

Pablo Gilabert "Self-Esteem and Competition"

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relations between self-esteem and competition. Self-esteem is a very important good and competition is a widespread phenomenon. They are commonly linked, as people often seek self-esteem through success in competition. Although competition in fact generates valuable consequences and can to some extent foster self-esteem, empirical research suggests that competition has a strong tendency to undermine self-esteem. To be sure, competition is not the source of all problematic deficits in self-esteem, and it can arise for, or undercut goods other than self-esteem. But the relation between competition and access to self-esteem is still significant, and it is worth asking how we might foster a desirable distribution of the latter in the face of difficulties created by the former. That is the question addressed in this paper. The approach I propose neither recommends self-denial nor the uncritical celebration of the rat race. It charts instead a solidaristic path to support the social conditions of the self-esteem of each individual. I proceed as follows. I start, in section 2, by clarifying key concepts involved in the discussion. In section 3, I identify ten mechanisms that support individuals' self-esteem and impose limits on competition. I focus, in particular, on the challenges faced by people in their practices of work. In section 4, I outline prudential and moral arguments to justify the use of the proposed mechanisms. Section 5 concludes with remarks on the role of social criticism in the processes of change implementing the mechanisms.

2. PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATIONS

2.1. *Self-esteem.* In general, self-esteem is, or expresses, a positive self-assessment, a sense of one's own worth. Individuals who have self-esteem tend to view themselves as valuable, as having projects worth carrying out, and as capable of fulfilling them. This positive relation to self is expressed in their attitudes (in their beliefs, judgments, feelings, emotions) and in their behavior. Self-esteem can be a state, a disposition, or a process, and it may occur consciously or as an implicit condition.

On this broad understanding, self-esteem is a relational phenomenon including the following components: an assessing individual, the same individual as assessed, a range of features of this individual being assessed, certain criteria of assessment or esteem, certain attitudes or actions expressing this assessment, and certain background material and social circumstances. Self-esteem has various forms, which become visible when we characterize its elements further.

Consider the background circumstances. They can be quite general conditions of material scarcity and of cooperative and competitive interdependence,¹ more specific historical conditions (such as a capitalist economy), or even more circumscribed epochal configurations (such as a certain form of capitalism) as well as particular institutional arenas (such as a determinate workplace).

Or consider the "criteria" and "range" elements. We can identify here two criss-crossing distinctions between moral and non-moral assessments, on the one hand, and between endowment-based and achievement-based assessments, on the other. Thus, people can assess themselves morally as persons with certain general duties. Or they can assess themselves in non-moral (or not exclusively moral) ways, for example as actors performing certain social roles or, on prudential terms, as pursuers of well-being. The notion of self-respect is often used to capture the moral dimension, and I will use it in this sense (as

¹ These are activities in which individuals have shared goals and need each other to achieve them, but compete over who does what and who gets what in the joint venture. Cecilia Ridgeway, *Status* (New York: Sage, 2019).

a special case of rather than as synonymous with self-esteem).² Moral or non-moral criteria can in turn be refined to assess different kinds of items in their range. Thus, people may view themselves in a positive light, morally speaking, as having various rights, simply because they have the capacities that give rise to their moral standing as persons, or, more specifically and contingently, because they have used these capacities to behave in ways that honor their moral duties. At the non-moral level, they may gain self-esteem because they have developed certain abilities or skills, or because they have used them to achieve beneficial results.³

2.2. Social dimension of self-esteem. According to empirical research, there are two key feeders of self-esteem: a sense of personal efficacy in one's activities and social recognition.⁴ The second feeder indicates that there is a strong relation between self-esteem and esteem by others (social esteem). The extent to which many individuals achieve or maintain self-esteem is heavily influenced by their sense of how other individuals see them. People often assess themselves on the basis of criteria they share with others, and typically seek their confirmation to reassure themselves that they are fulfilling these criteria. In addition to providing evidence of criteria-fulfillment, the positive judgment of others may be intrinsically valued, in that getting it may be taken as a direct reason for being satisfied with oneself.⁵ The positive assessment by others (especially when they are authoritative) thus fosters, and their negative assessment undermines, individuals' favorable self-assessment.⁶ The desire for positive social status (which involves being judged favorably by others) is also strong and widespread.⁷

The social dimension of self-esteem is also important in dynamic processes of social change. Individuals may coordinate not only in adopting and implementing certain conventional criteria of assessment, but also in challenging or refashioning them. Think, for example, about associations and

² In his influential discussion on the topic, John Rawls treats "self-respect" and "self-esteem" as equivalent. "We may define self-respect (or self-esteem) as having two aspects. First of all ... it includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. Second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions." Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). For the view that self-respect and self-esteem should be distinguished, see Elizabeth Brake, "Feminism, Family Law, and the Social Bases of Self-Respect," in Ruth Abbey ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Rawls* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2013), 57-74.

³ For surveys of the literature, see Robin Dillon, "Respect", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition) and Christian Schemmel, "Real Self-Respect and its Social Bases," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (2019), 628-51. Like Dillon, I use "self-respect" as a specifically moral notion. My second distinction is similar to Dillon's distinction between "recognition of status" and "evaluation of merits," and to Schemmel's distinction between assessments tracking "standing" and "standards." Each of these labels has advantages and difficulties. For example, status or standing can be moral or conventional, and quite basic moral standards may be used in self-respect. What is key is to retain the distinctions between the moral and the non-moral and between assessments based on features of people which have, or have not arisen through their voluntary control. At the margins, these distinctions can of course be fuzzy. An individual's basic capacities for moral and prudential reasoning may be part of their endowments, but to maintain them over time is partly their responsibility. Similarly, certain skills are the combined result of initial endowments and voluntary practices of cultivation. I return to these complications later in the paper.

⁴ Christophe André and François Lelord, *L'Estime de soi* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), 25-6; Christophe André, *Imparfais, libres et hereux. Pratiques de l'estime de soi* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), 43, 332.

⁵ I thank Niko Kolodny and Jules Salomone-Sehr for discussion on this distinction.

⁶ Timo Jütten, "Dignity, Esteem, and Social Contribution: A Recognition-Theoretical View," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (2017): 259-80. Jütten surveys relevant research in social science and philosophy, including, e.g., the important discussions in Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996) and Morris Rosenberg, *Conceiving the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

⁷ For survey of the empirical evidence, see Ridgeway, *Status*, ch. 3. The strong incidence of this desire is not surprising since "[p]eople are fundamentally dependent on their social relations with others to survive and get the things they want and need in life" (Ibid., 48-9). High social status brings people greater attention from others, influence, and ability to obtain external rewards (Ibid., 55). It also fosters their "own sense of self-worth—[their] self-esteem and sense of well-being and happiness" (Ibid., 57). Historical and experimental evidence also supports the view that the search for social status is not reducible to the search for power over others or money. The latter do not guarantee the former, and the former is often sought beyond the latter (Ibid., 59-60).

social movements of LGBTQ+ people and allies. They contest traditional views of sex and gender and try to normalize new perspectives on what is valuable or permissible. The aggregation of separate actions by uncoordinated individuals can also, and independently of their intentions, alter the background circumstances in which each of them thinks and acts, making new forms of sociability (more) feasible.⁸ This is also clear in the case of technological change.

2.3. Competition. Self-esteem is often pursued in contexts shaped by competition. Competition consists in forms of social activity in which those involved try to get certain things (such as jobs, monetary resources, prestige, etc.) which cannot be obtained simultaneously by all of them, so that some get them only if others do not. There are two senses of “competition”.⁹ In a broader sense, it arises simply when some people can get something that matters to them only if others do not. Lotteries for scarce resources are an example. In a narrower sense, competition involves specific relationships in which competitors act to outpace and interfere with each other’s pursuits, blocking their access to the desired outcomes. A soccer match is an example: it is not just that one team can win only if the other loses, but also that each team must take steps to frustrate the other’s attempts to score.¹⁰

Competition can support self-esteem by incentivizing people to develop valued features, creating performative arenas in which they become visible and their achievements are rewarded. But competition can also damage the prospects for each to have confidence in achieving their goals. When there is competition in the broader sense, it wrecks the possibility for everyone to achieve them simultaneously. When it holds in the narrower sense, competition is also such that for some to build themselves up, they must tear others down.

Self-esteem can be socially *comparative* when achieving it depends on whether, and how much, one has some feature by comparison with others. It is also *competitive* when it increases as a function of successfully acting to have more of the feature than they do.¹¹ We can distinguish two kinds of relations between variations in self-esteem and performances in competition. In both people gain or lose self-esteem depending on how well they do in competition. But the relation may be in one kind of case *internal* because doing well or badly in competition is taken by the person to be intrinsically significant. Here, when people assess themselves, references to how they do in the competition is part of what they take as reason for assessing themselves as they do. They say to themselves: “I am worthy because I won,” “I am worthless because I lost”. The second, *external* cases are different. Here doing well or badly in competition is causally relevant for gaining or losing self-esteem, but people do not make reference to their competitive performance to account for why they assess themselves as they do.

Consider two self-assessments by a worker. In both, the worker gains in self-esteem after doing well in a competition to get a job. In one, the gain in self-esteem is experienced as a matter of being a winner in that competition. In the other, the gain of self-esteem is experienced in terms of being able to provide for family members. In the second self-assessment, winning in competition is causally relevant for being a successful provider, but is not seen as intrinsically significant. The difference between internal and external links is practically important. Reducing the incidence of competition on self-esteem would depend on the extent to which people have to engage in it to gain self-esteem. But, as we will see in

⁸ On intended and unintended consequences of social action, see Erik Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), ch.8.

⁹ I thank Niko Kolodny for this distinction.

