Pray For Me:
Defining the Ethical Response to Ableism as a Young Adult

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When I first arrived at the University of Maine in the fall of 2022, my biggest concern did not involve textbooks, finding classes, or making friends like most college students my age. Instead, I was worried about being attacked. It was only one month into the semester when I began to use a cane for my physical disability, and I was afraid of being bullied by my peers for looking and walking differently. This fear worsened when I also began to use a wheelchair this past September. Much to my relief, my experience was quite the opposite. Countless classmates and unknown students alike have offered support, whether it be assisting me getting into a desk or helping me enter buildings that lack proper doorways for people like me. This acceptance not only made me feel a sense of relief but also a sense of community to know that Black Bears are willing to help one of their own when necessary.

Just as this concern was alleviated, however, a new one arose. The most shocking revelation that has come with my physical disability is not the interactions with fellow students, but my experiences with those who are in Generation X or older. I consistently face invasive questions, rude comments, and stares, all of which erode that sense of community I feel amongst my peers at UMaine. This has raised a fundamental question: what is the ethical response from college-aged disabled adults such as myself in the face of ableist behaviors from that older age group? My question stems from the larger issue of living in a society dominated by the moral attitude of "respecting your elders," which causes any sort of disagreement between younger and older populations to be understood as the former being disrespectful to the latter. This prevailing belief promotes excusing unethical behaviors from older generations and has resulted in two

choices for young disabled adults: either be "respectful" and endure their ableism or bear the undue burden of attempting to educate the offender. Both of these responses only serve to reinforce the discrimination that we face in our daily lives. The proper response to ableism should not be hijacked by concerns of being viewed as disrespectful but should instead be based upon the actions needed to fulfill our duty to defend our own self-respect. The lived experiences of young disabled adults must be heard and understood in order for society to fully understand the flaws with respecting one's elders regardless of their wrongdoings. Our perspective is crucial to combating the ableism that pervades society across all age groups.

Thoughts and Prayers in a Hannaford Parking Lot:

The question made me blink. I was about to get into my car, having successfully survived yet another trip to the Old Town Hannaford during a busy day, when an older woman rolled her cart in front of my vehicle, effectively blocking me from driving off. Before I could say anything, she asked me this:

“What happened to you?”

She was in her sixties or seventies. My heart pounding, I politely answered that I was not comfortable talking about my disability. I had been practicing that line for a bit at that point, trying to remind myself that it is acceptable to say no. She nodded her head, and I thought the worst of it was over. Then she asked, “Can I pray for you?”

Not being a religious person, I declined and wished her a good day. Thankfully, she finally moved her cart, and I was able to leave the parking lot. On my way home, I could not help but be upset. I knew it was wrong of her to have spoken to me that way,

but I was frustrated with my own passivity. Was I too lenient with her, or would a sterner response only have made the situation worse? What should I have done in order to be an ethical person? I was raised by an Irish Catholic mother from Boston and a father with southern roots who was born on a military base—my first words may very well have been "Sir" or "Ma'am." My upbringing and my service in the US Navy have ingrained manners and respect into my daily interactions with those around me. After becoming disabled, I have begun to face the challenge of balancing my ideals of respect for others with my duty to my own self-respect, which has caused me to re-evaluate my understanding of ethical behavior.

Defining Unethical Behavior:

The age difference between a young disabled adult and an older offender is important for several reasons. During conversations about my experiences with ableism, many people often have initial reactions of disgust. Yet, this reaction almost immediately disappears as the realization hits them and they ask the inevitable question: "Were they [the offender] old?" When answering in the positive, my experience as a young person almost immediately gets dismissed. Others excuse the older person's choices, such as "*They don't know any better," "They're probably not all there anymore,"* and "*They're from a different era."* Not only are many of these responses ageist, they also conflate one's being older with being free from responsibility for one's actions. "Respecting your elders" is too frequently defined as blindness toward their faults. Imagine if those ableist questions or comments were directed at another older adult? What if, at that grocery store, instead of a nineteen-year-old being chased down and

blocked in, it had been a forty-year-old mother with her children? Should she be expected to answer those questions in front of them? What sort of example would that be setting, that at any time someone older wants to be rude, their target must simply turn cheek?

Often, those who ask ableist questions have an ulterior motive to satisfy their curiosity about others' disabilities. This is obvious with how the older woman first asked me "What happened to you?" Upon my rejection of her invasive question, she instead changed tactics. Though her second question ("Can I pray for you?") may seem kind to some, disabled people such as myself are all-too-familiar with the "benign condescension" that accompanies those types of pitying questions.[1] Still, some may argue that the woman had innocent intentions and may have merely been curious. In their mind, the older woman was like a young child staring at my cane in public: despite making me uncomfortable, it is not their fault since they are unaware of the impact of their conspicuous curiosity. However, 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant's definition of a rational being rejects this comparison. A rational person is one who is able to act "in accordance with principles" (i.e. a will) rather than merely incentives (i.e. desires or inclinations) such as those that drive "animility" or "beasts."[2]

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[1] "Sympathy, Empathy, Compassion, and Pity: How Are They the Same and How are They Different?" RISE, April 17, 2019, accessed February 17, 2024, https://riseservicesinc.org/news/sympathy-empathy-compassion-pity/#:~:text=Pity%20usually%20%E2%80%9Csuggests%20a%20kindly,those%20who%20have%20a%20disability.

