

Reflections on Respect

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Reflections I - V

Introduction

Is respect something granted or something earned? What about self-respect, is that something granted or earned? Herein, I address the question of what respect is, what kind of respect is the most valuable, and how to gain it. I come to argue that the problem of respect is the distinction between what I call empathetic respect, and reverent respect. Empathetic respect is respect out of having a shared experience, and reverent respect is respect out of reverence for some accomplishment. The problem resides in confusing empathetic and reverent respect as the same. I also eventually come to argue that empathetic respect is granted for most things, but reverent respect is earned. Lastly, I argue that in terms of reverent respect, self-respect (also described as 'reverent self-respect') is the most valuable.

I write this work with Descartes "Meditations" in mind. The idea of a full bodied work that is created by means of thoughts that come to mind and chase them down their rabbit hole is very appealing to me. There are other examples of this, such as Marcus Aurelius' "Meditations," and Epictetus' "Enchiridion" come to mind. However, the two stoic examples are short pithy quick passages without consideration of the thought in depth that Descartes "Meditations" seem to fulfill in me. I am not writing this in the traditional analytic style because I do especially believe that the most impactful philosophy is not drowning in quoting others from the debate or repeating things for clarity, nor is the most impactful philosophy chock full with explicating the symbolic logic. Rest assured, I do not devalue these aspects of a philosophical work – I simply don't find them to be as impactful when read. My goal is to be impactful and insightful for my main audience – the public, while retaining the rigor an academic work demands. I do hope the

academic community accepts it as an academic work as well, but ultimately, even more than the public, and certainly the academic community, this work of philosophy was written for myself.

I have spent a large majority of my philosophical career 'people pleasing.' I have tried to write what I wanted still, however, I have been trying to write it the way they wanted me to.

Specifically, I mean, in the way they want me to. My formal education advocated for a dryly written piece, but with incredible precision – and the public advocated for evocative writing, but without much real direction. The goal herein was to write something precise enough to hold merit, but evocative enough to make an impact.

Reflection I

Empathetic and Reverent Respect

Respect is something of an enigma; it is taken for granted. Is sought after, but not really understood. What is it, how do we gain it, and is it even worth gaining?

One major work that most philosophers must be familiar with is that of Immanuel Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," pointing out that each person is an end in themselves. Effectively saying that everyone is worthy of respect just for being a human being, and that this respect is a specific treatment of others in that they are to be treated as an end in themselves. They have their own intentions, goals, obligations even that we must allow them to act on. Even in the case of their acts being immoral. While we don't need to aid them in their quest, we must still treat them as a human being with their own ends. I do end up disagreeing with Kant's categorical imperative, but the basis of everyone deserving respect for being a human being is something I cannot deny.

This view of respect ultimately points out that respect is something universally granted. Respect for the deontologist is a foundational right that every person deserves for just being a human being. However, this stops feeling like respect if everyone has it. One can't help but to think that this would still be called respect, but it doesn't feel the same as when we say that we *really* respect someone. This is because it seems there are really two different kinds of respect – empathetic respect, and reverent respect. Empathetic respect is a respect based on having had

a similar condition. Sharing an experience of a tour in war with another yields an empathetic respect with another soldier who lived through a similar situation. What Kant talks about is the human experience, which we all share. Kant talks about empathetic respect. However, there is another sort of respect – reverent respect. Reverent respect is respect for some achievement. I have reverent respect for professional athletes. I even have reverent respect for the office of presidency. These are achievements, and particularly, achievements I have not attained. One can have reverent and empathetic respect at the same time – such as when both parties are part of an inner circle, or exclusive club. An example of this could be a nobel prize winner having both empathetic and reverent respect for another nobel prize winner. They respect their achievement, and they respect their shared experience.

Kant's attempts at respect do not help what I am after. I am after reverent respect. Empathetic respect, especially based purely on the lived human condition isn't very special. Everyone (should) have it. The kind of respect I am interested in is of reverent respect, and there seems to be a great explanation of why I am after it at all.

