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The Rationality of Valuing Oneself: A Critique of Kant on Self-Respect

CYNTHIA A. STARK

IN RECENT DECADES several philosophers have examined the notion of self-respect and illustrated its moral importance. Thomas E. Hill Jr., for instance, argues that the failure to properly value one's moral rights, which is exhibited by such characters as the Deferential Wife and the Uncle Tom, is a violation of a duty to oneself.¹ Robin Dillon shows the connection between self-respect and moral goods such as integrity, autonomy, and responsibility. She chronicles the suffering and diminishment of character experienced by those who lack self-respect, such as the Self-Doubter, the Slavishly Dependent, the Vaguely Self-Defining, the Complacent, and the Shameless, to name only a few.² And John Rawls tells us that self-respect is the most important primary social good; it is something that any rational agent would want, regardless of the content of her conception of the good.³ In spite of the effort to illustrate the significance of self-respect and its place in moral theory, very little attention has been given in contemporary views to *justifying* the idea that self-respect is an important moral good.⁴ This omission is remarkable, given that self-respect is often appealed to as a means of justifying various other philosophical claims or views. For example, Bernard Boxill argues that the disempowered ought to protest their subordination because this is a means of publicly claiming their self-respect.⁵ Joel Feinberg maintains that the value of moral rights rests in

¹ Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Servility and Self-Respect," *Monist* 57 (January 1973): 87–104.

² Robin Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (April 1992): 125–39.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 178–83, 440–46.

⁴ An exception is Larry Thomas, "Rawlsian Self-Respect and the Black Consciousness Movement," *Philosophical Forum* 9 (Winter 1977–78): 303–14.

⁵ Bernard Boxill, "Self-Respect and Protest," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (Fall 1976): 69.

their being necessary for the securing of self-respect, and B. C. Postow critiques the gendered division of labor that renders women economically dependent upon men on the ground that this practice has a negative impact on women's self-respect.⁶ The most famous philosophical expression of the idea that persons ought to respect themselves is given by Kant, who believed that self-respect is a duty. He says in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: "Humanity in [one's] person is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other man, but which he must also not forfeit. Hence he can and should value himself. . . . And this *self-esteem* [self-respect]⁷ is a duty of man to himself."⁸ Though most contemporary writers on self-respect tend to regard it as a right or an entitlement, rather than a duty, their characterizations of self-respect reveal that they are working more or less within the Kantian tradition.⁹ No doubt part of the reason they neglect to address the issue of justification is that they are covertly relying on Kant's justification of the value of self-respect. My aim in this paper is to offer a criticism of that justification. My criticism has two parts. First, I argue that Kant's argument for the duty of self-respect commits him to an implausible view of the nature of self-respect. In particular, I show that Kant holds, and indeed must hold, that failures of self-respect are deliber-

⁶ Joel Feinberg, "The Nature and Value of Rights," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 4 (1970): 252; B. C. Postow, "Economic Dependence and Self-Respect," *Philosophical Forum* 10 (Winter/Spring 1978-79): 181-205.

⁷ Kant typically refers to our duty to properly value our own humanity not as a duty of self-respect (*Selbstachtung*), but as a duty of self-esteem (*Selbstschätzung*). See *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 435 and *Vorlesungen über Moralphilosophie, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 27* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1979), 1486-87. (The page numbers in the former refer to the Akademie edition.) In his translation of the latter, Louis Infield is not consistent in translating *Selbstschätzung* as "self-esteem"; he sometimes translates it "self-respect." See *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1963), 126-27. Most contemporary authors distinguish between self-respect and self-esteem. See, for example, David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1980): 346-60 and Larry L. Thomas, "Morality and Our Self-Concept," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 12 (1978): 258-68. I use the word 'self-respect' throughout because it best captures, in light of the distinction made by contemporary writers, the attitude with which Kant is concerned.

⁸ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 435. I will understand the "humanity in [one's] own person" to refer to one's rational nature and capacity to set ends. See Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Humanity as an End in Itself," *Ethics* 91 (Oct. 1980): 84-99.

⁹ Examples of those who regard themselves as working in the Kantian tradition include Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Servility and Self-Respect," and his "Self-Respect Reconsidered," in *Respect for Persons, Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 31, ed. O. H. Green (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1982): 129-37. (Hill is an exception to the claim that most contemporary theorists do not regard self-respect as a duty.) See also Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88 (October 1977): 36-49 and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (especially sect. 40, "The Kantian Interpretation of Justice as Fairness"). Examples of those whose accounts contain Kantian themes include Elizabeth Telfer, "Self-Respect," *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 114-21; Larry L. Thomas, "Rawlsian Self-Respect," and "Morality and Our Self-Concept," and Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect."

ate or involve a kind of self-deception. This discovery has deep implications, I contend, for contemporary theories. Despite their affinity with Kant, it is clear that they do not share Kant's view of the nature of self-respect. Consequently, as we will see, they cannot rely upon his justification for the claim that persons ought to respect themselves.

Second, I show that the most tempting way to avoid the problem with Kant's view of self-respect, which is to attribute failures of self-respect to a defect of rationality, is indefensible. Such an account, I claim, commits one to a view of rationality that is incompatible with human psychology. At the end of the essay, I suggest an approach to justifying the value of self-respect that contains both a plausible account of failures of self-respect and a plausible view of the relation between self-respect and rationality.

