

A Short History and Theory of Respect

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ABSTRACT: It has become common, following Stephen Darwall's "Two Kinds of Respect" (1977), to distinguish between "appraisal respect" and "recognition respect." I propose, rather, to distinguish between hierarchical and egalitarian respect. The way the two meanings interact and the way they either support or contrast with each other have yet to be made clear. The meanings gathered under the broad rubric of respect can be highlighted by a genealogy that convincingly shows that the hierarchical notion is fundamental and that the definition of an egalitarian meaning is a decisive shift made mainly by the Enlightenment movement, particularly by Kant. Furthermore, the notion of respect is currently being extended beyond persons—to animals, other living beings, and the environment. I argue that we can justifiably do so on the basis of the interaction between the hierarchical and egalitarian notions of respect.

1. THE VARIETIES OF RESPECT: AN INCOHERENT CONCEPT?

IT HAS BECOME COMMON, subsequent to Stephen Darwall's seminal article "Two Kinds of Respect," to distinguish between "appraisal respect" and "recognition respect." According to Darwall, appraisal respect has as its exclusive objects persons or features of persons and "consists in an attitude of positive appraisal of that person either as a person or as engaged in some particular pursuit"; on the other hand, recognition respect "consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do."¹ The distinction is clearly embedded in common language and is basically correct. Yet neither Darwall's article nor any of several that followed it² has offered any clue as to *why* the idea of respect entails two notions that are in fact divergent and, to a certain extent at least, mutually incompatible. The reasons for this distinction are both historical and theoretical, and we must ask ourselves whether the two dimensions can be maintained under a single coherent and comprehensive meaning. A conceptual analysis of our present understanding of the idea of respect might lead us to a clarification of our language and of the differences embedded in the distinction, but it might also confirm and foster the hidden and unspoken prejudices supporting

¹Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88 (1977): 36–49 at p. 38, doi: 10.1086/292054.

²Carl Cranor, "Kant's Respect-for-Persons Principle," *International Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1980): 19–39 doi: 10.5840/intstudphil198012237; Cranor, "On Respecting Human Beings as Persons," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 17 (1983): 103–11 doi: 10.1007/BF00158555; Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991); Hill, *Respect, Pluralism and Justice* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006); Carla Bagnoli, "The Mafioso Case: Autonomy and Self-Respect," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 12 (2009): 477–93 doi: 10.1007/s10677-009-9154-x.

it. A critical and purposive stance on respect is more likely to spring from some sort of historical awareness that traces the roots of our present understanding back to certain practices and ideas from the past.

Methodologically speaking, what is needed (along with a conceptual analysis) is a *genealogy* of the concept, or rather of the idea. A genealogy (following lines that simultaneously recall Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and Bernard Williams) is an attempt to recapitulate the way an idea and its associated practices arose in our historical-cultural context and evolved over time to acquire their present forms and dimensions. This kind of inquiry is particularly relevant in the case of respect, as our present understanding of it fails to accommodate the uses of the notion in common language into a single coherent framework.

In its present common sense, in fact, the idea of respect seems to entail (at least) two dimensions: a hierarchical (or differential) one and an egalitarian one. What Darwall called “appraisal respect” results from the perception of a *difference* between the respectful and the respected in terms of value: physical value or strength, mental value or cleverness, social value or rank, political value or power, moral value or virtue. Appraisal is given to those who deserve them, owing to their ability or position. I will call this “hierarchical or differential respect” since it implies not only the appreciation of a difference but the corresponding definition of a ranking and of a behavior that shows deference, reverence, and in some cases submission to a superior stance. Hierarchy is the establishment of *authority* among persons and is a basic structure of all human relationships, even in democratic contexts and even within egalitarian conceptions of democracy.³ The *recognition* of a difference, and not just its appraisal, as well as the recognition of a similarity or equality, is essential to social relationships, and I would therefore suggest a change in the distinction proposed by Darwall, which seems to imply that appraisal is opposed to recognition. A difference in power or in moral value between persons must be *recognized* in order to be appreciated. In fact, what I will call “egalitarian respect” (somewhat analogous to Darwall’s “recognition respect”) is simply based on the *recognition* of an *equality* between persons, as opposed to the recognition of a *difference*. It is an equality of dignity, i.e., the recognition of the autonomy and rationality that persons as such share regardless of race, gender, class or role. Clearly, this connotation seems to have become somewhat dominant in the contemporary idea of respect, but it by no means exhausts it, nor does it appear to have excluded hierarchical respect from the picture. This recognition of equality seems to ground moral relationships more than those that are social and political, and its strength in our conscience is such that we tend to admit of hierarchies only insofar as they do not violate egalitarian respect. Yet, the way the two meanings interact, and either support or contrast with each other, has yet to be made clear.

