

Character, Commodity and Convenience: Using a Relational Theory
of Ethics to Challenge the Role of Consent in Interpersonal Relations

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In casual dialog with numerous people of my generation, and even common among others, we find that it is no surprise it is often espoused that as long as one has consent one can do whatever they want with another human being. This emphasis on the importance of consent is not misplaced; without consent, the activity one has with another human being is not permitted by the other party, by definition. However, simply because a door is open does not mean we are necessarily allowed to walk through it. Using what I call a relational theory of ethics, I wish to draw the emphasis beyond merely consent to a question of the context in which we relate to each other as the prime measure of moral exchange. It will be my attempt here to draw a parallel in an abstracted syllogism between the usual permissions of two extreme examples that are regularly seen to be approbated in the one case, and negated in the other. Given the structure between these two relations, it will be charged that the approbation of one is a contradiction of belief if they also believe the other is morally wrong. Therefore, my attempt will be first to establish what assumptions are made in context to relations and ethic; I will proceed to draw the parallel mentioned and establish the model to compare the two; lastly, concerning ourselves with character formation, it will be considered that the allowance or disallowance of how we relate to others will have direct consequences on the character of ourselves and others.

When I speak of relations, I wish to be as general as I can. I define the relation as the interaction and exchange between parties. In the following analysis, I will not do a general relational mapping to that of two people interacting and the proceeding effects in the one-to-many relations they have with other people. Instead, it will be a narrow analysis of a two-party interchange. Echoing a Kantian sense of a maxim, I will also assume, for the sake of this argument that we ought not to form a relationship that exploits another moral agent. The purpose

for this derives directly from the general consensus against, for example, slavery. This will then be our example of disapprobation.

Given the definition of relations, and the maxim (1) by example and (2) derivable in terms of a relational theory of ethics which escapes the scope of this analysis, I will consider another concept that will be the crux of this model: treating moral agents as commodities. In terms of slavery, it is not unlike a Marxist criticism of human interchange. The etymological basis and the American Heritage Dictionary define commodities to be derived from convenience. This perspective would state that a car is a commodity because it makes our lives more convenient, i.e., said person benefits from the car by its convenience. Extending this to the definitions above, we can consider it a commodity (i.e., convenience) relationship when some person benefits in some interchange with another person (i.e., a moral agent) solely by the convenience of it. This provides a most general dichotomy of the relationships under consideration.¹ Therefore, this analysis is only going to consider commodity relationships and the unethical nature they provide when the exchange is of two moral agents.²

Having established the basis for this model, and implied an inherent goal of relational ethics (i.e., removing unethical relations), we shall now consider establishing the model and applying it to the specific examples. As has already been stated, the first example considered as our disapprobation is that of slavery. The second example will be a consensual sexual

¹ A more in-depth analysis will be alluded to in closing, but other kinds would definitely have to be considered from the space of possible relations. The attempt is to dichotomize the analysis to convenient and its complement (inconvenient). This is not to be mistaken with role ethics such as teacher-student, father-son, et cetera. Those roles are definitional criteria for ethical norms. Relational ethics is concerned with the relation itself as an object of analysis. A mathematical perspective might be that role ethics is more of a functional state of two parties $F(A,B)$, while relational ethics can use such mappings, but is an object itself, i.e., $F(A,B,\sim)$ to analyze the relationship $A\sim B$.

² For simplicity the moral agent is a human being. The circumstances of the agents themselves are an important aspect of relational ethics so this analysis simplifies to same-kind elements for A, B such that they both belong to the class of human beings.

relationship between two, obviously, consenting adults. The assumption of this example is that it is a “no-strings-attached” interchange in which the two parties are not related in the sense of forming some kind of relationship in which they are inconvenienced by “having strings”. The argument for such sexual exchanges is that they are consented or mutually agreed upon, and thus directly adopting the stance of being morally permissible to have such relationships. These, I proclaim, are directly corresponding to commodity relationships. That is to say:

- (i) Person A *consents* to x for the *benefit* of person B, where x is some event satisfactory to our second party by its convenience.

The first thing to address in this model is that each person is interchangeable. The reason for this is that we are not dealing with specific examples, only possible real examples. Person A in one interchange may be person B in another interchange with someone else. Therefore, we will not bother to elaborate any possible asymmetry in this model in any direct examples and look at it from only one side of the two-party exchange. Using the two interchanges listed, above our examples become:

- (a) Joe *consents* to *slavery* for the benefit of Smith.
- (b) Joe *consents* to *sex* for the benefit of Smith.

