JPE

Why Me?

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When a misfortune befalls us, it is natural for us to react: 'Why me?' This is not just the question: 'Why did this unfortunate event occur?' Nor are we simply wondering: 'Why do such things happen?' The self-reference implies a comparison we generally manage to keep at the back of our minds: 'Why did this happen to me and not someone else?' Importantly, this is not an expression of idle curiosity. It is an expression of shock, dismay, and disbelief. I am interested in both the moral significance of this natural reaction and the moral significance of our disinclination to acknowledge it. If, as I believe, we are often morally permitted to promote our own interests over the interests of others, if it is our disposition to do so that underlies the 'Why me?' reaction, and if we are nonetheless right to think there is something shameful about reacting this way, what does this suggest about the moral significance of our morally permissible self-privileging behavior? How close can we come to reconciling (1) our right to live lives that express very little concern for the fate of others with (2) an ideal of human solidarity that manifests itself in our self-censuring attitude toward the 'Why me?' thought and toward the very self-privileging actions whose moral permissibility we have least reason to challenge?

Keywords: moral permissibility.

I believe that if people's lives matter impersonally at all, they matter hugely. They matter so much, in fact, that the recognition of it is hard to bear, and most of us engage in some degree of suppression of the impersonal standpoint in order to avoid facing our pathetic failure to meet its claim (Nagel 1995: 19):

> How to know what is mine? The disciples of Christ asked: Who is my neighbor?
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> I knew a child who cried because his concierge's son had died. His parents let him cry, and then they got annoyed. 'After all, that little boy was not

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https://doi.org/10.3998/jpe.6207

> your brother.' The child dried his tears. But that was a dangerous thing to teach. Useless to cry over a little boy who is a stranger: so be it. But why cry over one's brother? 'It's none of your business,' says the woman holding back her husband who wants to join in a fight. The husband goes away, docile. But if the woman asks for his help a few minutes later, saying: 'I'm tired, I'm cold,' he looks at her with surprise from the heart of the solitude where he has withdrawn, thinking: 'Is that my business?' What does India matter? And what does Epirus matter? Why call this soil, this woman, these children mine? I brought these children into the world; they are here. The woman is next to me; the soil is under my feet. No tie exists between them and me. . . . Often during hardship man thus denies all his attachments. He does not want hardship; he looks for a way to flee from it. He looks within himself: he sees an indifferent body, a heart that beats to a steady rhythm. A voice says: 'I exist.' The hardship is not there. It is in the deserted house, on this dead face, in these streets. If I go within myself, I look at those inert streets with astonishment, saying: 'But what does it matter to me? All this is nothing to me.' I find myself indifferent, peaceful.
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> 'That little boy is not my brother.' But if I cry over him, he is no longer a stranger to me. . . . When the disciples asked Christ: who is my neighbor? Christ didn't respond by an enumeration. He told the parable of the good Samaritan. The latter was the neighbor of the man abandoned on the road; he covered him with his cloak and came to his aid. One is not the neighbor of anyone; one makes the other a neighbor by making oneself [*se faisant*] his neighbor through an act. (Beauvoir 2004: 92)

One Has Done Nothing Morally Impermissible, But . . . (Exhibit 1 and Introductory Remarks)

When a misfortune befalls us—when we are diagnosed with an aggressive cancer in what we thought were our 'early years', when a faulty electric wire causes our house to burn down, when our child runs out into the street and is hit by a car, when our child is born with a permanently compromised mental capacity—we may find ourselves thinking (screaming) 'Why ME?!!' There is more than one thought one might express in this way, and I will work my way up to a more detailed characterization of the experience of dismay and disbelief I have in mind after I present my second exhibit of the attitude that underlies this thought. For now, it suffices to note that this attitude presupposes a significant difference between our relation to our own suffering and our relation to the suffering of others. The intensity of the 'Why Me?' experience contrasts with,

and only makes sense in terms of, a relatively unperturbed acceptance of the fact that such misfortunes befall other people all the time; the *me* in 'Why me?' is essentially comparative. Even if we are strongly disinclined to spell out for ourselves the self-privileging aspect of this comparison, we implicitly acknowledge this aspect insofar as we are strongly inclined to keep the 'Why me?' thought to ourselves.

One of my aims in this paper is to argue that the attitude expressed in the 'Why me?' thought plays a crucial role in most of our life choices. Another aim is to argue that the natural self-censoring reaction to this thought reflects our endorsement of a moral ideal that is distinct from the ideal of respecting people as 'ends in themselves'. Very roughly (and I will say more about this in later sections), we treat someone with respect when we enable her to set and pursue her own ends, provided that in so doing, she does not significantly impede anyone else's opportunity to do likewise. Even if, I will argue, this is our fundamental moral obligation—even if, in particular, we have no distinct obligation to maximize utility or any other valuable condition—our reaction to the 'Why me?' thought is our way of registering the fact that, by our own lights, our relationship to one another has a moral significance at odds with our relationship as mutually respectful bearers of rights. There is an aspirational element in our conception of how each of us relates to the others, which we cannot live up to by simply living up to the aspiration to treat one another with concern and respect. This means that the permissions we take ourselves to have do not appear to provide us with adequate moral justification for what they permit. Importantly, this is a genuine conflict; it does not simply involve the recognition that we are justified in 'going beyond' what is morally permissible.

I am prepared to concede that someone who gives in to the self-privileging 'Why me?' thought—and even returns to it obsessively for a long period of time—need have no tendency to violate her moral obligations. Nonetheless, I endorse the self-censoring response to this thought, and I want to consider what it suggests about the moral significance of the priority we give to our own lives and the lives of our loved ones. How do both the 'Why me?' thought and the discomfort we experience in thinking it relate to our disposition to privilege ourselves over others in ways we rightly take to be morally permissible?[1] How, to put the same point the other way around, does this double-reaction relate to

1. An act is said to be 'supererogatory' if it is morally superior to alternative actions that are also morally permitted under the circumstances. In Buss (2023) I challenge the intelligibility of the assumptions that underlie the judgement of moral superiority. For my purposes here, what matters is that I am speaking of actions that 'go beyond the call of duty' because they are responsive to an ideal that is in tension with the ideal of respect. To call attention to the 'tension' between these two ideals is to note that there is no more fundamental moral standard relative to which being guided by one of them is morally superior to being guided by the other.

our disposition to respect others as ends in themselves in ways that enable us to avoid identifying their fates with our own?

In exploring this issue, I will be going over very old ground; at some level of granularity, there may be nothing new to say about the moral significance of the disposition to privilege one's own interests.[2] This concession notwithstanding, thinking about the cases I will be highlighting in this paper has reanimated—and complicated—this issue for me in a way that seemed worth exploring. More generally, I am operating on the assumption that it can be fruitful to approach an old, familiar issue from a new direction.

This is what I will be doing in exploring the hypothesis that though human nature and the conditions of rational agency impose constraints on what we are morally required to do, our actions typically reflect an attitude toward others that is morally problematic by our own lights, even when we do not violate these constraints, and have no disposition to do so. In sum, (1) most of us endorse a moral ideal that is distinct from the ideals of respect and benevolence, and (2) most of our morally permissible actions fall far short of this ideal because most of these actions reflect the orientation toward ourselves and others that is expressed in the 'Why me?' response, even if they also reflect a conscientious appreciation of what we owe one another.[3]

In defending these claims, I will supplement my discussion of the 'Why me?' reaction with a discussion of a second, very different, moral exhibit. I will argue that the scenario in this exhibit calls attention to the same morally problematic attitude that is manifest in the 'Why me?' thought and to the discomfort occasioned when we become aware of this attitude. Not only, I will argue, is it natural to ignore this attitude when we are acting in morally permissible ways but the importance of accommodating it is central to our understanding of what distinguishes permissible from impermissible actions. Importantly, the resulting tension in our moral stance toward one another has nothing essential to do with the familiar conflict between deontology and consequentialism—indeed, nothing to do with any debate over what we owe one another.[4] It is, rather, a tension

2. I have myself already approached this broad issue from two different directions in Buss (2020) and Buss (2006).

3. Some philosophers have defended the possibility of a class of actions they call 'suberogatory'. From what I can tell, these are not supposed to be cases that essentially involve conflicting ideals. In any case, I will leave it to others to determine whether I am, in effect, arguing that most of what those of us privileged few do in living our lives qualifies, by our own lights, as suberogatory. (For discussion of this alleged moral phenomenon, see Driver [1992] and Harman [2016]).

4. In thus distinguishing the tension that interests me from the sort of conflicts familiar from discussions of moral dilemmas, I am offering a distinct diagnosis of the temptation to self-deception that Lucy Allais so eloquently describes in her Kantian analysis of the moral standing of those of us whose privileged lives are inseparable from 'structural injustices' (see Allais [2021]) According to this analysis, the injustices leave us with a situation in which we 'simultaneously realize that [we are] entitled to enforce some right while also recognizing that [we are] not entitled

between our assumptions about what anyone can reasonably demand of us and what we demand (not unreasonably, we think) of ourselves.

