

## OFFENSIVE BENEFICENCE

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Simple acts of kindness that are performed sincerely and with evident good will can also, paradoxically, be received as deeply insulting by the people we succeed in benefiting.<sup>1</sup> When we are moved to help someone out of genuine concern for her, when we have no intention to humiliate or embarrass her and when we succeed at benefiting her, how can our generosity be disparaging or demeaning to her? Yet, when the tables are turned, we sometimes find ourselves brusquely refusing assistance from others or accepting it only grudgingly while trying to show that we do not need their charity. People with disabilities often find ourselves in situations of this sort, where we bristle at others who, for example, rush to open doors for us, offer to read small print we cannot see or hand us objects we have trouble reaching, while our kindhearted benefactors are surprised and hurt by the cold reception they receive for their efforts. We are usually aware that these people mean well and we often recognize the real benefits we stand to receive from their kindness, but many of us still feel offended and put down by acts of kindness that are normally regarded as quite commendable.

Taking offense at the kindness of others may seem inappropriate to those who think that acts of beneficence are always good and so merit gracious reception,

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appreciation and gratitude rather than feelings of disrespect or insult. It may seem imprudent to bear significant inconvenience and hardship rather than accept sincerely offered assistance from others. And those of us who are sometimes offended by beneficence may simply be unreasonable or unwise in our reluctance to ask for or accept assistance from others.

My aim is to explain some of the ways in which well-intentioned and effective beneficence can be disrespectful and offensive. I focus on cases in which someone provides assistance to a disabled person because of a perceived need that arises from that person's disability. The concerns I raise about beneficence are, I claim, especially apparent in such cases but I explain at the end how these worries can be generalized to other situations in which beneficence and respect come into conflict with one another.

I begin by characterizing a class of beneficent actions that may seem beyond moral dispute. These are actions in which a person successfully advances the good of another, as she intended to do for that person's own sake, and the benefactor believes that her assistance is not morally required or prohibited. Next, I distinguish three kinds of respect for oneself and others and I explain how offering or accepting beneficence can sometimes be disrespectful in these ways. One kind of respect for oneself is to maintain our equal rights with others by avoiding acts that diminish our moral freedom and put us under their direction. Accepting optional assistance from others, I argue, is often incompatible with this sort of self-respect because, in doing so, we incur debts of gratitude that place us in an unequal moral relationship of subordinate to superior. A second kind of respect for oneself and

others is to understand, acknowledge and appropriately value our own rights as well as their rights. When we misunderstand what these rights are and incorrectly assume that an act of beneficence is optional rather than owed then we risk disrespecting ourselves and others by accepting or offering as a mere kindness what is rightfully owed. A third kind of respect for oneself and others is to afford equal moral value to everyone as persons. When some people are generally afforded lower social standing and, as a result, diminished moral standing because they are perceived as especially needy then asking for, accepting, offering and giving beneficence can express or reinforce those demeaning attitudes. What unites these three kinds of respect, on a Kantian view, is that they are all ways of appropriately responding to the 'objective', 'unconditional' and 'incomparable' dignity of persons.<sup>2</sup> In the final two sections, I suggest some ways of adjudicating these kinds of conflicts between beneficence and respect.

## **Beneficence**

The types of cases I want to focus on are ones in which an ordinary person, who has the empirical and moral beliefs we would expect from a typical member of our society, performs or offers to perform what she takes to be an optional act of beneficence. She intends to help someone for her own sake rather than because, for instance, she fears social reprisals or aims to ingratiate herself. In light of the potentially false and biased empirical beliefs she has been able to gather from her

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<sup>2</sup> (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:435-6; Kant et al. 2002: 4:434-6)

past experiences and education, she reasonably believes that her action would be good for the person to some extent, so she is not simply rushing in haphazardly by her own lights. And from her own moral reflections and the social practices that currently exist, she does not reasonably believe that her action would be disrespectful or otherwise wrong, so she is not throwing money in someone's face or intending to put her down by her charity. Nor does she reasonably think that helping the person is strictly owed to the person, so she does not mean to be fulfilling a duty or special obligation. As a conceptual matter, such actions can be wrong and disrespectful, although perhaps morally worthy in many cases as well.

Beneficent actions are commonly understood as those that are intended to advance the good of another for his or her own sake. An action does not count as beneficent in this sense if the only benefits it brings to others were unintended or merely meant to further the giver's own good. Beneficent actions can nonetheless go awry when they do not in fact benefit those we intended to help. We may be mistaken, for example, about where a person's interests lie or about what we can do to further them.<sup>3</sup> We can say that a beneficent action is successful, it comes off well, if what we do actually advances someone's good, as we intended it to do for her own sake.

