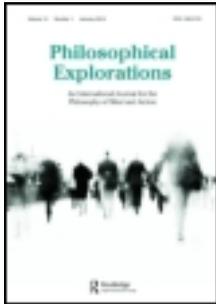


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Sociality and solitude

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“How can I, who am thinking about the entire, centerless universe, be anything so specific as this: this measly creature existing in a tiny morsel of space and time?” This metaphysically self-deprecating question, posed by Thomas Nagel, holds an insight into the nature of personhood and the ordinary ways we value it, in others and in ourselves. I articulate that insight and apply it to the phenomena of friendship, companionship, sexuality, solitude, and love. Although love comes in many forms, I say, it always involves a sense of wonder at a finite creature thinking infinite thoughts.

Keywords: emotions; Nagel, T.; moral psychology; ethics

Instead of asking “Why *be* moral?”, some ask “Why *are* we moral?”, and this question naturally elicits evolutionary explanations of moral motives such as altruism and sympathy, or a natural sense of fairness. Since I am a naturalist with Kantian inclinations – and I do not mean contractualist; I mean hard-core Kantian – I prefer to explain morality in terms of valuing personhood, in oneself and in others. And I do not think that valuing personhood has an evolutionary explanation; I suspect that it is an evolutionary spandrel, a by-product of other adaptive features of human nature.¹

So the question “Why are we moral?” does not lead me to explore the evolutionary past of valuing personhood; it leads me rather to examine how that motive fits into our social and psychological nature as it is today. Since I am a naturalist, I am not satisfied with normative explanations, which say, in effect, that we are moral because we ought to be and we know it. Nor do I have much hope for constitutivist explanations, which say that we are moral because we are persons and it is constitutive of persons to accept moral norms. I want to understand our valuing personhood in terms of the role it plays in human life and human nature, preferably as understood by common sense.

Objective self-awareness

Our response to personhood is expressed by Thomas Nagel, reflecting on personhood in himself. Nagel asks,²

[H]ow can I be merely a particular person? The problem here is not how it can be the case that I am this one rather than that one, but how I can be anything as specific as a particular person in the world – any person. (1983, 212)

How can I be anything so small and concrete and specific?

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I know this sounds like metaphysical megalomania of an unusually shameless kind. Merely being TN isn't good enough for me: I have to think of myself as the world soul in humble disguise. In mitigation I can plead only that the same thought is available to any of you. (Nagel 1983, 225)

To some, Nagel may sound disappointed with his personhood. To my ear, however, he is expressing a sense of wonder, albeit wonder at finding himself to be a wonderfully humble phenomenon.

Why is Nagel amazed at being anything so concrete and specific as a particular person? Did he think he was a universal? There must be something he felt himself to be, in contrast to which his concrete specificity amazes him.

Before dealing directly with these quotations from Nagel, I will have to discuss a feature of personhood that they express, namely, a person's objective self-conception. The self-conception that Nagel expresses is not just the subjective, egocentric conception of the world from the perspective of an unrepresented 'I'; it is the conception of himself as a creature with this very conception of itself. This self-conception is objective in the sense that it represents its subject *as* its subject in the world – a member of the objective order, standing in the relation of subject to this very thought, and in the relation of self to the unrepresented 'I' who is thinking it.³

An objective self-conception is distinctive of persons and, I believe, constitutive of their personhood.⁴ My basis for saying that it is constitutive of personhood is functionalist. If you want to know what it is to be a person, I say, look for ways in which it is characteristic of persons to function, and then look for what those functions have in common. What is common to the characteristic functions of persons, I will argue, is that they require and manifest an objective self-conception. I will not survey an exhaustive list of the functions that are characteristic of persons, but I will cover many functions that only and almost all persons perform: making plans that resolve an open future; participating in conversation and in joint intentions; and enjoying distinctively personal modes of togetherness and apartness – that is, of sociality and solitude.

Many of the functions that I discuss will turn out to be functions for which we value persons. What we are ultimately valuing, I will argue, is the capacity that makes those functions possible, namely, the capacity of persons to think of themselves as inhabitants of the world, thinking this thought.

