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Rational Engagement as a Way of Showing Respect to Oneself and Others: How We Ought to Respond to Persons Who Hold Unreasonable Beliefs

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**Rational Engagement as a Way of Showing Respect to
Oneself and Others: How We Ought to Respond to
Persons Who Hold Unreasonable Beliefs**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Elizabeth Cargile Williams
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ABSTRACT

We often encounter persons who hold unreasonable beliefs. I explore how respect informs our response to these persons. I conclude that we ought to be willing or disposed to engage in rational discussion sometimes and to some extent with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs as a way of recognizing and respecting their rational nature. I describe what the duty of rational engagement looks like in practice and apply the duty to individual cases. I then explore various considerations, including the consideration of self-respect, that influence whether we have reason to engage and how we should respond in different cases.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

While the importance of reasoned discussion about moral and political matters among ordinary persons in everyday interactions has garnered much interest in political philosophy, it remains relatively undiscussed in moral philosophy. For example, John Rawls' account of public reason has engendered a large literature on the limits and scope of public, democratic discourse.¹ Although some of these accounts of reasoned discussion in political philosophy focus on the moral duties of citizens, the context in which these duties are discussed is that of the public sphere. I am interested in a different context, namely that of interpersonal interactions between members of the moral community. Particularly, I am interested in our everyday encounters with competent adults who have unreasonable beliefs.²

When we come across such persons, how should we ideally respond to them? I will provide a partial answer to this question, namely that we should at least sometimes and to some extent rationally engage with them out of respect for their rational nature. While we might readily accept such a duty to persons who hold reasonable beliefs, I

¹ John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1999), 573-615. David A. Reidy, "Rawls's Wide View of Public Reason: Not Wide Enough," *Res Publica* 6 (1) (2000): 49-72.

² By unreasonable beliefs, I mean a common-sense notion of those that are not backed up by good evidence or based on good reasoning. I discuss this conception of unreasonableness in Section II. I do not mean John Rawls' conception of the reasonable and its connection to an overlapping consensus. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 94.

argue that we owe this duty even to persons who hold unreasonable beliefs. Such beliefs include ones that are not backed up by good evidence, that contradict our best scientific theories, and that do not conform to principles of reason. Climate change denial, flat earth-ism, and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories are all, I assume, unreasonable beliefs.

To illustrate the kind of case I have in mind, suppose you are on your way to a family Thanksgiving dinner, at which you will encounter your cousin who has repeatedly expressed to you her strong views that climate change is a hoax. You have ascertained from discussions on other subjects that your cousin is a generally reasonable and intelligent person. She is on the whole respectful towards you and other members of the family. Yet, when it comes to this issue, she seems strangely intransigent despite sometimes appearing to rationally engage with your arguments. To the best of your knowledge, your cousin is in good mental health and has not been manipulated into her belief. After multiple conversations on the subject, you do not expect that you will ever cause her to amend her views. In the likely event that she raises the subject again this year, how should you respond?

It might be tempting to save yourself the trouble of arguing with her about this issue by dismissing your cousin as stupid. Or, you might take some kind of perverse pleasure in demolishing her argument piece by piece across the dinner table in ways that will humiliate her in front of your family. A third natural response might be to avoid engaging at all and remain silent in order to keep the family peace or maintain an appearance of politeness. But, what would an ideally respectful person do in situations of this sort? In order to answer this question, I will explore some underlying philosophical

questions, including: What does respect require in everyday interactions with other persons? How can we best respect ourselves and others when those requirements of respect seem to conflict? And finally, ought we respect the theoretical rational capacities of other persons as well as their practical rational capacities?

I argue that a thorough examination of these questions in the context with which I am concerned leads us to the conclusion that we have an imperfect duty to rationally engage with other persons who hold unreasonable beliefs, despite their unreasonableness. I argue that we should do this in order to show respect for them as persons capable of properly exercising their rational capacities, even if our conversations do not change their views. Of course, there are other reasons that inform whether we should engage with another person in any given case, including what special relationships we have with the person, whether or not they themselves will be respectful, and whether or not we have conflicting obligations. But, I argue that we owe other persons specific, but imperfect, duties of respect to engage in rational discussion with them beyond what is required by basic courtesy and decency, even though their unreasonable beliefs may belie that they have not developed or exercised their rational capacities well.

My plan for this thesis is as follows: In Section II, I outline the kinds of cases with which I am concerned; in Section III, I argue that we ought to be willing to rationally engage with other persons as a way of respecting their rational nature; in Section IV, I outline a brief account of what I have in mind when I speak of respectful, rational discussion; in Section V, I consider how we might apply the duty to rationally engage in specific cases; in Section VI, I consider the notion of self-respect and how we might need

to be cautious when engaging in rational discussions with others in particular contexts; and in Section VII, I present some considerations that ought to inform our practical judgments concerning whether it is good to engage with a given person in a given situation.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CASE OF PERSONS WHO HOLD UNREASONABLE BELIEFS

I assume that in everyday contexts we may classify a belief as unreasonable not by the propositional content of the belief itself, but by the reasoning or evidence supporting the belief (excepting rare cases of logically contradictory beliefs, e.g. that there are square circles). I do not intend to give an account of what objectively unreasonable beliefs are, but instead to give practical guidelines for identifying the kinds of beliefs with which I am concerned. I take it that some common characteristics of unreasonable beliefs are those that are not backed up by good evidence, that are based on a poor use of logic, or that do not sufficiently explain the relevant evidence. We might also think of persons themselves as being unreasonable or failing to exercise their capacities of reason when they willfully ignore pertinent evidence, refuse to give reasons to support their views, or accept new and contrary evidence but fail to change their beliefs in response. One important distinction to make among unreasonable beliefs is between pernicious and non-pernicious beliefs. The recognition of harmful or damaging unreasonable beliefs will be relevant in Section VI when I consider cases in which one's self-respect is at stake. Although these are rather rough guidelines, the basic criteria of the beliefs I am concerned with is that they fail to either be well-reasoned or to be grounded in sufficient evidence.

One further clarification is needed to distinguish between cases of reasonable but merely mistaken beliefs and unreasonable beliefs, namely what counts as sufficient evidence for a belief. For example, it may be the case that certain expert views in

theoretical physics and moon landing conspiracy theories are both objectively founded on insufficient evidence. However, there is a clear difference between these two cases. The expert views in theoretical physics address a sufficient portion of the relevant evidence that we have access to at this point in time and are the result of good reasoning on the basis of this evidence, while the moon landing conspiracy theories do not take into account a sufficient portion of the evidence available to us now.

By ‘available to us now,’ I mean evidence that is contemporaneously available to persons who are not epistemically disadvantaged. Epistemically disadvantaged persons are those who do not have reasonable access to publicly available information. For example, a normal member of society would not be epistemically disadvantaged, but a cult member isolated within a compound would be. Hence, I assume that the criterion of sufficient evidence must be sensitive to the evidence available at the time of forming or maintaining the belief.³ This is necessary to include the possibility of reasonable disagreement between competing explanations in the absence of determining evidence yet to be discovered.

One feature of these criteria of unreasonable belief worth further exploration is that we cannot always know whether or not a belief is unreasonable just by hearing its propositional content. There may be beliefs that seem ridiculous and unreasonable on their face but are supported by good reasoning and a good apprehension of the evidence. For example, some scientific discoveries were initially dismissed because they conflicted

³ For more on the social dimensions of epistemic justification, see: Kevin Meeker, “Justification and the Social Nature of Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (1) (July 2004): 156-172.

with accepted wisdom of the time, but these same views were later recognized as good science. Similarly, some beliefs may seem reasonable at first even though they are not backed up by good reasoning or evidential support. Yet, as a general rule, certain beliefs will tend to be more or less reasonable than others.

While our general heuristics for classifying beliefs as unreasonable are useful, taking them as absolute principles could cause us to falsely assume the reasonableness or unreasonableness of a belief. For this reason, there is always a chance that a seemingly unreasonable belief may in fact be reasonable and vice versa. This will be important when determining what respectful, rational engagement should look like. These are rough guidelines for identifying the kinds of beliefs that I am concerned with and tailoring our responses to different underlying psychologies of unreasonable beliefs. However, as I will argue, whether or not someone does hold an unreasonable belief, we should be willing to engage them despite the fact that it seems to us that they hold an unreasonable belief.