If, as I believe, there is something shameful about the 'Why me?' reaction, then this is because, even if we are not obligated to maximize human well-being, our actions can fail to express a proper attitude toward others even if these actions are governed by principles that others cannot reasonably reject. They can fall short of a moral ideal that is distinct from both the ideal of respect and the ideal of benevolence. Whereas the ideal of respect is manifest in symmetrical relationships of mutual accountability between sovereign agents, and the ideal of benevolence is manifest in asymmetrical relationships between benefactors and beneficiaries, this third ideal is manifest in relationships of identification, in which each person recognizes the other as a member of a single community.

I will characterize this third ideal as the ideal of *human solidarity* (*solidarity*, for short).[5] Even if we assume, as I will be doing for the sake of my inquiry, that this ideal is not a guide to what distinguishes the morally permissible from the morally impermissible, it is a regulative ideal of moral agency. Even if whether someone acts wrongly depends on what others can reasonably demand of them as an individual with their own personal attachments and their own life to live, we can pass this second-personal test while failing to do justice to our first-personal relation to one another as members of a plural subject with a common

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to enforce it, as this would wrong others' (52). As far as I can tell, Allais's diagnosis is, in principle, compatible with mine. (More than one thing can be amiss in our broken world.) It is also possible that we mean the same thing when she says that 'how we live and what we have' 'wrongs others,' and I say: 'No, we are not violating anyone's rights, but there is something morally problematic about our morally permissible behavior—i.e., there is something wrong with it'. These remarks should be kept in mind when I address the contractualist conception of what we owe one another. As Nagel notes, it is not obvious that this is a fully coherent conception of moral permissibility. On the one hand, it seems that 'I cannot be condemned as unreasonable if I reject a principle that would require me to abandon most of the substance of my life to save yours'(Nagel 2001b: 151). On the other hand, would those who are destitute be unreasonable if they rejected a principle that would allow for the sort of disparities of wealth that have so long blighted our relations with one another? It may well be impossible, Nagel concludes, to discover any set of principles that no one can reasonably reject.

5. As Rahel Jaeggi notes, 'The more popular the concept [of solidarity], the more ambiguous its meaning' (Jaeggi 2001: 287). One could endorse a conception of solidarity that encompasses a heterogeneous collection of recognizably moral assumptions. Thus, Nagel approvingly notes that 'Wiggins finds a number of distinct concerns and dispositions, each of which forms a part of our solidarity with our fellow human beings: the sense that certain acts are strictly forbidden, or unspeakable; the priority of fundamental needs; the idea of what is humanly livable; the weak but very general sentiment of benevolence; the value of honesty, fairness, and so forth. This does not result in a comprehensive system that tells us what we ought to do in every situation' (Nagel 2009: 148). Clearly, it is not this expansive conception of 'solidarity' I am probing in this paper. Equally clearly, however, in probing a more restrictive conception, I am calling attention to the extent to which there is no single, coherent moral 'system' that provides clear guidance in every, or indeed almost any, situation.

fate.[6] This is the possibility reflected in our self-censuring reaction to the 'Why me?' response.

As the preceding remarks imply, it not only seems to me that this reaction is quite common; I also believe that those of us who react this way are on to something: we are right to endorse the ideal of human solidarity. This belief will guide the reflections that follow. But I hope that even those who do not share it will gain something from joining me in considering how the ideal of human solidarity relates to other, more widely discussed, moral ideals.

Before I turn to my second exhibit, I want to acknowledge one more thing it will be important for the reader to keep in mind: if relating to one another as members of a shared 'we' is to be more than an aspiration, this will surely depend on significant political—and legal—reforms. This dependence has at least two aspects. First, individual actions have relatively little power to bring about systemic change. And second, because, as I will argue, it is not reasonable to demand individual decision-makers to refrain from favoring their loved ones over everyone else, expressions of solidarity must largely be located in the political, legal, economic, and social structures within which we live. As Thomas Nagel notes, 'Any political theory that merits respect has to offer us an escape from the self-protective blocking out of the importance of others, which we may

6. The ideal of solidarity is generally acknowledged to be distinct from the ideal of respect. So is the ideal of love. Recently, however, P. Quinn White has argued that the 'universal love' of agape (the love for all) is the basis of the ideal of respect. According to White, 'Our obligation to respect all is . . . an obligation to approximate the fundamental ethical ideal: "agape"; respect for all is an approximation, a shadow, of love'. As he notes, it is interesting to relate this position to David Velleman's claim that 'respect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value', that of another's humanity (Velleman 1999: 366). In particular, on White's account, 'we are required to respect all exactly because [this] is the appropriate approximation of the maximal response of love'. (Note that, as White himself concedes in discussing Reinhold Niebuhr in a footnote, one can endorse some version of the 'approximation' claim while nonetheless maintaining that respect is a distinct ideal, regulating a distinct sort of relationship: 'For Niebuhr, consideration of rights or what is owed only makes sense in a context of conflict and competing interests whereas love exists in a space of harmony'.) As I learned from Allan Wood (Wood unpublished manuscript) at a recent conference, and was reminded again by White, Kant endorses a conceptual scheme that is more like mine. On his view, 'The principle of mutual love admonishes [people] constantly to come closer to [each other]; that of the respect they owe another, to keep themselves at a distance from [each other]; and should one of these great moral forces fail, then 'nothingness (immorality), with gaping throat would drink up the whole kingdom of (moral) beings like a drop of water' (Kant 2017: 6:449). (Kant is here citing the poet Albrecht von Haller.) In a very interesting discussion of the political significance of the emotions, Martha Nussbaum seems to split the difference between White and Kant: 'Respect and even sympathy, without love, is', she claims, 'insufficient and dangerously unstable' (Nussbaum 2015: 165). Her view is, perhaps, closest to Habermas's claim that 'justice conceived deontologically requires solidarity as its reverse side'. Putting the point in a way that brings him a little bit closer to White, Habermas explains that justice and solidarity are 'not so much . . . two moments that supplement each other as two aspects of the same thing' (See Habermas 1989: 47).

find psychologically unavoidable in a badly arranged world but which involves the denial of an essential aspect of ourselves'(Nagel 1995: 19).[7]

Those of us who support such reforms will need to form bonds of political solidarity in order to help bring about the desired change.[8] This having been said, my aim in this paper is not to contribute to political philosophy; nor will I be focusing on what individuals can do to put a more solidarity-friendly political theory into practice; nor will I be discussing the material conditions of interdependence that constitute us as a collective we, whether we know it or not (though I will be taking such interdependence for granted as a basic fact about anyone who is privileged enough to benefit from an advanced economy).[9] My subject is the moral situation of people with a considerable range of morally permissible options living within social, economic, legal, and political structures that express very limited human solidarity. Though I believe that most of these people (including this author and most of those reading this paper) have a compelling reason to do what they can to support social, economic, legal, and political reforms, and though at the end of this paper I will address the possibility that the moral ideal of solidarity can motivate such efforts, my chief aim is to argue that many of our life choices are morally troubling, and that for most of us they are morally troubling by our own lights even though, under the present circumstances, no one can reasonably demand that we choose otherwise.

7. 'We must', Nagel adds, 'change the question from "How should we live, whatever the circumstances?" to "Under what circumstances is it possible to live as we should?"' (Nagel 1995: 52). In response to this second question, we need to design 'institutions which penetrate and in part reconstruct their individual members, by producing differentiation within the self between public and private roles, and further differentiation subordinate to these' (Nagel 1995: 53). As Barbara Herman observes, 'A politics of the right sort can frame obligations that individuals are able to satisfy, and even carry some of the burden of moral responsibility. It can, in short, make us better moral agents' (Herman 2000: 36).

8. For a systematic treatment of this issue, see Zheng (unpublished manuscript).

9. In short, my focus on our attitudes toward one another leaves in the background 'the present conditions of cooperative relations within the division of labour as a constitutive aspect of society' (Jaeggi 2001: 303). As Jaeggi notes (following Durkheim), 'The fact of being associated, which even might exist "behind the individual's back", has to be actualized as a willingness to identify with a certain situation (a "common lot") and to act out of solidarity. The "we" of a solidaristic group must first constitute itself in order to be. That is to say, solidarity only actualises itself as a common "praxis" and it is this praxis in which the ability to "stand in for each other" emerges' (Jaeggi 2001: 307). 'De-solidarisation . . . means not simply "not being connected", being indifferent or "atomised", but is an expression of a disconnection between individuals who actually are involved with or dependent on each other and have good reasons to form solidaristic bonds. This is to say that the independence here is somewhat delusional. This sense of de-solidarisation can be criticized as social "alienation", as estrangement from something you actually are or should be involved with' (Jaeggi 2001: 302).

One Has Done Nothing Impermissible, But . . . (Exhibit 2)

Quo Vadis, Aida? is a Bosnian film that chronicles the murder of over eight thousand captive men and boys by the Serbs who took over Srebrenica in 1995 (Žbanić 2020). We experience this horrific event from the point of view of a local woman who is serving as a translator for the UN forces responsible for protecting the townspeople. As the situation continues to deteriorate, Aida does everything in her power, short of harming others, to save her husband and sons. She demands that they be allowed into the UN compound while thousands of others remain outside. She demands that they be allowed to hide out in one of the rooms reserved for the UN officers. She pleads with these officials to make false ID cards that will enable these three men to escape the Serbian roundup. She pleads with the UN doctor to ship them off with the wounded.