¹⁰ Institutional setups in which this happens constitute what Hussain calls “rivalry-defining arrangements.” Waheed Hussain, “Pitting People Against Each Other,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 48 (2020), 79-113. Hussain is right that competition in the narrower sense creates specific problems, but competition in the broader sense can be problematic too.

¹¹ Furthermore, self-approval could proceed on the basis of *maximizing* or *satisficing* assessments. In the former we ask ourselves “Am I amongst the best?” In the latter we ask, instead, “Am I good enough?” Using maximizing functions is of course more tightly associated with competition than using satisficing functions. There can be competition in the search for having enough, but there must be competition when trying to have more than others. Whereas satisficing pursuits are incidentally competitive, maximizing ones are constitutively so.

section 3, this may require different reforms in material and social circumstances depending on whether the connections targeted are internal or external.

Some forms of competition are particularly intense. In what we shall call the *rat race*, people's self-esteem is significantly tied to winning in competition: their self-assessment is more or less positive mostly depending on how successful they are in their competitive performances. The more social activities are competitive, and the more self-esteem depends on winning, the more they count as a rat race. I should add that a rat race need not be an all-out war. The competition can be variously regulated, and produce some common benefits shared by all besides the particular benefits that only winners can enjoy. The greater the number and (perceived) significance of the benefits that are subject to competition, and the more the self-esteem of the participants turns (directly or indirectly) on their competitive performance, the more the activity is a rat race.

2.4. Descriptive and normative claims about self-esteem. We should distinguish between descriptive and normative claims about self-esteem. The former are empirical reports about people seeking self-esteem and doing so on certain terms and in certain ways. Normative claims, by contrast, judge whether self-esteem should indeed be sought, and identify the appropriate criteria to frame it or the appropriate ways to pursue it. Descriptive and normative judgments can come apart, as people's operative reasons might not match reasons in the normative sense. We can consistently say, for example, that a successful Mafia boss has high self-esteem, but also that this self-esteem is not appropriate because the criteria and strategies he relies on are morally abhorrent, or prudentially flawed.¹² Appropriate self-esteem is self-esteem that is worth seeking, one that relies on correct criteria and fulfills them in defensible ways. This paper will concentrate on the relationship between self-esteem and competition. We will explore how different social configurations that limit competition might support self-esteem in prudentially and morally defensible ways. We assume for the time being that fostering self-esteem is indeed prudentially and morally valuable (but return to the normative scrutiny of it in section 4).

3. MECHANISMS SUPPORTING SELF-ESTEEM AND LIMITING COMPETITION

Competition can be a good thing. The risks and rewards it generates for competitors can increase their productivity. It incentivises the development and exercise of skills and the emergence of excellence. The results are enjoyable for participants and also for those consuming their products. Competition can make some activities more entertaining and even exhilarating. When regulated, it can be a controlled escape valve for aggressive tendencies which otherwise might be expressed in more destructive activities (such as criminality or war). As competitors try to stand out, it can usher in the emergence of singular individuality and originality. Finally, it can prevent the ossification of social hierarchies, facilitating social mobility and change.

Competition can also be quite harmful. The aims of competitors are not generally co-achievable—there must be losers if there are to be winners. The self-esteem of losers can be damaged when they see themselves as inferior to the winners. The self-esteem of winners is boosted, but it is also made insecure, as it is constantly threatened by reversals in new competitive exercises. A generalized state of anxiety and stress unfolds for every contender. Workers enmeshed in relentless competition experience burnout.¹³ Frequent social comparison is linked to increased incidence of negative attitudes and feelings like regret, culpability, envy, and dissatisfaction.¹⁴ There is a worrisome flipside to competition's incentivizing of originality, which is the tendency to fake it. Competition can hamper authenticity and

¹² I take this example from Schemmel, "Real Self-Respect and its Social Bases," sect. 2.4, and agree with his distinction between empirical and normative self-respect (although I present the normative dimension as including prudential besides moral aspects). For the distinction between reasons in the normative and operative senses, see T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18-9.

¹³ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

¹⁴ André, *Imparfais, libres et hereux*, 267.

personal integration: people present themselves in public (and ultimately to themselves) in streamlined and truncated ways, focusing on what will be seen as great, obscuring and neglecting the rest.¹⁵ Competition can also undermine cooperation and collective action by intensifying egoistic attitudes. Public goods go unsupported, the achievement of what requires coordinated action missed. An obsessive focus on positional standing and the self, on who does things, obscures the independent value of the things done. Much effort is wasted in generating what turn out to be intrinsically pointless or trivial markers of distinction, or “product differentiation.” For example, in academia, there is a frenzy to coin terms and distinctions to stand out, but without achieving much with them in terms of insight into the subject matter, thereby diverting energy from the elaboration of genuinely deep ideas in collaboration with others. The competitive emphasis on conflict increases prejudice and stereotyping.¹⁶ In its most aggressive forms, competition can breed brutality, ruthlessness, lack of empathy, and intense instrumentalization of others. It can also produce loneliness. Deep relationships (of friendship, love, and camaraderie) require vulnerability and sincerity, but these are avoided when adopting a competitive stance.

Fostering self-esteem is a complicated matter. It can hardly be improved directly, handed to others as money can, or to oneself like a pleasant meal. Fostering self-esteem is largely a matter of indirect mechanisms that shape material and social circumstances so that the availability of the feeders of self-esteem (such as self-efficacy and social recognition) are increased. Now, given the general facts and tendencies of competition just mentioned, it is worth exploring ways to organize social activities so that self-esteem is supported while competition is limited. Competition can be eliminated altogether, it can be contained so that there is less of it, or it can be reshaped so that its deleterious effects on self-esteem are reduced. All of these patterns of limitation deserve exploration, and the ten mechanisms I go on to identify engage them in various ways.

For easy reference, here is the list of mechanisms:

- M1: reducing external pressures to compete
- M2: propping up a generalized social status
- M3: pluralizing merit
- M4: social combination
- M5: immersion
- M6: impersonal or impartial appreciation of value
- M7: emphasizing effort
- M8: intrapersonal rather than interpersonal comparison
- M9: pivoting on dignity
- M10: special relationships.

3.1. Reducing external pressures to compete. The first mechanism (M1) concentrates on making competition unnecessary to gain certain crucial goods. To get to it, recall from 2.3 the distinction between internal and external connections between self-esteem and competition. As noted, these can come apart, but they may also be empirically linked, and this is something that lucid policy can pay attention to. People sometimes engage first in competition for external reasons, but in the process develop new dispositions and preferences (or intensify already existing ones), so that later on they also engage in competition for internal reasons (or do so more than before). So, one indirect way to reduce the incidence of the pursuit of self-esteem that is inherently competitive is to reduce the extent to which people must engage in competition for external reasons. Thus, for example, if good health care and education are securely available to all through public provision, then people would not have to be fiercely competitive in the labor market and at the workplace to get access to them for themselves or their children, and could

¹⁵ See the seminal discussion in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et le fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 123-4, 147-8.

¹⁶ Elliot Aronson and Joshua Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 12th ed (New York: Worth Publishers, 2018), 271-5.

thus approach their working lives in a less competitive way.¹⁷ M1 would not completely eliminate competition, but it would contain it by reducing the external pressure to engage in the rat race.

3.2. Propping up a generalized social status and pluralizing merit. Two other mechanisms have been salient in recent work in liberal political philosophy. The first (M2) is to prop up a generalized social status, such as the status of citizen. We can establish a robust form of equal citizenship detached from economic (and other forms of) success. People can have this secure social status of citizens independently of how they fare in specific areas of social life. Some goods, such as civil and political liberties, could be allocated equally on account of this status. Rawls has argued along these lines, noting that a society that gives every citizen equal access to these goods secures the “social bases of self-respect”.¹⁸ M2 effectively eliminates competition when it comes to access to some goods, and can be consequential in supporting self-esteem, particularly in the form of self-respect.

Second, we could facilitate a social environment in which there is a pluralistic understanding of merit (M3). By protecting and promoting associational freedom and effective economic opportunities, for example, we could enable the proliferation of non-comparing groups and activities in which individuals can become meritorious in diverse ways. M3 targets internal relations between the pursuit of self-esteem and competitive performance, so that people can be successful in some activities (such as some jobs) even if they fail in others. The different activities carry different criteria of assessment, and individuals with different skills can find one in which they shine. This point was also made by Rawls with his idea of a just society as a union of social unions comprising many communities in which different individuals’ characteristics are developed and appreciated.¹⁹ M3 would reshape competition so that the chances of doing well in it, and the self-esteem of contenders, increases.

These are valuable strategies. But they are limited. The affirmation of the status of citizen is certainly important, but it might be too general for some people to develop a strong sense of self-esteem just based on it. Self-esteem is sometimes pursued in an inherently comparative and competitive way. In this mode, you feel self-esteem to the extent that you exhibit (and in virtue of so exhibiting) *more than others* some feature that is valued. If everyone in the comparison group has the same score regarding the feature, you would not cite your having it as a reason to see *yourself* as worthy of esteem. When presenting this kind of worry, Nozick notes that we might not say that we feel self-esteem because we have an opposable thumb, or can speak some language, when this is true of everyone else in the comparison group. He also notes that the comparative nature of this approach to self-esteem makes it hard to equalize its presence, as whenever the features giving rise to it are equalized, self-esteem disappears and people look for it on the basis of further, unequally held, characteristics.²⁰ The pluralization of domains of value and the proliferation of activities in which they are incarnated is also an important and valuable strategy, but it is limited as well because there likely will be competition within the groups engaged in them, and not everyone will be able to be at the top in at least one. Additionally, your preferences and criteria of assessment may have been shaped by upbringing or earlier experiences and changing them could be difficult or costly, while the abilities you have for the activities under those criteria might not be particularly impressive. Furthermore, you might simply be unable to avoid certain consequential activities in which you get little social recognition—as is the case for people who need to work to make a living, but the jobs effectively available to them are uniformly oppressive.²¹

¹⁷ Social-democratic policies of this kind, which reduce the stakes of competition, are recommended in Hussain, “Pitting People Against Each Other.”

