

A Purely Selfish Reason to Value the Lives of Others

Why should you care about other people, really?

There are some good answers to this question, but none of them include “because you just ought to.” That unfortunately is how most of us justify generosity and love for others.

Of course, assuming the morality of caring about the lives of others kind of begs the question. And when people feel that caring for the flourishing of others goes against their own interests, they’ll drop moral pretense altogether.

It’s vital to know why you value the life of others if you want to defend that life effectively.

Fortunately, there are a number of ways in which the lives and flourishing of others directly improve your own life.

I heard one particularly good answer recently on the podcast EconTalk, in a discussion between Washington Post writer Megan McArdle and host Ross Roberts. The two were discussing social media shaming, and McArdle briefly made this case against “destroying” people’s reputations or livelihoods online (heavily paraphrased):

“There is a whole universe in every human mind. We snuff out a whole universe when we end a life.”

This struck me as one of the best reasons I’ve heard to respect the dignity of rational life.

What are you missing that you have not yet discovered? What are you missing that you will not have the time or the resources or the insight to experience?

Odds are, someone else has experienced those things. You have your own universe of constructed thought and emotion and memory and perspective and wisdom which no one else can ever see the way you do. Everyone else has – *is* – that same universe of experiences. Ephemeral, yes, but also irreplaceable.

What connections could other people make which no one else could? What creative work could they bring into the world? What could this person teach you that no one else could? There are dozens of reasons you should selfishly want their life to become as big and loud and lovely as possible.

Seen this way, harming a person’s potential is a bit like killing off an ecosystem. We would be shocked and devastated at the loss of a grove of redwoods, with all their majesty and

age. The loss of a grove doesn't directly harm us, but it does make the world smaller. That sort of thing should bring us sorrow.

We should feel as grateful for the flourishing of one human life, and as shocked at the ruin of a human life.