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Radical Decency Reflection #46
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Decency to Self

A reaction I sometimes hear to Radical Decency is that its prescription – decency to your self, others, and the world, at all times and in every context – while noble, is utopian and impractical. But the criticism is misguided. Why? Because it fails to take account of the philosophy’s full-throttled commitment to “decency to self.” When we seek to balance and integrate decency to self, with decency to others and the world, we are challenged to make choices in life that – far from being naïve – are a tough-minded, realistic and, crucially, sustainable.

In this Reflection I discuss decency to self – how it has been distorted by our engrained mainstream ways of thinking, and how Radical Decency can vitalize the ways in which we tend to and love ourselves.

The importance of decency to self is grounded in our biology. We humans are wired to be in deep and intimate connection with one another. Our physical and emotional development and continued well being depend upon it. But that is not the full story. Faced with perceived danger, our fight/flight brain shifts our attention, dramatically and decisively, to our own needs. Any approach to living that fails to take account of both of these biological realities – our fundamentally affiliative nature and our very sensible attention to physical and emotional safety, when it is called for – is unrealistic and unsustainable.

This balanced approach is not, however, embraced in the mainstream culture. Instead, we are conditioned to view our selves and others through an illogical, all-or-nothing prism: Either we are selfish – or we are altruistic and caring. There is little currency for the view that we can – and should – be decent to others and the world and, at the same time, decent to our selves.

This odd, biologically unnatural mindset grows directly out of the authoritarian ways of operating that dominate our world. In this model, there are two roles: The dominant person – the boss, the traditional husband – who demands what he wants and projects his needs onto others, and the subordinate person who tends to them. So, for example, as the boss gets ready for the meeting, she barks at her assistant “where’s the file,” and the subordinate, internalizing the boss’s anxiety, scurries to find it.

This is, needless to say, a deeply flawed system. The dominant person’s attunement skills and ability to love and nurture atrophy. And the subordinate person’s ability to understand, assert and satisfy her needs correspondingly shrinks. Everybody loses.

One of the special geniuses of the mainstream culture is its ability to generate cover stories that justify its preoccupation with competition, dominance and control. And so,

we celebrate the life-style of the people at the top of this authoritarian pyramid, conveniently overlooking its high emotional price. And the hallmarks of this way of life – the unbounded pursuit of money, power, and material goods and toys – have become our culture’s standard measures of decency to self.

On the flip side, the mainstream culture promotes an equally distorted version of decency to others. Implicitly glorifying the role of the subordinate person in this authoritarian structure, it relentlessly romanticizes the “ever nurturing, always there to serve others” mother/nurse/secretary who should, in fact, be more appropriately viewed as a victim of this highly exploitative system.

These twin distortions – deeply interwoven in their effects – are instrumental in short-circuiting our ability to be more decent to ourselves. Here’s how the process works.

Given the insistent pressures of the world in which we live, most people are simply seeking to get by as best they can. They do this by pursuing the culture’s prescribed path, including its limited and distorted view of what it means to be decent to your self. The all too typical by-product of this way of life is some combination of the spirit-sapping conditions that are endemic in our grasping, dog eat dog world: Anxiety, depression, anger and violence, addictive behaviors, failed relationships, and so on.

Interestingly, while many people recognize the shortcomings in the mainstream culture’s prescription for happiness, it seldom leads to a different way of living. Why? Because the culture’s twin distortions – of the ways in which we understand decency to self and others – make it seem as though there are no other options.

To begin with, alternative, non-mainstream pathways for pursuing decency to self are visibly and unambiguously sanctioned. The institutions that drive our culture and write our paychecks demand steady, nose to the grindstone production and penalize choices that noticeably diverge from these norms. Thus, a decision to get off the treadmill in order to tend to one’s deeper emotional and spiritual needs is, for most, far too risky.

Moreover, the only alternative career path that the mainstream culture offers – a service oriented life – is, as noted earlier, set up as an either/or proposition: If you make the needs of others your focus, you will get – and should expect to get – less for yourself. Social workers, message therapists, and missionaries are expected to work for far less than those who sell widgets and, at an interpersonal level, are expected to be Florence Nightingale types who, in the words of the country and western song are, “always giving, never asking back.” The idea that decency to self could be a co-equal concern for these people is, in this mainstream view, a nonstarter.

So, where does that leave our typical mainstream person, leading his typical mainstream life? Because the only visible alternative – a service oriented life – demands an unreasonable sacrifice of key elements of decency to self, he is checkmated. The grievous price he pays in terms of decency to self seems inescapable and inevitable.

Note that the people who do chose the alternative path of service are similarly mouse trapped by these distorted views of decency. Buying into the self-sacrificing model of their chosen path, they are primed to subordinate their needs to the needs of others. And the mainstream culture fails to offer a better model – only the flawed acquisitive model, described above. These people, like their more mainstream brothers and sisters, feel adrift, without a viable option.

Radical Decency offers a way out. It focuses on a specific set of values – respect, understanding, empathy, equity, and justice. See Reflection #17, *What Is Decency?* Then, it invites us to apply these values on an across-the-board basis. Doing so, it replaces the confused and distorted values of the mainstream culture with a clear and coherent prescription for living; a prescription that, crucially, fully accounts for decency to self.

We humans are intensely creatures of habit. As we do something more and more, the likelihood that we will instinctually do the same thing, in the same way, the next time – and the next – increases correspondingly. One of the great virtues of Radical Decency is that it knowingly enlists this signature characteristic of our brains in the service of a better life. The philosophy’s central proposition is this: If our intent is to be respectful, understanding, empathic, equitable and just in all that we do, choices that reflect these values will over time become our habitual ways of living – and, with that, our ability to make wise, more strategic choices that embody and promote these values will grow as well.

The really good news, when it comes to decency to self, is that this area of living – like every other – will be powerfully altered by unwavering attention to these values. We will continue to do what we have to do to maintain our economic viability since this is clearly an important part of decency to self. But, at the same time, our emerging, radically decent habits of mind will guide us, more and more, toward choices that honor – as well – our broader physical, emotional, and spiritual needs with the understanding, empathy, and respect the philosophy demands.

Implementation of this approach to living, difficult in the best of circumstances, is greatly compounded by the context in which we live: A culture that relentlessly pushes us to operate out of a very different set of values. Thus, the art of being decent to our selves – like the art of being decent to others and the world – is a wisdom-stretching proposition; the practicalities of which I regularly address in the Reflections. See, for example, Reflection #19, *Implementing Radical Decency*; #35 *Salaried Workers – Realities and Possibilities*; #37 *Recognizing Our Comfort Zones*; and #43, *A Fairy Tale*.

Given this reality, we always need to remember that Radical Decency is the strong medicine we need to deal with our virulent cultural disease. If we hope to craft lives that express our deepest needs and longings, a radical embrace of these more decent values is essential. And, equally, we need to continually remind ourselves that, as difficult as it is, Radical Decency is its own reward; that it is the surest path to a more meaningful and nourishing life.