

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

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Part II

In Part I of this essay I presented a general account of self-esteem, arguing that accounts which have previously been offered in the philosophical literature have been inadequate both in their analyses of the concept of self-esteem, and in their prescriptions for healthy self-esteem. More specifically, I argued that the analyses given by Rawls, Sachs, Thomas, Deigh, Massey, and others are all versions of self-esteem based upon developed capacities, and that all such versions fail in one way or another to meet three intuitive criteria for adequate self-esteem: roughly, that it be high, stable, and well-connected with other important human goods.¹

In this Part II of the essay I aim to present an account of optimal self-esteem—esteem based upon appreciation for what it is to be a human being—arguing that it is psychologically possible and that it measures up to the three criteria for adequacy. The strategy I will employ toward both of these goals is two-fold: first, to show how the sort of capacity-based esteem I criticized as inadequate in Part I can be modified to more closely meet the named criteria for adequacy; and second to show that the sort of self-esteem I will describe as optimal can be seen as a further stage in the development of this improved capacity-based variety. To the task.

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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

I

To show how capacity-based self-esteem strategies can be developed toward providing a version which is high, stable, and well-connected with other goods, let me briefly recall and expand upon a few of the distinctions drawn in Part I while discussing the nature of self-esteem. Self-esteem, recall, was defined there as the affective/intentional (emotional/volitional) responses to the elements of an individual's self-concept. In general, positive self-esteem grows in response to reflection on experience of any and all good things in life. I say in response to *reflection*; the affective or intentional response to the experience itself is indicated in the judgement that the object of the experience is good (or not good) in some respect.²

Reflection admits of many levels, and attending to them is essential for understanding the distinctions among different varieties of self-esteem. Let us briefly attend to the affective/intentional responses to apprehension at lower-level reflection, so that through understanding self-esteem produced at these levels we may understand how the kind of self-esteem I will describe as optimal develops in response to higher-level reflection.

Noticing that certain goods are obtainable in virtue of some capacity or other *of ours* occurs at a lower level of reflection on our relationship with the objects in question, the lowest level of our self-conception. We can react positively (or negatively) to

² Judgements about objects are part of the cognitive aspect of our relationship with those objects. But judgements about the goodness of objects make reference not only to the objects themselves, but also to our inclinations associated with our apprehension of those objects.

these reflections on our capacities.³ If we react positively toward our reflection on some capacity of ours insofar as that capacity seems likely to enable the attainment of good states of affairs in the future, we value that capacity as a means. If we react positively to reflection on a capacity without attending to—that is, abstracting from—the question of the relationship between our possessing that capacity and our obtaining future goals, then we value that capacity as an end. We can reflect on capacities, moreover, abstracting from questions about whether or not they are ours, or whether or not they might become our own, and under what conditions; this is to reflect not only on the actual, but on the possible. When we attend to the fact that a capacity which we value as a means or as an end is in fact a capacity of ours, and react positively to that apprehension, we are exhibiting positive self-esteem. When we attend to the fact that some valued capacity is not our own, and react negatively toward that apprehended state of affairs, we are exhibiting negative self-esteem.

It should be clear from this account of positive and negative self-esteem that 1) having negative self-esteem is not the same as having no self-esteem; and 2) that not all aspects of negative self-esteem are undesirable (nor of positive, desirable.) To notice one's lack of fidelity in friendships, and to regret that one lacks that quality, is to exhibit what is arguably a desirable dimension of negative self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem may not consist of entirely positive self-esteem, then; at least not of just any variety of positive self-esteem.

If healthy self-esteem is likely not the same as positive self-esteem, what exactly is healthy self-esteem? Implicit in the previous paragraph is one criteria, and it really

³ To react positively toward an apprehended state of affairs is to have inclination toward obtaining the most narrowly defined future states of affairs similar to it in the relevant respects ("relevant" would have to be specified counterfactually.)

just amounts to the third of those previously mentioned: that self-esteem stand in harmonious relationship with other important human goods (like friendship.) To give a fully adequate characterization of healthy self-esteem, then, is not possible without a full theory of the good for human beings.⁴ Such a theory of the good would have to include an account of human development, since it is possible that there are some restrictions on the order in which the goods of life must be obtained, on any acceptable account.

Suppose we had some acceptable sketch of such an account, or rather, a sketch of such an account, minus an account of acceptable self-esteem, since that is what we are attempting to sketch here. We might imagine our account of the good life imposing something like the following restrictions on capacity-based self-esteem: ideally healthy self-esteem consists of some measure of negative affective and intentional responses to apprehension that one lacks those capacities it would be good for one to possess, and of positive affective and intentional responses to the apprehension that one possesses those capacities it is good for one to possess.⁵ This suggestion in effect tailors esteem based upon developed capacities to meet the third criteria for adequacy mentioned earlier, but it does not address the first two criteria, nor to provide a way for capacity-based self-esteem to resolve the tension between these first two criteria, which I described in Part I as the unstable/unexciting dilemma.⁶

⁴ Hence, again, the essay's title. See note 8 of Part I of this essay.

⁵ I could complicate these suggested restrictions by including responses to capacities it is harmful for one to possess, etc. I am supposing that we could describe these by referring to the virtues that would govern these "bad capacities", so that we can conceive of them as good but incomplete capacities, after all. I am relying on the Thomistic suggestion that evil can be understood as a lack (strictly speaking, a privation) of being or excellence.

