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What's Wrong with Being Lonely?

Justice, Beneficence, and Meaningful Relationships

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A life without liberty and material resources is not a good life. Equally, a life devoid of meaningful social relationships—such as friendships, family attachments, and romances—is not a good life. From this it is tempting to conclude that just as individuals have rights to liberty and material resources, they also have rights to access meaningful social relationships. I argue that this conclusion can be defended only in a narrow set of cases. “Pure” social-relationship deprivation—i.e., deprivation that is not caused, or accompanied, by deficits in liberties and material resources—mostly generates demands of private beneficence. I suggest that social-relationship deprivation is unjust, hence a rights-violation, only when it is due to factors—e.g., one’s race—that are irrelevant to one’s being a good participant in social relationships. I thus conclude that access to meaningful social relationships is not a fundamental concern for theories of (personal or political) justice.

Introduction

Political theories of justice have long been concerned with individuals’ entitlements to freedoms and material resources.¹ A moment’s reflection reveals that freedoms and material resources are necessary but not sufficient for a life worth living. Human beings are social creatures, very much in need of receiving and providing meaningful social contact and relationships. This suggests that theorizing about *justice* should focus on rights to access not only *freedoms and material resources*, but also *social resources*, namely meaningful social relationships, such as friendships, family attachments, romances and so forth.

This suggestion has been recently explored by a number of scholars. Kimberley Brownlee features prominently among them (Brownlee 2013; 2015;

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¹ But cf. Rawls’s (1999, 155-56, 386ff.) discussion on the “social bases of self-respect.”

forthcoming; Nussbaum 2000, 79–80; see also Liao 2006; Cordelli 2015a; 2015b; Gheaus 2009; Collins 2013).² Brownlee argues that, when individuals *lack the ability and opportunity* to forge meaningful social connections, a distinctive type of injustice is done to them.³ For example, a neglected child is wronged, among other things, because the abuse she is subjected to undermines her *ability* to forge meaningful social connections in the future. Equally, a physically impaired old man unable to leave his home, a prisoner unable to leave his cell, and other similarly placed individuals are wronged in this distinctive way unless *opportunities for meaningful social relationships* are made available to them (Brownlee 2016, xx). These relationships should be distinguished from superficial interactions with people we encounter intermittently, such as bus drivers, shop assistants, bank employees, and other professionals. Meaningful social relationships are sustained over time, and generate special obligations.

In one respect, I think Brownlee is exactly right: our political institutions should attend to people’s access to meaningful social relationships. Doing so involves, among other things, creating public spaces for social interaction, providing individuals at risk of isolation—e.g., elderly and disabled people—with dedicated opportunities for sociable activities, making sure that everyone has sufficient leisure time to cultivate social connections, and planning urban and rural environments so as to facilitate people’s maintenance of those connections. Is the local hospital or prison in reasonably easy reach for friends and relatives of prisoners and patients? Is decent public transport available for grandparents to visit their grandchildren? These questions must be addressed by a society aspiring to be just.⁴ Brownlee’s—and others’—recent work is admirable, among other things, for giving these issues the prominence that they deserve.

That said, in this article, I want to examine just *how fundamental* our (putative) right to access social resources is. Specifically, I want to consider whether our readiness to assert the existence of such a right implicitly rests on the empirically

² For Cordelli (2015a), the distribution of “social” or “relational” resources is relevant to theories of justice to the extent that it significantly affects the distribution of other goods (e.g., access to education, health care, and income).

³ Brownlee calls this “social contribution injustice,” and argues that it manifests itself in two principal ways: through social-resource deprivation and through misvaluing one’s social contribution—e.g., when men are assumed to be unfit carers, or women are assumed to lack leadership skills. Here, I only focus on the former, behavioural type of social contribution injustice.

⁴ I thank Kimberley Brownlee and Chiara Cordelli for offering these examples.

plausible, but conceptually unnecessary, assumption that social-resource deficits are symptomatic of other forms of deprivation. To do so, I discuss several—admittedly unrealistic—cases of “pure” social-resource deprivation. These cases involve capable adults who lack access to social resources, but enjoy full access to freedoms and material goods. Although Brownlee’s work does not focus on such hypothetical cases, discussing them is useful if we want to be clear about *what place* social resources should have in a theory of justice. If, on reflection, it emerges that pure social-resource deprivation fails to trigger demands of justice, we will have reason to conclude that access to social resources matters at the level of the *implementation* of theories of justice, but not in the formulation of their *fundamental* principles (cf. Cohen 2003). On this picture—at least when it comes to capable adults—justice demands no more than access to freedoms and material goods.⁵ Attending to social-resource deprivation is thus not an independent demand of justice, but a means of remedying *other* resource deficits.