In order to better specify how we might respond in different cases, here are a few paradigm cases of psychologies and epistemic situations that can underlie unreasonable beliefs. I will refer to these cases later in the paper: Case 1 is that of a competent, generally respectful adult who has developed her rational capacities but fails to exercise them properly when forming the belief in question. Case 2 is that of a person who has developed her rational capacities, but who has been epistemically disadvantaged such that she does not have access to pertinent information needed to form a reasonable belief about some issue. Case 3 is that of someone who has underdeveloped rational capacities.

Finally, Case 4 is that of the willfully ignorant person who forms and holds her beliefs despite knowing reasons or evidence to the contrary.⁴

One potential interpretation of the epistemically disadvantaged person in Case 2 is that she has formed a reasonable belief because she has properly exercised her rational capacities within the constraints of the limited knowledge available to her.⁵ However, given my heuristic criteria for how we might identify unreasonable beliefs, namely that a reasonable belief requires not only good reasoning but also sufficient knowledge of the currently available relevant evidence, she has not formed a reasonable belief. In other words, because her belief is predicated on either demonstrably bad evidence or insufficient evidence, she has not formed a reasonable belief despite her well-functioning rational capacities.

While I make no strong claim about the defining characteristics of unreasonable belief, the above description properly captures the kinds of cases I am concerned with and is sufficiently close to our common use of the term. Each paradigm case represents a different way in which a belief can fail to be either well-reasoned or well-supported by evidence. While unreasonable beliefs may have more complex underlying psychologies when we encounter them in everyday life, classifying different kinds of unreasonable beliefs can better inform how we can best respond to individual cases. For my purposes here, I will assume that the beliefs I describe are unreasonable.

⁴ There may be a Case 0 whereby the person has in fact formed a reasonable belief contrary to appearances, but I will focus on Cases 1-4.

⁵ Feldman and Conee advance a similar view in their paper “Evidentialism,” *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1) (July 1985): 15-34.

CHAPTER THREE

RATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AS A WAY OF SHOWING RESPECT

My argument depends on a number of broadly Kantian assumptions that I will not attempt to defend here.⁶ I do not aim to offer a critical interpretation of Kant's philosophical framework generally, but instead to focus on and apply some of Kant's basic ideas about dignity and respect to the case of daily interactions with people whom we believe hold unreasonable beliefs.⁷ My account is grounded in the idea that persons have certain morally relevant capacities that inform how they ought to be treated.

I assume that persons have a distinctive moral value, namely dignity, which is not something that can be exchanged for anything of lesser value, nor something of which persons can have more or less.⁸ I assume that the value of dignity is something we ought to respect within ourselves and others as rational beings. Respect can be shown through various actions and attitudes, but at its core, an attitude of respect expresses a recognition of rational persons as having an objective worth without equivalent. This value should not be sacrificed for mere instrumental gain or for other values that are merely grounded

⁶ Arguments for these assumptions can be found in the following sources: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209-213; 186-187.

⁷ We might also believe such persons to be unreasonable themselves. My focus is on those with unreasonable beliefs, but in terms of unreasonable persons I have in mind a case of someone who is only partially unreasonable, not wholly so.

⁸ I am chiefly following Thomas E. Hill Jr.'s conception of dignity expressed in the paper "Humanity as an End in Itself," *Ethics* 91 (October 1980): 84-99.

in our self-serving desires, aims, and inclinations.⁹ In other words, respect entails that we should never merely use people for our own, selfish ends without also respecting their autonomous choices.

I assume that the value of dignity is grounded in rational nature, which includes the capacity to think in accordance with principles of reason and the ability to decide upon and enact a course of action to achieve one's goals.¹⁰ Although rational nature is composed of several capacities, my argument will focus on certain theoretical and practical capacities of reason.¹¹ Theoretical rational capacities include the ability to think in accordance with principles of reason, to form reasoned judgments about the world, to reason inductively and deductively, to evaluate evidence, and to test predictions. Practical

⁹ This idea is expressed in Kant's Formula of Humanity, which states: "[s]o act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 38. There is much debate as to what humanity means, although here I will take it to mean rational nature. See: Thomas E. Hill Jr., "Humanity as an End in Itself," *Ethics* 91 (October 1980): 84-99. For competing views on humanity, see: Christine Korsgaard, "Kant's Formula of Humanity," *Kant-Studien*, 77 (1-4) (1986): 183-202; Allen W. Wood and Onora O'Neill, "Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 72 (1998): 189-228; Richard Dean, *The Value of Humanity in Kant's Moral Theory*, (Clarendon Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Although Kant thinks that rational capacities are the only morally relevant capacities, it might be the case that they are merely the distinctive moral capacities that set apart human beings from other animals. Human beings may also possess other morally relevant capacities that they share with other animals, but I am not concerned with those capacities within this paper. Christine Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures: Kantian ethics and our duties to animals," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 24 (2004): 77-110. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

¹¹ There is much debate as to what rational capacities entail and whether or not they ought to be included in determining moral status, particularly in relation to persons with cognitive disabilities. For more information on the subject, see: Leslie P. Francis, "Understanding autonomy in light of intellectual disability," *Disability and Disadvantage*, edited by Kimberley Brownlee and Adam Cureton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 200-215.

rational capacities include the ability to form intentions, to act in ways that will best achieve one's own ends, and to discern what one ought to do in a given case.¹² While some unreasonable beliefs can be neatly explained by a failure to exercise one of these capacities, others involve dysfunction of both practical and theoretical capacities of reason.

One of the ways we can show respect to other persons is by recognizing their rational capacities, including their capacities of theoretical and practical reason. Although we sometimes owe additional duties of respect to persons who have developed their capacities of reason and exercise them well, we also ought to respect persons simply because they have rational capacities. The first kind of respect is called appraisal respect, or respect for someone's character or achievements. The second kind of respect is called recognition respect, or respect for the morally relevant capacities persons possess, including rational nature.¹³ For example, we would show greater appraisal respect for an emeritus professor than we would for a freshman philosophy student. However, both the student and the professor are owed the same recognition respect as persons with rational

¹² I refrain from drawing a sharp distinction between or giving a strict definition of the capacities of practical and theoretical reason, as there is much discussion on what characteristics separate the two and how intermingled or distinct these capacities are. For more on this subject, see: M. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ Stephen L. Darwall defines appraisal respect as "positive appraisal of a person, or his qualities," similar to esteem or high regard. Darwall defines recognition respect as respect that "consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do." Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88 (1) (1977): 38, 39.

capacities. Thus, in the kinds of cases with which I am concerned, each rational person who holds unreasonable beliefs is still owed recognition respect.

Recognition respect is sometimes conceived as prohibiting certain actions, with a few potential exceptions. I think, however, that this kind of respect can also inform what positive actions we ought to perform when interacting with other persons in our daily lives. Some actions express our recognition of the rational capacities of others, and refusing to ever perform such actions may demonstrate a lack of respect. When encountering persons who hold unreasonable beliefs, I argue that recognition respect requires us to at least sometimes and to some extent have a reasoned conversation with those persons about their unreasonable beliefs. In contrast, a maxim of always ignoring, deriding, or otherwise repudiating any rational engagement with such persons fails to show them proper recognition respect. Rational engagement is thus an imperfect duty which requires us to recognize the rational capacities of others. Having this end requires us sometimes and to some extent to engage with others in rational discussion.

Since the imperfect duty of rational engagement is owed to rational persons in general, we might wonder why we have a duty specifically to engage with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs. In other words, we might think that we can still properly fulfill this duty by not conversing with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs and instead focusing our efforts on engaging with persons who hold reasonable beliefs. If this were a duty of appraisal respect, this kind of differential response might be appropriate. However, since this is a duty of recognition respect, refusing to engage with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs while at the same time engaging with persons who hold

reasonable beliefs indicates some underlying belief that persons who hold reasonable beliefs have a higher status value than persons who hold unreasonable beliefs. It is permissible to favor conversing with persons who hold reasonable beliefs over those who hold unreasonable beliefs; however, we must recognize the rational nature of persons who hold unreasonable beliefs and at least sometimes and to some extent engage in rational discussion with them.

Refusing to engage in rational discussion with other persons whom we find to have unreasonable beliefs may also betray a belief that those persons are not fundamentally capable of thinking rationally nor that they can be convinced by reason. This judgment shows a failure to recognize the dignity of persons who hold unreasonable beliefs and reveals a kind of arrogance within ourselves. But, when we do engage in respectful, rational discussion with other persons, we affirm that they are at least capable of being rational, whether or not they will develop or exercise their capacities of reason in response to the discussion.