¹⁸ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 60.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, sects. 79-81.

²⁰ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 239-46.

²¹ Jütten, “Dignity, Esteem, and Social Contribution,” 262.

The difficulties also arise for a system that allocates positions in society and rewards like income on the basis of merit because it leads to status inequality.²² Assuming that there is formal equality of opportunity to compete for positions (so that discrimination is minimized), and that there is also substantive equality of opportunity (so that the differential effects of social conditions such as class in the training of people's abilities is also minimized), the worry is that those who are not at the top must see themselves, and be seen by others, as inferior: since they had equal liberties and opportunities, if they ended up worse off than others it must be because they have lesser powers or chose not to use the powers they have.

Are there other ways for people to nurture self-esteem that are not, or are less, threatened by the risk of competitive defeat? I think there are. The remaining mechanisms suggest some additional strategies. They target the internal links between engaging in the rat race and gaining self-esteem, envisioning a reorganization of activities, and of criteria of assessment and esteem within them, to set things up so that people are less prone to evaluate themselves, and others, in competitive terms. These mechanisms differ from M1, which targets external links, and M3, which targets internal links but focuses on making opportunities for competition more numerous and diverse rather than on reducing it.²³ They also differ from M2 in that the aim is not to put differences between individuals aside, but to approach them in a positive light.

I should pause to acknowledge, however briefly, Axel Honneth's important exploration of M2-M3 in his account of social recognition as involving respect via legal civil, political, and social rights, and as involving social esteem.²⁴ Respect for rights tracks general features of individuals as moral persons, while social esteem focuses on specific abilities and traits that mark them as different from others. According to Honneth, in the transition to (capitalist) modernity, the evaluation of individuals stops being centered on their standing or "honor" as members of some of the established groups or estates forming a fixed hierarchical system. It becomes, on the one hand, more abstract and generalized (through the shared social status of equal citizenship) and, on the other, concretized and individualized (through the different forms of appreciation for particular achievements to socially valued endeavors). Honneth uses the term "self-esteem" in a narrower sense than I do in this paper, to refer exclusively to individuals' positive relation to self that is the internalized counterpart to the "social esteem" they receive for their distinctive abilities, traits, and contributions (he uses "self-respect" for the other, more generalized form of recognition involving legal rights). Importantly, Honneth notes that what counts as a contribution to society—i.e. the criteria of social esteem—are open to contestation, and that groups engage in a "struggle for recognition" of their contributions when these are ignored or denigrated. He argues that the more inclusive and individualized a society becomes in its appreciation of diverse forms of contribution, the more people can gain social esteem and thus achieve self-esteem. A form of "solidarity" can then unfold in which people accept and affirm each other. Although it is not exactly the case that through this solidarity each individual positively values every contribution by others equally, at least social arrangements become such that "individual competition for social esteem" is more or less "free from pain" in the sense of not being "marred by experiences of disrespect".²⁵

²² See survey of philosophical discussions in Stuart White, *Equality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 71-3. For the phenomenon of self-responsibilization for failure and the concomitant loss of self-esteem, see André, *Imparfais, libres et hereux*, 154-5.

²³ As Jütten ("Dignity, Esteem, and Competition," 276-8) argues, a Rawlsian property-owning democracy that disperses ownership of capital and limits income inequality could reduce the harms to self-esteem we encounter in contemporary capitalism, but might still feature intense competition. Thus additional strategies are needed that target the link between self-esteem and competition more directly.

²⁴ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, ch. 5. Honneth identifies a third form of social recognition in addition to "respect" and "social esteem," viz. "love" which applies in intimate relationships and cements the "self-confidence" of individuals. This is important for M10, which I discuss below.

²⁵ Ibid: 130. Honneth views increased social inclusion and individuation as immanent criteria for judging moral progress in modern relations of recognition. See Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution and Recognition?* (London: Verso, 2003), 184-5.

A discussion of Honneth's complex normative social theory would require a separate paper, but I want to point out that, although I agree with his general view that social recognition is of great significance for individuals' positive relation to themselves, and find the more specific points summarized above plausible, I share Timo Jütten's worry that the picture of solidarity envisioned is unduly optimistic. In particular, it seems insufficient to address the difficulties for self-esteem generated by economic competition.²⁶ If what cements an individual's self-esteem is their being regarded as better than others in their contributions to society, then, even if there are background general rights, a plurality of spheres of valued contribution, and equality of opportunity to engage in competition, hierarchies of social esteem will likely arise. They might, furthermore, involve morally problematic judgments of merit that evaluate people on the basis of disparities in capacities that arise through no choice or fault of their own. There is then a serious risk that individuals' access to the conditions of their self-esteem will involve morally arbitrary inequalities and be more insecure than it could and should be. Indeed, the mechanisms I go on to discuss can reduce further (if not completely eliminate) the problematic consequences, and the incidence, of inherently competitive approaches to social esteem and self-esteem. As the discussion of these mechanisms will make clear, I do not accept the view (suggested by Nozick's challenge) that self-esteem can only, or should always, be shaped competitively.

3.3. Social combination. Through this mechanism (M4), you can gain self-esteem when you offer a distinctive contribution in a collaborative effort that involves other people as well, but in which the others do different things than you do. You stand out as different from, but not in a competition with, them. This strategy harnesses the fact that sociality can be a vector for the emergence of special identities and worthy contributions without needing to be conflictive. Distinction and worthiness can be achieved here in two ways. The first concerns individual distinction within a group. In a harmonious division of labor, different individuals can boast different specific contributions while working in tandem with each other.²⁷ A familiar example is a jazz trio. Each musician plays a different instrument, they have their moment within songs to do a solo, at other times they play simultaneously, and in general their combined efforts determine the quality of their performance.²⁸ Another example is worker-owned and run cooperatives in which workers regulate their workplace so that their abilities can be honed and deployed to the benefit of all. Although competition (say for income and positions) can still exist, it would likely be less intense and yield less inequality than in standard capitalist firms. Governmental policies could be devised to incentivize and protect the emergence of art groups and cooperatives in the economy.

Secondly, there is group distinction. Individuals can identify themselves with the group they are part of, and gain self-esteem by reference to what the group, of which they are members, brings about. There are social comparisons in both cases (within and between groups), but they need not be competitive. M4 tends to contain competition within the group. Group distinction, might, however, sometimes proceed competitively, so that the incentive to win in inter-group competition incentivizes cooperation within the group. That said, there is empirical evidence that intra-group cooperation fosters inter-group cooperation.²⁹ Dispositions towards appreciation of different contributions within a group can extend to contributions by other groups. M4 can also contain and reshape competition to make it more amenable

²⁶ Jütten, "The Theory of Recognition in the Frankfurt School," in P. Gordon, E. Hammer, A. Honneth eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 82-94, at 89, 91.

²⁷ This theme also appears in Rawls's ideal of social union, in *A Theory of Justice*, 459-60.

²⁸ There is empirical evidence that moving from competitive structures to interdependence and cooperation in activities improves performance, reduces prejudice, and increases self-esteem. An example is the widely replicated experiment using the "jigsaw method" in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms. The procedure asks students to work together in teams, with the academic success of each depending on how well they combine with others in their team. See Aronson and Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 290-9. More generally, there is some evidence that self-esteem is supported through finding an equilibrium between differentiation and affiliation, and by toning down the predominance of competition over collaboration, supremacy over harmony, and dominance over belonging. Taking pleasure in the achievements and well-being of others can increase one's own. André, *Imparfais Libres et Hereux*, 319-23.

²⁹ Aronson and Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 290-1.

to the self-esteem of diverse individuals from different groups. Public policies can facilitate cooperation and reduce competition within and across groups. Thus, labor law regulating capitalist firms could give workers greater power to act together to influence the terms on which they work not only within their firm (for example through works councils), but also the relations between firms (for example through collective bargaining involving unions within and across economic sectors).

3.4. Immersion and impersonal or impartial appreciation of value. Another promising mechanism is immersion in an object or a task (M5). Think about the work of a scientist, or an artist. They may gain self-esteem as a function of advancing in their own approximation to what they hold valuable (truth, beauty), appreciating their efficacy in the search for it as they cultivate their abilities for knowledge and creation. It seems that in these cases comparison with other people is not necessary. When you manage to be absorbed in these tasks (which, granted, is not easy), the issue of how you compare to others drops out of view, and the values you focus on are internal to the practice itself. When you write or read a poem, for example, further thoughts and action can be prompted, but the activity is significant in its own right—something important happens to you right there and then. Additional benefits to you, including regarding self-esteem, arise mostly as by-products—something that is caused by what you do, but not part of what you intentionally aim to obtain as you act. Self-esteem here often works also as an implicit state of self-confidence facilitating your engagement in the activity rather than as a thematic state targeted in self-preoccupation. Furthermore, even when a comparison arises here, it is often an intrapersonal one—you notice how far you have gone in the quest (a point we return to in 3.5). The relation-to-self enacted is not the one of a strategic ego framing a curated persona to display in public in a certain favorable way. For example, one poet characterizes the act of creation as a “welling up” of content about the self and the world which actually surprises the artist.³⁰ The artist is to cultivate openness to this emergence, and prevent worries about reputation getting in the way. Often when a positive self-image is not a by-product or a reinforcer but the driving aim, the activity itself becomes less dynamic and profound, and the results are less gripping.