⁶ In the first part of this essay I described a tension between the requirement that self-esteem be high, and that it be stable: it is easy to find stable capacities, like the capacity to have a self-concept, which would provide self-esteem at every moment self-esteem was at issue. But it seems hard to find a

Suppose we examine the most promising of strategies against that dilemma, among those which seek to ground self-esteem based upon particular capacities. I will show that the direction taken by those strategies to avoid the unstable/unexciting dilemma, when coupled with some easily-observed features of human psychological development, suggest a strategy for overcoming that dilemma which is demonstrably superior to strategies grounding self-esteem on particular capacities (or other attributes.) That strategy requires employment of deeper levels of reflection than those required for self-esteem based upon developed capacities, we will see.

II

Any capacity or attribute which is valued as an end *can* contribute to positive self-esteem, insofar as an individual is psychologically able to apprehend that capacity or attribute as (in effect) saying or revealing something about that individual. To achieve a high and relatively stable self-esteem which harmonizes with the achievement of one's overall good, then, the following strategy suggests itself: an individual should identify a wide variety of capacities which are such that valuing them otherwise contributes to an individual's overall good, which can be valued as ends, and which can be perceived as revealing something about that individual. Earlier, while discussing self-esteem based upon particular *developed* capacities and attending to the corrosive affect of advancing age on the state of development of many capacities, I noted the possibility that one might take formerly-developed capacities to reveal something about the person whose capacities they were. (This

stable base that is at the same time esteemed as excellent or exciting, providing high self-esteem. This tension is the unstable/unexciting dilemma.

seems an important part of the reason why esteem can be based upon accomplishments: these are evidence that capacities of a certain sort at least once were developed.) It does indeed seem psychologically possible for an individual to associate formerly developed capacities, presently diminished, with that individual's current self; after all, one might think, no mediocre person could have developed such an excellent capacity.

Just as *formerly-developed* capacities might be taken by a person to reveal something of the significance of that person, so too, it seems, might *potentially-developed* capacities. One might develop a positive affective and intentional responses to reflection on the excellence of capacities which one has it within oneself to acquire, or develop. *Possible* developed capacities, *past* developed capacities, and *actual* developed capacities all might contribute to positive self-esteem, it seems.

Moreover, if possible developed capacities can be taken to reveal something of the excellence of the individual for whom the development of these capacities is possible, it would seem that recognition of the significance of being the kind of thing whose possibilities these are could be maintained even if the excellences in question never were developed, and even if they no longer are possibly able to be developed. A person who had a self-recognized potential for greatness as both an athlete and a musician may take both those potentials to reveal something about themselves long after the option toward music, and away from athletic greatness, has been chosen.

The common thread connecting esteem based on all these stages of potentiality--developed, once developed, possibly developed, and once but no longer possibly developed--is the recognition that some *actuality* must underlie (to use the

Aristotelian metaphor) these potentialities, an actuality which is itself admirable, in virtue of the excellence of the potentialities it supports. This is not to say that the underlying actuality is valuable only instrumentally, as a means. If it were, once-developed and once-possibly-developed capacities could not be taken as revealing anything of the excellence of the individual whose possibilities these were.⁷ Even developed capacities, after all, are valuable only because the *activities* for which they are capacities are esteemed as excellent (or good); it does not follow from this that the developed capacities are valued only as means to their exercise. The virtuosity of a violinist can be esteemed even when disability or immanent death make it clear that he or she will never play again. That virtuosity (and any developed capacity) is an actual excellence which at the same time is a potentiality—in some sense—for certain activity. The excellence of the actuality which constitutes the capacity is measured by the excellence of the activity for which it is a capacity, but the actual capacity can be valued when apprehended *qua* actuality—as an excellent thing, *actually*—as well as when apprehended as potentially contributing toward its excellent act. This same relationship which holds between any developed capacity and the exercise of its act, also holds between the actual potential whose act is some particular developed capacity, and that developed capacity. (Whether or not this Aristotelian framing of the grounds for the psychological possibility is useful, it is fairly clear from examples like that of the musician/athlete that one can take now-precluded possibilities to reveal something about the excellence of the being one actually is.)

⁷ There is, of course, the possibility that a formerly-developed capacity could be taken only as an indicator of an actually developed capacity, in the way that a former excellence might be taken to indicate an actual strength of will, or courage, of the individual who once developed that capacity. An individual whose self-esteem were bolstered by the memory of past accomplishment in this way would be liable to some version of the difficulties associated with esteem based upon developed capacities . . .

I want to go on to argue that for a psychologically well-developed human being, any and all *human* capacities for excellence, when recognized, will contribute to self-esteem based upon recognition of the excellence of that actuality which grounds all of these capacities and which all human beings share: their common human nature. By considering some very familiar features of what will be agreed by a wide range of people to be positive steps in human psychological development, I will indicate that the kind of self-esteem I am advocating as optimal is no mere logical construction, but is plausibly viewed as the maturation of the process of natural psychological development.