Ernest Becker has had a huge sweeping influence on my thought in this regard. In particular, the writings found in "Denial of Death," are so sturdy a foundation, I cannot find a great way around it as of yet, although it has some issues. It is the basis from which I attempt to circumvent the issues herein.

Becker argues that man is in a constant struggle to immortalize himself. We know our body, or life itself is not permanent. As he says "...the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man." What Becker is saying here is that we deny our death by trying to attain some sort of reverent respect. We immortalize ourselves with our achievements, or at least as part of some movement that does achieve something.

Insofar as reverent respect goes, why should this produce reverent respect? We all want to immortalize ourselves in some way – leave a legacy. This is a shared experience, an empathetic respect is given. In other words, we need to have empathetic respect before we can gain reverent respect. We give reverent respect because we have the shared experience of wanting to achieve something.

There is a modern problem, however. Empathetic respect is becoming harder to come by, even the one Kant talks about – for just being another human being. As stated, we cannot have or gain reverent respect, which everyone is after, as Becker points out, without first having empathetic respect for wanting to achieve something. It is quite odd, I am not sure why empathetic respect is seeing a decline – everyone does share the experience of wanting to achieve something (at least in generalization), yet there is little empathetic respect given for that shared experience.

It is possible that Becker may not be as relevant today? Maybe the number of people who don't want to achieve anything or immortalize themselves is far less than universal, or even general. Maybe the desire to immortalize oneself is on the decline. I fear this is true, and if true, lament it greatly. If it is true, it is entirely possible that people are deciding that it – both immortalizing oneself, and reverent respect more broadly – is not worth attaining. Which is what I want to delve into next.

To start, though, I deny that it is true that people don't want to immortalize themselves. The argument is that if one doesn't want to immortalize themselves, then they do not give reverent respect. They don't want to immortalize themselves, therefore, they do not give reverent respect. I disagree, though. People *do* want to immortalize themselves, or conduct – as Becker suggests – an immortality project. There is just a complication to this.

People do give reverent respect, but reverent respect is more than the generic achievement, what was achieved matters. To be more specific, reverent respect is given and gained in perspective of what was achieved. Someone who hates wars doesn't particularly give reverent respect to a war general who sends soldiers to their death for example. Younger students don't want to achieve a nobel prize particularly, and so don't particularly respect those who have received one – let alone anyone lesser, like their teachers and what they are trying to do. The empathetic respect for wanting to attain reverent respect needs to be a shared desire for the same kind of reverent respect. That is, it needs to be the same achievement that is desired by another in order to gain reverent respect from them. People who don't really care about philosophy, for example, will not reverently respect this work, maybe not even empathetically respect it (although, it seems to be a common human condition to question one's own death and how to immortalize it). I can't change that, it has to be a desire they come to themselves. Even if

I try to vouch for the value of philosophy, it has to be intrinsically valuable to them in order for them to have any reverent respect for the work of philosophy in question.

Speaking of intrinsic desires, one possible response here is that this immortality is an extrinsic motivation, which is never as motivating as an intrinsic one. Thus, the extrinsic motivator of the immortality project is not as motivating as something else because the immortality project is about gaining immortality with other people – by gaining *their* lasting respect, including beyond the confines of our mortality. Not only this, they might say, but that one is at the mercy of the opinion of others whether they become immortal or not. This is very shaky grounds from which to build immortality from. When the immortality project is judged by the court of public opinion, the immortality project has failed – it is vulnerable.

It is simply untrue, however, that the immortality project is an extrinsic motivation. It is inherently intrinsic by virtue of the desire to defeat mortality. We all want to live longer than our mortality allows for. The problem is, however, the immortality project only allows for that immortality to last within other people, as there is no more (mortal) self to continue living. Immortality is a desire for the inherently mortal – and can only be desired by the living. There is still, clearly, a problem with the court of public perception, however.