Immersion is related to, although different from an impartial or impersonal appreciation of independent value (M6). The latter involves a contemplation of something as valuable independently of one’s involvement with it as producer. M6 can support self-esteem in several ways. First, as already noted, it can support the self-esteem of the producer as they engage in production: they can gain a sense of pride by reflecting on their ability to make something that is independently valuable. Second, M6 can help reduce the hurt of those who lose in competitions, as they redirect their evaluative focus to the goodness of the fact that there are out there in the world certain valuable features, even if they are held or produced by someone else. Envy gives way to admiration and inspiration. Third, consumers can use it to gain self-appreciation. When you enjoy a work of art someone else created, for example, you may also enjoy your own ability to engage its complexity and insights. Fourth, consumers’ enjoyment can feed into producers’ self-esteem. This can happen quite directly, as when your aim in producing something is that a particular individual enjoys it, and they do. Consumer’s appreciation of others’ achievements can benefit producers’ self-esteem more diffusely, in the sense that if acts of appreciation become common, they increase the probability that each producer will gain recognition by others for their contributions, even if the contributions are not directed at anyone in particular. Thus, a potential risk with M3 and M4 is that the value of activities and their products is open to varying interpretations by third parties. The self-expression, self-knowledge, and self-affirmation of producers could be threatened or destabilized by such negative assessments. This is especially so when the interpretations are shaped by a selective preference for the types of tasks and objects the interpreters themselves have

³⁰ “Poet Steven Heighon on Writing, Making Music, and Literally Losing His Voice,” *The Walrus*, 22 January 2022. On the related experience of “flow,” see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

an excellent involvement with.³¹ M6 helps limit this bias. An appreciation of the independent value of the object or task can make it easier to welcome and praise the contributions of others to it, even when this also involves acknowledging that one has not or could not make those contributions oneself. Even in the case of M5, although through immersion the producer is not directly aiming at appreciation by others of the value of what they create, if the impersonal appreciation by others does arise, the producer's activity and the self-esteem attached to it would be reinforced. Social recognition, in addition to a sense of personal efficacy, is often crucial for sustaining the confidence needed to engage in immersion. But for either to have deep supporting force, they must track independent value. Answering questions of the form "Is x worth recognizing?" and "Is efficacy in producing x significant?" requires adopting the standpoint involved in M6. A self-esteem that ignores it would likely be superficial and weak.

To increase our chances of gaining self-esteem, it seems to be a good idea to favor more instances of social combination, immersion, and impersonal appreciation. Interestingly, although in these endeavors our *self* features less prominently in our attitudes, they offer, as a by-product, a powerful affirmation of it. The value in the self is also partly anchored in something beyond it, which, surprisingly, makes it stronger. A blend of M4, M5, and M6 can increase the strength of each. At any rate, these mechanisms are worth taking seriously. An exclusively competitive model for self-esteem is bound to be socially self-defeating (as not everyone can compare favorably to others on the same criteria) and personally shallow (as the criteria themselves must track value that is independent from the self-serving attitudes of each).

3.5. *Emphasizing effort and intrapersonal comparison.* We noted (in 3.2) that a meritocratic society, even if it deploys M1-M3 to secure certain basic goods, equalize opportunity, and pluralize assessment of merit, would still likely generate status inequality and deficiencies in self-esteem, as some workers will perform better than others in valued tasks. M4-M6 reduce these deficiencies. Another mechanism (M7) offers further help. It involves an allocation of social esteem for individuals on the basis of their effort relative to their abilities rather than on the basis of the abilities themselves or the output of their use just as such. People seem to be more capable of controlling whether they exert effort in producing certain valuable things than they are in controlling whether they produce them or produce the most excellent versions of them. If people are given social appreciation on the basis of effort, and to the extent that they do really control how much effort they exert, then their self-esteem, insofar as it depends on their contribution to socially valued endeavors, is accessible to them, even if they are less talented or productive than others. Their comparative deficiencies in productivity that depend on abilities and external conditions are not controlled by them, and thus on this account do not determine their evaluative score.

The use of M7 helps address three problems. First, it serves fairness in fostering equal *ex ante* chances to do well. Formal equality of opportunity and support for people to develop their basic capacities irrespective of social class do not go far enough because inequalities in native endowments remain. Focus on effort could compensate for the consequences of these inequalities. Second, M7 counters the common tendency to disproportionately give esteem to those who have power over others within social structures. The third issue concerns the feasibility of the criteria of assessment of individuals' performances. M7 helps identify standards that people can actually meet. Each can say to themselves: "Even if I was able to produce less than others, I did my best and fulfilled my potential."

A plausible use of this strategy would require that we employ different criteria for allocating jobs and for allocating social esteem and economic rewards (such as income) to those holding them. Evaluations of ability may be key to select people for jobs they can do, while effectively serving the interests of others. But considerations of effort could be important for the second allocation. We can distribute esteem or rewards (such as pay increases) to people performing some socially valuable activity on the basis of how much effort they exert relative to their abilities. The ratios of effort to ability may be such that sometimes an individual with lower talents but who applies more effort is more deserving than another

³¹ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sect. V.C.a.

who has the same or greater talents but applies less effort. Of course, measuring these ratios is a difficult task. But if we could, it might provide a better way of apportioning social esteem, and allow everyone, regardless of ability, to reach high, and even equal, levels of self-esteem.

There are complications with this proposal. Some difficulties turn on the relation between choice and circumstance. First, it is not clear that the ability to make an effort is not itself, to some extent at least, determined by factors beyond the agent's control (such as their personality, their early socialization with its patterns of encouragement or disparagement and their effects on their readiness to pursue activities later on).³² Second, some of their current abilities are the result of developing more basic capacities, and although these capacities are not themselves shaped by the agent, their abilities are partly the result of their earlier efforts to develop them (for example through training and activities in which skills are gained). So to some extent their abilities may have to be factored in within the exercises of social appreciation of the relevant kind after all. This difficulty could be resolved if we can identify the incidence of previous effort in the presence of current abilities, counting it in our calculus of esteem. However, it may turn out that, third, in terms of social knowledge, it is difficult to identify what and how much is the result of people's choices and what and how much is instead the result of their personal, social, and material circumstances. Because of these uncertainties, social evaluative judgments might not be very reliable, and the potential for unduly harsh or lenient judgments could be significant.

Although focus on effort can benefit a person, it might also be used in a way that decreases their self-esteem. If I value feature F, and have done my best to come to have it, then if I end up not having it, I will at least not have the regret of not having tried. But this could make things worse, making it clear that F is just beyond me. I may not be able to rationalize my predicament by saying to myself "It was in my power, but I just chose not to get it..." A source of reduction of anxiety here would be to deploy M6 to appreciate the goodness of the fact that the valuable feature is out there in the world, independently of who has it. Another is to see that it is inappropriate to judge oneself on the basis of standards that one cannot feasibly satisfy. A standard centered on exhibiting F would not be appropriate for me. I should manage to enjoy Adrienne Rich's poems without worrying about my inability to write like her.

A final potential difficulty is that a new competition could be triggered. A form of "effortocracy" could arise in which people compete for social status, as more effortful than others. But it is worth noticing as well that comparison could be *intrapersonal*. Your self-esteem could turn on whether you see yourself favorably in virtue of how you compare not to others but to yourself (as you were in the past, or would have been if you have acted differently). M7 could be cultivated to emphasize intrapersonal assessments. Focus on intrapersonal rather than interpersonal comparisons is actually an important mechanism (M8) to add to our list. It need not be limited to the appreciation of effort. As noted in our discussion of immersion, people could focus on intrapersonal comparisons of achievement, such as how much they have improved rather than how good they are relative to others in approximating something that is independently valuable. M8 can also interact well with the next mechanism.

3.6. *Pivoting on dignity.* An important mechanism to support self-esteem (M9) turns on separating certain valuable features of the person that are at the basis of their moral status as beings with dignity from others which are not, and on resolutely affirming the former. People can always appreciate themselves as worthy on account of the features at the basis of their dignity, such as their capacities for moral and prudential reasoning, sentience, and creativity, and engage them to start again with their endeavors, even after significant failures. Because they are beings with these valuable features, people

³² Disaggregating what depends on choice and circumstance is very hard. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 64, 89, 274. For survey of scientific evidence on the unequal distribution of mental resources for deliberation, effort, and successful activity, see Tom Malleson, "Good Life Egalitarianism," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 48 (2022), 14-39. On complexities of assessment of desert and merit, see T. M. Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 8; Jeppe Von Platz, "The Principle of Merit and the Capital-Labor Split," *Economics and Philosophy* 38 (2022), 1-23.

always can and deserve to seek a meaningful life for themselves, and should also be supported by others as they do so (and these others, who have those capacities too, can see why).³³

It is important here to distinguish between moral and social status (and to recall the distinction between endowment-based and achievement-based assessments from 2.1). Dignity as a moral status exists independently of whether it is recognized. People who are treated as their dignity calls for enjoy condition-dignity, but their status-dignity remains even if they lack condition-dignity. Status-dignity is not necessarily tied to specific roles and positions in a social structure, or to achievements and meritorious performances in social practices. In addition to contrasting with social status, dignity is an unconditional worth which is not reducible to exchange or use value. It is not a price to be measured by how much an assessor is willing to give up to get what has it, and what has it does not count only insofar as it is useful for the fulfillment of some desire or plan that the assessor has. These points have been made by Kant in his account of dignity as an intrinsic, evaluative and deontic, egalitarian, categorical, and supreme standing of persons as ends in themselves.³⁴

An important aspect of this strategy (which also links to Kant's insights) is the significance of self-determination or autonomy. When people have the capacities for prudential and moral judgment, they can pivot on them and recast their projects so that they are fitting for them. They can stand back from their existing practical entanglements, examine critically the criteria of assessment used in them, and reformulate the terms of their engagements in better ways.

