, in Kant's language, it fails to treat her as an end. In order for interpersonal notice to be morally appropriate, it must acknowledge the person's

standing in a way that marks her as an equal in Kant's sense of being a fellow member of the kingdom of ends.[16]

We can also, of course, deny or diminish a person's moral standing through a refusal to engage in the standard conventions of interpersonal notice in social interactions. According to Kant, respect for others precludes both treating them with contempt and also mocking or defaming them. Mocking someone treats that person as a mere means to the amusement or pleasure of others. Treating another with contempt denies that person his status as an end by implying that he is not the sort of being who warrants interpersonal engagement. Although Kant is sympathetic to the idea that we cannot help feeling contempt on occasion, he stands firm in his claim that we must make every effort not to show it. Respect for others as fellow rational agents, fellow members of the kingdom of ends, precludes expressions of contempt for them.[17]

To notice someone is to acknowledge her standing as a being entitled to public social acknowledgment. Refusing that acknowledgment thus has significant moral implications. In etiquette manuals, the social practice of not acknowledging someone who is physically present is referred to as "cutting" that person, presumably because it cuts someone entirely out of social space. To deny someone recognition as a fellow member of the community, entitled to engage in social interactions, is often tantamount to denying his overall moral standing.[18] One fairly well known example of this is the practice of shunning, whereby a person is no longer recognized as a

[16] I do not mean that all social interactions must be characterized by absolute social equality. As Tom Hill has pointed out to me, it may be that granting someone appropriate standing requires deference, such as when encountering a dignitary. I will set aside these cases, interesting though they are, and assume that the social interactions in question are between people who are social and moral equals.

[17] See *Metaphysics of Morals,* 463. My account of Kant on contempt is influenced by Thomas Hill, "Must Respect Be Earned?" in *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice: Kantian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For an argument that contempt is actually compatible with respect, see Michelle Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude" *Ethics* 113, vol. 2 (2003): 234-272.

[18] In traditional etiquette practices, cutting can be done in degrees is licensed only in certain circumstances, mostly when the person being cut has done something morally reprehensible.

member of a particular community. Shunning in religious communities, such as the Amish, is generally a result of a major sin or transgression on the part of the person being shunned. The specific conventions of shunning vary, but in general, shunned persons are barred from participating in a variety of common social interactions, including meals, celebrations, and religious rituals. Of course, shunning occurs in other social groups as well, and can take any number of forms. Unfriending or unfollowing someone on social media can, particularly if done publicly and with the intent of it receiving uptake, qualify as a form of shunning.

The refusal of notice in the form of shunning is a powerful social punishment precisely because it denies the person recognition as a member of the relevant group. If done collectively, shunning effectively blocks the person from any form of participation in the community's social life. It is essentially a way of ejecting someone from a community. The justification for shunning someone thus presupposes that there is a justification for an ejection from the community, and for the ejection to be made manifest in that particular way. Kant's aversion to contempt rests on his belief that it is impossible to be ejected from, or to eject yourself from the moral community. The moral status conferred by rational agency cannot be waived or removed, which is why Kant thought that even the worst possible criminal is still entitled to basic respect in virtue of his status.[19]

Importantly, it doesn't follow from Kant's view that shunning a person is necessarily at odds with the respect owed to him. Indeed, in some cases, the shunning represents an effort to get him to repent, in which case he would be eligible to rejoin the community. (This appears to

[19] This basic respect, as Kant describes it, may seem much too minimal to modern readers. On Kant's view, it blocks punishments like drawing and quartering, but not execution. It also permits many uses of criminals that modern readers are likely to find morally troubling. The point here, though, is not so much about the nature of the basic respect but about the fact of it. Every rational being has, in virtue of their rationality, some minimal moral standing.

be the motivation behind the Amish practice.) Setting aside such cases, we may think that even if a person can't forfeit his right to membership in the moral community, he may nevertheless forfeit his right to recognition in at least some social contexts. It seems reasonable to think that the victim of a crime is entitled to avoid the perpetrator at social gatherings, particularly if he is unrepentant.[20]