1. THE GENERAL ARGUMENT

I begin with an outline of Kant's argument for the duty of self-respect. In very general terms, his justification has three stages. The first two are found in the *Groundwork* in the section where he derives the second formulation of the categorical imperative—the formula of the end in itself. The first stage consists in an argument for the claim that persons, as ends in themselves, ought never to be treated or treat themselves merely as a means but always as ends in themselves. In this stage, Kant can be understood as initially supposing that persons *are* ends in themselves, i.e., beings that possess an absolute value which he calls dignity, and then showing that on this ground they ought not to be treated merely as means to some other end, but must always be treated or treat themselves as an end. The second stage consists in an argument for the claim that persons are ends in themselves. The third major stage in Kant's argument for the duty of self-respect is contained in *The Metaphysics of Morals* where he presents his view of the nature of self-respect. He tells us there why respecting oneself is a duty and of what that duty is comprised. I will present a brief outline of each of these stages in order to provide the necessary background for a more detailed consideration of the third stage.¹⁰

The first stage is as follows:

- 1a. Suppose the humanity in persons is an objective end.¹¹
- 2a. An objective end has, by definition, absolute worth.¹²

¹⁰ For a more thorough consideration of the entire argument see Cynthia A. Stark, *Securing Self-Respect*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1993, 58–63.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 428. (Page numbers refer to the Akademie edition.) Kant does not so much *suppose* that persons are ends in themselves, as he *pronounces* it; he states: "Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself. . . ."

¹² *Ibid.*

3a. Something of absolute worth, by definition, may never permissibly be treated merely as a means but must always be treated as an end.¹³

4a. Therefore, if the humanity in persons is an objective end, then it has absolute worth and may never permissibly be treated merely as a means but must always be treated as an end.

The second stage of Kant's justification of the duty of self-respect is an argument for the supposition stated as the first premise of the reasoning outlined above. It can be reconstructed as follows:¹⁴

1b. Each of us necessarily conceives of the humanity in ourselves as conferring on us an absolute worth and requiring that we always be treated as an end and never merely as a means.¹⁵

2b. Each of us therefore recognizes that the humanity in others confers an absolute value on them and requires that they always be treated as ends and never merely as means.¹⁶

3b. Therefore the humanity in persons exists as an objective end or an end in itself.¹⁷

The third stage is as follows:

1c. The fact that persons are ends in themselves, or beings that have an absolute worth, requires that they be respected by others and by themselves.¹⁸

2c. To respect oneself is to view, and derivatively to treat, oneself as having a moral status equal to that of other persons.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Some claim that this argument is invalid. See, for example, Pepita Haezrahi, "The Concept of Man as an End-in-Himself," in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals: Text and Critical Essays*, trans. Lewis White Beck, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1985), 292–318; and H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947), 176. Elsewhere I argue that, properly understood, the argument is valid. See Stark, *Securing Self-Respect*, 57–58.

¹⁵ *Groundwork*, 429. Kant states: "Rational nature exists as an end in itself. This is the way in which a man necessarily conceives of his own existence . . ." (my emphasis). I am understanding "this" to refer to the whole previous discussion (on 428) where Kant explains the implications of a thing's being an end in itself, namely, that it has absolute worth and may never be treated merely as a means but must always be treated at the same time as an end. Hence, I conclude that when Kant says "this" he refers to a recognition of one's absolute worth as well as an understanding of the constraints upon permissible treatment implied by that worth.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ It follows from 4a and 3b that the humanity in persons may never permissibly be treated merely as a means but must always be treated as an end.

¹⁸ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 434. Just as cultivating their talents or refraining from committing suicide are ways in which persons treat their humanity as an end and not as a means only (Kant, *Groundwork*, 421–23), respecting themselves is a way in which persons treat the humanity in them as an end and not as a means only.

¹⁹ This is a non-standard interpretation of Kant for which I argue elsewhere (Stark, *Securing Self-Respect*, 58–63). The traditional interpretation, which states that the second formulation of the categorical imperative expresses a duty to respect others and oneself, is seen most readily in

3c. Therefore all persons are required to view and to treat themselves as having the same moral status as other persons.

2. STAGE THREE: THE DUTY OF SELF-RESPECT

Kant's discussion, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, of the basis of the duty of self-respect bears a direct resemblance to his discussion in the *Groundwork* of the basis for the second formulation of the categorical imperative. In the *Groundwork*, he maintains that persons have a special value and are required to treat themselves in ways that reflect and are compatible with that value. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he claims that persons have a special value and are required to regard themselves in a way that reflects and is compatible with that value. There, he states:

... man regarded as a person, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.²⁰

