

"Toward a Full Theory of Self-Esteem: Part I"

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Part I

Philosophers do not pay much attention to self-esteem, any more. For about a decade after John Rawls' publication of *A Theory of Justice*, there was a small flurry of scholarship commenting on his discussion of self-esteem, which he at that time did not distinguish from self-respect. But for nearly the past decade, not much has been added to what has become almost a received view that Rawls had it right about self-esteem—that it is based, roughly, on beliefs in the excellence of one's capacities to achieve goals one takes to be important—but that self-respect is a different concept, probably based on something to do with morality (either on our capacity for it, or on rights.¹)

In the disciplines of psychology and sociology, however, the last decade has been a veritable bee-hive of scholarly activity surrounding self-esteem.² In September, 1986, the State of California found room in its budget for over a quarter of a million dollars a year for three years to study the relationship between self-esteem and social

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¹ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 1971, p. 440-446; David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Esteem from Self-Respect", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, 4, 1981, p. 346-360; and Larry Thomas, "Morality and Our Self-Concept", *Journal of Value Inquiry* 12, 1978, p. 268-78; John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique", *Ethics* 93, 1983, p. 225-245; Stephen J. Massey, "Is Self-Esteem a Moral or a Psychological Concept?", *Ethics* 93, 2, Ja83, p. 246-261; for Rawls' later acknowledgement of the self-esteem/self-respect distinction, see his "Justice as Fairness: Political, Not Metaphysical", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14, Summer, 1985, p. 223-251 (note 33.)

² Scheff, Retzinger, and Ryan refer to "several thousand quantitative studies", reported since 1979, of the relationship between self-esteem and crime and violence alone, in "Crime, Violence, and Self-Esteem", in Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos, ed.s, *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem* (hereafter, *SISE*) (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1989, p. 177.

problems.³ If there is a received view emerging among the reviewers of the literature in those disciplines, it is two-fold: first, that self-esteem is very important and connected with key social problems; and, second, that no one has an acceptable analysis of the concept of self-esteem, either for theoretical or empirical purposes.⁴

One might hope that a discipline in need of logical analysis of a concept would turn to philosophers for help, but it is fairly clear that not much interdisciplinary cooperation of that sort has occurred.⁵ As I will argue, however, the apparently settled analyses of the philosophers are not characterized by anywhere near the complexity necessary to cover the range of phenomena of which social scientists seek to offer an interpretation.

In Part I of this essay, I will offer a general account of self-esteem which makes room for a number of psychologically possible varieties of self-esteem. Since both philosophers and social scientists are interested in the connection between self-esteem and human well-being, I will present criteria for assessing the adequacy of different kinds of self-esteem. After showing that other prominent varieties, including the one Rawls identified as a primary human good, fail to meet these criteria, I will—in Part II—present an account of the nature and development of a particular variety of self-esteem which succeeds in measuring up to them. Throughout and in summary, I will show how the analysis of self-esteem I offer

³ See Vasconcellos, *SISE*, p. xvii.

⁴ See Neil Smelser's review of the reviews of the literature, "Self-Esteem and Social Problems", in *SISE*, esp. p. 18, 19.

⁵ A survey of the seven bibliographies included in *SISE* shows not a single reference to any articles by philosophers analyzing self-esteem and self-respect. (Philosophers, on the other hand, at least occasionally have cited psychologists: for example, Bandura, Coopersmith, Piers and Singer, and Rosenberg are variously cited by Rawls, Thomas, Deigh, and Massey.)

promises to explain the phenomena covered by other analyses, while overcoming the limitations facing those analyses.

I

To fully support my claim that philosophers standardly treat of the phenomena surrounding self-esteem with insufficient attention to the complexity of those phenomena, I would need to present the phenomena in question in their complexity: not the sort of thing of which journal articles are made, not for which philosophers are standardly qualified. What I hope to accomplish instead, in this first section, is to uncover just enough of the complexity involved—at the price, perhaps, of inconsistent depth of treatment—to both show how standard analyses of self-esteem fail to cover the entire range of relevant phenomena, and to ground a more adequate account of self-esteem in later sections.