In these two examples, we have a rudimentary comparison of a commodity relationship in which case the former Smith is benefiting through a convenient relation to Joe by the slavery he consented to. In the latter case, Smith is benefiting through a convenient relation to Joe by the sex he provides in which he consented, i.e., through the mutual agreement. Considering the ethical presumptions espoused initially, the first example is often found unethical in the modern world, while the latter is found legitimate, often for the fact of the agreeableness provided in the exchange; whether the value of the transaction is equal or fair is of no consequence to this model,

and thus quality internal to an example or interchanged in examples is not endogenous or important.

To refine this model, we must consider the nature of the variable x and each example. When it comes to convenient sexual relations, the justification revolves around the *mutual* agreement provided. This context means it is directly reversible that Smith is providing sex for Joe's benefit by his convenience. This implies, in criticizing the former example, that the slave master is not mutually interchangeable to a slave, therefore any comparison on this generic ground is unfounded since in the model they can be. To elaborate on why the model does not address *possible* asymmetry is because the variables of the agents consist only of a *possible* exchangeability. In other words, the model inherently addresses it implicitly. In either example, we still have a commodity relationship where one party is treating the other like a commodity to be traded as an economic exchange. This brings to light another necessary element in our model: the benefit. Whether the commodity party (which depending on symmetry may be one or both) is utilized for sex or slavery we are assuming a value exchange, i.e., that both parties are benefiting. It is explicit in the statement that Smith certainly is benefiting from the transaction, hence his "purchase." It is implicit that the consent is stating a benefit to the prior party for allowing themselves to become a commodity. Our model, then, can be afforded the addition:

- (ii) Person A consents to x for the benefit of person B, resulting in an increase in y for both parties, where y is some benefit satisfying the desires respective to each party (e.g., utility, pleasure, satisfaction, *et cetera*.)

The most immediate fact to address in this addition is the nature of y , because y does not necessarily contain the same satisfactions in all examples, nor internally to each party. It can be considered that y instead is a variable acting more like a function mapping from the set of possible beneficial qualities derivable in the domain of the relationship to what the person is

actually attaining in any instance of exchange. Since the breadth of that analysis is irrelevant to this model or this examination, we will simply consider y to absorb all desires that are benefiting the parties even if they are differing in quality and kind for each party. Therefore, let us review our examples:

- (c) Joe consents to *slavery* for the benefit of Smith, resulting in an increase in *utility* for both parties.
- (d) Joe consents to sex for the benefit of Smith, resulting in an increase in *pleasure* for both parties.

Considering the unilateral approach of this analysis, and the disregard of symmetry, we will consider y in terms of the second party. Therefore, the benefit Joe receives in his exchange with Smith in the first case may not be utility. Since it is arbitrary, and an interpersonal comparison of utility, being subjective, is impossible anyway, it resolves itself for the same reasons quality has no bearing on this model. Similarly, the second example's y may (or may not) be the pleasure each receives, e.g., one party might not be doing it for the pleasure of sex, but for other possible reasons. The difference results in a quality comparison which along with equality of enjoyment, such that Smith and Joe value pleasure equally, is irrelevant. Thus, any criticism along these lines is either inherently addressed or having no impact on the constituents of the relation and the exchange. However, that does not remove all possible criticisms, and I certainly have not addressed them all.

To bring closure to this model, there is one critique that needs to be made, and that is to draw the parallel and dispel the misconception revolving the terms. I have used slavery generally without appealing to the connotations and perspectives some may have on it. Merriam-Webster defines slavery to be, "submission to a dominating influence" in the most general case. This is, as my model has been general, the kind of meaning I have implied. Therefore, in speaking about slavery, I am not merely talking about the American South during the pre-civil war era, or other

such chattel (i.e., property) relations. The argument that is most readily going to come against this comparison, beyond my model, is that slavery and sex relations are simply not comparable, which begs the question anyway. Is slavery never a warranted relation? The scope of that question is certainly vast, but I will address some facets that make it so slavery is not inherently wrong “because it is wrong.”