III

To show the psychological possibility of valuing oneself based upon the human nature which underlies one's own and all human capacities, developed or undeveloped, it is necessary to show the psychological possibility, first, of human beings coming to an open-ended appreciation for the full range of the goods of human life, and thus for human capacities for those goods; and second, of human beings coming to identify those human excellences as revealing something about themselves. A full account of the kind of self-esteem I am advocating would require a full-blown account of human psychological development, with particular attention to the ways in which these two aforementioned psychological possibilities develop and harmonize with other healthy features of the human psyche. Here, I can only touch on two features of human development, but they are familiar and accessible enough to ground the plausibility of the claims I will support with them.

Human maturity includes growth in awareness of the range of good things in life. Education fosters this growth, and at its earlier and most basic levels we call it

socialization. Two aspects of the socialization of children particularly lend themselves to an interpretation which supports my view that appreciation of one's own humanity characterizes human maturity (I could say instead, adulthood.) Among the earliest of stages of the development of children—characterizing even well-formed two-year-olds—is the recognition that the needs of others matter. I am referring here not only, and not primarily, to the acquisition of the *belief* that other human beings ought to receive consideration, but to the development of *positive affective/intentional responses* to the well-being of others (and similar negative affective/intentional responses to their sufferings.) Perhaps the seeds of this concern for others lies in the recognition of the instrumental value of the prosperity of persons with whom a child has a significant relationship ("Johnny won't play with me, while he's crying"). In any case, it is clear that eventually the welfare of others can take on a value in its own right for a child. Perhaps this growth in empathy is learned by imitation; after all, a well-nurtured child has been unconditionally affirmed by others all of his or her life. In any case, growth in empathy is fostered by the development of the imagination, and in particular by encouragement of a child's imaginative participation in the lives of others. We instill virtue by utilizing this "moral imagination": "How would you like it if Johnny pushed you? Then you shouldn't push Johnny, either." Empathy develops not only in regard to very similar goods (as one child's physical pain is similar to another's) but also to increasingly different sorts of goods, by way of analogy (as one child's favorite blanket is different but analogous to another child's favorite stuffed animal.) As a child grows, he or she learns that more matters in life than the goods that immediately present themselves for his or her consumption. The

welfare of others matter, too, and a child's appreciation for the good things in life grows through his or her empathic participation in the lives of others.⁸

A second important and later stage in the socialization of children is the recognition that the range of goods is not the same as the range of immediate desires or commitments/intentions (of the child's own, or of others.) This recognition seems to be fostered by two rather different sorts of experiences. In the first instance, with maturity comes a change in the sorts of things that matter to children: for example, from food and the attention of parents to adventure, skill development, and eventually romance. The second sort of experience is that of regret. Children learn that their own desires and intentions depend upon their perception of the likely outcome of choices--of what it would be like to experience each chosen option--and they learn that this sort of perception can be incomplete, and can err. They become familiar with experiences of regret, relief, or elation at having pursued particular courses of action. They learn that people can be mistaken about whether or not something is good. Children learn, then, that the standard of good (eventually of worth, value, excellence) is not the same as one's own or others' current inclinations. The good that human life has to offer awaits *discovery*; it is not legislated by the individual.⁹ In people who react well to this feature of their lives, there develops a certain humility with respect to the goods of human existence: a recognition of the need for a willingness to learn, instead of to demand, from life. A healthy appreciation of the goods of human existence is thus consciously open-

⁸ This empathic participation in the lives of others is the basis for the passionate engagement with the lives and thought of people of different times, cultures, religions, etc., which is essential to successful education as it passes into the study of the liberal arts.

⁹ For an exploration of the phenomena in question here, and for a philosophical analysis of 'good' which takes those phenomena into account, see Peter Railton, "Facts and Values", in *Phil Topics* XIV, No. 2, Fall 1986, p. 5-31. While I think Railton's account is on the right track, I also find it to fall short in several respects. I present an alternate account in "Traditions and Informed-Desire Accounts of 'Good'", unpublished.

ended. (We might define a high level of open-ended appreciation for the goods of human life as *awe*.)

When we consider some person who recognizes that the standard of good is not the standard of desire or of commitment--since these can miss the mark--we can understand how it is psychologically possible for that person to suppose that human nature is the ground, the standard for human good. For an individual's tendency to appreciate, to react favorably toward, any apprehended object, is not entirely subject to his or her desires or intentions; it is something one finds true of oneself. Of course, one's tendencies are different in many respects from those of others, and no doubt individual desires and intentions/commitments, produced through an individual's particular interaction with his or her particular environment, play some role in determining what he or she will and will not react favorably toward under specified circumstances. But these particular tendencies, produced by an individual's interaction with his or her particular environment, are overcome, in a way, through the capacity for empathic participation in the lives of others. (One may not have a zeal for artistic expression, but one can learn to appreciate--react positively toward--that good as it is experienced functioning in the lives of others.) The range of goods for any and all human beings are both delimited and made possible by our being the kind of thing we are; that is, by our common human nature. Our common human nature determines the ways in which the particular experiences of individual human beings shape the way in which each can best participate in some measure of the goods which are possible for human beings. Our common human nature also enables us to participate empathically in the lives of others, i.e., to have positive affective/intentional reactions to certain states of affairs in virtue of our apprehending similar actual or possible reactions in others. In this way we are able to see beyond the limitations of our particular experience of

being human, and we develop an open-ended vision of the good for human beings. Our common human nature thus determines the limits of our own particular good, as well as enabling us to broaden our particular good to include, in an open-ended fashion, the good of all human beings. My being a human being, then, accounts for my capacities to enjoy whatever goods I enjoy, and enables that enjoyment to be found in a vast array of human experiences through empathic participation in the lives of an in-principle endless number and variety of fellow human beings.¹⁰