Kant clearly holds that for the same reason that one ought to treat oneself always as an end, one ought to value oneself always as an end. Moreover, this duty to properly value one's humanity, or to respect oneself, in some measure embellishes or qualifies other more conduct-centered duties that follow from the general precept to treat oneself as an end. Kant states: "[one] should pursue his end, which in itself is a duty, not abjectly, not in a *servile spirit* (*animo servili*) as if he were seeking a favor, not disavowing his dignity, but always with

the respect-for-persons literature. Although this body of literature is generally concerned with respect for others rather than *self-respect*, we can infer that insofar as the requirement that we treat others as ends is judged to be tantamount to the view that we owe them respect, the requirement that we treat ourselves as ends is judged to be tantamount to the view that we owe ourselves respect. See, for example, R. S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer, *Respect for Persons* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970); Stephen Hudson, "The Nature of Respect," *Social Theory and Practice* 6 (Spring 1980): 69–90; John Atwell, "Kant's Notion of Respect for Persons," in *Respect for Persons*, 29–43; and Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 229. Carl Cranor, notably, takes exception to this interpretation of Kant and remarks on the puzzling ubiquity of the view that the second formulation of the categorical imperative is, for Kant, a respect-for-persons principle. See his "Kant's Respect for Persons Principle," *International Studies in Philosophy* 12 (Fall 1980): 19–40. Some writers on self-respect also assume that Kant's requirement that we respect ourselves is expressed through the second formulation of the categorical imperative. For example, Robin Dillon, *Self-Respect and Justice*, Ph.D. Dissertation. For support of the idea that self-respect is at the center of Kant's moral philosophy, see Stephen Massey, "Kant on Self-Respect," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (January 1983): 57–73.

²⁰ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 435.

consciousness of his sublime moral predisposition. . . .”²¹ The general precept to properly value one’s moral agency, or to, in Kant’s words, “seek [one’s] end . . . with a consciousness of his sublime moral predisposition” is mostly formal and hence relatively uninformative. What is it to properly value one’s moral agency? The passage I just quoted gives us a clue as to the specific content of the duty of self-respect, for in it Kant tells us that acting in a servile fashion or disavowing one’s dignity constitute failures to properly value oneself. But what counts as acting in a servile fashion or disavowing one’s dignity? Kant provides us with numerous examples: making oneself subservient to another; allowing one’s rights to be violated; incurring unmanageable debts; accepting unnecessary favors; being a flatterer, parasite, or beggar; becoming destitute through lack of thriftiness, complaining, whining, and crying out in bodily pain; and “kneeling down or prostrating oneself on the ground.”²²

With the possible exception of the admonition against complaining, whining, or crying out in bodily pain, each of these actions is one that either conveys the belief that one has a lower moral status than another, or one through which a person subordinates herself to another.²³ That Kant’s examples are fairly well unified by this theme is consistent with his characterization of self-respect, quoted earlier, as an attitude of regarding oneself as having a moral status equal to that of other persons. Each of us, he says, “can measure himself with every other [rational] being . . . and value himself on a footing of equality with them.”²⁴

Besides relying on Kant’s examples of violations of the duty of self-respect, we can also gain insight into the content of this duty by looking at the three character traits or attitudes that Kant identifies as contrary to self-respect. They include: morally false servility, ambition, and false humility. The first, morally false servility, is described as “[w]aiving any claim to moral worth in oneself, in the belief that one will thereby acquire a borrowed worth. . . .”²⁵ The second, ambition, is characterized as endeavoring to regard oneself as having less worth than others, “believing that in this way one will get an even greater inner worth.”²⁶ In other words, ambition consists in humbling oneself

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 436.

²³ These examples are obviously anachronistic. The kinds of actions that Kant thinks of as representative of viewing oneself as having a lower moral standing than others are not the sorts of actions that would likely come to mind for the modern reader. (Allowing one’s rights to be violated is an exception.) Prevailing sensibilities and social circumstances are apt to bring to mind the kinds of cases discussed in Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect.” Cases of this sort will be considered subsequently.

²⁴ *Metaphysics of Morals*, 435.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

before others in order to convince oneself that one is morally superior to those who are not as humble. The third vice that is contrary to self-respect is false humility, which is “belittling one’s own moral worth merely as a means to acquire the favor of another, whoever it may be (hypocrisy and flattery).”²⁷ The manner in which Kant characterizes these traits is revealing. It is clear from his discussion that he believes that a person could not sincerely and reflectively conclude that she has a moral status inferior to others. As he describes these vices, they involve either the intentional ignoring of one’s moral worth when one knows better, as suggested by the description of false humility, or a kind of mental subterfuge, as implied by the description of ambition. False humility, recall, consists in the deliberate belittling of one’s own moral worth,²⁸ and ambition consists in attempting to convince oneself that one has less worth than others so that one may regard oneself as superior for being so humble. Violations of the duty to respect oneself for Kant are either intentional or else are the outcome of a kind of self-deception whereby one rationalizes or neglects to undergo the proper degree of self-scrutiny.

3. THE NECESSITY OF VIEWING ONESELF AS AN END

We should not be surprised that Kant’s account of self-respect suggests that he believes that persons who fail to respect themselves are either deliberately ignoring or overlooking their moral worth or are somehow deceiving themselves into thinking that they have less moral worth than others, for he tells us in the *Groundwork*, as the first premise of his argument for the claim that persons are ends in themselves, that all persons, when rational, necessarily conceive of themselves as beings that have absolute worth who always should be treated as ends. But this is just to say that rational beings as such necessarily recognize their special moral worth and standing. In short, on Kant’s view, persons, when fully rational, necessarily respect themselves.²⁹ Kant’s adher-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 435–36. Notice that each of the attitudes that are contrary to self-respect consists in viewing oneself or portraying oneself as having a lesser moral worth than other persons. Further evidence that Kant views self-respect as consisting primarily in a belief in one’s moral equality with others can be found in his discussion of self-respect in *Lectures on Ethics*, 126–27.