The reference to dignity and to autonomy have a certain pride of place. Consider M3. The partition of society into various spheres of competition must itself be justified. Reference to how the various capacities at the basis of dignity would be engaged by the pluralization of spheres would provide a rationale. Consider also mechanism M2. The structuring role of a citizen in the rule-making process that shapes the rest of society's terms of cooperation can be defended by showing that it gives autonomy its proper recognition and traction at the highest level of social organization. Each citizen can then tell themselves: "However I am doing under the rules of this society, I am shaping these rules with others as an equal." Similar considerations apply to the defense of greater autonomy of workers at the workplace.

Would M9 be subject to Nozick's challenge to M2? I do not claim that all of self-esteem is to be built by reflection on our dignity, but only that some of it can and should (and could be quite consequential especially in times of defeat or despair). Even if limited, dignity can make a positive contribution, and do so beyond citizenship. The former is a deeper status. It is not lost even if the latter is, and it has additional consequences. Dignity can further erode the force of the challenge because it helps illuminate difference in the midst of equality. Thus, although two individuals may equally have dignity because they both have the valuable features at the basis of their dignity, they need not describe themselves as being in every relevant respect the same. Although they may both build a sense of self-esteem because they have those features, or because they unfolded them in their lives, they can do this unfolding in importantly different ways—I can be creative in poetry, you in music, for example. The acknowledgment

³³ Reference to dignity can then illuminate Schemmel's important point that we should support a "robust" form of self-esteem as resiliency in the face of adversity. See "Real Self-Respect and its Social Bases."

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:434; 439; *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:462, 483. Both are included in Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Paralleling Rousseau's distinction between *amour de soi-même* and *amour propre* (on which see his *Discours*, Note XV), Kant uses a distinction between *self-love* [*Eigenliebe*, *Selbsts liebe*, *philautia*] and *self-respect*, on the one hand, and *self-conceit* [*Eigendünkel*, *arrogantia*], on the other. He emphasizes how appropriate respect and love for others and for oneself are a matter of recognizing each person's dignity (e.g., *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:462). Kant also explores how people shift from self-love (which demands that one not view oneself as inferior to others), to a self-conceited search for superiority over others, as when competition arises first out of fear but in time becomes a personal and cultural pattern or tendency. Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:29-32. For my account of dignity, including the distinction between status-dignity and condition-dignity, and a discussion of commonalities and differences with Kant, see Pablo Gilabert, *Human Dignity and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Pablo Gilabert, *Human Dignity and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

of this diversity and its social appreciation are themselves part of what responding appropriately to the dignity of each calls for. Dignity involves equality, but also attunement to individuality.

Is this strategy comparative? And could it reintroduce competition? It could, but it imposes limits as well. The dignity of a human individual could be construed through various comparisons. The comparison could be intrapersonal, between features of the individual at the basis of their dignity and other features of them. There is no need for competition here. Some comparisons regarding individuals' contributions when they unfold their capacities could be interpersonal without being competitive. The view that self-esteem can only really arise through competition is false, because distinctiveness does not necessarily require triumph over others, as we saw when discussing social combination (M4). There could be, on the other hand, interpersonal comparisons regarding how different individuals have responded to their own dignity. There is room here for social comparison regarding virtue (a form of achievement-based dignity), for example, and potentially for a form of competition for moral esteem. A problematic form of "dignitocracy" could arise. But that it is problematic could be understood and remedied from the dignitarian perspective itself. Competing for virtue would be at odds with recognizing the equal status-dignity of others. If others are behind in honoring their dignity, or achieving dignitarian virtue, then the appropriate response should be to help them do better, not to arrogantly bask at their failure or insist on one's greater success for reputational gain.³⁵

I note, finally, that M9 supplies a way to prevent a morally problematic application of M6. I have in mind an application that supercharges that rat race on account of its (alleged) tendency to be maximally efficient in generating the most excellent instances of independent value (in, say, works of science and culture). The deontological structure underpinning M9 would severely constrain an approach of this kind, which would see individuals as mere tools for bringing about valuable states of affairs instead of arranging social life to give each what is due to them for their own sake.

3.6. *Special relationships.* The list of mechanisms I proposed does not mean to be exhaustive. We could extend it further, for example, by referring to engagement in special relationships. This mechanism (M10) is clearly important. One of the most consequential ways in which many of us gain and maintain self-esteem is through the affirmation and love we receive from parents, partners, and friends. Failures in economic competition are far less damaging when we are secure in these bonds. Although we should not expect public policy to directly give us a family, partners, or friends, it can support these relationships in various ways. Limiting the duration of the standard working week, generous parental leave, and vacations with pay can increase people's ability to nurture relationships, and in this way support the self-esteem of those involved.³⁶

4. NORMATIVE ARGUMENTS

4.1. *Mid-level devices.* We identified ten mechanisms that could support self-esteem while limiting competition. Practically speaking, we can think of these mechanisms as mid-level devices occupying an intermediate position between specific policies and initiatives that activate them and prudential and moral principles or societal ideals that justify them. I have already mentioned several policies and initiatives that harness the mechanisms, such as the introduction of robust social rights for M1, the affirmation of equal political rights for M2, the protection of civil and associative liberties and the fostering of

³⁵ A third comparison could arise between humans and other species. A human individual might see their dignity as based on their difference, and superiority, to non-human animals. But this strategy may problematically lead to mistreatment of animals and insufficient appreciation of people's own dignity (the basis of which may partly overlap with that of other animals).

³⁶ Another example might be legal frameworks supporting and protecting a range of relationship types. See Elizabeth Brake, "Minimal Marriage: What Political Liberalism Implies for Marriage Law," *Ethics* 120 (2010), 302-37. We should acknowledge, however, that special relationships can themselves be sites of competition. I thank Arash Abizadeh and Colin Macleod for discussion on M10.

opportunities for M3, workers' cooperatives, labor law facilitating works councils and collective bargaining for M4, schedules of distribution tracking effort for M7, nourishing a social ethos of impersonal appreciation and dignitarian respect for M5, M6, M8, and M9, and parental leave and limits on working hours for M10. We can add other proposals, such as curricula in schools that inform young people about the mechanisms and lets them experiment with their use.³⁷ A more ambitious reform would be the introduction of a Universal Basic Income, which would enable people to avoid having to enter the rat race to survive, and thus to choose forms of social cooperation that are more conducive to their self-esteem. We could envision even more ambitious transformations that experiment with socialist organization of economic activity. A democratic form of market socialism would be an example. Some of these proposals may be more immediately feasible depending on the context, and some may be made more feasible over time through the earlier implementation of others. Lucid political judgment is needed to identify dynamic sequences of social change in which greater overall achievements are reached.

Lucid judgment is also needed because, although I emphasized synergies, surely tensions between the implementation of the mechanisms could arise, so that appropriate projects may have to involve trade-offs. Furthermore, given the diversity and complexity of individuals' temperaments and circumstances, the ameliorative prospects of policy proposals are likely to be an increased probability in gaining self-esteem for them, without yielding strict sufficient or necessary conditions. More empirical research and reflection on experiments will no doubt enhance our understanding of these proposals. Although I will say more about them, my main objective here is not to offer a policy blueprint, but to make some suggestions about how to frame our normative inquiry about what proposals to pursue. To do this, we can step back and explore the second relation concerning the mechanisms and prudential and moral principles, to examine how the use of the mechanisms might be justified.

4.2. Prudential considerations. We can first notice that self-esteem is important for well-being. This can be done by showing that having a positive sense of self is intrinsically important, and that it contributes to having other prudential goods. This inquiry can be run by using the different available types of theories of well-being, such as hedonism, desire-satisfaction theories, and objectivist conceptions including objective goods list theories or perfectionism. It seems uncontroversial that self-esteem will be important on any of these familiar theories. Feeling well about ourselves is typically an enjoyable state of the kind a hedonist recommends. A list theorist or a perfectionist recognizing enjoyment as an intrinsic good would concur. And a desire-satisfaction theorist might agree that self-esteem is part of the description of various plans or outcomes we pursue. Furthermore, there is empirical evidence from psychology that having self-esteem increases our ability to achieve other things, and is thus instrumentally relevant. When our relation to ourselves is negative, we tend to withdraw from social relationships and refrain from taking chances to do things we value. By contrast, when we have self-esteem, we are more willing to make plans and pursue them confidently, manage defeats with flexibility and resiliency (recalibrating our projects and starting again instead of shutting down), and are open to developing and sustaining social bonds.³⁸ We can then notice that although the rat race can sometimes be stimulating, it is also problematic for the search of self-esteem, by rendering it superficial and highly insecure. Given these considerations, we can conclude that since M1-M10 enhance access to central feeders of self-esteem (such as social recognition and a sense of self-efficacy), enacting them would be supportive of our well-being, and thus that we have prudential reason to explore policies and practices that activate them.

Despite this likely general convergence on pursuing M1-M10, I acknowledge that the differences between the commitments in each approach to well-being could generate disagreements about details of

³⁷ It is true that some of the mechanisms (such as M5 and M8) are more readily a matter of personal than social action. But even then, supportive social action is possible and potentially consequential. We may have reason to not block, or to facilitate others' immersive endeavors. We can engage in collective immersion (e.g. in dance or philosophical exploration). Educational practices could be less centered on interpersonal rankings and encourage more intrapersonal assessments. Mental health care attending to individuals' particular challenges can be publicly funded.

