

# Respect, Self-Respect, and Self-Knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

Knowledge and respect exhibit a puzzling self-other asymmetry: Self-respect generates an imperative to know oneself, but as the objectionability of paternalism and privacy violations illustrate, respect for others can require that we avoid acquiring, or making use of, knowledge we have about them. This article elaborates this asymmetry and offers a solution to it, rooted in the distinctive importance that self-knowledge has for self-respecting rational agents: Self-respecting agents have reasons to have others defer to their ‘surfaces’ or self-presentations in order to inhibit making themselves vulnerable to others in ways that undermine their self-respect by subordinating their wills to the wills of others, as well as to ensure that self-knowledge can play its desired role in the lives of self-respecting agents.

Philosophers (particularly those in the Kantian tradition) have carefully investigated what respect for others, as well as respect for ourselves, requires morally. But they have said relatively little about what respect requires in the way of knowledge, i.e., of what respect asks us to know or forbids us from knowing. Morality clearly has an epistemic dimension. Knowledge is good, but it does not follow thereby that every parcel of knowledge is equally good or worthy of our pursuit. A fortiori, there may well be parcels of knowledge we have duties to pursue or duties to forego pursuing. So what does respect require of us in the epistemic sphere? Respect, I shall argue, generates epistemic imperatives. Curiously though, these imperatives take on different forms depending on whom respect is directed at. In the case of respect for others, we are sometimes required not to pursue knowledge of them or not to make use of what we know about them. Their separateness from us places morally justified constraints on how we relate to them epistemically. In contrast, in the case of self-respect, we are required to pursue self-knowledge and to make use of it in our deliberating and choosing. A person who claims to respect themselves, or who aspires to do so, but is entirely uncurious about fundamental facts regarding their values, personality, character, etc. has overlooked the specifically epistemic dimension of self-respect.

What we might call the ‘epistemic morality of respect’ thus seems to contain a puzzling *self-other asymmetry*. Respect for others can oppose knowing them or treating them in accordance with what we know about them. Self-respect, in contrast, mandates knowing ourselves and acting in the light of that self-knowledge. This article elaborates this asymmetry and offers a

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plausible solution to that asymmetry rooted in the distinctive importance that self-knowledge (and acting in the world on the basis of that self-knowledge) has for self-respecting rational agents.

## 1. THE EPISTEMIC DEMANDS OF RESPECT FOR OTHERS

Respecting others sometimes requires us to conform to epistemic constraints in how we relate to them. For instance, respecting others often demands that we *not* gather or engage with evidence regarding their background, aptitudes, character, life circumstances, etc. This is most obvious in connection with private information. Others' privacy can require not only that we not actively attempt to learn facts about others but also that we forego opportunities to learn such facts even when opportunities to do so present themselves (we ought to delete the browser histories of prior users on public computers, for instance). Furthermore, respect for others can require that our treatment of them not rest upon knowledge already in our possession. For instance, even when we have good evidence that another person is about to make a choice that is imprudent even by their own lights, respect can ask that we bracket that information in how we treat them, lest we use our knowledge to paternalize them. Similarly, respect may require that inadvertently acquired knowledge not be exploited in our subsequent decision making. A search committee member who accidentally overhears a job candidate say that they will accept the position if offered should not rely upon that information in deciding which candidate to offer a position to.

Such examples underscore that the moral norm of respect for others imposes epistemic barriers on how we relate to others. Curiosity about others is generally a laudable trait, but if not kept in check, an otherwise admirable desire to know about others becomes a vice. When this curiosity about others exceeds its bounds, we become epistemic *busybodies*.