²⁸ The intentional aspect of the vice of false humility is suggested more strongly in other translations of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. James Ellington translates Kant’s characterization of false humility as “the studied disparagement of one’s own moral worth” and Mary Gregor, in her earlier translation, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, translates it as “deliberately to set aside one’s own moral worth.” See *Kant’s Ethical Philosophy*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 98 and *The Doctrine of Virtue*, trans. Mary Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 101.

²⁹ He says as much, of course, when he maintains, as he does in numerous places in *The Metaphysics of Morals* and *Lectures on Ethics*, that all persons experience a feeling of veneration toward themselves as authors of the moral law. This feeling, which is distinct from the self-respect

ence to this claim forces him to regard transgressions of the duty of self-respect as consisting exclusively in ingratitude or a variety of self-deception. In other words, if rational beings as such respect themselves, then, provided they are acting rationally, they will fail to respect themselves only if they intentionally ignore their moral status or engage in some sort of deliberate self-deception, whereby they persuade themselves that they have less moral worth than others.

There are two important questions that arise concerning Kant's claim that persons necessarily view themselves as ends in themselves. First, why does Kant believe this? And second, what are we to make of its implications for his view of self-respect? Consideration of the first question is, unfortunately, difficult, as Kant himself never explicitly set out to support this claim. A thorough attempt to reconstruct Kant's view on this point, is, moreover, beyond the scope of this paper. So I will briefly review some discussions of Kant's claim that persons necessarily regard themselves as ends in themselves. Though these accounts provide some insight into his thinking on this point, in the end they seem to leave the question largely unanswered.

H. J. Paton interprets Kant as making the following inference: "A rational being can act only under the idea of freedom, and so must conceive of himself as autonomous and therefore as an end in himself."³⁰ If we suppose that Kant adequately supports the idea that in order to act we must view ourselves as having a free will, it remains nonetheless unclear why he thinks that in conceiving of myself as a free will and therefore as autonomous, I must also conceive of myself as an end in itself. It is not obvious, in other words, why the fact that I must view myself as a rational agent implies that I must view my rational agency as conferring on me an absolute worth that places restrictions on the way I may be treated. Paton's suggestion, then, of how we might see Kant as supporting the idea that persons necessarily regard themselves as ends in themselves is not very illuminating.

Alan Donagan explicates Kant's claim that rational beings necessarily see themselves as ends in themselves in the following manner: because humans are rational, in the sense that they can deliberate about their ends, unlike other animals, which are driven by instinct to fulfill certain ends, they are

that we have a duty to adopt, he calls variously "respect" for oneself (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, 403, 436), "self-esteem" (*Lectures on Ethics*, 124, 125; *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 402, 436) and "moral self-esteem" (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, 435; *Lectures on Ethics*, 127).

³⁰ See the notes in his translation of the *Groundwork*, 139. Alan Donagan claims that our status as ends in ourselves is not grounded in our autonomy, but the other way around: our autonomy is grounded in our being ends in ourselves. He states: "It is as ends in themselves that rational beings find in their own natures a ground for the law they lay down to themselves" (*Theory of Morality*, 233).

“higher” beings. Since they are “higher” in this sense, they are justified in regarding themselves, and others like them, as “an end for rational action.”³¹

Like Paton, Donagan sees the necessity of regarding oneself as an end in itself as linked, for Kant, to the necessity of regarding oneself as free. He claims: “since their actions are negatively free, the actions of a rational being have a causality higher than those of a brute animal; and it is because of that higher kind of causality that rational beings are ends in themselves.”³² Though he provides some *elaboration* of the idea that rational beings necessarily regard themselves as ends in themselves, Donagan seems to avoid the main issue. The question still remains, why does the fact that we are able rationally to set ends rationally require that we view ourselves as having special worth?³³

Kant clearly invites speculation concerning his support of the notion that rational beings as such necessarily see themselves as objective ends. It does seem clear, however, from his discussion of the formula of the end in itself in chapter 2 of the *Groundwork*, that the necessity of viewing oneself as an objective end ultimately follows from the possibility of morality itself. He states: “Persons . . . are . . . things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve simply as a means; for unless this is so, nothing at all of *absolute* value would be found anywhere. But if all value were conditioned—that is, contingent—then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all.”³⁴ Since the absolute worth of persons is a condition for the possibility of morality and since, as we saw above, the absolute worth of persons is derived from the necessity of rational beings to view their humanity as having absolute worth, it follows that the necessity of rational beings to view their humanity as having absolute worth is a condition for the possibility of morality.

³¹ Donagan, *Theory of Morality*, 232. His effort to explain why it is that *humans qua rational* must view themselves as ends in themselves serves to obscure the fact that he does not really provide us with an argument for why *rational beings as such* must view themselves as ends in themselves. The latter notion—that *rational beings* necessarily regard themselves as ends in themselves—is, of course, Kant’s claim.

³² *Ibid.*, 233. For Donagan, the necessity of regarding oneself as an end in itself resolves to an issue of being justified in regarding oneself as an end in itself because, in his words, “[Kant’s] assertion that human beings necessarily conceive their own existence as an end in itself must be understood as meaning that it is contrary to reason for them to conceive it in any other way” (230). (Kant does not claim that *human* beings necessarily regard themselves as ends in themselves, he claims that *rational* beings necessarily do.) The notion of justification, here, is apparently a strong one: persons are not only rationally *entitled* to regard themselves as ends in themselves, but rationally *required*.

