

A Right to Opportunities for Meaningful Relationships¹

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1. Introduction

Questions about which human rights we have and why we have them have been the subject of intense philosophical scrutiny. Surprisingly, given that scrutiny, there has been little philosophical discussion of distinctively social rights before Kimberley Brownlee's ground-breaking work on the right against social deprivation (Brownlee, 2013). Brownlee's work on the right against social deprivation highlights something that, on reflection, is hard to deny, namely that our social needs are deep and genuinely fundamental to our well-being.

I will suggest that there are two ways of interpreting what exactly our social rights ultimately aim to protect: basic social interactions² (ordinary kinds of interaction, such as the interaction we have with someone at a till) or meaningful relationships (such as the relationship we have with family members and friends). My aim in this chapter is to explore the relevance and importance of this distinction for our social rights, and by doing so, to shed light on their content and scope. I will argue here a) that we have a right to have opportunities to meaningful relationships, b) that such a right is distinct from a right focusing only on protecting access to more basic social interactions, and c) that to the extent that we have rights to both kinds of social interactions, the one focused on more meaningful relationships should have priority because it secures an interest of greater importance for us. In section 7, I consider a thought experiment to support this claim.

Before I begin, let me first clarify what I mean exactly by these two kinds of social interactions. I'll take *basic social interactions* to refer to any social interaction that falls short of a meaningful relationship: these are the ordinary social interactions of the kind we have with a bus driver, a neighbour, employees in shops, other students in lecture halls, colleagues in our workplaces, or other parents in the school ground.³ Of course, such relationships can develop into friendships, in which case they become meaningful relationships.

By contrast, I'll take *meaningful relationships* to refer to the close relationships we develop with our friends and loved ones. They are typically exemplified by relationships between parents and their children, romantic relationships, relationships between friends or between inspiring career mentors and their mentees. Such relationships typically involve regular, extensive and long-lasting interaction as well as emotional attachment and (often but not always involving emotional intimacy), and they will often deeply affect the way individuals conceive of their lives. Some meaningful relationships, such as those we develop with friends, are chosen from the start, but others, such as our relationships with close family members, are not, at least not to begin with.⁴

I will proceed as follows. In section 2, I will describe Brownlee's novel right against social deprivation and relate her discussion to the distinction I drew above between two kinds of social interactions. We shall see that while Brownlee's early work seemed more focused on the protection

¹ For very insightful written comments on this chapter, I am grateful to Kimberley Brownlee, Guy Kahane and Adam Neal and to two anonymous referees.

² For a discussion of these 'non-associative interactions', see Brownlee's chapter in this collection.

³ What I describe as *basic social interactions* would encompass what Brownlee describes as *non-associative interactions* but also some of the relations Brownlee describes as *acquaintances* (2020: 103). Brownlee describes non-associative interactions as 'momentary, one-off, and goal-oriented exchanges marked by mutual disinterest, courtesy and a context-specific acknowledgement of each other's wishes (2020: 101). She also recognises that acquaintances constitute a kind of relationship lying between non-associative interactions and persistent relationships (2020: 103).

⁴ The notion of 'meaningful relationships' used here matches Brownlee's reference to 'persistent associations'. Offering rigorous necessary and sufficient conditions for a social interaction to count as meaningful is beyond the scope of this chapter, and there may not be a sharp line between such relationships and more mundane ones. But this is true of many other important ethical distinctions.

of basic social interactions, her more recent work also highlights more meaningful relationships, though these are taken to be protected under a distinct right for social contribution. I will suggest that our right for opportunities to meaningful relationships ought to be protected even when contribution to others' well-being is not at issue. In section 3, I will briefly review different accounts of how human rights might be grounded, and will highlight the central role of intrinsic value or need in many such accounts. In section 4, I will argue that a right for opportunities for meaningful relationships should be distinguished from a right focusing on opportunities for more mundane or basic social interactions, and I will explore the content of the more ambitious right for opportunities for meaningful relationships. In section 5, I will respond to a series of objections that can give the impression that the idea of such a right is a non-starter. In section 6, I will consider the further distinct objection that such a right will, in practice anyway, overlap with a right protecting more basic social interactions. I will argue that while the two will often overlap, they can also come apart in some important cases. In section 7, I will further argue that there is a stronger case for thinking that meaningful relationships are intrinsically valuable meaning that, on some accounts of rights, a right protecting such relationships is easier to defend. Section 8 concludes.

