The Significance of the Ethics of Respect

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author examines the idea of respect and makes this the cornerstone of a new approach to ethics that is particularly well suited to addressing the challenges society faces in an age shaped so profoundly by technology. The author uncovers a wealth of meaning in the notion of 'respect' and shows how this relates to the gaze. The attentive gaze is seen as the essence of respect. This thought-provoking analysis is presented in a straightforward way and is certainly open to further development and refinement in fields such as ecology, medicine, education and the promotion of civic-mindedness.

Keywords: Attentive Gaze, Fragility, Respect, Techno-ethics, Technology

‘An art which will not implant the faculty of sight [in the soul] for that exists already, but will set it straight when it has been turned in the wrong direction, and is looking away from the truth…’ (Plato, Republic, VII, 518d)

QUESTIONS

Three main questions are posed in this paper: what is respect? What merits respect? And why might the ethics of respect be a valuable approach for a time such as ours, shaped largely by science and technology?

There are words that explain and words that need explanation. There are also words that at the same time explain and need explanation; respect is such a word. In principle, the experience of respect for something or someone is not unusual or problematic: it is an altogether normal and straightforward phenomenon. Yet reflecting on the meaning of respect can turn out to be a very worthwhile endeavour. Despite being one of the most significant moral attitudes, the notion of respect has received little attention compared to the countless pages dedicated, for example, to love or to justice. As is the case for other important notions, the term’s wealth of meaning makes defining its key concept more difficult; in response to the broad and varied landscape before us, we must identify what is most essential. The position argued for here is that the essence of respect is determined by the gaze.

The second question formulated above reflects a common way of thinking about respect: it is believed and said that there are people and things that should be respected, that deserve respect. This expression alerts us to the fact that respect is an ethical attitude that links us directly

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to things, to the world. It is not my intention to resurrect outmoded forms of more or less naïve realism; after some of the lessons of modern philosophy, it is no longer possible to get around the centrality of the person as knowing subject. However, this does not preclude the possibility of exploring, as a number of contemporary approaches attempt to do, a philosophy that turns on the highly significant relationship between the self and the world. In a philosophy of this type, respect could play a crucial role given that it implies fundamental links between the self and the world – between the attitude of respect (on the part of the subject) and the person or thing that is the intentional object of that attitude. Reflecting on what it is that merits respect lead us to the notions of harmony, fragility and secret, and we see how, based on these ideas, it is possible to understand why there are things in the world that merit respect.

The third question is intended to draw attention to the fact that even if the need is not yet urgent, this is at least an opportune moment to promote an ethical system based on respect. No one disputes the fact that we are living in the age of science and technology, which are not only the driving forces for contemporary society but also ways of seeing and understanding the world and life. Indeed, even on the planetary scale, the techno-scientific worldview is gaining ever-greater hegemony. My objective is not to give respect a more significant role within the techno-scientific worldview, but rather to show that respect is the key to a distinct worldview. Moreover, if adopted together with the currently dominant worldview, this new perspective would make us less one-dimensional and more balanced at a time when superficiality and imbalance are unmistakable ills afflicting our society.

EVERYDAY EXPRESSIONS

Philosophy frequently finds in familiar and colloquial turns of phrase not only a starting point for reflection but also clues that point to the essence of a particular term or concept. The word respect is part of our everyday speech; everyone uses it, knows what it means, and understands that respect for people and certain things is a good example of moral conduct. It is also one of the terms most frequently used in moral and political discourse and in ethical theories of all times. It comes up everywhere: ‘respect for human dignity’, ‘respect for public things’, ‘respect for the environment’, ‘respect for the elderly’, ‘respect for oneself’, ‘respect for justice and freedom’, ‘respect for the law’, ‘respect for works of art’, ‘respect for animals and nature’, ‘respect for the sacred’...

Respect is an intentional relationship, an attitude towards someone or something. Given that we sometimes see respect as being based on a particular reason, we sometimes use the expression ‘out of respect for...’ In the phrase ‘out of respect for his age’, for instance, we understand that age is the main reason for a certain kind of respect shown towards the person in question. We also find the expression ‘respect of...’ used when we refer to the subject who adopts the attitude of respect, for example: ‘the respect of students for their teacher’ or ‘earn the respect of everyone’.

Respect can be referred to as a kind of attitude – ‘a respectful attitude’ – or as a virtue – that ascribed to a respectful individual. Actions, particularly the use of language, may also be described as respectful. We speak of ‘respectful language’, as opposed to language that is coarse, immoderate, ill-mannered, or perhaps even worse, language used to express sarcasm or utter insults and offensive remarks. To speak respectfully of someone is to take care in our choice of words, avoiding terms that are too direct and using instead words and expressions that refer to or reach that person in a way that is considerate and measured. Words, in short, that maintain a certain ‘respectful distance’.

With all of these different ways of using the word, however, it is not clear how respect
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