[2] Immanuel Kant, "Second Section: Transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals," in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,* ed. Allen W. Wood (Yale University Press, 2002), 29, 43, 45 accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njjwt.8; Victor Chidi Wolemonwu, Review of *The Value of Humanity in Kant's Moral Theory* by Richard Dean, *Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2020): 222, accessed February 26, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs11019-019-09926-2; Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher, "Kantian Ethics," in *Ethics for A-Level: For AQA Philosophy and OCR Religious Studies* (Open Book Publishers, 2017), 41, accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wc7r6j.6.

Whereas the child is too young to have the ability to act beyond their basic desires, the older woman does not have this limitation considering her maturity. She is able to exercise reason when choosing between what her desires are versus ethical actions.

The ability to rationalize is key to defining morality.[3] Kant argues that the reasoning behind one's actions (i.e. their "good will") are what determines whether or not a rational being is behaving ethically, which initially would appear to defend the ethical standing of the older woman if her actions had been born of curiosity.[4] Yet, as Dr. Garrath Williams of Lancaster University's Philosophy and Religion Department writes, "[M]y desire only *explains* my rudeness… it does not *justify* my doing this."[5] Indeed, Kant adds the stipulation that "[a]ny action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law."[6] This freedom serves as the basis of human rights, in which all humans are inherently free from "all the forms of manipulation and tutelage including the contemporary sophisticated 'micro-physics' of power.'"[7] Kant further states that anyone who violates this freedom (and by extension, equality) of another does them wrong.[8]

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[3] Maureen Sie and Bart Engelen, "Why Ethical Reflection Matters: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy," in *Second Thoughts: First Introductions to Philosophy* (Open Press Tilburg University, 2021), 8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.34023113.
[4] Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/.
[5] Garrath Williams, "Kant's Account of Reason," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/kant-reason/.
[6] Edward Demenchonok, "The Universal Concept of Human Rights as a Regulative Principle: Freedom versus Paternalism," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 68, no. 1 (2009): 282, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27739769.
[7] Demenchonok, "The Universal Concept of Human Rights as a Regulative Principle ," 273, 278-279, 282, 289.
[8] Demenchonok, "The Universal Concept of Human Rights as a Regulative Principle," 282.

Kant also argues that one should never treat others "merely as a means but… as an end in itself" out of respect for their inherent dignity and value as a person.[9] With this, he directly rejects the concept of *paternalism,* which concludes that the actor is the sole party capable of good judgment and that the one being acted upon lacks this ability.[10] Similarly, University of Pennsylvania Professor of Legal Studies and Business Ethics Dr. Nicolas Cornell argues that, through its expressive content, "paternalism is wrong in the same way that an insult is wrong."[11] In his view, the action's intention does not excuse the effects of the action itself.[12] Since ableist behavior results in a denial of a disabled person's freedom, equality, and dignity, any form of it—intentional or not—is unethical. This ruling is applicable to all rational beings who engage in this type of discriminatory behavior, regardless of their seniority to their target.

Defining the Ethical Response:

One could argue (as many in my life have tried) that the proper way to articulate a dutiful response in the face of ableism is to use that moment as an "educational opportunity." Rather than this being a solution, however, it only further exacerbates the infringements upon one's inherent freedom.

When making a trip to the grocery store, it is expected that I do basic actions such as parking in the proper spot or paying at the register. Since these expectations apply to everyone, it does not specifically infringe upon my freedom as a disabled person. Yet when there is the social expectation that I am obligated to educate others

[9] Wolemonwu, Review of *The Value of Humanity,* 225.
[10] Nicolas Cornell, "A Third Theory of Paternalism," *Michigan Law Review* 113, no. 8 (2015): 1295, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24770827.
[11] Cornell, "A Third Theory of Paternalism," 1295.
[12] Cornell, "A Third Theory of Paternalism," 1324.

when they ask about my disability, it creates a double standard. It is not expected for anyone else to divulge their personal information to others when they visit the grocery store or similar places, for that matter. Why should those in my identity group, especially of my age, be any different? For example, if a non-disabled, middle-aged adult frequently uses the restroom in a store, they would likely be shocked to leave the stall and find another customer waiting outside, asking why they used the restroom so often. Now imagine if that customer feigns innocence as to why their actions are wrong. Should the person have to stay in the restroom with them, patiently explaining why it is unacceptable to invade another's privacy like that? The common view is that it is preposterous to expect another person to entertain that sort of behavior. So why is this standard applied to people with disabilities, especially younger people? The "attempted protection" of providing education to ableists "can, in this way, become injury."[13] By targeting a specific group—in this case young disabled people—and expecting us to answer questions that others would balk at, it only worsens the discrimination created when those questions are asked in the first place.