2. Brownlee on the Right Against Social Deprivation

The right against social deprivation was first introduced by Brownlee (2013) and further developed in her *Being Sure of Each Other* (2020). Brownlee proposed the novel idea that we have a human right that is *distinctively* and *thoroughly* focused on our interpersonal social needs (2013). Brownlee conceptualizes the right against social deprivation in the following way: The right against social deprivation is the right to have “minimally adequate opportunities for non-threatening, decent or supportive social interaction” (2013: 206). Brownlee’s argument for the right emphasizes the philosophical claim that “we are, by nature, social creatures” (2013: 209) as well as the empirical work of social neuroscientists such as John T. Cacioppo to show the importance of social interaction in ensuring physical and psychological well-being (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). Finally, Brownlee also argues that our Kantian duty to treat persons as ends in themselves entails a commitment to the right against social deprivation (2013: 212).

It is important for Brownlee’s project that we understand the right against social deprivation to be a human right. Brownlee understands human rights to be rights to “those conditions that are necessary for the realization of a minimally decent human life” (2013: 200). Therefore, to count as a *human* right, the right against social deprivation shouldn’t be too ambitious. Brownlee’s conceptualization of the right is therefore modest in two respects. First, it focuses on protecting *opportunities* for interactions instead of protecting the actual development and maintenance of interactions.⁵ This ensures that in cases in which isolation is freely chosen (such as by nuns and monks), no right would be violated (provided that this choice is compatible with the person retaining the cognitive ability necessary to continue reasonably to affirm that choice). Second, and more importantly for our purposes, the right is modest in that it focuses on securing ‘minimal opportunities for the *ordinary kinds* of social interaction’ (2013: 206; my emphasis) that is basic social interactions instead of opportunities for meaningful relationships.

On a plausible interpretation of Brownlee’s 2013 account of the right, it is grounded in our interest in ordinary social interactions and in their value: Brownlee eloquently describes the many ways in which ordinary social interaction can *instrumentally* contribute to someone’s well-being, but also claims that such interactions have intrinsic value. Either way, in this early work, her focus is on basic social interactions.⁶

⁵ With the exception of relationships that already exist, as Brownlee claims that we have a right for them not to be severed (Brownlee, 2020, ch. 3).

⁶ Importantly for our purposes, in her response to Brownlee, Valentini attributes to Brownlee the view that we have a right to access *meaningful relationships* (Valentini 2016). Valentini takes Brownlee to hold that we have a right to

In her later book *Being Sure of Each Other* (2020), Brownlee formulates a broader account of our social rights. There Brownlee states that in order to lead minimally good lives, we need “access to persistent stable social connections” (2020: 8), strongly suggesting that she holds that we have a right to access such persistent (and presumably more substantial) connections. However, Brownlee attributes the protection of opportunities for meaningful relationships to a distinct social right, the right to contribute to specific other persons’ survival and well-being, which she defends both in the book and in earlier work (2016; 2020).

While Brownlee’s formulation of the right against social deprivation may be compatible with a more expansive interpretation, it strongly suggests a focus on basic social interactions, and the right is grounded in the idea that such ordinary interactions are valuable, and that we have an interest in having opportunities to engage in them. Brownlee’s later work (2016, 2020) makes it clear that she also sees the protection of opportunities to meaningful relationships as crucial to the protection of another social right, the right to contribute to specific other persons’ survival and well-being. However, the distinction I drew above between basic social interactions and meaningful relationships isn’t central to Brownlee’s core argument. My aim here is to explore its significance for the idea of a human right against social deprivation, and I will propose, more specifically, that such a right ought to explicitly protect access to more meaningful relationships.

Before I do so, let me briefly explain why I think that such protection cannot be adequately covered by the idea of a social right to contribute to specific other persons’ survival and well-being. First, some may disagree that we have a need to contribute to specific other persons’ survival and well-being or that these needs could ground a distinct right; yet access to meaningful relationships seems deserving of protection independently of accepting such a need. Second, and more importantly, I believe that meaningful relationships benefit us even when we don’t contribute to others’ well-being and even when we could have other, more direct, ways of benefitting others. Consider, for example, a highly flourishing individual, Elizabeth, who has a wide social network. I might have a highly meaningful relationship with Elizabeth (she might be my most important friend). But Elizabeth has so many other valuable friendships that my friendship can’t really be said to benefit her much at all. I still think that, in this case, the opportunity to develop that friendship is valuable and should be protected, because the value to me of having this relationship with her isn’t dependent on my contributing to her well-being. Indeed, such meaningful relationships have great instrumental value to us, and are also, as we shall see below, valuable in its own right on many objective list views. We should therefore endorse a right for opportunities for meaningful relationships that is not dependent on one’s ability to contribute to specific other persons’ survival and well-being.