Human beings are a kind of being who in virtue of their complex principle of organization are capable of being acted upon by their environment in a range of ways we call apprehension: from simple sensation, through various levels of abstract reasoning. Our environment produces in us sensations, awarenesses, beliefs, etc.; all these apprehendings, at whatever level, amount to stimuli, input from our environment, which in turn elicit a corresponding range of responses: emotion, desire, aversion, intention, choice, and various motor activities.⁶ All such responses can be considered inclinations of various kinds. These inclinations are

⁶ I am making no attempt to precisely characterize the range of responses to apprehensive input, in this list. Motor activities seem to be sometimes moved more immediately by sensation (reflex reactions), and sometimes by emotional or volitional responses (more or less voluntary motor activities.) Since I am concerned in this essay with psychological phenomena, I will make no further reference to motor activity in discussing responses to apprehension.

likewise part of the environment we can apprehend; that is, we can apprehend these responses to our apprehendings, and when we apprehend them we respond in turn to these responses. (We can be ashamed of our own enjoyment of a certain activity, for example.)

In general, we respond in some way to whatever we apprehend. From the vast range of our capacities for apprehension, including our capacity for reflection (i.e., for apprehending our own apprehendings and our responses to these), emerges an unfathomably complex array of psychological phenomena. Our concepts pick out some aspects and combination of aspects of these phenomena and their interrelationships: the ones we have especially noticed, or about which have had reason to communicate. It would be a society highly attentive to this interior life which had as common currency the conceptual resources to adequately discuss the depths of these complex psychological phenomena. Ours does not seem to be such a society.

To explore a bit of the complexity of the particular psychological phenomena connected with what is commonly called self-esteem, let us first attend to a few of the features of the relationship between the cognitive (apprehensive) and the affective/intentional (reactive) aspects of our interaction with our environment.⁷

Among the features of the world which impinge on our *apprehensive field* (the totality of cognitive input) are certain relationships between apprehended phenomena, notably, that of temporal priority, and obtainability. When we

⁷ Here and hereafter I am using "cognitive" to cover the full range of human apprehensive capacities, from simple sensation to abstract reasoning. By keeping the distinction between the affective and the intentional, I mean to refer roughly to the distinction between the sensory and rational appetite as conceived of in Thomistic rational psychology; i.e., between the passions, and the will.

apprehend a state of affairs as not yet actual, but obtainable (actualizable), and at the same time incline toward it in some way, the apprehended state of affairs is an *end* for us. When we apprehend *that* we have some inclination toward that object or state of affairs, we apprehend *that* it is an end for us. When we apprehend a state of affairs as not yet actual, but actualizable from the actual state of affairs, and that bringing about that state of affairs would be conducive to the actualization of some other state of affairs which functions as an end for us, that first state of affairs is apprehended as a *means* to that end.

Any apprehended object can function for us as a means, an end, or both (at the same time, and in any number of respects). Any such object can function in these ways, moreover, in virtue of anything about that object toward which the apprehending agent can have inclination. The significance of these features of the human psyche for understanding self-esteem-related phenomena will become clear just below.

Leaving unresolved problems surrounding our knowledge of the existence of our own or other minds, let us adopt as a working hypothesis the claim that human beings can apprehend human beings--themselves, and others--in their various aspects and relationships: aspects about them which we attend to when we notice who they are, what they are, where they are, when, why, and how.⁸ All such questions about human beings point to various aspects of their being, including aspects of their relationships with other things we apprehend. Our apprehendings of various aspects of human beings--of ourselves, included--constitute the cognitive (apprehensive) elements of our relationships with human beings. Our reactions/responses (I do not mean to distinguish these) to our apprehendings

⁸ I might instead have listed Aristotle's ten categories.

constitute the affective/intentional aspects of those relationships. But since we can apprehend these affective/intentional aspects, the cognitive and the affective/intentional aspects of those relationships will be interrelated in highly complex ways.

We employ concepts like "concept" and "conception" to describe our apprehension of various objects, including persons, including ourselves. The notion of a *self-concept* or *self-conception* covers our apprehension of any and all aspects of ourselves, including our relationships to other things we apprehend.⁹ Among the things which we perceive about ourselves are the various reactions we have to other things we perceive about ourselves: we may know that we like our hair color; we may be aware that we wish we were the kind of person who attracted more loyal friends. Our self-conception, then, inextricably involves both cognitive and affective/intentional elements, but the latter always through the former.