Beneficent actions can also be accompanied by the belief that they are morally required, prohibited or optional. We may decide to help someone in need for her own sake, thinking that we are doing her an optional kindness, but we may not know that morality strictly requires us to assist her or that it expressly forbids

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<sup>3</sup> (Driver 1997)

us from doing so. In such cases, even if our action furthers the person's good, we lack the requisite moral freedom for our action to count as one of optional beneficence. An act of optional beneficence is successful if (1) we really do benefit someone, as we intended to do for her own sake, and if (2) our action was not actually required or prohibited by morality, as we did not believe it to be.

For my purposes here, I will understand beneficent actions as those that are *intended* to further the good of another for her own sake under the *belief* that doing so is morally optional. Beneficent actions, in this sense, can be effective or ineffective, beneficial or harmful, respectful or disrespectful, and right or wrong depending on the actual effects they have on other people as well as the other requirements of duty and obligation that we are under when we act in these ways.

Moral assessments of this kind of beneficence depend on how, if at all, the distinction is drawn between what is owed to others and what is good, but not required, to do for them. Meeting the basic needs of others or saving them from extreme duress is in many cases required by morality rather than simply charitable. We may strictly owe assistance to others as a matter of justice; we may have special obligations to help our children, family, friends or associates; and basic respect may require us to exchange pleasantries and courtesies or return favors from others.<sup>4</sup>

A common reaction to offers of what are presented as optional beneficence from others, especially among people with disabilities, is to reject such help while trying to show that it is unneeded. Think of the mild annoyance and wounded pride

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<sup>4</sup> For discussions of the assistance that basic respect may require, see (Buss 1999; Herman 2012)

we may sometimes feel when a family member tries to give us advice about our career choices, when a neighbor brings second-hand clothes for our children or when another parent helps us to put up our camping tent. Even when we are sure that their beneficence is genuine and good for us, we may still feel somewhat disrespected, resentful or put down when others help us. Their assistance can sometimes make us feel helpless, vulnerable, needy or pitiful, which may lead us to reject it or to react in ungrateful and begrudging ways once it is given. These responses, and the attitudes that underlie them, may be irrational or unjustified, so it is worth exploring whether well-intentioned, sincere and apparently optional beneficence can also be disrespectful. In the next three sections, I will describe three kinds of respect for persons and explain how they can each conflict with the kind of beneficent actions I have characterized.

## **Respect as maintaining equality of moral rights**

When we know that someone has done us an optional kindness, morality is commonly thought to require some kind of grateful response or disposition to respond on our part.<sup>5</sup> Depending on, for example, the type of benefit we received and the trouble the person went through in helping us, we may simply be required to smile or nod appreciatively, but we may also have to write them a thank-you note,

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<sup>5</sup> Duties of gratitude are affirmed by moralists such as Aquinas (1964: II-II, Q. 106), Hobbes (1994: I.11.7; I.15.16), Hume (2000: 300, 308, 333-4, 385), Kant (MM 6:454-6; 458-9), Sidgwick (1884: 258-261; 278-283; 423-435) and W.D. Ross (2002: 21, 27). Recent discussions of gratitude as a duty include (Berger 1975; Card 1988; McAleer 2012; Smilansky 1997; Walker 1980), and recent discussions of gratitude as a virtue include (Kristjánsson 2013; Weiss 1985; Wellman 1999).

recount how their favor helped us if asked, tell them what we thought of their gift, buy them a small token of appreciation, be nicer to them than we otherwise would or perhaps even repay their generosity in kind or at least stand ready to do these things. We tend to regard it as a moral failing if someone ignores our kindness or fails to acknowledge it, acts as if our generosity is a burden to her, treats us with indifference even though we have done her many favors in the past, or refuses to reciprocate our generosity (e.g., I drove you to work all last week, but now that I have a flat tire, I am appalled that you are refusing to give me a ride). While my focus here is on duties of gratitude that arise from optional beneficence, I do not mean to deny that gratitude can also be a morally appropriate response to acts that are strictly owed.

Although we usually have significant latitude to decide how and when to show such gratitude for the optional beneficence that others show us, we arguably have some kind of obligation to our benefactors for their generosity. We are sometimes quite pleased by opportunities to show recognition and appreciation for the morally worthy actions of others, yet at other times the gratitude that we owe them can feel burdensome. We may not ask a neighbor to watch our children because we expect to be called upon to do the same for them; accepting a book as a gift may require us to comment on it if asked even though other books are higher on our reading list; even the heightened pleasantries and courtesy we must sometimes show others for their kindness can become tiresome.

