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CHAPTER

5 Persons as Things

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Abstract

Persons are things. We are biological creatures, things of flesh and blood, whose behavior is governed by the same principles that govern the behavior of any other social mammals, plus or minus the complications that come from the recursive possibilities of access to natural language. That much is fact. But to be treated as a thing amounts to a deep insult. To be treated as a thing is to be minimized, rather than engaged with, predicted and controlled rather than reasoned with, written off as the product of our environment rather than appreciated for our unique contributions. Chapter 5 explores what it means to be treated as a thing in a morally problematic way, and argues that the answer must be tempered by the fact that persons are also a kind of thing.

Keywords: [Rae Langton](#), [Kant](#), [Peter Strawson](#), [objectification](#), [metaphilosophy](#), [interpretation](#), [charity](#)

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Persons are things. We are biological creatures, things of flesh and blood, whose behavior is governed by the same principles that govern the behavior of any other social mammals, plus or minus the complications that come from the recursive possibilities of access to natural language. That much is fact.¹ But to be treated as a thing amounts to a deep insult. To be treated as a thing is to be minimized, rather than engaged with, predicted and controlled rather than reasoned with, written off as the product of our environment rather than appreciated for our unique contributions. We are deeply familiar with all manner of concrete ways of being treated as things, ranging from the straightforward sexual objectification of the entertainment press commenting on the appearance of actresses and female musicians, to the casual diminishment of the mansplainer who reduces his audience to an opportunity for display, to the well-meaning friend whose reaction to your latest accomplishment is that “see? I told you that you do better work when you’ve had caffeine.” There may be no single form to being treated like a thing, but we know it when we see it, and unless we manage ourselves well, we resent it. We expect—no, we demand—better from those around us. We expect to be treated as *persons*.

Philosophers, more than anyone else, have waxed eloquent in their attempts to articulate the principle that we deserve to be treated as persons, and not merely as things. In Kant’s hands it is the principle that we must recognize one another as self-legislating co-rulers of a kingdom of ends, noumena who transcend the phenomenal appearance of being subject to predictive laws and act according to our *conception* of laws. Perhaps philosophers have taken this thought to heart most forcefully because it articulates what we seek for our own work—that others engage with our arguments, rather than merely taking them as evidence for what sorts

p. 96 of ideas are in vogue at west coast departments, or as a way to trace out the ↪ various strands of influence of dissertation advisors on their students' second book projects.

One of the central philosophical themes that we trace to Socrates is the conviction that ideas can and should be engaged with for ideas' sake and without regard for their progeny, and writing and publishing philosophy is a way of aspiring to this ideal—to be engaged with as a rational being, in the domain of reasons and justifications, rather than merely as a psychological being, subject to prediction or explanation for what we say. So philosophers may tend to light on this observation about what we value from each other in ordinary life, in part because philosophers themselves value this so much in their own work.

I believe that there is something deeply right and central about the idea that we deserve to be treated as persons and not merely as things. Indeed, I think that there is much more that is right about it than my title would suggest. But the thought that motivates this chapter is that this idea is often taken too far. Part of what I want to suggest is that not only is treating someone as a person *compatible* with treating them as a thing, but in fact, in many cases treating someone as the thing that they are is actually *required* in order to successfully engage with them as the person who they are. Both in philosophy and in life, I will be arguing, the fact that persons in fact *are* things places an important constraint on what it takes in order to most successfully relate to them as persons, and the mode of relating that is suggested by the strongest flights of Kantian fancy actually constitutes a particular kind of vice—a moral vice in our relations to others in ordinary life, and a philosophical vice in our relations to others through their philosophical work.

If this much is right, moreover, then that leaves us with a burning question, to which I turn in the remainder of the paper. It is: Which are which? That is, what makes for the difference between the kinds of ways of recognizing and taking account for how persons are in fact things take us outside of the realm of persons, and the kinds that allow us to more successfully relate to one another as persons? My answer will be necessarily incomplete, but will attempt to explain a striking asymmetry.

1. Diminishing Returns

p. 97 Wednesday afternoon my wife, Maria, comes home from work, smiles and gives me a kiss, and compliments me on how the jasmine vine I've been cultivating is coming along. Suppose that I responded by wondering whether ↪ she has found a coin in a vending machine return that afternoon. I take it that that would be a signal of a deep flaw in our relationship. It diminishes Maria for me to view her favorable opinion of my jasmine vine, which, after all, is still coming along only slowly, as the product of her environment, rather than as a sincere judgment about horticulture to be engaged with on its own terms—a compliment to be accepted with gratitude or demurred from, disagreed with or enthusiastically concurred with.

The facts that Maria is a human being, that human beings are, as a matter of documented social science, more likely to compliment one another when in better moods, and that the surprise of finding a coin in a vending machine is a common way in which moods can perk up, do nothing to change our sense not only that there is something wrong with me, if this is how I relate to Maria, but that there is something suspicious about my even keeping this hypothesis in reserve, simply as part of my interpretive repertoire. Even to entertain this hypothesis, I contend, is to diminish Maria in some important way.

