Callard 2020: Who Wants To Play A Status Game?

When you first meet someone, you "feel each other out" to see where your lives might connect—where are you from, what do you do, what music/art/books do you like, etc. You are looking for common ground on the basis of which your conversation might proceed. Call this the Basic Game; I'd like to contrast it with two more advanced games that can be played in its stead, or alongside it.

In the Importance Game, participants jockey for position. This usually works by way of casual references to wealth, talent, accomplishment or connections, but there are many variants. I can, for instance, play this game by pretending to eschew it: "Let's get straight down to business" can telegraph my being much too important to waste time with such games; or your being so unimportant as to render the game otiose.

The other game is the Leveling Game, and it uses empathy to equalize the players. So I might performatively share feelings of stress, inadequacy or weakness; or express discontent with the Powers that Be; or home in on a source of communal outrage, frustration or oppression.

A player of the Importance Game tries to ascend high enough to reach for something that will set her above her interlocutor, a player of the Leveling Game reaches down low enough to hit common ground. The former needs to signal enough power to establish a hierarchy; the latter enough powerlessness to establish equality.

The advanced games really are advanced, in the sense of being harder to play than the Basic Game. This is due to the fact that

There are some issues here. Callard speaks of a universal "When you first meet someone," but it is clear the protocol she describes—feeling out where someone is from, what they do, what cultural objects they enjoy—is not universal. It's a very specific kind of social small talk. Not all first meetings proceed this way. Many don't.

Of course, you reply. You're taking her too literally. She doesn't think *literally all* first meetings proceed this way. But, first of all, she implies that *most* do, which is at best true of relatively modern, Western, pre-online culture. And second, she's decided to carve reality at a specific place—why choose small talk and party mingling? What she really wants to talk about—what "the Basic Game" of most social interaction—is this "feeling out," the way interactants look "to see where [their] lives might connect." Why do participants care about these (potential and already existing) intersections of lives? Why are they "feeling" each other up?

I think the short answer is this. The participants are ecologically interdependent. That is, purely by virtue of sharing a space together—and perhaps a social community, professional community, etc—their futures are intertwined. If one throws a drink in the other's face at the party, it will have real consequences for the recipient—social and otherwise. If this seems like an extreme example, consider the pre-modern case, when many first-time interactants were armed, lived outside governmental and legal structures, and may not even have shared a language. Interactants have to quickly figure out what kind of person the face across from them is—a dangerous person, a rival, a person who can be trusted, a person who can be talked to frankly, a person who can be joked with. And this is purely the defensive aspect, the wary foresight of potential insults, potential injuries. It is also: is this a person I can collaborate with, a person I can sleep with, a person I can befriend. The "Basic Game" of interaction, between agents who do not have a real relationships, is so basic because it has such high stakes. In Callard's case, this list of risks and opportunities may look more like: is this a person I can talk to without being perfectly politically correct, is this a person I would have over for a dinner party; could a playdate between our kids result; is this person important for my professional success. If you want to optimize your future, you must know the answers to these questions.

I don't think this framing helps us, because I think "Importance" and "Leveling" are better thought of as strategies of play, rather than games in their own right. The basic goals of the basic game are set by the latent field of possibilities which emerges from the interaction. There are negative outcomes to be avoided, and positive outcomes which interactants can move themselves toward. (Either one-sided positive outcomes, in which case the nudging of interactional direction must be covert, or else win-win, in which case it can be done relatively explicitly.) If both participants in the game are sizing each other up simultaneously, and if a given participant's behavior depends in part on their models of the other, then by *affecting* the other's models, the participant can make certain positive outcomes more likely, and certain negative outcomes less likely. It is more simply said through example: If Callard wishes to get ahead professionally, and she is speaking to a distinguished academic in her field, it will behoove her to *impress* them with her knowledge, wit, ability, etc. By *creating* this impression, she improves her "future forecast."