Free beneficence from others imposes constraints on our moral freedom. We usually do not feel these limitations when we are otherwise pleased to show others

how grateful we are for their kindness or when we are simply in the good habit of doing so. But we may also begin to feel hemmed in by the gratitude we owe others when we would rather keep to ourselves or pursue our other projects than be especially affable to them or perform favors in return.

Some people may wish to downplay the role of optional beneficence from others in their lives because they want to avoid the obligations and debts of gratitude that they would otherwise owe others. We may sometimes not like owing gratitude to people, especially when such obligations were foisted upon us by beneficent actions we did not accept or when we could get along just fine without their optional assistance. This willingness to accept a potentially diminished level of wellbeing rather than incur obligations of gratitude, however, may simply be a further personal preference that lacks any moral backing. The kind of gratitude that we owe others for their kindness can be as simple as saying “thank-you” or giving a smile, while the more onerous debts of gratitude are usually reserved for occasions in which we have significantly benefited from the actions of others. We are often quite happy to show our appreciation to those who help us. And many of us are not particularly unsettled by having obligations of other kinds, whether voluntarily incurred or not – we are usually fine with signing mortgages, making promises, caring for our children, paying our taxes and seeking to respect the basic moral rights of all. So what, if anything, is it about incurring obligations of gratitude that may be morally objectionable?

We might begin to justify a preference for avoiding or refusing optional beneficence from others because of the obligations of gratitude they bring by



looking to an argument of Kant's.<sup>6</sup> Before describing this argument, I should note that Kant's conception of the content and scope of gratitude, which he develops in his later work the *Metaphysics of Morals*, has several problematic features that conflict with commonsense. First, Kant implausibly argues that all duties of gratitude can never be fully discharged because, as he sees it, we can never repay someone for having been the first to do us a kindness. Second, Kant thinks that obligations of gratitude are only owed for optional beneficence whereas we may think that gratitude may also be appropriate or even owed when others provide assistance that is morally required, such as to bystanders who save us from great duress, or to people who sincerely try but fail to help us. Third, Kant thinks of gratitude as necessarily obligatory, but in some cases gratitude may simply be commendable or virtuous but not required, such as when a nurse takes good care of us even though it was his job to do so. Finally, Kant claims that we must at least repay in equal measure the benefits freely given to us by others, whereas commonsense suggests that the gratitude we owe is usually not so precise or potentially onerous as that.

Although Kant's account of the scope and content of gratitude is too simple, he gives a powerful argument for why we have good moral reasons to avoid incurring obligations of gratitude while also cheerfully discharging the ones we have. According to Kant, when we permissibly choose to do someone an optional favor that succeeds in benefiting her, she thereby incurs a duty of gratitude to us.

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<sup>6</sup> (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:454-6; 458-9). For discussions of Kant's conception of gratitude and gratitude more generally see (Card 1988; Herman 2012; Smit and Timmons 2011)

Any gratitude she shows us in fulfilling this duty would not be grounds for further gratitude to her on our part, it would not create a further obligation of gratitude to her in us, because her grateful assistance and signs of appreciation are morally required rather than supererogatory. Other things equal, therefore, the two of us now stand in a kind of unequal moral relationship with regard to the duties we owe one another. Her freedom is constrained more than ours is because of the extra obligation she owes us. We are also in a position to direct some of her choices by our own potentially arbitrary decisions (such as inquiring after the benefits she received from us, asking her to reciprocate on a particular occasion, etc.) even though she does not have the same power over us. On a whim, we can decide to cancel her debt of gratitude or continue to uphold it, waive off the benefits she attempts to give in return, or call on her to help us in kind (I took you to work all last week, now it's your turn).

Kant's view is that it is morally objectionable for two people to stand in an unequal relation of a subordinate who is less morally free than her superior and partially under his direction when the superior is not also bound to his subordinate in the same way. This is a kind of moral inequality in which the beneficiary, other things equal, has less moral freedom than the benefactor while the benefactor also has the moral power to direct the choices of the beneficiary in how she fulfills her debt to him. The situation, according to Kant, is analogous to a servant who freely gives over certain of his rights to a master without gaining any rights from the master in return. All persons, according to Kant, have equal moral rights against one another, which they may transfer in mutual contractual arrangements or

exchange in close personal relationships without losing their basic moral equality with regard to what they owe one another. Even promises often implicitly involve mutual transfers of rights. What makes debts of gratitude different, in Kant's view, is that they are asymmetric obligations that, all else equal, make one person beholden to another and so eliminate the equality of duties that, for Kant, should exist between them.