IV

There are grounds, here, for being favorably impressed by what it is to be a human being. This psychological possibility is plausibly seen as an extension of the more familiar experiences of human development discussed earlier, and as emerging from deeper reflection on those experiences. Being impressed by the excellence of human nature, and thus by one's own humanity, clearly constitutes a variety of self-esteem, for it is an aspect of one's affective/intentional relationship with one's self-concept. Just as one's particular capacities and attributes--developed, diminished, possible, or once possible--can impress and serve as grounds for a variety of kinds of self-esteem, so can human nature, which is in effect a capacity for these capacities, be apprehended as excellent, as impressive, and ground a kind of self-esteem. This dimension of self-esteem, which is a valuing of oneself as an end, in virtue of one's humanity, shares with varieties based upon developed capacities a dependence on one's being favorably impressed by various modes of human activity, whose objects are the goods of human life. No capacity is impressive, unless in virtue of the

¹⁰ Were endless individual human existence not at least logically possible, human mortality would place a logical limit on the goods I could experience, since only finite interaction with other beings of only finite experience would be possible.

impressiveness of the mode of activity for which it is a capacity. Just so, one's appraisal of the excellence of human nature will depend on one's appreciation of the range of goods which are possible for things of this, human kind.

The relationship between valuing one's human nature and valuing one's developed capacities would seem to be this, then. First, one cannot begin to appreciate the significance of human nature except insofar as one begins to experience the spectrum of excellent modes of activity, the good things in life, available to human beings, and except insofar as one begins to appreciate the excellence, as ends, of the developed capacities for living out these excellent modes of human activity. For appreciation of the significance of human nature develops out of a deepening reflection on--I mean only an awareness of--first the excellent modes of activity, and then the immediate ground of those activity, which are the developed capacities for those ways of living. One cannot realize that it is good to be a human being without realizing, at some level of awareness, that it is good to think, and to show compassion, etc., and thus that it is an important and excellent thing to be an intelligent human being, or a compassionate one, etc.

There is a second feature of the relationship between this better-developed appreciation for one's life and these essential stages on the way to it which is worth mentioning. The development of additional capacities for living out additional excellent modes of human life will enrich the self-esteem of those who value themselves as ends in virtue of their humanity, even when this humanity is valued in an optimally-developed way.¹¹ For self-esteem consists of positive

¹¹ It is necessary to point out that the account of self-esteem I am offering is admittedly incomplete, and at least one important reason for this is that the analysis of self-conception, in terms of which self-esteem is defined, has only been sketched. Different ways of conceiving of the self will effect the sort of self-esteem which accompanies them. For example, if one thinks of the self as being radically

affective and intentional reactions to one's own self-concept, and believing new valuable things to be true of oneself will produce such reaction in anyone whose emotions and intentions are functioning within a normal range.¹² As I will try to show, it is possible for self-esteem to be *enriched*, without what might be called self-worth being *increased*, however.

All aspects of human life which are potentially appreciated in a positive way add to the significance of human nature, since all are rendered possible in virtue of human beings being what they are.¹³ It seems to follow from this that the significance of being a human being is greater than the significance of any particular developed capacity (such as musical ability.) The excellence or significance of human nature indeed includes the significance of that developed capacity, since both are based on the significance of the same mode of activity. Human nature grounds that same activity eminently, however; that is, it fully grounds the activity by enabling the development of the particular capacity for it, and it grounds many other excellences as well. In the same way, the significance of human nature is greater than that of any finite set of particular capacities, such as a single human being might experience in a single lifetime, and this, for the same reason the significance of human nature surpasses a single capacity.

dependent on God, in the way Christian traditions have tended to conceive of it, then the particular form of the positive affective reaction to the self would seem to be something like gratitude. So the increase in self-esteem which a well-developed human being with this dependent conception of self would experience on the occasion of the development of additional capacities to live well would take the form of a deeper realization of the goodness of God, and a deeper gratitude for His making that goodness available to creatures, and to this creature in particular.

¹² Biochemical imbalances and perhaps certain genetic abnormalities might prevent healthy emotions from developing under what would normally constitute optimal conditions.

¹³ By the significance of human nature, spoken of without reference to its appreciation by particular human beings, I am referring to the way any human being would appreciate human nature, if he or she were to have the requisite kinds of experiences, including the requisite kind of development, discussed above.

The significance of human nature is not limited, then, by any particular set of human goods, and is in fact not fully knowable by particular human beings, except under a conception of it which is intrinsically open-ended: the significance of human nature is measured by whatever goods are possible for human beings. Thus, the significance or worth of an individual human being is not measurable in terms of any number of the particular goods of human existence, and—since no means to any end can be valued more highly than the end in question—*a fortiori* to continued human existence itself, insofar as this is valued instrumentally (that is, for the sake of the attainment of whatever particular human goods that continued existence will enable an individual human being to attain.) One cannot place a price, in terms of other goods, on a human being, then, or so one would have grounds to conclude were one formed to appreciate the value of one's own and others' humanity in the way I am describing as optimal for psychological well-being. This Kantian-sounding conclusion forms a familiar part of ordinary moral experience, I will argue shortly.¹⁴ I propose to give the attitude I have been explicating a Kantian-sounding description: let us call respect for the immeasurable value of human beings, oneself and others, in virtue of their common human nature, *respect for the dignity of human beings*.