In the end, her efforts come to nothing. She is, of course, devastated, as are those of us who have been rooting for her—surely, almost everyone watching the film. Yet though I kept hoping that she would succeed, I also felt deeply uncomfortable. On the one hand, I accept that behavior like Aida's is a permissible means of trying to save oneself and one's loved ones. I accept the widespread assumption that, as long as we respect certain limits, each of us is morally permitted to treat our own interests and those of our loved ones as far more important than those of everyone else. And I grant that Aida does not fail to respect these moral limits. On the other hand, it seems to me that if I found myself in Aida's circumstances, I would experience significant discomfort—even shame, and maybe even something akin to guilt—in meeting the eyes of those whose pleas I was ignoring in my desperate efforts to avoid their fate. So, too, I would feel this way if, like the others waiting anxiously in the UN compound, I was among those who grabbed for the scarce bread knowing that someone standing right next to me would end up empty-handed as a result.

The discomfort I have in mind is not the compassionate reaction of a mere bystander but the pain one feels at knowing that one is doing everything one permissibly can to secure the position of a mere bystander.[10] Interestingly, the very circumstances in which it is most obvious that one is permitted to express this lack of solidarity with others are among the circumstances in which one is most likely to feel discomfort, and even shame or guilt, about one's permissible behavior.[11]

10. While watching the movie, I was keenly aware of experiencing great relief at being a mere spectator, well out of harm's way. This experience is part of what made watching so painful—given that, at the same time, I was identifying powerfully with those whose plight I was taking in from a safe and comfortable distance.

11. I will, in effect, be arguing that almost all our choices are partly regulated by the commitment to remaining a mere bystander to suffering. There are many cases that fall somewhere

What the Two Cases Exhibit

Precisely because Aida's actions so clearly express a lack of solidarity with the other human beings in her predicament, they call attention to the same attitude that underlies the 'Why me?' response. Like the 'Why me?' response, these actions are perfectly compatible with acknowledging that every rational agent imposes constraints on what the others are justified in doing. Yet like the 'Why me?' response, they remind us that it is possible for us to fall short in our relations with one another (in a way I see no reason not to call *moral*) without doing anything morally impermissible, or *immoral*. Falling short in this way is not a matter of doing something *less-than-supererogatory*.[12] Rather, our reaction to what Aida does—like our reaction to the 'Why me?' thought—reflects our endorsement of a moral ideal that grounds imperatives that have nothing essential to do with what we owe one another.

Like the ideal of mutual respect, and unlike the ideal of benevolent concern, the ideal of human solidarity picks out an essentially symmetrical relation among human beings. But it corresponds to a different conception of what it is for a person to relate to other people's needs, interests, and goals as constraints on their own goals. According to the ideal of mutual respect, a 'kingdom of ends' is, as Kant puts it, 'a systematic union of various rational beings under laws' (Kant 1997: 433). In contrast, the kingdom of ends associated with the ideal of human solidarity is something closer to the French fraternité: a union of various rational beings committed to relationships of mutual support.

I will eventually have more to say about this ideal. First, however, I want to focus on the problematic attitude that is also revealed in these cases. I want to argue that the best way to make sense of these cases is by assuming that this attitude underlies most of our morally permissible actions.

According to this hypothesis, if we do not usually experience the sort of painful, self-censoring feelings that characterize the two cases here on exhibit, this is because it is our privilege not to give much thought to how little solidarity with others is expressed in our choices. In short, the problematic attitude is there. We just fail to notice it. This, I will argue, is the best explanation of the data—and of the 'Why me?' response, in particular.

My argument begins with an observation about the end of the movie. Having lost the three human beings who meant more to her than anything in the world, Aida appears to make a dramatic shift in attitude: she pivots from (1) making one desperate attempt after another to gain her loved ones a special privilege that none of the other refugees will have to (2) knowing full well that she has no

between (1) deliberate efforts to obtain a scarce resource and (2) choices that do not consciously aim at maintaining a distance. Think, for example, of so-called white flight to the suburbs and the use of tax loopholes to safeguard one's wealth.

12. See note 1.

ground for privileging her own suffering over that of the thousands of others whose husbands, sons, and fathers were murdered. Perhaps as important, she gives no sign of thinking it would have been more fitting—or even just better—if the blow had fallen on other wives and mothers instead—not only those whose bad fortune she had devoted all her energy to not sharing but also the Serbian wives and mothers whose children she has prepared for a school performance we witness in the movie's final scene.

At the most obvious level of description, this pair of attitudes is perfectly consistent. After all, in believing that one is justified in seeking certain special privileges, and in acting on this belief, one need not deny that others are entitled to do the same. I will directly address this point soon. First, however, I want to suggest that we can acknowledge it while at the same time noting that there is a tension between (1) the lack of solidarity essential to the desperate self-promoting behavior aimed at escaping the suffering of others and (2) the expression of solidarity in suffering. More generally, at least in a world like ours, with laws and policies that do little to limit the scope of our choices, one is likely to have a very weak sense of solidarity with others if one has cultivated habits of mind and deed structured around permissible goals that—like most permissible goals—are formed and pursued with very little attention to the interests and ends of most others. It is our appreciation of this fact, together with the assumption that most of us have just these habits of mind and deed, that explains why we would not have been the least bit surprised had Aida responded to the tragedy that befell her with the outcry 'Why me?'

Aida's behavior at the end of the film is noteworthy precisely because, from what we can tell, she stops manifesting the attitude that motivated her actions until then. To register this fact as worth contemplating is to assume that Aida's disposition to separate her fate from the fate of others would not just disappear when she lost the power to save her family. And it is to assume that this is because the disposition did not just pop into existence at the moment she found herself in dire circumstances.

Having failed to escape the suffering of others, one could simply shrug one's shoulders. Or one could deeply regret one's failure, without engaging in any comparisons with anyone else. Or one could make such comparisons without distinguishing one's grievance from that of all the others suffering one's fate. None of these reactions would involve privileging oneself. After all, a disinterested observer could also deeply regret the fact that someone had not made it through the gate before the guards noticed the gap. This reaction would not presuppose that the unlucky person's suffering is more important than anyone else's.

If, however, someone is disposed to think 'Why ME?' when they find themselves among the unlucky, a plausible explanation of this fact is that this very disposition played a role in their earlier actions—whether these consisted in desperate efforts to save their own skin, and/or that of their loved ones, or a series of

choices designed (in far less extreme circumstances) to keep their life humming along as securely and comfortably as possible. Indeed, the very ordinariness of the 'Why me?' response suggests that both common, everyday, self-privileging actions and desperate actions self-consciously aimed at avoiding the suffering of others reflect the same self-privileging attitude that is expressed by 'Why me?'

This does not mean that the self-privileging behavior relies on an inference from the thought that one's own interests matter more than theirs. The point is that the attitude expressed by this thought is embodied in the intention to promote one's interests over theirs. It is an attitude implicit in the behavior itself, even if, in all but the extreme cases, it is easy for us to keep it comfortably under the radar. Once someone is no longer in a position to, as we say, help themselves, then, trivially, their self-privileging attitude can no longer be expressed in anything they do to avoid the fate that has befallen them. Accordingly, if this attitude does not suddenly disappear, then it must be incorporated into their reflection on this fate. It must take the form of a thought. Under these circumstances, the natural expression of this thought is: 'Why me?'

The argument from our two cases to the conclusion that the same problematic attitude underlies most permissible behavior has the form of an inference to the best explanation. But at this point some readers might protest that though there is good reason to think that most of us have a stable underlying disposition to attribute far greater importance to ourselves than we attribute to others, I have not established that this disposition is morally problematic. I will respond to this concern in three ways. First, I will supplement my characterization of the 'Why me' attitude and what is wrong with it. I will then more directly address the charge that there is nothing morally problematic about the self-privileging that is typical of most permissible choices. This, finally, will prepare the way for me to explore the psychological and metaphysical limits on our solidarity with others and the relationship between these limits and the ideal of treating one another with respect. The upshot of this multistage response will be that the considerations supporting a moral right to privilege one's own interests do not undermine the suspicion that we ought to give these interests far less weight than we do. They are not considerations against regarding human solidarity as a regulative ideal. So they are not considerations against the suggestion that there is something deeply troubling about most morally permissible self-privileging actions.

The Phenomenology of 'Why Me?'

What, exactly, is wrong with the 'Why me?' response? Let me begin by acknowledging that there is nothing wrong with wishing that one had better luck. There is nothing wrong with being deeply disappointed and upset when one's

reasonable goals are thwarted and one's hopes are dashed. More important for our purposes here, it is not only permissible but appropriate to feel deep indignation and outrage at the fact that one is the victim of murderers, corrupt officials, an unjust political system, and more. Insofar as 'Why me?' registers any of these reactions—insofar as it expresses frustration and outrage at having crossed paths with murderous thugs (when one can easily imagine a different scenario) or at having been born at a time and place in which basic human rights go unprotected and some people live safely and comfortably at the expense of others—it expresses a proper response to one's situation.