³⁸ André and Lelord, *L'Estime de soi*, chs. II and VI.

implementation. Thus, a desire-satisfaction theorist could think that if a worker wants to do a certain job and gets actual self-esteem out of it, then they have prudential reason to engage in it. An objectivist might take pause, however, and ask whether there is another job available in which the worker could develop and exercise their valuable capacities for creativity or social cooperation to a greater extent. If that is so, the actual self-esteem of the worker in the first job is not as appropriate as the one they would get in the second, even if they do not currently desire to take it. In what follows, I will formulate my specific points in terms of an objectivist view of well-being—because I find it the most plausible—while acknowledging that separate argument would be needed to show that the other theories would converge, and when they do not, that we should put them aside. As I see it, a view of this kind has an important connection to M9. The basis of dignity is made up of valuable capacities such as those concerning prudential and moral reasoning, sentience, self-awareness, creativity, and empathy. Well-being can be seen as at least in part made up of the development and exercise of these capacities in our lives. Self-esteem can be a positive, satisfying instantiation of self-awareness, and one, furthermore, that reflects the unfolding of the other capacities.³⁹ Thus, for example, we can construe appropriate self-esteem at work as emerging in activities that feature self-determination and self-realization. We have self-determination when, and to the extent that we control our activities (choosing, understanding, and directing them). And we have self-realization when, and to the extent that, in our activities, we actualize ourselves by cultivating and employing our various talents and cooperative skills, and externalize ourselves by producing objects others appreciate.⁴⁰

A final point about prudential matters. It is important that we avoid the polar extremes of self-obsession and self-denial. Each of these is undesirable and carries serious problems of feasibility. Self-obsession is undesirable, for example, because it blocks the kind of involvement with the intrinsic value of others and of our tasks which are necessary for rewarding social and individual action. It also makes self-esteem less feasible because it accelerates our engagement in the rat race, with the frustration of self-esteem it generates. Self-denial is similarly problematic. Ignoring the importance of our selves and our projects cannot yield self-esteem, except occasionally and temporarily, as when we are atoning for moral wrongdoing (but then also appreciating our moral capacities and the dignity that comes with them and repositioning ourselves to start afresh with self-affirming endeavors). Because self-regard is integral to our agency, it is also unlikely that we will succeed when we frame our life on terms of self-denial. We will simply not comply with this policy, and will likely deceive ourselves in thinking that we do. Self-denial also undermines the self-esteem of others, as individuals who deny themselves destroy the standing that would allow them to recognize others in a way that the latter can find really satisfying.⁴¹ Its generalization would thus be bad for everyone. Self-obsession and self-denial are ultimately empty and emptying attitudes. The knot of the difficulty is perhaps their absolutist search for control, their inability to lucidly accept and participate in the contingencies of action and sociality.

4.3. Social justice. Let us turn now to moral argument. Here the focus is on what we owe to each other, and in particular on showing that we have a duty to foster the social conditions of self-esteem through M1-M10. This can be a matter of interpersonal morality or/and political morality regarding the outlines of the basic structure of a society. I will concentrate on ideals of social justice, which apply to the latter (although I understand the notion of the basic structure capaciously, to include a society's normative ethos or culture besides its various formal institutions).

In arguing for making use of M1-M10 effectively available in certain practical contexts (such as working activities), we would have to show three things:

³⁹ On this view of well-being, see Pablo Gilabert "Perfectionism and Dignity," *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022), 259-78.

⁴⁰ Gilabert, *Human Dignity and Social Justice*, ch. 6. This view is inspired by Marx's discussion on alienated labor. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)," in Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992), 279-400.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ch. IV.

1. That, in general, having access to the social conditions of self-esteem is an important interest that gives rise to pro tanto rights.
2. That, more specifically, shaping the contexts so that they feature availability of M1-M10 is a feasible and a reasonable focus for social reform and public policy.
3. That, all things considered, shaping the relevant contexts so that they feature access to M1-M10 is indeed (at least) permissible given the feasible alternatives and after taking into account the implications not only for self-esteem but also for other morally important interests and rights.

Steps 1 and 2 would deliver an initial argument for making M1-M10 available, while adding step 3 would give us an overall defense of this project. In what follows, I sketch the broad contours of how the argument could proceed.

Regarding step 1, we can develop interpretations of societal ideals of solidarity, freedom, and equality that enjoin support for people's access to the social conditions of their self-esteem. We can start with a general ideal of solidaristic empowerment calling for the construction of social practices and institutions that enact general and reciprocal support for people's pursuit of well-being and, especially, their interest in self-esteem. The wide-ranging moral importance of these interests could be defended further by noting that their object coincides with the unfolding of the valuable capacities that give rise to people's status-dignity, which in turn grounds their standing as rights-holders.⁴² Solidarity is the most obvious and clear opposite to the rat race, as it requires that we see others as ends in themselves rather than only as obstacles or means for achieving our own, self-regarding ends. It is true that workable competition often requires some level of solidarity in the form of endorsement and compliance with the rules of competitive games. The winners will not enjoy the spoils of competition if the losers withdraw from, or sabotage, the game they are losing, or if they fail to recognize the winners. But I have in mind here a deeper solidarity in which each participant aims for the flourishing of others besides their own, so that achievement, and the self-esteem attached to it, is not necessarily structured in zero-sum terms. This deeper idea of solidarity can be specified further through other ideas, such as freedom and equality, as they are often construed in liberal egalitarian and democratic socialist approaches to social justice. Thus, we can identify a requirement of freedom enjoining us to support people's access to opportunities for activities in which their self-esteem can be effectively fostered. (This includes, but goes beyond, the negative liberty from interference that destroys this access.) We can then formulate a distributive requirement of equal access to these opportunities, and a relational ideal shaping social interactions so that people relate to each other in ways that track the conditions of their self-esteem. These arguments can target the desirable forms of support as directly required—so that the presence or absence of what they require readily marks the relevant social context as more or less just or fair. The arguments can also have an indirect form, functioning as linkage arguments suggesting that the social practices and institutions they recommend are necessary for, or more realistically, strongly contribute to, achieving other normative goals which are independently accepted. An example is Rawls's account of the social primary good of the social bases of self-respect as crucial for the pursuit of other social primary goods (such as economic opportunities and income).⁴³ A parallel case can be made for the social bases of self-esteem.

The second step would target support for people's access to M1-M10 as important devices to bolster the social conditions of their self-esteem. Establishing this would involve showing the feasibility of arrangements featuring M1-M10 for the relevant practical context. It would also require showing that the availability of these arrangements is practically crucial in that it would be too hard (i.e. unreasonably difficult or costly, if not impossible) for people to exit the activities these arrangements are meant to

⁴² This would add moral substance to the criteria of increased inclusion and individuation mentioned in footnote 25. Even if this guideline is not already considered valid by agents scrutinizing standards of social esteem, it may still be correct, and they could accept it as such as they seek reflective equilibrium in their practical deliberations.

⁴³ The "social bases of self-respect" concern "those aspects of basic institutions normally essential if citizens are to have a lively sense of their worth as persons and to be able to advance their ends with self-confidence." Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 59.

affect or structure, or achieve comparable levels of self-esteem in other, substitutive, practical endeavors. Thus, we would have to show that the relevant practical contexts are quite consequential and practically unavoidable.⁴⁴ Let us see how this exercise might proceed for our paradigmatic case of working activities. In a capitalist society, for example, it is extremely hard for most adults to gain access to subsistence goods without working, and thus without joining the rat race in the labor market and the workplace. This is a structural condition given workers' lack of control of means of production and ready access to means of subsistence. Typically, this society also generates a social ethos such that adults who can but do not work face social opprobrium and shame. Although it is not strictly impossible for some individuals, given their personalities and social connections, to have some self-esteem and survive without working, the ability of many of them to do so is greatly compromised if they do not join the rat race. The social conditions for their self-esteem are thus deeply constrained by competitive schemes. In this context, introducing implementations of M1-M10 through some of the policies mentioned at the beginning of this section seems reasonable. Enshrining social and political rights implementing M1 and M2 would insulate workers from some of the worst outcomes of competition, and allow them to enter it on freer terms. Civil and other liberties enabling the use of M3 would offer them greater chances to work in ways that are self-affirming, even as they compete. Governmental incentives and protections securing the availability of working activities engaging M4 and M5 would go further by giving them real options to work in ways in which self-esteem is not (or is less) built competitively, with the direct benefits this implies, while also cementing further their effective freedom to determine whether they join instead the rat race if that is what they prefer (thus giving their liberty to do so its worth). Where feasible and not unduly intrusive, more ambitious economic schemes of distribution and the promotion of cultural patterns of social esteem implementing M7 and M8 (above the minima tracked by M1 and M2) would offer independent support for the self-esteem of workers who, because of the natural and social lottery, have talents that are less valued in the economy.⁴⁵ Finally, shaping our social ethos—for example through educational policies and conscientious public discourse—so that M6 and M9 are enacted would help workers to enjoy the results of social cooperation, and to appreciate the unconditional worth they have within it. The introduction of at least some of these policies seems readily feasible (there have been versions of them advanced by social-democratic reforms in many countries, for example). Others, especially those concerning M4, M5, M7, and M8 seem harder to implement. But, not being strictly impossible, their high desirability marks them as a focus for dynamic duties to push the feasibility frontier over time in order to make them more practicable.⁴⁶

If carried out successfully, steps 1 and 2 of the argument roughly outlined here would conclude that the implementation of M1-M10 is reasonable because, without it, the configuration of the practical contexts under examination would foreseeably, avoidably, and significantly hamper people's achievement of self-esteem. But the argument is incomplete if we do not consider the impact of this implementation on considerations other than self-esteem, as well as some worries about its degree of feasibility that heighten potential tensions. Thus, turning to step 3, we should face some objections, such as that it would be better to avoid the recommended limits to competition (1) in order to respect people's

⁴⁴ I partially agree here with Hussain's focus on "engulfing" social contexts in which important goods are at stake and participation is practically unavoidable. Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other." I construe the second point on weaker terms, however, as a matter of lack of sufficiently reasonable alternatives. More importantly, I add consideration of the good of self-esteem. That the practical contexts have significant impact on participants' self-esteem helps identify the moral stakes in their assessment, and this in a way that helps answer objections about their regulation.