The view I defend in what follows comes close to this picture. I argue that *pure* social-resource deprivation counts as a right-violation only in a relatively narrow set of circumstances. Furthermore, the right in question is not legitimately enforceable, hence not the kind of right that should concern a *political* theory of *justice*. Pure social-resource deprivation generates, in large part, demands of private beneficence.

My discussion develops as follows. In Section 1, I sketch the distinction between “justice” and “beneficence.” In Section 2, I isolate cases of pure social-resource deprivation from “mixed” cases in which social-resource deprivation is combined with material-resource deprivation. In Sections 3 and 4, I offer a moral analysis of instances of social-resource deprivation stemming, respectively, from factors that negatively affect the ability of the deprived to be good partners in a meaningful social relation, and from factors that are “morally irrelevant” from the perspective of meaningful social relations. I argue that, while in the former case, neither the state nor private individuals have duties of justice towards the socially deprived, in the latter, *some* private individuals do. These duties, however, are not

⁵ I remain agnostic about “hard cases” involving children and the mentally disabled. These are also cases in which the “separation” between social-resource deprivation and deprivation more generally is hardest to envisage. On this see, e.g., Liao (2006).

legitimately enforceable by the state. I thus conclude that, in the vast majority of cases, social-resource deprivation triggers duties of beneficence rather than of justice.

1. Justice and beneficence

Let me begin by sketching the main differences between two moral notions: *justice* and *beneficence* (Buchanan 1987; see also Valentini 2015; 2013b).⁶ In its broadest characterization, “justice” concerns Hohfeldian (1917) claim rights. Whenever an injustice is committed, we know that a right—i.e., a *directed* duty *owed* to someone—has been violated. Injustices, that is, involve wronging particular others.⁷

For instance, if John breaks a promise he made to Sarah (without good reason), he commits an injustice against her: he violates her right to the content of that promise. Similarly, if a state arbitrarily incarcerates political protesters, it commits an injustice: it violates their rights against arbitrary incarceration. As these examples show, the bearers of duties of justice are a diverse set, ranging from individual moral agents to collective ones, such as the state.⁸

A further feature of an important subset of duties of justice—let’s call them duties of *political, as opposed to personal, justice*—is that they may be rightfully enforced by appropriately placed agents (see e.g. Nardin 2004). Not all rights exhibit this feature. For instance, directed duties grounded in promises or friendship may not be rightfully enforced (Valentini 2013a). Morally speaking, our friends may have entitlements to our care and support across a wide range of circumstances. Yet, these are paradigmatically non-enforceable. A friend may not legitimately threaten sanctions—e.g., a fine—if I do not support her in a difficult moment. To be sure, she might react by slowly withdrawing her friendship, but it is typically inappropriate for friends to issue the following kind of statement: “Unless you do X voluntarily, I will force you to do it, or otherwise punish you for your failure.”

Directed duties grounded in friendships and promises may be contrasted with a different class of duties of justice: for example, individuals’ duties not to steal from and not to physically harm others. Unlike duties of friendship, these moral

⁶ What I here call “beneficence” is sometimes also referred to as “humanity” or “charity.”

⁷ I am here understanding justice as a “normative” as opposed to a “purely evaluative” notion. In doing so, however, I am not denying the possibility of meaningfully calling a state of affairs unjust when that state of affairs involves unfairness, yet nobody’s rights are violated. For present purposes, I simply set aside this purely evaluative understanding of justice. For discussion see Gilibert (2011) Gheaus (2013), and Valentini (2016).

⁸ This is so for those who believe that collective agents exist. See, e.g., List and Pettit (2011).

requirements may be in principle rightfully enforced. In fact, one of the main functions of the state is precisely to carry out such enforcement. We typically think it is perfectly legitimate to threaten thieves, tax evaders and criminals with all kinds of sanctions, ranging from fines to long periods spent in prison.

To sum up, duties of justice are directed, namely correlative to rights. Within the broad category of “justice,” we may further distinguish between *political justice*, dealing with directed duties that are in principle rightfully enforceable (e.g., by the state) and *personal justice*, concerning directed duties that lack rightful enforceability.

A different kind of moral concern, but still a very important one, is “beneficence.” Duties of beneficence are unlike duties of justice in that they are not correlative to rights, i.e., not directed. Everyone has duties of beneficence to do good for others, so long as this is not too costly to oneself, but nobody is *entitled* to the performance of these duties, and these duties are never rightfully enforceable. Importantly, duties of beneficence are “subordinated” to duties of justice (Barry 1991). They demand that we help others with resources—be they material or emotional—to which we are entitled in the first place. When we fail to act beneficently, showing disregard for the good of others, *we act wrongly*, but we do not wrong anyone in particular. For example, my neighbour has no right that I babysit for her, yet, in appropriate circumstances—say, an unexpected family emergency—I may have a duty of beneficence to do so. My neighbour cannot “demand” that I babysit for her, yet I would be acting wrongly if I refused to do so.

