

CHECKING PEOPLE OUT

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You're walking down the street. Approaching in the opposite direction you see a very attractive person. As he or she passes, you feel tempted to turn your head so as to, well, check them out. I assume that you have felt this temptation. I, at least, have felt it many times. I have resisted turning my head, however, since doing so is supposedly *a bad thing*.

But what, exactly, is supposed to make it bad?

One answer might be that it is a privacy invasion. But that can't be right. By turning your head, you don't come to see anything that isn't already public. The perspective that you get is identical to the perspective available to whoever is already walking behind the person.

A slightly different answer might be that you 'make use' of another person without their consent. After all, when checking somebody out, head-turners don't ask for permission. But this response is no more convincing. We don't think that looking at someone on the street for a few seconds requires their consent.

A third answer might be that, by turning your head to check someone out, you *objectify* them: you treat them not as the full person that they are, but as a bodily object for your personal gratification. And objectification, we are always told, is *bad*.

Much has been written about objectification, but a few points are worth making. First, it is a mundane—but seldom emphasized—fact that human beings are, in fact, objects, and in that sense similar to spoons, stars, and satsumas. Admittedly, we humans belong to a subcategory of objects that are *also* subjects, but that does not contradict the reality that we really are objects (if you are in doubt, locate a mirror). Accordingly, if we treat someone as an object, we are not treating them

as something that they are not; we are treating them in accordance with just one of their aspects.

Treating someone on the basis of just one of their aspects *can* be bad. It is certainly bad in cases where they are harmed as a result. If I tread on your toe so as to reach for a book on a shelf, I treat you merely as an object having no valid interest in not being stepped on. I disregard your subjectivity and harm you as a result. But is a selective focus on just one aspect of a person problematic even in cases where it does not affect that person's well-being?

It might be suggested that checking somebody out somehow *reduces* them to one aspect (their physical attractiveness). But I don't understand what 'reducing' can mean in this context. In one sense of the term, I am often 'reduced' to one of my aspects. For example, I am *counted*—I was counted during registration at school, I am counted in the census. When I am counted I am reduced to a quantity or a number. Sometimes I am weighed. And sometimes I am registered as a citizen. But does any of this *reduce* me in a problematic manner? Does it deny that I have aspects other than a quantity, a weight, and a citizenship? I don't see why it should; it is only a selective focus on one of my aspects for a purpose where the other aspects are not so relevant. Equally, it is unclear why focusing on someone's body implies a rejection of the fact that the person has many other aspects.

There is, however, at least one plausible reason for why checking people out on the street is wrong. By checking somebody out one might make the other person annoyed, uncomfortable, and afraid. This *harm-based* argument certainly counts against many forms of checking people out.

Let me therefore propose a rule: *wait until the person is at least one full step behind you before you turn your head*. That way, they are very unlikely to notice that you are looking, and as long as they do not notice, they won't feel uncomfortable, afraid, or annoyed. (Of course, they might also turn their head to look at you, and then notice you checking them out. But this could result in a happy ending.)

One worry about my rule might be that others on the street could still see what was going on. Yet why should that matter? If we grant that the action itself is acceptable, it is puzzling that it could be made unacceptable by a bystander observing it.

Granted, there are many wrong ways to check people out. And it's not just that one's behaviour might be annoying or threatening. It might

manifest a negative view of women (or men). When we are providing an ethical assessment of an activity, however, the interesting question is not whether there are *bad* ways of engaging in that activity. For there are bad ways of engaging in virtually any activity. The much more interesting question is whether there are *acceptable* ways of doing it.

I contend that there are no general reasons for why it is bad to turn one's head to check someone out on the street. Although there might be good reasons to avoid doing so in many contexts (if it would upset one's fiancée, say), occasionally catching a discreet glance over one's shoulder can be morally just fine.

Just remember the one-step rule.¹

Note

1. For further reading, see Papadaki, L. (2010). 'What is objectification?', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 7: 16.