As in life, so also in philosophy. Victor publishes his first paper in *Ethics*, a detailed attempt to articulate the way in which affirmative action policies wrong all successful members of minority groups by casting doubt on the merits of their accomplishments. Spencer reads Victor's abstract and infers that Victor, who he knows to be a successful black philosopher, must be insecure about his own accomplishments. Like my interpretation of Maria, Spencer's interpretation of Victor diminishes him—it takes the contributions of his paper outside the realm of rational engagement with his arguments and into the realm of psychological analysis and evidence about personal experience.

The fact that Victor is a human being, and human beings are, we know, more likely to write about topics in which they have a particular interest, and that experience shows us that those who have experienced life belonging to historically disadvantaged racial groups are often more likely to have interest in the experiences of historically disadvantaged racial groups, do nothing to change, again, our sense that there is something wrong about Spencer's engaging with Victor's contribution in this way.

We can say more about both Victor and Maria, about *what* is missing if Spencer and I interpret them in these ways. Gratitude, Strawson told us, is one of the participant attitudes—an attitude that helps to constitute our relationships with one another.² Though one may be grateful *for* all kinds of things, it doesn't make sense to be grateful *to* a rock or a machine. It only makes sense to be grateful to a person with genuine agency. Or perhaps less contentiously, it only makes sense to be grateful to someone within the participant stance—as part of a collection of attitudes that together constitute taking them to be a *someone*, and not just a *something*. If that is right, then it gives us the tools for an explanation of why attributing Maria's compliment to her finding a coin in a vending machine tends to crowd out being grateful to her for the compliment. To treat her compliment as something that is subject to non-rational prediction and explanation by background facts such as having found a coin in a vending machine is to treat her as a thing, rather than as a person. It diminishes her, treating her as a *something*, rather than as a *someone*. But that takes her outside of the participant stance, which in turn makes her compliment ineligible for gratitude.

Similarly, we might say, *rational persuasion* is, if not an attitude exactly, nevertheless a move within the participant stance. Though we may change our minds *in response to* all kinds of events, we can only be persuaded by someone within the participant stance—the collection of attitudes that together constitute taking them to be a *someone*, and not simply a *something*. The contrast between changing one's mind in a way that is stimulated by the sounds coming out of someone else's mouth and being rationally persuaded by them is important; indeed, it is precisely this contrast that diminishes us when our interlocutor changes his mind only once he puts our point in his own words (something I'm afraid I do quite often).³ If this is right, it gives us an explanation of why attributing Victor's thesis to his experience as a black American in the academy tends to crowd out being rationally persuaded by his arguments—which it does (though it is consistent with taking his experiences as evidence). Spencer's attitude toward Victor takes him out of the participant stance, treating him as an object of prediction rather than engagement, and this is what makes his arguments ineligible to be exercises of rational persuasion.

I haven't yet argued for any of the claims in the last two paragraphs. But they are a package of attractive claims that seem to hang together, in cases like these. The idea that gratitude is a participant attitude helps to explain the intuitive sense that my response to Maria's compliment diminishes her, in some important sense, and in particular, treats her in a way that is paradigmatically morally objectionable within the context of an intimate interpersonal relationship, but whose moral objectionability extends in some attenuated way even to the context of interactions between strangers. Only a dick, as my undergraduate students might say, thinks about their wife in that way, and the regard that we expect within such relationships is worth aspiring to even among strangers. And similar points go for Spencer's treatment of Victor. So much, I believe, Kant gets right, when he advises us to treat one another as legislators-in-themselves.

It is this very insight by which Kant himself fails so dramatically in his correspondence with Maria von Herbert, as documented and explored so persuasively by Rae Langton in her wonderfully rich essay, "Duty and Desolation" (1992). According to Langton, when I come to accept a causal explanation of my neighbor's behavior,

I stop thinking of him as an agent, whose reasons, mysterious as they might be, I can in principle come to understand. My neighbour becomes a problem to be managed, an obstacle to be avoided, not a person to be argued with. He becomes just one more of the hazards of Elwood, along with the threat of the flooding canal. I have switched from the participant standpoint to what Strawson calls the *objective*. This is the attitude we have to things, items in the natural order, whose behaviour is explicable under causal laws, and manipulated if you know enough about them. To adopt it is to see a person as, perhaps, 'an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; [someone] to be managed or handled or cured or trained.'

[...] Strawson says that although the two attitudes are deeply opposed to one another, they don't exclude each other. We *can* step back, and observe people as we observe the planets. We can observe a friend's rising anger as if it were the rising of the canal waters—something to be feared and avoided, not to be understood and respected. We can cast an objective eye on our students, our friends, our lovers, and no doubt we often do, when the interactive stance proves too exhausting. Kant would say that when we do this, we fail to treat people as human, as agents in the kingdom of ends, as ends in themselves.

p. 100 And Langton goes on, drawing on both Strawson (1962) and Korsgaard (1992), to document in compelling detail the ways in which Kant himself ↪ takes the objective stance toward his correspondent, Maria von Herbert, describing her to another as “an ecstatical little lady” suffering from a “curious mental derangement,” which opens him up to using her as a mere means, passing her intimate correspondence on to another stranger without her consent.