Against the backdrop of this conceptual distinction, our question is whether and, if so, under what conditions, pure social-resource deprivations give rise to claims of justice—whether personal or political.

2. Isolating social-resource deficits

As anticipated, a key difficulty in addressing this question is that social-resource deficits are often intertwined with other, more familiar deprivations. To go back to our initial examples, neglected children and physically impaired elderly people are likely to have their material (and not only social) needs unmet. To better isolate the concern at hand, I present the admittedly imaginary and artificial case of a woman: Gertraud.

Gertraud suffers no morally problematic deficits in access to liberties and socio-economic opportunities, yet she entirely lacks social resources.

Gertraud

Gertraud had a normal childhood, with fulfilling social relationships—involving family and friends—up to the age of 25. We now take a snapshot of her life at age 30. All of her civil and political liberties are respected—she has freedom of movement, expression, to vote, to associate, and so forth. She also has a good job, which gives her more than enough to live on, and to enjoy leisure time. However, she has *no meaningful social relationships with anyone*. She is rarely seen talking to her co-workers, unless it's for directly business-related reasons. She has no regular friends, and no contact with her family. She occasionally watches television, goes to art galleries and museums over the weekend, and sometimes goes on short trips by herself.

Granted, Gertraud's life is not very appealing. But the question is whether her situation should raise moral concerns, and specifically concerns of either personal or political justice. Our *intuitive* responses, I suggest, will vary depending on what has brought about Gertraud's social-resource deprivation in the first place. Let us consider three possibilities.

Solitary Gertraud

Gertraud just wants to be left alone. Her social isolation is her own choice. She has plenty of opportunities to forge social relationships, but she just has no interest in doing so. After a young life spent in the company of others, she has now decided to live in “relational solitude.”

Grumpy Gertraud

Gertraud became very grumpy when she turned 25, for no apparent good reason.⁹ Since then, she has been unbearable. When anyone tries to strike a conversation with her, she begins a long monologue listing all the aspects of her life she is unhappy with, showing absolutely no concern for the situation of others, including those who are much worse off than she is. Alternatively, she just starts criticising others—including her interlocutors. She is also known to

⁹ That is, we cannot trace her grumpiness to something like a “socially caused” trauma.

be a bit of a bully, and to routinely spread vicious rumours. Her family, former friends, co-workers, and other individuals she regularly sees (the greengrocer, newsagent, butcher etc.) know this, and over time they have learnt to keep interaction with her to a minimum (cf. Brownlee 2013, 217–18).

Lovely Gertraud

Gertraud is a lovely woman. She migrated to country X at the age of 25, when her society of origin, Y, was struck by violence and civil war. Gertraud visibly belongs to the “Y people,” and is the only Y-person living in X. Unfortunately, the Xs have strong prejudices against the Ys. Gertraud’s status under X’s law is equal to that of everyone else, yet nobody wants to have close relationships with her.

What should we say about Gertraud’s situation across these cases? *Solitary Gertraud* seems unproblematic. Of course, a case like this is unlikely to occur in the real world but, if it did, it would not raise any “justice concern.” Gertraud is not deprived of the ability or opportunity to form social connections. She just does not want to exercise that ability, and take advantage of the relevant opportunities. In this respect, her life choice is not so different—at least relationship-wise—to that of a monk. And, as Brownlee herself acknowledges, the lack of social contact characterizing monks—if voluntarily sought—does not amount to an unjust social-resource deficit (Brownlee 2013, 205).

Grumpy Gertraud and *Lovely Gertraud* are instead prima facie morally problematic, and—at least intuitively—the latter more so than the former. But what kinds of moral concerns—if any—do they raise upon reflection? For those who hold that, at a fundamental level, justice requires everyone to have a substantive opportunity to forge meaningful social connections, both raise concerns of justice.¹⁰ In both, Gertraud wishes to forge those connections, but due to others’ unwillingness to associate with her, she lacks a *substantive* opportunity to do so.

¹⁰ Note that, although Brownlee affirms such a right, she does so in relation to cases where social resource deprivation is associated with liberty-and-material deprivation. This being so, it is not clear what her view implies for cases such as the ones discussed here.

This conclusion is intuitively appealing but, in what follows, I argue that it is incorrect. *Grumpy Gertraud* and *Lovely Gertraud* do raise moral concerns, but those are primarily a matter of beneficence. Only *Lovely Gertraud* involves injustice.

3. Grumpy Gertraud, justice, and beneficence

We want to know whether in *Grumpy Gertraud* an injustice occurs. That is, we want to know whether Gertraud has a claim right to access social resources that is plausibly *violated* in the scenario at hand. For claim rights to be violated, some agents must fail to honour directed duties to provide Gertraud with access to social resources. Two types of agents may be thought to bear the relevant duties: the state of which Gertraud is a citizen and/or individuals who come into contact with her. Below, I consider each possibility in turn.