3. Human Rights and their Grounds

Since we are discussing possible human rights and what may ground them, a few words are in order on how I will understand the idea of a human right and its possible grounds. I take human rights to be pre-institutional moral rights that are best understood as justified by the fact that they entail the respect and protection of certain objective goods or needs that we have *qua* human beings. Following Jeremy Waldron, I take the project of providing a foundation for a right to be “a way of understanding the point of rights that will help us interpret particular rights provisions” (Waldron 2015: 131). Identifying the ground of a right isn’t a merely theoretical exercise since, as

‘access social resources, namely meaningful social relationships, such as friendships, family attachments, romances, and so forth’ (Valentini 2016: 49). But this seems to me to misinterpret Brownlee, who, in her 2013 paper, only discusses *minimal opportunities for social interaction* and who, as mentioned above, explicitly excludes in this paper the interpretation according to which friendships and interaction with loved ones should be what the right against social deprivation is about. Valentini might have interpreted the right this way because it is in fact plausible to think that meaningful relationships *are* one of the most important kinds of interactions that we can have.

Waldron shows, the foundation of a right also has important implications for how to address conflicts between this right and other rights as well as for the scope and application of the right (2015: 131).

I will make two assumptions about the grounding of human rights. First, while some authors hold that human rights reflect our basic moral status independently from how these rights promote further values,⁷ I accept the more influential and intuitive value-based approach. On this approach, the justification for human rights is that they protect certain valuable features in human life, such as agency, elements of a good life or basic needs (Cruft, Liao, and Renzo 2015). Second, in my view it is more plausible to think that each human right serves a different good or need (or possibly several of them) rather than seeing multiple human rights as all serving one unique interest (Tasioulas, 2014, Barry and Southwood, 2011). It seems unlikely that the wide variety of interests protected by rights could all be subsumed under one single value (e.g. agency). For this reason, I believe that the different human rights are grounded in a range of goods or basic needs. I will therefore proceed on the assumption that to ground our social rights, we need to link them either to basic needs or to one or more objective goods that are constitutive of a good life. And as we shall see, whether we ground social rights in the value of (or need for) basic social interactions or in more meaningful ones will have implications for the scope and applications of the resulting social rights.⁸

4. Two Distinct Social Rights

I started by highlighting the distinction between basic social interactions and more meaningful relationships and we just saw that the value or need that grounds a human right can affect its content and scope. Putting these two ideas together, I will now show how grounding a right against social deprivation on each kind of social interaction will support a different social right.

We have already seen what a right focusing on basic social interactions would look like. As I have interpreted Brownlee's own conception of the right against social deprivation (Brownlee, 2013), it would broadly take such a form.⁹ Put more explicitly (and setting aside the question of whether it exactly captures Brownlee's own intent), we get the following:

The Right for Opportunities for Basic Social Interactions (henceforth ROB): This right is grounded in the (supposed) interest we have in (or value of) basic social interactions, and therefore aims to protect opportunities for such interactions (as defined earlier).

The Right for Opportunities for Meaningful Relationships (henceforth ROM): This right is grounded on the (supposed) interest we have in (or the value of) developing and maintaining meaningful relationships and therefore aims to protect opportunities for such meaningful relationships.

My primary aim in what follows is to show that there is a strong case for ROM. I think that there is a strong *prima facie* argument for the claim that we have a fundamental interest in having meaningful relationships. And I also believe that meaningful relationships are intrinsically valuable and constitute a good that is constitutive of a good life. So on both accounts of what grounds human rights (as discussed in the previous section), it would make sense to argue that we have

⁷ This kind of view has been defended by Frances Kamm (2007) and Thomas Nagel (2002). Another alternative is to see human rights as created by practice, such as that of limiting countries' sovereignty (Beitz 2009).

⁸ In addition, since I'll later argue that there's a stronger case for thinking that meaningful relationships are objective goods, rights protecting access to such relationships will be more plausible if one accepts views on which rights must be grounded in such goods rather than in needs.

⁹ However, in her 2020 book, *Being Sure of Each Other*, Brownlee's discussion goes beyond basic social interactions, as she stresses more the importance of joint narratives, diachronic social needs and the assaults that can be done on social access needs within existing relationships.

ROM. ROM protects access to a minimum number of opportunities for such meaningful relationships to develop, but it should also offer guarantees against potential threats to these relationships once established.¹⁰

I will not argue against ROB and my main argument is compatible both with accepting or rejecting it or, indeed, with holding that there is a single right against social deprivation that protects opportunities for both basic social interactions and meaningful relationships, so long as it's clear that such a more complex social right is grounded in two distinct values or needs.¹¹ Moreover, I will argue that in cases where the two rights (or aspects of the more complex single right) pull in opposing directions, meaningful relationships should have the normative priority.

In the next section, I will address several objections to ROM that can give the impressions that the very idea of such a right makes no sense. I will then turn to look more closely at ways in which ROB and ROM can come apart, and potentially conflict. We shall see, however, that there is nevertheless substantial overlap between the two, and even if one ends up rejecting ROB, ROM would still offer significant protections for more basic social interactions.