Plans

I will start with the role of an objective self-conception in plans. Plans are central to our agency, which is in turn central to our personhood. Bratman (1987, 2) puts the point like this:

The central fact is that we are planning agents. We frequently settle in advance on more or less complex plans concerning the future, and then these plans guide our later conduct. So much, anyway, is included in our commonsense understanding of the sort of beings we are. As planning agents, we have two central capacities. We have the capacity to act purposively; and we have the capacity to form and execute plans. The latter capacity clearly requires the former; but it is plausible to suppose that the former could exist without the latter. Indeed, it is natural to see many nonhuman animals as having only the former capacity and to see our possession of both capacities as a central feature of the sort of beings we are.

Like Bratman, I believe that planning is central to the sort of beings we are; I also claim that an objective self-conception is central to planning.

Some philosophers of action believe that plans have as their objects actions without agents, as expressed in the infinitive or gerundive of the verb. The attitude of planning to hang a picture, they believe, has as its object “to hang a picture” or “hanging a picture”. Yet I may plan, not to hang the picture, but rather that the picture be hung, or that we hang it together, and all of these plans seem to share a deep structure despite their differences at the surface. In order to support all of them, this structure must have an argument place for the intended agent or agents, who may or may not be mentioned when the plans are expressed. What gets expressed as the plan that the picture be hung is fundamentally the plan that someone or other hang it; what gets expressed as the plan to hang the picture with you is a plan that you and I hang it together; and so what gets expressed as the plan simply to hang the picture must be a plan that I hang it. In each case, there is some determination, implicit or explicit, as to the agent of the intended act.

The attitude of planning to hang a picture thus includes a conception of myself as someone by whom a picture can be hung, just as it might be hung by someone else, either with me or alone. Indeed, it has to include a conception of myself as hanging the picture because of having hereby planned to hang it, not because I was already going to hang it anyway. I have to plan my own actions from the first-person perspective, but I simultaneously have to conceive of myself as an efficacious inhabitant of the objective world, and I have to conceive of my plan as itself efficacious in prompting me to act (Harman 1976, 440–48; 1986, Chapter 8).

This feature of plans accounts for the openness of the future from the planner’s point-of-view.⁵ “That I hang a picture” is potentially a fact about the future, whereas “to hang a picture” and “hanging a picture” are not. When I plan to hang a picture, I represent what is going to come true as a result of my plan: I am going to hang a picture, because of having hereby planned to. If I planned instead to sell the picture, then I would represent something else as coming true as a result of my plan. I can therefore represent different ways the future will go because of my so representing it, and in most cases, it will go that way. With respect to myself and the picture, then, there is no single way that I must represent the future in order to represent it correctly. From my planning perspective, the future is open: it will go however I think it will.

The Turing test

Our need for an objective self-conception is suggested by the work of computer scientists following in the footsteps of Turing (1950). Turing’s eponymous test is a measure of a computer’s ability to simulate a person. Computer scientists since Turing have discovered that in order for a computer to be recognized as a person, it must present a coherent persona, and so it must have a third-personal representation of the person it is simulating.⁶

There are two ways to explain this discovery. One explanation is that the computer needs a representation of the person to be simulated precisely because, being unlike a person, it needs guidance from a representation of what to simulate. This explanation presupposes that a real person does not need a representation of the person he is, because he already *is* that person. According to the alternative explanation, the reason why the computer needs guidance from a representation of the person to be simulated is that the person himself is guided by a representation of the person who he is. In other words, a computer simulates a person by coming to resemble him precisely in virtue of acting on a representation of him, as he does.

The latter explanation suggests that a person and a computer will pass the Turing Test in the very same way. Turing himself pointed out that his “imitation game” was often used as a

test for humans rather than machines – for example, in a *viva voce* examination “to discover whether some one really understands something or has ‘learnt it parrot fashion’” (446). Turing probably meant that a parrot cannot answer follow-up questions; yet a parrot that could answer follow-up questions would still answer “in parrot fashion” unless it had an objective self-conception. Let the examiner say “Speak up, please”, and the parrot would be stumped. In order to speak up when asked, the parrot would have to conceive of itself as a speaker in whom this request was intended to elicit a recognition like this, of the need to speak louder.⁷

Indeed, an objective self-conception is prerequisite to the simple speech act of telling someone something. Telling someone that *p* requires the intention that he believe *p* as a result of recognizing this very intention. And this intention contains a conception of oneself as the speaker, and of itself as an intention that can be recognized.⁸ Without that objective self-conception, we would be parrot-like communicators, squawking *at* one another rather than conversing *with* one another.

