

Friendship, Bad People, and the Limits of Reactivity

There is something troubling about knowingly choosing to be friends with a “bad person,” i.e., someone who is seriously and unrepentantly vicious. I develop a novel view on which this choice is morally blameworthy because it constitutively involves taking up an evaluative stance toward them that is both improper and occludes one’s ability to take up the proper evaluative stance.

Choosing to befriend someone involves taking up a version of what Strawson (1962/2008) calls *the participant stance* toward them, i.e., the mental orientation (consisting, *inter alia*, of a suite of attentional, interpretative, and emotional dispositions) through which we relate to another as a fellow reasoner, i.e., as one with whom reasons can be addressed and exchanged. Moreover, it involves a suite of elevated *pro-social* dispositions, e.g., seeing them as a unique individual, interpreting their behavior in a nuanced and holistic manner, being motivated to spend time with them, engage in joint activities or projects, and seeing and treating their needs and requests as giving one stronger reasons than the needs and requests of strangers (all else equal).

But this is in opposition to the proper stance to take toward bad people—under normal circumstances. The proper stance is what I call the *semi-objective stance*, which we take by, *inter alia*, tokening attitudes such as reactive contempt, disdain, or moral disgust. From this stance, one sees and interprets another in an essentializing manner, e.g., simply as a misogynist or racist (Darwall 2018, Mason 2018). Moreover, one sees them as worthy of anti-sociability and is motivated to distance oneself from them or to withdraw from social interaction.

The semi-objective reactive attitudes address their target but, unlike participant reactive attitudes, do not bid for a *dialogical* response like justification, explanation, or apology. Rather, they issue an ultimatum: reform or be subject to the objective stance (Mason 2018). The semi-objective stance and its attitudes thereby act as a kind of guardian of the moral community.

I conclude by showing how my account makes sense of important data: (i) befriending a person seems to wrong their victims, give the bad person something they don’t deserve, and put oneself at risk of becoming a worse person, (ii) it’s more troubling to start such a friendship than to continue it, (iii) it’s still somewhat troubling to be “drinking buddies” with a bad person, and (iv) it’s less troubling for a bad person to befriend another bad person.