It is clear that the attitude I am describing, including that dimension of it which I have described as optimal self-esteem, has certain affinities with what most other recent work in the area has called self-respect. Self-esteem has often been roughly identified with self-respect in some influential works on the subject—most notably in Rawls—but recently even Rawls has recognized as important the distinction

¹⁴ A comparison is suggested with Kant's concept of *reverentia*, presented well in Stephen J. Massey, "Kant on Self-Respect", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, January 1983, p. 57-74. I would argue, were space to permit, that Kant's view of the attitude he took to be appropriately reserved for the moral law is with better reason directed toward human nature.

between the two for which Thomas and Sachs have argued.¹⁵ I have neglected the distinction here, not because I think there are no important distinctions in the area—it should be clear that I think there are far many more important distinctions in the area than the ones Sachs and Thomas advocate—but because I can bring what they take to be disparate psychological phenomena under a unifying theory. I will clarify the relationship between what I advocate as optimal self-esteem and the self-esteem and self-respect which Sachs and others distinguish, shortly. Before doing so, however, I will need to explore a bit further the connection between self-esteem of the variety I have proposed as optimal and some other closely-related goods, thus contributing in some measure toward showing that the variety of self-esteem I am proposing indeed meets the third of the criteria for optimal self-esteem, namely, that it be harmoniously connected with other important human goods.

V

Self-esteem is often taken to be closely connected with motivation and with a sense of acceptance or belonging, and indeed the connections among these goods are many and complicated.¹⁶ It is commonplace to notice, for example, that lack of self-esteem (of some often unspecified variety) is associated with a lack of motivation. There is something of a self-esteem movement which has interpreted this association in such a way as to try to bolster motivation—in schools, and in self-improvement

¹⁵ For Rawls' early view, see *A Theory of Justice*, p. 440; See the articles cited above for Sachs' and Thomas's work; for Rawls' later acknowledgement of the distinction, see his "Justice as Fairness: Political, Not Metaphysical", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14, Summer, 1985, p. 223-251 (note 33.)

¹⁶ See the sources cited in Bhatti, *et al.*, in Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos, eds., *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem* (hereafter, *SISE*) (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1989, p. 36, 38. The relationship between self-esteem and motivation is quite complex: Covington reviews some of these puzzling complexities in *SISE*, p. 83-88. On Rawls' view of self-esteem (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 440), the requirements for self-esteem just *are* the requirements for motivation.

programs such as drug education--by seeking to promote self-esteem, as if low self-esteem were the cause of low motivation. Motivation is not secured by high self-esteem, however; it is secured by the creation of the same conditions which foster adequate self-esteem, I will argue.

Ideal motivation is toward as full a range as possible of the goods of human life. Motivation is developed by fostering 1) adequate apprehension of the goods in question, as well as 2) adequate apprehension of some capacities in the individual to act in ways which will effect the attainment of these goods. Before we examine how the conditions which foster adequate self-esteem also foster the development of motivation, we should attend briefly to a family of obstacles to that development.

A lack of especially important goods can warp motivation, channeling an individual's attention and thus motivation toward a narrow range of goods which are judged to be effective means to the procurement of the crucially-lacking goods. Lack of food, or of security, can channel motivation primarily or exclusively toward activities which foster the acquisition of these goods.¹⁷

Especially important in this regard are goods in the area of belonging and acceptance, and these in turn seem closely connected at various levels with the goods of trust and communication. The goods in these areas seem crucially important to human development and well-being, and when appropriate acceptance/affirmation is lacking, a person's attention and motivation seems channeled around the acquisition of these goods, and around whatever goods are apprehended as means to

¹⁷ An adequate identification of the sorts of crucial goods I have in mind would require an account of a hierarchy of human needs. A full treatment of the interrelationships among the goods of self-esteem, motivation, belonging, etc., would require an account of human development and the hierarchy of needs as background.

them. Thus, when affirmation/acceptance is seen as dependent upon some particular developed capacity or capacities, inordinate attention is likely to be focused on the development of those capacities. The motivation of people whose attention has been focused on particular developed capacities or other attributes in this way may be high, but it will be guided by the pursuit of the goods of affirmation/acceptance rather than toward those activities such people would enjoy for their own sakes. The affective consequences of successful activity, moreover, will be more akin to relief than to joy, since those activities will only temporarily secure the affirmation perceived as lacking.¹⁸ Self-esteem based upon developed capacities would seem to be fostered in environments when affirmation is tied primarily to performance or to particular attributes in this way, since a positive affective response will become associated with capacities apprehended to be effective in filling an individual's affirmation needs, and since those needs seem to be so substantial that attention to other dimensions of life may be crowded out by the pursuit of affirmation.

When conditions fostering the development of optimal self-esteem, or respect for the dignity of human beings, are created, motivation is also fostered. What I have been calling optimal self-esteem is fostered, I have already shown, by 1) conditions fostering the development of empathic participation of the lives of others; and 2) conditions enabling an appreciation of a wide variety of the goods of human life. Taking these one at a time, let me show how both sorts of conditions are conducive to the development of motivation.