If there is an entitlement to shun someone who has acted badly, this is in part because interpersonal notice generally requires face engagement and as we have seen, face engagement opens a person up to the possibility of having demands placed on her. When we want to avoid having demands made on us, we avoid conventions of interpersonal notice. Sometimes this is clearly justified, as in the case of the crime victim. It is also justified as a response to disrespectful and objectifying forms of notice, like catcalls and crude remarks. The mere fact that someone seeks to initiate face engagement does not necessarily bind the other person to reciprocate it. Not all demands are legitimate demands; when we have reason to suspect that initiating or responding to face engagement would lead someone to make illegitimate demands or otherwise impose on us, we are entitled to refuse it.

Sometimes, however, the justification for avoiding interaction is more dubious. Passersby who want to escape contact with homeless persons asking for change tend to avert their eyes so as to fend off face engagement. They may employ involvement shields like sunglasses or cell phones, or they may simply act as though they neither see nor hear the person. Whether this is a justifiable response to a stranger seeking financial help is open to dispute. It is important to notice, though, that either way, the response does moral work. Denying someone notice can be disrespectful on its face, if it's done overtly or blatantly. Even when it isn't

[20] Indeed, restraining orders seem to be a legal mechanism to bring about and enforce something like social shunning.

disrespectful, it may also be unkind, insofar as it shows an unwillingness to be open to another's reasonable demands. Kantian duties of respect and love are thus both operative in our decisions about whom to acknowledge and on what basis.

We can see this readily by reflecting on quite routine social interactions. Suppose that I am in the grocery store and see my neighbor. Ordinarily, some form of interpersonal notice among acquaintances is expected, at least if we are within a certain physical proximity. The notice is not highly scripted; it could take the form of a wave, a smile, or a verbal greeting, but from the standpoint of social conventions, the notice must occur, and it must also be reciprocated. The importance of such notice is evident when we reflect on what we would have to do if we wanted to avoid such an encounter. Suppose I am feeling unwell and irritable during my grocery trip. As I round the corner of the yogurt aisle, I see my neighbor up ahead. If I acknowledge her, I know she will launch into a lengthy speech about the merits of Greek yogurt from which it will be hard to extricate myself. In an effort to dodge her, I decide to forgo buying yogurt and head the other way before she catches sight of me. I thus avoid initiating interpersonal notice, and prevent her from initiating it as well.

This is a form of pretense, although not a mutual one. If my dodge doesn't work and she spots me anyway, I may choose to pretend that I hadn't seen her in the first place. This would be deceptive in a way that the pretense about laptop screens is not. Crucially, avoiding interpersonal notice, even in a one-sided way, is importantly different from refusing to engage in interpersonal notice with someone present. I would be doing the latter if, once she spoke to me, I ignored her. Unlike the dodge, this refusal to respond to another's notice is intended to be noticed. The refusal is meant to get uptake, either by that person or by others. By contrast, my dodging of my neighbor in the yogurt aisle is designed *not* to get uptake. The first one counts as shunning the

person; the second is merely avoiding her. Shunning is often (although as we have seen, not always) a public expression of disrespect. The point is to convey to the target and to observers that the target is not a full participant relevant community. It aims at reducing or denying the person's moral standing at a fundamental level.

But even when we are simply avoiding someone, and not actively shunning or cutting them, we may still be failing with respect to our moral duties. It might be a lesser failure of respect, but it may also be a failure of our duties of love. The Kantian duty of love, requires me to be generally open to possibility of others making demands on my time or attention. Face engagement, to use Goffman's term, is one of the ways in which I express that openness. Although I am not always required to offer face engagement, withholding it can, in some circumstances, amount to a failure of love. Love requires me to be open to the needs and goals of others, acting to promote them when possible. Indifference to those needs is a moral problem.[21] Whether or not it's permissible to avoid my bothersome neighbor in the yogurt aisle will depend on the broader context of our relationship. If I am generally attentive to her when we meet, I may well be fulfilling all the moral demands of being a good neighbor. If, however, I avoid her whenever I can, or if I have reason to think that she is particularly in need of social contact (perhaps she is recently widowed), then it may be unkind for me to pretend I don't see her on this occasion. True, I am not cutting her out of my social community, but neither am I permitting her room to occupy the full space to which she is entitled.