Another way rational engagement can show respect is by encouraging our interlocutor to think for herself. If she is someone who generally lacks confidence in her own reason and merely accepts the dictates of others without question, listening to her thoughts and aiding her in the development of her reason may help her gain confidence in the use of her rational capacities.¹⁴ This does not mean that we can make her think for

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant similarly exhorts persons to exercise their rational autonomy and think freely in his 1784 essay titled "What is Enlightenment." Immanuel Kant, "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?" *Practical Philosophy* ed. Mary J. Gregor et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 11-22.

herself, but we can at least make it easier for her to do so. This is in part because developing the ability to think for oneself often depends upon being challenged by other rational persons. If, by contrast, our interlocutor is someone who is epistemically puffed up and overly sure of his powers of reason, we might kindly point out mistakes and help him realize his fallibility. By doing so, we demonstrate that we take him to be capable of responding to reasons and not wholly blinded by his arrogance.

When dealing with persons described in paradigm cases 1 and 2, namely those who have developed their rational capacities, I argue that recognition respect requires us to be willing or disposed to rationally engage with those persons, challenging their reasoning or presenting them with new evidence as the individual case requires. When dealing with the persons described in Case 3, namely those who have not developed their rational capacities, we ought to respond by first aiding them in the development of their rational capacities. This remediation is a pre-requisite to participating in rational discussion. Once persons in Case 3 have achieved sufficient mastery of their rational faculties, then we may engage them as we would persons in Cases 1 and 2. When encountering the willfully unreasonable person in Case 4, we may attempt to convince them to care about reasons and become open to revising their beliefs.

Whether or not we should engage a given person will depend on assorted contextual considerations. Although I will not address all of these considerations in this thesis, I will outline some morally relevant considerations that may influence our decisions to engage that person in Section VII. However, I maintain that the basic disposition to sometimes engage persons who hold unreasonable beliefs is morally

required as an expression of recognition respect in the right circumstances. By the right circumstances, I mean those in which we have sufficient reason to believe our interlocutor will be respectful, we have no stronger competing obligations, and there are no other apparent reasons that on balance should lead us to refrain from engaging.¹⁵ Once we ascertain the kind of unreasonableness present, we may tailor our responses to the unique circumstances of the case.

As should be clear by now, I do not think our primary goal should be to convince the other person to change their beliefs or to take up a particular belief. If we were to be solely focused on this objective, we might be able to justify tactics such as manipulation, coercion, or other rationally undermining strategies. Moreover, if we only value the end of our interlocutor forming a specific belief, we fail to value her rational autonomy. At the same time, there may be contexts in which we have reason to try to convince our interlocutor to take up a different belief. I discuss these sorts of considerations in Section VI. But importantly, even when we have reason to convince her of something, in most cases respecting the rational nature of our interlocutor is of primary importance over persuading them to take up a certain belief.¹⁶

One objection to a positive duty of rational engagement is that we have no duty to rationally engage with other persons, because we cannot make other persons think

¹⁵ It is possible that choosing to engage others in contexts that present a threat to one's sense of self-respect is an act of courage and supererogation. I will discuss this possibility further in Section V.

¹⁶ There may exist some limit cases wherein it is permissible to manipulate someone into a belief, for example, the case of a hostage negotiator manipulating the hostage-taker into releasing the hostages.

rationally or develop their rational capacities. Instead, it is up to them to seek enlightenment. As such, we are only responsible for developing our own rational capacities and checking the reasonableness of our own beliefs. One version of this objection seems to be predicated on a conception of persons as isolated, rational individuals instead of members of an epistemic community. By a conception of persons as isolated, rational individuals, I mean that we each intellectually “pull ourselves up by the bootstraps,” so to speak, and root out all sources of unreasonableness through introspection alone.¹⁷ But, this conception does not seem to properly track how we form and assess our ideas about the world.

While we form our own ideas and beliefs about the world, we check these ideas with others to ensure that we are not misguided. For example, in our everyday lives, we check with our friends and peers to ensure that our responses to various situations are appropriate and that our perceptions are not clouded. Additionally, we may sometimes miss certain aspects of the world around us if we are not attuned to them. Others may need to point out our mistakes or disrespectful actions of which we are unaware. For example, a white supremacist living in a rural, likeminded community in the early 1800s would have a very difficult time discerning that his views on race are problematic. But, a modern white supremacist who encounters persons who explain to him the wrongness of his views could more easily revise his beliefs.¹⁸

¹⁷ For those unfamiliar with the phrase, I use it here to mean a kind of self-focused narrative of success framed as solely due to one’s own natural talents and efforts without regard for the contributions of friends, family, and the surrounding community.

¹⁸ A similar, real-life example can be read about here: R. Derek Black, “Why I Left White Nationalism,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016, accessed February 8,

While it is true that we cannot usually make other persons amend their beliefs or think in accordance with reason, we can make it easier for them to do so by providing social support through education and conversation. It may be the case that seeking enlightenment is a duty we only owe to ourselves and likewise a duty persons who hold unreasonable beliefs only owe to themselves. However, this is not a successful objection because the point of the imperfect duty of rational engagement is to respect the rational nature of other persons, not to cause them to think for themselves.

Another objection to a positive duty of rational engagement as a way of showing recognition respect is that this duty of respect is not something owed to all persons qua rational human beings but is only required in the contexts of special relationships. In other words, the objector might say that we should sometimes converse with family members, friends, and those engaged in similar practices, but we have no such duty to strangers. Although I do agree that special relationships can give us added reason to engage with other persons, I maintain that we owe this kind of respect even to strangers.

For example, imagine that while on vacation in a different state, you are making small talk with another seemingly intelligent patron in line at a coffee shop. After revealing that you are on vacation, she tells you that she is also on vacation attending an alien convention. Furthermore, she says that she believes aliens built the pyramids and other such structures. Even though you have had no prior relation to this person and presumably will never see her in the future, it still seems that you have some reason to

2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html?_r=0.

engage her – assuming you both have time to properly discuss the issue – out of a belief that she herself is capable of thinking rationally about this issue.

While there is no strong requirement to engage with the alien enthusiast in this situation, we still have reason to rationally engage with her about her belief that aliens built the pyramids as it would show her respect. Other responses may be open to us, such as refraining from challenging her alien beliefs or looking at her askance when she states her views about aliens. However, certain responses are prohibited, such as openly mocking her or refusing to speak to or acknowledge her once she has stated her beliefs about aliens. How we choose to respond in a given situation should be guided by principles of respect.

One final objection is that there are some circumstances in which it is more respectful to our interlocutor to refrain from rational engagement than to rationally engage with her. For example, if I were to engage with the alien enthusiast in the example above, she may feel slighted and disrespected. Or, in cases in which persons are deeply attached to their unreasonable beliefs, it may be better to allow them to continue to hold those beliefs without challenge. However, responses like these, at least in some cases, seem to truncate the autonomy of our interlocutor because we act on the assumption that they prefer maintaining their beliefs without challenge over pursuing the truth of the matter.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thomas E. Hill, Jr. discusses related cases and considerations in his paper “Autonomy and Benevolent Lies,” *J. Value Inquiry* 18 (1984): 251-267.

Rational, respectful engagement does not operate on this assumption and instead allows the possibility that our interlocutor may desire to follow the dictates of reason. When we engage, we may discover that the other person does not want her belief to be challenged. At that time, we may refrain from rational engagement, as we have sufficient evidence that she does not want to engage with us on that issue. There perhaps exist certain limit cases in which it is more respectful to the unreasonable belief-holder to abstain in the absence of knowing whether or not our interlocutor desires to have her beliefs challenged. But, these cases represent outliers from the usual case with which I am concerned, namely that of competent adults going about their daily lives.

In sum, by conversing with others as rational persons, we not only affirm their rational nature to ourselves but also communicate to them that they have the ability to think rationally and form their own considered opinions. This is not a guarantee that they will correctly interpret the message we intend to communicate. However, if we engage persons who hold unreasonable beliefs in the right kinds of ways which I outline in the next section, we can hopefully avoid these kinds of misunderstandings.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE IDEA OF RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT

Although I do not intend to give an exhaustive account of what respectful discussion looks like, here are a few of its qualities and characteristics: First, we should not assume why our interlocutor holds an unreasonable belief without sufficient evidence. As illustrated by the paradigm cases I presented in Sections II-III, there are often multiple explanations as to why someone holds an unreasonable belief. Not only is it epistemically unfounded to presume one explanation over another without sufficient evidence, it can also be disrespectful. If we assume that someone holds an unreasonable belief because they have not developed their rational capacities when instead they merely do not have sufficient evidence, we may fail to show them proper appraisal respect.