The 'Why me?' reaction is morally problematic insofar as it is the thought: 'Why was it ME, rather than some other vulnerable person? Why was I the unlucky one, and not them?' Someone who entertains such thoughts would not have been disappointed if no one had been so unlucky. Rather, their reaction rests on the unarticulated assumption that some people are going to suffer—and even that, under the present natural, social, and political circumstances, some people are going to suffer in this way. It is against this background that the thought 'If only I had not been so unlucky!' takes the form: 'If only it had not been me!'—where this, in turn, is the thought (though the equivalence is almost never self-consciously acknowledged): 'If only it had been someone else!'

In question form—'Why did this horrible thing happen to me?!'—the thought contains an implicit (if inchoate) complaint. Again, this complaint is not directed at any of the human choices that facilitated the 'bad luck'. It is aimed at one's bad luck as such. For the purposes of this complaint, it is irrelevant whether one's child's death is attributable to structural injustice, renegade murderers, or the child's own careless behavior.

The observations in the last two paragraphs suggest a close kinship between the problematic attitude and a problematic fantasy. This is the fantasy of something or someone (we might call it *providence*) with the power to distribute costs and benefits—and, especially, suffering. It is part of this fantasy that bad stuff is 'bound to' happen to 'someone'. In this respect, the fantasy posits a situation with the same structure as the extreme situation exemplified by the case of Aida: there is a more-or-less fixed supply of brain cancer, and not everyone is going to be able to avoid getting it. What's more—and here is where the complaint comes in—one's own life is much too important to be cursed in this way.

Clearly, it is morally innocuous for me to react to this fantasy with the wish that whoever has the relevant power had enabled my loved ones and me to escape our cruel fate. Just as clearly, 'Why me?' would reflect a moral failing if it were the thought: 'It is unfair that my loved ones and I were not favored over the others'. The injustice of one's suffering lies elsewhere—not in this particular distribution. One has no special entitlement to be spared bad luck, and it is shameful to think otherwise.

Is the appeal to a morally indefensible conception of 'fairness' implicit in the 'Why me?' response? Not, I think, in any straightforward sense: this response is not, most fundamentally, the expression of a sense of what human beings owe to each other. Nonetheless, the paradigm 'Why me?' reaction expresses a form of self-pity that resembles the 'It's not fair!' reaction insofar as it contains an essentially comparative component. The comparison may be pushed back to the far edges of consciousness. But it's there, implicit in the contrast between one's reaction to one's own misfortune and one's relatively complacent attitude toward the fact that lots of people suffer misfortune all the time. 'How could I be so unlucky?' is not the thought: 'How could anyone be so unlucky?' As a cry against fate, it reflects a fantasy-fueled faith in a cosmic power that can steer the world's steady supply of misfortune far away from me. 'Why me?' is the thought that this power has failed me; it has failed to protect me from the fate I had been assuming would be assigned to someone else. The under-the-radar thought underlying this thought is, in effect: 'Just as I am justified in harnessing my own power in certain ways to protect myself at the expense of others, so too, I am justified in demanding to be insulated from the blow that I know is going to land somewhere, on someone, to devastating effect'.

This fantasy is confused. I am no less deserving of bad fortune than anyone else. To suggest otherwise is to fail to appreciate my relation to others. Again, this is not the failure to appreciate that others have the same moral rights that I have. (It is compatible with conceding an important respect in which their interests are no less important than mine.) Rather, it is the blindness associated with an ungrounded faith in being one of the 'chosen' few who have been singled out for special protection from bad fortune. There is nothing about any of us that grounds any such privilege. It is a deep moral failing to assume otherwise, natural though this fantasy may be for those of us whose privilege has always been an essential element of our lives.

The Morally Problematic Nature of Partiality

I know what many readers are thinking: 'My own self-privileging actions do not reflect any such morally suspect attitude. They simply express the assumption that my interests matter more to me; and nothing about this assumption commits me to thinking that other people are mistaken to attribute the same special significance to their interests'. (See the parenthetical sentence in the preceding paragraph.) This story is morally soothing because it is, in effect, the story of how, in attributing special importance to my own interests, I am not really assuming that I am more important than anyone else. In strengthening my case for the thesis that we cannot let ourselves off the hook so easily, I want to examine this

comforting story. I want to call attention to the fact that it owes much of its reassuring power to the sense in which it underplays the respect in which I am not privileging myself when I give more weight to my own interests.

In granting a special action-guiding role to the fact that my interests are my own, I do not thereby presuppose that other people are not justified in doing the same. But this is a misleading way of characterizing my position; for the double negative obscures the fact that I am committed to something stronger. The reason why I do not presuppose that others are not justified in favoring themselves is because I presuppose that their self-privileging habits are justified. This assumption is inseparable from the assumption that my self-privileging habits are justified and that what justifies them is simply that the interests I favor are mine. More carefully, I assume that this justifies my treating the ends and interests of others as if they were of no importance, provided that this self-privileging behavior takes place 'under common laws'. On this assumption, as long as I respect the right that each of us has to live our own lives, I am permitted to make choices that do not acknowledge the needs and ends of others in any other way. Indeed, within the constraints of treating these others with concern and respect, I am permitted to regard their needs and interests as impediments and threats—though, again, there are limits to what I may permissibly do to protect myself.

In short, the symmetry that is central to the observation that others are no less justified in giving relatively little weight to my interests should not distract us from the content of the self-privileging thought itself. The thought, again, is that I am justified in attributing vastly more importance to my own interests.[13] This is a distinctly nonegalitarian thought. Nothing it does or does not imply can alter this basic fact.

Of course, this thought does not figure among the premises in my reasoning. It is what helps explain these premises and the significance I give them. It is what makes them—and the choices and actions they support—intelligible. To return to the case of Aida: when she tries to persuade the authorities to save her family, she is not simply engaging in behavior that is caused by the thought 'They are my children'. She is acting on the assumption that their being her children is a sufficient reason to move heaven and earth to save them, even if this means begging that they be treated differently from everyone else's children. To repeat: this does not involve thinking an extra thought from which she derives the conclusion that she is justified in trying to save them. Rather, it involves regarding

13. I am not here distinguishing between the following two claims: (1) as a matter of fact I care more about my interests, and this fact justifies my giving priority to these interests; (2) I care more about my own interests, and I am justified in doing so because they are mine. My concern in this paper is with the disposition to grant one's own perceived interests far greater importance than the interests of others when one is shaping one's life.

the fact that they are her children in a certain way—regarding the fact that they are her children as warranting her efforts to prevent them from suffering the fate of everyone else.

To make a normative assumption is to assume that it is intelligible to wonder what justifies it. Of course, one might never have good enough reason to wonder. My point is that reflecting on the 'Why me?' reaction prompts just this sort of self-examination. It raises a question one cannot silence by noting that insofar as one's self-privileging actions are permissible, they respect the goals and interests of others—nor even by noting that one would not have acted this way had this action been incompatible with respecting their goals and interests. Clearly, my negative appraisal of the 'Why me?' reaction cannot be dismissed by acknowledging that other people are no less justified in reacting this way and that I am not permitted to prevent them from doing so. Why think, then, that concerns about the attitude underlying our morally permissible self-privileging behavior can be dismissed in the same way?

The Psychological and Metaphysical Limits on Human Solidarity

We cannot offer a compelling justification for privileging ourselves over others. Most of us suspect as much. This makes us uneasy, especially to the extent that we regard human solidarity as a regulative ideal. Even if, however, we cannot justify attributing far greater significance to our own interests, it does not follow that we can be criticized for failing to express more than a very limited solidarity with one another. After all, a stone's lack of fellow feeling is unjustified for the simple reason that it is not the sort of thing that can be more or less justified. Aren't we forced to say something similar about our own nature and about the natural power of our self-love in particular?[14]

This question brings us to the psychological and metaphysical limits on human solidarity. I want to acknowledge these limits while arguing that we can get less moral mileage out of them than we might have hoped. I will then turn, in the next section, to the role these limits play in our thinking about moral respect. This will eventually lead me back to the moral tension I feel in contemplating

14. This is, in effect, the view defended by Susan Wolf in the context of allying herself with Bernard Williams's famous claim that when a man decides to save his wife rather than a stranger because he appreciates that he is morally permitted to show this sort of favoritism, he is thinking 'one thought too many' (Wolf 2012). My response to Wolf's observation that 'we do not ordinarily think such a justification necessary or even appropriate' can be found on pages 13–19. It is worth stressing here that what is at issue in my discussion is not whether I can justify loving A rather than B, but what follows regarding the significance I should attribute to the interests and ends of each in my decisions about how to organize my life (Wolf 1986: 719).

the case of Aida, the tension she herself must feel—if not when she is frantically pursuing her morally permissible efforts to escape the suffering of others, then at a later time, when she reflects back on those horrible, harrowing days. In the final section of this paper, I will tentatively consider the action-guiding implications of this tension.

Even if, as I have argued, we cannot dismiss the self-critique prompted by reflections on our two cases by acknowledging that others are no less justified in privileging themselves, there might seem to be an even more compelling retort: I simply can't help it; I am simply incapable of identifying my fate with the fate of others; I am incapable of believing that what happens to them happens also—in some important sense—to me.