The elementary comparison that draws attention to the benefits is that sex is good and slavery bad, *ex vi termini*. A little probing will lead to sex is good, because it is pleasurable if not completely pleasurable, to both parties (disregarding the nature of STDs or possible ill outcomes). Even if this is true, it leads to an implication in probing the nature of slavery that slavery simply has no good value to it, not unlike sex provides, yet on the outset of the second formulation of this model I already addressed the fact each party would not engage in this interchange unless they were benefiting in some manner. The confusion arises because of a misunderstanding of slavery. As I already attempted to address the definition, most will provide a different one, e.g., slavery is often associated with the dissolution of freedoms or choices available to the individual. However true this is, it does not mean there are no benefits to slavery. It can be argued that there are,³ but the consensual nature of this comparison is that the person, in our case, Joe, is allowing himself to be enslaved. Referring back to the definition of “submission to a dominating influence,” we are not talking about someone *forced* into slavery. This defies the consensual nature of the model and this analysis. Serfs in feudal Europe, the term deriving from

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) pp. 28-9 makes reference to Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), pp. 125-6. In such, he points out the findings that slaves had “relatively high ‘pecuniary incomes’” and that the “commodity baskets of consumption of slaves compared favorably ... with the incomes of free agricultural laborers.” Furthermore, “the slaves’ life expectancy too was, relatively speaking, not especially low – ‘nearly identical with the life expectation of countries as advanced as France and Holland,’ and ‘much longer [than] life expectations [of] free urban industrial workers in both the United States and Europe.’”

slave, is a classic example of a class of people who submitted, by some degree of their consenting power, to a dominating force, in this case to the will of the landowner. In a more complex view, we can consider a general case of “exploited workers” who submit to some condition in the work force even though they are, in a sense, submitting to the influence of some dominant force: whether it be the management of some business in a small town which is the only job that provides a high income that is desirable, or the general nature of the market being an influence we choose to submit to, though we could still do something else, but at a lower price.⁴ Many questions arise about the nature of opportunities to the slave, the extent of their consensual power, or the completeness of their benefit (compared with the disutility they get from the exchange). Certainly we can say the sexual relation described in this analysis is far more complete in the sense of its pleasures or utility derived, but such would result in an interpersonal or cross-utility comparison, which inherently is impossible without some kind of external or comparative metric. Lest such be made and shown to sever the comparison, the two are essentially parallel factors in this model, and thus the disapprobation of slavery spoken in one turn, is a direct contradiction to approbation of a convenient sexual relation spoken in the next.

Provided the comparative relation of these two examples the last thing to consider in our ethical conclusion is, under this model, how do we derive a “pushing out” of commodity relations in our relationships with other moral agents? Almost trivially regarded, the solution is

⁴ A simple mathematical description might be that an individual consents to the domination of her livelihood for the pecuniary benefits it provides her. Drawing a relatively basic array of choices, say we have two jobs P and Q. P causes the person in question to become enslaved as defined in this analysis, but also provides \$100 per day. Q is an alternative option that is markedly better in that it does not consist of submission, yet only provides \$10 per day. If her life’s demands were such that she needed any amount greater than \$10 per day, and the only options were P and Q, then she would be forced into choosing P. This forced compliance is not under analysis for it does not consist of consent. However, say life demanded \$9 per day. Working through Q, though better, will still only provide a very minimal amount of pecuniary benefit. If she chooses P, the difference is substantially improved (\$91 disposable income compared to \$1, or over ten days worth) and the choice would be one of consent. Given that, she may do so to provide financial support for family abroad, or any other number of possible motives that escape the reach of this examination.

to provide the opposite, i.e., an inconvenient relationship. Discounting any connotations one may draw from this term, it is nothing more than providing the ethical maxim that addresses both the relation and the relational consequence regardless of the consensual nature of the relation.⁵

Therefore the model is completed with the incorporation of this statement:

- (iii) For all x , if person B is unrelated to person A , then person B *ought not to benefit* from person A from any x by its convenience.