Affective/intentional aspects of our relationships to objects we apprehend are picked out by evaluative concepts, and by "esteem" and "respect", in particular. We

⁹ A full account of the self-concept would require at least a phenomenological, developmental, and conceptual analysis of "self", which I am not nearly prepared to give. Since the account of self-esteem I offer here makes reference to the self-concept, the account of self-esteem offered can be only a partial one; hence, this paper's title. What I do mean to say about the self-concept is that it should be understood as a subset of the *cognitive* dimensions of a rational being's relationship to the world, including affective dimensions of that relationship only insofar as those affective dimensions are apprehended. Thus, the account of "self-conception" I propose differs from Rosenberg's account of self-conception as the "totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object". Since there will always be some level of reaction to apprehension which is not itself apprehended (though it may be apprehendable), it does not seem right to include all of an individual's feelings (or even intentions) about himself or herself as part of that individual's self-conception. Only what is *apprehended*--and this does include many, can (perhaps) include any, but does not include all affective/intentional dimensions of an individual's relationship with himself or herself--is part of that individual's self-conception, I would suggest. Self-esteem, it will soon be clear, is closely connected with but not simply a part of a person's self-conception, then. See Rosenberg's *Conceiving the Self* (NY: Basic Books) 1979, p. 7, cited favorably in Bhatti, et al., "The Association Between Child Maltreatment and Self-Esteem" in Mecca, et al., *SISE*, p. 36.

say that a wide-receiver has respect for a defensive secondary when he apprehends that its members stand in relationship to states of affairs toward which he has inclination: when he apprehends, that is, their capacities to inflict completion-interrupting or even career-ending blows. One can value, have esteem for, or respect any apprehended object in virtue of anything about that object which one can apprehend as relevant to anything one cares about. I propose that we consider esteem or respect for self--or for any person--in the same sense that a player may have respect for his or her opponent, or an artisan for his or her tools. One can esteem, respect, or value any person--oneself, or another--as a means, as an end, or as both, in virtue of any number and combination of aspects of our conception of ourselves or of another which we can apprehend as connected to anything we apprehend and incline toward. Just below we will consider some of the more important varieties of the kinds of respect/value/esteem in question. Before doing so, however, we should notice that in light of the complexity of the possible relationships between an apprehending agent and aspects of that agent's environment covered by his or her self-conception, it seems on the face of it overly-simple to talk about "self-esteem" or "self-respect" as if these concepts referred to some single psychological phenomenon, or even to phenomena adequately captured by just a few distinctions like those of the psychological vs. moral¹⁰, self-esteem vs. self-respect¹¹, worthy plans of life vs. excellences in ability and one ground of excellence vs. another¹², inner vs. outer self-esteem, etc.¹³ (A similar point could be made for respect for others, or from others.)

¹⁰ Stephen J. Massey, "Is Self-Esteem a Moral or a Psychological Concept", *Ethics* 93, 2, Ja83, p. 246-261.

¹¹ David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Esteem from Self-Respect", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, 4, 1981, p. 346-360; and Larry Thomas, "Morality and Our Self-Concept", *Journal of Value Inquiry* 12, 1978, p. 268-78.

¹² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 1971, p. 440-446; and John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique", *Ethics* 93, 1983, p. 225-245.

II

It should already be clear that affective/intentional aspects of our relationship with elements of our self-conception--aspects often lumped together under the heading "self-esteem"¹⁴--will admit of at least the following species: we can value ourselves in virtue of what we take ourselves to be, essentially; we can value ourselves in virtue of any subset of our capacities or other attributes (and these, either potentially or actually developed), or in virtue of any subset of our apprehended relationships with other things or other persons, or in virtue of any combination from among these several varieties. Moreover, any of these features might be valued for its own sake--as an end--or, as a means, for the sake of its apprehended connection with something else we value.¹⁵

¹³ For an overview of this and other distinctions recognized in recent psychological literature, see Bhatti, et al., in *SISE*, p. 36-37.

¹⁴ One might believe that a certain feature about oneself is valuable, and *intend* to maintain that feature, yet not "feel" especially good about it. Similarly, one might *feel* good about a feature one does not believe is good, and intends--in spite of one's feelings about it--to change. Self-esteem seems to involve both intentional and affective dimensions of a person's relationship with his or her self-conception. To give a full account of self-esteem, then, a full account of the relationship between the will and the passions must serve as the foundation. To sketch a few key features of that relationship, according to Thomistic rational psychology: the passions can move the will indirectly, either by sapping the energy of the will, or by affecting rational apprehension, to which all acts of will are responses. The will can move the passions, also, either indirectly by intending to change the causes of those passions insofar as the intellect apprehends them, or directly and unintentionally: Aquinas thought that strong movements of the will "spilled over" into the passions, and moved them (without the intellect's having apprehended this potential movement, and thus without the will having intended it.) Mental health, then, would require a) that one's emotional reactions tend to prompt thoughts leading to good choices; b) that the intellect and will interact in a way tending to promote good choices; and c) that the will's unintentional effects on the passions operate in a way promoting the state of affairs described in a). Some of these matters are discussed in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 30, a. 3, ad 1, 2 and q. 77, a. 5 and a. 6.