3.1 The State

By hypothesis, Gertraud’s state secures her civil and political liberties, and she has satisfactory access to socio-economic goods. She also enjoys a *formal* opportunity to forge social connections: her state protects freedom of association, and invests resources in the creation of spaces and public initiatives to bring people together socially. Yet she lacks the *substantive* opportunity to forge social connections, since nobody wishes to associate with her. In these circumstances, the state would qualify as a perpetrator of injustice against Gertraud only if we could plausibly posit an obligation, on the part of the state, to do more, by providing Gertraud with the *substantive* opportunity to forge social connections.

There are two ways in which the state might discharge such a putative obligation: (i) through *forcing* people to befriend the grumpy and obnoxious, by threatening sanctions in case of non-compliance and (ii) by *incentivizing* people to establish social connections with the grumpy and obnoxious. Both options, I suggest, are unpalatable.¹¹

3.1.1 Forcing people to befriend the grumpy

I present three objections—of progressively greater force—against the idea of forcing people to “befriend the grumpy.” First, and predictably, forcing people to create and sustain social connections with individuals with whom they would rather have no

¹¹ Of course, the state may also make available some “relationship education” or counseling to people like Gertraud; but let us assume that in Gertraud’s case these have not been efficacious. I thank Chiara Cordelli and Anca Gheaus for prompting me to specify this.

relationships is deeply illiberal. To be sure, this “illiberalism” charge cannot be used as an all-purpose “trump card.” After all, individuals’ interest to not associate with “unwanted” others has only so much weight (Brownlee 2015).

For instance, at the end of World War II, many fled the Russian-occupied eastern parts of Germany, and moved to the territories occupied by the British and American armies. Families residing there were forced to house refugees in their homes, and in some cases for protracted periods of time. Here, the host families’ interest in associating with whomever they wanted was set back but, it would seem, justifiably so.

Note, crucially, two features of the refugees’ case. First, the most basic material interests of the refugees were at stake. Second, host families were not forced to form *meaningful* social connections with their “imposed guests.” Of course, they were placed in a situation in which the formation of such connections was facilitated, but certainly not necessitated—interactions could remain superficial. What the host families were forced to provide was shelter and some minimal access to subsistence; nothing else.

This situation is entirely different from the one described in *Grumpy Gertraud*. Here, Gertraud’s material interests are fulfilled, and the envisaged “state-compelled” association is a much deeper one than in the refugee case. Gertraud’s interest in social connections, contrary to the refugees’ interest in surviving, is arguably not strong enough to outweigh third parties’ (legitimate) interest in avoiding social relations with obnoxious individuals.

Second, implementing the envisaged policy, by forcing third parties to befriend the grumpy, could not be done without incurring unacceptable moral costs. In particular, the policy in question would be demeaning towards its intended beneficiaries. The argument here mirrors Elizabeth Anderson’s critique of luck-egalitarianism. On Anderson’s (1999) view, compensating people for their bad brute luck would lead governments to intrusively inquire about people’s (lack of) natural endowments, in order to determine whether they are “ugly,” “untalented,” “unintelligent” and therefore disadvantaged through no fault of their own.

Similarly, in order to force some of its citizens to befriend “the grumpy,” a government would have to intrude into people’s private spheres to determine whose lack of social connections is caused by “grumpiness,” and not by a voluntary choice. But how could a government go about determining who, in the relevant society, is

“grumpy and obnoxious” without thereby demeaning and disrespecting some of its citizens? It would seem that a policy of “forcing others to befriend the grumpy” would add an official stigma to the disadvantage the grumpy already suffer.¹²

In response, it might be suggested that governments wouldn’t need to identify the cause of one’s solitude—be it one’s obnoxiousness, a set of bad coincidences, widespread prejudice or something else. They would only have to exclude that one’s solitude is a deliberate life choice. But even this more “coarse-grained” policy would be unacceptably intrusive. How could the government establish whether our lives are devoid of meaningful social relationships—barring unreliable self-reports—other than by closely monitoring us? This close monitoring appears undesirable: an unwarranted governmental intrusion within our private spheres (cf. the discussion of “opacity respect” in Carter 2011).

Third, arguably, *meaningful* social connections—such as real friendships or romantic relationships—simply cannot be established through coercion (cf. Collins 2013, 918ff.). This is because, as argued by Philip Pettit (2015), values like love, friendship and attachment are *modally robust*. That is, for the value to be instantiated in the actual world, the relevant attitudes that are constitutive of the value need to exist not only in the actual world, but across an appropriate set of possible worlds.