³³ Donagan’s claim that rational beings may reasonably judge the humanity in them as an end because they have a “higher power” than other animals simply pushes the question back a step. Clearly “higher” here is a *normative* notion. Why are beings capable of deliberation concerning their ends “higher” than beings who do not have this capability?

³⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 428.

Kant's contention that persons must value their rational nature, then, is at the basis of his ethical theory. However central this claim is, and however plausible its transcendental justification, it nonetheless creates a serious difficulty for his account of self-respect, for it commits him to seeing those with diminished or damaged self-respect as either disingenuous or self-deceptive, provided, of course, that we assume that their rational capacity is not impaired. On purely factual grounds, this view of failures of self-respect is false. Moreover, it is clearly not shared by contemporary accounts of self-respect. Though many of these accounts are Kantian in spirit, none incorporates the idea that all those who lack self-respect knowingly disparage or deny their moral worth in order to fulfill their desires. Nor do these views imply that every case of a seemingly genuine lack of self-respect involves a kind of self-deception. Instead they assume that people can genuinely and sincerely, though mistakenly, conclude that they have little moral worth. Kant's account simply denies the possibility of some of the most interesting, and indeed tragic, ways in which persons may fail to value themselves.

Many of these ways, as I mentioned at the outset of this essay, have been considered by contemporary theorists. These writers offer us profiles of people who, for a variety reasons and in a variety of ways, see themselves as fundamentally lacking in worth or who treat themselves in ways that reflect a flawed sense of self-worth. The Deferential Wife, for instance, sees it as her duty to defer to her husband's wishes on all matters and to conform her preferences and ideals to his. She believes that her wishes and ideals are not as worthwhile as her husband's.³⁵ The Self-Doubter, unlike the Deferential Wife, is not convinced that she has less worth than some others, but she is forever doubting her worth. This lack of confidence is incompatible with full self-respect. The Vaguely Self-Defining is not autonomous with regard to his moral standards. He abdicates responsibility for formulating his ideals and standards to others, thereby eschewing his moral agency.³⁶ Insofar as Kant's view of self-respect precludes the possibility of people genuinely possessing attitudes like those I just described, his account of self-respect is implausible.

4. SELF-RESPECT AND RATIONALITY

The problem with Kant's view of self-respect can be formulated in the following way: on the one hand, if we believe that persons have a special moral standing that serves as the normative ground of self-respect, then it seems we must accept the claim that persons, *qua* rational, value themselves as rational agents; the unconditioned worth of persons depends upon their rational judg-

³⁵ See Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 89.

³⁶ See Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," 130.

ment that they have unconditioned worth. At the same time, we have reason to reject the Kantian conception of self-respect that is generated by this view. We have reason to reject, in other words, the idea that failures of self-respect involve willfully neglecting to see ourselves as having a special moral worth; many who are afflicted with diminished self-respect are genuinely convinced that they are lacking in worth or status. Our only option, then, is to regard failures of self-respect as failures of rationality. If it is rational to regard oneself as an objective end, and those who do not regard themselves in this way are not, for the most part, disingenuous or self-deceptive, then they must be irrational.

This position, which might be appealing to contemporary Kantians, could be filled out as follows: social institutions, misfortune, and other factors can and do impair, in certain ways, one's capacity for rational reflection. External influences may construct individuals whose self-respect is deficient by injuring their rational capacity. In other words, societies create individuals with limited self-respect by creating individuals with limited rationality. In the absence of the distorting effects of society, one might argue, agents' rational capacity would be fully intact (barring certain physiological defects) and those agents would inevitably, as rational, regard themselves as having absolute worth. In what follows I argue that adopting the view that diminished self-respect is the outcome of an impaired rational capacity requires adhering to a conception of rationality that is psychologically implausible and perhaps politically suspect.

Earlier I described a number of ways in which persons can lack self-respect. They involved such things as failing to regard oneself as the moral equal of others, neglecting to fully acknowledge one's autonomy, and refraining from standing up for one's rights or legitimate interests. Though these attitudes are often regarded as paradigmatic examples of inadequate self-respect, there is a kind of failure of self-respect that differs from these sorts of attitudes in an important way. This failure involves persons relinquishing or transgressing commitments central to their identity.³⁷ Dillon calls this phenomenon self-betrayal. The Self-Betrayer, she says, "has staked herself to some . . . standards, whose purpose it is to protect her identity-conferring commitments, but then abandons them, and with them, herself."³⁸ Kant's account of violations of the duty of self-respect bears a crucial resemblance to Dillon's description of self-betrayal: the compromising of one's self-respect, for Kant, consists in an intentional renouncing or forsaking of one's standards. This is not to say that individuals are never forced by circumstances to forego their self-respect. Dillon's discussion makes this poignantly clear. She

³⁷ Hill considers cases of this sort in his "Self-Respect Reconsidered."

³⁸ Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," 130.

observes that Sophie, in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, is a Self-Betrayer. Though Sophie's handing her daughter over to the Nazis was an act of self-betrayal, none of the options open to her would have allowed Sophie to preserve her identity. She was forced by tragic circumstance to betray her deepest commitments.³⁹

The similarity between Kant's description of diminished self-respect and the case of the Self-Betrayer shows that Kant is assuming that seeing oneself as having moral worth and committing oneself to acting in accordance with this self-vision is part of one's identity. To assume that those who fail to value themselves as moral agents are intentionally violating their own standards is to assume that they have *committed themselves to appreciating and showing their appreciation of their special moral standing as persons*. One cannot betray one's standards if one has not, with some degree of awareness, adopted those standards as one's own. Kant is clearly assuming, then, that everyone has, *as part of their identity*, a conception of themselves as persons, as beings possessed of an absolute worth.