Assumptions of this sort belie a kind of epistemic arrogance within ourselves such that we believe we can easily know why other persons hold their beliefs. Extreme versions of this arrogance may lead us to dismiss the testimony of other persons about the reasons why they hold their beliefs. While it may sometimes be the case that other persons do not fully understand their reasons for holding a belief, we should be willing to address the reasons they explicitly give us instead of presuming without sufficient evidence that we know them better than they themselves do. Even in cases in which we have good reason to think that we know others better than themselves, we may still show respect by both addressing the reasons they present to us and the reasons we believe they hold for their beliefs.

Similar pre-judgments about other persons underlie various problematic testimonial exchanges, including the phenomenon of ‘mansplaining,’ which occurs when a man explains things to a woman under the wrongful assumption that the woman does not know about those things, generally because of the implicit assumption that women in general are not knowledgeable.²⁰ One potential way to avoid these problems is to assume the best and adjust our response based upon new information.²¹ The prime virtue should be one of understanding why our interlocutor holds her beliefs instead of hastily jumping to categorize her.

Second, we ought to be charitable toward our interlocutor. For example, we might assume she is more rational and has better views than it initially appears, affirm the good parts of her views, and point out her mistakes kindly. This virtue of charity is an expansion upon the first virtue of understanding, whereby we ought to give our interlocutor the benefit of the doubt as a sign of good will. We should not always expect the other person to be fully rational – after all, as finite persons there are limits to our own rationality and ability to think about various issues in depth. By showing charity, we

²⁰ The phenomenon was first identified and described by Rebecca Solnit in her article “Men Explain Things to Me.” Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me,” *Guernica*, August 20, 2012, accessed February 11, 2017, <https://www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>.

²¹ In some cases it may be permissible for marginalized persons to act on the presumption that persons who hold oppressive beliefs are disrespectful and avoid engaging with those persons. While this is non-ideal, it may serve an important function in protecting marginalized persons from entering into potentially dangerous or damaging conversations. However, this exception is perhaps best understood as one way of preserving one’s own self-respect and safety, concerns which I will take up in Section V.

model collaborative discourse in which good argumentation and truth are valued over intellectual sparring matches in which the prime goal is to defeat one's opponent.

If we assume the worst of our interlocutor, we risk treating those who have well-thought out views with disrespect. Even if our interlocutor is less reasonable than they initially appear, treating her views with charity and providing her with arguments that might support her views can help her better understand the dialectic and participate in conversations on the subject. The aim of these conversations is to recognize that persons who hold unreasonable beliefs are capable of thinking reasonably. Instead of prioritizing changing their views or convincing them of the unreasonableness of their arguments, we should help them acquire the rational and evidential tools to form a reasonable belief. This goal may sometimes be achieved by providing rational support for beliefs we think are mistaken. Once the other person takes up a reasonable belief, the conversation may progress to one of determining which belief is correct.

Third, we ought to take up an attitude of epistemic humility, such that we recognize our own fallibility. This does not mean that we must think of ourselves as epistemic peers with persons who have not developed their rational capacities to the same degree, nor does it mean that we have to treat unreasonably grounded views as on an equal epistemic footing with reasonably grounded views. However, it does mean that we must recognize the limitations of our own epistemic standpoint and refrain from acting as if we know and are right about everything. For example, a renowned physicist may rightly recognize his expertise in the realm of physics but cannot generalize from this fact alone that he is an expert in philosophy. The physicist may also be convinced that his

reasonable beliefs about quantum mechanics are right, but he ought not assume that none of his views about physics could ever be proven wrong. Thus epistemic confidence is permissible and even good, but epistemic arrogance is inimical to respectful discourse.

Fourth, we should recognize that some rational discussions will necessarily involve emotional work. For example, Sally has built her life around being at the forefront of the anti-GMO movement. Her self-conception and place in her community are predicated on her activism and beliefs in this regard.²² If we were to engage Sally and cause her to reconsider her beliefs, this could be incredibly emotionally taxing and potentially threatening to her. It would be insensitive on our part to pretend as if we have fully satisfied our duty of respect to Sally once we have merely treated the rational components of Sally's belief. The rational and the emotional are often closely tied, especially for the philosophically uninitiated.

The emotional aspects of ourselves, while not the primary locus of our moral value, are important components of how we operate as ethical persons, taking up attitudes of love, forgiveness, righteous anger, etc. Furthermore, disregarding the emotions of others when they are in pain or otherwise suffering shows a disturbing lack of care for those persons. In cases in which the emotions of others are interfering with their ability to think rationally, we should be willing to assist them so that they can better exercise their

²² There are adjacent cases in which the belief being discussed is itself not central to our interlocutor's self-conception or core values but is held in support of those values. For example, creationism is not a central pillar of Christian faith, but in certain fundamentalist sects it serves as a supporting belief for the central tenet that the Bible is the literal and infallible word of God. Thus, if a fundamentalist's belief in creationism is threatened, the more central tenet is also threatened, which can provoke an intense emotional response.

rational capacities.²³ However, there are some cases in which we are not obligated to perform the emotional work necessary to engage with some persons out of the consideration of self-respect. I will discuss a few of these exceptions in Section VI.

Fifth, we should be sensitive to the tone of the conversation so that the other person does not feel attacked and disrespected. This not only applies to the emotion with which we convey our words but also to the way we phrase our thoughts and objections. One way of moderating the tone is by focusing on the content of the belief and the argument given instead of locating the flaws in the person. For example, instead of stating “you are clearly wrong about this fact” or “you have made the elementary mistake of affirming the consequent,” we might say “I understand why you might think this, but there is clear evidence to the contrary,” or “a critic might say...,” or “someone who holds your view might worry that...,” etc. Framing the discussion in the third-person can also help to avoid combative conversations in which our interlocutor is either treated as or perceives themselves as merely an opponent to be defeated.

Framing the intellectual debate in less personal terms while affirming as much as possible the good elements of the interlocutor’s view creates a less threatening conversation space. If our interlocutor perceives the conversation as an attack on her person and ability to reason, she may lose confidence in her ability to think rationally and

²³ Although I make a distinction between reason and emotion, I am not committed to the view that the two are diametrically opposed to and completely separate from one another. In some cases our emotions can assist our rational deliberations, and likewise reason can inform which emotions we choose to cultivate. For more on the relationship between rationality and emotion, see: Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994).

subsequently feel a diminished sense of self-respect. While we cannot always control how others will perceive our intentions in conversations, we should still be conscious of the tone of our conversation to show respect to those persons for whom it will make a difference.

Additional other-regarding epistemic virtues might involve a commitment to developing one's abilities to listen and understand and to clearly expound one's own thoughts. I assume that these skills are somewhat developed for those engaging in rational discussion with others, but a wholly virtuous agent who embraces the model of rational discussion might take it upon herself to better develop these faculties in order to better communicate with and educate others.²⁴

In light of this model of respectful, rational engagement, there are several responses that do not show proper respect for other persons. First, we should not focus our attention on using rhetorical devices or other psychological tricks to more readily convince other persons to hold different beliefs, as this prioritizes the result of convincing them over recognizing their rational autonomy. Second, refusing to listen to the other person, exiting the conversation as a way of dismissal, or otherwise ignoring their contributions can show a lack of caring for other persons and communicate to them that we do not find them worth our time and effort. There will be times that we cannot engage with other persons due to prior obligations, but in these cases we can respectfully explain why we cannot continue the conversation or do not have time to give full consideration to

²⁴ Jason Kawall discusses such virtues in his paper "Other-Regarding Epistemic Virtues," *Ratio* 15 (3) (September 2002): 257-275.

their concerns. Finally, we ought not gleefully dismantle the other person's argument solely out for our intellectual self-aggrandizement, as this uses our interlocutor as a mere means for our own ends.