It is important not to gloss over the fact that both Langton and Strawson allow for, though they don’t emphasize, a kind of *compatibility* between the objective and participant stances. For Langton, you can go back and forth between treating someone with the objective and participant stances—perhaps when “exhausted.” And for Strawson, though they are “deeply opposed,” they don’t “exclude one another.” Indeed, I think that for Strawson this point is quite important. It is possible that these remarks are consistent with the point for which I want to argue in this chapter, but if so, this is I think too little emphasized, and correspondingly too often overlooked. When Langton, Strawson, and others identify the objective stance with prediction, subsumption under causal laws, and management, and then go on to suggest that the objective stance is in some way in tension with the participant stance, they are certainly at least suggesting a *diagnosis* of what would make it so diminishing, were I to respond to Maria’s compliment by interpreting it in causal terms.

On this account, interpreting another’s behavior under causal laws *precludes* engagement with them under the participant stance, at least in this instance. *If and when* you interpret someone’s behavior in non-rational causal terms, this explanation goes, you take the objective stance toward them, and *if and when* you take the objective stance toward someone, you thereby preclude the participant stance.⁴ Call this two-pronged diagnosis of these first two cases the *Kantian Diagnosis*. Importantly, I do not claim that anyone—even Langton, Korsgaard, Strawson, or Kant—quite accepts this diagnosis. But there is something in the neighborhood of the Kantian Diagnosis that is deep and true, I believe—something that accounts for why it is so perennially tempting. And I ultimately want to suggest something very different from the Kantian Diagnosis: that because persons are in ↪ fact a kind of thing, it should not be surprising if the participant stance—the perspective *par excellence* from which we engage with one another as persons—does *not* preclude prediction, interpretation under a causal lens, or even, perhaps, at least some kinds of management.

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2. Harder Cases

The next week Maria comes home and snaps at me that my Jasmine vines are coming along too slowly. This time it occurs to me that she might have had a bad afternoon at work. After all, I know that she sometimes does have bad afternoons at work—her job as a cancer surgeon can be stressful, and sometimes she has to tell women with small children that they have advanced stage breast cancer. And frustrating encounters with colleagues are not completely unheard of. It would be no wonder if from time to time she took these work frustrations out on me; on the contrary, we know from the study of human behavior more generally that it is harder to be cordial when in a bad mood, and that other events can influence one’s mood. Indeed, this isn’t just my observation—in the past she has sometimes even apologized to me after the fact for taking work frustrations out on me.

Of course, if every time Maria complained to me about something, I were to immediately speculate about her mood, that would be a sign of something wrong with our relationship. Likewise, there may be something problematic if it is my *first* interpretive hypothesis. But at some point—for example, if the vines about which she is complaining are the same ones she complimented last week, or if she won’t let it go even after I agree that we should have let the bougainvillea grow back instead, or if she easily transfers her complaints to other topics rather than engaging with me about the growth of the jasmine—it is not, at the very least, a *flaw* in our relationship, if I resort to the causal mode of interpretation of her behavior.

Once more, philosophy is a microcosm for life in general. Fred publishes a thirty-page paper with a twelve-page digression developing a complicated set of new terminology that he uses in order to state his paper’s main thesis more precisely. But when Allison reads the paper, she concludes that the whole point of this section is that in order not to be subject to straightforward counterexamples, Fred’s thesis needs to appeal to the analytic/synthetic distinction, but as a moral philosopher trained at Harvard in the 1960s, Fred’s internal Quine makes him too uncomfortable using those words, so what he has really done is to try to reinvent the analytic/synthetic ↪ distinction in twelve pages while denying that that is what he is doing. Allison concludes that we should ignore this part of Fred’s paper, and so when she later references the main idea in Fred’s paper, she describes it in terms of analyticity even though she knows that Fred himself would disavow that description.

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Obviously if Allison treats it as a general rule that moral philosophers, or philosophers who studied at Harvard in the 1960s, are not to be interpreted as having interesting things to say about the analytic/synthetic distinction, then something has gone wrong. But that is not what Allison does. She explores the possible interpretive hypotheses about what makes the subtopic of these twelve complicated pages, initially reserves judgment about whether the right explanation rationalizes or merely predicts, and on the balance of the evidence, comes to the conclusion that the right explanation for these pages is Fred's internal Quine. But she does not diminish Fred, or relegate him to the realm of things. One can imagine that even Fred, once it is pointed out to him or perhaps with a few years' distance, comes to accept Allison's hypothesis about what those pages were doing, and likewise screens them out when conceiving of the contribution of his own paper.