Relating this to respect, we have seen that there are two types of respect, empathetic and reverent respect. We have reverent respect for someone when they have achieved something valuable to the respecer, and that achievement is immortalizing to the respecer. In this way, when we want to immortalize ourselves with an immortality project in other people and make a mark in history, what we are really after is gaining reverent respect. This becomes problematic, however, in that whether respect is gained or not is rather subjective – although we may revisit whether certain things should be objectively valued, since I don't particularly take a subjectivist standpoint to ethics. What matters, though, is whether the prospective respecer values the achievement that the prospective respected has achieved. Whether a successful social media page has successfully completed their immortality project or not is wholly in the hands of those who value, or not value that achievement.

One might suggest this as a misinterpretation of Becker, and there is an air of truth to this. Becker suggests that the immortality project is in being part of history. This means that those who become a welder and are proud of being a welder immortalize themselves, to be

remembered as part of the immortalized group (as part of history) of welders. To have, in some small way, influenced what it is to be a “welder,” the welder immortalizes themselves. Even evil villains of history have successfully completed their immortality project – they will be remembered. So this throws yet another wrench at this problem. What makes someone want to commit evil acts, even if their immortality will be infamy?

I suggest those who live in infamy do not actually intend to do anything wrong. From all the evildoers of history, they only at best see the folly of what they have done after the fact. It is possible they were blinded by other factors such as power or greed in the name of completing their immortality project. Of course, they do not see it as abuse of power or greed – they see it as an achievement towards their goals of immortality. They are concerned with the immortality project itself, without regard for reverent respect. Reverence is immortalizing, but immortalization does not itself yield reverence.

Reflection II

Reverent Self Respect

As I sit here thinking about how both Becker and Kant talk about respect, in two different regards, the thought arises that there are other forms or subjects of respect. Robin Dillon points this out well in his article for the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy titled, aptly, “Respect.” Dillon points out at least three major subjects of respect – respect for persons, respect for self, and respect for animals and non human beings.

I want to hone in on respect for self in this reflection. I have already regarded there to be two different kinds of respect – empathetic and reverent respect. Empathetic respect being the kind of respect that we give as we share in an experience. Kant points out one basic experience that is universal that we can all respect in the human experience. This has to do with respect for persons, certainly, but does it apply to the self? Can we have empathetic respect for the self?

Through Becker, we can certainly have reverent respect for the self. We can be reverently respectful of the self – it all depends on if it's an achievement we value. If I value nobel prizes

and reverently respect the winners thereof, then surely, if I were to win a nobel prize, then I can reverently respect my own achievement. This is usually seen as what we call “confidence.” In other words, confidence is reverently respecting the self.

Empathetic respect for the self may be a little more complicated. We share the experiences we have with ourselves, in fact, we share *every one* of our experiences with ourselves. What this means is that we are concerned with caring for ourselves and valuing ourselves for the sake of having shared an experience with ourselves.

There is a problem with this, however. Empathetic respect for the self in this regard ultimately requires two separate selves. One that experiences, and one that shares in that experience. There is but one self, even if changing to the point that we may not call the same person I was even yesterday the same one as the self that is me today. This is of course an obvious nod to the ship of theseus. For sake of considering this, though, let's simplify and say that there is just one self, there is no second self to experience our experience.

A response comes through in that we need to complicate these things in order to deconstruct them and understand them fully. For example, if I am not the me that I was yesterday, I can empathetically respect what I did the last time this experience happened. In fact, so obvious is this, that we call it “learning from experience.” We look at what we did in a previous situation that resembled our current situation, and are trying to avoid the negatives and promote the positives of that previous situation. This is a sort of empathetic self respect. I learned from what happened last time, and will use what I learned in that situation and apply it to the current situation.

I have previously written about how gaining reverent respect first requires empathetic respect. In terms of self respect, then, we need to respect ourselves empathetically, before we can gain our own reverent respect. In brief, we need to be able to hold compassion for ourselves, before we can gain real confidence, fulfillment and self-actualization.