A central aspect of respect for others thus takes the form of epistemic *distancing*: Respecting others asks us, as Ian Carter has put it, to treat them as 'opaque', to abstain "from looking behind the exteriors people present to us as moral agents" (Carter 2011, 551; See also Cholbi [2017], MacKenzie [2018, 257]). That respect for others mandates treating them as opaque coheres with the general features that distinguish respect as a response to the distinctive value of persons. Respect for persons, especially as it is understood in the Kantian tradition, calls for honouring certain interpersonal boundaries. As Kant observed, where love admonishes us to "come closer to one another," the respect we owe one another admonishes us to keep one another "at a distance" (1798, 6:449). Keeping others at a distance fosters a recognition of their standing as fellow rational agents and so discourages our viewing them in morally objectionable ways (for instance, by viewing them as no more than means to our ends). Of course, there are contexts where interpersonal respect does not require the kind of epistemic distancing I have described. A psychiatrist seeking to evaluate a patient's mental capacity, for example, is obligated to 'look behind' the patient's exterior and not necessarily take the patient's declarations about their treatment preferences at face value. Further, although interpersonal respect has a role to play in close personal relationships, the requirements of epistemic distancing are significantly weaker in that context: To love a person is to want to know them intimately (MacKenzie 2018, 248–49).

Crucially, our reasons for such distancing are not exhausted by benevolence (by the fact that knowing others could cause them shame or set back their pursuit of their ends, for example). A would-be paternalizer, for instance, may violate norms of epistemic distancing, motivated by a desire to promote others' well-being. If such violations can be justified all things considered, this requires showing how it is justified despite the disrespect shown to the paternalist's target.

In most interpersonal contexts then, respect asks us to treat individuals in accordance solely with what we can glean from the surfaces they choose to present to us. This may seem discordant

with another commonly acknowledged feature of respect. Respect is closely linked to a proper recognition of the *nature* of the respected object. In respecting someone (or something), we are to assign weight in our treatment of it that reflects the object's essence or intrinsic properties (Darwall 1977; see also Dillon [2007] and Cholbi [2020]). So when we fail to respect persons, we deny that person's nature, treating them as if they are not who they actually are (Frankfurt 2015, 86–87). Disrespect is thus a failure to notice or give adequate weight to another's *status*. But how can respect both require us to properly recognize others' status while also foregoing or prescinding from knowledge of them?

In response, note that if respect is directed at others qua rational agents, no such tension arises. Granted, others knowing facts about our histories, interests, concerns, etc. can sometimes be to our benefit. But such knowledge is subsidiary to the status that renders us worthy of respect. We are owed respect not because we pursue particular ends or have particular interests but because, as rational agents, our ends or interests reflect our rational endorsement of them. Others should therefore take the evidence manifested in our choices, etc. as *prima facie* decisive in how they treat us. For our choices, etc. are expressions of agency that merit others' respect rather than their second guessing or doubting these. That one is a rational agent is, at the outset at least, all one needs to know in order to justify such respect.<sup>1</sup> Respect for others' nature as rational agents may thus demand that we *defer* to their exteriors in deciding how to treat them, treating them more or less as they appear to be.

## 2. SELF-RESPECT AND THE EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRY

What though of *self-respect*—does it require similar epistemic distancing or that we treat *ourselves* as opaque?

At the outset, we might suppose that this question is otiose; for such distancing or treating as opaque may seem impossible thanks to the epistemic intimacy we enjoy with ourselves. Perhaps we know ourselves too readily or too well to achieve such distancing or opacity. And if 'ought' implies 'can', then there can be no sense in which we ought to distance ourselves from ourselves or treat ourselves as opaque, for doing so falls outside our power.

In reply, we should not exaggerate the extent of our self-knowledge or the degree to which such self-knowledge influences how we choose and act toward ourselves. 'Trivial' self-knowledge of our occurrent mental states is widely regarded as highly secure, perhaps even infallible. Perhaps it is difficult to envision how one could (for example) 'distance' themselves from the fact that one is presently perceiving a canoe floating in a shimmering lake or how, given the fact of this perception, it could fail to play a part in our theoretical or practical deliberation. But the story clearly differs when it comes to what Quassim Cassam (2014) has called "substantial self-knowledge," knowledge of our own character, values, preferences, personality, sources of well-being, and so on. We need not subscribe to any deep theory of the unconscious to appreciate the many ways in which we are not transparent to ourselves. Whether I am genuinely a compassionate person, a good Catholic, or talented at music are not propositions that we can readily verify through casual observation or simple introspection. We often do not fully grasp the actual motives behind our choices, the explanations for our patterns of emotional reaction, or the commitments and aspirations that frame our choices. And even sincere efforts at substantial self-knowledge can be sabotaged by other facets of our psychology, and in particular by our tendency to appraise ourselves more positively in order to protect our egos, identities, or sense of agency (Wilson and Dunn 2004; Mercier and Sperber 2017; Bardon 2019) Nor do we invariably put the substantial self-knowledge we manage to attain to appropriate use in our practical deliberations. For example, akrasia can certainly occur with respect to self-regarding choices despite our knowledge of ourselves.