Now, if the Kantian Diagnosis's diagnosis of our earlier cases is on the right track, then interpreting someone's behavior according to causal laws is sufficient for relating to them, at least in this instance, through what Strawson calls the "objective stance," and relating through the objective stance precludes, at least in this instance, relating to them by way of the participant stance. But in these new cases, Allison and I both do interpret Fred and Maria through a causal lens. I interpret Maria's behavior, ultimately, as better explained by an underlying bad mood than as a conversational move that requires a response. And Allison interprets a major portion of Fred's paper which he obviously thinks is important to hang-ups about Quine rolling over in his grave, rather than as motivated by particular philosophical concerns that need to be addressed within the confines of his paper. So if the Kantian Diagnosis is right, then my reaction to Maria's complaint and Allison's diagnosis of Fred should be diminishing in the same way as my hypothetical reaction to Maria's compliment and Spencer's diagnosis of Victor.

p. 103 But there is nothing wrong, I say, about at least some cases of interpreting someone's behavior through a causal, rather than rational, lens—even when alternative, rationalizing, interpretations are possible. Not only are such interpretations not wrong, moreover, *they do not require leaving the participant stance*. These cases are counterexamples, I claim, to the Kantian ↯ Diagnosis. When I resort to the interpretive hypothesis that Maria had a bad day at work, I do not relinquish my interactions with her, for the time being, to the realm of prediction and control, and I certainly do not do so when I merely hold this hypothesis in reserve, as part of my interpretive repertoire. On the contrary, interpreting her complaint in this way is fully compatible with feeling gratitude to her for coming home from work early, or anger at her for forgetting my birthday, or both at the same time. Similarly, when Allison characterizes Fred's thesis in terms of the analytic/synthetic distinction in order to credit him with an important insight that she means to draw on in her own work, she does not remove him from the participant stance or debar herself, even for a moment, from treating him as a serious interlocutor in the space of ideas. On the contrary, setting aside the alternative terminology and complications in the twelve-page digression are what allow her to engage more fruitfully with Fred's real main contribution in his paper.

Moreover, although I have used an interpersonal relationships example to illustrate the simultaneity of the participant stance and causal interpretation, and a philosophical example to illustrate the interconnectedness between the causal interpretation and identification of the agent's contribution, the reverse kinds of examples are also easy to come by. When a six-year-old misgenders their sibling's pronouns, it may be a provocation, but when an octogenarian begins to systematically misgender following a stroke, we are right to screen that out into the causal background, in order to latch onto what they really meant to say. These aren't two attitudes that we take side-by-side, but rather, setting aside the pronoun genders as caused by the stroke is what allows us to see through them. And I can simultaneously marvel at a philosopher's ingenuity in resolving the semantic paradoxes within classical logic while also recognizing that that is a paradigmatically Oxford thing to want so strongly to do.

In all of these cases, I believe, it is either a poor or an impossible description of what is going on, to describe it as alternating between the participant and objective stances. The relationship between causal interpretation and the participant stance is too intimate to separate them in this way. Rational engagement cannot preclude recognition of how someone is situated in the space of causes, because we all know, as part of the background, that our actions are physically constituted by movements of our bodies, which are very much subject to causal laws. Since it should be common ground that persons are a special case of things, it should be no surprise that engaging with someone as a person cannot preclude the recognition that they are also a thing.

p. 104 But then what are we to make of the way in which such causal interpretation does seem to preclude participant attitudes toward the very features that are so interpreted? That is, why should my interpreting Maria's complaint as caused by her bad mood or her rough work day preclude my resenting it, if it doesn't push me out of the participant stance toward her? The only answer to this that I see, is that even if the participant stance is itself all or nothing, the participant attitudes themselves don't come only as a package. It must

be possible to exclude some aspects of someone's behavior from the domain toward which one is open to participant attitudes, without excluding others. In some sense this should not be surprising; if *excusing* someone is, following Strawson, excepting that behavior from the domain of participant attitudes, we can surely excuse someone for some behaviors while simultaneously not excusing them for others—even for others performed at the very same time. Indeed, the case of Maria's complaint about my gardening may fit exactly this mold.

But I think the correct point here is really much more general and not concerned merely with excuses at all. When Allison interprets Fred's paper, she is not *excusing* him for including a twelve-page digression from the paper's main topic at all—indeed, she may actively *resent* him for not being better at monitoring to see that this is the sort of thing best delegated to the philosophers of language. When she interprets the reason this section appears in the paper in causal terms, she doesn't excuse it, but rather simply sets it aside as neither here nor there for purposes of coming to grips with what Fred is actually contributing in his paper. She relegates it to the causal background in the very same way that we adjust visual perception to different lighting conditions. It is there, but it is something to be seen *through*, rather than visually inspected, and once you have properly incorporated it into the background—once your eyes have adjusted to the new conditions—it is effectively invisible, and you see objects as the same colors as before you took off your sunglasses.

3. Going Deeper

p. 105 So far I've been trying to draw our attention to a way in which, despite its manifest attractions as an explanation of a wide variety of wrongs, the Kantian Diagnosis is overly strong. Causal interpretation, I have been arguing, is not incompatible or even in the slightest tension with the participant stance, though causal interpretation of particular behaviors *is* in tension with holding participant attitudes toward those very behaviors. There is nothing wrong with deploying such causal interpretation even with our dearest loved ones and closest interlocutors, and even if we can also step aside from such relationships and take the completely objective stance on our loved ones, as Strawson and Langton claim, we certainly do not need to do so in order to appreciate the very specific ways in which some of their behaviors are very much part of the causal order.