In this paper I argue for a theoretical thesis and for a supporting methodological one. My theoretical thesis is that hierarchical respect grounds egalitarian respect.

³Tom P. S. Angier, “Hierarchy and Social Respect: Friends or Enemies?” in *The Equal Society: Essays on Equality in Theory and Practice*, ed. G. Hull, G. Schouten, T. P. S. Angier, B. Williams, and D. Bilchitz (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 165–83.

This is a *theoretical* thesis, not a historiographical or hermeneutical one. A solid understanding of respect needs to admit that we respect each other equally only insofar as we recognize a certain kind of hierarchy at its foundations. This is a conceptual claim, but in order to argue for it I will recall, if only briefly, the way the egalitarian notion arose and has evolved in the history of Western culture. My methodological thesis is that this will help clarify the conceptual foundations of my claim, and at the same time offer an explanation for the development of the concept from a mainly hierarchical meaning in antiquity to a prevalently egalitarian one in modern times.

On the whole, therefore, my argument is that the meanings now gathered under the broad rubric of respect, which has gone by various names throughout history, rather convincingly *show* that the hierarchical notion is fundamental and that the definition of an egalitarian meaning is a decisive shift made mainly by the Enlightenment movement, and particularly (within the context of a theoretical foundation) by Immanuel Kant. Furthermore, and Kant notwithstanding, nowadays we tend to extend the notion of respect beyond persons (respect for animals, for living beings, for the environment, for artifacts), and this could not be accommodated if the meaning of respect depended entirely on the recognition of the autonomy and dignity of persons. In that case, the idea of respect for animals or the environment would be difficult to accept, or even understand. I will therefore argue that the genealogical interpretation offers a framework for a comprehensive theory of respect that comprises both hierarchical and egalitarian respect, and as a consequence of this argument, that it also offers suggestions for justifiably extending the principle of respect to include artifacts, animals and the environment.

I will now very briefly recall some fundamental junctions in the genealogy of respect through the history of Western culture. I will point out a few particularly significant examples of how our twofold understanding of respect (hierarchical and egalitarian) was conceptualized in the past, highlighting the passage from the prevalence of one meaning to the rise of the other. Then, I will connect these examples in a thread that makes sense not only of the evolution of the idea but also of its present status, resolving the apparent incoherence in our language within a consistent framework.

2. A GENEALOGY: FROM HIERARCHY TO EQUALITY

2.1. *Aidos*, or *Aias Redivivus*

In the Greek tradition there is no word that expresses exactly what we mean by “respect.” Coming somewhat close to it is the word *aidos*, which may mean “shame” or at times “modesty” but also “respect” in the sense of reverence toward leaders, parents, and authorities in general as well as toward the laws of the *polis*. Among many examples, we may take the tragedy *Aias* by Sophocles. Having exposed himself to ridicule by killing cattle instead of the Achaian leaders, Aias is precipitated into *aidos*. His maid Tecmessa says: “How to tell of what should not be spoken? / What has happened you will find / as bad as death itself. / Our great Aias, overwhelmed

by madness / in the night, has been degraded.”⁴ He has been seen doing foolish things, and his courage and value are called into question. As Bernard Williams pointed out, shame in the Greek culture is “being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition.”⁵ The word is connected with the root *id*, which recurs in nouns concerning vision. But *aidos* is also related to the reverence due to parents and to the honor that the hero attempts to defend at any cost. In fact, Tecmessa later invites Aias to abandon the plan she guesses that he has conceived, i.e., to kill himself out of shame, saying:

Respect (*aidesai*) your father, don’t desert him
in the grimness of old age.
Respect your mother, now allotted many years,
who prays so often you shall come back home alive.⁶

Thus, *aidos* here resembles our “respect” in the traditional sense of recognizing the authority and dignity of those who stand above us, not only in lineage.

This can also be seen with reference to laws. Menelaus condemns Aias for having attempted to kill the Achaian leaders—an act that would have thrown *all* the Greeks into *aidos*. A community cannot survive without *aidos*, i.e., without respect for its leaders and for its laws. Menelaus says:

Indeed, it is the sign of a bad person
when a commoner disdains to pay respect to his superiors.
Good order never could advance in a society
where there is no establishment of fear;
likewise an army can’t be ordered properly unless
there’s a protective shield of fear and due respect (*aidous ekon*).
A man should know, however brawny
he may grow in bulk, a small affliction
may still bring him down.
It is the person with a proper sense of fear
and modesty (*aiskyne*) who wins security, you know.⁷

And yet, Odysseus succeeds in having Aias buried within the camp, arguing that he was a generous and talented warrior. His superiority in arms raises the attitude of respect in Odysseus and his comrades.