To illustrate, Mike might behave in a “friend-like” manner towards Joe: he might exhibit affection towards him, worry about his health, regularly call him to see how he is, offer some help when Joe is facing difficulties, and so forth. But would we say that Mike is Joe’s *friend* if we knew that, were Joe to all of a sudden lose all of his money, Mike would immediately withdraw his support and affection? Probably, we would not—a *real* friend is one whose feelings are not dependent on how fat one’s bank account is. A real friend is one who remains supportive across a wide enough set of contingencies—and Mike, therefore, is not a real friend. The social connection existing between Mike and Joe in the actual world is not a genuinely “meaningful one.”

The same would be the case if the only reason why Mike showed affection to Joe was his being forced to do so by the state. If the existence of a social relation is

¹² A further difficulty, which I do not discuss here, concerns the identification of the particular individuals who would be coerced into friendships. Those picked out—say, due to their proximity to Gertraud—could complain that they are being asked to carry an unfair burden. In response, some complex compensation scheme could be devised, but it is not clear that some monetary reward could properly compensate for one’s being forced to befriend obnoxious others.

conditional on coercion, that social relation is not a meaningful one.¹³ Of course, a meaningful social relation might eventually obtain as the result of initial coercion, in the same way in which a couple who was initially forced to marry might develop genuine feelings of affection over time. But this is unlikely to be a particularly frequent phenomenon, especially in a case like the one under discussion, where continued state coercion makes it epistemically difficult for the parties involved to know whether the relationship between them would exist even if coercion were lifted.

Differently put, the concern with “coerced relationships” is that such relationships will, most of the time, not be “meaningful,” namely not the kind of thing we are trying to establish in the first place. In light of this, the suggestion that the state has a duty to *coerce* citizens to befriend the grumpy stands on shaky ground.¹⁴

3.1.2 Incentivising people to befriend the grumpy

But might the state have a duty to provide a substantive opportunity for Gertraud to forge meaningful social relationships through non-coercive, monetary incentives? It is not clear how a state could go about doing this, without running into the same difficulties we encountered in the coercive case. While the relevant policies might be less “illiberal,” they would still be demeaning towards the grumpy, intrusive, and unable to deliver the desired result, since the established relationships would be *contingent* on financial incentives. To be sure, the state might try to foster a friendly and solidaristic ethos among its citizens, but this is something we would already expect to find in the society where Gertraud lives, given the existence of a well-functioning welfare system, which we assumed at the beginning.

In light of our discussion, it appears that the state cannot plausibly have a duty, owed to people like Gertraud, to force or incentivize third parties to befriend the grumpy and unbearable. If Gertraud has a right to meaningful social connections, this is not one against the state.

3.2. Other individuals

Might Gertraud instead have a right against other individuals that they establish meaningful social relationships with her? In that case, *third parties* would owe it to

¹³ A version of this point also appears in Brownlee’s (2016) paper in the context of her discussion of *The Truman Show* movie. The film’s protagonist, Truman, is immersed in a thick web of social relationships, but they are all “fake”—namely, not really meaningful. His “would-be” friends and family are all actors, and their expressions of affection towards him are conditional on their being continuously employed by the show’s producers.

¹⁴ For related discussion, see Cordelli (2015a).

Gertraud to cultivate the relevant relationships. Before answering this question, we should distinguish between the duty to *establish* meaningful social relationships and the duty to *uphold* already existing ones.

Consider a long-standing friend of Gertraud's: Tom. Tom notices that, the day after her 25th birthday, Gertraud is unusually difficult, ungrateful and generally unpleasant. Tom, as an old friend, would not be justified in suddenly withdrawing his support and friendship. He would have to try to understand what caused Gertraud's sudden change in personality, and continue to act "as a friend" towards her, at least for some time. An immediate retraction of support would wrong Gertraud.

This can again be explained by reference to what Philip Pettit (2015) calls the "modally robust" nature of meaningful social relationships. A friend is not really a friend if, the moment you turn difficult, he withdraws his affection. However, in order to count as a friend, one's affection need not be unconditional. Plausibly, if I discovered that a good friend of mine is in fact a vicious criminal, I may permissibly withdraw my support—friendship is modally robust, but not to an unlimited extent. Similarly, if Gertraud displays obnoxious and unbearable behaviour for a protracted period of time, making Tom's life impossible and rudely rejecting his attempts to sustain a healthy friendship, Tom may permissibly distance himself from Gertraud, thereby gradually extinguishing their former relationship.

But note, importantly, that here we are not asking about the duties of people who already have on-going meaningful relationships with each other. Instead, we are asking whether individuals who are virtually strangers to Gertraud *owe it to her* to befriend her, such that Gertraud could turn up to them and *claim* their friendship, affection and social engagement.