Seen in this light, substantial self-knowledge looks far from commonplace, thus rendering coherent imperatives concerning its pursuit. Jordan MacKenzie suggests (2018, 254) that “we cannot make our relationship with ourselves less intimate.” Admittedly, we likely cannot, with respect to self-knowledge, divorce ourselves in the hope of thereby severing all ties of epistemic intimacy. But to the extent that intimacy involves knowledge, we clearly are not as intimate with ourselves as we ordinarily assume, and the greater epistemic intimacy we enjoy with ourselves does not preclude our being ignorant of ourselves in the ways that the epistemic demands associated with respect for others requires that we be able to be ignorant of others, nor does that greater epistemic intimacy preclude the possibility of self-opacity. It thus remains a live question what epistemic demands, if any, are associated with self-respect.

A full account of the nature or value of self-respect is too great a task to undertake here. But in parallel with our earlier discussion of respect for others as mandating recognition of their status as rational agents with ends and concerns distinct from our own, we are concerned with self-respect as a species of *self*-recognition, that is, with a persisting set of attitudes, dispositions, or behaviours that are appropriately responsive to one’s own status. Self-respect, as Robin Dillon observes, is “a mode of being in the world at the heart of which is an appropriate appreciation of oneself as having significant worth,” including “an engaged understanding of one’s worth” (2022). The self-respecting individual recognizes the distinct value of themselves (Bird 2010), and so takes themselves seriously by both attending to the worth-conferring features of themselves and striving to protect and cultivate these features. Crucially, an individual with little if any substantial self-knowledge (or with no interest whatsoever in acquiring it) would fail to fully grasp what is worthy of respect in themselves.

Like respect for persons, self-respect cannot be directed at no one in particular. In the case of self-respect, its object is not a generic property (selfhood) or selves taken as a collective. Rather, self-respect is directed at our selves as *particular* rational selves, at our selves in all their psychological, ethical, emotional, etc., specificity. Self-respect issues in a *de dicto* imperative—to know who we are, whomever that may be—but the content of that imperative is *de re*—to know the very individual that we are.

Perhaps unexpectedly then, self-respect seems to generate epistemic demands of a contrary kind to those associated with respect for others. Whereas respecting others constrains our pursuit of knowledge about them, respect for oneself grounds an imperative to seek out such self-knowledge. An agent indifferent to substantial self-knowledge—who cares not at all to interrogate their central values, commitments, traits, etc.—seems not to show themselves a due measure of respect. Of course, to constantly interrogate one’s values, etc., may devolve into narcissism or a near paralytic neuroticism wherein we are unable to act in the world (MacKenzie 2022). For this reason, if self-respect grounds a moral imperative to seek out substantial self-knowledge, the imperative is an imperfect duty, one requiring only that we will its acquisition as an end, consistent with other perfect moral duties to ourselves and to others. At the same time, to show no measure of *self*-curiosity, taking one’s actual values, etc., as uncontroversial givens in one’s practical life, not only invites the possibility of a kind of alienation from oneself, it also disregards the particular self one is. A self-respecting person, then, has an abiding commitment to pursue substantial self-knowledge and to incorporate it into their practical deliberations and choices.

Self-knowledge is also essential to other forms or manifestations of self-respect besides recognition of one’s worth as a distinct rational agent. Another aspect of self-respect is “appraisal” or “standards” self-respect, living up to norms or standards one endorses (Hill 1982; Bird 2010). It is difficult to imagine an individual lacking in substantial self-knowledge having norms or standards that they endorse or feeling pride when they satisfy these (or shame when they do not). Or consider Rawls’s proposal that self-respect is a primary social good, desirable regardless

of whatever else we want. Rawls describes self-respect as involving “a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out,” and a “a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions” (Rawls 1971, 440). An individual lacking in substantial self-knowledge is unlikely to achieve the self-respect Rawls identifies. For having a secure conviction that one’s conception of the good is worth carrying out or having confidence in one’s ability to pursue it both seem to require that one know what the relevant conception of the good consists in. And if such self-respect is a primary social good, that suggests that we take one another’s conceptions of the good seriously, an unlikely result if we do not take our own conceptions of the good seriously. Doing that, I have argued, requires a commitment to substantial self-knowledge.