At one point I attempted to educate someone after a particularly obscene question regarding my disability. Last year I had been working a shift as a nighttime janitor when I entered an office space that needed cleaning. An older woman was there, working late, and she looked up at me. I pushed my cart further in and greeted her. Her face twisted into one of disgust, and rather than greet me back, she asked:

"What's wrong with you?"

[13] Cornell, "A Third Theory of Paternalism," 1327-1328.

I froze, stopping my cart. She continued to stare at me, then motioned to my body with a flippant hand, saying "Like, what's wrong with you? What's wrong with your leg?" She must have noticed my limp as I had pushed the cart in. Flustered, I simply answered that I have a bad leg. She continued to stare, possibly hoping for more information, before she realized that I was focused on my work and finally left. It was not until a few months later that I would see her again for the first time since the incident. I approached her calmly in a public space, and, keeping my voice low, politely reminded her of the situation and encouraged her to learn to be more respectful to people with disabilities in the future. She clearly recognized me given her facial expressions, but rather than simply acknowledging what she did, she instead denied it ever happened and hurriedly left. Her paternalistic attitude confounded her ability to take accountability for her actions and learn from someone younger than herself. This is the problem with attempting to "educate" older adults, especially from a younger person's perspective. Unfortunately, many of them do not wish to listen, in no small part due to how society has granted older people greater authority due to their age. When correcting this authority is seen as disrespectful, education becomes infeasible.

If passive endurance of ableism only encourages the unethical behavior, and attempts at addressing the issue are met with rejection, then what is the proper response to assert one's right to freedom from discrimination? The answer is found in Kant's support for human rights and one's inherent dignity, which can also be applied to one's sense of one's own value.[14] Building upon his concepts regarding respect for another's

[14] James W. Nickel, "Equal Respect and Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1982): 77, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/761991.

freedoms, Kant extends this respect to oneself, stating that a person should not allow their freedom and dignity to be violated, and that "this *self-esteem* is a duty of man to himself."[15] Kant defines duty as something that is required of us despite what we really wish to do.[16] When Kant argues that self-esteem is a duty to ourselves, he specifically defines it to apply to situations where we may rather not act. For example, a shy person gets insulted by one of their classmates, and they would rather just ignore the situation despite their classmates' laughter. This inclination to stay quiet in the face of an attack on their self-esteem is exactly what creates their duty to take action and defend it.

With this realization comes the answer to how young disabled people should react to ableism: due to our inherent right to freedom, the ethical response is one that asserts our dignity and fulfills our duty to maintaining our self-esteem. This response may take different forms depending on the situation, but the result is the same: a stern reminder that our age does not entitle older adults to treat us with any less respect than anyone else.

Conclusion:

Disabled young adults like me should not be forced into situations of having to choose between taking the brunt of someone's invasive curiosities, getting rejected when trying to educate, or being perceived as "yet another rude kid these days" when faced with ableist questions and comments from older adults. The adage "respect your elders" only encourages unethical behaviors as it allows older adults to take advantage of their social position and avoid scrutiny for their actions. We cannot live in a society

[15] Demenchonok, "The Universal Concept of Human Rights as a Regulative Principle," 284.
[16] Dimmock and Fisher, "Kantian Ethics," 32.

where one's age gives them an excuse to behave however they please, especially when it comes to discriminatory behavior such as ableism. These actions violate Kant's ideals of a person's dignity and inherent right to freedom. In order to rectify this, the ethical response from young disabled people is to immediately fulfill our duty to protect our own self-esteem by disengaging with the offender, even if that requires going in the face of social norms.

While it is important for young adults with disabilities to work on identifying boundaries and articulating them, the responsibility to combat ableism does not lie with us, but with those outside our community. Even if the older woman had the intention of being kind, the result of her actions was still the same. The pity conveyed when asking to pray for someone due to their disability implies that we need saving. The answer is: we do not. As Kant himself argues in his third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, "every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a lawmaking member in the universal kingdom of ends."[17] So, the next time you interact with someone who is disabled, ask yourself: would you want to be treated this way? If the answer is no, then you need to re-evaluate your behavior. Our allies must identify and correct ableism both within themselves and amongst those in their communities where the heart of the issue resides. There are a variety of ways one can respond—in the moment and beyond it—but the bottom line is the same: not only is it the *moral* choice to respond to ableist attacks but also the *ethical* one. That being said, please do not judge situations solely by who is saying what. Do not allow the predominant attitude of "respecting your elders" to inhibit you from recognizing discrimination. Instead, take a

[17] Dimmock and Fisher, "Kantian Ethics," 39.

moment to pause and truly assess the situation. Oftentimes, we as younger people have a good point. You just have to be willing to listen.

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