

Everyday Morality: Misrepresentation

Moralists tend to give morality a bad name: all too often morality is used as a weapon with which to attack others. This is done not only by religious people and politicians, but also by you and I in our daily lives. Whenever we feel morally wronged by someone close to us, we're likely to behave badly --- perhaps especially when we really have been morally wronged. I'll elaborate on this theme in the fourth of our series on everyday morality, sometime in October. But we would in general do well to be suspicious of moralists. That is, in a way, a major message in Friedrich Nietzsche's **Thus Spake Zarathustra**, and I've asked Al Nettleon to read a typical paragraph.

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The one song in our Prairie songbook that seems closest to the spirit of Nietzsche is "Unrest," set to a poem by Don Marquis.

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Let me begin with an extended example. Several years ago Mary Mullens and Fredericka Schilling presented a service here about the problems confronted by gays and lesbians in our society. I left persuaded that we should be concerned about the homophobia around us and that we should do what we can to reduce discrimination against gays and lesbians in the larger society and in our own community. I think people like Mary and Fredericka have been successful in improving in this respect that social climate in our own Society and in the Unitarian-Universalist Association, and I think there has been clear progress in the larger society as well.

But during their service I wondered about how those straight people got so anxious and concerned about homosexuals, and this led me to recall the few times in my life when I have been aware of being propositioned in a sexual way by other men. I suppose most straight people have had the experience.....It can be rather unsettling, especially to the young and inexperienced. The first time Lois was propositioned by another woman was when she was a student at the Art Institute, and the idea of that kind of sexual behavior had never occurred to her, so it was rather surprising. The propositions might be especially upsetting to those straights who don't have a secure sense of sexual identity, and I'm confident that some of the anxiety and hostility of the homophobics can be explained in terms of those psychological defense mechanisms identified by Sigmund Freud.

In my own experiences I have felt offended because I thought the men involved had been misrepresenting themselves to me. The men themselves were charming, we shared some interests, and after all they found me attractive. But it was only after conversing for twenty or thirty minutes that I gathered that the interaction was about for them. The last occasion was eight years ago, on my first trip to Norway, when I felt I was old enough and looked old enough not to be a likely candidate to be propositioned by anyone of either sex. My brother and I had stopped in the early afternoon at a resort hotel in a mountainous region of Southern Norway, and we met these two North Sea oil workers while having a beer on the hotel patio. I'm into the sociology of work, and I found their accounts of work on the North Sea oil rigs quite fascinating.

But, after half an hour, it very gradually became clear to me that, while for me the focus of the interaction was his experiences at work in the North Sea, for him the focus of the interaction was otherwise. This kind of misrepresentation in social interaction can be upsetting: as one becomes aware of it, one is forced to reinterpret the whole of the exchange --- one is induced to question the meaning of what was said and the motive for saying it. My feeling then was that the other fellow had initially presented himself in a false light, had an assumed identity.

Later on, however, after I learned more about the setting, I had some second thoughts about the situation. It wasn't so clear about who was misrepresenting himself as what. It turned out that my brother and I had stumbled into a holiday weekend for gays and lesbians that had been well advertised all over Southern and Central Norway.....not that we could have read the ads if we had seen them. Just about all the guests at the hotel had come for that holiday weekend, and when the oil workers sat down at the patio table with my brother and me, they had every reason to believe that we two were gay men attending this holiday weekend.

If I had known more about the situation, I suppose I might have had an obligation to more clearly represent my own sexual identity. As a person without much experience in these things, I don't have much of a repertoire of devices to indicate that I'm straight. Maybe having a wedding ring would have helped, but perhaps not. Clearly the best way of manifesting my claimed sexual identity would have been to have a wife present, but I wasn't married at the time.

I am a member of the dominant group in our society: mature straight white male. Given that, and given that I don't go around chasing women, I can afford to be ignorant of ways of conveying my claimed sexual identity to others. Mistakes have been few, and only mildly upsetting. Gays and lesbians, and straight women, have to be more perceptive about these things. I suppose most women have had experiences with men who are on the make in a sexual way while pretending to be something else. You think you're discussing your term paper with your professor and gradually discover that he is trying to accomplish something else. Because women usually are less powerful than the men they meet, they must be more sensitive to these things than men like me.

Since they are potentially subject to more or less extreme discrimination, I suppose that gays and lesbians are even more perceptive to displays of sexual identity, that they are even more likely than straight women to carefully control their own displays of sexual identity. Gay men must learn to feign to be straight. They know, as I know, that the best way of doing so is to have a wife around. So one hears of a gay businessman who asks a woman friend to act as a wife for the evening when he has to entertain a business prospect for dinner in his apartment....and how the performance might be discredited when she is overheard asking him before dinner, "Hey, honey, where do we keep the silverware?"

But note the parallel: both gay men and straight men know how to appear to be straight, and both may have occasion to deliberately make such an appearance. For the straight man, it is not always enough to **be** straight --- one also has to **appear** to be straight, because people will behave towards you on the basis of these appearances.

I could, and you probably could, provide many other examples of displays of sexual

identity and intention. One of my high school buddies had an example from the singles bar scene, which he was able to enter by misrepresenting his age. He observed that some of the women on the scene, who were interested in very casual affairs, tended to be wary of young unmarried men, because they found such men to be too serious and too hard to get rid of. They preferred going out with married men. Having learned this, my buddy learned to turn his high school class ring around so that it appeared to be a wedding band. This kind of misrepresentation could be successful in bringing about just that kind of relation that he and the women he propositioned wanted.