This is not a new concept, but it is a new means of getting there. Abraham Maslow has pointed this out most prominently, and is now known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This is also well documented in more eastern philosophies – Buddhism in particular comes to mind. Gelong

Thubten, a Buddhist monk, has given many talks world wide. One particular talk, “A Monk’s Guide to Happiness,” which is also a successful book, drives home this point.

The route by which I arrive at this is through the lens of respect. The goal, for Thubten is to be happier – do it to be happier. I instead suggest that if you want reverent respect for yourself (confidence), then you need to have empathetic respect for yourself first. To gain empathetic respect for yourself, you need to be compassionate of the self.

Thubten talks about gaining happiness, which is absolutely admirable and something to look at. What I am referring to is respect. It seems compassion, in this way, yields two results – happiness and empathetic self respect.

The reason I am currently focused on reverent self respect is because it seems to be the best kind of respect. It is easier to obtain, as everyone generally already has a little more care for themselves than others (not to say care for others is unimportant or unnecessary by any means), but it also is something we have more control over. We are the one we are trying to gain reverent respect from ultimately. I can know why I don’t reverently respect myself, and I can best convince myself why I am worthy of reverent respect from myself. Trying to get others to reverently respect us is a tougher task – we don’t know what they reverently respect more generally that we can fit into, or why what we do isn’t worthy of their reverent respect (although sometimes they will blatantly tell you). In many ways, gaining reverent respect for ourselves is the most important person we can get to reverently respect us.

Make yourself proud. Learn from what doesn’t. This is complete self respect.

Reflection III

Value and Respect

One thing that comes up when it comes to self-respect is in determining what we should respect. What deserves our self-respect? What things should I respect in myself? This is a matter of value. What do I value, and therefore respect about myself?

We can easily point to the things we value in ourselves, but we can also focus on the three major philosophical views around value. Deontology, which we have covered previously, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. For our purposes here today, we are leaving alone nihilism or relativism because, as I hope to convey, they don't particularly pertain to what we are after here. What I intend to point out is that respect doesn't require action, it is the reaction of an action. The idea is that each of the doing acts in line with any of the major views of value are worthy of respect – and committing to doing them is worthy of self-respect

Deontology, or duty ethics is the classic view by Immanuel Kant that says we should essentially value something on principle of it being a universalized rule. This applies to self-respect in that an agent can respect that they adhered to a principle. Choosing to act based on general principles is a fair assessment, and any agent can respect that they did their best to do good by following this general principle.

This doesn't contradict acting out of a utilitarian perspective, however. If I act out of trying to maximize "the good," I can say that I have tried my best. Jeremy Bentham argued that the best thing to do is generate the most amount of happiness. We often choose one theory over another in any given circumstance. If we choose the utilitarian route, it is respectable because there was an attempt to build something good – namely, happiness.

These two lead up to the ultimate cause of these other two to be respectable. Aristotle founded what is now known as virtue ethics. The idea is that instead of looking at the act itself that was committed, look at the intent. If the act was an act of courage, and not cowardice nor foolhardiness, then we can say it was a good act. The thing is, one who follows this view inevitably falls into the other two by virtue of intent being based on reason. One can have self-respect for the sheer fact that they at least tried to be a good person, even if the attempt to act good fails in other regards such as the utilitarian or deontological views.

The attempt here is not to try and sway anyone towards virtue ethics, though. Nor towards utilitarianism or deontology. The goal is to point out that while choosing an act may commit one to an act as either right or wrong, this means nothing for respect. If an agent has a good reason for doing what they did, they can be said to be self-respecting. The views listed above all can be good reasons for acting – although each one of them has a pretty damning counterexample as

well. However, they remain the prominent views within ethics entirely because they all make such good points.