This is, I just said, a 'compelling' retort. But is it true? Surely, there are limits to our ability to identify our fate with the fate of others. But it seems equally clear that we have very little idea where these limits are located. This becomes especially evident when we remind ourselves of my opening remark about political, social, and economic structures: we know enough about the impact such structures have on human attitudes to know that we are in no position to confidently predict the impact of significant political, social, and economic reforms.

Even if, moreover, we focus on our present far-from-ideal situation, it is hardly obvious that human nature is such that in this situation we are incapable of being more greatly moved by the ideal of solidarity than most of us actually are. As far as I can tell, the compelling retort owes much of its attraction to the fact that it silences any suspicions to the contrary.

This having been said, there is surely a strong case for the thesis that we can love only a small handful of human beings, or at least that we cannot love most of them while also maintaining the sort of valuable loving relations that are essentially partial.[15] Can we grant this point while insisting that what Aida did out of love was nonetheless morally problematic, and that we are right to be troubled by this fact?

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15. Many philosophers have made this point in many different ways. Beauvoir herself follows the passages quoted at this essay's beginning with the following:

> "That little boy was not your brother", said the parents to their oversensitive son. "You are not going to cry your whole life. Each day there are thousands of children across the earth who die". Not all your life, so why five minutes? Not over all children; why over this one? If all men are my brothers, no particular man is my brother any longer. Multiplying the ties that bind me to the world by infinity is a way of denying those that unite me to this singular minute, to this singular corner of the earth. I no longer have a homeland, nor friends, nor parents (Beauvoir 2004: 109–10).

These reflections echo George Eliot's famous observation about the limits of the human capacity to identify one's lot with the lot of others: 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded

I do not think we can dismiss the moral tension we feel about Aida's behavior by simply noting that it is an expression of love.[16] This is true even though human love (or at least a distinctively valuable form of human love) is necessarily partial and even though any defensible conception of what we owe to each other must accommodate this fact. I want to elaborate on this point and to consider how it interacts with the lessons I have drawn from the two cases.

I begin with a question: Must someone be disposed to act like Aida if she really loves someone? Imagine someone who is deeply concerned about the welfare of her grown child. (I stipulate that the child is grown in order to ensure that our imaginings are not muddled by thoughts of special parental obligations.) This mother is strongly disposed to grieve deeply when her child suffers significant misfortune, and she rejoices when things go well for him. She is not disposed to respond in these ways to anyone else's child. Nonetheless, she has no disposition whatsoever to promote his good fortune over the fortune of others no less deserving. Though her passivity is compatible with her susceptibility to the 'Why me?' response, the fact that her maternal feelings are insulated from any exercise of agency means that she is never forced to consider the action-guiding significance of these feelings. She is thus able to experience setbacks to her child's interests as significant blows without being the least bit disposed to promote his interests over those of anyone else.

Does this mother truly love her child? I am loath to deny this. I would change my mind, however, if I learned that she is not disposed to privilege his needs and ends over the needs and ends of all others despite being disposed to go to considerable lengths to protect and promote other things she values. If her impotent love were not a function of a broader incapacity to act, it would seem to be a self-contradictory phenomenon. As far as I can tell, it is not conceptually possible for someone to have the capacity to set and pursue goals without being disposed to set and pursue goals that reflect her deepest cares and concerns. Accordingly, if someone does have the broader agential capacity, then they will

with stupidity' (Eliot 1965: 226) For some more recent elaborations on the thought that universal love is incompatible with loving a few particular human beings, see Cottingham (1983), Jollimore (2011), and Velleman (1999).

16. In highlighting this tension, I am fundamentally in agreement with White. Despite our disagreements (see note 6), we both call attention to an important (if, as he says, 'hard-to-identify') sense in which we fall morally short, by our own lights, even when we live up to the ideal of respect. It is important to compare this diagnosis with Allais's. White seems to assume that even if all structural injustices were removed, we would still be unable to avoid coming up morally short. I myself am inclined to think that, whereas Allais focuses too little on the constraints on solidarity that do not depend on structural injustices, White attributes too little to the impact of social, political, and economic structures on our capacity to love. For more on this complex relationship, see Nussbaum (2015).

be disposed to promote the interests of those who matter more to them than anything else in the world.

This is a familiar thought: insofar as one has goals, one does not—and cannot—relate to oneself as just one among others. One's ends would not be one's ends—one would not have any ends—if there were not a fundamental sense in which one privileged one's ends over those of all others. This is, in effect, Bernard Williams's point when he argues that we could not embrace utilitarianism without losing touch with ourselves (Williams and Smart 1973: 116–17). We would not be anyone in particular if we had no commitments, and we would have no commitments were we to regard our commitments as no more significant than the commitments of anyone else.

This constraint on the possibility of agency appears to leave room for the possibility that someone's goals could reflect the assumption that everyone's interests have an equal claim on her (and so, it may seem that she could be an act-utilitarian, after all). But could such a person really love anyone? Insofar as someone who sets and pursues ends loves another someone, her love will necessarily determine her ends. This is but a vivid instance of the more general point that our perceived interests determine our ends, even as we also have a general interest in achieving our ends. None of this requires us to compare our interests with the interests of others. But in caring about our interests in the way we necessarily do as setters and pursuers of ends, we necessarily impose limits on our solidarity with others. Again, if we were to give the interests of others the same weight in our deliberations that we give to our own interests, then we would have no ends of our own. In this very important respect, our agency itself limits our capacity for solidarity with others—given, again, that we care about certain things more than we care about solidarity itself.

Insofar as the heterogeneous interests and ends of agents limit their capacity for solidarity, they impose limits on the extent to which even a purely benevolent agent can identify with others. If there is a God, then He surely cares about all of us equally—and even as much as He cares about Himself. But if God is an agent, then She cannot fail to favor Her ends over those of all other agents. And so, She cannot fail to give Her benevolent ends priority over each of the (less-benevolent) ends of the others. God's power is no proof against this sort of conflict. It does not free Them from the metaphysical limits on solidarity.

But now we can ask: What do these limits imply about the role that the ideal of solidarity can and should play in our relations to others? As far as I can tell, the fact that all human ends cannot be in perfect harmony with each other is compatible with the fact that relating to one another as if we are 'all in the same boat' is a regulative ideal we can come far closer to realizing than most of us do. Otherwise put: the metaphysical constraint on solidarity that applies even to a purely benevolent being does not prevent us from significantly strengthening the very impoverished

attitude of solidarity that informs most of our morally permissible choices. The limited potency of our sense of ourselves, not only as subjects of a kingdom of compatible ends but also as members of a community of entangled fates, is not itself attributable to the metaphysics of agency; more important, no matter what the cause, our limited solidarity with others has no metaphysical justification.

It might seem that the necessary conditions of agency justify abandoning our solidarity with others when this is necessary if we are to satisfy our most basic needs. There are two different questions here: (1) would a genuine attitude of solidarity be circumstance-sensitive in this way? And (2) given the connection between being an agent and satisfying one's most basic needs, does it follow that a less-circumscribed solidarity is irrational? I have my doubts about whether a solidarity that would melt away in the face of a real challenge is the genuine article. But the plausibility of this answer depends, in part, on the answer to the second question. Support for a negative answer to this question might seem to come from an appeal to something like Kant's 'contradiction in the will' test. (Kant 1997: 4:423) According to this suggestion, as long as I have any ends at all, including altruistic ends, I am committed to preserving my capacity to pursue them. But what follows? Importantly, it does not follow that I am contradicting myself if I give less priority to my own needs on the understanding that this involves giving less priority to my survival—to my persisting as a pursuer of ends. This much should already have been obvious: I am not justified in killing someone in order to snatch the bread from their hands, even if I will starve to death otherwise. It seems, then, that even if we focus exclusively on the most basic human needs (leaving all other interests to one side), we cannot appeal to the connection between these needs and our agency to justify doing everything we permissibly can to separate our fate from the fate of others. The necessary conditions of rational agency do not rule out the possibility of cultivating a far stronger disposition to treat the ideal of human fellowship as a constraint on our choices.

The Limits of Human Solidarity and the Moral Ideal of Respect

In arguing that we have a compelling reason to cultivate stronger feelings of solidarity, and that those of us who aspire to do so cannot coherently regard 'going beyond the call of duty' as merely permissible, I have been keen to stress that this is not a point about what we are morally obligated to do. I now want to take a closer look at this working hypothesis and the conception of moral obligation it presupposes. This will allow me to deepen my diagnosis of the tension between the ideal of respect for others and the ideal of solidarity with others.