Awareness versus attention

My insistence on the role of an objective self-conception in personhood may seem to suggest that persons are continually thinking about themselves. No such thing is intended. The verb-phrase “to think about” connotes not just awareness but attention, and self-directed attention is no part of the functions that I am describing.

Consider that you sometimes “forget yourself” in an activity, a phenomenon that Daoists call “non-action” and some psychologists call “flow”.⁹ When you forget yourself in an activity, you do not lose your first-personal awareness of performing it; what you lose is your objective awareness of yourself as the agent, an inhabitant of the world who is doing something and is hereby aware of doing it. In short, you lose your objective self-awareness. Since forgetting yourself in this sense is the exception, the rule must be remembering yourself, that is, maintaining your objective self-awareness.

Yet when you “remember yourself” in an activity, you are not “thinking about” yourself, either: your objective self-awareness is merely implicit. On those very rare occasions when I wear a suit, I do not watch myself wearing the suit; I do not think, “Now I’ll wear my suit across the street”. But when I cross the street, I put the idea of crossing the street into action, and it is not the idea of street-crossing in the abstract, or of someone or other’s crossing the street; it is the idea of myself crossing the street, and the self in that idea is wearing a suit. So I tend to square my shoulders a bit, walk a bit slower, pull in my gut.

I sometimes forget about wearing a suit and plop down on the damp grass. What I have forgotten in that case is not anything that I was “thinking about” in most senses of the phrase; it is something of which I was merely, only implicitly aware. So until I forgot myself, my behavior was being guided by a whole lot more than I was thinking about in the sense that requires attention or explicit thought. One of the implicit thoughts by which it was guided is a conception of myself as a person presenting a well-dressed appearance that does not go well with a slouch.

Mutuality

An objective-self conception is essential to many forms of mutuality that are distinctive of persons. Consider joint intentions. When one intends to do something jointly with others, one must conceive of them as likewise intending to do it with oneself. Thinking of the other as so intending requires one to conceive of oneself as an agent with whom the other can

intend to act, and to conceive of one's own intention as an intention that the other can thereby reciprocate. Joint intentions therefore require an objective self-conception.

Joint intentions are far more common than is generally noted by philosophers. They are essential even to the collective activity that consists in avoiding other collective activities. Subway riders jointly intend to defuse bodily proximity by averting their eyes, but only if others intend likewise, since they intend to return unwanted stares, and they feel free to stare at others who are not going to look anyway. Mutual neglect is also in force on a busy street, insofar as everyone intends to leave everyone else alone, provided that they intend likewise. Thus, joint intentions are operative even when people are doing nothing together besides doing nothing else together; and all of these joint intentions require objective self-awareness.

Like all objectively reflexive thought, joint intentions are self-referring. When I intend to do something on the condition of your intending likewise, "intending likewise" means having an intention with the same content as mine *mutatis mutandis*. The content of this intention depends on the content of its stipulation that you intend likewise, which depends in turn on the content of the whole intention. The content of my intention therefore yields a regress of contents depending on contents depending on contents, and so on *ad infinitum*.

The content of such an attitude is not finitely completable. Some regard this incompleteness as a problem, but I do not see why we cannot have attitudes with incompletable contents, so long as they have some content that is finitely complete. (A British publisher used to place this notice on its copyright pages: "This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser". No one was alarmed by the incompleteness of this condition.)¹⁰

An objective self-conception is also required for joint attention. When two people watch the sunset together, rather than merely side-by-side, each sees the sunset as being likewise seen by the other. You see the sunset as being seen also by the other, and as being seen by the other as being hereby seen by you. Your visual experience therefore represents you as seen by the other as having that very experience – an objectively reflexive representation.

Joint *attention* and joint *intention* are often combined. Imagine that you are viewing a painting in the museum while standing next to a stranger who is viewing the same painting. In your peripheral vision, you see him in front of the painting; you presume that he sees you in his peripheral vision as well. But you do not quite see whether he is looking at the painting. (For all you can see, he might be reading the legend next to it.) Or maybe you do not quite see whether he is seeing you look at the painting. (For all you can see, it might be the case for all he can see that you are reading the legend.) In short, you and he may have common knowledge of standing side-by-side in front of the painting, but you have not entered a state of joint attention to it.