¹⁸ Compare, in this connection, what Martin Covington has to say about *overstrivers*, a variety of student motivated to achieve scholastic success out of fear of failure, which they take as an indication of their self-worth. These are likely students whose self-esteem is capacity-based, in the way that Rawls and others take to be constitutive of all self-esteem. See Covington, "Self-Esteem and Failure in School", *SISE*, p. 93ff.

Part of what seems likely to contribute to the development of empathy is the example of concern for the child shown by others, usually and chiefly by parents. Parents' concern is usually in some measure unconditional, at least early in life, and parents respecting the dignity of human beings would exhibit this concern maximally, since the child would be perceived as worthy of such acceptance/attention/affirmation at all times, in all circumstances.¹⁹ The unconditional acceptance grounded in respect for human nature is *not*, it is important to note, unconditional acceptance of behavior, but rather of the person. Unconditional affirmation of *behavior* has a disastrous affect on both motivation and the development of optimal self-esteem, since it erodes acquaintance with human excellences.²⁰ To accept/affirm/attend to/demonstrate concern for a *person*, on the other hand, is simply to act as if that person's well-being matters.

This unconditional affirmation of a child seems to meet at least a large measure of a child's needs for affirmation/acceptance.²¹ If these acceptance needs are met, the way is clear for development of interest in a variety of aspects of human life which

¹⁹ Please note that in describing conditions for the development of optimal self-esteem, I make reference to the optimal self-esteem of the parents, in the development of their children's sense of dignity. One could formulate some sort of regress question about this process, but its answer is reasonably clear, and so I'll leave it unaddressed.

²⁰ The failure of many esteem-based educational/self-help programs to achieve desirable outcomes seems due to their lack of affirmation of standards of excellence. See, for example, Joseph Pereira's front-page article entitled "Shunned Lessons" in the *Wall Street Journal*, Friday, Nov. 10, 1989. For a discussion of such programs, see W. R. Coulsen, ed., *La Jolla Program Newsletter*, Feb, March, April of 1991.

²¹ How large a measure of a child's affirmation needs is a question for empirical psychologists, though to know what to look for and how to interpret it they would need to utilize some account of psychological well-being, like the one I am starting to sketch, here. A philosophical account of well-being and an empirically validated account seem to depend radically on one another, in such a way that progress in either discipline at some stage requires input from the other discipline, where that input is guided by or at least harmonious with the more certain accomplishments of the other discipline it seeks to support. The philosophical reflections contained in this paper are situated very early in that process of interplay.

are free from inordinate association with the meeting of these acceptance needs. In a way I have described earlier, the development of empathic participation in the lives of others contributes to this process of discovery, once that process is liberated from a focus on affirmation. Thus, treating a child with dignity fosters a widening apprehension of the good things in human life, which is the first of two conditions which must be met for a person to be motivated to pursue these good things.

The second condition required for motivation is that an individual apprehend himself or herself to possess the capacities necessary for acquiring the goods in question, in the circumstances in which he or she apprehends as obtaining. Unconditional affirmation of the worth of a person frees a person to develop capacities for activities which the person values for their own sakes--rather than for the sake of affirmation--as well as for which the person is dispositionally well-suited. A sense of capability, or of power, will most likely develop around the pursuit of activities a person actually enjoys, and toward which the person is well-suited. A rewarding sense of accomplishment, as well as the intrinsic reward of the activities themselves, draw a person's attention to his or her capacities to successful engagement in such activities.

Those who unconditionally respect a person out of respect for the dignity of that person will be most likely to affirm that person in their successful pursuit of the good things in life. For adults with an appreciation for human dignity are most liable to be able to appreciate, in virtue of their well-developed capacity for empathic participation, the goods which the child pursues. Their unconditional affirmation of the child does not render them unable to affirm the child particularly on account of demonstrated capabilities, since it is in virtue of the excellence of the particular modes of life which are possible for human beings that the capacities for those

activities are esteemed, and the capacity for these capacities, human nature, as well. Adults appreciating the dignity of human beings will enjoy and affirm the worthwhile activities of children, but in their unconditional (and knowledgeable) concern for their children these adults will free children from the weight of performing to gain acceptance, thus maximally fostering motivation.

The conditions under which optimal self-esteem is fostered, conditions in which mature members exemplify the esteem they seek to foster in the less mature, are the same conditions under which motivation and the goods associated with belonging and acceptance are secured. This preliminary sketch of the relationships among the goods surrounding self-esteem suggests, then, that valuing oneself as an end, in virtue of one's humanity, meets the third criteria of adequacy for self-esteem. Respecting the dignity of human beings, in the sense I have described, harmonizes with the attainment of other important human goods, and in a way which other varieties of self-esteem do not.

VI

Thus, self-esteem based upon a deep and open-ended appreciation for the significance of what it is to be a human being is psychologically possible, and it meets all three of the criteria for adequacy for which I argued earlier. None of the other varieties of self-esteem, in any of their various species, seem to fare as well.