To intervene in others’ affairs can be disrespectful to them, but we are hardly required to forego ‘intervening’ in our own affairs. To intervene in our own affairs can be instead be mandated by prudence. This asymmetry mirrors the epistemic asymmetry between respect for others and self-respect we have surfaced: The former can demand that we epistemically distance ourselves from others (in MacKenzie’s words, that we “‘back off’ from other people” [2018, 257]) and treat them as opaque, especially when it comes to knowledge of what would be substantial self-knowledge for them,<sup>2</sup> whereas the former demands that we pursue substantial self-knowledge and thereby make us less opaque to ourselves. What might be objectionable prying on my part when done to others (digging through my neighbour’s trash to figure out whether they have an alcohol problem) seems like a laudable act of self-examination when directed at myself (considering whether my drinking habits are worrying). This does not mean that self-knowledge is an overriding, or even particularly strong, moral imperative or that the imperative to seek out self-knowledge cannot collide with prudential imperatives (some self-knowledge could be troubling or upsetting, for instance). But it does mean that however difficult self-knowledge may prove to be, it is in no sense a species of morally *forbidden* knowledge.

### 3. LOVE, RESPECT, AND THE EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRY

The remainder of this article will largely be concerned with how to account for this asymmetry. How, in other words, can respect for others require epistemic distance while self-respect requires epistemic intimacy? Before developing my own account, I will first address an alternative account.

MacKenzie (2018) argues—largely persuasively, in my estimation—that *self-love* provides us reasons to pursue self-knowledge. An individual who loves another but is entirely incurious about their beloved’s ends, values, character, abilities, temperament, etc., has not grasped a fundamental dimension of love. Love grounds reasons, of at least a partially noninstrumental kind, to seek knowledge of those we love. Similarly, to the extent that we love ourselves, we have noninstrumental reasons to pursue substantial self-knowledge as part of showing noninstrumental care toward ourselves. Self-love thus invites us to establish a greater degree of epistemic intimacy with ourselves. MacKenzie assigns self-respect a different role vis-à-vis self-knowledge. Self-respect places limits on the pursuit of self-knowledge similar to those that, we have noted, respect for others plays with regard to the pursuit of (or use of) our knowledge of others. Self-respect, she claims, “puts constraints on the ways in which we may pursue this project of self-discovery” (2018, 244). In particular, self-respect keeps our pursuit of self-knowledge honest, tempering our tendency to attend only to those facets of the self that validate our positive self-understandings. Someone whose self-love is self-indulgent may well be motivated to validate a flattering self-image and thus “fixate on the prettiest parts of [their] image” while “ignoring [their] warts.” So where self-love provides the rationale for self-knowledge, self-respect helps to ensure that our pursuit of self-knowledge does not run aground in self-deception. For

MacKenzie then, self-respect generates epistemic prerogatives of the kind I have articulated, but largely for epistemic (not moral) reasons: Without the corrective influence of self-respect, our self-knowledge ascriptions are likely to be led astray by the very self-love that should lead us to seek substantial self-knowledge in the first place.

MacKenzie does not advance her argument that self-love provides us reasons to pursue self-knowledge in order to address the epistemic asymmetry I have identified, but a possible resolution can be gleaned from it all the same: We observed earlier that in close personal relationships, the usual epistemic distancing required by respect for others is attenuated or persuaded. Romantic partners, for example, have reasons, both instrumental and nonderivative, to know intimate truths about one another. Indeed, part of the value of such relationships consist in their affording us opportunities to know and to be known in intimate ways. But such relationships are typically rooted in love, and love, we might suppose, cancels or at least counteracts the demands of interpersonal respect in these cases. Respect in general speaks in favour of epistemic distancing, except when love is in the air. But love is also in the air in connection with our relationships with ourselves. It would seem to follow that we have reasons of self-love to be epistemically intimate with our selves. This resolution seems to resolve the epistemic asymmetry but on terms different from those I have entertained thus far. I suggested that there is an asymmetry between self and other with regard to the demands of respect. The solution I have extracted from MacKenzie instead relocates the asymmetry as one between those we love (whom we ought to know) and those whom we respect (knowledge of whom is subject to moral limits).