But the path that we have taken toward reaching these conclusions leads me to think that we have also discovered something much stronger: that deploying causal interpretation as an interpretive tool is actually one of the key elements of successful interpersonal engagement. In order to *most* successfully engage with another specifically as a person—or put differently, in order to fully occupy the participant stance toward them—you *must* have the tool of causal interpretation at your disposal.

Return, again, to the case of Allison and Fred. It is possible, a priori, that a twelve-page digression in the middle of a paper by a moral philosopher about the characterological implications of exploitative marketing practices (as let us suppose Fred's thesis concerns) is the best place to look for special insight into the nature of the analytic/synthetic distinction, but it is unlikely. Fred didn't write his paper in order to try to make progress on or replace the analytic/synthetic distinction; he wrote it to make a contribution to our understanding of exploitative marketing practices. So it is by seeing *through* the complications introduced by Fred's complicated and idiosyncratic terminology that Allison is able to see through to the real contributions of his paper and properly engage with him as a colleague in the space of ideas. And it is only because she is willing to set some of his words aside as part of the causal background, rather than part of his contribution, that she is in a position to do so.

Suppose, in contrast, that Allison had set herself the constraint that in order to engage with Fred's paper, she must not set any part of his contribution aside as merely caused, rather than rationalized. In that case, she would be treating it as an interpretive constraint that Fred's alternative terminology must be about something other than the analytic/synthetic distinction. And that, in turn, would prevent her from accepting the best *rationalizing* account of why Fred's thesis is qualified using this terminology. It would force her, in other words, to misunderstand Fred's reasons. It is an unpromising start, in trying to engage with someone in the space of reasons, rather than the space of causes, if you start by playing by rules that prevent you from even recognizing what the other person's reasons even are.

p. 106 Indeed, over-rationalizing the contributions of others in this way is a common philosophical vice, and particularly common among graduate students and others just entering the field. More than one PhD student I have worked with has struggled over what Michael

Smith meant, in *The Moral Problem* (1994), by the claim that you have a reason to do something just in case your fully rational self would advise you to do it. The most salient interpretive problem arises from the fact that you can have reasons both for and against the same action—indeed, there are almost always reasons on both sides of every possible choice. But it seems unlikely that your fully rational self will always offer you conflicting advice. I once caught a student who had become so paralyzed by the thought that Smith’s view couldn’t be subject to such a simple counterexample that he had convinced himself that he had no idea what was going on in the book at all, and had become intellectually paralyzed for over a week. The answer, I think, is that when he wrote that book, Smith just was not clearly thinking about the difference between ‘a reason’ and ‘most reason.’ But this isn’t a rationalizing explanation—it is just the causal background against which rationalizing explanations are possible.

Cases like this one are, I think, the rule, rather than the exception. If you have done philosophy for more than a few years and cannot identify dozens of places in which your earlier thinking was shaped by who you were talking to, which referees happened to be assigned to your paper submissions, or simple failures of imagination, then you are self-deceived. Moreover, you are failing to take advantage of the full resources available to you in order to remain open to the possibility of changing your mind—it is far easier to change your mind if you can identify *non*-rational contributing factors to the process that led to your earlier conclusion. We should all be open to recognizing non-rational influences on our own past thinking. And if we can do it to ourselves, we can have no principled right to complain, just because someone else does it to us—though we may still disagree about whether this interpretive tool is being applied correctly!

p. 107 What goes for philosophy also goes for life. When Deeksha begins obsessing about her weight, if Brandon doesn’t have available to him the hypothesis that she is merely displacing her anxiety about not hearing back about the jobs that she has applied to, then despite superficially talking about the same thing, Deeksha’s weight, the two of them are going to fail to connect on their concerns of fundamental importance. If Kat assumes that Wilbur’s sudden complaint about her tone of voice is an attempt to ↪ open a conversation about the aesthetics of vocal qualities rather than a manifestation of ‘hanger’ better addressed by stopping for a snack, then the two of them are likely to spiral into worse misunderstandings. And if Leah doesn’t understand that what upsets Ginger about their change in plans was the way it reminds her of a childhood event, then she won’t understand how to reassure her, either.

In all of these cases, I claim, agents *need* to understand the ways in which each other’s behavior is shaped by the causal background, in order to be able to identify each other’s rational concerns and contributions. The space of reasons doesn’t cross-cut the space of causation; it is located within the space of causation, and so if you can’t properly navigate the space of causation, then you simply can’t find it.