Now imagine that you enter a state of joint attention. Each of you not only sees the painting but sees it as being likewise seen by the other, which entails its being seen by the other as being likewise seen by yourself. The representational contents of your visual experiences are now causally dependent on the direction of one another's gaze: those contents will change if the other looks away, since you will no longer see the painting as being jointly seen. Each party's visual experience is thus under the control of both gazes: what each sees is dependent on where both look.¹¹

If you are visiting the museum with a companion, you probably have joint intentions to pay joint attention to the various paintings in turn. That is, each of you intends to join the other in viewing the next painting, but only while the other is like-minded; both intentions

allow for breaking the joint view of the painting if either shows signs of intending to do so; and each intends to move on in that case, so long as the other intends likewise. So the direction of both gazes is determined by both intentions and, in turn, determines both visual experiences. Where each of you looks depends on where both of you intend to look; and where both of you look determines what each of you sees.

An objective self-conception may be essential to the distinctively human form of sexual arousal. Writing in a different context, Nagel (1969, 10) says, “Sexual desire involves . . . not only perceptions of the sexual object, but perceptions of oneself”. He continues:

[Romeo] notices, and moreover senses, Juliet sensing him. . . . Juliet . . . senses that he senses her. This puts Romeo in a position to notice, and be aroused by, her arousal at being sensed by him. He senses that she senses that he senses her. This is still another level of arousal, for he becomes conscious of his sexuality through his awareness of its effect on her and of her awareness that this effect is due to him.

Obviously, Romeo can enter this erotic hall-of-mirrors only if the intentional object of his arousal is a Juliet aroused by a Romeo feeling this very arousal.

Of course, animals feel sexual arousal, and our sexual response has evolved from theirs. The point is that objectively reflexive thought is crucial to what has evolved. The reason why dogs are not ashamed when seen mating is not that they are shameless, like exhibitionists; it is that they are utterly incapable of shame, because they cannot imagine being seen as failing to conceal themselves.¹² The kind of sexual arousal that Nagel describes – the kind that is distinctive of persons – involves the excitement of revealing oneself in a state that one would normally conceal from others, namely, this very state of being sexually excited.

Solitude

Finally, an objective self-conception is necessary for the distinctively human way of being alone, which Hannah Arendt characterized as solitude. “Solitude”, she wrote, “means that though alone, I am together with somebody (myself, that is)” (Arendt 2003, 98). In other words, solitude entails keeping oneself company, by being *there for* oneself. And to be *there for* a person is to intend that one’s availability provide comfort or reassurance by being recognized as so intended.

The capacity for solitude is what Winnicott (1990) had in mind when he wrote that a child learns to be alone by being alone in the presence of another. A child is alone in the presence of another when, instead of jointly attending to a toy or book, they attend to separate activities while remaining jointly aware of one another’s presence. The child then acquires the ability to lie snugly in bed aware of his parents talking softly downstairs aware of him lying upstairs snugly in bed. From there he can make the transition to solitude, because his awareness of his parents’ awareness of him has led him to notice that he is someone there in bed, someone who can keep him company in bed, hence that he can be there for himself, that he can keep himself company.

None of these instances of objective self-awareness involves self-directed attention or explicit thought. One can watch the sunset in solitude without focusing on oneself, but if one were not aware of being by oneself, and of being hereby aware of that fact, one would not be watching in solitude; if one is to watch in company with another, being one of the company must enter one’s awareness, even though the sunset has one’s undivided attention; when working with another on a joint project, one attends to the project, but if it is truly to be a joint project, then one must conceive of oneself as a member of the reciprocally

intending pair; and that goes as well for the pair whose joint project unfolds in bed. Thus, objective self-awareness is central to many settings, both solitary and social, where explicitly thinking about oneself would be out of place.

Valuing objective self-awareness

I have tried to show that an objective self-conception is crucial to a wide variety of functions that are characteristic of persons. The list now includes central elements of rational agency, such as perceiving an open future and planning for it. It also includes distinctively personal forms of apartness (solitude), togetherness (companionship), and interaction (conversation, sex). I now turn to various ways in which we value personhood conceived as the capacity for these distinctive functions. My first example of valuing personhood was Thomas Nagel's amazement at being a particular person. It is now time to face the question, What is so amazing?