¹⁵ To value features about ourselves is not strictly the same as to value ourselves in virtue of those features. It is one thing to apprehend a given feature about ourselves, and another to apprehend ourselves as possessing that feature: I may be quite aware of my money, and be glad that I have it, but not think of myself as a person with money. People may more closely identify themselves with certain dimensions of their self-concepts, than with others, as Rawls and Sartre seem to have done with their commitments, and others with their intellectual or moral capacities, or certain of their relationships.

Thus, there is a distinction between valuing oneself as an end, versus as a means, and it cuts across the distinctions among the various bases of valuing oneself. If one values oneself in virtue of one's apprehended capacity to gain the approval of others, one may indeed have in some respect a high opinion of oneself—an opinion which would likely score highly on various instruments used to measure self-esteem¹⁶—even while it is the case that what one values as an end is the acceptance of others. In fact, one may (but need not) value acceptance of others because of insecurity about one's worth, using the acceptance/approval of others as evidence that one really is a worthy person, after all.¹⁷ Thus, knowing how well a person perceives others to think of him or her, in some area that person judges to be important, by itself tells us far too little about the affective/intentional dimensions of that individual's relationship to his or her own self-concept; that is, about that individual's "self-esteem". Thus, the distinction between valuing oneself as an end, in virtue of some set of capacities, *versus* valuing oneself as a means is important for the assessment of the adequacy of one's attitude toward oneself, whether that assessment is cast (as philosophers are wont) in terms of wellbeing, or (as the psychologists would have it) in terms of mental health.

If we adopt as a definition of self-esteem *the affective/intentional dimensions of an individual's relationship with his or her own self-concept*, it will be clear that self-

¹⁶ For overviews of a number of leading instruments used to evaluate self-esteem, see Bhatti, et al., p. 39ff; Crockenberg & Soby, p. 158-161; and Skager & Kerst, p. 258,9, all in *SISE*.

¹⁷ Rawls' analysis of self-respect (see p. 441 of his *Theory of Justice*) seems undergirt with the assumption that human beings suffer from this defect almost universally. Covington's distinction between success-oriented students vs. what he calls overstrivers seems to illustrate the inadequacy of valuing oneself as a means: even a successful overstriver, who works to achieve the esteem of others and the accompanying sense of worth, is likely impaired in his or her educational pursuits (which amount to a pursuit of a sense of worth, instead of learning for its own sake.) See Covington, *SISE*, p. 93,4.

esteem consists of a considerable number of very different aspects.¹⁸ Any positive experiences of human life can contribute to an individual's self-esteem, so defined, since an individual can reflect (not necessarily at the level of consciousness, or full awareness) on those experiences, and be glad to be the thing which has those experiences. "I am daddy's special girl" (the positive experiences are of being loved, of belonging, of security, . . .); "I am a good reader" (where the relevant positive experiences are the joy associated with reflection on the read subject matter, or a sense of accomplishment); "I am the best athlete in my class (where the positive experiences might range from anticipated belonging, to a sense of accomplishment, to a sense of purpose); we could continue.

An individual can experience the value of having the capacities to engage in whichever aspects of life toward which he or she is inclined. Those capacities may be valued instrumentally, that is, as means, since these capacities enable one to participate in the modes of life toward which one is inclined. Capacities/attributes can be valued for their own sake, as ends, on the other hand, because they are admirable, excellent, beautiful, etc., in their own right. Intelligence, for example, can be admired, apart from the fact that being intelligent is useful for obtaining other things. Political power, beauty, reliability, truthfulness, physical strength, the capacity to love, to plan, to adapt, etc.: any and all of these may be valued for what they may play a role in obtaining for us--a sense of belonging, a chance to communicate, a sense of purpose, physical pleasure, etc.--or for their own sake.

¹⁸ It is now clear from the definitions of self-conception and self-esteem given here that neither is strictly a subset of the other, though there will be considerable overlap, since (it seems likely) we can apprehend any given aspect of our affective/intentional relationship to any aspect of our self-concept. There will always be an at least temporarily last level of apprehension, though, and a reaction to that apprehension which is not itself apprehended. So a great deal of our self-esteem will be included in our self-concept (as apprehended object), and any aspect of our self-esteem may (on the assumption of a fully reflexive relationship between cognition and affection/intention) become part of our self-concept, but some (unspecified) part of our self-esteem will remain outside our self-concept.