It is not clear how this argument could be made to work. First, who, exactly, would bear the duty to establish social relationships with Gertraud? Clearly, Gertraud's putative right to access meaningful social relations cannot entail that *everyone she knows or encounters* should enter into the relevant relations with her; just like everyone else's right to such relations does not entail a corresponding universal duty. So, which set of people are under an obligation, owed to Gertraud, to meaningfully relate to her? An obvious answer would seem to point to her family members and (former) friends. But on reflection, this answer is unsatisfactory. Gertraud's family members and former friends have probably already suffered the

consequences of a relationship with her. It would seem unfair to ask them to continue to carry this burden.

But what about those other individuals who happen to know Gertraud, if only superficially, such as co-workers, neighbours and distant acquaintances? Again, there seems to be *no principled* mechanism to single out the ones who would *owe* Gertraud to initiate and sustain meaningful relationships with her. Each putative duty-bearer would be entitled to ask “*Why me*, and not, say, this other neighbour, the butcher, Gertraud’s co-worker, or some other person who has never even met her?”

Finally, and most importantly, even if we were to devise a principled way of singling out duty bearers—which I find unlikely—it is not at all clear that these individuals would have a duty *owed* to Gertraud to forge meaningful relationships with her. True, their duty would stem from Gertraud’s weighty interest in accessing social resources. But the fact—assumed for the sake of argument—that Gertraud’s interest is weighty enough to place duties on (some) others does not necessarily entail that others’ duties are *owed* to Gertraud. As Frances Kamm (2002) explains, arguing against Raz’s (1986) interest theory of rights, I may have a duty to save a stranger’s life when this can be done at little cost to myself, and this in order appropriately to respond to the interests of the rescuee, but this does not entail that the relevant duty is also *owed* to the rescuee.

Of course, things would be different if the rescuee were someone with whom we had a special relationship: say a close friend, co-worker or family member. Here, the special relationship could plausibly give rise to a right to be rescued. But absent any special relationship, it is unclear why Gertraud’s interest should give rise to a *directed* duty, rather than a *duty simpliciter*; one the performance of which she cannot claim (see Valentini 2015). After all, it would seem counter-intuitive to suggest that Gertraud could protest, against any given individual, that they “owe it” to her to be her friend or close associate. If anything, she should be grateful if some others are patient enough to befriend her despite her character. But this only reveals that she doesn’t have a genuine “right” to access friendships.

These reflections speak in favour of regarding a putative duty to “befriend” Gertraud as one of beneficence rather than as one of justice. Beneficence demands that we act in ways that promote other people’s interests with resources (material and psychological) that rightfully belong to us. People like Gertraud have a strong interest in leading a life that includes meaningful social relationships. When we are faced with

individuals like her, *one way* we can fulfil our general duties of beneficence is by making an effort to befriend them. In doing so, we would invest psychological and affective resources that are “ours,” and which we would have a right to use in some other way if we wished. On this construal, nobody has a duty, *owed* to Gertraud, to befriend her. However, some may partly fulfil their general duties of *beneficence* by establishing meaningful social relationships with the grumpy and unbearable.

To sum up, in this section I have argued that neither the state, nor private individuals have duties of justice to establish meaningful social relationships with people like Gertraud. Instead, private individuals have at most a duty of *beneficence* to do so.

4. Lovely Gertraud, justice, and beneficence

Let us now turn to *Lovely Gertraud*. Does the particular causal mechanism leading to the underfulfilment of her interest in accessing social resources make a difference to our moral analysis of her situation, compared to *Grumpy Gertraud*? Does this underfulfilment amount to a rights violation in her case? Once again, two putative bearers of the duties correlative to Gertraud’s alleged right are available: the state and other individuals.

4.1. The state

Let us assume that state X—i.e., the state where Gertraud, who belongs to people Y, has moved—is already engaged in a broad toleration campaign, whereby officials attempt to spread the message that minorities should be treated with respect and not discriminated against. These campaigns succeed in allowing all minorities to enjoy the freedoms and socio-economic goods available to the rest of the citizenry. In Gertraud’s case, however, they do not result in her gaining access to meaningful social relationships. Everyone is perfectly happy to work with her, pay her a fair wage, treat her as a “valued customer,” respect her civil and political rights, and so forth. Yet nobody wishes to properly befriend her, or establish a long-lasting, deep social connection with her.

Admittedly, Lovely Gertraud’s case is far-fetched; not the sort of case we are ever likely to encounter in the real world. Focusing on it, though, helps us reflect on the place that “access to meaningful social relationships” should have within a theory of justice. Let us begin with political justice. Could the state plausibly owe it to Gertraud to *force* or *incentivize* some individuals to befriend her?

Just like in the previous case, the answer seems to be “no.” As we have seen, *forcing* people to befriend others they would rather have no contact with is (i) illiberal, (ii) intrusive and, (iii) unlikely to be conducive to the establishment of meaningful social relationships.¹⁵ Such relationships must be adequately modally robust, and not contingent on the threat of sanctions. A similar level of scepticism would seem warranted in the case of *monetary incentives*, which would again rob social relationships of the spontaneity that makes them meaningful in the first place.