As with encounters on trains, encounters in grocery stores are governed by a complex set of social conventions around interpersonal notice. Once my neighbor and I have engaged in our reciprocal greeting, we have to determine together what the rest of the encounter will be like. If

[21] I have argued for this in "Kantian Beneficence and the Problem of Obligatory Aid," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 45-67.

she wants to keep the encounter brief, she may choose to give indications that she is in a hurry, such as by continuing to walk as she greets me. Part of my task is to notice *that* she is giving me these indications and respond accordingly, since it is a request to have a boundary respected. Not all obligations to respect boundaries are requested; they may stem from what we observe. Suppose I happen to notice that my neighbor is wearing pajamas in the middle of the afternoon, or that her cart is filled with a peculiar collection of food items. It may or may not be respectful for me to convey my uptake of such things; that will depend on what I know about her and the nature of our relationship. The more the features of circumstances have the potential to embarrass or shame her, the less I should acknowledge that I notice those features. There is, of course, a great deal to be said about why certain circumstances are regarded as more shameful than others and hence, not to be noticed, but I will set this aside for the moment. The goal here is just to point out how the choice to acknowledge something (or not!) affects not just the initial encounter, but also the social space in which that encounter subsequently unfolds.

If I make apparent my notice of the fact that my neighbor is in pajamas or that her cart is filled with bottles of whiskey, I have thus put those features of her circumstances on the table for our subsequent interaction. In that respect, it resembles making apparent my uptake of my seatmate's tears. The moral challenge here is that acknowledging uptake of these unusual circumstances may come across as a demand for an explanation or an account. If I inquire of my seatmate why he is crying, or ask my neighbor with the whiskey bottles whether she is having a party, I am putting forward a social demand to be given information to which I do not seem to have a moral right. I thus put the burden on the other person either to accede to my social demand or to deflect it somehow.

On the other side, attending to features of a person's circumstances is a crucial element of what it means to be appropriately loving toward her. Sensitivity to the needs of others and imaginative insights into how we might help fulfill those needs are an important part of genuine beneficence, and we cannot help people if we are not attending to the ways in which they may need help. In a famous set of experiments, psychologists arranged for Princeton seminarians to walk past a seemingly ill person on their way to give a talk across campus. A surprisingly high percentage of seminarians failed to stop to help, even when the seminarians were on their way to give a talk about the Good Samaritan parable.[22] The key factor seemed to be in the amount of extra time the experiment subjects thought they had. The more of a hurry they took themselves to be in, the less likely they were to stop and help. It's unclear just why the hurrying seminarians failed to help, but one possibility is that in their haste, they simply didn't notice the man slumped by the side of the path. Insofar as our duties of love require us to help people in serious need of aid, they also require us to develop habits of attention that will enable us to recognize such situations when we encounter them. Noticing what is happening with people is a necessary precondition of being able to help them. The person who is constantly checked out of her surroundings may succeed in in not treating anyone disrespectfully, but she won't really be regarding her fellow human beings as worthy objects of care and concern.