Thus, self-esteem admits of many varieties. One can value oneself, as a means, in virtue of some single or of some combination of any of a variety of capacities, apprehended as suitably connected with states of affairs toward which one is inclined. (In this connection, we should notice that one's own continued existence can be valued instrumentally, in this way: without it, we can not get things that we want.) On the other hand, one may value oneself, as an end, in virtue of any one or more capacities/attributes judged worth having for their own sake; that is, which are perceived in such a way as to elicit an overall positive affective or intentional reaction, which reaction would stand independently of judgements about the actual usefulness of those capacities for obtaining other goods in the future. One's own continued existence can be valued in this way, as well: one can appreciate the fact that being a human being is a fine and excellent thing, not only on account of the particular subset of the goods of human life in which one is likely to participate in one's own lifetime.

An individual's capacities, valuable as either or both means and ends, can be valued insofar as they are well-developed, or potentially able to become developed. If valued as ends, any such capacities can be also be valued even when their continuing in a developed state has been impeded, by, say, the passing into old age.¹⁹ (This is why an individual may retain self-esteem based on his or her past accomplishments--evidences of once-developed capacities--even while the

¹⁹ If the period when the impediment was introduced was early childhood, one might suppose a sufficiently attentive individual could value himself or herself in virtue of those impeded capacities, nonetheless. The occasion whereby the individual came to appreciate the impeded capacity would of course be different, were he or she never to have experienced the capacity by exercising it, directly. This possibility will serve as an important indication that the kind of optimal self-esteem I will describe in a later section is psychologically possible.

individual is unable to duplicate those accomplishments, the relevant capacities having been diminished.)

III

There are other distinctions relevant to self-esteem which might warrant the attention of the empirical or clinical psychologist, but for the philosopher, enough has been said. The variety of kinds of self-esteem already presented is adequate to indicate that the phenomena surrounding the concept of self-esteem are indeed complex. The variety of kinds of self-esteem also suggests a question of interest to both the philosopher and the psychologists: of the many varieties (and degrees) of self-esteem now seen to be possible, which are productive or constitutive of the psychological health/well-being of human beings; which, that is, are good for us? To present any variety of self-esteem as more or less adequate, one will need to make reference to criteria.

Without attending here to an analysis of what it is for anything to be good for a person²⁰, we can intuitively identify three intuitive criteria for any adequate self-esteem. Since we are our own constant companions, it is important--putting aside for now some qualifications which will be addressed later--that we have a favorable reaction toward ourselves; we would do well to enjoy our own company, that is. This criterion is usually captured by speaking of self-esteem as sufficiently high. We need self-esteem to be sufficiently stable, moreover, since it remains a good throughout the various stages of life. Thirdly, we need self-esteem to be connected

²⁰ My own analysis of what it is for anything to be good for a person is roughly an informed-desire account. I have developed such an account in "Traditions and Informed-Desire Accounts of 'Good'", yet unpublished. For a somewhat similar view, see Peter Railton, "Facts and Values", in *Phil Topics* XIV, No. 2, Fall 1986.

favorably with other important goods, so that our having the kind of self-esteem we have maximally fosters our obtainment of other important goods, such as a sense of belonging, friendship, a sense of purpose, etc. After proposing an account of optimal self-esteem in a later section, I'll describe these goods, and their connection with self-esteem, in greater detail. It should be noted that there is no guarantee that any psychologically possible variety of self-esteem can meet all of these criteria, or that only a single variety will be optimally suited for any given person, or that a single variety will best suit all human beings. Perhaps the best we can do is to rule out certain plainly inadequate varieties, against these criteria.

From the description of those possible varieties of self-esteem sketched thus far, we can easily identify kinds of self-esteem which will fail to meet one or more of these criteria. The second of the criterion mentioned, that of stability, enables an easy dismissal of some varieties of self-esteem as less than optimal.²¹ Were an individual to value himself or herself as a means, based upon any capacities whatsoever, the stability of that esteem would rest on factors external to that individual's possession of the capacities in question. If one's self-esteem were based upon personal appearance, for example, and if that appearance were valued in virtue of its apprehended connection to the admiration, approval, or acceptance of others, then that individual's perception of the worth of his or her personal appearance, and thus of himself or herself, could evaporate when a new kid moves to town.²² A person can lose self-esteem based on capacities valued only as means,

²¹ For now, I am assessing varieties of self-esteem taken from the domain of the logically possible, rather than the psychologically possible, since the latter domain takes much more work to characterize. Later, I will argue that a candidate shown to be optimal from the domain of the logically possible is indeed a member of the psychologically possible.

²² "Don't hate me, because I'm beautiful", the commercial has it. Why would anyone do that? There are a number of possible causes of this sort of envy, but one of those we might imagine is loss of self-esteem based upon personal appearance.

without losing any other real properties at all: Snow White's coming to live with the seven dwarfs did not alter the appearance of the wicked queen. Thus, self-esteem based on capacities valued as means only is threatened with a source of instability with which kinds of esteem based on capacities valued as ends are not.