This is why it's conceptually or ontologically confused to name an "Importance Game" or "Leveling Game." In a given basic game—an early impression, where relative strangers size one another up—either impressions of importance, or impressions of

one must, while playing them, also pretend not to be playing them. It is not okay to approach a new acquaintance with: "Let us set up a contest to figure out which of the two of us is smarter." Nor would it be reasonable for me to say to my colleague: "How the administration oppresses us! Let us unite in self-pity." Or to an undergraduate who enters my office: "Let me tell you how overwhelmed I am, that will put us on equal footing." ("Stars: they're just like us!")

Players of the Basic Game are permitted to come pretty close to explicitly saying "Let us see what places/people/interests we have in common." With the other two games this kind of explicitness itself violates one of the rules of the game. Call this "The Self-Effacing Rule." Why does this rule apply to the advanced games, but not the Basic Game?

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In James Boswell's *Life Of Johnson*, Samuel Johnson often speaks in defense of a rigid social class system as the key to social order, because it creates a shared public knowledge of where everyone stands. There is a certain sense in this. A recent acquaintance told me that the least stressful new interactions in his life were in the army, because status relations were immediately evident and common knowledge—you just looked at how many stripes the person had on his shoulder and that was that, status negotiations complete. By contrast, in the extramilitary world, confusion reigns: billionaires wear hoodies, it is high-status to pretend you are low-status and no one is sure who exactly "the elite" refers to. The ensuing condition of generalized status-panic would be Johnson's worst nightmare. He would be quick to point out that eliminating the obvious markers of status is hardly the same as eliminating status altogether.

When status must be renegotiated in every interaction with strangers, people end up spending a lot of time asking and being asked the question "Just who do you think you are?" The mystery is why we feel required to pretend that this is not what we are doing. Again, what explains the Self-Effacing Rule?

I am much more sure of the significance of this question than I am of the answer to it; the rest of this column will constitute my best attempt at one. Let me begin with the observation that either game in its pure form—"I am so important"; "I am nobody special"—feels heavy-handed and dull. The most adroit players are always finding new ways to mix it up, so the successful lighten their self-importance by emphasizing the struggles they face or their humble origins; likewise, you can add zest to the Leveling Game by finding ways to turn empathy into a status battleground. This is what the game of competitive wokeness is all about. In an academic context, I've noticed that complaining about how busy one is hits a sweet spot of oppression—I cannot manage my life!—and importance—because I am so in demand! When you're playing with a master, it can be hard to tell which game you're in.

We seem to be less interested in either of these games than in exploring the connection between them—or rather, the philosophical question to which that connection points.

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What makes you valuable? One answer is: the fact that you are a person. This way of answering rests on the thought that all people are equally worthy: value is something you get for free, by being a certain kind of creature. Another way to answer would be to talk about value that you (in particular, as opposed to others) have acquired for yourself. You have exercised your agency, choice and capacities in such a way as to make yourself (especially)

empathy, or a thousand other impressions, could advance the interests of Callard-as-participant. This is an *impression* game, at the heart of it. (Some impression games are selection games, but not all.)

Here, Callard treats the concept of "value" as a single floating entity which "exists," perhaps even in a noble metaphysical sense: "all people are equally worthy." (Worthy of what, we ask; who deems it?) Even when she grounds value in utility, she reifies it as an entity instead of as an interpersonal proposition. Value does not "exist" separate from a set of goals, projects, or interests which the object-of-value can help advance. Value is instrumental

valuable. These two answers point us to two very different conceptions of what it means to speak of the fundamental worth of a human being.

We might think we can steer these ideas out of the way of one another by allotting to one or the other a slightly more fundamental place—sometimes the political right is characterized as the party of competitive striving, and the left as the party of equality and dignity. But the right is also the party of populism and middle America; and the left of the coastal academic and cultural elites—the non-"deplorables." Neither of our ideas of worth—the intrinsic and the earned—allows itself to be denied or subordinated for long; ignore it, and it bubbles back up in some other form.