One of the most challenging aspects of interpersonal noticing is the difficulty of conveying uptake of the person and her circumstances in a way that expresses both appropriate concern for her well-being and also respect for her right to maintain boundaries around her own projects and narratives and not to be subject to unwelcome or illegitimate demands that she

[22] J. M. Darley and C. D. Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviors" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (1973): 100-108. Not all the seminarians in the study were told they would be speaking on the Good Samaritan parable.

account for herself. Thus far, I have been focusing in a general way on the complex moral demands of interpersonal noticing. I now want to turn the more specific, although no less complex, moral demands of interpersonal noticing when one of the parties to the interaction has a visible disability. There are of course many circumstances in which the fact of someone's disability is entirely irrelevant to the interaction. There are many more when it *should* be irrelevant, but I is not. There are also some circumstances in which the fact of someone's disability is morally relevant to the interaction, but in ways that are not always straightforward or governed by widely known, mutually accepted conventions of interpersonal noticing. As I have argued in this section, the ways in which we employ these conventions in social interactions have moral significance. Employing them badly or unreflectively can communicate a failure of respect or of love, or both. It matters, then, that we make every effort to employ them well.

PART III

I will begin by stating the obvious, which is that a person's disability is irrelevant to his or her moral status. In theory, then, we might think that the social practice of interpersonal noticing should always be unaffected by the presence or absence of a disability. And indeed, it often is unaffected, particularly when the disability is one that is either frequently encountered or not always conceptualized as a disability. An elderly person walking slowly and leaning on a cane has a visible disability, but it is not a disability that normally leads anyone to turn and stare at him, or to sneak furtive looks in his direction, or to scurry away so as not to have to speak to him. But of course, this is not the experience of many people with visible disabilities, disabilities that are far more likely to produce rude or awkward responses on the part of strangers. It is the

latter kind of interaction that calls for closer attention to conventions of interpersonal noticing and their moral repercussions.

Let us start with an especially common and troubling response to a person with a visible disability, which is to stare. Most people believe that it's rude to stare and yet most people nevertheless stare on occasion anyway.[23] Our gaze is easily drawn to the surprising and shocking, and we can be temporarily transfixed by an appearance that we do not expect and cannot readily process. In her book, *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts it this way: "we stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story."[24]

Indeed, the story is very often what I am seeking when I stare at another person with a disability.[25] It may be the story of what the disability is, how the person came to have it, or how they manage to function with it. In the course of wondering and speculating, we find ourselves staring, at least until we realize that we're doing so, or until the person who is the object of our stare responds. Then, embarrassed or ashamed, we look away and perhaps avoid further engagement so as not to exacerbate the embarrassment or awkwardness. Such social encounters, which are obviously part of the daily experience of people with visible disabilities, are a long way from exemplifying Kantian ideals of respect and love.

Garland-Thomson's book explores the power of the stare, in terms of both its ability to deny a person her humanity and also its capacity to transform and extend our understanding of

[23] I don't mean to suggest that this convention exists everywhere, although my own experience leads me to believe that it is quite widespread. Across subcultures of the United States, there is surprising agreement about the rudeness of staring.

[24] *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 3.

[25] In this section, I will use "I" and occasionally "we" to refer to the party in the interaction who does not have the particular disability that is the source of social focus in that interaction. I recognize and regret the inevitable way in which this casts the party with a disability as "other," but I see no good alternative.

human experience. Regarding the latter, she discusses the work of artist Doug Auld, who painted a series of portraits of people whose bodies have been altered by severe burns.[26] He began the series, called "State of Grace," as a response to a brief encounter he had with a young girl who had suffered severe burns all over her face and head. He stared at her, and when she met his eyes, he turned away. For years, the memory of this encounter and his inability to look her in the eyes, troubled him. Auld's series is aimed at encouraging people to stare at the portraits, to look at the faces of people with badly burned skin and see their humanity. The idea is that by staring at beautiful portraits of people with burns, we may learn to simply meet the eyes of the subjects, and people like them, when we encounter them in person.

Auld's project aims to alter our reaction to the sight of people with burned skin by transforming our aesthetic responses to them. And yet, as Garland-Thomson points out, the stare demands something more. It demands the story of the burns, perhaps in the hope that there will be something in that story that assures the starer that s/he is immune to a similar fate. Horrified shock can morph into embarrassment, but it can also slide over into pity and even smugness. The interrogative nature of a stare is not necessarily improved when the questions are answered. Even when the stare is withdrawn, its effects will linger. The person has still been singled out as an object of visual curiosity and perhaps also pity and admiration. She remains noticed, and noticed in virtue of her disability.