⁴⁵ The socialist Abilities/Needs Principle ("From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs!") can be interpreted to embody a view along these lines, recommending (inter alia) that the distribution of access to some consumption goods be proportional to how much those who can work put an effort given their abilities. This principle can be interpreted as also enjoining unconditional allocation of certain basic goods (such as those targeted by the social and citizenship rights envisioned in M1 and M2), and as supporting the creation of some workplaces in which people can achieve self-realization, thus implementing M4 and M5. Gilibert, *Human Dignity and Social Justice*, ch. 3.

⁴⁶ For a dynamic view of feasibility in social justice, see Gilibert, *Human Dignity and Social Justice*, ch. 4.

liberty, (2) to allow for the gains in production of enjoyable goods that competition incentivizes, and (3) to attend more fully to the claims of merit.

The first objection is that the measures recommended would infringe upon people's liberty to engage in activities and relationships they choose, paternalistically preventing them from competing with others to protect their self-esteem. In response, consider four points. First, we can insist that the key demand is that there be real or effective opportunities, not that people be forced to take them up. The argument outlined here affirms basic liberal tenets regarding freedom of occupation and association. The reason for this is not only that securing success in self-esteem for others is infeasible (it cannot be directly handed out like a cheque to people, and differences in people's personalities are such that not every mechanism of support will work well for them).⁴⁷ Fundamentally, it is because of the importance of self-determination. It should be up to each person to shape the terms on which they live their lives and to achieve their well-being and self-esteem (within reasonable limits imposed by their duties to others). This applies to the engagement of M3-M5, for example. What is required is that people have these mechanisms available, not that they use them. If self-realization at work is not what they choose, they should be allowed to forgo it, even if it is bad for them. Second, we should recall the fact that certain social systems (like an unregulated capitalist economy) actually pressure people to engage in highly competitive schemes to survive and gain social recognition. The social and material conditions are such that they can hardly access urgently needed goods without seeking and gaining certain competitive goods. So the proposed measures, in particular those activating M1 and M2, would actually free people from having to engage in the rat race to survive and have basic social standing. To this it can be added that a hypercompetitive economy carries a systemic bias. Independently of the intentions of those designing or sustaining it, it endogenously affects the formation of people's preferences⁴⁸ so that they become more individualistic and competitive than they would be in a different system that makes certain basic goods readily accessible to all—without needing to compete with others to get them. So, third, the availability of the mechanisms would in fact increase individual autonomy, not depress it.

It is indeed important to note that competitive practices do not only express pre-existing attitudes and dispositions, but also generate them. People may enter the rat race to satisfy some non-competitive preferences, but as they partake in it regularly, they come to prefer new things, and adopt new criteria of assessment of others and themselves. For example, it becomes important that in competitive markets and workplaces they come out as “winners” rather than as “losers.” They do not want to let others “hold them back.” They brag; they suddenly break up engagements and associations to move to new, more highly remunerated ones; they refrain from joining collective endeavors (such as union organizing) and favor individual paths of self-advancement. Labor markets do not only determine who gets what position and how much money they make in it. In addition, they have a “formative” effect in shaping peoples' wishes, habits, and patterns of behavior.⁴⁹

It is true that if governmental institutions act to make the mechanisms available, they would limit capitalist freedoms regarding ownership and use of economic resources. But it seems that, all things considered, this limitation is reasonable because of the resulting gains concerning the social conditions of self-esteem. As already pointed out, basic liberal civil liberties are protected. Capitalist freedoms, on the other hand, are not basic liberal liberties,⁵⁰ and assuming that they should not be limited would be

⁴⁷ In general, our duties regarding the well-being of others turn on facilitating their own achievement of it rather than on directly giving it to them. Joseph Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8-10.

⁴⁸ On how this point helps respond to some liberal worries about state neutrality, see Erik Wright, “Eroding Capitalism: A Comment on Stuart White's ‘Basic Capital in the Egalitarian Toolkit’”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32 (2015), 432-9, at 433-4.

⁴⁹ Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 25-6.

⁵⁰ For defense of this claim against right-libertarian criticisms, see Samuel Freeman, “Illiberal Libertarians: Why Libertarianism is Not a Liberal View,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2001), 105-51. On the compatibility of liberalism

question-begging when we are precisely trying to assess whether their limitation is acceptable. I note also, fourth, that the argument includes democratic political freedoms in the normative package. As free and equal citizens, all affected individuals have rights to shape and contest the policies that limit competition and enhance the social conditions of their self-esteem.

Turning to the second objection, I grant that competition can incentivize production. But I note, first, that the view that unlimited competition is required for maximal productivity is not empirically uncontroversial. Economic activity featuring versions of M1-M10 could yield comparable levels of productivity. Examples include the German system of co-determination giving workers greater self-determination within firms and economic sectors,⁵¹ the success of some cooperatives,⁵² and the greater growth in capitalist economies under social-democratic policies when compared to neoliberal ones.⁵³ More dramatically, some have argued that productivity in a market socialist economy could compare well with a capitalist one.⁵⁴ Second, the significance of productivity can itself be questioned. Production of objects for consumption is surely important, but so is the protection of the environment and leisure time (with the personal and public goods facilitated by it). If an already materially advanced economy enacting M1-M10 features less production but more of the other goods, then it might still be all things considered preferable. Finally, and relatedly, we can insist that self-esteem has great weight. A social system that supports it strengthens people's access to an extremely important good, and enables them to pursue and enjoy other goods more effectively. It is not clear that this achievement should be traded off to have even more stuff to consume.

Consider finally the third objection, which worries that implementing M1-M10 would conflict with attending to the claims of merit. What are the claims of merit? They could track the moral claims of those who have chosen to develop and use their talents to benefit others in society. If this is what they are, then M7, which calls for focus on effort of this kind, already caters for them. But if the view is that people have a moral claim to greater rewards on account of the part of their contribution that depends on their luck in having certain capacities that others lack, then it seems that we do not really have *moral* reason to accept it. The main issues here would be, instead, one about the feasibility of people actually developing and exercising their greater capacities if they do not get especial rewards for doing so, and another about all-things-considered practical judgment as to whether we should give them those rewards to get the benefits of their performance despite the morally problematic inequality in access to self-esteem and other benefits that would result.

Reaching a lucid judgment on these matters is difficult. It would require assembling empirical resources from biology, social psychology, and sociology about the feasibility of mechanisms favoring or diminishing motivation to engage in productive activities and their impact on self-esteem. For example, an evolutionary account of why competitiveness is so common might be plausible. Those who triumph in competition likely attract mates and survive and reproduce more. But tendencies to limit competition to secure stable cooperation were likely also selected for, as groups exhibiting strong cooperation are more effective in feeding their members and prevailing in conflict with other groups in

with socialism, see Martin O'Neill, "Social Justice and Economic Systems: On Rawls, Democratic Socialism, and Alternatives to Capitalism." *Philosophical Topics* 48 (2020), 159-202.

⁵¹ Thomas Piketty argues that in cases like this, greater self-determination of workers increases their productivity. See *Capital et Ideologie* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 512, 578-98, 1118-22. Workers with lower social status and self-esteem are reported to experience more burnout. Avita Johnson, Rakesh Jayappa, Manisha James, Avono Kulnu, Rajitha Kovayil, Bobby Joseph, "Do Low Self-Esteem and High Stress Lead to Burnout Among Health-Care Workers? Evidence From a Tertiary Hospital in Bangalore, India," *Safety at Health and Work* 11 (2020), 347-52.

⁵² Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 3-4, 234-46.

⁵³ Piketty, *Capital et Ideologie*, 633-7.

⁵⁴ John Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). David Schweickart, "Economic Democracy" (2016), at <https://thenextsystem.org/node/204>. For discussion, see Giacomo Corneo, *Is Capitalism Obsolete?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

disputes over limited resources.⁵⁵ Similarly complex considerations likely apply to competition between groups, accounting for in-group versus out-group patterns of preferences.⁵⁶ According to sociological research, the search for distinctive social status is widespread, but so is the tendency to moderate it so that social esteem is granted to those who are competent and willing to contribute to the well-being of others rather than to simply hand it out to those who are powerful and ruthless.⁵⁷ Finally, social systems vary in their competitiveness. Capitalism is more competitive than socialism. And different forms of each can display different degrees. Neoliberal capitalism is more competitive than monopoly capitalism, while market socialism is more competitive than a planned socialist economy.

In general, the exploration of our topic has to reckon with two possible points that speak in favor of accepting competition. First, notwithstanding the qualifications made in answering the second objection, competition may have instrumental value as a stimulant for people to develop and use their talents. In this way, it can increase production and economic efficiency, and help deliver things that people care about. Second, competitive tendencies may be deeply lodged in human beings' psychology, so that although different social systems may exacerbate them more or less, they can be expected to remain important motivational factors. Competitiveness seems especially acute in capitalism, but a requirement to build a society that completely does away with competition might be infeasible. So, in the end, practical judgment might not recommend wholly eliminating competitive patterns of social life but to limit them by identifying their proper (all things considered socially convenient) place, framing their scope, and surrounding them with arrangements that engage the ten mechanisms discussed, so that overall people's self-esteem is much less dependent on how they do in competition.