Let me review the account of self-esteem in general, and of its optimal variety presented here, and briefly sketch the ways in which my account shows promise for embodying the virtues of rival accounts, revealing and overcoming the weaknesses

of those accounts, and explaining the emergence of that limited range of phenomena of which these rival views seek to give an account.²²

Self-esteem, on my general account of it, is the affective/intentional dimensions of an individual's relationship with his or her self-conception. The self-conception is, roughly, the cognitive dimensions of an individual's relationship with himself or herself. A person's self-esteem and self-conception will overlap, then, but they are not coextensive, and neither forms a proper subset of the other. Since everything we apprehend elicits some sort of affective or intentional responses, there can be as many dimensions to self-esteem as there are dimensions of human activity with which human beings can associate themselves, and as there are levels of reflection and abstraction of which human cognition is capable.

What Rawls and others have identified variously as self-esteem and self-respect (and his later critics identified as self-esteem alone) is indeed a variety of self-esteem on the definition I propose; it is a variety, roughly, based upon developed capacities for activities about which a person cares.²³ On the road to the development of esteem based not upon developed capacities but rather upon being the kind of thing able to develop those capacities and many others, the kind of response to developed capacities which Rawls, Sachs, Thomas, and others identify with self-esteem will indeed be elicited. It is, after all, only because certain activities are excellent, and the developed capacities for those activities, fine, that it is good to be the kind of thing which grounds the possibility of those capacities being developed, and the activities

²² I embrace this agenda, with respect to rival views, in conscious accord with MacIntyre's argument for the nature of fruitful engagement among rival traditions. See chapter XVIII of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press)1988.

²³ For an analysis of the theory of worth at work in Rawls' account, as well as for a discussion of kinds of worth not covered by—as Deigh calls it—Rawls's "auteur theory of worth", see John Deigh's "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique", cited above, esp. p. 241.

engaged. In those whose sense of their own worth consists solely in their positive reaction to reflection on developed capacities, however, there seems room for the deeper reflection on the grounds of these developed capacities, as I have described.

Those whose self-esteem does not develop beyond the appreciation of their developed capacities, furthermore, seem liable to the instability which will threaten esteem based solely on grounds which can be lost, or diminish in significance, I have argued. The negative effect of capacity-based self-esteem on the development of motivation has also been plausibly described. I have only suggested the negative affect of this sort of self-esteem on the development of personal relationships. The sort of self-esteem I have described as capacity-based has implications for one's attitude toward others, and it may well be that human beings would prefer to be around other human beings who treat them as unconditionally important and as equal in worth.

It is true, of course, that many who advocate the sort of capacity-based self-esteem I have criticized as always less than optimal would argue that the shortcomings which I have just reviewed are based upon my confusing self-esteem with self-respect. It is clear from the account of self-esteem that I have given, however, that what they call self-respect is quite clearly a variety of attitude toward the self which I have united under a single general account. The only way in which a rival analysis of self-respect could escape falling under the definition of self-esteem I have proposed—the affective/intentional dimension of one's relationship toward one's self-concept—would be by attempting to present it as purely cognitive. But one who merely believed, for example, that one possessed "fundamental human rights", but did not *care* about or in *any* way insist upon those rights, would clearly be one who lacked respect for himself (or, *mutatis mutandis*, for others). One who did *not*

believe in such rights—not under that concept, that is—but was deeply committed to one's own well-being (and the well-being of others) in just the way rights-advocates would insist on, might be a fine example of a person with self-respect, however.

To adequately address views which seek to ground self-respect either in the capacity to act morally, or in the possession of human rights, or in acting in accord with the moral law, I would need to examine carefully the accounts of morality, rights, and the will which underlie those accounts.²⁴ Clearly, that task goes beyond what space permits, here. What I think should be said about all such theories of self-respect, is that they share at least the following limitations: first, that there is more about human beings which makes us worthy of respect—such as our capacities for creativity, and our aesthetic sensibilities—than is addressed by those accounts; second, that such accounts fail to probe deeply or successfully enough into the grounds of the activities or properties (moral rights, etc.) which they take as valuable; and third, that everything these accounts of self-respect seek to account for by way of their self-esteem/self-respect distinction is better explained through the analysis of the dignity of human beings I have presented here.

I have presented an account of self-esteem/self-respect—I do not distinguish these—on which any and all of the dimensions of living well are included among the grounds for the dignity of human life, since all these excellent modes of life are the grounds of the excellence of that actuality which renders them possible. No appeal to special moral properties or activities is needed to ground the fundamental equal worth of all human beings; our common human nature is revealed as an entirely sufficient basis for that judgement.

²⁴ Massey argues that Kant held this view, and also that acting in accord with morality constituted grounds for an even deeper level of respect, or *reverentia*, in his "Kant on Self-Respect".

One further point concerning morality should be made. If the partial account of human prosperity offered here is plausible, it provides reason to think that the true interests of human beings are essentially in harmony. With the reestablishment of a universal and objective account of human prosperity of this sort, morality may be more plausibly thought to be the pursuit of the good life, as Aristotelian traditions have taken it to be; morality and practical reason may thus be reunited. This suggestion is in line with Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of the requirements for recovery of what once was morality.²⁵

Important conclusions are suggested not only for moral philosophy, but also for clinical and empirical psychology, by the account of maturity I have offered. At the risk of venturing far beyond my area of competence, let me mention a few of these. For empirical purposes, it would seem to be especially important to design instruments which enable interpretations which recognize important distinctions among varieties of self-esteem. To know that someone has a favorable attitude toward his or her own personal appearance, for example, gives little important information without knowing whether or not, or to what degree the satisfaction of that person's acceptance needs depends largely on personal appearance, and whether there are other important bases for self-esteem operating in the person's life.