Persons with disabilities, of course, do not all think of themselves, their disabilities, and their identity as a person with a disability in the same way. It is usually not possible to know in an instant how a given party to a social interaction thinks of herself. Moreover, a person's ability to manage her social identity may be affected by her circumstances. Consider the difference

[26] *Staring*, p. 79-81.

between the circumstances of person with mobility issues choosing to stop so as to admire a view and being forced to stop because of barrier in her environment that prevents her from moving forward.[27] In the first situation, her agency is not impeded by her environment and thus there is no reason to suppose that she must be frustrated or in need of assistance. In the second situation, of course, the person's mobility problems become more salient to her environment. She may not be frustrated, but of course she may be. She may not want assistance, but perhaps she does. The fact of her disability is not immediately morally salient in the first case. In the second case, it is morally salient; however, the saliences are complex.

When people move through space with each other, they ordinarily make adjustments to accommodate each other and the space around them. These adjustments require noticing things like narrowed sidewalks, obstacles on the path ahead, oncoming traffic, and so forth. If I see a large puddle up ahead on your part of the sidewalk, I may move further over so you have more room to walk, or I may move ahead or behind you so that we can walk single file. We do this without thinking most of the time. And for persons with mobility issues and those who frequently travel with them, many of the necessary adjustments become second nature as well. When the presence or absence of a curb cut or ramp is essential to unimpeded movement, one notices curb cuts and ramps as much as one notices puddles and oncoming foot traffic.

Such adjustments tend to flow quite smoothly when the parties involved are accustomed to interacting with each other in shared space. A person who frequently travels with a companion in a wheelchair does not need to think about how much space to give her companion to move around a corner, or how they should proceed through a particular set of doors. Of course, both people will still take note of unusual obstacles or circumstances and make necessary adjustments,

[27] The very idea of a mobility issue is itself fraught. Every human being has a mobility issue in some respect, insofar as none of us can fly, most of us cannot dunk a basketball, etc.

just as any group of companions would do. But the frequency of the interaction greatly diminishes the social complexity of the person's disability by creating a slightly different set of norms to which people adjust their behavior.

In interactions between strangers, however, there is often confusion over the relevant set of norms. Staying with the example of mobility, a person A encountering another person B in a wheelchair may be unsure about how much space B requires in order to maneuver around obstacles. If A fails to notice B or to consider the turning radius of B's wheelchair, then A may leave B too little room to get around, placing the burden on B to ask A to adjust her behavior. (Of course, this can happen in other circumstances, such as when B is pushing a shopping cart and trying to get down an aisle blocked by A.) Alternatively, A may err in the other direction and leave far too much space between herself and B. Doing so may make it easier for B to move, but it may also make B feel isolated, stigmatized, or more noticeable than he might otherwise be.

The fact that such maneuvers draw everyone's notice to the disability is important. As we have seen, Garland-Thomson describes a stare as an interrogation. In the case of a stare directed at someone's visible disability or injury, we might describe it as a demand for an explanation of how the disability or injury came about. "What happened to you?" may seem like an innocuous question. Indeed, it is often an unobjectionable expression of curious concern when asked of a friend who suddenly appears on crutches or with a bandaged arm. In fact, if we said nothing about it, that would be a violation of social convention. Friends are supposed to inquire after the well-being of their friends, and that includes noticing visible injuries or disabling conditions. But of course this doesn't extend to strangers; we don't have standing to demand an account of their situation, or even launch an inquiry. Insofar as a stare is an attempt to answer our questions for

ourselves (are those, or are those not scars from a suicide attempt?), we are nevertheless demanding an account, even if we are not using words to do so.