Any self-esteem which is based upon developed capacities, though, can be lost if the capacities in question can be lost. Many capacities which do seem to provide bases for the self-esteem of many human beings can be lost in a way which results in loss of self-esteem: many of the abilities to accomplish the goals which are part of life-plans--the reference is to Rawls--are easily lost, for example. Some capacities erode with age; some can be lost to physical accidents. Even moral virtue, which we might understand as the capacity to act in accord with right reason, and with ease, is susceptible to erosion, though it is among the most stable bases for interpersonal relationships, and for a positive relationship with one's own self-concept, as well.²³ Since moral failure is so common an experience, one might look for a yet more stable base for (at least some aspects of) self-esteem.

Of course, there are any number of potential bases for self-esteem which are entirely stable, or at least entirely stable during the range of times at which self-esteem is at issue. The capacity to have a self-concept is a trivial example. Though it is not hard to find bases for self-esteem which meet the stability criterion, it is difficult indeed to find bases which both provide stability, and also meet the other two criteria. Having a self-concept, for example, is not an especially exciting feature about ourselves, and self-esteem based on it would be unlikely to be especially high. (We might call this dimension of the difficulty the unstable/unexciting dilemma.) Certainly, we can

²³ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b11 on the stability of virtue.

imagine people who are deeply aware of their capacities for self-conception, and yet lack especially rich self-esteem. (On this point, empirical psychologists might turn their instruments on themselves)

Two noteworthy special cases of the unexciting are the capacity to act morally, and the possession of rights. These cases are quite complicated, as we shall later see, and I will end up taking some of this back. What I mean to point out here is that mere recognition--enough for normal adult participation in the language surrounding these capacities and rights--that one possesses these candidate bases for self-esteem is insufficient to stir much excitement. Adults can acknowledge their possession of rights and capacities for acting morally, and yet remain largely unimpressed with life, their own included.²⁴ One can, of course, try to work up excitement about these human qualities; Rawls can be understood as trying to do something like this, in his creation of an entire social order which depends in part for its justification on its public support for the self-esteem of its citizens.²⁵ Such attempts founder, though, on the third criteria for adequacy. One runs the danger of fooling people into thinking that their mediocre lives are as wonderful as things get; in doing so, one may make them more comfortable with themselves, but at the expense of their recognizing and obtaining what is excellent. This line of argument must wait for further development until the connection between self-esteem and other important human goods has been sketched with a bit of substance, in a later section.²⁶

²⁴ See David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem", cited earlier, for a psychological description of one species of the genus of personality I have in mind.

²⁵ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* p. 178-79.

²⁶ The almost universal failure of attempts to improve education outcomes by making students feel better about themselves--the "student-centered" view surveyed by Covington in *SISE*, p. 78-82--illustrates the danger, the failure to meet the third criteria, to which I am referring here.

In spite of the potential abuses in the neighborhood, it may indeed be the case that deep reflection upon the significance of our capacity to act morally, or upon our rights, can prove significantly rewarding. Even if this were so, it would remain an open question as to the nature of the causal relationship between awareness of rights and self-esteem. I will argue that the causal relationship between morally adequate recognition of human rights and self-esteem is complicated and very different from the simple "recognition of rights causes self-respect" view.²⁷ In any case, the more appealing account of the nature and development of self-esteem I will propose below will serve to justify the claim that even if one could ground some not-too-harmful version of self-esteem on the recognition of the possession of rights, or of certain stable capacities, there is a version of self-esteem available which would be superior to it in every important respect.

Before presenting that account of optimal self-esteem, there is one more strategy to achieve stability which deserves mention. Just as the stability of a major ocean-going vessel is achieved not just through the strength of its hull, but by the number and placement of structurally-independent reasonably water-tight compartments, so might one seek to ground a stable and high self-esteem by developing a significant number of reasonably gratifying capacities, not most of which are likely to be lost at any one time. This "eggs-in-many-baskets" strategy seems quite healthy, at least at first glance; descriptors like "well-rounded" and "adaptable" come to mind. The healthy component of the strategy, and the reason why persons taking it are nearer to developing optimal self-esteem than many others, will become clear (I promise yet once more) in a later section. Here, let me point out some of the features of any

²⁷ For a discussion of some adherents of this simpler view, see Massey, "Is self-Respect a Moral or a Psychological Concept", p. 255-258.

self-esteem based primarily upon developed capacities which will be seen to rule out any such strategy as optimal.