5. Four Objections to a Right to Opportunities for Meaningful Relationships

The first objection to ROM is that we don't necessarily think of all people lacking such relationships as not leading minimally decent human lives. But I would argue that the fact that some people don't have meaningful relationships shouldn't dissuade us from ensuring that there are *opportunities* for all to develop and maintain such relationships.¹² As Brownlee herself points out in the case of basic social interactions, monks and nuns may well choose complete isolation for extended periods—forgoing even basic social interactions—but this doesn't mean that protecting their opportunities for social contact doesn't matter (2013: 205). By protecting these opportunities, we ensure that isolation is a choice; indeed, the very meaning of, say, a monk taking a vow of silence *requires* that the option of speaking with others remains open. And the same response can be given in the case of meaningful relationships. Protecting opportunities for meaningful relationships doesn't entail forcing everyone to make use of these opportunities, but allows everyone to make a choice as to whether or not to engage with them.

The second objection is based on the point that rights entail duties. So doesn't a ROM imply that others have a duty to develop and maintain such friendships and loving relationships with us, which sounds implausible? But as Brownlee argues in defence of the right against social deprivation, we don't need *specific* individuals to carry the duty to protect the right as there should be a division of labour: specific institutions will carry out the duty. Most of us will only have the duty to ensure that the institutions in question do so. In practice, this means that specific

¹⁰ Let me say a word about the relation between the right I defend here—the right for opportunities for meaningful relationships—and the right described in the previous chapter by Stephanie Collins, the right to intimacy considerations. These two rights differ in several important respects. First, I focus on meaningful relationships, which might or might not be of an intimate nature. Second, Collins's right to "intimacy consideration" entails that we have a duty to '(i) consider the grounds on which we prefer some intimacy relationships over others and (ii) take steps to revise those grounds if they are found to leave without intimacy some people with whom we could be intimate'. In contrast, the right for opportunities for meaningful relationships requires that each individual has a minimal level of opportunities for meaningful relationships and that individuals aren't prevented from making use of such opportunities. Third, Collins's paper also explores the idea that we have a group right to intimacy, whereas my account of the right for opportunities for meaningful relationships takes it to be an individual right.

¹¹ Brownlee's case for seeing solitary confinement as a violation of human rights seems to me to provide support for ROB. Now, ROM would also entail that solitary confinement is a violation of prisoners' rights. But it does seem that the main problem with it relates to the complete absence of any social interaction, not because, in consequence, there are no opportunities for more meaningful interactions.

¹² This is very similar to what we think in the case of many other rights: some people never opt to marry, some people never practice a religion, but it is important that they have the option to do these things for the sake of their autonomy.

institutions would be responsible for adopting the policies needed to protect these rights—for example, arranging that social workers be sent to interact with the socially deprived.¹³

A third objection would ask us to consider the case of intolerable individuals, that is, individuals with whom others don't want to associate. This kind of cases has been discussed by Laura Valentini who describes Grumpy Gertraud as someone who became grumpy “for no apparent reason”. Gertraud spreads vicious rumors behind people's back, sometimes behaves like a bully and always moans about the things that dissatisfy her in her life (Valentini, 2016, p. 6-7). The objector could ask: can we still say that Grumpy Gertraud has genuine opportunities for meaningful relationships? If not, then how could there be a right that protects her opportunities to form such relationships?

To that I would give two responses. First, to repeat, the right only aims to protect *opportunities* but can't guarantee the actual enjoyment of meaningful relationships. It is true that, in my understanding of ROM, we should not only remove external obstacles to these opportunities (such as discriminative practices, lack of leisure time, etc.) but also need to enable individuals to be able to seize these opportunities by removing internal obstacles (such as mental health issues) and by equipping them with the right kind of skills (by providing socio-emotional education in schools). Enabling individuals to access opportunities for meaningful relationships might require a range of policies on the part of the state, but it doesn't require others to associate with specific individuals, such as Grumpy Gertraud. Even if Grumpy Gertraud was in a state the fully realised ROM, including via school provision of socio-emotional skills, she might still fail to develop these skills and therefore have no meaningful relationships. The right needs to respect the ability of individuals to be autonomous and responsible for their behaviour.

Second, the right doesn't aim to *equalise* the number of opportunities for meaningful relationships each individual has, but only to ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for such meaningful relationships. There is a limit to how many resources should be channelled into hard cases such as this. So although ROM would demand more than ROB, such a right cannot, and needn't, guarantee that 'intolerable individuals', or anyone else for that matter, would in fact develop such relationships or even have the exact same opportunities as others to do so.