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All this is a way of introducing you to the work of Erving Goffman, probably one of the most important sociologists to work after world war II, and certainly one of the most interesting. I knew Goffman at Berkeley around 1960; I never took courses with him, but I went to Chinese dinners with him. He was an acute observer of social interaction, including minute aspects of social interaction. He's one of those observers who tends to make one self conscious in interaction, one who pays attention to eye contact in conversation, or to the placement of hems and haws and pauses in conversation. (Try it yourself: in our culture does the speaker in a conversation look at the listener, or vice versa? It turns out that changing eye contact is associated with turn taking in conversation.)

Goffman was one of a kind. He couldn't be put into a school of sociologists, he didn't have a set of personal disciples; he was an entire specialty by himself. His works are quite unpretentious. His early works can be read and enjoyed by almost anyone, and even some of his later works are quite accessible, for example **Gender Advertisements**.

Today and next week I will be referring to his first book and to some early essays on deference and demeanor and on embarrassment. That first book, **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**, is about impression management. What I had to say about managing the impressions others might get about my sexual identity will have prepared you to follow the concluding paragraphs of that book.

(Quote pp. 160-162)

The perspective Goffman introduced has been called "dramaturgical analysis," the analysis of everyday life as a performance put on before an audience. Goffman was clear that this is only a partial perspective. Social settings may also be analyzed in a more strictly technical fashion---it is not enough that the bridge designer appear to be an engineer, he has to be able to design real bridges. There are also political perspectives; power may be heavily buttressed by staged ceremonies, but power is more than that. And so forth. But the dramaturgical perspective is important in examining daily life. In the course of his book Goffman examined a variety of ways in which impressions were, or were not, successfully managed. For example, performers are often obliged to act in accord with the idealized expectations of members of the audience for their role. It is not enough to **be** a competent burglary detective --- to **appear** to be one, it may be necessary to appear quickly after a burglary and do such things as dust for fingerprints --- even if one knows that such efforts are totally without value. Sometimes performers can mystify

members of the audience into believing that they have esoteric skills and knowledge, and this makes impression management easier. When I go to get new eyeglasses, the technician often presents himself as a medical expert: he has a white coat, and the office smells vaguely medical. (I understand one can buy spray cans to use around the office to produce that effect.) Many performers have a backstage area, where the audience is not permitted and where they can plan their performances. That's usually the case with kitchens in restaurants; when chefs must work in view of the diners, their work is substantially more difficult. And performances are often put together by a team of performers. Teammates may help one another convey desired impressions --- or they may undercut one another's performances. It is not only actors in performance who experience being upstaged by other members of the cast, for example.

Goffman was interested in confidence men, who make a business out of misrepresentation. It makes sense to consult experts in you're interested in the topic. One of his early essays was titled "On Cooling the Mark Out." In a confidence scam, after the victim becomes aware of being victimized, a member of the gang usually is left behind to cool the mark out, to dissuade the victim from going to the police or from taking other unpleasant actions. Goffman noted that the same problem exists in many more legitimate activities, from the complaint desk in a department store to the girl who has to deal with the lover she has jilted. Con men learn that their victims might take unpleasant steps not only because of their material loss but because of their loss of face, of self esteem. So part of cooling out the mark is to recover some self esteem for him. In the same way, a girl who jilts her lover might offer him an alternative status as valued "friend."

Given his interest in confidence scams and the like, it is easy to see Goffman as a cynic, one who depicts people in general as scheming, calculating, Machiavellian actors. That would be a mistake. Actually he stressed the extent to which morality pervades daily life. Almost every time we encounter others we claim an identity, and we offer some signs to support that claim. Generally, those we encounter are morally obligated to accept the claims, and we are obligated to provide some consistency between the images we present and the reality behind them. Con men are the exception, not the rule; they can be successful because most of the time people don't misrepresent themselves, and most of the time people accept the identity claims of others.

Goffman developed this point further in an article on "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," which I'll discuss next.....week (or maybe today).

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Discussion

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All of this is profoundly areligious. I became clearly aware of how areligious when I started to pick songs for this service: there seems to be absolutely nothing in the Prairie song book or the U-U hymnal that fits the topic of misrepresentation and impression management(Or is there?) This is not to say that the topic is irreligious or that we can neglect efforts to

manage the impressions we give off in our ritual life. Quite the contrary. Ritual life tends to be highly scripted partly because of the necessity to strictly control the impressions we give others. This is true for all of us, conventionally religious or not. It is very important to have the proper bearings at events like weddings and funerals, and few things can be quite as discrediting as failure to do so. Hence, unless we have lots of experience, we tend to be self-conscious at such rituals. Let me give a personal example. My mother's death and her funeral was one of the most intense experiences in my life: I intensely experienced a whole gamut of emotions, from simple grief, to terror, to guilt, and others. But, at her graveside, I also experienced a dramaturgical problem. The funeral director had placed three chairs by the open grave. I was uncertain whether I should sit, as one of her three immediate survivors, or whether it would be unmanly to do so, that maybe the chairs were for women or old people. I took a chair, but I felt awkward about it. Twenty-five years later I remember this about the ceremony, but not what the minister said, or who else was present and what they said. It was a religious ceremony, but I'm sure you'll agree with me that my concerns about not appearing manly during it were definitely not religious.

Since I couldn't find a song appropriate to the topic, I picked one I like, "Will You Go LASSIE Go," and let's close this part of the service with it.