When someone does us an optional kindness, according to Kant, we are often pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, we may be very appreciative of the person for her generosity, enjoy being especially nice to her and welcome opportunities to buy her "thank-you" gifts and even to repay her in kind. On the other hand, Kant thinks that our self-respecting attitudes also leads us to resent the fact that we are now beholden to her while she is not beholden in the same way to us. There are now things we *must* do for her even if we lose the desire to do so and she has moral power over us in how we discharge our obligation, which she may exercise to our liking or not, by waiving or enforcing our debt of gratitude or accepting or refusing to accept a small token as sufficient to fulfill it. When our obligations of gratitude and our appreciative desires and feelings coincide, our resentment may not be very apparent to us, but on reflection Kant thinks that our self-respect tends to diminish when our moral freedom is constrained by another person while we lack any comparable moral power over her. For this reason, according to Kant, it is disrespectful for others to intend to bind us by the assistance they aim to give.

In Kant's view, we must resist the temptation to allow our wounded self-respect to lead us to become unappreciative, where we refuse the gratitude we owe or act as if their kindness is a burden to us. And we must especially prevent this tendency from turning into the "loathsome" and "detestable" vice of ingratitude, which is outright hatred of the person for doing us a morally optional kindness because we resent her for putting us in an inferior position with respect to her.<sup>7</sup>

The proper target of our resentment to sincere acts of kindness, according to Kant, is not the benefactor, who we must acknowledge and honor for her morally worthy actions, but rather ourselves, for having incurred those obligations in the first place. The moral fault does not lie with the benefactor but with the beneficiary who accepted the benefits. Someone shows a lack of self-respect, in Kant's view, if she asks for or accepts favors from others or puts herself in a position in which she needs them, for in so doing she places herself in an inferior moral position as compared to her benefactor.<sup>8</sup> We therefore have self-regarding reasons of self-respect to avoid or refuse acts of optional beneficence in order to avoid asymmetrical debts of gratitude and so maintain our self-respect as an agent with the same moral power over others as they have over us.

If we broaden our focus from one-off interpersonal interactions, there are ways that we could mitigate the effects that beneficence from others can have on this kind of self-respect. Friends, families and close associations may have a long history of assisting one another, so they may maintain their equality with one

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<sup>7</sup> (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:458-459)

<sup>8</sup> Kant gives this as one of the examples to illustrate a kind of servility. See (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:436).

another if no single person among them owes more or less gratitude than anyone else in the network of obligations that exist among them. Even in society as a whole, if we are roughly as likely to receive help as to give it then, as it were, “paying it forward” can help to ensure that we each stand on an equal moral footing with others with regard to the duties of gratitude we owe one another.

Some people with disabilities may be especially concerned about the moral inequality that beneficence can create because we worry that our current social circumstances and abilities make us more likely than others to receive optional beneficence and less likely than others to be in a position to give it. If this empirical claim is true then people with disabilities would tend to occupy a subordinate social role because we would be beholden to many more people than the average person, while fewer people than average would be beholden to us. Non-disabled people may not have experienced the sheer number of beneficent actions that people with disabilities are subject to, so gratitude may come easily to them without dealing much of a blow to their self-respect. A wheelchair user, however, may feel appreciation when the first or second door is opened for him, but by the 20<sup>th</sup> door that day his warm feelings may have subsided, leaving him to force yet another smile or “thank-you” when he would rather have just managed by himself. Gratitude can feel quite constraining and oppressive for those who are regularly expected to give it, especially when we also have little opportunity to provide similar assistance to other people.

There may be reasons, therefore, to hide or downplay the beneficence we give to some people if certain kinds of gratitude would not be required of those who

were unaware that they were benefited by a morally optional act. We can also interpret and express the assistance we give them as morally required rather than charitable, which may not require the same kind of gratitude on their part. We may need to give people with disabilities, in particular, reasonable opportunities to repay acts of kindness and to assist us as well. And there may be, in some cases, good reasons for us to cancel or diminish the debts of gratitude we expect from people with disabilities. Nonetheless, if Kant is correct that our moral freedom is diminished by incurring debts of gratitude then we have moral reasons of self-respect to resist asking for or accepting optional beneficence that gives rise to such obligations.

## **Respect as understanding and appropriately valuing moral rights**

A second kind of respect for persons is to understand what their moral rights are and to place an equal value on those rights as compared to the rights of others.<sup>9</sup> Self-respect and respect for others, in this sense, are distinguished by whether it is one's own rights or the rights of another person that are to be acknowledged and appropriately valued. A servile person is one who affords herself a lower than equal moral status within the true system of moral rights while an arrogant person is one who gives others a status that is lower than her own within that system. Servility and arrogance do not necessarily involve violating anyone's rights but instead involve misunderstanding or denying the equal value of one's own rights or the

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<sup>9</sup> (Hill 1991).

rights of others. Respect of this kind therefore presupposes that persons have moral rights but it does not presuppose any particular conception of what those rights are.