As things stand, then, lovely Gertraud cannot be regarded as the victim of injustice *at the hand of the state*. There is no duty, owed to Gertraud, that the state is violating.

4.2. Other individuals

What about other individuals? Does anyone have a duty, owed to Gertraud, to establish a meaningful social relationship with her? We already know that, in the case of grumpy Gertraud, the answer is “no.” Importantly, from a purely “outcome-based” perspective, lovely Gertraud and grumpy Gertraud are in exactly the same situation: they are deprived of the substantive opportunity to establish meaningful social relationships. Yet, in the case of lovely Gertraud, we have a stronger intuition that her predicament involves a rights violation: a proper injustice. The vindication of this intuition requires identifying a morally salient, and explanatorily adequate difference between the two cases.

The most obvious one is that, in *Grumpy Gertraud*, third parties’ refusal to befriend Gertraud appears *reasonable*. Being friends with grumpy Gertraud is indeed quite a burden, and Gertraud herself cannot plausibly demand, as a matter of justice, that others bear it.¹⁶ In *Lovely Gertraud*, by contrast, third parties’ refusal to befriend Gertraud is *unreasonable*, namely based on factors—such as Gertraud’s race and ethnicity—that do not impact on her ability to be a “good friend” (or partner—I am

¹⁵ In this case, people’s interest in not being forced to befriend Gertraud is somewhat weaker, since she is in fact a lovely person. Taking this into account, though, doesn’t seem sufficient to ease concerns about “illiberalism.”

¹⁶ But what if Gertraud could not possibly be held responsible for her obnoxiousness, since this is in some sense pathological? If this was the case, she might perhaps be entitled to compensation on luck-egalitarian grounds (with all the difficulties this entails), but for the reasons I have offered in my earlier discussion, she would still not be entitled to others’ willingness to befriend her. What matters here, is not so much whether Gertraud is “responsible” for her grumpiness, but whether others may plausibly be forced to befriend her *given* her grumpiness. For discussion of luck-egalitarianism in relation to friendship, see Cordelli (2015a, 683).

here focusing on friendship for simplicity's sake). These factors, in other words, are morally irrelevant from the perspective of establishing meaningful social relations.¹⁷

Perhaps, then, we could explain the rights-violation suffered by lovely Gertraud by appeal to the following principle:

P1: One has a right that the social relationships one enjoys or lacks *not* depend on factors that are irrelevant to one's being a good participant in meaningful social relations.

This principle is implausible. A moment's reflection reveals that virtually *all* social relationships among competent adults are, at least in part, determined by such "irrelevant" factors. For instance, I might make friends with people with blond hair because I happen to like blond hair better than dark hair, yet this is a morally irrelevant factor: the colour of one's hair is irrelevant to one's ability to participate in meaningful social relationships. More generally, we typically establish meaningful social relationships with people "we like"—among those we encounter—but *why* we like them often goes back to features that do not make these individuals more "objectively deserving" of our friendship and attachment than others. If P1 is correct, then the vast majority of meaningful relationships is based on wrongdoing, which seems implausible.

In response to this concern, the following, restricted version of the previous principle might be offered instead.

P2: One has a right to *not* be denied access to social relationships due to factors that are irrelevant to one's being a good participant in meaningful social relations.

This principle only concerns one's social-relationship deprivation. It implies that, if I do not befriend lovely Gertraud due to a morally irrelevant factor—e.g., her racial background—I wrong her. But again, this principle over-reaches. For instance, it is perfectly plausible to hypothesize that, were I to live in Brazil rather than London, I

¹⁷ This of course raises the question of what factors *are* relevant. This is a complex matter I cannot address in the present piece. Instead, I limit myself to discussing factors that—I hope most would agree—are *clearly irrelevant*.

would be friends with some people in Brazil who currently do not enjoy the benefit of my friendship. The fact that they live in Brazil—which is why I am not friends with them—is, in an important sense, “irrelevant”: these residents of Brazil may be capable of being wonderful friends, and with modern technology, I might be able to sustain a meaningful relationship with them. Still, it would be odd to suggest that I am wronging them *because* I am not friends with them. Friendships and relationships are often based on chancy encounters. Equally, the *absence* of friendships and relationships is often a matter of chance. In light of this, the following revision of P2 might be proposed.

P3: One has a right to not be denied access to meaningful social relationships *by people they know, solely* due to factors that are irrelevant to one’s being a good participant in meaningful social relations.

The latter principle takes care of the counter-example I offered earlier, by discounting the arbitrariness involved in the people we encounter or know in the first place. P3, in particular, says that I wrong a given person if I know her and the *only reason* I refrain from forging a proper social relationship with her—say, of friendship—traces back to a friendship-irrelevant factor. If, were it not for that factor, I would befriend the person in question, then I wrong her by denying her my friendship.