According to this diagnosis, neither the ordinary nor the extraordinary situations I have been discussing are situations in which one person violates another

person's rights. Rather, they are situations in which people fall short in their relations to one another, despite the fact that they treat one another with respect and despite the fact that treating people with respect sometimes requires promoting their ends. On the one hand, the ideal of respect constrains the demands we can make on one another in the name of greater solidarity. Yet, on the other hand, this fact does nothing to eliminate, or even to weaken, the aspiration intrinsic to the ideal of solidarity itself. It thus does nothing to weaken the tension between this aspiration and our profound indifference to the fate of others. To this extent, there is a tension between the two ideals themselves, and this is the point I want to explore now. In short: though respecting one another requires that we limit what we do out of self-love, the ideal of respect takes it for granted that our self-concern is far, far greater than our concern for almost anyone else. It takes it for granted that this is a fact to be accommodated, that accommodating one another's self-love is an essential feature of what we owe one another. For this reason, the ideal of respect is essentially in conflict with any ideal that treats the power and extent of our self-love as an issue, not a datum. It is this conflict that is exposed in each of the two cases. The soothing story we considered earlier provides inadequate grounds for dismissing the conflict as confused precisely because it spells out only one side: the commitment to being constrained by what anyone can reasonably demand, understood as a commitment to mutual accommodation.

Most human beings place a very high priority on not going hungry. So, most human beings are disposed to grab for scarce bread, knowing full well that someone else will starve as a result. More generally, most human beings are disposed to limit their expressions of solidarity to actions that do not jeopardize their ability to pursue goals that reflect little, if any, concern for the fate of all but a few others. What is at issue for us insofar as we think that such behavior is permissible? This is certainly not the place to review the pros and cons of competing theories of right action. Nonetheless, I want to focus attention for a moment on the widely shared, if rather inchoate, intuition that, given the special relation every agent stands in to her own agency, treating a rational agent with respect requires allowing them to set and pursue their own ends, provided that these ends are themselves constrained by a respect for the ends of others. As I have explained, this is what I have been assuming in talking of 'permissible' self-privileging behavior.

Attributing a special moral significance to the metaphysics of rational agency is a hallmark of contractualist accounts of right and wrong. Such accounts are typically contrasted with consequentialism and with utilitarianism, in particular. To put this contrast very roughly: whereas utilitarians focus on the equal intrinsic significance of everyone's pains and pleasures, or preferences, contractualists appeal to the equal intrinsic value of everyone's 'autonomy', conceived as demarcating an 'inviolable' 'sphere'. According to the contractualists, respecting

the value of an agent's autonomy requires respecting certain normative 'boundaries' ('rights') (Nagel 2021: 5).

How do my own reflections on the 'Why me?' thought relate to this basic contrast between the consequentialists and the contractualists? My concerns about contractualism are concerns about the limits on the sort of criticism that is intelligible in its terms. This allies me with the consequentialists. Like the consequentialists, I have been calling attention to an ideal that appears to be in tension with drawing certain boundaries between each individual agent and each of the others. Like them, I am concerned about the moral significance of our shared capacity to suffer. In evoking the ideal of solidarity, however, I have not been appealing to the relative value of various states of affairs (in particular, as containing more or less suffering). More fundamentally, the ideal of solidarity is not the ideal of benevolent concern.[17] The crude image that animates my inquiry is not the image of two different ways of prioritizing the suffering of two groups of beings, one containing more suffering, of longer duration, than the other. It is the image of two groups of suffering human beings whose difference has nothing to do with differences in their mode or degree of suffering and nothing, correspondingly, to do with which group has a greater claim to be helped. In the first group, people are sharing their blankets and food, exchanging stories, and otherwise communicating to each other their shared conviction that 'we are all in this together'. In the second group, everyone is doing what he/she/they permissibly can to attain the most desirable position (the best blankets, the best food, the highest, driest ground), and when they are not actively pursuing this goal, they—individuals and very small groups—are doing their best to 'keep to themselves'.

According to one influential version of the contractualist project, we identify the normative boundaries essential to relations of mutual respect by identifying which action-guiding principles any of us could reasonably reject.[18] In treating

17. As Jaeggi notes, 'Being moved by the suffering of others and even practicing charity is not to be identified with acting out of solidarity' (Jaeggi 2001: 292).

18. For a relevant complication, see the point attributed to Nagel at the end of note 4. The criterion of reasonable rejectability is defended by T. M. Scanlon. It is interesting to relate my reflections in this part of the text to Scanlon's observation about this criterion:

> This account of moral motivation has much in common with another idea mentioned by Mill. In the chapter of *Utilitarianism* devoted to moral motivation Mill does not appeal directly to the substantive value of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but invokes instead what he calls the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures'. The ideal to which contractualism appeals—that of being able to justify your actions to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject—is very similar to Mill's idea of 'unity'. One important difference, however, is that Mill takes himself to be describing a sentiment—a natural feature of human psychology—which explains how the motivation to act in accordance with utilitarianism could arise on some

this test as a constraint on what we are morally permitted to do, we express the conviction that there are limits on what it is reasonable for each of us to demand of the others.[19] In short, on this picture, identifying the relevant moral boundaries is closely tied to assessing the appropriateness of certain reactive attitudes. Considerations of standing appear to be relevant to settling this question. In determining which actions we can reasonably agree to criticize, we must ask ourselves: Who am I to demand more? Who is he to reject my demand? To be sure, I can judge that *P* did wrong, but that I have no standing to blame *P* for this wrongdoing (because he is not accountable for what he did (where this could be because he is incapable of appreciating the reasonableness of my demand), or because he is not accountable to me in this instance, or because I myself have done the same, or because . . .). Yet, at the same time, my judgment that *P* did wrong is a judgment about what it is reasonable for me, and any other rational agent, to demand of him given the relative importance of various interests he has. And this judgment itself incorporates notions of accountability and standing.

In effect, these observations supplement my earlier response to the thought that other human agents impose normative constraints on my actions because they, too, are justified in privileging themselves. If, as I have been arguing, this thought is an imperfect moral guide, this is at least in part because our moral relations to one another are not determined exclusively by the reasonable demands we can make on each other. It is because, by our own lights, regardless of what anyone else can reasonably demand, we fall morally short insofar as we fail to acknowledge one another as members of the fellowship of human beings. Though moral obligations are necessarily responsive to the limits of rational agency and

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> basis other than social conditioning. By contrast, on the account I am offering there is no need to appeal to a special psychological element to explain how a person could be moved to avoid an action by the thought that any principle allowing it would be one that others could reasonably reject. (Scanlon 1998: 162)

The contrast Scanlon identifies in this passage can, he suggests, be characterized as a contrast between the value of 'friendship' and the value of 'mutual recognition'. It is worth stressing that, according to Scanlon, 'contractualism does not provide a plausible account of everything to which the name "morality" is commonly applied. It thus entails that morality in this broad sense is motivationally diverse, and I have maintained that this implication is, on reflection, one that we should accept' (187).

19. The point is often related to P. F. Strawson's highly influential discussion of moral responsibility: 'Freedom and Resentment'. Thus Stephen Darwall appeals to Strawson in arguing that 'reactive attitudes, and actions that express them, must . . . presuppose the authority to expect and hold one another responsible for compliance with moral obligations (which must then be standards to which we can warrantedly hold each other as members of the moral community)' (Darwall 2009: 140). It is, Darwall claims, 'conceptually impossible for one to be morally obligated to do something but not responsible for doing it, neither to the moral community, nor to God, nor to anyone' (138). Also acknowledging a debt to Strawson, R. Jay Wallace, suggests that 'moral rightness is to be understood in terms of directed obligations that are connected to the claims of other parties' (Wallace 2019: 66–67).

human nature, we also (quite naturally) aspire to something more in our relations to one another. Insofar as we acknowledge this fact, it is natural (and appropriate) for us to suspect that there is something amiss in these relations insofar as we treat one another with respect by pursuing agendas that treat all but a few others as if—to use an adverb of magnitude that contrasts with Nagel's 'hugely' in this paper's opening epigraph—they matter only minutely, if they matter at all.[20]

As I noted in discussing Aida, it is especially difficult to repudiate this ideal when our permissible actions most clearly fail to express it. Evading the significance of the human 'us' would be nearly impossible were I to meet the gaze of the person who comes up empty-handed in the competition for the single loaf that cannot sustain us both. Even if in reaching for the bread I were to act on a principle that this person cannot reasonably reject, her gaze would express an appeal that I could not dismiss as unreasonable. I am not talking about an appeal for the bread, or even for someone to provide her with bread. Rather, I am talking about an appeal to a relationship that I cannot comfortably reconcile with my morally permissible behavior. Insofar as this appeal is reasonable, it is not a demand. (In this respect, it differs from the appeals for bread and for help.) Nonetheless, it evokes an ideal I cannot reasonably reject: a conception of the two of us as members of a community of fellow travelers, whose equal value as fellow travelers we can fail to acknowledge without failing to acknowledge our right to be treated with equal respect.

A group of human beings whose members regard themselves as members of a community of fellow travelers is not to be confused with a group that is defined by a shared purpose or goal.[21] Nor, importantly, does it essentially involve the sort of 'sharing' of thoughts and feelings we reserve for our most intimate relationships. The ideal I have in mind is also not—at least most fundamentally—*a political ideal*[22]—though, as I have conceded, we are unlikely to come close to realizing it

20. To put the point somewhat paradoxically, it is natural for us to suspect that to content ourselves with satisfying the relatively modest demands of morality is to treat this modesty as a justification for agendas that themselves attribute very little significance to the lives of others. In two other papers, I explore a thought that I return to in a different form at the end of this paper: it may well be a virtue to be less than fully coherent (See Buss 2020 and Buss 2023). It is also interesting to compare the concern with the bad faith I am alluding to here with G. A. Cohen's challenge to champions of liberal democracy in Cohen (2001). Nagel's discussion of Cohen is especially relevant (See Nagel:2001).