To illustrate how one of these conversations might progress, imagine that your friend has expressed to you that he sincerely believes NASA faked the moon landing. Instead of initially dismissing him as stupid or deriding him for his view, you might respond by asking him why he would think such a thing or what evidence convinced him. Further discussion might center on responding to his stated reasons by working to help him understand the flaws in his reasoning and any evidence of which he is unaware. If he remains unconvinced and fails to see the weight of your arguments, you might continue the conversation at a later time and perhaps even research and respond to any external arguments or sources he provides. Whether or not he will change his views, it is worthwhile to engage him in order to show recognition respect for his rational capacities. Although changing his views may be desirable, any success in this regard is secondary to the importance of respecting your friend's rational nature.

CHAPTER FIVE

RATIONAL, RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

To better illustrate how rational engagement shows respect, I will now take up specific instances of Cases 1-4 and analyze them. Case 1 is that of the person who is a generally respectful, competent adult who has developed his capacities of reason but occasionally fails to exercise them well. For example, Giles is an accomplished mathematician whose work is widely acclaimed. He has recently become enamored with numerology and believes that he can predict the future using numerological methods. On my view, we have some reason to respond to Giles by conversing with him about his belief in numerology, attempting to understand his reasoning, and challenging the mistakes in his reasoning. By rationally engaging with Giles, we recognize that he is capable of exercising his rational capacities and forming a reasonable belief about numerology. We show him courtesy by respectfully pointing out his faulty reasoning so that he can reevaluate his belief and better exercise his rational capacities. Given his clear intelligence, responding by mocking him for his stupidity does not show proper respect for his capacities of reason which he has developed to a formidable degree.

One objection to this case might be that Giles's belief in numerology is not indicative of a failure to exercise his capacities but instead reveals a failure to develop parts of his rational capacities, perhaps to be appropriately skeptical of non-falsifiable claims. Even if there are some deficiencies in his methods of reasoning, Giles has clearly developed his rational capacities to a high degree. As such, he is owed some degree of appraisal respect. Giles is thus distinct from persons who have under-developed

capacities of reason, represented by paradigm Case 3. However, our fundamental reason to engage with Giles is that he possesses the ability to ameliorate this deficiency in his reasoning and amend his ill-founded belief in light of new evidence and reasons. We thus have reason to rationally engage with Giles in a respectful manner that both shows appraisal respect for his intellectual capacities and recognition respect for his capacity to rationally revise his belief and further develop his powers of reason.

To illustrate Case 2, that of a person who has developed her capacities of reason but is epistemically disadvantaged, let us take up the case of Weiss. Weiss has been homeschooled and socially isolated within her parents' limited social group for her entire life. Although she is highly literate and well-versed in matters of logic and reason, Weiss's only sources of information are those approved by her parents. As a result, she has large gaps in her knowledge of the outside world and has merely adopted her parents' teachings about these matters. When she first emerges into the outside world for her college education, she expresses these epistemically unfounded, strange beliefs to those around her. However, Weiss herself is as of yet unaware of her insular upbringing and still believes that her views are well-founded.

In Weiss's case, we ought to respond by affirming the validity of her prior reasoning and presenting her with evidence that she previously lacked. If she is hesitant to take up new evidence due to a fear of harming her relationship with her parents, we might encourage her to think for herself and prize the truth over family loyalty. In doing so, we communicate that we respect her rational abilities and value her intellectual autonomy. If Weiss is instead met with responses that question her intelligence, dismiss

her as willfully ignorant, or otherwise mock her, she is likely to doubt her ability to think rationally and question her epistemic standing as someone whose thoughts matter. She may also be tempted to retreat into her sheltered world. These responses ignore the fact that she has exercised and developed her rational capacities well given her limited access to information and as such fail to show her proper appraisal respect. More importantly, they fail to recognize that Weiss has the rational capacity to revise her beliefs in light of new evidence.

For Case 3, namely that of the person with undeveloped or underdeveloped capacities of reason, let us take up the case of Pippin. Pippin is relatively uneducated and has never been a voracious reader. While he is able to get by in life with the basic skills he has developed, he has only rarely reflected on many of his own beliefs and the reasoning behind them. As Pippin has not developed his rational capacities, we do not owe him the same appraisal respect that we do to Giles and Weiss. However, Pippin still possesses rational capacities and as such is owed recognition respect. Thus, it would be disrespectful of us to dismiss him as incapable of reflecting on his beliefs or cultivating his rational faculties. Perhaps it is true that he cannot reason well about his beliefs in his current state, but with a proper education and a desire to learn, Pippin has the ability to develop his powers of reason and better exercise them.

While Cases 1 and 2 more closely model our ideals of rational discussion as centering on the reasoning and relevant evidence underlying a belief, persons in Case 3 require remedial work before the rational conversations in Cases 1 and 2 can occur. When someone's rational capacities are minimally developed, we can provide basic

instruction in critical thinking and encourage our interlocutor to further develop his capacities as he is able. If he does not see the value of his rational capacities or their development, we may impress upon him the importance of his rational personhood. In some cases in which the remedial work needed is extensive, we may not have sufficient time or energy to rectify his rational deficiencies. However, we might point him towards resources that can better help him and assist him to the extent we can. What each of these response have in common is that they acknowledge that our interlocutor has rational capacities which he can develop if he so chooses. Our responses cannot cause him to do so, but may facilitate and encourage his development.

Finally, let us take up the case of Dolores as an instance of Case 4, namely that of the willfully ignorant person. Although Dolores is intelligent and has access to a broad range of information, she intentionally dismisses any attempts to challenge her unreasonable beliefs, which she has no interest in revising. Dolores is aware of evidence that should cause her to reconsider her beliefs, yet she maintains her beliefs despite this evidence. If she ever gives ear to those who would convince her otherwise, she does not take up their concerns and instead merely reiterates her beliefs or engages in sophistry.

When we encounter Dolores, we may not try to convince her to change her beliefs which she adamantly holds, but we may try to impress upon her why she should be open to revising her beliefs given sufficient reason and evidence. However, if she is not at all willing to engage with us in any manner, we should respect her autonomous decision not to rationally engage with us. One potential concern with Case 4 is that persons like Dolores will not exhibit any reciprocity such that they cannot meet the basic criteria for

rational, respectful engagement. If, in more extreme circumstances, this is the case, we may have reason to refrain from engaging with willfully unreasonable persons, namely because rationally engaging with them may be impossible.

Individual cases may possess elements of different paradigm cases or fall outside the categorizations of Cases 1-4. In these instances we must use our best judgment to determine how we ought to respond, although the above guidelines may assist us in our deliberation. Additionally, I do not assume that the characteristics of persons who hold unreasonable beliefs are immutable. For example, someone who is willfully ignorant may later become open to rational, respectful discussion, or someone who is rationally underdeveloped may develop her powers of reason and occasionally fail to exercise them well. We thus should be sensitive to this possibility and be willing to revise our judgments of and responses to other persons based upon new evidence.

By rationally engaging with the persons in Cases 1 and 2, we show that they are capable of properly exercising their rational capacities and revising their beliefs in light of new evidence. Not only do we affirm to ourselves that these persons can respond to reason, we also send the message to those persons that we value their rational nature. By helping persons in Case 3 to better develop their faculties of reason, we affirm that they are capable of doing so. By attempting to convince them of the importance of developing and exercising their rational capacities in response to reasons and evidence, we recognize that persons in Case 4 can choose to recant their willful ignorance. However, if they refuse to engage at all, we show respect for their autonomous decision by politely exiting the conversation. In each of our responses, we do not take these persons to be

irredeemably stuck in their unreasonable beliefs, but treat them as if they have the ability to change.

In sum, our comportment in these conversations should reflect a proper attitude of respect for our own rational nature and that of other persons. I have outlined some ways we might express that attitude here, but we will need to use our own judgment to decide how to best respect ourselves and others in each context. In Sections VI and VII, I will illustrate how a variety of considerations can inform how we ought to demonstrate respect, including instances in which these considerations may conflict with each other.

CHAPTER SIX

SELF-RESPECT

Although we should generally be willing to engage with other persons in rational discussion, there are some contexts in which we have good reason to refrain from doing so. In this section I will outline one reason we may have for refraining from rational engagement, namely whether the conversation poses a threat to our sense of self-respect. By ‘a sense of self-respect’ I mean confidence in one’s rational nature and a proper appreciation of one’s moral status as an individual and as a member of the moral community. I will address this consideration in relation to cases in which marginalized persons might rationally engage with oppressors, as these interactions are likely to pose a threat to the self-respect of the marginalized person. However, I recognize that self-respect can be threatened in non-marginalized cases, potentially for some of the same reasons I outline with regard to marginalized persons.