4. Interpretation

So far, I have been arguing that despite its initial appeal, the Kantian Diagnosis is too strong. Not only is interpretation in merely causal, non-rationalizing, terms consistent with the participant stance, it is sometimes actually *required*, and the inability to resort to merely causal interpretation constitutes a distinctive vice both within philosophy and within interpersonal relationships, much more generally. What I would love to do, at this point, would be to offer a general answer as to *when* causal interpretation enables the participant stance, and when it disables it and diminishes. But as this is a very general question and I have only been considering a very limited diet of cases, anything I attempt to say about this will of necessity be vastly undermotivated, carrying implications about issues to which I have not paid attention only because I have not paid attention to them, rather than because I have reasons for thinking that things go in that way.

p. 108 Nevertheless, I am going to try to set out a suggestion that I find particularly fruitful, in thinking about the contrast between the Maria compliment/complaint cases, and between Spencer and Allison. It is a suggestion that fits particularly well with the extended analogy that I have been drawing throughout this chapter between philosophy and life. I am well aware that it does not obviously encompass every case of diminishing interpretation or behavior, and I do not know whether that is more likely to be because it tracks only one important form which diminishment can take, or because it gestures toward the truth but only very imperfectly, or it turns out not to ↪ be on the right track after all. But I am inclined to think that it *is* on the right track toward helping us to understand at least some of these cases, and will endeavor to gesture toward why.

When Allison interprets Fred, I suggest, she does well by him as a philosophical interlocutor because she follows a form, broadly speaking, of the principle of *charity*. She endeavors to make the most of his article, to see it as making the most interesting and significant contribution that it can, compatibly with the textual constraints. She looks, that is, for the *best* interpretation. But it is important to be careful about what I mean by this. If there are three dancers, of whom one dances best, one is best to talk to, and one is best to have in a fight, we could pick out any of the three with the phrase ‘best dancer,’ depending on our purposes. But only one of them is best with respect to the internal standards governing dancing.⁵ Similarly, we may have many purposes for being interested in interpretations, and when these purposes are active, we may truly pick out many different interpretations with the phrase ‘best interpretation.’ But only one of these will be best by the internal standard governing interpretation. This is the interpretation that we seek, when we are charitable, in the very strictest sense, and which Allison seeks for Fred.

What I suggest, about cases like this one, is not merely that many interpretations are possible and so as long as we are being charitable we do not wrong the author of a text, but rather that despite a considerable domain for reasonable disagreement, there are genuine facts of the matter about the contribution made by each interesting piece of philosophical work, and that charity is the appropriate principle because charity tracks *truth*. And charity can track truth only if the real contribution made by a particular piece of argumentative writing simply *is* the best, most charitable interpretation of that piece of writing—the one that allows its contribution to be greatest, given the background constraints. Call this the *interpretive account* of philosophical contributions.⁶

p. 109 The interpretive account of philosophical contributions goes substantially further than the claim that we should exercise charity. But in addition to ↪ making sense of why charity is not epistemically problematic, it also makes sense of why interpreting an author’s main point through a purely causal lens feels diminishing. When you think to yourself, ‘of course Schroeder has started thinking about wooly topics—he’s going through a mid-life crisis,’ instead of hearing my arguments out, that diminishes my contribution in the very real sense that it makes my contribution out to be less than it really is.

This leads me to conjecture that something similar goes for persons. When I interpret Maria’s complaint through a causal lens, as the product of a bad mood caused by a difficult afternoon at work, this enables a more charitable interpretation of Maria, on the whole—an interpretation that makes her contribution to the world greater, better, or more significant. As with all interpretation, interpretation of persons is constrained by a text, and in the case of persons, that text is the totality of behavior. But though all text goes into the interpretation, not all text plays the same role within a good interpretation. Behavior while sleepwalking is still behavior, and maybe even reveals something about an agent’s subconscious anxieties or obsessions, but it is not properly attributable to the person in the fullest sense.

So all behavior goes in, and self-avowals must be treated with deference, but even self-avowals can go wrong. Since the person you are is not a character constituted by your narrative of who you say you are, the best interpretation of this person is not constrained by self-avowals in the way interpretations of the actions of a fictional character are constrained by every letter of the text. On the contrary, if interpreting you is a matter of finding the best interpretation of your *contribution* to the world, then whenever your self-avowals are best explained in causal terms, even those self-avowals are not properly yours, and so they do not place a hard constraint on which behavior belongs as part of the story about what contribution you are actually making.

p. 110 In the case of philosophical writing, I went further, and suggested that charitable interpretation is not just a game that we play which permits us to find things in a text that are not really there, but rather can be thought of as a way of discovering the truth about an author’s contribution to the space of ideas, if only we accept the interpretive account of philosophical contributions, according to which there *is* a fact of the matter about what contribution is made by an argumentative piece of writing, and that fact is constituted by the best interpretation of what contribution it makes. Similarly, we can go further in the case of interpersonal interpretation, if we accept the *interpretive* ↪ *account* of persons—the conjecture that a person is *constituted* by the best interpretation of what contribution their behavior makes to the world.

As before, the interpretive account of persons goes substantially further than the mere claim that we should be charitable. But it doesn’t just make sense of why there is no epistemic defect in interpreting another’s behavior charitably; it also makes sense of why failing to do so feels *depersonalizing*. If I respond to Maria’s compliment by wondering whether she found a coin in a vending machine, that brings her down. It treats her as a mere thing. If persons simply *are*, at least in part, the best interpretation of the

behavior of their bodies, then it is no wonder that this is so. Interpreting her behavior in this way is precisely failing to relate to her as a *person*.