I do not contest MacKenzie's central claim that self-love offers us reasons for self-knowledge that parallel the reasons that love for others provides for knowing them. But this move will not, in my estimation, fully account for the epistemic asymmetry.

First, I concur with MacKenzie that we invariably stand in a normative relationship with ourselves—that “we are too close to ourselves to remain neutral on the subject”—but it is not obvious that the capacity for self-love, which MacKenzie describes as a “mode of noninstrumental caring” for oneself, is inevitable (2018, 251–52). Individuals in profound states of depression may come to see their selves as worthless insofar as there are no self-regarding ends they find worthy of being pursued or willed. Such individuals seem to lack what [Korsgaard \(1996\)](#) called a “practical identity,” a reason-giving description of themselves under which they value themselves. Such individuals are in a state of nihilism and may end up contemplating suicide ([Cholbi 2002](#)). For while they have conditional desires regarding their lives (desires regarding how their lives go *if* their lives continue, such as the desire to satisfy hunger), they have come to lack *categorical* desires (desires that offer reasons to continue to live) ([Williams 1973](#)). Yet even in such a condition of nihilism, the demands of self-respect, and of self-knowledge in turn, remain in place. An individual contemplating suicide so as to end their nihilistic condition still ought to respect herself as a rational agent, and in particular, to make this momentous choice on the basis of compelling reasons. These are the kinds of reasons likely to be unearthed via the pursuit of substantial self-knowledge, reasons relating to (for example) one's attitudes regarding the value of human lives, the significance of suffering, the importance of virtues such as fortitude, etc. Even those individuals no longer able to have the noninstrumental care for themselves characteristic of self-love still have reasons to seek self-knowledge. But these are not reasons of self-love. Hence, to anchor our reasons for self-knowledge in self-love (or the capacity thereunto) does not capture the scope of these reasons.

In addition, this account offers a philosophically less than satisfactory resolution to the epistemic asymmetry between self-respect and respect for others. If (as MacKenzie agrees) our reasons for self-knowledge are at least partly grounded in self-respect, then even if we have other reasons—reasons of self-love—to seek substantial self-knowledge, we are still left with an underlying puzzle about what we might call the epistemic vectors of respect. Regarding others, respect

can require epistemic distancing and treating them opaquely, in accordance with their surface presentation; regarding ourselves, respect requires epistemic intimacy and the overcoming of opacity, i.e., substantial self-knowledge. That there are reasons unrelated to self-respect (reasons of self-love) to pursue such self-knowledge does not make sense of the underlying asymmetry.<sup>3</sup>

More satisfying, I contend, would be an account that explains how respect's epistemic vectors point in divergent directions in connection with others and with ourselves. Let us now consider such an account.

#### 4. SELF-RESPECT AND THE MANAGEMENT OF SELF-PRESENTATION

Self-respect, I have argued, mandates that we will the pursuit of substantial self-knowledge as one of our ongoing ends, as well as our putting that knowledge to use in our deliberation and choice. Let us suppose that this account is essentially correct. A plausible explanation of the epistemic symmetry emerges if the epistemic distancing or opacity mandated by respect for others is itself needed in order us to respect ourselves. Self-respecting agents, I shall argue, have reason to want others to abide by norms of epistemic distancing or opacity because their doing so enables self-knowledge to play its proper role in the lives of self-respecting agents. Self-knowledge, in other words, cannot matter in the way that it matters to self-respecting agents if others do not epistemically distance themselves from them.