This assumption allows Kant to hold that, on reflection, rational beings will see themselves as ends in themselves. He believes that through rational reflection one will encounter that aspect of one's identity which is one's being a person. But suppose that individuals' identities not only do not always include a conception of themselves as persons, but are often incompatible with a conception of themselves as persons. Consider again the Deferential Wife or the Uncle Tom. For perfectly obvious socio-cultural reasons, these characters have identities that include a conception of themselves as inferior, in moral standing, to certain others. As a woman, or perhaps a wife—features central to her identity—the Deferential Wife regards herself as having a lower moral status than her husband, or maybe than men in general, class and racial differences, perhaps, being equal. The Uncle Tom, likewise, whose identity includes being black, regards himself as inferior in moral status to those of European descent, setting aside, again, gender and class differences.

So Kant's moral psychology is flawed. It implies either that every person's identity will include a conception of him or herself as a member of humanity, or it implies that individual rational agents, by means of reflection alone, are capable of constructing for themselves a conception of themselves as members of humanity. The expectation that rational beings as such will be capable of transcending their deeply socially constituted identities, and the cultural imperatives that do the constructing, sets a very high standard of rationality. This is especially clear when one recognizes that persons' identities in fact are often incompatible with viewing themselves as beings with an absolute worth

³⁹ Ibid.

that makes them the moral equal of others.⁴⁰ Identities of this sort are, of course, produced by social institutions and ideologies that function to systematically impede the development of a robust sense of worth in members of certain social groups. It turns out, then, that what rational agents are rationally required to do may be beyond our reach psychologically.

Two further points are worth making here. First, to regard the lack of self-worth exhibited by persons such as the Deferential Wife or the Uncle Tom, who are members of socially devalued groups, as a form of irrationality is to risk engaging in victim-blaming.⁴¹ Such a view runs the danger of implying that individuals are responsible for their diminished sense of worth and that they are capable of simply pulling themselves up, as it were, by their own rational bootstraps. Second, the relegation of members of certain social groups to the realm of the irrational, the subjective, or the otherwise epistemically unfit, is a time-worn ideological method used to justify the marginalization of those groups. Consequently, we should be especially cautious about a view that maintains that a characteristic which tends to be displayed by members of non-dominant cultural groups is a consequence of their irrationality, even if we grant that such irrationality has social, as opposed to “natural,” causes.

To summarize: here is where our examination of Kant’s argument for the duty of self-respect has brought us thus far. Kant holds that persons, as autonomous rational agents possessed of dignity, owe themselves respect. He bases the idea that persons have dignity, or absolute worth, upon the rational necessity of their regarding themselves and other persons as having this special moral status. This contention, I claimed, commits us to either an implausible view of failures of self-respect—they always involve self-deception or deliberate ingratiation—or to an implausible view of rationality—agents are rationally required to do the psychologically impossible. Since Kant’s justification for the claim that persons ought to respect themselves encumbers us with one or the other of these unfounded views, it must be rejected or substantially altered. One way of modifying Kant’s view would be to attempt to ground the worth of persons in something other than the rational necessity of persons

⁴⁰ Some would argue that this Kantian idea is culturally biased: why assume that all humans are rationally required to view themselves according to the Enlightenment view of humanity? While this concern has some merit, it is not totally without problems. The appeal of the notion of human rights as a standard for evaluating the justice of various cultural practices is quite wide, even among cultures not in the legacy of the European Enlightenment. This shows either that there is some truth to the idea that persons as such have a special moral standing or that the hegemony of Enlightenment thinking is extensive.

⁴¹ The potentially victim-blaming aspect of Kant’s view of failures of self-respect is expressed rather graphically in his assertion that “whoever makes himself a worm cannot complain when he is then trampled underfoot” (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, 437).

seeing themselves and others as having absolute worth.⁴² In the next section I briefly consider a modification of this sort, which appears to be widely accepted but is nonetheless indefensible.

5. AN UNTENABLE BUT POPULAR ALTERNATIVE

The idea that something about the nature of human beings bestows upon us a special moral status (which may in turn serve to ground our entitlement or duty to respect ourselves) enjoys a distinguished place in the history of Western philosophy and is still currently widespread.⁴³ Typically the feature of humans that is said to impart to us this special status is our capacity for rationality, though in recent times certain other (mental) capacities have been offered as grounds for the special worth of humans.⁴⁴ Some of the alternatives to the capacity for rationality offered by recent philosophers have been suggested in the context of clarifying or elucidating the idea that persons as such are owed a certain kind of treatment⁴⁵ or respect,⁴⁶ ought to be treated or regarded equally,⁴⁷ or are entitled to respect themselves,⁴⁸ and some have been presented explicitly as modifications of the Kantian principle that persons have intrinsic worth as rational agents.⁴⁹ In virtually all cases, however, the discussion tends to *assume* rather than *establish* that the capacity proposed

⁴² The independent ground for accepting this claim (i.e., that valuing our rational agency is a condition for the possibility of morality) notwithstanding.