This implies that all those who know Gertraud and, were it not for her belonging to people Y, would be friends with her, wrong her. But this also implies that all those who know Johnny, and were it not for his bad looks would befriend him, wrong him. It also implies that all those who know Margaret and, were it not for her belonging to a lower class, would befriend her, wrong her, and so forth. In other words, if we follow P3, we are still driven to the conclusion that there are a lot more rights violations happening in our society than we would intuitively acknowledge.

It might be suggested that the conditions outlined in P3 are only *necessary*, but not sufficient, for a refusal to befriend to count as wrongful. In addition to the cause of the refusal being a friendship-irrelevant factor, the recipient must suffer an “objective” social-resource deprivation. According to this suggestion, Johnny is not wronged if I refuse to befriend him due to his bad looks, provided there are enough other people prepared to be friends with him. If we follow this line of reasoning, the “difference-making power” of friendship-irrelevant factors is impermissible only

contingently: namely in the presence of severe social-resource deprivation (Brownlee forthcoming).

Although this suggestion addresses the over-inclusiveness problem, it appears explanatorily deficient. Specifically, the “objective social-resource deprivation clause” is an *ad hoc* addition. What explains P3 and gives it plausibility is that we disrespect people, qua persons, if we refuse to befriend them due to morally irrelevant factors. The existence of this form of disrespect seems to be independent of its consequences. We disrespect people when we refuse to befriend them no matter whether they already have enough friends or not. To be sure, if they don’t, we have further reasons for regarding their situation as being in need of remedy. That is, if the refusal to befriend results in social-resource deprivation, the situation of people like lovely Gertraud is not merely one in which they suffer injustice, but one in which they are also badly off.

To sum up, in order to argue that lovely Gertraud is *wronged* by other individuals who refuse to befriend her due to her race (or some other irrelevant factor) we must significantly extend the set of circumstances in which we believe wrongdoing (specifically, moral rights-violations) occurs. I find this a bullet worth biting. In fact, I am not sure it is a “bullet to bite” in the first place. We typically believe it wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of morally irrelevant factors when it comes to the distribution of all kinds of *material* advantages, and it is unclear why *social* advantages should be treated any differently. To be sure, the wrong in question would not be a concern for “political morality”—for the reasons just mentioned. But it is nonetheless a concern for personal morality. And this is reflected in our rightly negative reactions to someone saying: “I do not want to befriend X because...” and the explanation being any of the following—e.g., “X is ugly,” “X is black,” “X is a woman,” “X is not wealthy,” and so forth.

If I am right, at the level of personal justice, lovely Gertraud is indeed wronged. Furthermore, all those who know her and would be friends with her, were it not for her membership of people Y, have a duty, owed to Gertraud, to in fact befriend her. Faced with this duty, they cannot possibly complain that it would place an unfair burden on them. This is because the burdensomeness of befriending Gertraud, in their case, is “spurious.” She is objectively lovely, and they would befriend her were it not for her race/provenance—but this alleged race-related burden is *morally inadmissible*. These people should just get over their prejudices.

Furthermore, those who have not befriended Gertraud for admissible reasons *could* have duties of beneficence to make friends with her—assuming this would involve some personal costs (e.g., the acquisition of more responsibilities)—given her absolute social-relationship deprivation.

But unlike in the case of grumpy Gertraud, lovely Gertraud may appropriately be regarded as the victim of personal (not political) injustice.

Conclusion

I have addressed the question of whether individuals have a fundamental *right* to access social resources, independent of their rights to access freedoms and material goods. I have argued that this right only exists in a narrow set of circumstances, and that it cannot be plausibly enforced by the state or by equivalent political institutions. Specifically, non-voluntary deprivations of meaningful social relationships are *unjust* (from a personal, as opposed to a political perspective) whenever they stem from factors—such as one’s race, gender, and looks—that do not affect one’s ability to be a good partner in the *relevant kind* of social relationship.¹⁸ Those who refuse to befriend others only due to such factors wrong those they do not befriend. When non-voluntary relational deprivations are not traceable to such irrelevant factors, people have at most duties of *beneficence* to befriend socially deprived individuals, but no duties of justice. This suggests that the neglect displayed by the most prominent theories of political justice with respect to access to social resources is not entirely misplaced. If I am right, access to meaningful social relationships, considered in isolation from other forms of deprivation, is not a matter of *political* justice.¹⁹

¹⁸ This qualification is needed since gender and looks are irrelevant in the case of friendship, but arguably relevant in the case of romantic relationships.

¹⁹ Brownlee (forthcoming, 17) explicitly acknowledges that the distribution of “social resources” is not just a matter of political morality, but also—and primarily—of personal (justice-based) morality. I, in turn, am suggesting that it is almost *exclusively* a matter of personal morality, and only rarely a matter of personal *justice*.

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