When we consider the first sub-type of disrespect, which involves failing to understand and acknowledge one's own rights or the rights of others, we find that there are various ways that people may tend to misunderstand or fail to appreciate the moral rights of people with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> First, there was a time when people with disabilities were thought to lack certain basic moral rights altogether because of their disability. Second, although it is commonly accepted nowadays that people with disabilities have the same basic human rights as everyone else, some ordinary people may not fully grasp that some moral rights are positive, they mandate the performance of certain kinds of actions as owed such as giving mutual aid to others, meeting their basic needs, ensuring they have opportunities of various kinds, and providing them with distributive shares. Third, properly respecting someone's negative rights, which forbid certain kinds of interference from others, can also require positive action to ensure that the person is in a position to meaningfully exercise her rights. The right to freedom of association, for example, may require provisions that assist people with disabilities to communicate and congregate with others. Fourth, some people may not realize that the more specific treatment that people with disabilities are entitled to by right are not always the same as the treatment owed to people who are not disabled. The right to fair and decent

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<sup>10</sup> (Kittay 2005; Shakespeare 2006; Silvers 1998, 2009; Silvers and Francis 2009; Wasserman 1998).

treatment, for example, requires reasonable accommodations be made to allow people with disabilities an opportunity to participate fully in public life. Fifth, some people may not understand whether it is the government that bears primary or sole responsibility for satisfying certain moral rights or whether these rights are mainly against specific individuals or society at large. There may also be some role for political institutions as well as individuals in ensuring that certain moral rights are met. Although in our society, for example, the state is supposed to ensure that various buildings are wheelchair accessible, particular individuals may bear a burden of assistance when a building lacks an accessible entrance. Finally, although we are arguably excused from performing otherwise rightful acts if doing so would impose a significant burden on us, we may be too quick to assume we are exempted from certain kinds of rightful actions because of the personal costs we think they would involve.<sup>11</sup>

A person with a disability exhibits a servile attitude if she fails to understand and appreciate her own moral rights for these and other reasons. She may think that various kinds of assistance and reasonable accommodations from others are optional forms of charity or beneficence even though, as a matter of fact, they are rightfully owed to her. If she were to meekly seek out such help, fawn over potential benefactors or perhaps even beg for assistance that she is actually owed by right,

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<sup>11</sup> This is the conception of supererogation discussed in (Rawls 1999).



while displaying deferential signs of appreciation for those who give it, she would be expressing a kind of disrespect for herself.<sup>12</sup>

Many people with disabilities seek to avoid falling into this kind of servility, yet we are often unsure just what our moral rights are, so we may adopt a heuristic strategy of generally refusing to ask for or accept supposed favors rather than risk seeking as generosity what is actually our due. As long as we have some idea of our most basic rights, what we give up in refusing such assistance are potential improvements to our wellbeing, but what we gain is a greater assurance that we are showing proper respect to ourselves. Until we are in a better position to know what our moral rights are, the commitment that some people with disabilities have to avoiding morally optional beneficence from others can thus be an indirect way for us to avoid servility. Yet this strategy can also misfire when it leads us to refuse beneficent actions that go beyond the call of duty, but this is a chance some of us are willing to take for the greater assurance that we are showing proper respect to ourselves.

In the case of respect for others, someone exhibits a disrespectful attitude toward a person with a disability if she fails to understand and acknowledge that person's rights. She may express her thought that the assistance she successfully provides is optional when in fact the disabled person has a right to it. In these cases, people with disabilities may feel affronted and put down by the person's evident misunderstanding of her moral rights. In order to avoid being disrespected in this

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<sup>12</sup> Eva Kittay (2011) is also concerned about this kind of servility, particularly toward those who care for us.

way, people with disabilities have a further reason to adopt a general policy of refusing to ask for or accept beneficence when they suspect that it is incorrectly offered as morally optional charity.

Turning now to the second sub-type of respect, someone may understand and acknowledge that she has the same moral rights as others and know how and when she can forfeit them, but she would still be servile in the second way if she did not appropriately value the rights she has. Such a person may refuse to stand up for her rights or fight for them; she may choose not to press her rightful claims on others, regularly decide not to exercise certain moral rights, refrain from holding others to account for violating them, or allow others to treat her as if she lacks those rights. This sort of person may prefer to fawn, beg or simply hope that others will respect her rights without demanding that they do so; she would often rather waive her rights than make a fuss; she usually allows violations of her rights to pass without comment; she is willing to show signs of gratitude and deference to those who satisfy her rights as if they are doing her a favor; and she is willing to play along with others who do not recognize and appreciate her rights.