To implement this perspective, we should take a closer look at how to shape opportunities for activities generating self-esteem. Here it is helpful to consider Williams' distinction between different ways in which the goods an opportunity opens access to might be scarce. The goods might be necessarily, contingently, or fortuitously scarce: it could be simply impossible for the goods to be accessible to all (as with inherently positional goods), they could be widely accessible but on condition of having certain aptitudes which not all have (as when certain specific skills are required for a job), or they could be dependent upon certain material conditions which do not obtain in extensive ways (as when relevant resources are limited).⁵⁸ To support the social conditions of self-esteem, we could structure opportunities so that there is less social focus on the significance of goods of the first kind. We could foster the creation of, and better and more extensive training for, access to the goods of the second kind. Finally, we could encourage technological innovation that expands the resources to support goods of the third kind. The remaining frustration in not getting positions one wanted can be reduced by shaping the cultural script justifying the positions in the social structure in such a way that their point is not so much to give those

⁵⁵ For empirical evidence debunking the common picture of the *homo economicus*, showing that tendencies to altruism and reciprocity are widespread across cultures and history, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *The Cooperative Species* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ See White, *Equality*, 160 n.3 for empirical hypotheses and research on human tendencies to dominance and cooperation. For the recurrence of "us vs. them" tribal thinking, see Aronson and Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 29-32, 105-6, 270-1, 256, 276. However, the extent to which people's tendencies (such as aggression) actually get activated depends on social circumstances (Ibid., 205ff, 247-9). For the recurrence of self-assessment via social comparison and competition, see Ibid., 43-4, 248-9. Stereotyping and looking down on others (e.g. on out-groups) can bolster our self-esteem (Ibid. 276); but so can increasing cooperation and interdependence (Ibid., 290-9).

⁵⁷ Ridgeway, *Social status*. Ridgeway argues that totally eliminating social status as a form of inequality may not be feasible because the mechanisms underpinning it are deeply rooted in human culture. To solve problems of coordination and distribution in contexts featuring cooperative and competitive interdependence, people tend to form status beliefs favoring individuals thought to be more competent and ready to produce what the group values. But status hierarchies can be moderated through cultural changes that alter the content of status beliefs so that they do not single out membership in social groups such as class, gender, or race as a basis for expecting performative competence.

⁵⁸ Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in Williams, *In the Beginning was The Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 97-114, at 109.

who get them what they deserve, but that having people in such positions who are competent in their tasks will benefit everyone.⁵⁹ This involves a version of M6, reducing the harm to self-esteem in a context of competition by increasing the impartial appreciation of social outcomes. This mechanism, when constrained as it should by M9, would also discourage those occupying positions desired by others from bragging about their station and their achievements, as well as from expecting and bargaining for more support for their own well-being than for that of others (for example by asking for more public acts of recognition, greater salaries, and other perks).⁶⁰ As noted, these mechanisms could work in synergy with mechanisms M4 and M5 fostering immersion and social combination, so that self-esteem is envisioned not so much as a matter of competitive triumphs but as the satisfaction with oneself that results from working with others to do and make valuable things.

5. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

Is the limitation of competition really a good idea? A critic might say that since self-esteem is inherently a comparative phenomenon, and competition increases the occasions for individuals to emerge and be appreciated as better than others in some activity or other, we support individuals' self-esteem best by fostering rather than limiting competition. If we contrast the generalized competition in contemporary capitalism with the fixed and arbitrary hierarchies in pre-modern times, we can see that the prospects for self-esteem have improved. When it creates certain problems, we could introduce regulations that reshape competition so that it also serves other socially desirable goals (such as the protection of liberty and economic efficiency).

This paper has resisted the premises of this critical argument. It is not true that self-esteem is necessarily tied to comparison and competition. Some self-esteem can, and should, be achieved without comparisons with others, and some comparisons can, and should, be arranged in ways that do not involve winning in competitive contests. The mechanisms explored in section 3 provide many examples of ways to increase individuals' access to the social conditions of self-esteem that limit competition. On the other hand, I have acknowledged in section 4 that some instances of self-esteem will likely involve competition, that people's civil liberties must be respected, and that competition could have instrumental benefits. So, to be all things considered feasible and reasonable, an appropriate approach to the social conditions of self-esteem will likely allow for some degree of competition. But the only alternatives are not the fixed social hierarchies of feudal times and the intensely competitive outlook of contemporary capitalism. We can envision dynamics of social change that implement M1-M10. These engage all three patterns of limitation of competition—partial elimination, containment, and reshaping. Although they do not enjoin the complete eradication of competition, they chart a path in which individuals' distinctive features and contributions can unfold and gain recognition without having to proceed on competitive terms. Or so I have argued.

As noted, fostering the social conditions of self-esteem is partly a matter of the cultivation of a new social ethos. Social critique, of the kind undertaken in this paper, has a role in this process. We can identify certain historically specific patterns of pursuit of self-esteem that are problematic. For example, the extreme emphasis in achieving self-esteem through triumph in competition is arguably specific to capitalism. Capitalism forces people to compete relentlessly to survive—if they are workers to get jobs and preserve them, if they are entrepreneurs to establish new firms and keep them profitable. It is true, however, that capitalism itself has had different historical incarnations. When moderated by a welfare state, people have some security of access to some goods independently of the rat race. By contrast, in

⁵⁹ Niko Kolodny argues that the justification of these positions and their allocation can be instrumental, targeting impartially valuable outcomes. See *The Pecking Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), sect. 6.3.

⁶⁰ On the moral odiousness of this attitude, see G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), Part I.

its neoliberal incarnation, the rat race increases. Already in its difference from feudalism and other pre-capitalist societies, capitalism generates a social environment in which people's paths are not so determined by initial social station, so that they have more opportunities to choose what they do with their lives—what jobs to pursue, for example. But in its neoliberal incarnation, this engagement of individual responsibility is intensified: jobs are more flexible, career-paths within firms are less fixed, etc. This is to some extent liberating and exhilarating, allowing for new possibilities to gain self-esteem through authentic individual pursuits. But it also heightens the rat race and the uncertainties and anxieties linked to it, and with them the costs on self-esteem—as expectations of individual achievement go unmet and failures to emerge or remain distinctive pile up. The cultural emphasis on individual responsibility is exaggerated and obscures the significance of the social environment in determining the extent to which people achieve good lives. It becomes an ideological script. It includes false beliefs about what causes what in social life—a large-scale version of what social psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error,” which consists in giving too much explanatory weight to individuals' personal dispositions and choices and not enough to social circumstances.⁶¹ Furthermore, it contributes to legitimizing terms of social organization that benefit some people more than others (in particular the capitalist employers who no longer need to comply with the now dismantled regulations imposed by the welfare state to support their workers), and which are historically contingent and could be changed. The script tells you: “If you are worse off it is your own fault, the system has given you the chances you needed and you just blew it; stop complaining and try harder!”

A critical counter-script would respond: “The system is shaped so that failure is likely; but it is a social creation and we could do better through collective action that changes it.” I recall a picture of a graffiti on a wall on an Argentine street that said: “It wasn't depression, it was capitalism.” A plausible interpretation of its message is that we should recognize that the causes of our miseries are not reducible to our personalities or individual choices, but involve (also) the social circumstances in which we act. The response to our problems cannot just be therapy (although that surely can help). It must also be politics.

There is a dialectic of self-esteem. Adorno and Horkheimer identified a “dialectic of Enlightenment,” noticing that ideals of freedom and reason have been turned against themselves through articulations of them in terms of domination.⁶² Similarly, we can identify a dialectic of self-esteem by noticing that articulations of it in terms of triumph in competitive rat races tend to undermine its achievement. Adorno and Horkheimer thought that the progressive response to the predicament of the Enlightenment is a “determinate negation” of it in which the positive values of freedom and reason are retained but developed in new ways that eschew domination (such as, for example, through deeper forms of democratic self-determination). Similarly, we can envision new ways to foster self-esteem that support people's reasonable interests in cultivating personal differentiation and worth. We can limit the hypercompetitive and egotistic patterns of the rat race, exploring instead the furtherance of mechanisms M1-M10.

This discussion bears on how to understand the crucial mechanism M9. Pivoting on dignity, and autonomy, can be understood in ideological terms. When this happens, individuals are unduly held to be completely responsible for their predicament, ignoring that it significantly depends on circumstances they do not fully control. It is not that their agency is not relevant at all. The right response is not to take oneself to be a helpless toy of external forces, but to lucidly understand the extent of one's power to reshape one's predicament. The power may not be as high as the ideological picture has it, but also not as low as a despondent (and in a way also ideological) view would suggest. Often, a key discovery will

⁶¹ Aronson and Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 377.

⁶² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

be that certain social exercises of self-determination could greatly alter individuals' situation.⁶³ Envisioning new social institutions and practices that enact the mechanisms supporting self-esteem discussed in this paper would be a dynamic instance of an appropriate, critical and emancipatory attitude, which pivots on our dignity and gives it the appreciation it deserves.⁶⁴

⁶³ We can see this attitude at play when activist workers respond to the neglect of their rights by engaging in collective action to create unions that defend them. An example is the first successful campaign of unionization by Amazon workers in the United States. The company tried to defeat this collective effort, and insisted with the script that individuals would do better on their own. "In an unsigned statement on its corporate blog, Amazon said, 'We're disappointed with the outcome of the election in Staten Island because we believe having a direct relationship with the company is best for our employees'." Karen Weise and Noam Scheiber, "Amazon Workers on Staten Island Vote to Unionize in Landmark Win for Labor," *New York Times*, 1 April 2022.

⁶⁴ For comments and conversations, I thank a referee, Arash Abizadeh, Emil Andersson, Elizabeth Brake, Kimberley Bronwlee, Simone Chambers, Tom Christiano, Andrée-Anne Cormier, Guy Davidov, Anca Gheaus, Bob Goodin, Robert Hickey, Niko Kolodny, Colin Macleod, Nadine Medawar, Julio Montero, Ryan Pevnick, Veronica Ponce, Ingrid Robeyns, Jules Salomone-Sehr, Jiewuh Song, Daniel Weinstock, and audiences at the Social Justice Theory Workshop, Centro de Investigaciones Filosóficas (Buenos Aires), Université de Montréal, Queen's University, Rice University, the "Philosophy and Social Science" Conference, and the American Political Science Association Congress.