Finally, someone might object that, because ROM is more ambitious than ROB, it is harder to claim it as a human right. After all, human rights only secure “those conditions that are necessary for the realization of a minimally decent human life” (Brownlee, 2013: 200). In section 2, I pointed out that to ground our social rights, we need to link them either to basic needs or to one or more objective goods that are constitutive of a good life. First, I believe that human beings have a basic need (or interest) for meaningful relationships and that this interest is more fundamental than our interest in having basic social interactions. I use a thought experiment to support that claim in section 7. Second, I also believe that meaningful relationships are one of the objective goods that are constitutive of a good life. I'll also argue for the claim that meaningful relationships have intrinsic value and are one of the objective goods constitutive of the good life in section 7.

6. Distinguishing the Two Rights

Perhaps a more fundamental objection is that the distinction I drew doesn't matter much since the two rights would anyway overlap. After all, aren't opportunities for basic social relationships not *also* opportunities for more meaningful ones? This, however, is not always the case, as I will now show. In particular, I will highlight cases where one can have opportunities for basic social interactions without also having opportunities for meaningful relationships. This will also help bring out the concrete practical upshots of accepting the more ambitious ROM.

¹³ This response to the objection that ROM is too demanding is also in line with how similar objections are addressed in the contexts of other human rights: it is usually accepted that it would be unduly burdensome for every individual to be responsible for the protection of everyone's human rights.

It is true that ROM does commit us to protecting opportunities for basic social interactions, since such interactions often also constitute opportunities to meet new people with whom we end up developing meaningful relationships. But ROM requires more. In particular, it also requires protecting the opportunity to engage in *repeated* social interaction over a certain period with others, since even frequent but fleeting interactions with constantly changing people don't have the potential to develop into meaningful relationships.¹⁴ It isn't enough to ensure access to just *any* kind of social interaction, as is the case with ROB. Here are some of the ways in which ROM is more demanding than ROB:

(1) Let me start with some concrete examples. Take first the case of immigrants and the visa policies for the family members and friends who visit them for instance. If we endorse ROM, we would need to ensure that immigrants have opportunities to maintain the meaningful relationships they have with their family members and friends from their home country. This could count as an important consideration in granting longer visas for these friends and family members. Taking into consideration the relationships that a visitor has with individuals living in the country is intuitive and in line with current practice. This isn't something that would be supported by ROB.

Consider next the carceral context. Imagine a prison where the prisoners have regular opportunities to enjoy basic social interaction with the other prisoners. However, they are unable to meet the same prisoners regularly enough or for long enough for social bonds to emerge (e.g. perhaps breaks are scheduled in such a way that prisoners never meet the same people regularly)—and therefore have no opportunity to form a meaningful relationship. Or imagine that a prisoner is placed in a context where everyone else speaks a language that she only understands at a very basic level. In both cases, despite the prisoners having access to basic social interactions, they do not have opportunities to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with others.¹⁵ While their ROB is protected, we may still feel that there is something problematic in these arrangements and that these prisoners' rights are breached—in line with the idea of ROM.

Consider finally the case of people who are bed-ridden or who suffer from severe social anxiety. When individuals have such difficulties interacting with others it has an impact on their ability to enjoy both basic social interactions and develop and maintain meaningful relationships. Both rights may recommend, for example, sending a social worker to attend to such a person. However, ROB only requires sending a social worker who interacts in a supportive fashion with the person in need of basic social interactions, whereas this may not be sufficient according to ROM. First, ROM requires that the same social worker (or workers) would need to be sent to ensure that a relationship can develop between the socially deprived individual and the social workers in question, whereas sending a different person each time is compatible with ROB.¹⁶ Second, as I have argued earlier, meaningful relationships require underlying motivations that might be lacking in the case of a social worker paying an obligatory call. It might depend on how motivated the social worker is to create a connection with the individual they visit. Third, whether or not a visit by a social worker genuinely provides opportunities for meaningful relationships can depend on whether their personalities and interests sufficiently match. This suggests that fully addressing ROM may require not just repeated interactions with the same person, but *also* opportunities for such repeated interactions with a sufficiently wide *range* of persons.

(2) Another way in which ROM goes beyond ROB is that it arguably requires the protection of people's privacy, including periods of *absence* from basic social interactions. Basic social interactions don't require a measure of privacy. But in order to have genuine opportunities for meaningful relationships, we do need privacy from the public eye so that meaningful relationships

¹⁴ Note that Brownlee herself discusses the necessity of repeated social interaction to ensure that the right to contribute to specific other peoples' survival and well-being is respected (Brownlee 2020: 88-9; 2016).

¹⁵ In her discussion of social contribution injustice, Brownlee discusses a similar case involving Mandela in jail.