First, this eggs-in-many-baskets strategy will preserve stability only under certain conditions. The process of aging becomes universally corrosive of self-esteem based on developed capacities, although perhaps not seriously corrosive for persons who are able to employ this strategy successfully.²⁸ What a drag it would be, being old, for a person whose sense of worth depended on the state of development of capacities which were slowly slipping away. (An older person could, of course, retain a sense of worth based on those capacities, were they considered not in virtue of the state of their development, but as indicators--whether underdeveloped, developed, impeded, whatever--of the excellence of being the kind of thing capable, at some level, of developing those capacities. But this attitude reveals a very different strategy, employable not only by the elderly or impaired. We will see more of it, later.)

The eggs-in-many-baskets strategy not only preserves stability only during a limited range of conditions; it also preserves a very particular level of esteem. One could imagine conceptually graphing the state of development of the capacities of any given person (plotting degree of development against kinds of capacities valued by a given person, S1.) The graphs of many persons would overlap in numerous places: person S1 is more developed in area A1 than S2, but S2 is more developed in A2

²⁸ This strategy is employed widely in our society, affecting both self-esteem, as well as respect for others (in a way which I will discuss in the section connecting optimal self-esteem with other important goods.) In my home state of Washington, we have an upcoming ballot measure--Measure 119--proposing to institutionalize this estimation of worth based upon developed capacities, by allowing the terminally ill--on their consent--to be killed by their physicians. The clear message to the elderly will be: "though you have every right to continue to live, it is pretty clear that our society considers your existence not worth preserving, since your capacities for living life of a sufficient quality have become so diminished

than is S1, etc. Some rough equality of impressiveness, of worth, would result for S1 among persons with different degrees of development of different capacities.

Yet some individuals would clearly be less well developed in virtually every area: the very young, the very impaired, and many of the very old. Others will excel in degree of development in virtually every area: Nietzsche's "noble soul" would be well developed in this way (or would die, trying.) Nietzschean self-esteem can be understood as being of just this variety: the noble soul measures worth in terms of strength, excellence, or of degree of development, across the spectrum of human natural capacities. Thus, the strategy of valuing oneself as an end, in virtue of the degree of development of a wide variety of capacities, achieves stability at the price of equality.²⁹

Inequality of worth may be an undesirable feature of this strategy for securing a sense of self-worth for a number of reasons. The strategy may fail, in various ways, against the third criterion for adequacy, namely, that of harmonizing with the attainment of other important goods. (The kinds of personal relationships possible for persons who valued human beings unequally in this way would surely be affected.) My concern here, though, is with the second criterion, that of stability. I will argue that a sense of inequality of worth threatens the stability of the self-esteem which produces it.

²⁹ Of course, to consider the implication of unequal worth a "price" of stability--without argument--is to beg the question against Nietzsche. It also begs the question against those, like Thomas and Sachs, who find a sharp distinction between self-esteem and self-respect. (They argue that the latter, but not the former, grounds a sense of the equal worth of persons.) My account of self-esteem reconceives of this distinction as recognizing importantly different bases for *regard* (to use a term neutral to the esteem/respect debate) for persons. See Larry Thomas, "Morality and Our Self-Concept", *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, v. 12 (1978); and David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, v. 10, no. 4 (1981).

Anyone who has shopped for a cut diamond will have experienced the drastic effect on perception of beauty produced by direct comparison between two stones of significantly different clarity (say, E with H.) In general, how excellent a capacity will seem to us often depends on our acquaintance with what is possible, and this is revealed by comparison. Thus, the recognition of excellence will work against any sense of self-esteem grounded on developed capacities. One can, of course, refuse to make comparisons to safeguard self-esteem, but apart from the negative impact of that strategy on the achievement of excellence (and hence of a more enjoyable life), this "ostrich" strategy against the threat of excellence will be difficult to execute successfully: excellence has a way of calling attention to itself.³⁰ So self-esteem based upon developed capacities—even upon a large number of varied capacities—would seem to produce some measure of a scramble to achieve and maintain capacities of sufficient prominence, relative to the capacities of those around us, so that self-esteem might be maintained.³¹ The stability of such self-esteem is undermined by the recognition of excellence.

IV

I have presented a case for the inadequacy of valuing oneself as an end, or as a means, based upon developed capacities of any sort (including the capacity to act morally) as strategies for arriving at optimal self-esteem, i.e., self-esteem which meets the three criteria of adequacy as closely as psychologically possible. One might ask, are any candidates left in the race for optimal self-esteem? Fortunately, a

³⁰ For Larry Thomas's criticism of John Rawls' version of this "ostrich" strategy, see Thomas, "Rawlsian Self-Respect and the Black Self-Consciousness Movement", *The Philosophical Forum* (Boston), 9, W/Sp '77-78, p. 305-306.