It may be considered redundant to universally quantify the actions initially, but it addresses the particular nature that the model does draw the consequence to any x that may occur, such that any exchange that goes on between the two parties, whether it be slavery or sex, it ought to be one that is through the formation of a relationship that adds “strings” to it. The “unrelated parties” is a declaration to implicitly address the consent of the interaction. Person B is unrelated to person A because the relation in question *is not formed*. Therefore, this maxim is addresses two parties and their possible relational interaction and how it ought to be constructed. Under this model, it clearly should be one in which once related it ought not to be one of convenience, which negatively imposes that it ought to be one of inconvenience. How that relationship is constructed in the affirmation of “inconvenience” is a question for further analysis under a relational theory of ethics. Therefore, the outcome in general to either example follows the same pattern derived from this model:

⁵ The question of consent arises wherein consent needs to exist, as stated introductorily, but the degree to which the agent has consent is always a concern. It does not affect the outcome of this analysis; however, a moral agent may differ if the extent to which they have choices is limited. The measure of degree of consent is not so much consent as it is the basket of options available to the agent. Therefore, the capacity by which the agents have options of equal or differing values is important, but is not an analysis of the relation. It is a matter of the agents.

- (e.1) If Smith is unrelated to Joe, then Smith ought not to benefit from Joe from any *slavery* by its convenience.
- (e.2) Joe consents to *slavery* for the benefit of Smith, resulting in an increase in *utility* for both Smith and Joe.
- (e.3) From (1), Smith ought not to benefit from Joe, less Smith forms a relationship with him by which Joe is no longer classified as a convenience.
- (f.1) If Smith is unrelated to Joe, then Smith ought not to benefit from Joe from any *sex* by its convenience.
- (f.2) Joe consents to *sex* for the benefit of Smith, resulting in an increase in *pleasure* for both Smith and Joe.
- (f.3) From (1), Smith ought not to benefit from Joe, less Smith forms a relationship with him by which Joe is no longer classified as a convenience.

As a result of the parallel nature of these specific x values, and the structure of the relational consequences derived from the interaction of a commodity relation the model addresses, it is unethical for any person to construct a relationship based purely on the “go ahead” of consent. If any person is willing to denounce slavery on account of the value, the quality differences or even the question of consensual engagement, which does not deter from the fact they are denouncing a relation that is formulated on the basis of a commodity transaction, then say a commodity transaction of sex with “no-strings-attached” is fully permissible, is stating a blatant contradiction.

The symmetry of this model was disregarded, but in terms of the formation of character as abstracted from this model, we need to consider the fact any of us can be person A or B given the circumstances. Consequently, that symmetry implies a perpetuating nature: if we are inconsistent in the ethical valuation of our relations, then we are propagating unethical tendencies in people without regard to the effects. If we evaluate a one-to-many relationship in which we say it is okay to have a commodity relationship between two parties denoted $A \sim B$, then it instills the tendency that such relations are okay. B , in turn formulates respective commodity relations (not necessarily of the same kind) with the many they relate to, e.g., $B \sim C$, $B \sim D$, $B \sim E$. Furthermore, A formulates their own commodity relations, some of which may be with the same

persons *B* relates to. The propagation ensues. Through the identification that commodity relations are unethical and should be eliminated from our classification of relations with other people (i.e., in the sense our relations should derive from a pool of other kind of relations that exist in the space of inconveniences), this develops the character in the initial parties (*A~B*) that will further propagate the tendency to formulate proper relations to the other parties (*C, D, E,...*). The direct consequence, and benefit, of this analysis is simply expressed that relationships are formed whenever we interact with other moral agents (in context to this analysis). Ethics has to do with character and choices, and we have a choice in our relations. Particularly, we are concerned with choosing to have a relation with other parties, such that, we are not basing them purely off the convenience of the relation, nor simply justifying the legitimacy of that relation on consent. The relation itself is an object of evaluation, and relational ethics thus aims to develop the kind of character by which ethical relations are formed.

In this investigation we considered, implicitly, that we have a universe of discourse from which we can pluck out, through our choices, the kind of relation that is ethical. The metaphysical basis beyond this analysis might consider, more completely, a higher order principle through which to identify which kinds of relations fall into the partition of ethical relations, and those which fall into the complement. In any case, we consider the inherent conflict a commodity relation exhibits, and that, in general, we concede that they are wrong in certain cases, but correct in others. Under a relational theory of ethics, this is a contradiction because the relation itself is unethical. But all is not lost for relations are malleable, and simply choosing to step into an inconvenient relation, whatever that might entail, will certainly improve the ethical nature of the relation, and consequently the character of all parties in this relational mapping.