Why is it that people seem to feel entitled to an explanation of a person's disability? In his 1962 book, *Stigma*, Erving Goffman suggests that the demands are built into the structure of social interaction:

> Society establishes the mean of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his "social identity".....We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.[28]

Let us return to the grocery store example. We anticipate that people will take up a certain amount of space in a grocery store aisle, which leads us to build up certain expectations about how people will conduct themselves so as to enable our passage. These expectations that have normative upshot for how we feel entitled to respond. If someone blocks an entire aisle with her shopping cart, I may feel entitled to make my presence and my desire to proceed known to her in some way. I may move her cart to the side myself if she does not act quickly enough from my perspective.

When I encounter a person in a wide wheelchair in a shopping aisle, I am unlikely to think to myself that she is rude to be taking up so much space. And yet, the demand itself may still be present. As Goffman puts it:

> Typically, we do not become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled. It is then that we are likely to realize that all along we had been making certain assumptions as to what the individual before us ought to be.[29]

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[28] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963) p. 2.
[29] *Stigma,* p. 2

I may not realize that I am expecting someone to get out of my way until I am confronted with someone who will not be getting out of my way. And even if I succeed in not responding impatiently or rudely, the normative expectation can remain. One is "supposed" to be the sort of person who takes up only a certain amount of space in a grocery aisle. If one is not such a person, then an explanation is expected.

The implication is that in a social encounter in which the fact of a person's disability changes the application of the usual social conventions, the person with the disability is put into a position of being someone who does not live up to the social expectations of others. Her presence requires others to adjust their behavior, and whether they say so or not, they may be demanding an explanation. As Goffman points out, the extent to which this social friction occurs depends on the circumstances and the extent to which the person's disability alters the interaction. He points out that in a meeting conducted with participants seated around a table, the fact that one participant is in a wheelchair makes little difference to the interaction itself. He contrasts it with stuttering, which produces significant alteration to standard communication conventions: "The very mechanisms of spoken encounters constantly redirect attention to the defect, constantly making demands for clear and rapid messages that must constantly be defaulted."[30]

Of course people who frequently communicate with someone with a stutter become accustomed to it. Together, they adjust their communication conventions to accommodate it, just as people adjust their movement conventions to accommodate one person's wheelchair. But such adjustments take time and are often highly specific to the particular people involved. One person's movement in a wheelchair may be very unlike another person's; one may be capable of

[30] *Stigma,* p. 49.

navigating obstacles that the other is not or simply more prepared to take on risks to himself or to his equipment. Even a well-informed stranger cannot know in advance what accommodations would be necessary in order for the social interaction to proceed smoothly.

Goffman suggests that people with disabilities very often employ coping mechanisms that are designed to put socially uncomfortable others at their ease. This may include accepting well-meant offers of help, even when the help is not only unnecessary, but positively burdensome. Rejecting the help carries social costs, putting the would-be benefactor on the defensive and further adding to the social friction. Indeed, according to Goffman, "good adjustment" to a disability seems to require that a disabled person "cheerfully and unself-consciously accept himself as the same as others" while still being prepared to "withhold himself from those situations in which normals would find it difficult to give lip service to their similar adjustment of him."[31]

Although Goffman endeavors to maintain the neutral language of the social scientist, his portrayal of this demand on persons with disabilities that they be "well-adjusted" is strikingly poignant:

> One should ask what the following of it by the stigmatized means to normal. It means that the unfairness and pain of having to carry a stigma will never be presented to them; it means that normal will not have to admit to themselves how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is; and it means that normal can remain relatively uncontaminated by intimate contact with the stigmatized, relatively unthreatened in their identity beliefs.[32]

The suggestion here is that the expectation that a person with a disability will do his or her best to conform to ordinary social conventions is deeply unfair in its allocations of the burdens. Not only is it obviously a great deal of work for the person with the disability, but Goffman suggests that the real beneficiary is the "normal"—the person whose expectations are driving the

[31] *Stigma,* p. 121. Goffman's language of 'normals' is of course anachronistic.
[32] *Stigma,* p. 121.

interaction. The more a person with a disability can adhere to existing social conventions, the easier it is for people without disabilities to cope.