⁴³ See Michael Philips, "Reason, Dignity and the Formal Conception of Practical Reason," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (April, 1987): 191–98. For a critique of this notion see S. F. Sapontzis, "A Critique of Personhood," *Ethics* 91 (July, 1981): 607–18. For a critique of Sapontzis, see W. R. Carter, "On the Scope of Justice and the Community of Persons," in *Respect for Persons*, 155–68.

⁴⁴ For instance, self-consciousness, reflective consciousness, self-consciousness and the ensuing capacity for morality, self-consciousness and the ensuing ability to have a self-conception, the capacities for well-being and freedom, and the capacity for justice. See Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," in *The Rights and Wrongs of Abortion*, ed. Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 52–84; Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 237; Thomas, "Rawlsian Self-Respect," 308–10; Elizabeth Spelman, "On Treating Persons as Persons," *Ethics* 88 (October 1977): 159; Gregory Vlastos, "Human Worth, Merit and Equality," in *Moral Concepts*, 148–149 and Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 505–10, respectively. For a discussion of the relationship between metaphysical and normative features of persons, see Daniel Dennett, "Conditions of Personhood," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 175–96. See also John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *The John Dewey Lectures, Journal of Philosophy* 77 (September 1980): 571.

⁴⁵ See Spelman.

⁴⁶ See Williams.

⁴⁷ See Williams, Vlastos, and Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

⁴⁸ See Thomas, "Rawlsian Self-Respect."

⁴⁹ See Williams and Vlastos; also Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Donagan for examples of contemporary versions of the Kantian doctrine that autonomous rational beings have intrinsic moral worth.

grounds the absolute worth of persons.⁵⁰ Despite the fact that some who attempt to derive the value of persons from a capacity purport to be working within the Kantian tradition, their views differ in a crucial regard from Kant's. The difference lies in the fact that their views appeal to some property: the property of self-consciousness, the property of negative freedom, and so on. The moral standing of persons is said to be derived directly from the fact of our possessing one of these properties. Where for Kant the worth of persons is a precept of reason, on these alternative accounts the worth of persons is conceived as a normative property of or fact about persons that is derived from the possession of a metaphysical property.

It is obvious that a normative feature of persons (such as intrinsic worth), or a normative rule that is said to apply to all persons (such as an injunction to respect persons as such), cannot be derived solely from a descriptive metaphysical characteristic.⁵¹ For this reason, Kant's view of the ground of the worth of persons is more convincing than those that are, or claim to be, in his legacy. Nonetheless, as we saw above, when it comes to supporting the idea that persons ought to respect *themselves*, Kant's approach contains what looks to be a recalcitrant problem. Clearly, arguments for the notion that persons ought to respect themselves that bypass the idea that persons necessarily regard themselves as having moral worth, and instead ground the value of persons in the possession of a metaphysical property, can avoid the indefensible moral psychology implicit in Kant's account. Nonetheless, those arguments do not even get off the ground, since they rely on an unwarranted move from nature to status.⁵²

⁵⁰ Rawls concludes his discussion of the criteria for granting beings membership in the moral community with an admission that none of what has transpired "is literally argument" (*Theory of Justice*, 509).

⁵¹ See Charles Landesman, "Against Respect for Persons," in *Respect for Persons*, 33–36, for a discussion of the implicit theism in Kantian-based respect for persons theories. He maintains that within the context of a theistic and hierarchical metaphysics the move from nature to status (from "rational nature" to "moral worth") makes sense since the hierarchy is already infused with normativity as a consequence of its being created by God. Within a naturalistic, nonhierarchical metaphysics, he claims, the move from a metaphysical property to a normative one cannot be supported. Although Landesman's point holds for the contemporary Kantian views he is considering (Donagan's and Fried's) it may not hold for Kant's own view for the precisely the reason explained above: Kant does not move (directly) from nature to status. See also Carl Cranor, "Limitations on Respect-for-Persons Theories," in *Respect for Persons*, 45–60.

⁵² For a defense of such inferences, see Carter, "On the Scope of Justice." Carter's defense relies on a conflation of normativity as status and normativity as evaluative goodness. He conflates, in other words, having value as a person in the sense of having a certain moral status and having value as a person in the sense of being a good person. He also exploits an ambiguity inherent in the notion of being morally responsible, namely, that between having the kind of capacities that warrant one's being held morally responsible and acting in a way that is judged to be morally responsible. The former confers a status, while the latter is an evaluation of one's performance in relation to that status.

6. TOWARD A RESOLUTION

A conviction of the "absolute" or "intrinsic" worth of persons, along with its sibling convictions of the moral rights of persons and of our equal moral standing, rest at the foundation of a dominant strand of moral and political philosophy. Moreover, some theorists who do not explicitly subscribe to these claims tend to rely on some of them covertly.⁵³ Worries, then, about the adequacy of Kant's support for the duty of self-respect raise difficult and deep questions concerning the justification of our most fundamental moral values. One means for avoiding confronting these general questions about justification is to argue that self-respect has a certain kind of instrumental value. This seems to be Rawls's approach. Self-respect is important, he says, because it is indispensable to individuals' pursuit of their life plans. He asserts: "[w]ithout [self-respect] nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them, and we sink into apathy and cynicism."⁵⁴ He concludes from this observation that rational agents would consent to a set of social institutions only if it would enable them to secure their self-respect.