What amazes Nagel about being a particular person, recall, is that he is "anything so . . . concrete and specific". This amazement at his own concrete specificity must have a foil in something else about himself with which it contrasts. What is it about himself that makes Nagel's concrete specificity so amazing to him?

Nagel himself contrasts his concrete specificity with the size and grandeur of the universe. He says:

I begin by considering the world as a whole, as if from nowhere, and in those vast spaces TN is just one person among countless others, all equally insignificant. Taking up that impersonal standpoint produces in me a sense of complete detachment from TN. How can I, who am thinking about the entire, centerless universe, be anything so specific as this: this measly creature existing in a tiny morsel of space and time, with a definite and by no means universal mental and physical organization? How can I be anything so small and concrete and specific? (Nagel 1983, 225)

There are two contrasts at work in this passage. The first is a contrast in size, between the vastness of the universe and the "tiny morsel of space and time" that Nagel occupies. To my mind, however, the crucial contrast is the second, which is between the centerlessness of the universe and Nagel's "definite and by no means universal . . . organization". Centerlessness is a feature of the infinite – there is no median integer – whereas Nagel is finite, or as he puts it, "definite and by no means universal". What amazes Nagel is that this by-no-means-universal creature can be thinking about the centerlessly infinite universe, can encompass the universe *in thought*. The wonder, in other words, is that a concrete and specific individual can think abstractly about everything there is. And the "shameless megalomania" to which Nagel nearly confesses would be based on the assumption that only "the world soul" could contain such an idea.

There is indeed something remarkable about the capacity of a concrete individual to quantify abstractly over everything; or, reversing the direction, about the disproportion between the universality of the quantifier and the particularity of the creature who thinks it. That disproportion is what amazes Nagel, I believe, as he shifts attention from the universe to his measly self.

Nagel could have felt magnified rather than diminished by the disproportion. And he could have been impressed by an even more remarkable disproportion, between his own finitude and his infinitely regressive thoughts, which themselves partake of infinitude, albeit abstractly, in the determination of their content. That is, he could have been impressed

by his capacity to have thoughts whose content implicitly involves the incompletable many iterations of self-reference.

A person has what you might call psychic depth.¹³ The description of someone's eyes as deep pools is trite but not for all that untrue. What we see when we look into someone's eyes is his self-awareness, because we see him seeing us likewise, hence seeing us seeing him, *ad infinitum* – a regress in which he goes on endlessly seeing himself being seen. If we are paying proper attention, we marvel at the bottomless depth of the self-awareness that is embodied in this particular, concrete human being. If only Nagel had concentrated on his capacity for such self-awareness rather than the measly creature who has it, he would have been impressed by himself for being a person.

Love

We do not have a word for this sense of wonder at personhood, but we do have a word for an emotion of which it is often a part. It is often a part of love.¹⁴

When we philosophers talk about love, we are almost always talking about a twine of attitudes and dispositions, strands of which may include attraction, affection, attachment – plus identification, sympathy, benevolence – also loyalty, gratitude, pity – not to mention nostalgia and pride. The reason why we are talking about many of these things at once is that we are usually talking about our feelings for people whom we would describe as loved ones: friends, family, lovers. In the context of these relationships, I would say, love is more of a syndrome than a single emotion.

So I do not see much point in talking about what love *is*. Still, I think that there is one strand of emotion that almost always runs through love and for which we have no other term: it is the emotion that I have described as amazement at the personhood of another.

Asya Passinsky has independently arrived at a similar view, based on Kant's theory of the sublime. She believes that love is an experience of the beloved as sublime – specifically, as mathematically sublime – in the sense defined by Kant.

Kant (1952, 90) says that our sense of the sublime involves “a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with the super-added thought of its totality”. We experience the sublime when a magnitude outruns the capacity of our imagination but can be encompassed by our reason, as when we find that we cannot count to infinity but can grasp it intellectually. We feel displeasure when the imagination despairs of reaching the infinite, and pleasure when reason triumphs in grasping it. The tension between pleasure and displeasure generates our sense of the sublime.