What does this mean for the social practice of interpersonal noticing? One implication is that pretending not to notice the disability or its relevance to the encounter may relieve temporary awkwardness, but only by placing a considerable burden on the person with the disability. There is, of course, a cost to the person with the disability insofar as s/he has to take burdensome steps to adhere to the conventions. But there are also costs of a different kind, since this means that it is the person with the disability who is forced to take on responsibility for the other person's comfort. All the burdens of removing the awkwardness fall on her. Pretending not to notice a person's disability may seem as though it is protecting the person with the disability, but it is just as much a way of protecting the pretender, allowing his expectations to remain unchallenged and unaltered. He is able to go on under the illusion that the world will bend to fit his expectations, and moreover that he himself will never be on the other side of the encounter. It enables him to keep his distance from the fact of disability and the people who have disabilities. But this is not the respectful distance of Kantian relationships; it is more like hunkering down on the train with a book, refusing to attend to what is happening around us.

This is not to say that pretending not to notice a person's disability is never the right course of action. Undoubtedly it often is. In casual social encounters with strangers, many disabilities, if not most, are simply not relevant to the interaction. Where the fact of the disability is relevant, appropriate noticing on my part requires anticipating and making adjustments to my own behavior in as understated a way as possible. I have in mind things like remembering to keep facing a person who may rely on lip reading to understand what is being said or adjusting one's path so that a person in a wheelchair has unimpeded access to ramps and aisles. This kind

of noticing shifts some of the social burden of the interaction away from the person with the disability and toward other participants in the encounter. Moreover, it can be done in the background, so to speak, so that the person with the disability is free to participate the encounter without her disability being placed on the table by other people.

Pretending not to notice a disability is, however, not always possible and indeed, not always desirable. Noticing a disability is sometimes simply essential to noticing the person herself. For some people with disabilities, the disability is part of that person's social identity. It is impossible to engage with her without engaging with the disability. The disability may be fundamental to her personality and style of social interaction. In such cases, to ignore the disability is to ignore the person.

In order for social conventions to be effective vehicles for communicating moral aims like love and respect, we must remain conscious of their effects in the actual world. Ideally, the conventions of noticing would function in such a way that they would make everyone comfortable at all times. We would feel noticed just enough, but not too much. We would be accorded civil inattention most of the time and granted face engagement when we seek it. Many people with disabilities, however, rarely receive civil inattention from other people, especially from those unaccustomed to the sight of those particular disabilities. Suppose that I stare at someone with a very noticeable and unusual disability. She catches my eye, and I look away. In my embarrassment at having overstepped the boundaries of appropriate notice by staring, I respond by denying her the face engagement to which she might otherwise be entitled from me. This of course only compounds the problem, and subjects her to inappropriate visual notice twice over—first in receiving too much of it, and then in receiving too little.

In this paper, I have argued that the conventions of interpersonal notice are morally important because they allow us to fulfill the demands of respect and love in a given situation. It is through those conventions that we express recognition of another's moral standing and our willingness to keep a respectful distance from her and her personal concerns. But the conventions also enable us to communicate our appreciation of others as proper objects of love, people whose needs may place demands on us. It is not possible to employ the conventions well in any context without a full understanding of the moral complexity that underlies their proper use in that context. Alas, there is no neat way of summing up what would count as appropriate notice of people with visible disabilities, mostly because there is no neat way of summing up people with visible disabilities. Disability sometimes matters to a social interaction, but sometimes it does not. The best we can do, I suggest, is to keep hold of the underlying moral aims of the conventions and attend closely to their practical effects.[33]

[33] An ancestor of this paper was presented at a panel at the Society for Philosophy and Disability, American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, in March 2014. I am grateful for the helpful comments and insights of Cheshire Calhoun, Adam Cureton, Richard Dean, Tom Hill, Oliver Sensen, Anita Silverman, and David Sussman.