This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, it is empirically doubtful. Plenty of people who suffer from diminished self-respect have not been significantly hindered from pursuing their ends. No doubt, failing to properly value oneself as a person can be debilitating and may sometimes serve as an obstacle to one's happiness or well-being. Nevertheless, the relation of the many components of self-respect to these goods is complicated; no simple claim about its instrumental relation to our pursuit of our ends will be supportable. Second, and more importantly, we would surely think self-respect a morally significant value even if it turned out that it is not required for the adequate pursuit of our ends. That is, even if self-respect were not necessary for our success in fulfilling our life plans, surely we would not conclude that it is not valuable—that it does not matter morally whether or not persons respect themselves. This speculation suggests that we cannot simply abandon our Kantian intuition that we ought to respect ourselves regardless of what goods may come our way if we successfully maintain or achieve a robust sense of our own worth.

Despite its defects, Rawls's argument for the value of self-respect has one conspicuous advantage over Kant's argument. Rawls weakens the troublesome link between self-respect and rationality. Where for Kant rational beings as

⁵³ I have in mind the claim of the utilitarian that each person's happiness ought to count no more or less than any other person's happiness and Marx's contention that capitalism is objectionable because it alienates us from our uniquely human creative capacities and prevents us from controlling important aspects of our lives.

⁵⁴ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 440; see also 178.

such necessarily recognize their moral worth, for Rawls they necessarily desire to.⁵⁵ That is, on Rawls's account, rationality requires not that we see ourselves as ends in ourselves but that we desire to live under circumstances that will permit and encourage us to regard ourselves as ends in ourselves.⁵⁶ What follows is a modification of Rawls's argument for the value of self-respect that allows us to preserve its strengths and avoid its defects. This sketch is not intended to be complete; my objective is to suggest an approach to constructing an answer to the question "Why ought persons to respect themselves?" that might, with further development, prove fruitful.

It seems that the parties in the original position have much stronger, and quite explicitly Kantian, reasons for desiring self-respect than those that Rawls attributes to them. Let us suppose that Kant is correct in claiming that self-respect is a condition for the possibility of morality. That is, let us suppose that for morality to be possible, rational agents must view themselves as beings that have absolute worth. Let us suppose further, that the parties in the original position, as ideally rational, recognize that persons' viewing themselves as having absolute worth is a condition for the possibility of morality, and hence of justice. Since they are set the task of choosing principles of justice, and since it is stipulated that they, and those they are imagined to represent, have an interest in exercising their capacity for justice,⁵⁷ it follows that they would desire the social bases of self-respect. Self-respect, or, more accurately, its social bases,⁵⁸ is a primary good, then, not because it is necessary for individuals adequately to pursue their life plans, but because it is a condition for the exercise of their capacity for justice. The very practice of justice itself depends on persons valuing their rational agency. Indeed, the very expression of our agency, conceived as our ability to act in conformity with moral rules, depends

⁵⁵ I say "necessarily" here in reference to Rawls's view because he explicitly states that the primary goods (of which self-respect is one) are derived from a conception of the person and are not arrived at by empirical methods. See Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," 526–27 and his "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, A. Sen and B. Williams, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 166–67.

⁵⁶ Rawls's argument that self-respect is a primary good contains a conception of self-respect that is not nearly as overtly Kantian as I suggest here; he characterizes self-respect as the conviction that our life plan is worthwhile accompanied by a belief that we are capable of pursuing our life plan. See *Theory of Justice*, 440. Later works contain modifications of the original account of self-respect along Kantian lines, thereby justifying my incorporation of a clearly Kantian conception of self-respect into Rawls's argument for the moral significance of self-respect. See, for example, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," 526, and his *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 318–20.

⁵⁷ See Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," 164–65.

⁵⁸ In Rawls's later writings he is careful to specify that it is the social bases of self-respect that are primary goods and not self-respect itself. This shift presumably results from his recognition that self-respect itself is not something that the government can distribute or redistribute in the way it can distribute and redistribute rights or income.

upon our valuing ourselves in virtue of having that capacity. Hence rational agents, characterized as having an interest in exercising their capacity for justice, would desire to live under circumstances that protect their self-respect. The desire for self-respect, therefore, is a rational desire.

This proposal avoids Kant's deficient moral psychology in the following way. Rather than holding that actual, socially situated rational agents will, *qua* rational, have self-respect, this view states that idealized rational agents—that is, agents abstracted from their particular circumstances and seen as equipped with a capacity and a desire for justice—would, *qua* rational, want self-respect. On this view, there is no expectation that rational beings who might find themselves in circumstances of oppression, abuse, or trauma will, even when fully rational, respect themselves. Indeed, on this view, the precariousness of self-respect and its vulnerability to social and political arrangements is explicitly acknowledged.

This proposal also avoids the weaknesses identified in Rawls's argument for the importance of self-respect, for it does not rely upon a questionable empirical claim connecting self-respect with the successful pursuit of one's life plan. Furthermore, and more importantly, because self-respect on this account is a condition for the possibility of justice and for the expression of our agency, it is recognized as having a moral significance that goes considerably beyond its utility in our achieving our ends. This account, then, allows us to preserve that aspect of Kant's view which sees persons regarding themselves as ends in themselves as fundamental to morality.

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