³¹ I am inclined to call this situation "the American Condition." In Christian traditions, it has been called "Pride".

wonderfully-suited candidate remains. All of the varieties of self-esteem thus far ruled out amount to valuing persons for what they can do, or for the particular ways in which they are developed. We might value human beings, instead, for what they are: human beings.³² It will take some space to unfold the account of optimal self-esteem I am proposing, and I will present that account by developing it around each of the three criteria for adequacy, making a case that there is a kind of self-esteem which is high, stable, and well-connected to other important human goods. The bulk of that argument is the subject of Part II of this essay, but a sketch of the presentation is not out of place here.

Whatever it may mean to value oneself based upon one's humanity, it surely involves basing one's self-esteem on one's essence, on what it is to be the kind of thing that one is. Since what is essential cannot be lost, the esteem in question—if there is some psychologically possible version of it—will be stable. What exactly is it, though, to value oneself based upon what one is, upon recognition of one's human nature? To explicate the view I have in mind, let us return first to an objection raised against some other bases for self-esteem which meet the test of stability. Some stable capacities, like the capacity to have a self-concept, or to act morally, or the like, seem insufficiently exciting to meet the second criteria of adequacy, that self-esteem be sufficiently high. Whatever one might mean by valuing oneself based upon one's humanity, won't it become impaled on just this same horn of the

³² I do not say persons, here. Human beings are very particular kinds of persons (though some think we are the only kind with actual instances.) Anyone who has seen the film "Aliens" can envision at least one other possible kind of person, about whom the question of value seems not to be settled. Were I to defend the view I am advocating against the charge of "speciesism", I would argue that it is in the real interests of human beings to value what it is to be a human being more highly than what it is to be other known species, and hence that morality requires us to prefer our own species to others, since morality is based (roughly) upon the common interests of individual moral agents. I have sketched an argument for this line of defense against the charge of speciesism in "Resanctifying Human Life", in Paul L. Williams, ed., *Recovering The Sacred* (Pittston, PA: Northeast Books) 1990, p. 83-99.

unstable/unexciting dilemma? After all, most all human beings know, at every time when self-esteem is an issue, that they are human beings, and yet many human beings remain unimpressed by that fact. How could it be otherwise?

We should begin to answer that question by noticing that there is a real distinction between knowing *that* something is what it is, and knowing what it is to be that thing. Most adults in our society can know that a certain object is a computer; far less common is an awareness of the nature and capabilities of any given kind of computer. So it is with human beings: it is one thing to be able under ordinary circumstances to identify one human being as the same kind of thing as another, but quite another to be aware of what it is to be a human being. We can call the latter side of this distinction "appreciation". It is possible—it sometimes happens in children—that a person know what human beings are, in the sense of knowing that (at least in the clear cases) something is a human being, and yet not even know that human beings die, let alone compose music, envision just societies, lay down their lives for friends, or even strangers. To such activities, as well, the distinction between (roughly) knowing that, and appreciating, applies. Music appreciation courses are intended to help with the latter, even while the former is pretty firmly in place, with respect to music. It is clear that valuing one's humanity in the sense of appreciating, or being deeply aware of, what it is to be a human being is not the same as being excited over knowing the species to which we belong.³³

³³ I should point out that this distinction between knowing that a thing is what it is, and appreciating what it is, serves the defender of other stable capacities as bases for adequate self-esteem or self-respect. Knowing that we have the capacity for acting morally is a far cry from understanding the significance of that capacity. Once the defender of that view makes use of the distinction I offer, though, the resulting view will be plainly near to the one I will offer, while just as plainly stopping short of my more adequate view, or so I hope to show in Part II.

What it *does* mean to value oneself in virtue of one's humanity will be made clear, in Part II of this essay, by showing how the familiar (and thus psychologically possible) strategy of basing self-esteem upon developed capacities can be improved, such that the three criteria for adequacy are more closely met. When this improved capacity-based strategy has been laid out, both the nature and psychological possibility of self-esteem based upon one's human nature will be manifest, since that optimal variety of self-esteem is but a step further along the very same pathway of development on which capacity-based self-esteem must proceed to more nearly meet the three criteria for adequate self-esteem. Once the optimal self-esteem has been presented in this way, it will be clear how it provides a stable basis for self-esteem without in any way succumbing to the charges that it is insufficiently exciting or inadequately connected with other important human goods.

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