In my view, the limitlessness of the beloved is to be found in his capacity for objectively reflexive thoughts, with their implicit regress of self-reference. The totality of this unimaginable regress is represented, not just in our intellectual grasp of the regress itself, but in our grasp of its being implicit in thoughts entertained by a concrete, specific individual. When we register the tension between this limitlessness and its totality, we have an experience of the sublime, and that experience amounts to a component of love.

(It stands to reason that the experience I am describing should be the experience of the sublime, given that it is the inverse of Nagel's sense of being a measly little creature, which might be described as the experience of the ridiculous.)¹⁵

The mere knowledge of someone's personhood is not an emotional matter: before one can get emotional about someone's personhood, one has to notice and pay attention to it. Even when Nagel is not attending to the fact that he is TN, he is certainly aware of it. He is not amazed, however, until he confronts his personhood face-to-face. He marvels

at being a particular person only when he attends to the contrast between his finite particularity and his infinitely recursive thoughts.

Similarly with our appreciation of one another's personhood. We can look one another in the eye without consciously registering that we are seeing and being seen *like this*, and that our visual experience is therefore incompletely recursive in content – more colloquially, that both of us are looking into bottomless pools.

Sometimes, though, mutual awareness is not necessary to seeing someone as self-aware. Some people just strike us as *there* in their faces, as if the lights are on and there is somebody home. We almost never speak to them, much less become acquaintances, even less friends. If against all odds we become lovers, however, we will say that it was love at first sight, and we will not be guilty of retrospective projection. At first sight we really did feel an important part of what we will feel then.

People scoff at the idea of love at first sight. They are right to scoff if the idea is that a single look can provoke the entire syndrome; they are wrong if they think that it cannot provoke an important component of the syndrome – an important strand even if not the whole ball of twine.

Friendship

The wonder of love is not our only evaluative response to the personhood of others. We also value personhood in appreciating the personhood of our friends.

Aristotle's (2000, 143) theory of friendship includes a role for companionship and joint intention. He starts out by describing friendship as "two going together", and he later contrasts the case of people living together with "the case of cattle, grazing in the same place" (Aristotle 2000, 179). When cattle merely graze in the same place, they are not grazing together, because they are not jointly aware of doing so. They are like children engaged in what we call parallel play.

Visiting a museum is a human sort of grazing, but visiting with a companion is not just a case of grazing in the same place, or parallel play; it is a case of two going together. The point of visiting the museum with a companion is to join in viewing the paintings out of a joint intention so to view them, thereby having a shared activity and a shared experience. Although you naturally prefer some friends over others as partners in museum-going, and you prefer friends over strangers, grazing the galleries with a companionable stranger may be preferable to going alone. The mere personhood of another person, which makes him eligible for going together, is of value even in the absence of any personal relationship. And conversely, one of many values in personal relationships is that they provide ready access to companionship of the kind that you would value even in a companionable stranger.

Solitude

Another way of valuing personhood is to take pleasure in solitude. Pleasure taken in one's own company does not come from finding oneself entertaining. Entertaining oneself, keeping oneself occupied, are distractions from solitude. The pleasure of solitude comes from simply contemplating one's capacity for being company to someone – in this case, to oneself. It thus comes from appreciating one's own personhood.

Sometimes one's own company is not enough, and then the awareness of having only oneself for company turns from solitude into loneliness. One longs for more company, which would be an enlargement of one's own. What one longs for, in other words, is to

enlarge one's solitary self-awareness to include the shared self-awareness involved in joint attention, joint intention, and other forms of mutuality. One thereby appreciates the value of what one is missing, the personhood of others, and also the unrealized potential in oneself, which consists in one's own personhood.

Sometimes one does not want any company, including one's own. One prefers to forget oneself in "flow". But preferring to leave off exercising personhood on occasion is compatible with valuing it. A valuable thing does not demand to be valued all the time.

So there are many ways in which humans value personhood: love and sexual arousal; pleasure in solitude, in companionship, and in friendship; loneliness. These ways of valuing personhood are mutually reinforcing, both dispositionally and occurrently. The capacity to savor solitude enhances one's capacities for companionship, friendship, and love; loving someone in particular enhances friendship and companionship with him, and of course sex as well.