Earlier, I highlighted two particular manifestations of the epistemic distancing associated with respecting others. In honouring others' privacy, we forego knowledge beyond what an individual knowingly presents to the wider world. Philosophers have long recognized a close relationship between privacy and our interest in *self-presentation* (Marmor 2015; Véliz 2022). Violations of privacy typically involve acquiring or exploiting information about a person otherwise unavailable to the wider world. To protect people's privacy, therefore, is to enable them to exert a measure of control regarding their self-presentation, i.e., regarding how they appear to others. That paternalism is similarly connected to self-presentation has largely gone overlooked, but we may see paternalism as similarly antithetical to a person's self-presentation. A person's words, deeds, behaviour, etc.—in short, their self-presentation—attest to what they take their good to consist in. The paternalist views this evidence as in some way insufficient or misleading, and so views themselves as knowing better than their paternalized target does what will in fact promote the target's good (Shiffrin 2000; Cholbi 2017). Hence, in refraining from paternalism, we bracket knowledge we may have of others in deciding how to promote their good. Privacy and paternalism are thus morally linked. To honour others' privacy and to refrain from paternalizing them respects them by circumscribing our interactions with them by reference to what can be gleaned from the surfaces they present. Respect for others thus asks us, in different ways, to defer to others' surfaces—to allow their self-presentations to dictate the terms of our interactions with them.

Self-respecting agents have good reason to prefer that they be treated (in general) in accordance with their self-presentations. When others are able to penetrate beneath our surfaces to know what we know about ourselves, we are thereby made vulnerable to a wide range of mistreatment: humiliation or shame, blackmail, exploitation, and the like. When others do not maintain their epistemic distance from us, they thus make it possible for us to be unwittingly subjected to the prerogatives of their wills. When they do so, their behaviour is blameworthy. But in Kantian terms, because we owe ourselves self-respect, we should also be able to decide for ourselves when to make ourselves vulnerable to the wills of others. This necessitates our controlling others' access to what we know about ourselves. Without this control, we risk making ourselves inadvertently servile to others (Hill 1971) or complicit in our own oppression (Hay

2011). Others' epistemic distancing is therefore one of our chief tools for enabling us to respect ourselves and to treat ourselves as ends in ourselves. Epistemic distancing enables the independence of will essential to self-respect.

One might worry that this reasoning only applies when we *possess* self-knowledge: Self-respecting agents have reasons, rooted in self-respect, to be able to manage what others know about them, and in particular, to sometime bar others from knowing about them what they know about themselves. But as we emphasized earlier, substantial self-knowledge is often elusive, so why ought we defer to others' self-presentations when those self-presentations reflect their own self-ignorance? Indeed, paternalism's justification turns on the very possibility that individuals do not in some sense know what is best for themselves. It may appear puzzling why treating others as self-respecting agents requires treating them as opaque, etc., including refraining from paternalism, when they lack the self-knowledge at issue.

Here we should recall that respect for others is respect directed at self-respecting *agents*, individuals who not only have attitudes, intentions, etc., but also act on these. Self-respecting agents have reason to want the world to bear the imprint of their own attitudes, intentions, and the like. When the world bears none of the imprint of our attitudes, etc., we are estranged from the world and from ourselves. To live in a world shaped and reflected solely by nature and by the attitudes, etc. of others is to live in an alienated world. In Marxian terms, self-respecting agents seek to objectify their wills in the world so as to enable their agency to be reflected back at them in an extra-mental material reality. Paternalism undermines this objectification, as the paternalist interpolates their understanding of their targets' good into the causal chain between the targets' attitudes, actions, and the world affected by those actions. The world that results thus comes to reflect the paternalizer's sense of what their target's attitudes and choices ought to be. In substituting their will for that of their targets, the paternalizer severs the link between agents and the world they seek to fashion in their own image (von Kriegstein 2014; Cholbi 2017). As with violations of privacy, paternalism (because it operates in opposition to our self-presentations) can render us servile to others, less in the sense that others might take advantage of us and more insofar as the world reflects their understanding of our wills rather than our own. This is so even if the paternalizer is correct that the target is ignorant regarding their well-being or how best to pursue it. That I am presumptively ignorant regarding my well-being in cases of paternalism therefore does not render paternalism compatible with self-respect or with the concerns for self-knowledge that self-respect generates.