5. Circumstantial Evidence

The interpretive account of persons sounds wild. I acknowledge that—it turns my head. Yet the interpretive account of philosophical contributions is not, I think, wild, and the analogies between interpersonal interpretation and textual interpretation of philosophical work are, as I have been endeavoring to illustrate in this paper, fairly robust. It is also supported, I think, by a range of circumstantial evidence.

The interpretive account fits with the asymmetries that we have observed between cases in which non-rationalizing causal interpretation of behavior is appropriate and inappropriate. The evidential bar for interpreting a compliment through a merely causal lens is higher than the evidential bar for so interpreting a complaint, because the range of circumstances in which a compliment helps to constitute a person's contribution to a relationship or shared project or to the world more generally are wider than those in which a complaint does so.

This is not a bare positive/negative asymmetry, or charitable interpretation would always attempt to screen out complaints. Many complaints do contribute in a positive way to shared projects—they constitute initial moves toward assistance at overcoming bad behavior, or toward reconciliation after frustration has created distance within a relationship, or a deserved reprimand for inappropriate behavior by another. But when complaints do not play one of these or similar roles, they can mar an agent's contribution to a relationship or to the world. That is why the range of circumstances in which a compliment helps to constitute an agent's positive contribution are wider than those for a complaint, and correspondingly why it is more often easier to justify interpretation of a complaint in causal terms without diminishing the subject of interpretation.

The interpretive account also makes sense of why it is that inappropriate deployment of causal resources in explaining someone's behavior feels diminishing—and in particular why it seems depersonalizing, and to leave something out about recognizing *who you are*. If I too readily think of Maria's compliment as something likely caused by an upbeat mood because she found a coin in a vending machine, then I am probably, in that instance, not in the business of charitable interpretation of her contribution at all. And if I am not, then I am *not* treating her as a person, but as some other kind of thing. So it should be no wonder, then, that it feels depersonalizing for me to treat her in this way.

Moreover, the interpretive account even makes sense of why sincere attempts to engage with someone can feel depersonalizing or insulting. On this account, a person is constituted by the *best* interpretation of their behavior. But the question of which interpretation is best is an evaluative one, and like many evaluative questions, subject to a range of reasonable disagreement. It is a consequence of this that not only can two interpreters disagree about the best interpretation of a third person's behavior, but it is even possible to reasonably disagree with a person herself about the best interpretation of her own behavior. Many such disagreements, of course, will not be reasonable, because a good interpretation is constrained to be identifiable as the person's own contribution, and her own interpretation is one of the salient pieces of evidence about which contribution is her own. But if Fred at some later time can reasonably disagree with Fred at the time of authoring his article about the best interpretation of what is going on in his twelve-page digression, then similarly it must be possible for Allison to reasonably disagree with Fred. And similar points go for Maria at the time at which she is taking out her frustrations on the rate of growth of my jasmine vine.

It will be no wonder if, in the heat of being still upset from her afternoon at work, Maria felt insulted or diminished if I refuse to engage with her about my problematic gardening—even if she later comes to accept my interpretation of the course of events. Our evaluative perspectives can be distorted by our emotions in ways that lend greater perceived importance to the proximal objects of our passions. So given that, it should be no wonder if Maria may, in the heat of the moment, reasonably disagree with me about the best interpretation of her behavior. And if she does, then if I reveal my interpretation to her through my words or actions, it will make sense for her to feel either that I have failed to appreciate or acknowledge what she is genuinely trying to say to me, or that I am not even trying.

I take it to be a distinctive virtue of the interpretive account, that it can make this kind of sense of the ways in which we can hurt one another even when we are well-meaning. Because interpretation is value-laden, interpretations will diverge whenever values diverge, and hence it will often be a vexed issue whether and to what extent we are relating to one another successfully within the participant stance. And when values diverge deeply, as in the social polarization that we increasingly observe in twentieth-century North America, for example, that will place special tensions on the tenability of even sincere participants to *recognize* one another as sincerely engaged in the participant perspective. When such conditions arise, the interpretive account should lead us to expect, each participant will see themselves as sincerely engaged but the other as somehow detached, not sincere, or having little to contribute that is rational and not merely caused.

Indeed, this leads to a diagnosis of many forms of distinctive relationship pathologies. Marissa, for example, places particular value on generosity and mentorship; growing up as a teenager, her parents became distracted by a protracted divorce and did not provide her with the advice and guidance that she craved through difficult and formative life choices. But she has done well for herself and takes pride in being able to share the financial fruits of her labor to help her nieces and nephews pursue opportunities that she would not have had as a child. Many of her nieces and nephews are grateful for this attention and the opportunities it provides, but Ingrid resents it. Ingrid is a student of Locke and Mill, more than of Rousseau; she values her personal autonomy and freedom, and feels that Aunt Marissa is abusing her role as benefactor in order to try to control Ingrid's choices.