21. This is perhaps the most important respect in which the attitude I have in mind differs from the solidarity of groups whose actions are coordinated in virtue of their members having a shared objective. As I mention in note 9, the interdependence that can ground a plural subject need not be established in this way. As long as our choices impact each other, we have the opportunity to 'identify' with this 'common lot' and to 'act out of solidarity' (See Jaeggi 2001: 307). (This comment is also related to the issue addressed in notes 22, 23, 24, and 26.)

22. It is worth considering Marx in this context. A champion of class solidarity, he argued that in a just social order, there would be no conflict between individual interests and the common

without profound changes to our political, social, and economic structures. As a fact that most of us find all too easy to ignore, the fellowship of human beings is nothing more nor less than our shared humanity—the vulnerabilities and aspirations that group us together as the sort of social animals we are. As a regulative ideal inspired by this fact—something human beings ought to strive for, knowing that they can never fully realize it and can never even fully understand what would count as realizing it—it is neither, most fundamentally, the ideal of mutual respect—or mutual accountability—nor the ideal of benevolent concern. It is the ideal of belonging to a maximally inclusive 'us', of pursuing our individual projects in a context in which we are all in this—this business of living a human life—together. This is the ideal to which Beauvoir alludes in the second epigraph to this essay.[23]

In seeking to realize this ideal, one is seeking to share, not goals or information or even points of view, but vulnerabilities. Insofar as one has internalized the ideal of human solidarity, one wants to lead one's own life in such a way that one regards the misfortunes of others as one's own misfortunes too. To be regulated by this ideal is to strive to incorporate into one's attitude toward others an action-guiding commitment to not regarding them as participants in a special sort of zero-sum competition for the most basic human goods.[24] More important,

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interest. Discussing this ideal, Darwall asks: 'What [form] of ethical motivation can support this social order?' His tentative answer is: 'A form of motivation that is, roughly, as close as possible to equal (recognition) respect while lacking its rechtlich character: solidarity with others as fellow pursuers and members of a shared emancipated social order' (Darwall forthcoming). (It is interesting to relate this suggestion to the observations in notes 4 and 6.)

23. Clearly, like Beauvoir in the epigraph, I am here evoking the familiar Christian imperative to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Galatians 5. 14). Though I have stressed this connection in notes 6 and 15 (and expand on the point in the following footnote), I do not want to put too much weight on it. There are other powerful evocations of the attitude that interest me that do not seem to require that we think of the attitude as a variety of love. See, for example, the end of Robert Frost's 'Tuft of Flowers': We all work together, 'I told him from my heart, whether we work together or apart' (Frost 1963: 20).

24. Whereas Nussbaum's chief concern in the chapter to which I refer in note 6 is the association between a competitive attitude and 'group hatred, stigmatization, and exclusion'(Nussbaum 2015: 168), my chief concern is the association between the stance of competition and the stance of indifference. Nonetheless, with an emphasis on the insights of psychoanalysis, Nussbaum also channels Iris Murdoch in understanding the fundamental problem as that of how to 'fully [accept] the reality of others' (Nussbaum 2015: 173). Here are some relevant passages from Murdoch: (1)'Suppression of self is required before accurate vision can be obtained'(2014: 65); (2)'The same virtues, in the end, the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person. An increasing awareness of "goods" and the attempt (usually only partially successful) to attend to them purely, without self, brings with it an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world' (68–69); (3) 'It is in the capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called "will" or "willing" belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by,

it is to be disposed not to be soothed by the fact that this competition is morally permitted insofar as everyone acknowledges certain constraints on what anyone can do to promote their own interests. It is to be less-than-fully comfortable with one's conception of oneself as a bearer of rights that carve out a large sphere for self-privileging action. Rahel Jaeggi offers a positive characterization of these negative points: 'One could see the ability to form solidaristic relations as an enlargement of the self and its power to form meaningful relations to the world. . . . Being solidaristic therefore means enlarging not only the range of what is in one's "own interest", but also one's understanding of what belongs to my own person' (Jaeggi 2001: 307). This is what it means to say that maintaining relations of solidarity, involves 'standing in for each other' (288).

I doubt that this attitude can be sustained without a profound appreciation of one's own relative unimportance.[25] But in the present inquiry I have been stressing the positive side of this self-relation: a sense of oneself as one among many, where this involves regarding oneself as more than a demander, giver, and accepter of reasons and reasonable demands. George Eliot elaborates on this self-conception in describing her heroine Dorothea:

> She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (Eliot 1965: 846)[26]

consisting of, love' (65). Like Murdoch, Nussbaum also stresses the role that the disposition to 'wonder' plays in our ability to identify with others. (Nussbaum 2015: 171.)

25. Here would be the place to stress the relation between the ideal I am struggling to articulate and an ideal at the heart of Buddhism. Sadly, I am not qualified to assess the relationship between anything I am saying here and the commitments of the Buddhist tradition. I do, however, explore the general issue in Buss (2020).

26. Of course, some people think that the ideal of human solidarity is confused. Jaeggi notes that though calls for 'international loyalty' would be 'absurd', there is a 'remarkable history' of calls for 'international solidarity' (Jaeggi 2001: 288). But according to David Heyd, 'The idea of a "human community" is as misleading as it is attractive' (Heyd 2007: 119). 'Strictly speaking', Heyd insists, 'solidarity can never be universal' (56). 'If', he says, 'God gave the natural world to humanity as a whole for its use, then we all have to share natural resources with each other, but, in the absence of such theological assumption, the fact that we happen to live on this planet does not in itself create a motive or a reason for sharing. Sharing takes place when we feel special care for others, which arises out of either natural ties or cooperative commitments' (117).

Some Weak and Rather Tentative Conclusions

To most of us, it is a profound error to think that we belong to a racial or socio-economic 'we' that is in competition with 'them'. This is not merely because we reject the idea that basic rights are tied to racial identities or classes. It is, more fundamentally, because we think that dividing ourselves into an 'us' and a 'them' reflects a deep failure to understand who we ourselves really are. In contrast, as I have conceded, the distinction between each individual practical reasoner and all other practical reasoners does appear to have a deep metaphysical, and an almost-as-deep psychological, basis. Yet, as I also have said, this distinction between me (and mine) and them (and theirs) does not justify the 'Why me?' response, and this is because it does not justify the attitude behind this response. If, as I am inclined to think, this means that many of our choices (including, importantly, our choices regarding how to spend our time and money) fall morally short—and (for most of us) by our own lights—if it means they fall short even when they are constrained by a commitment to respecting the basic rights of others, where does this leave us?

As far as I can tell, without strong institutional incentives to share the fate of those they do not love, most animals of the human kind will express relatively limited solidarity with most other such animals. Some of them will support policies and laws that strengthen these incentives. But in most cases, this support will amount to little more than voting for elected officials committed to building and sustaining the relevant institutions, campaigning for such officials, mailing the occasional letter to them (and to others in positions of power), writing the occasional op-ed, making regular modest donations to one or more groups of people for whom promoting the needs and rights of the least fortunate is their life's work, boycotting businesses that mistreat their workers, donating modest sums to the workers' strike fund. Other expressions of solidarity that are relatively easy for many human beings to incorporate into their busy, self-preoccupied lives include such actions as sending a timely note of sympathy to a distressed student or neighbor and running errands for a sick friend. Most of us also seem to be capable of a moderately strong sense of solidarity with those who, as we say, 'work with us' in institutions like university departments—and even universities—where there is some sense of a shared set of goals and our roles are defined in such a way as to commit us to coordinating with and accommodating ourselves to others—the others on 'our team'.

How significantly those of us in positions of social and economic privilege can and should strengthen our sense of solidarity beyond this point—and what it would mean for us to do so without the support of larger institutional structures—is partly an empirical question. I have nothing helpfully specific to say

about which experiments in living we ought to make in attempting to answer this question. I do, however, want to conclude these reflections with a very general, rather tentative, suggestion. I will work my way up to this suggestion by returning to a possibility I mentioned when I began these reflections. This is the possibility of being invulnerable to the 'Why me?' response, even though one has a very weak disposition to identify with those one does not love when one is setting and pursuing one's own ends.