I think that a similar function is served by the much-derided phenomenon of love at first sight. The amazement that can turn out to have been the beginning of love usually leads nowhere but still alerts one to the value at which full-blown love would stand in wonder. Feeling incipient love for a perfect stranger thus enlivens one's capacity for appreciating personhood in other ways. It may be followed by reflective solitude or depressing loneliness or the thought of a real-life lover, all of which are further ways of valuing personhood.

Valuing personhood

I have tried to show that all of these evaluative responses have one and the same object, namely, the capacity for objectively reflexive thought, which makes persons the amazing creatures we are. I hope you will agree that the responses I have catalogued are rooted in human nature. Enjoying both solitude and companionship; suffering from loneliness; being wowed by a beloved; feeling the buzz of mutual arousal – these responses are not peculiar to any person, place, or time.

In calling these responses natural, I do not mean to imply that they are naturally selected. I do not think that valuing personhood is necessarily adaptive; but then, I do not think that evolutionary theory is the place to look for what is moral in human nature. All I claim is that valuing personhood is a part of human nature, witness the way it figures in the universally human ways of being together and being alone. It appears to come along with the cognitive capacity for objectively reflexive thought, which may itself have been adaptive for other reasons.

Because these evaluative responses are rooted in human nature, they constrain the ways of life on which human beings are likely to converge – provided, of course, that they are free to converge spontaneously, rather than herded together by powerful individuals or interest groups. Left to coordinate on their own, members a human community will favor ways of life that are hospitable to valuing persons as humans naturally do – hospitable, that is, to the uninhibited enjoyment of solitude, companionship, friendship, love, and sex. That is why we tend to be moral.

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Notes

1. I suspect the same of many phenomena in moral psychology (Velleman 2007).
2. See also Nagel 1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1984, Chapter IV. Nagel (1984) is perhaps the most widely read of these works, but its chapter on the “objective self” is, in my view, considerably watered down. I recommend Nagel (1983) instead.
3. Exactly how there can be such a self-conception is a vexed question, which, fortunately, need not be answered here. Especially fortunate is that forms of reflexive thought have been extensively explored by John Perry (see Perry 1990, 1998; see also Perry 1979). Note that whereas Perry focuses on the reflexive thought by which a person thinks of himself, I focus on that by which a person also thinks of this very reflexive thought. The phenomena of interest to me involve thoughts that are self-referring in the sense that they refer not only to their subjects but also to themselves.
4. I think it is possible that some of the higher apes have an objective self-concept. If they do, then they are persons, in my view. This consequence of my view does not strike me as a counterexample, since I think that some of the higher apes just might be persons.
5. Of course, plans do not make the future metaphysically open; they make it only epistemically open. I discuss this phenomenon in Velleman (1989).
6. I explore this research in Velleman (2008c).
7. Of course, an un-pitticine parrot would also need a second-person conception of his examiners. In addition to conceiving of *me* as “this creature”, he would have to conceive of *those creatures* as “you”. Whether the latter conception is possible without the former is another vexed question that, fortunately, need not be answered here.
8. This is Grice’s (1989) analysis of assertion. Grice’s analysis does not work as an analysis of assertion, since assertion does not necessarily involve the intention to be believed. Telling does involve that intention, however, and so it fits Grice’s analysis.
9. I discuss this phenomenon, and its significance for the philosophy of action, in Velleman (2008b).
10. For discussion of this problem, including references, see the appendix of my work (1997).
11. This change need not involve the sensory content of your visual experience – the arrangement of colors and shapes in one’s visual field. What changes is the representational content of the experience. This change in representational content may be experienced as a Gestalt-switch, as the relations between the represented items is perceived to change.
12. I discuss the emotion of shame in Velleman (2001).
13. Personhood involves many dimensions of psychic depth, of course. Taylor (1997, 114 ff.) explains “our ordinary use of the metaphor of depth applied to people” in terms of how a person evaluates his own motives. In this sense, only some people are deep. But being either deep or shallow in this sense requires objective self-awareness, which makes all persons deep in my sense.
14. The claim that love involves valuing personhood appears to be incompatible with the partiality of love. I address this problem among others in Velleman (1999, 2008a).
15. In his work (1971, 720) Nagel writes: “[H]umans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it sub specie aeternitatis – and the view is at once sobering and comical”.

Notes on contributor

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