Ingrid and Marissa's relationship, I suggest, is completely normal. All interpersonal relationships involve clashes of values of one form or another, sometimes large, and sometimes small. And when these clashes happen, they engender clashes in each participant's sincere interpretations of one another's behavior. What Marissa interprets as generosity in her own behavior and values as one of her greatest contributions to her relationship with Ingrid, is seen instead by Ingrid as part of the causal background—a kind of compulsion Marissa faces to satisfy her own desire to be helpful, rather than listening to what Ingrid actually needs. This clash is why instead of feeling both gratitude and frustration, Ingrid has a hard time feeling gratitude at all. Likewise, the behavior that Ingrid interprets as an exercise ↪ of personal autonomy that helps to constitute her personal contribution to the world is interpreted instead by Marissa as willful disregard for the wisdom of her elders. Marissa has a hard time acknowledging these choices as truly Ingrid's own because she values independent measures of success over autonomy, and so she sees them as products of youthful indiscretion or the influence of problematic friends, rather than choices of which Ingrid is proud and for which she seeks recognition from her beloved aunt.

The reason that pathologies like Marissa and Ingrid's persist and create conflict within their relationship goes much deeper than the fact that they each exhibit behaviors that bother each other. It is that each *values* and *identifies* with their own behavior while the other sees it as something that is mere behavior that should be overcome. When we do things that bother our friends and partners but we don't identify with, these *are* easy to overcome—we can and do adapt our behavior in order to make our interpersonal relationships work. It is the behaviors that our loved ones interpret as less central to us but which are more central to our own interpretation of our own lives that are so hard to give up, and form the basis of the kinds of persistent pathologies, like the one between Marissa and Ingrid, which in greater or lesser forms crop up in ongoing and meaningful human relationships.

6. Taking Stock

We began with an attractive, broadly Kantian, Diagnosis that was motivated in order to make sense of a way in which we systematically wrong one another within close interpersonal relationships, and by extension, in human interaction more broadly. This wrong is constituted not by outward behavior or treatment, but by a failure to *recognize* one another as persons, or at least as the distinctive persons that we are. To the extent that we fail to recognize one another as persons, or as the distinctive persons that we are, we place obstacles to what we can achieve together.

As attractive as it is, the Kantian Diagnosis is not quite true. Indeed, not only are there exceptions, in which it is permissible and does not wrong someone in any way to interpret their behavior through a causal lens even within the bounds of the participant stance, but this is actively *required* in order to most successfully relate to one another as persons. And this means that full adherence p. 114 to the Kantian advice to interpret one another always as rational self-movers actually constitutes an opposing vice in interpersonal

↳ relationships. It may be the less significant of two opposing vices, or as Aristotle might say, one for which we have no name. But it is a vice nevertheless.

Success in relating to one another as persons requires recognizing the fact that we are also things. I have endeavored to lay out a brief sketch of one proposal—the interpretive account—for what kind of thing persons are, that might make sense of these other observations, but the main points that I wish to make transcend the details of this proposal. Whatever kind of thing persons are, I have suggested, it should be no surprise that success in relating to one another as persons requires recognizing the fact that we are also things—*of course* persons are a kind of thing. Since persons are a kind of thing, failure to appreciate the kind of thing that we are will of course constitute a failure to engage with us as persons.⁷

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Notes

- 1 Compare Korsgaard (2011, 91).
- 2 Somewhat surprisingly from a contemporary perspective in which following Wallace (1994) much attention has been paid to the attitudes of guilt, resentment, and indignation, gratitude is actually Strawson's first and one of his leading examples of a participant attitude. See especially Bero (2017) for discussion.
- 3 Compare Richard Holton's (1994) similar distinction between trusting and coming to believe, also a case in Strawsonian terms.
- 4 In what follows, I will frequently refer to 'causal' interpretation, omitting the 'non-rational' qualification. I do not mean to imply that rational explanation is not a special case of causal explanation, but merely to contrast paradigmatic rational interpretation with other forms of causal explanation. Similarly, though I will refer throughout to 'causal' interpretation, everything that I say could also apply equally well to merely statistical prediction or to essentializing explanations. It would be an easy exercise to offer statistical or essentializing variants on all of my key examples.
- 5 'Best,' as Geach (1956) points out, is an attributive adjective. The remarks in this paragraph are intended to allow for some of the important observations in Szabo (2001) without giving up the spirit of what animates Geach.
- 6 Here it is worth comparing Dworkin's (1986) treatment of the law, though I do not mean to be endorsing any of Dworkin's specific views about good interpretation. But if the law is itself a kind of collective contribution of all of the legislators and judges who contribute to its content, it should not be surprising, on my view, if the law does turn out to be identical to the best interpretation of the behavior of the legal system.
- 7 Special thanks to audiences at the Arizona Normative Ethics Workshop and the 4th Congreso de Posgrado del Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and to Rima Basu, Steve Bero, Renee Bolinger, Alex Dietz, Carolina Flores, Micha Gläser, Fernando Rudy Hiller, Joe Horton, Nathan Howard, Aaron James, Robin Jeshion, Zoë Johnson King, Matt King, Berislav Marusic, Shyam Nair, Michael Nelson, Alexander Prescott-Couch, Grant Rozeboom, Sam Shpall, Elise Woodard, and many others.

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