To retrace our steps: We have been seeking an account of the epistemic asymmetry between the epistemic distancing mandated by respect for others and the contrary imperative, rooted in self-respect, to seek substantial self-knowledge. I have proposed an account wherein self-respect does the primary explanatory work. Self-respecting agents have reasons to have others defer to their 'surfaces' or self-presentations in order to inhibit making themselves vulnerable to others in ways that undermine their self-respect by subordinating their wills to the wills of others. A measure of control over what others know about us and over what they do with that knowledge thus undergirds self-respect by enabling self-knowledge to play the role that it should play in the lives of self-respecting agents. Epistemic distancing thus operates in concert with the ways in which self-respecting agents value and pursue epistemic intimacy with themselves.

A critic might well ask however how, if the solution to the epistemic asymmetry is rooted in how self-presentation matters to us in our interpersonal relations, self-knowledge is crucial to this solution. Being treated in accordance with their self-presentation may still matter to a person who is deeply ignorant of themselves (or even simply unsure about what they are really all about). A person may want others to believe that they care deeply about climate change even if they do not or if they do not know whether they do, for example. An agent who fails to



know themselves may well be a bad moral agent in a self-regarding sense, yet retain the status as a rational agent that requires others to defer to their self-presentations. Such discrepancies between our self-presentations and our self-knowledge thus do not appear to cancel the respect-based demands that others distance themselves from us and abide by our self-presentations.

In reply to such a critic, we return to an observation made earlier in section 2. Self-knowledge, especially the substantial variety, is difficult. It is not easily won, and even once acquired, can prove fragile. One source of this fragility is other people: When others do not defer to our self-presentations, they exert pressure (both epistemic and social) on what we believe ourselves to be. For how others treat us reflects what they believe us to be or how they want us to be. The moral norms in play in the epistemic asymmetry, particularly the norm to respect others by deferring to their self-presentations, enable each of us to have a sphere wherein such pressures are muted (or least diminished), giving us a kind of freedom of self-investigation we need in order to pursue self-knowledge and be confident that what we think we know about ourselves is not unduly tainted by what others take us to be. This is not to say that others have no role in contributing to our self-knowledge, and even in the absence of such norms, self-knowledge would still be possible. But its pursuit, and hence the self-respect that mandates it, would be a greater challenge insofar as we may be unable to avoid fashioning ourselves in the images others have of us. The solution, I propose, is found in norms that compel others to take the image we present as determinative in how they treat us so as to counteract the very real danger that our self-conceptions will end up being defined by the intellects and wills of others. Deferring to our self-presentations thus contributes to the conditions under which genuine self-knowledge and self-respect are made available to us.

## 5. SOME OBJECTIONS

A possible objection to the solution to the epistemic asymmetry I have advanced is that we often have reasons to not want others to epistemically distance themselves from us, reasons rooted in the same self-respect that (I have argued) grounds respect-based demands for epistemic distancing. In response, self-respecting agents having reasons to have their self-presentations and self-knowledge respected is not incompatible with their rationally deciding to let the veil established by epistemic distancing be pierced. As noted earlier, loving relationships thrive on the individuals knowing a great deal about one another, and some ethical contexts (medical or therapeutic relationships) fulfil their purposes only if such epistemic distancing is curtailed. But a presumption that others defer to our self-presentations is still warranted while allowing self-disclosure, etc. to be up to us.

Relatedly, my opponents may worry that my solution endorses the unattractive proposition that individuals should not want to be known by others, and in particular, that they should conceal central facts about themselves. But should we not want to be seen fully by others for what we are and to be treated in accordance with who we are, instead of managing our self-presentations in order to avoid shame, humiliation, and the like? I have argued that others not deferring to our self-presentation invites a kind of alienation. But Erving Goffman, the thinker perhaps most responsible for underscoring the pervasiveness with which we manage our self-presentations in everyday life, proposed that others deferring to our self-presentation contributes to alienation too. “To the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe,” Goffman wrote (1959) “he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others.” Various identity liberation advocates have likewise argued that concealing key parcels of substantial self-knowledge (sexual identities, for instance) is not only stigmatizing and thereby harmful to the self-knower but also an obstacle to political liberation itself.