¹⁶ In the third chapter of her book (Brownlee, 2020: 88-89), Brownlee considers a similar example, but takes this as an example of social contribution injustice.

with others can be developed. As James Rachels has argued, privacy is central to the development of special relationships with others (Rachels, 1975). It is when we are apart from the others that we develop genuine relationships with our loved ones. Other arguments could be made in support of that link between privacy and meaningful relationships. The hidden nature of some relationships (from the public eye) can contribute to their meaningfulness, because we can choose to reveal in them more about ourselves than we do in our public life (Couto, 2006, p.230). And periods of complete privacy from interaction (where we are missing our loved ones and where our minds can be set free) may be critical to the endurance of meaningful relationships.

(3) ROM arguably also requires multiple background conditions that are not required, or at least not to the same extent, by ROB. First, the right to opportunity for meaningful relationships may require the provision of basic social and emotional skills as part of the curriculum in primary and secondary school. Individuals need to be provided with tools that enable them to engage, and develop mutually satisfying relationships, with others.

Second, ROM requires the protection of children from potentially abusive relationships that will prevent them from developing into emotionally integrated human beings capable of genuine intimacy and attachment. Having social services that would spot easily and intervene early in cases where abuse could take place would also be a necessary requirement for ROM to be protected.¹⁷ Third, ROM also arguably requires access to psychological counselling and adequate mental health treatment. Many will suffer from some mental health issues at some point, these can impact on their ability to bond with others. Someone might retort that the right for opportunity for basic social interaction would also require access to psychological counselling. This may be true of more extreme psychological disorder. But most individuals who suffer from less radical mental health issues have no difficulty in participating in basic social interactions.¹⁸ Fourth, and importantly, ROM may also require providing individuals sufficient leisure time to allow them to develop and maintain meaningful relationships—individuals who need to work around the clock just to survive may still regularly engage in basic social interactions but simply not have the time or energy to develop deeper relationships.¹⁹ As many of us painfully realise in busy periods of our lives, maintaining meaningful relationships takes time. And this means that implementing a right to opportunities for meaningful relationships would have an impact on labour law. But ROB can be easily realised even in contexts of constant work, so long as that work has some kind of social dimension.

As some of my examples above demonstrate, ROM cannot be satisfied simply by the state not interfering negatively with the possibility of meaningful relationships developing; some people are disadvantaged socially in one way or another often through no fault of their own (due to physical disabilities, mental health issues, traumatic past, etc.) and, without assistance, are likely to fall below a certain threshold of sufficient opportunities for meaningful relationships. ROM may therefore be more demanding than it may at first seem.

In this section, I have addressed the worry that the distinction between ROB and ROM doesn't matter because they would protect the same opportunities. I hope to have shown here that you can have full opportunities for basic social interaction without also having opportunities for

¹⁷ I am not suggesting here that protecting children from abuse is first and foremost necessary to protect children's opportunities for meaningful relationships. Of course, protecting children from abuse is first and foremost necessary to protect them from direct harm and to protect their immediate well-being. But the fact that different rights converge on the same policies isn't an issue. According to the indivisibility thesis, rights are supposed to be linked to each other and support each other (Nickel, 2008). Independently from whether or not you believe in the indivisibility thesis, the fact that rights converge on the same recommendations doesn't undermine in itself either right.

¹⁸ One might object further that access to psychological counselling isn't primarily valuable because it allows for the development of meaningful relationships. But here again, different rights might require the same policies.

¹⁹ Once again, we already have a right to rest and leisure time (as secured by the International Declaration of Human Rights) but this doesn't undermine the claim that having sufficient leisure time might also be required by our right to opportunity for meaningful relationships.

meaningful relationships. In the process, I have also fleshed out some concrete ways in which the two rights would differ in practice.

7. The Intrinsic Prudential Value of Meaningful Relationships and Basic Social Interactions

I now turn to consider another important difference between basic social interactions and meaningful relationships. I will argue that there is a much stronger case for seeing the latter as intrinsically valuable.²⁰ This is important given that, on some views of rights, a right must protect something that is intrinsically valuable—an essential aspect of a good life. Even if you don't accept this view, a right protecting an intrinsic good seems more important. I will argue that when meaningful and basic interactions are in conflict, we should give priority to meaningful ones.

To know what is essential to a minimally decent human life we need to look to theories of well-being. Here I will focus on objective list conceptions of well-being.²¹ Among authors who endorse an objective list conception of well-being, nearly all argue that meaningful relationships are one of the objectively valuable goods constitutive of individuals' well-being. For example, Richard Arneson includes in his list of objective goods "having relations of love and friendship" (2000: 53). And Joseph Raz includes "warm and trusting relations with family and friends, stormy and enthusiastic involvement with other people, many hours spent having fun in good company" (1988: 306).²² Guy Fletcher includes friendship in his list of objective goods (2015: 149), while John Finnis includes sociability (friendship) (Finnis, 1980). There is thus a strong consensus about the intrinsic value of meaningful relationships. By contrast, none of these authors includes merely basic social interactions in their list.