For respect, and particularly self-respect, we need not commit to one ethical view or another. Respect is a response to an act, not a means for deciding *how* to act. For example, say someone kills one person in the name of saving five others. In particular, say you are a surgeon who, by killing one healthy patient, can harvest their organs and save five dying patients upstairs. This example seems surely damning for utilitarianism – a surgeon should not do this, but it maximizes happiness. However, we are not trying to tell the surgeon what is right or what is wrong when it comes to respect. Respect, alternatively, is a matter of responding to others reasons for their act in this regard. If the surgeon said that he did it for this reason, and he were heartbroken by what he had done, but felt like it was the right thing to do in the moment because of all the potential to save lives, we can respect this. We can certainly still say that it was wrong and that they shouldn't have done it. They will, as they should, still go to prison. Yet, we can still respect it. If you don't, I'm sure at least the five people upstairs can.

Reflection IV

Reverence as a Virtue

Since one of the main kinds of respect I am after here is reverent respect. Reverent respect is respect for some sort of achievement that merits it based on some sort of reverence for an agent, we can look at the value of reverence, and thereby reverent respect.

Reverence is generally considered a virtue. Although, there is an ongoing debate as to its value as one. For example, Jason Kawall writes about reverence as a virtue in “Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue.” The idea is that all living beings have some moral standing by virtue of simply being a living being – and should be revered as such.

While most consider reverence an issue, there is an idea floating around as a limiting virtue – a virtue that adds constraints beyond the bounds of human limits based on how virtuous one is attempting to become. David McPherson writes in “The Virtues of Limits,” “The limiting virtue of

reverence is concerned with being properly responsive... to that which is reverence-worthy...” To simplify, the idea is that we may have too high of expectations for what is considered reverence worthy. So high, in fact, that to be revered is beyond the bounds of our human constraints. Of course, McPherson is not saying that reverence is impossible, but, we can only have some much reverence within the bounds of human constraint.

The importance of these two articles in terms of respect cannot be understated. It seems that reverence, from one regard, is mundane, since life is all around us and we ought to revere life itself. On the other hand, we can only revere so much before it becomes impossible – for example, I can’t go through life with reverence to every living being – I couldn’t so much as clap my hands with reverence for the microbial lives in which perish as a result. Should I allow a mosquito to drink my blood and give me disease because it deserves reverence? This is not to say that I disagree with Kawall, life is definitely worthy of reverence, but it certainly has its limits as McPherson points out.

What this tells me is that reverence is a virtue that is impractical, even impossible to reach a maximum. Since I have been coming to the idea, throughout writing these reflections, that reverent self-respect is the most important kind of respect, is it fair then to say that sometimes it is impractical to hold reverent self-respect sometimes? Following from Kawall and McPherson, it must be so, and I do think there are times when reverent self-respect is not appropriate.

If I were to do something immoral, impractical or something worthy of *dis*respect, I cannot continue to reverently respect myself. Just as the mosquito has disrespected me (although, they do it for the sake of their lives), I cannot revere it’s life simply for that sake. If we go through life living in reverence of the self, we will not accomplish anything reverence worthy. As I have said previously, respect (and thereby reverent respect and ultimately reverence) is a reaction to an action. Not something granted. In order to have reverent self-respect, we must do something reverence worthy.

This reflects what I have previously written and thought about. In order to hold any reverent self-respect, we must do something we are proud of. However, you cannot be proud of something you haven’t actually done. This is the limit – you don’t have reverent self-respect until the thing about you worthy of reverence has actually been done. I cannot be proud of writing this reflection until it is done, for example.

I'll say it again, to have reverent self-respect, do something worthy of reverence. Make yourself proud.

Reflection V

Value of Respect for Others vs. Respect for Self

As one might guess by now, yet not totally explicated, I am coming to see that the most valuable kind of respect is self respect. Not only this, but since I am after reverent respect, how does reverent self-respect work? Here, I plan on speaking a little on why reverent self-respect is the most valuable kind of respect.