For remediation for persons with low self-esteem and/or low motivation, the account I have offered suggests several important points. First, healthy self-esteem is not produced by taking a low instance of just any variety of self-esteem and making it higher; what is needed in many cases is a shifting of the grounds for self-

²⁵ See his "Moral Philosophy: What Next?" in MacIntyre and Hauerwas, ed.s, *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press) 1983.

esteem.²⁶ An especially important application of that first general point is that people with low motivation are unlikely to become motivated by making them feel better about the state of development of their various capacities.²⁷ Motivation is developed in a context where the person's need for unconditional acceptance is met, thus disassociating worth from performance, as well as by providing exposure to and opportunities for enjoyable modes of activity. The maintenance of high standards of excellence threatens only unhealthy self-esteem, consisting of inordinate affective or intentional responses to a confined range of developed capacities. Healthy self-esteem--passionate commitment to the dignity of human beings--is developed in conditions manifesting unconditional affirmation of the worth of human beings, and by exposure to what is excellent, and recognized as excellent. So, for example, addressing problems with self-esteem and motivation in schools by affirming just any of the students' personal standards of behavior and performance may make some kinds of students feel more comfortable about themselves, but that approach to such problems is revealed by the analysis I have offered as subversive to both healthy self-esteem as well as healthy motivation.

A final point: in my view, the merit of the account of self-esteem and related goods I have offered stems from the grounding of that account in a particular approach to rational psychology. The approach I have taken as a point of departure is Thomistic.

²⁶ Rodney Skager and Elizabeth Kerst offer a similar suggestion; see "Alcohol and Drug Use: A Psychological Perspective", *SISE*, p. 252.

²⁷ Low motivation, like low self-esteem, can have a variety of causes; what is needed in the case of each individual is an assessment of what stages in the process of healthy development of self-esteem and motivation have been inadequately developed. A good place to begin, in every case, is by fostering an environment of unconditional affirmation of the worth of the person in a way in which a dissociation occurs between worth and performance, and between worth and the possession of certain capacities or attributes. This dissociation creates a climate in which exploration of the good, the true, and the beautiful can take place unhindered from pressure to meet acceptance-needs. This exploration is unhindered by--indeed, it is necessary to guide it by--the upholding of standards of excellence. The joys of any craft are best revealed by exposure to a master of that craft, whether the craft be weaving, logical analysis, or friendship.

All my remarks about the nature of apprehension and affective/intentional responses to it have been largely promissory, and thus the account of self-esteem grounded in that approach can only be tentative. Nevertheless, the approach I have sketched seems markedly superior to those produced in the philosophical literature of recent decades, and judging from the most recent global appraisal of the literature in the *Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, the psychologists and sociologists have no convincing analysis to offer, either.²⁸ The point I want to make is that the nesting of my account of self-esteem in the broader range of assumptions--many of them controversial--about human rational psychology is what enables account the account presented here to succeed in covering the range of complex phenomena that it does.²⁹ If this account enables greater empirical and therapeutic progress than has been possible on other analyses, as I think it will, that progress, too--to be recognized as progress--will depend on the acceptance of the rational psychology which underlies this account. I take this as an illustration of MacIntyre's claim that inquiry without a substantial body of prior agreement is destined to be barren.³⁰ Rather than proceeding by taking for granted only positions established to the satisfaction of most all practicing members of a given profession, future conceptual/theoretical and empirical studies ought to focus around some particular

²⁸ See, all in *SISE*, Neil Smelser, "Self-Esteem and Social Problems", esp. p. 18, 19, and Scheff, *et al.*, "Crime, Violence, and Self-Esteem", esp. p. 177, 180. Covington, in "Self-Esteem and Failure in School" offers a similar assessment (p. 83). My account of the connection between and conditions for the development of self-esteem and motivation covers the phenomena Covington goes on to explain by his introduction of a theory of worth which he takes to be the most promising yet to emerge (see his pages 88-91.)

²⁹ Among the features of the rational psychology operative in my analysis is the interpretation of the passions and the will as essentially responses to cognitive input. On any libertarian account of freedom, for example, the will must be a good deal more than this. The analysis of the faculty of will, or whatever analogue to it is offered, will play a central role in any account of morality, and hence of the moral dimensions of self-respect. I have addressed these issues in "Freedom and Good in the Thomistic Tradition", unpublished.

³⁰ See his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, chapter XIX, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press) 1990, ch. X.

tradition of inquiry or another, and push that programme deeply through the many interrelated dimensions of its implications.

What I hope to have sketched here is how the Thomistic tradition of inquiry has the resources to account for phenomena which are both puzzling and of real concern to a very wide range of individuals and disciplines in contemporary Western societies. The promise the Thomistic tradition holds for resolving both conceptual puzzles and real human problems connected with self-esteem, respect for others, acceptance/belonging, and motivation, offers to a considerable range of persons some reason for taking seriously the question of whether the Thomistic tradition offers a viable analysis of the human condition.

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