Martha Nussbaum, however, may offer one interesting exception, as she describes two distinct capacities:

Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence, in general, to love, grieve, to feel longing and gratitude...

Being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of familial and social interaction. (Nussbaum 1992: 222).

Although the distinction between these two distinctive capacities does not correspond to my own distinction, it seems to recognise the value of engaging in a variety of ways with others. But even Nussbaum's second capacity seems to go beyond merely basic social interactions, so even that exception seems to support the case for treating meaningful relationships as the main source of value grounding our social rights.

Moving beyond the lists endorsed by philosophers, we can directly consider whether basic social interactions—such as the polite interaction between a passenger and a bus driver—also possess intrinsic value. Bear in mind that we're not asking whether they have instrumental value. For example, many people have a psychological need to be in physical proximity with others, even

²⁰ Brownlee suggests that minimally adequate access to social contact in the form of decent and supportive interpersonal relations is intrinsically valuable (2013: 212; 2020: 9). My argument here raises questions about this claim insofar as it refers to basic social interactions.

²¹ Hedonists or desire satisfaction theorists both deny that personal relationships are intrinsically valuable in this way. But, if social interactions relationships are considered to be intrinsically valuable, and since Brownlee herself appeals to the intrinsic value of social interactions, this can only make sense within an objective list conception of well-being. Moreover, there's a strong case for holding that meaningful relationships possess far more instrumental value, on these theories of well-being, than merely basic interactions.

²² Elsewhere, I have pointed out that there are some issues with the formulation: 'many hours spent having fun in good company', as it isn't clear which property is the good-maker here (Couto 2014).

if this need might vary in intensity. This, however, may only reflect a contingent (if important) feature of actual human psychology. For consider the following scenarios:

The Pill Against Basic Social Needs: In a society ravaged by various pandemics that led individuals to isolate themselves from others, pharmaceutical companies devise a pill that will prevent individuals from feeling any suffering from the lack of actual physical and social contact with other human beings. In this society, people can still develop meaningful relationships, but they have to do so mostly virtually. The pill allows individuals not to suffer from the lack of actual physical and social daily contact, but they still need and pursue meaningful relationships.²³

The Pill Against Meaningful Relationships Needs: In a society where meaningful relationships have become dangerous due to the spreading of a strange disease whose lethal symptoms is triggered by the emotions experienced in such relationships, pharmaceutical companies devise a pill that will prevent individuals from suffering from the lack of meaningful relationships. They will still interact with others on a daily basis but they won't be suffering from the lack of meaningful relationships in their lives, and won't thus want or pursue them.

While both scenarios are disturbing, it seems to me far less disturbing to provide the pill against basic social needs so long as people still continued to want and pursue meaningful relationships. By contrast, the idea of a pill against meaningful relationships needs seems horrifying. These imaginary examples offer a more radical illustration of how basic and meaningful interactions can come apart and again strongly suggest to me that meaningful relationships are essential to a minimally decent life and more important than basic interactions. We have a fundamental interest in meaningful relationships, which is more important than the interest we have in basic social interactions.²⁴

So long as we still find a pill against basic social needs problematic, we may still hold that such interactions possess at least some intrinsic value. However, it seems to me that if and when basic social interactions have such a value, this value derives entirely from their *resembling* (or displaying) features of more meaningful interactions. Consider the situation in which you rejoice in seeing a familiar shopkeeper and in exchanging some pleasantries with them. You rejoice to the extent that the shopkeeper manifests an enjoyment of your company as an individual beyond the limited exchange required for your minimal commercial interaction. The enjoyment you get from the interaction derives from the sense that the interaction goes beyond mere necessary exchange, reflecting respect and a degree of care for each other and even an appreciation of each other as individuals. Or consider smiling at an elderly woman passing by, and being told by her that it's been a long time since someone gave her such a friendly smile.²⁵ Such exchanges seem to me intrinsically valuable *only in so far and to the extent that they share some features of a meaningful relationship*.

What about interactions that entirely lack in spontaneity, emerge out of necessity and follow closely the conventional rules of politeness—think, for example, of a cordial relationship between individuals working in the same space but never developing any knowledge of or appreciation of each other. Again, this kind of interaction might still be instrumentally valuable to the extent that being physically close to other human beings in a shared space along with the polite recognition of each other's presence might still benefit individuals' well-being. But I doubt that such basic social interactions have intrinsic value. This is in part because for relationship to possess intrinsic value, it needs, I believe, to have distinctive motivations. To see this, imagine that you were to discover that one of your friends had been motivated to be your friend because they were hoping

²³ In this society, we still need to make sure that individuals get to know people with whom they will ultimately develop relationships. There could be specific websites set up, which would allow for the virtual meeting of others. So individuals would still meet other individuals that they don't know virtually, but only for the sake of finding those with whom they can develop meaningful relationships.