Firstly, let's talk about self-respect on its own. Earlier, I discussed how gaining reverent respect from others relies on what others value. While we can discuss what others *should* value, it does not mean that they *will*. One who denies academics as 'full of hot air,' will not respect a scientist or philosophers, or even perhaps a theologian's work. As much as we can stress the value of their work, it does not mean that they will.

This leads first and foremost to the obvious answer that we may be able to control others actions, but we (generally speaking) cannot control their minds. Of course, there are psychological tricks and subliminal messaging that sway us every day – advertisements are an obvious example. Yet, they are still themselves, and make their own choices – even if swayed. *Swaying* one's mind is not the same as *controlling* one's mind.

One philosophical subject that pops up often in my daily life is metaphilosophy – perhaps because once my interlocutor learns that my formal education is a philosophical one, they want to change gears and start talking about philosophy itself. One such conversation happened with an educational colleague recently that lead to the point of philosophy. The conversation was a positive experience – as they usually are – but the age old question came up – why do philosophy if you cannot change anyone's mind? Of course, leaving alone that question for another day, the relevance here is in changing another's mind. It seems universally agreed (and I think right) that no matter how sound or cogent we think our arguments are, it doesn't seem to

be entirely convincing. There is always some sort of “I agree, *but...*” This points out that we cannot *control* another person’s mind, but at most, *influence* it.

Since we have to rely on others views of us, and only be able to influence it, respect *from* others is not as valuable as respect from *ourselves*. It is important to note that this is different from respect *for* others. You can convince yourself – that’s why we argue for a particular standpoint. Epictetus made a great point of this in his “Enchiridion.” He says:

“Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs. ... those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, alien.” (Epictetus, “Enchiridion”)

While the discussion of free will and determinism can still be discussed, surely, this premise of it seems to be foundational. There are some things that we cannot control, and for our purposes here, from Epictetus, we are considering reputation as reverent respect from others.

On the other hand, we have self-respect. Empathetic self-respect *should* be granted – you have shared every experience you have ever had with yourself. You can respect yourself in that you lived the experience and you can reciprocate your experience with yourself better than anyone else ever can. In the same way, you can have reverent self-respect in that you can accomplish what *you* value. If you revere nobel prize winners, you can have reverent self-respect by winning a nobel prize. If you revere well written works of philosophy, you can have reverent self-respect by writing a well written (whatever that means to you) piece of philosophy. It is about completing work that you find valuable to have been completed.

You have control over what you reverently respect, and you have the power to attain what you reverently respect. Maybe you won’t be able to attain a nobel prize, but I guarantee there are other things you reverently respect. I have reverent self-respect for this work. I am proud of this work, even though I cannot control others opinions of it. I hope there are others that value it, but I cannot control that. The most important thing to remember, though, is that I reverently respect it – and that, I do.

I am proud that I stuck to this one subject for an actual length of time, rather than jumping around subject to subject. I have not covered everything – but for my purposes, I revere this work. The intent is not to cover everything in regards to respect, covering everything takes away from the central points of the work, and the central points can be covered simply. There are two different types of respect, empathetic respect and reverent respect, and that empathetic respect should be granted to everything for sharing the experience of being human. Through Ernest Becker, we are all after reverent respect – but reverent respect from others is out of our own hands, we cannot control others' opinions of us. So, reverent self-respect is what we should really be after.

There is a problem with this, however. What Becker talks about is in defeating our own immortality by instilling our legacy in others – an *immortality project*. When we have reverent self-respect, we are instilling our legacy in *ourselves* who is mortal and will thus not cement our own immortality. I am going to grant this – thankfully, my goal is not to defeat my own immortality here, but to talk about respect. In other words, it is a red herring to reference the immortality project of Becker in talking about the problems of reverent self-respect. Still, I grant that the immortality project is something I revere, and thus I don't get to contemplate the deeper problem – how does one complete the immortality project if they cannot control others' opinions of them? This is a question I hope to tackle, but right now, it remains an enigma.

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