Finally, my solution may seem to provide moral warrant for lying or deception. Self-respecting agents seem to have similar reasons for lying or deceiving others regarding themselves that they have for wanting to manage their own self-presentations and for others to defer to those self-presentations. Once possessed of the truth about us, others can fail to respect us (and thereby undermine our self-respect). Do we not thereby have license to lie or deceive about ourselves in order to prevent such disrespect? A full treatment of the ethics of lying and deception is beyond the ken of our discussion. My solution to the epistemic asymmetry concerning respect certainly does not provide moral *carte blanche* for lying or deception. For one, it does not speak to lying or deception regarding matters unrelated to the self. In addition, the solution seems to shed light on an important facet of these ethical issues. Lying or deception may sometimes be justified when others are not *entitled* to know the truths in question, for instance, in order to prevent or counteract others' attempts to penetrate our self-presentations. For example, lying or deception may be justified when others interrogate us on the basis of knowledge they have acquired by violating the norms of epistemic distancing (a criminal suspect is not morally obligated to respond to police questions motivated by evidence that the police acquired through a privacy-violating search of the suspect's dwelling, for instance). In this respect, my solution may clarify where one of the bounds of morally permissible lying or deception resides.

Interpersonal transparency is an enticing ideal, I concede. It would indeed be simpler and more fulfilling (perhaps more authentic, etc.) if such management of our self-presentations were unnecessary. However, this strikes me as too idealistic a depiction of human social and psychological reality. Again, we self-respecting agents are not perfect self-knowers, and as such, there is more to be gained by embracing norms of interpersonal respect that disallow others knowing (or acting as if they know) us better than we know ourselves. No doubt there is moral injury in being misunderstood. But there is equal or greater moral injury in being understood in the absence of self-understanding. Certainly the prospect of alienation from self that Goffman proposes should be acknowledged. But this prospect should be juxtaposed with the advantages that accrue to self-respecting agents when they are allowed to maintain a "show before others," whether or not that show reflects what they know about themselves. Again, interpersonal respect and self-respect do not preclude our waiving the norms of epistemic distancing. But presumptive epistemic distancing leaves the epistemic boundaries between us and others up to us. A measure of concealment from one another may therefore be, as Nagel stated, a "condition of civilization" (1998, 4) for agents with characteristically human moral and rational imperfections.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The epistemic asymmetry between respect and self-respect reflects the distinctive part that self-knowledge plays in the practical lives of self-respecting agents. The epistemic parameters of respecting others and the epistemic parameters of self-respect share a common origin. Out of respect for others and for their efforts both to make normative sense of themselves and to shape the world in accordance with that normative sensibility, we are (except in atypical circumstances) to engage with them by reference to their exteriors, not making use of our knowledge of their interiors. The epistemic prerogatives of self-respect and of respecting others thus flow from a common source, to wit, the role of self-knowledge as both an aim of, and contributor to, the self-respect that rational agents ought to show themselves.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Note that this appeal to respect does not preclude being treated as opaque being instrumentally valuable to us inasmuch as it allows us to regulate the part that our interests play in the deliberations of others. I am thus inclined to agree with (among others) Groll (2012) and Enoch (2016) that being

- treated as epistemically opaque reflects exclusionary reasons we have to bar other agents from using our welfare as a reason in how they treat us, but I cannot defend that claim here.
2. We have, in my view, particularly forceful reasons to defer to others' putative substantial self-knowledge and to desire that others defer to ours. This is not to say though that deference regarding *trivial* self-knowledge is never warranted (we should defer to one another regarding what we say we weigh or how many siblings we have, for instance).
  3. This is not to say that MacKenzie's account could not be extended in such a way that self-knowledge is required by self-respect, as I allege. My point here is merely that self-love does not account adequately for the apparent demands of self-knowledge.
  4. I gratefully acknowledge the valuable feedback that participants in a 2020 online workshop on 'Obligations to Oneself' provided on this article, including Rosalind Chaplin, Julia Driver, Allen Habib, Yuliya Kanigyna, Jordan MacKenzie, Daniel Munoz, Janis Schaab, Paul Schofield, and especially my commentator, Francey Russell. Thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for *The Monist*, who offered incisive and generous comments.

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