In philosophy we tend to find one of the two ideas foregrounded, the other squeezed in as an afterthought. So Kant holds that being capable of rational agency gives you dignity—it makes you an incomparable source of moral worth, irrespective of anything else that might be true of you. He does, at one point, acknowledge an (imperfect!) duty to cultivate one's talents, but there is no suggestion that talent or its development plays much of a role in Kant's answer to the question of "what makes a human being valuable." Hence Nietzsche savages Kant (and other Enlightenment thinkers) for promoting a "herd morality" that glorifies mediocrity.

For Aristotle the ethical project is squarely one of cultivating superior excellence. He sees human political organization as fundamentally hierarchical, such that the highest virtue in the practical domain—wisdom (phronesis)—can be had only by the ruler. Another virtue, greatness of soul (megalopsychia), consists in being properly appreciative of how much better one is than other people. The occasional nod to equality—for instance, when Aristotle grants that in a criminal proceeding a judge should treat the parties as equals: "it makes no difference whether a good man has defrauded a bad man or a bad man a good one"—only underscores how unequal the overall story is.

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It is much easier to mock others for engaging in the Importance Game and the Leveling Game than to acknowledge one is doing it. Jockeying for position and fishing for empathy offer up such twisted, ugly versions of the philosophical ideas of virtue and equality that we could not stand to engage in them for long, were we not shielding our eyes from what we are doing. And that, I think, is what ultimately explains the Self-Effacing Rule.

There is a philosophical conundrum at the root of all this: morality requires we maintain a safety net at the bottom that catches everyone—the alternative is simply inhumane—but we

and relational: one is valuable to another, insofar as one helps accomplish this other's goals. One can have more or less value even to the same person depending on when the interaction takes place: we can imagine meeting someone years later, and even if this person has stayed exactly the same in every way, they will be more valuable given our own new goals and projects.

When individuals are valuable to us, it is because they can advance our interests. Similarly, when individuals are dangerous to us, it is because they can set back our interests. Many "high status" people—celebrities, politicians, billionaires—will seem to have "value" in a vacuum, but in reality, this "absolute" sense of value, untethered to any specific individual to whom these people are valuable, is an illusion. Just as even the most celebrated

works of art do not possess some "inherent quality" that is "beauty"—but rather, produce the sensation of beauty when viewed by many or most human beings—individuals we call high status are those with whom affiliation carries significant value for most people.

Because "value" in the sense of "deserves moral consideration," and "value" in the sense of "contributes to society, i.e., advances the goals of many individuals," share the same concept handle ("value")—despite being meaningfully different concepts—Callard presents them as having an "interplay." This works in part because one kind of value is typically used as justification for the other: if a member of the group contributes to the group's well-being, then the member deserves a set of moral protections. One earns one's keep.

also need an aspirational target at the top, so as to inspire us to excellence, creativity and accomplishment. In other words, we need worth to come for free, and we also need it to be acquirable. And no philosopher—not Kant, not Aristotle, not Nietzsche, not I—has yet figured out how to construct a moral theory that allows us to say both of those things.

This is a giant unsolved problem, and it touches us all. We may not explicitly articulate it, but we feel it, and project the psychic turmoil it generates onto our interactions with one another: there is a hierarchy, one of us is more valuable—no, no, no, hierarchy is evil, everyone is equally valuable; I want to be at the top—no, no, no, I'm perfectly comfortable wherever you are. In my view, there is a philosophical counterpart to Freud's psychoanalytic thesis that we repetitively "act out" traumatic events we cannot process, namely that we "act out" conceptual problems we cannot solve. A person who cannot see to the bottom of her own ideas becomes a vehicle for the transmission of confusion.

Status-mongering is the mess that results from leaving some of our ethical theorizing undone. We don't know who we think we are, and it shows.