While in many contexts engaging with other persons in rational discourse is not detrimental to our sense of self-respect, these conversations can sometimes become fraught when conditions of reciprocity do not obtain, when the other person does not show basic respect, or when she merely pretends to show respect and listens to our perspective only to later dismiss it without any deep engagement. These issues can become even more complex in situations in which the conversation partners have power-differentiated social identities, such that someone who holds a marginalized identity may be more readily dismissed by those with privileged identities, especially if their testimony is contrary to dominant conceptions of knowledge.

These power-differentiated social identities are constituted by a combination of historical disparities, contemporary structural inequalities, and agential operations of power.²⁵ By agential operations of power, I mean individual, personal exercises of power grounded in their socially recognized identities. Agential operations of power are opposed to purely structural operations of power which are not perpetrated by an agent.²⁶ Agential operations of power and structural inequalities can reinforce each other, such that it is sometimes difficult to understand the importance of the structural without understanding the agential, and vice versa. I mention structural inequalities for this reason, though I am primarily concerned with agential operations of power in testimonial exchanges.

Additionally, systems of oppression often rely on truncated, inaccurate stereotypes of marginalized persons, both as moral and epistemic persons. For example, black persons in intellectually prestigious positions are sometimes regarded as undeserving of the position and elevated to its status merely by some kind of tokenism. These underlying attitudes and assumptions can inform interactions with marginalized persons and make it more likely that their testimony will be inaccurately perceived or that they will be otherwise disrespected.

Before a marginalized person enters a testimonial exchange, they may already be burdened by a diminished sense of self-respect. This lack of self-respect may be

²⁵ Miranda Fricker discusses identity power and its relation to epistemic interactions in her book *Epistemic Injustice*. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

expressed in several ways, one of which is a lack of trust of one's own judgments and perceptions.²⁷ In other words, oppressed persons may doubt their ability to correctly appraise the world through the use of their rational capacities. This kind of distrust can be fostered through various social practices that dismiss the testimony of marginalized persons and perpetuated by the learned deference of marginalized persons.²⁸ In certain cases, marginalized persons may even take up the views of those in power and actively work to uphold those norms. In the worst cases, marginalized persons may doubt and distrust their own rational capacities and subsequently be at a disadvantage when attempting to think for themselves.

To illustrate the difficulty of such situations, imagine a questioning member of a very conservative, fundamentalist church congregation, in which any mention of evolution in a positive light would not only be met with dismissal or derision, but perhaps

²⁷ Kristen Borgwald discusses how patriarchy can affect women's self-trust of their rational capacities and subsequently their sense of self-respect in her paper "Women's anger, epistemic personhood, and self-respect: an application of Lehrer's work on self-trust." Borgwald also illustrates how it can be incredibly difficult to break out of these systems that encourage cognitive deference, stating: "[i]f a woman does not trust her judgments, she cannot successfully assert her judgments. Either she does not trust that her thoughts are reasonable and dismisses them internally, or she communicates her thoughts with hesitation causing others to doubt her." Kristen Borgwald, "Women's anger, epistemic personhood, and self-respect: an application of Lehrer's work on self-trust," *Philos Stud* 161 (2012): 70.

²⁸ In her paper "Internalized Oppression and Its Varied Moral Harms: Self-Perceptions of Reduced Agency and Criminality," Nabina Liebow asserts that this lack of self-trust can also perpetuate systems of oppression, such that "internalized oppression is not only a symptom of an oppressive social climate, but it also represents a mechanism for its continued existence." Liebow also notes that internalized oppression can "harm a person by damaging one's view of the self as a moral agent." Nabina Liebow, "Internalized Oppression and Its Varied Moral Harms: Self-Perceptions of Reduced Agency and Criminality." *Hypatia* 31 (2016): 713–714.

also with social ostracization. Imagine further that this church member has grown up in the church her entire life, has never developed any friends outside the church, is still dependent on other fundamentalist members of her family, and through furtive internet research has only recently come to the conclusion that evolution is better scientifically supported than creationism. Furthermore, as a woman in a very patriarchal church, she regularly hears that women are emotional and irrational compared to men, is not allowed to teach other men in the church or weigh in on doctrine, and is expected to accept everything the church teaches without question.

In this case, although she might show proper respect to the other persons in the church by being willing to rationally engage with them on the subject of evolution, it seems that she is not in a good position to engage with her fellow church members, at least not without threatening her own sense of self-respect. If she were to question the accepted doctrine of creationism publicly within the church, it seems likely that she would be dismissed, not only on religious grounds but also as an emotional and irrational woman. Additionally, she may face strong social pressure to fall back in line with church doctrine. If her sense of self-respect and confidence in her own rationality is tenuous at best, this kind of pressure could cause her to lose confidence in her ability to think for herself and in her self-worth. Even if she is able to maintain her considered judgment in the face of pressure, she might still incur a strong emotional burden from the community backlash. So, it seems justified for her to refrain from engaging with her fellow congregation members while in this fraught situation.

It might be tempting to think that the questioning member ought to engage with her fellow church-goers and that being so easily swayed and silenced by countervailing social pressures is merely a reflection of weakness of will. After all, we might laud the person who stands up for what they think is right and true despite others' attempts to coerce or silence them. If the church member refrains from engaging with the other congregation members merely to maintain her own happiness and to avoid the potential hassle that revealing her beliefs would cause, this is not a justifiable excuse. However, if she has a tenuous sense of self-respect at best, such that she feels that she has very little worth as a person and generally lacks confidence in her own judgments, then she ought to first build up her sense of self-respect before she enters situations that could be damaging to it. Even if she has built up a modicum of confidence in her rational abilities, she may still experience both internal and external mechanisms that push back against that confidence. The external mechanisms can be very forceful in part because external pressure on our beliefs and confidence in our rational abilities is not merely a social pressure but also a rational one.²⁹

We do not gain confidence in our ability to form reasonable beliefs in a vacuum. Instead, we respond to feedback from other persons, authority figures, and experts to judge the reliability of our beliefs.³⁰ We still might hold that marginalized persons have a responsibility to fight against their own oppression, but this responsibility could entail

²⁹ Karen Jones, "The Politics of Intellectual Self-Trust," *Social Epistemology* 26 (2) (April 2012): 238.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 245-247.

different actions depending on the context.^{31, 32} For example, before the church member can rationally engage with the other members and maintain her sense of self-respect, she might need to further bolster her confidence in her own reason and secure outside sources of support and other exit strategies. Once she has developed a robust sense of self-respect and no longer faces significant harm from her church community, she may then have some obligation to engage the church members.

In less dire circumstances, marginalized persons may have good reason to refrain from engaging with persons who hold oppressive attitudes. This will often be dependent on the relation of the conversation topic to one's axes of oppression or privilege. Refraining from engaging with oppressors may also be inadvisable due to a general lack of confidence in one's rational capacities. For example, it may be inadvisable for a black person to engage with a white supremacist on the subject of racism, if he does not have a normally sufficient sense of self-worth. If he does choose to engage, the black person will most likely be subject to a testimonial injustice wherein the white supremacist gives less credence to his experiences and viewpoints as a person of color. More importantly, the subject itself could be incredibly fraught for him to discuss, as it may require him to

³¹ Carol Hay argues for such an obligation in her paper titled "The Obligation to Resist Oppression." Hay thinks that oppressed persons have an imperfect duty to resist oppression in order to protect their rational nature. However, Hay is careful to specify that this resistance can take many forms depending on external circumstances and may only require internal resistance in situations that threaten an oppressed person's survival or well-being. Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 42 (1) (Spring 2011): 21–45.

³² Failing to fight one's oppression may also belie a lack of self-respect. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Servility and Self Respect," *The Monist* (January 1973): 87-104, accessed April 27, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27902296>.

defend his own humanity. Being forced to defend one's basic worth as a person to someone who is actively arguing against that worth can be very harmful to one's sense of self-respect.³³

These same principles apply across different axes of oppression, such that women should not always be required to engage with sexists about gender equality, LGBT persons should not always be required to engage with homophobic persons about LGBT equality, disabled persons should not always be required to engage with ableists about disability rights, etc.³⁴ My examples here concern single axes of oppression, but my account is also compatible with multiple, intersecting axes of oppression which raise their own, unique problems. Thus, marginalized persons have good reason not to rationally engage their oppressors when doing so would be harmful to the self-respect of the marginalized.