A disabled person exhibits this second kind of servility when she places a lower value on her moral rights as compared to those of others.<sup>13</sup> Even when she knows, at least in broad outline, what her moral rights are, such a person usually chooses not to stand up for or press them on others. She may thus prefer to accept as a kindness what is actually her due and exhibit deferential signs of gratitude

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<sup>13</sup> Both kinds of servility are discussed in (Goffman 1963).

rather than make it clear to the benefactor and others that she expects and demands the beneficent action as a matter of right.

And someone disrespects a person with a disability in this second way by placing lower importance on that person's rights as compared to the rights of others. She may refuse to provide assistance that is owed, assign lower priority to giving it than she does to fulfilling her other duties, or recognize that her help is required but nonetheless offer it in a spirit of magnanimity that, in her mind, warrants fawning gratitude and deference. A self-respecting disabled person may thus prefer to refuse certain goods that are owed when they are presented as morally optional charity, at least until those actions are offered in a respectful way that shows a proper recognition of her right to them.

Some beneficent actions that are thought to be supererogatory can thus lead to feelings of resentment and offense among people with disabilities who feel like they are being put down by people who do not recognize and appreciate that their supposed generosity, although kindhearted, is actually owed. This puts the person with a disability in a difficult position. On the one hand, the most effective way to get what she is owed may be by flattery, fawning and complaisance to those who do not understand or appropriately value her rights. Doing so may reinforce their disparaging views of her and other people with disabilities, but it may also lead her to adopt their attitudes herself and so doubt whether her moral status is on a par with theirs. In accepting as favors what is owed, waiving her rights or refusing to fight for them, she may be expressing and reinforcing a deferential attitude in herself that is incompatible with full self-respect. On the other hand, if she refuses

to play along and stands up for her rights, she risks social reprisal from others who are annoyed by her “presumptiveness” as well as reduced wellbeing and loss of assistance that is due to her. A general strategy of standing on her rights and generally avoiding beneficent actions that are offered as morally optional may be a morally worthwhile way of trying to maintain one’s self-respect in an imperfect world.

These arguments for seeking one’s own wellbeing without much in the way of optional beneficence from others do not establish that it is always preferable to refuse such kindness and generosity from others. There are many ways in which a person can avoid servility of both kinds while graciously accepting favors. Many optional acts of beneficence are successful – they would be helpful and they are not required or forbidden by morality – so in graciously accepting them as the kinds of acts they are we may not be misunderstanding our rights or placing a lower value on them. Even when someone presents an action as beneficent when we know that it is required, we may have other reasons to accept it and even to show signs of gratitude, without thereby having or expressing a servile attitude. And when we are unsure whether a beneficent action is required or not, it may be worth the moral risk to accept it.

Some people with disabilities are perhaps overly-sensitive to the potential moral pitfalls of asking for and accepting favors because of our concerns about falling into servility or being subjected to these forms of disrespect from others, yet it may still be a worthwhile approach for us generally to avoid asking for or accepting much beneficence until we and others have a clearer idea of what our

rights are. But especially in cases in which it is uncertain to all where to draw the line between what is owed as a matter of right and what is good to do but not required, people with disabilities should perhaps be more understanding and less offended by others who sincerely and reasonably think the assistance they are offering is optional and likely to further our good. Other people should perhaps be more sensitive to the potentially demeaning messages that their actions can express to disabled people. And all of us should reflect more deeply on what rights people with disabilities have and to adjust our legal and social practices accordingly.

## **Respect as equal moral status**

A third kind of respect for persons is the attitude of valuing oneself and others as moral equals who have an objective and incomparable worth. As Kant and Rousseau have argued, however, human beings are disposed to ground a person's basic moral status on her relative social standing.<sup>14</sup> Societies afford social standing differently, but wealth, power, social position, natural or realized ability, physical appearance, moral merit (or demerit), gender and race have figured prominently in the relative honor and prestige that people enjoy in society. When someone is appraised highly by these metrics or is a member of a prized group, Kant and Rousseau think we have a mistaken tendency to judge that she has a higher moral status than those who do not fare as well by society's standards.

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<sup>14</sup> (Rousseau and Gourevitch 1997); (Kant et al. 1998: 6:27).