If human love—of others and of self—is as closely tied to the 'Why me?' thought as I have suggested, how are we to understand someone—like Aida in the movie—who appears to have no disposition to think this thought even though she is wholeheartedly committed to doing whatever she permissibly can to avoid sharing the misfortune of others? What must be true of an otherwise ordinary human being if she is to have no disposition to think 'Why me?' One hypothesis is that this human being must not only have two competing ideals ((1) an ideal associated with her conception of herself as one among many mutually respectful individuals, each living their own life, and (2) an ideal associated with her conception of herself as one among many members of a collective 'we', each sharing the fate of the others); she must also be disposed to abruptly alter her attitudes toward herself and others. It might seem that we need not resort to this hypothesis: couldn't it be that the same attitude is simply manifested differently under different circumstances? According to this counterhypothesis, when (within the limits imposed by the conditions of mutual respect) we can promote the interests of our loved ones over those of everyone else, we take advantage of this ability, and when we lack any such power, we are forced to regard our fate as deeply entangled with the fate of even those we do not love. As I have argued, however, acknowledging that there is no longer anything one can do to escape some misfortune does not essentially involve adjusting one's attitude toward others; nor does it give one a reason to make this adjustment. Indeed, one of my main suggestions in this paper is that when we lose the power to keep misfortune at bay, the attitude that was expressed—or reflected—in our self-privileging behavior is preserved, and is naturally expressed, in the 'Why me?' reaction. If, then, I adjust my stance toward others as soon as I can no longer avoid a similar misfortune myself, this is not because I have lost the relevant power; nor is it because the fact that someone else's fate is similar to mine is a reason to regard their fate as inseparable from mine. (After all, a fate can be 'shared' in the first sense without a blow to either of us being a blow to us both.)

In reflecting on the significance of the discontinuity between a person's attitude toward others at $t1$ and her attitude toward them at $t2$, it is helpful to consider other contexts in which the same shift in attitude occurs. Consider, for example, the context in which 'Why me?' expresses an attitude that is the opposite of the one I have been investigating. I refer to situations in which a person

is struck by the extent to which their good fortune is just this—good luck. Such a realization can prompt the experience of 'survivor guilt'. And it is natural to express this experience with the question: 'Why me?'.

This question acknowledges one's kinship with others, and even reflects a deep identification with them. Why might this acknowledgment be experienced as guilt? If one's survival is simply a matter of good luck, then there is no reason to blame oneself for being one of the few who remain standing. If, however, one has tried to improve the chances of one's survival—if, as is almost surely the case, one has taken steps to put oneself in a better position to survive than others no less deserving (or has been prepared to do so and, in the meantime, has made no effort to improve their chances of survival)—then, if my reflections in this paper are on the right track, one would be justified in taking a critical stance toward one's own 'good luck'.

Relatedly—and perhaps more important—guilt and shame might be appropriate insofar as they concern not one's survival but one's immediate reaction to it. The closer this reaction comes to being expressible by the thought: 'Halleluiah! Praise the Lord! I was (and am) one of the chosen! (Or, Halleluiah! My daughter was not among the unlucky! The ambulance was not speeding toward her!) Providence has smiled on ME-E-E!!! Could anything be more worthy of celebration?', the closer it comes to the morally problematic attitude I have been examining. And the closer it comes to this morally problematic attitude, the more intelligible it is for the subject of this attitude to feel some mixture of guilt and shame—again, not about having escaped the fate of so many others but about regarding this escape as an intrinsically celebration-worthy event.[27]

In short, if the experience of survivor guilt is at least sometimes a fitting response to one's failure to identify with the suffering of others, this is because it is sometimes the closest a person can come to freeing themselves from the fantasy of privilege when they find themselves among the lucky few. On at least some such occasions, achieving greater diachronic coherence in one's attitudes toward others would require adopting a more consistently alienated, or competitive, stance toward these others. (In the second epigraph to this paper, Beauvoir highlights the moral dangers of such consistency.)

A similar diagnosis appears to apply to the guilt and humiliation people report feeling when they reflect on what they did in cases like Aida's—when they consider the steps they took to promote their own basic interests (and those of their loved ones) at the expense of others. Given that these people were acting under circumstances of extreme deprivation, doing more to acknowledge

27. In correspondence Roger Crisp suggested that there may be a structural similarity between survivor guilt and agent-regret. According to this suggestion, survivor guilt may be a sort of 'patient-regret', a reaction that is fitting, without being justified in the way that fitting guilt generally is.

their fellowship with those they do not love would have required them to abandon their attempts to preserve their own lives. Nonetheless, they need not be confused in order to feel ashamed of having done whatever they permissibly could to avoid sharing the horrible fate of others. As in the case of survivor guilt, such experiences of guilt and shame might be the only form their expression of solidarity can take as long as they give some priority to their own interests. (I have suggested that such self-censure may even be intelligible at the moment of action—when we meet the gaze of those who lose out in the competition for the scarce bread.)

Of course, from the fact that it is intelligible and fitting to feel this way under the circumstances I have just mentioned, it does not follow that people should cultivate such feelings. If an experience of guilt or shame has no edifying effect—if it has no tendency to cause people to alter their way of living—then we would seem to have good reason to discourage this painful experience. I believe that the shame we are disposed to experience upon thinking 'Why me?' does at least sometimes have beneficial effects. Rather than defending this conviction, however, I want to turn my attention back to the case in which someone implicitly repudiates their earlier lack of solidarity with others without thereby adopting an attitude of self-censure. This is the case of someone who, despite doing everything they permissibly can to separate themselves from those who are suffering, or will suffer, some horrible misfortune, has no inclination to think 'Why me?' when they suffer such a misfortune themselves.

What might account for this abrupt shift in orientation? As many have noted, the visceral experience of one's vulnerability to deep suffering appears to have great power to shake the fantasy of deserved privilege.[28] Of course, suffering can also render the sufferer less able and willing to identify their interests with the interests of others. And even a sudden discovery of fellowship in suffering need not make one any less inclined to distance oneself from others when the next opportunity presents itself. Precisely to the extent that an increased expression of solidarity is limited to a shift in attitude, it is also of only marginal value. Indeed, a genuine change of this sort is often difficult for even the person themselves to distinguish from a merely apparent self-transformation.

This having been said, a sudden blow to one's privilege in the luck lottery is often the first step in significantly reorienting one's relation to others. Such blows can push those on the receiving end into an unlooked-for fellowship. Someone who has suddenly discovered this fellowship is someone who is suddenly struck by the fact that they are no more deserving than others when it comes to the distribution of luck. In gaining this insight, they are likely to be struck by their prior moral blindness. And so, they are likely to find it more difficult to

28. This is one of the chief themes in all Eliot's work.

maintain habits of mind and deed that relegate most other human beings to a territory beyond the domain of their morally permissible concern. Though they could resist this insight by insisting that 'leaving the bad luck to others' is a mere side-effect of their permissible habits of self-protection and self-promotion, this defensive retort is likely to strike them as a symptom of blindness.

In effect, the blows of misfortune resemble the constraints of solidarity-friendly laws in bringing outside pressure to bear on our understanding of our relations to others. I have suggested that, for most of us, more robust legal constraints are necessary if our self-understanding is to incorporate a significantly more robust sense of human solidarity. But the transformative power of suffering suggests that dramatic shifts in perspective are possible without any shifts in social norms or incentives. Of course, one can endorse this suggestion while insisting that people will not significantly reorient themselves unless they are prompted to do so by a significant change in their circumstances. It seems to me, however, that this is not the right lesson to draw from the often edifying effect of losing one's privilege. Though we cannot simply will ourselves to change how we regard our relations to others (and though change would certainly come far more rapidly if it were forced upon us by those whose far less fortunate conditions are the correlate of our privilege), we need not wait for help from outside forces in order to begin acting as we would act if we no longer had the self-privileging disposition to ask: 'Why me?' We need not be motivated by external blows or external norms in order to cultivate a stronger disposition to ask: 'Why them?' and even (eventually): 'Why one of us?' Without undermining our loving relationships, these questions can open us to challenging the necessity and 'naturalness' of the social structures and norms that stand in the way of a more meaningful human fellowship.[29] Even if under the present circumstances no one has the authority to obligate us to revise our self-understanding in this way, the ideal of human solidarity can itself move us to take the necessary first steps.

So, too, can the aspiration to avoid inner conflict. For consider. If our social reality were to reflect the more meaningful solidarity we value, we would almost surely also acquire a new understanding of what we can reasonably demand of each other. Under these circumstances, what we can reasonably demand would

29. Note the important form that such challenging takes in the works of critical theory: One way that the privileged can help to undermine their own privilege is by encouraging those far less fortunate to oppose this privilege. I am not prepared to say that power conflicts among groups with competing interests are a necessary condition for the possibility of securing a future of robust human fellowship. My point here is simply that such conflicts can arise in response to the efforts of those with a relatively weak commitment to human solidarity, and that this is one way that endorsing a more robust human fellowship can move us to transform an impotent guilty conscience into a commitment to change.

itself change.[30] There would thus be less tension between our ideal of solidarity and our ideal of mutual respect.[31] In short, though our new orientation toward others would be discontinuous with the old orientation, there would be significantly less tension in our relation to ourselves.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kyla Ebels-Duggan and Nandi Theunissen for conversations on a very early draft of the manuscript and Roger Crisp and Daniel Herwitz for comments on a draft that was only slightly more well baked. Thanks, too, to audiences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Oxford University and to two anonymous reviewers. I am especially grateful for the advice and patience of the editors of this journal.

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30. Note that the opposition mentioned in the previous paragraph will itself almost surely take the form of challenges to the present widely shared understanding of what it is reasonable to demand. (For a related point, see the reference to Nagel in note 4.)

31. This suggestion is, I think, worth comparing with Akeel Bilgrami's suggestion that cultivating the ideal of 'non alienation' would alter our understanding of the relation between the ideal of equality and the ideal of liberty (Bilgrami 2023).

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