There may be some exceptions to this heuristic, namely when rationally engaging with oppressors is necessary for marginalized persons to effect social progress. When

³³ Interacting with oppressors can also open up marginalized persons to the possibility of being subject to microaggressions. Though more subtle than open affirmations of oppressive attitudes, the effect of microaggressions can compound over time such that the experience of one minor indignity is not merely a one-off incident but instead emblematic of a larger pattern of derision and dismissal. Vanessa Hunn et. al., "Microaggression and the mitigation of psychological harm: four social workers' exposition for care of clients, students, and faculty who suffer 'a thousand little cuts,'" *Journal of Pan African Studies* 7 (9) (April 2015): 41.

³⁴ The idea of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who recognized the importance of recognizing black women's oppression as distinct from the combination of black men's and white women's oppressions. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8) (1989): 139-167.

these cases arise, marginalized persons may have competing obligations of self-respect, such that engaging with oppressive persons may be both damaging to their sense of self-respect within the testimonial exchange but also potentially advantageous in gaining public recognition of their dignity. Adjudicating between these obligations may involve actively refraining from engaging with oppressors at some times while making an effort to engage at others. However, much will depend on the relative harms to self-respect in each scenario. For example, if the harms incurred by testimonial injustice are significantly less severe than the societal harms, it may be better to engage oppressors in order to push back against societal harms. It is important to note that in cases with competing obligations, it is not required that we must sacrifice our own dignity to show respect to others. When faced with equal, opposing duties to ourselves and to another, we may prioritize our own concerns out of rational self-interest.

Additionally, oppressors cannot demand that the most proximal marginalized person educate them about their oppression as an act of unpaid labor. This action belies an epistemic neglect in the oppressor themselves, such that they have failed to seek out available, freely-offered educational resources.³⁵ Additionally, this kind of demand shows great disrespect to the marginalized person, such that they are at best merely treated as a convenient source of knowledge and labor without regard to their autonomous desires. In more severe cases, oppressors may demand that marginalized persons educate them

³⁵ There may exist certain cases in which there is little to no educational information available on the experience of the marginalized. In these cases, it may be permissible to ask marginalized persons to explain their experience, but it is impermissible in interpersonal contexts to demand that they do so without their consent.

merely to provide the oppressor with an opportunity to dismiss the testimony of the marginalized and assert their own contrary views as equally (if not more) justified.³⁶ The oppressor may use this as an excuse to pretend as if they have sufficiently fulfilled their epistemic duty to understand and listen to the experiences of the marginalized.

Conversations about oppression can become emotionally fraught. For example, conversations about race with white persons unaccustomed to thinking about whiteness often elicit defensive emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt.³⁷ This is in part due to the fact that these discussions threaten the unstated assumption of the white perspective as objective and normative.³⁸ When this assumption is undermined, white persons are faced with the daunting task of re-evaluating their fundamental perceptions of the world. This task requires the emotional work of processing potentially strong feelings not only by the person undergoing the perspectival change, but also by the educator. The educator may also feel a need to make the privileged person feel comfortable, to respond with empathy, and to help them moderate strong emotions. Each of these responses can be fairly draining on the educator's emotional resources.

³⁶ Nora Berenstain discusses how privileged persons' expectation of marginalized persons to educate them can be exploitative in her paper "Epistemic Exploitation." Nora Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo* 3 (26) (2016).

³⁷ Robin DiAngelo discusses this phenomenon and the factors that contribute to it in her paper "White Fragility." Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (3) (2011): 54-70.

³⁸ Charles Mills elucidates the normative nature of whiteness and the reasons it remains uninterrogated by white persons in his paper "White Ignorance." Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan et. al., (State University of New York Press, 2007), 11-38.

For marginalized persons who regularly must spend time and energy dealing with the emotional consequences of their own oppression, it is unjust to also require them to also deal with the emotions felt by the privileged when they are confronted with oppression. Privileged persons may also have reason to refrain from helping others deal with the emotions raised by difficult conversations if they are dealing with the emotional repercussions from life experiences of divorce, death of a family member, or illness. Helping others work through their emotions is something that persons may freely choose to do and may have reason to do in some circumstances, but marginalized persons should not always be expected to perform the emotional work needed by the privileged.

Because of the inability of some marginalized persons to engage in conversations with oppressors due to considerations of self-respect, there is a need for allies to step up and take on the labor of educating and conversing with oppressors. While allies may have a general duty to do this out of respect for the rational nature of oppressors, they have an additional duty to engage oppressors in order to advocate for the needs to minority persons and to effect social change. Marginalized persons themselves may also take it upon themselves to advocate as allies for other marginalized persons on topics that are not likely to be damaging to their self-respect. For example, a white woman may be unable to engage a sexist man on the subject of sexism, but she can engage on the subject of racism with other white persons.³⁹

³⁹ When engaging with others, those acting as allies should be careful to avoid acting disrespectfully towards the marginalized persons for whom they are advocating. For example, the white woman engaging with other white persons on the subject of racism could act disrespectfully if she were to view herself as a white savior. How she acts as an

Additionally, allies may need to be sensitive to the contexts in which they engage oppressors. Some cases in which it may be best for allies to refrain from engaging include those in which marginalized persons are bystanders. For example, imagine that you are a non-religious person at a social gathering with a Muslim friend. Another party attendee begins loudly spouting claims that all Muslims are terrorists. While it may be respectful to rationally engage with the Islamophobic partygoer privately, the public nature of this encounter seems to call for a different response.

If you were to engage in conversation with the Islamophobic partygoer in front of the other party attendees, it is likely that he would continue spouting hate speech that could be detrimental to the self-respect of your Muslim friend. While public mocking or otherwise demeaning responses are still prohibited out of recognition respect for the Islamophobe's rational nature, calmly communicating to him that his claims are reprehensible and inaccurate, perhaps offering to speak with him at another time, and then exiting the conversation may better protect the self-respect of your friend.⁴⁰ However, if the situation poses a threat of violence, it is advisable to de-escalate the situation as best as possible.

In this case, there are clear, conflicting values and duties: one's own self-respect, the self-respect of one's friend, respect for the Islamophobe's rational nature, and the basic safety of those involved. Determining the best response in this case is a fraught endeavor, although I think a good response is one that recognizes and attempts to

ally should be informed by the considerations of the marginalized and responsive to claims by marginalized persons that certain actions are disrespectful.

⁴⁰ Credit goes to Michael Ball-Blakely for alerting me to this kind of case.

reconcile the conflicting values at stake. I have offered what I take to be such a response above; however, I remain agnostic as to whether it is the best response in this situation.

One might think that situations like these are moral tragedies in which any response we are able to give will not be ideally respectful to all parties involved. For example, in this case it seems that we are incapable of responding ideally to the Islamophobic partygoer by rationally engaging with him, because doing so may forfeit our duty of respect to our Muslim friend. Likewise, a response that might be ideally respectful to our friend may fail to show full respect to the Islamophobe. We may conceive of our options in situations like these as being limited to a select number of non-ideal responses which each fail morally in some way.

However, one might also conceive of cases like these as merely more complicated moral equations that can be solved with enough understanding of the situation and the relevant moral principles. On this conception, there is an ideally respectful response that should not leave the moral agent with any regret. I will not adjudicate between these views in this thesis, but on either conception it is true that complex situations like these may require intensive study and comprehension to make the best moral judgment. I do not presume to identify the best response in each situation, but instead to identify and outline some of the various moral considerations that may be at play in the kinds of situations with which I am concerned.

One practical objection, or at the very least a troubling consideration, is that the usual case of persons who hold unreasonable beliefs is one in which the other person does not meet the minimum requirements of respect and reciprocity with regard to our

self-respect. This is a deeper concern, and one I am not sure I can adequately address. It is true that some persons who hold unreasonable views will also be disrespectful. However, as my paradigm cases illustrate, there are other underlying explanations for unreasonable beliefs. But, even if the vast majority of persons who hold unreasonable beliefs are disrespectful, those whose sense of self-respect is not at risk should be willing to engage with the interlocutor until she shows herself to be disrespectful. I remain optimistic that it is not the case that most persons who hold unreasonable beliefs will be disrespectful, but the imperfect duty to rationally engage those who hold unreasonable beliefs is not undermined by the possibility that it is.