People with disabilities have tended to suffer from a diminished social status in Western societies, which has often been translated by some into an inferior moral standing. We tend to be perceived as weak, pitiful and less productive than others because of our disability.<sup>15</sup> We tend to have fewer resources and less power than those who are not disabled.<sup>16</sup> Because of these and other social factors, we likely receive help and offers of help more often than others because we are seen as less capable of caring for ourselves or pursuing our own good, while we are likely given fewer opportunities to assist others. Even though these and other considerations may be exaggerated or mostly result from unjust social conditions, they are nonetheless stereotypically applied in many societies to particular disabled people in a way that can significantly diminish our relative social standing.<sup>17</sup>

If people with disabilities tend to have a diminished social status in part because we are seen as needy or pitiful, and if this inferior social status leads some people to afford us a less than equal moral status, then providing optional beneficence can express or reinforce these disparaging attitudes about people with disabilities. People with disabilities may feel pressure from prevailing social attitudes, as well as from the beneficent actions that may encourage and accentuate them, to internalize those attitudes and so diminish the respect we have for ourselves in comparison with others. It can be very difficult to maintain a sense of one's own worth in a society that has a comparatively low opinion of people like

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<sup>15</sup> (Hardeep and Andrea 2014)

<sup>16</sup> (Brault 2012; Melchior et al. 2006)

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of some cross-cultural differences in how people with disabilities are perceived, see (Munyi 2012).

you. And that low opinion, which results in part from a mistaken conflation of social standing with moral status, can be encouraged by acts of beneficence that portray people with disabilities as dependent on the kindness of others.

Even when someone is able to resist these social pressures and understand and appreciate his basic moral status, there are also questions about how a fully self-respecting person should respond to those who have or express the demeaning attitude that he is morally inferior in light of his social standing. Others may respect his rights simply from fear of punishment or reprisal even though their attitudes toward him are still deeply disrespectful. If he says nothing and simply allows others to continue thinking of him as second-class then he risks placing a comparatively low value on his basic moral status itself. One way he can stand up for himself is to fight the misconception that moral status varies with the opinions of others.

A person with a disability who finds himself in a context of this sort, where he has a diminished social standing that tends to lead him and others to regard him as morally inferior, has reasons of self-respect to try to sever the socially accepted connection between social and moral worth. In the meantime, he might also have reasons to show that he and others fare better by society's standards than is commonly thought, as a way of combating stereotypes and diminishing the psychological pressure he may feel to diminish his sense of moral worth. If his society values those who pursue their own wellbeing without depending on charity or optional beneficence from others then he would have reasons to be reticent in asking for or accepting favors as a way of diminishing psychological obstacles to his

own self-respect. Some people with disabilities may thus have a strong preference to play a particularly active role in the pursuits of our groups, to show off our talents and abilities and to demonstrate our usefulness without seeking or accepting additional help from others. In ordinary life, we may also wish to exercise and develop our natural talents and abilities ourselves without assistance from others as a way to maintain our own self-esteem and call attention to the subtleties and skills that even basic life activities can involve. One of our aims in doing these things is to secure the esteem and appreciation of our associates and so maintain a sense that our own projects and efforts are prized and worth pursuing. We must be careful, however, not to reinforce the tendency to conflate social and moral value or to send the message that we accept the tendency others may have to view us as morally inferior or superior in virtue of our social position. But we may justifiably want to resist optional beneficence as a way of protecting our sense of our own moral worth until it can be fully recognized by our society.

## **Social practices**

How these various kinds of respect should combine to guide our beneficent actions and responses to the kindness of others in an imperfect world is often very complicated. In this section, I want to explore how we might begin to resolve some of these tensions in our everyday decision-making.

One significant problem is that we often lack certain basic empirical information that is relevant to our decisions about offering or accepting help. Those who are considering whether to give assistance may not know whether there are



ways we could actually help someone, if that person would welcome or accept their help, or if she would be offended by it. We may not have reflected enough on how our beneficence will be perceived by society or on the kinds of pressures it may place on the beneficiaries of our assistance. Potential beneficiaries, on the other hand, may not know the intentions of others, whether those people mean to help at all, whether they are moved by self-serving reasons, whether they regard their assistance as charitable and if the person would actually be helpful.

Both sides may also lack certain moral knowledge as well. They may not know whether the assistance is required or forbidden by morality or free to give, whether other people or the political system bear primary responsibility for the assistance as well as what is required from whom when that aid is not forthcoming. Some people may have not thought enough about the connections between beneficence and various forms of respect or they may be unsure how the values of respect weighs against the benefits they stand to provide.