²⁴ For further support for that claim, see the previous chapter by Stephanie Collins.

²⁵ I owe this excellent example to an anonymous referee.

for some benefit from an association with you paid to spend time with you and pretend to like you. I suspect you would not continue to attribute intrinsic value to this relationship.²⁶

It could be pressed that, in the absence of basic social interactions, we would experience a loss in the *variety* of the kinds of relationships we have—recall Nussbaum’s remarks. But I doubt that such an interest in social variety has the potential to ground a human right. According to the interest theory of rights, for an interest to ground a right, the interest at stake needs to be strong enough to hold someone else under a duty (Raz 1986: 166), and an interest in social variety seems just too weak for that. Although we benefit greatly and our lives are made more exciting and fulfilling from having some variety in our lives (whether this pertains to food, types of interaction, aesthetic experiences, etc.), variety in experiences can’t be said to be necessary for a minimally good life. We have a right to food but no right to experience various cuisines.

Perhaps a stronger objection is that basic social interactions might be needed to sustain a sense of community or, indeed, the very possibility of a community.²⁷ I find this suggestion appealing though it’s not obvious that it would establish something stronger than a significant instrumental role for basic social interaction and notice further that it won’t show that basic social interactions as such possess value, since such interactions can take place between people who do not belong to the same community or who do not care about the community to which they in fact belong. Nor is it clear to me that a community cannot be sustained without such interactions.²⁸ In any event, I am open to the possibility that at least some basic social interactions possess intrinsic value. But I think the case for that is far weaker than the case for the intrinsic value of meaningful relationships and that if basic relationships do possess such value, that value is considerably smaller.

I have argued in this section that whereas the case for seeing meaningful relationships as having intrinsic value is strong, it’s doubtful that basic social interactions possess such value beyond ways in which they mimic meaningful relationships. On views of rights that ground them in intrinsic goods, there is therefore a strong case for ROM and perhaps not at all for ROB—though what I said here is compatible with seeing ROB as based in common human needs.

8. Conclusion

This chapter aims to address questions about the grounds, content, and implications of a human right against social deprivation. I have focused in particular on two ways that such a social right could be understood: as grounded by, and aiming to protect, only opportunities for basic social interaction or as grounded by and aiming to protect, opportunities for more meaningful relationships. I have argued that whether or not we think that there is a right protecting more basic kinds of social interactions, we should take seriously the idea of a more ambitious right focused on affording opportunities for meaningful relationships—a right that cannot, I have argued, be fully explicated in terms of a right to contribute to others’ well-being. While such a right would be considerably more ambitious, I have argued that it is compatible with being a human right since a minimally decent life requires sufficient opportunities for such relationships—though whether or not those opportunities will be taken is a different matter.

I spent some time addressing the worry that, in practical terms, a right focused on more meaningful relationships wouldn’t really differ from the less ambitious one focused on basic social interactions. I argued that the two rights won’t always overlap and that, in a range of cases, what would be sufficient to provide opportunities for basic interactions won’t be sufficient to provide opportunities for, say, forming deep friendships. This argument also brought out some of the

²⁶ Brownlee herself points to two illustrations where friendships are an illusion, but she discusses them to argue about social contribution injustices (2016: 37).

²⁷ I owe this suggestion to an anonymous referee.

²⁸ Arguably, I could participate actively in my local community (by taking my turn in cleaning the street, expressing my vote on local choices, etc.) without basic social interactions with its other members.

practical implications of the more demanding right—these include not just providing opportunities for repeated interactions with the same people, but also things such as provision of a sufficient degree of privacy and leisure time, social and emotional skills, and, when needed, psychological counselling. I further argued that in cases where the more demanding and the less demanding social aims are in tension, clear priority should be given to the aim of protecting opportunities for meaningful relationships. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, I further bolstered these claims by arguing that the case for seeing meaningful relationships as having intrinsic value is far stronger than the parallel case for ascribing such value to basic social interactions. This is shown both by the central role that meaningful relationships are given in most objective list accounts of the good life and by our intuitions about some hypothetical scenarios.

None of this requires me to deny the importance of being able to enjoy basic social interactions with others. Such interactions are a central path to the development of more meaningful relationships, and they may even possess a degree of intrinsic value when they echo such deeper relationships. Nor do I rule out that they may, in some contexts, possess intrinsic value in other ways (such as by playing a role in constituting communities). My main point was rather to encourage those who find the idea of a right against social deprivation compelling not to construe it too modestly.

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