One additional worry is that by rationally engaging with oppressors and attempting to listen to and understand their reasons we will cause them to become further epistemically puffed up. In other words, if we listen to someone who is already epistemically arrogant, we may cause them to become more sure of their own unreasonable views and less open to rational reflection. Even if in some cases rational engagement may encourage epistemic arrogance, I maintain that we still ought to engage our interlocutor out of recognition respect for her rational capacities. But, I also worry that this objection conflates listening to and taking seriously someone's unreasonable view with giving credence to the view or treating it as on equal epistemic footing with reasonable views. As I explained in Section IV, I assume we may take seriously that someone holds a view based upon the reasons they communicate without believing that the view is reasonable or that the reasons act as sufficient justification.

However, our internal attitudes are not always easily communicated in our interactions with others. For this reason, we may need to be careful about not only what attitudes we take up towards our interlocutor but also in which contexts we choose to engage him. For example, engaging a white supremacist in a public forum may less clearly show a repudiation of his views, as this may give him a seemingly equal platform from which to spout his unreasonable and reprehensible ideas. Even if we ought not engage with those who hold reprehensible views in the public sphere, we may still find other ways to engage them that more clearly communicate to them and others that their views are wholly unreasonable.

In sum, in certain contexts it is justifiable to refrain from engaging with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs if doing so presents a real and present harm to our sense of self-respect. This conclusion is consistent with the idea that rational engagement is an imperfect duty, such that we ought to always have the general disposition to engage others in the right circumstances but also be able to discern when it is advisable to do so. I have given several considerations to better determine whether a given case will pose a threat to our sense of self-respect, including the relation of power-differentiated social identities between ourselves and our interlocutor, the relative stability of our internal sense of self-respect, and the potential for social or physical retribution. There may be other considerations in the case of minority persons that I have not considered here; however, I take it that these considerations are central to understanding the case of marginalized persons interacting with oppressors. Furthermore, I assume that these self-regarding considerations of respect can inform our responses in other cases.

CHAPTER SEVEN

OTHER PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the previous section I explored one consideration that might inform our judgments as to whether it is good for us to rationally engage other persons in a given situation, namely that of self-respect. In this section I will explore a few other relevant considerations.

The first consideration is that we may have a stronger obligation to engage with someone if we are in some kind of special relationship with them, for example, as a friend, family member, teacher, or fellow citizen.⁴¹ Although these special relationships in general give us additional responsibilities to these persons, we may also have a stronger obligation to rationally engage with those to whom we are specially related over mere strangers. This could be explained by the nature of some relationships, such that, for example, stronger friendships may be in part constituted not only by participation in shared physical practices or surface-level conversation but also by conversations about fundamental beliefs and values. In other cases, citizens might have duties to engage each other in matters of public reason in order to uphold democratic institutions and values.

Second, we might have prior, competing obligations that we need to fulfill instead of spending time addressing someone's unreasonable beliefs. I do not mean merely competing values, but instead specific priorities like keeping one's promises, fulfilling

⁴¹ For a Kantian view of the importance of special relationships, see: Marilea Bramer, "The Importance of Personal Relationships in Kantian Moral Theory: A Reply to Care Ethics," *Hypatia* 25 (1) (2010): 121-139.

time-sensitive job responsibilities, etc. For example, we may have more reason to engage someone on our own free time than when we have to pick up a friend from the airport or meet a project deadline. Not all of these obligations must be other-oriented and may include commitments to self-care, rest, etc. Some conflicts may be between imperfect duties and may admit to personal choice between equally valuable competing options, while other conflicts may exist between perfect and imperfect duties such that we must fulfill the stronger obligation.

Third, our relative expertise in a particular subject matter might inform whether we are best suited to adequately address the subject in a discussion. For example, an evolutionary biologist may be better equipped than an accountant to discuss the scientific evidence of evolution with a creationist. Or, a religious studies professor may be better able to dispute the claim that all members of a particular religion endorse extremist values than a chemist. Although both examples rely on professional expertise, expertise can be held in other capacities.

When engaging with others, we should be cognizant of our relative expertise in the subject matter we discuss. An ideally respectful person who aims at respectful, rational engagement may even take upon herself the introspective duty of determining the strengths and limits of her knowledge. If we engage with someone on a topic on which we are not sufficiently informed, we can respect the rationality of our interlocutor by pointing them to educational materials or referring them to someone else who is more knowledgeable. Presumably cases like these will occur when beliefs we formed in the past are based upon reasonable evidence no longer fresh in our minds or when they

concern expert views of which we may not have full comprehension. It would be epistemically arrogant to engage with others on subjects on which we do not have and have never had sufficient knowledge or expertise.

Fourth, there will be certain contexts in which conditions of reciprocity are less likely to obtain than others. While conditions of reciprocity may be lacking in hierarchical or oppressive situations, they can also occur in different contexts. For example, it will be more difficult to rationally engage someone who is acting as a member of a special interest group such that their job is to convince others of their position. However, we may be able to engage the same person when she is acting on her own free time. Although these kinds of situations may make it more difficult to convince others of reasonable views, the important consideration is that this lack of reciprocity may make them unable to fully participate in rational discussion and potentially more likely to be dismissive or otherwise act disrespectfully.

Fifth, we may have more reason to engage someone when her unreasonable beliefs may lead to harm. For example, imagine that you encounter an expectant mother who believes vaccines cause autism and plans to refrain from vaccinating her children. Not only is her theoretical belief that vaccines cause autism unreasonable as it is contrary to a large body of scientific research, it also influences her practical decision to oppose having her children vaccinated. While we still have reason to rationally engage with her out of a recognition of her ability to rationally revise her theoretical belief, we also have reason to convince her otherwise out of a concern for the wellbeing of her children and the children of others who might be negatively impacted by her decision. This kind of

case is more urgent than that of a chemtrail conspiracy theorist whose beliefs do not have as negative an impact on his wellbeing or the wellbeing of those around him.

Undoubtedly there are other relevant considerations that I have not mentioned here, as real life cases are often incredibly complex. We will thus need to use our own judgment to pick out and evaluate relevant considerations and decide how to respond in any given case.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

If the broadly Kantian picture given here is correct and my argument for an imperfect duty to rationally engage persons with unreasonable beliefs succeeds, we may draw several conclusions with broader implications. First, we ought to respect both the practical and theoretical capacities of reason of others, not merely their practical capacities of reason or ability to set ends. Second, imperfect duties of respect are extended not only to those who have developed their capacities but are also required for persons who have not fully developed them or who fail to exercise them well in certain cases. Although we may show appraisal respect to those who have spent their lives developing their rational capacities and exercising them well, we still owe a basic recognition respect to other persons merely for the possession of rational capacities. Third, this recognition respect can inform both how we ought to interact with other persons in our everyday lives and what attitudes we ought to take up towards those persons. We can think about these day to day positive duties of respect in terms of an imperfect duty, but they can also be conceived of in terms of an attitude or a disposition.

One avenue for further research might include the relation of political duties of public reason to the moral duty of rational engagement. Questions to consider might include how the moral duty informs the political duty and whether the moral and the political might conflict. While I have hinted at some relation between the two in this thesis, much more could be said on this matter. Another area of research might be to consider in more depth the different moral considerations at play in public discourse and

in private conversations. For example, are the aims and ends of public discourse at all the same as private discourse? If these types of engagement have different aims, how might this influence our responses in each case? Philosophical research in this area might further consider the credence given to views in public and private discourse and the differential impacts of allowing unreasonable views to be presented in each case.

A third area of additional research might concern the norms governing conversation and how they relate to the imperfect duty of rational engagement. While I have pointed to a few considerations that inform how we ought to engage in rational, respectful conversations with others, I have done so only with an eye for how we might best respect our interlocutor. Other questions might concern how the social function of conversation and the importance of conversation in moral development affect how we conceive of the moral duty of rational engagement. Finally, research could be conducted to further analyze complications of non-ideal testimonial exchanges and how these complications inform an ideally respectful response. I have given a brief overview of some of the concerns and considerations taken up by feminist epistemologists, but there are undoubtedly cases and reasons that I have failed to account for within this thesis.

In sum, I have shown how we might apply abstract principles of respect and human value to real-life, imperfect circumstances. In particular, I have shown how we might apply broadly Kantian principles to everyday situations in which we encounter competent adults who hold unreasonable beliefs. This project is important because it illustrates the applicability of general Kantian moral principles to specific, differentiated cases. Most significantly, the work in this thesis has contributed to the literature

discussing the practical implications of a Kantian moral view. I conclude that if we accept a broadly Kantian moral view, we ought to at least sometimes and to some extent engage with persons who hold unreasonable beliefs.

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