One strategy that societies have employed to deal with these issues is to institute, enforce and teach certain percepts, norms and rules of thumb to help people decide how and when to assist others and how to respond when others attempt, but perhaps fail, to do so. Our social practices pick out various signs and gestures that often make it clear when someone wants, needs or welcomes our help; these rules and norms also help us to determine whether a potential benefactor has pure intentions or regards her assistance as a favor. Our social practices include deliberative guidelines for when help is required or forbidden, who is responsible for giving it and what kinds of responses are called for. We have socially enforced

rules about when and how it is appropriate to offer help as well as ones that require us to give optional beneficence, such as holding doors for people carrying heavy packages, giving directions when asked, or helping to carry a baby stroller up a flight of steps. Good judgment is needed to apply our norms of beneficence and respect, and various virtues and sensitivities are necessary as well, but these rules can be reasonably useful in navigating everyday contexts.

Our social norms of beneficence and respect are far from perfect, however, because they can lead us to make mistakes or overlook relevant considerations; they may also provide little guidance in rare or unforeseen cases. By their nature, social norms have to be reasonably simple, teachable and publicly accessible so that ordinary people can look to them for guidance in particular contexts. Rules will not always be subtle enough to fully capture every relevant moral distinction or empirical circumstance and they may be biased in which ones they do include. In many cases, social norms are also tailored to cases that regularly arise in a society while glossing over those that are less common.

For these reasons, our social norms of beneficence and respect, as they currently exist, often provide mistaken or limited guidance in cases involving people with disabilities. The usual signs that someone is struggling to perform an activity and would welcome our assistance may not reveal the same need or willingness in a person with a disability. The typical ways that we succeed in helping others may be ineffective and harmful for someone with various kinds of impairments. Our rules may not fully capture what kind of assistance is morally required to respect the rights of a person with a disability and who is responsible for doing so. Even when

we have a sense that our social norms are not quite adequate in such cases, our own reflections may not be particularly effective either. We may assume that disability itself is a sign that others need and want our help, or try to imagine ourselves in their position to see how we would react, or rely on our own limited experiences to decide what we owe to people with disabilities. The rules may also provide little guidance to people with disabilities about what is actually owed to them and what sorts of responses are called for when others offer or give beneficence.

In light of these difficulties, there are reasons for greater understanding and tolerance on both sides. Although others may have acted inappropriately in attempting to help us, we have reasons to recognize and appreciate their good intentions, mitigate the blame we might feel tempted to give, while perhaps explaining how they could have done better. And when we are rebuffed in our efforts to help a person with a disability, we should be more understanding of the person's reasons for refusing our assistance as well as the unintended messages our actions can send and the stereotypes and psychological tendencies that we may be reinforcing by our help.

What is also needed, from a social point of view, is an improved set of social percepts and norms for how to treat people with disabilities based on an improved understanding of their needs, interests and capabilities. We could incorporate rules about asking a person with a disability whether she needs help rather than assuming she does and rushing in to give it; we could put in place norms about standing ready to help when asked by a person with a disability and following her lead about how to do so. There should be rules about how a person with a disability

can show that help would be welcome when the usual ways of doing so are not possible. We might institute norms that favor hiding our beneficence in certain cases or masking it as self-interest or duty. Perhaps the assistance we give should be narrowly tailored to the need at hand rather than assuming that a person with one kind of disability is incapable in other areas as well. And there should be norms about what kinds of gratitude are owed for morally beneficent actions, what opportunities should be given to show it and when those debts should be forgiven. More generally, we should work to institute cautionary rules of respect that recognize the reasons people with disabilities have for sometimes refusing our beneficence.

## Conclusion

Although my focus here has been on beneficence for people with disabilities, similar tensions between beneficence and respect of various types can arise for the sorts of assistance we might want to provide to those who are poor, elderly, or part of an oppressed group. Our well-intentioned assistance can be especially offensive to those who are already beholden in various ways to others, whose rights are not generally understood or valued, or who occupy a lower social standing because they are perceived as needy or incapable. Accepting such assistance can also be particularly damaging to the self-respect of those people by partially subordinating themselves to their benefactors because of the debts of gratitude they owe, expressing a servile attitude about their moral standing in the system of moral rights and reinforcing their inferior social status.

Beneficence, Kant says, “admonishes [people] constantly to come closer to one another” while respect leads people to “to keep themselves at a distance from one another.” If 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.’”<sup>18</sup> I hope to have shown how, more specifically, genuinely helpful and well-intentioned acts of beneficence can also be deeply offensive while also pointing the way toward more respectful ways of helping people that should be encouraged. There are moral reasons, I have argued, for demanding help from others that is owed, resisting aid that is not, while showing appreciation for the kindness we do receive and the good-will of those who give it.

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<sup>18</sup> (Kant and Gregor 1996: 6:449). The quotation is from Albrecht Heller’s 1736 poem “Über die Ewigkeit.”

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