⁴Sophocles, *Aias*, trans. Oliver Taplin in Sophocles, *Four Tragedies* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), here vv. 215–17.

⁵Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 78.

⁶*Aias*, vv. 506–09.

⁷*Aias*, vv. 1070–1080.

Here we encounter the notion of appraisal respect, but in terms more complex than the simple recognition of a valuable trait. There is the recognition of a *difference of power* that respect admits of and that generates the attitude of bowing to a superior, even when that figure is inimical and threatening. The morals of honor entail such a conception of human relationships as based on differences in power, and the hierarchical notion of respect (reflected at least partially in the notion of *aidos*) captures this dimension as an original part of the more complex notion presented here. The concept of hierarchical respect, various features of which were already present in Greek culture, is still with us but has undergone major transformation and extension.

2.2. Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle

Democritus offers a further dimension of *aidos*. In certain fragments he uses the word in order to suggest an *inward* look, especially in moral terms: “First of all, one must be ashamed towards oneself (*eouton aiskynesthai*) for the depraved actions done.”⁸ To be virtuous is to be aware of an inner look that replicates the look of those whose judgment we value but that is the look of the subject himself upon his own life and deeds:

One should not be more ashamed (*aideisthai*) about something when it is in front of other people than in front of oneself and, by the same token, one should not do something wrong more easily if nobody gets to know it than if every man discovers it. On the contrary, one should be ashamed first of all in front of oneself [but one might also translate: one must first of all respect oneself] and one must impose to his soul this rule, so that he never performs improper actions.⁹

While Democritus emphasizes a subjective dimension, Plato changes the less sophisticated notion of *aidos* that we find in the tragedies and in the Homeric poems into something strictly connected to a political order. In the *Protagoras*, Plato reformulates the myth of Prometheus, who has created an embarrassing situation by leaving human beings without any particular characteristics and has therefore stolen fire from the Gods so that men might have technical abilities. As a result, humans begin using iron weapons to kill one another. Seeing this, “Zeus, fearing that our race was in danger of utter destruction, sent Hermes to bring respect (*aidos*) and right among men, to the end that there should be regulation of cities and friendly ties to draw them together” (*Protagoras* 322c).¹⁰ These resources, the sense of respect and the sense of justice, were distributed equally among men, and Zeus ordered that “he who cannot partake of respect (*aidos*) and right shall die the death as a public pest.”¹¹ The order to be respected is that of a hierarchical society,

⁸Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Zurich: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1951), 526, B 84.

⁹*Ibid.*, B 264.

¹⁰Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), 322c.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 322d.

but the capacity to recognize and respect the law is universal. It binds all humans in a community of equals. The myth makes reference to the gods, and here we see the seed of a *vertical dimension* in the meaning of *aidos*: equality among men derives from the spirit of justice and respect coming from an authority standing above any human power. It is not enough that you are the strongest (as Thrasymachus would have it; see *Republic I*): if you want to establish justice, you have to recognize the superior strength of the idea of justice.

Aristotle uses *aidos* only with reference to decency or modesty, and in this sense he says:

Shame is not properly spoken of as a virtue, since it is more like a feeling than a state of character. Anyway, it is defined as a kind of fear of disrepute, and it has an effect very like that produced by the fear of something horrible: people blush when they feel disgrace, and turn pale when they are afraid of death. So both seem to be in some way bodily conditions, and this seems to be more characteristic of a feeling than a state.¹²

Even in this perspective, however, *aidos* depends on recognizing a difference between one's own power and that of another, as when one is confronted with danger, or with a look that could cast one into disgrace. The notion maintains its hierarchical connotation.

On the contrary, in his conception of distributive justice Aristotle clearly states that injustice consists in being "unfair or unequal" and that "the just is a sort of proportion" in the sense of recognizing a ratio "since proportion is an equality of ratios"¹³ between the needs of persons and the goods available. As in Plato, justice is seen as respecting a rule, which in Aristotle does not depend on strength but on a formal definition establishing a kind of relationship among humans as such.

Therefore, we might say that the philosophical outlook brings the notion of *aidos* into connection with that of justice, but in different (though rather complementary) ways. Plato emphasizes the hierarchical dimension of justice by recalling that it requires the recognition of the authority of the laws. Aristotle emphasizes proportionality, and thus equality—at the same time separating it sharply from any feeling, *aidos* included—resulting in a completely formal notion of justice. Nonetheless, even Aristotle admits of a "political" value of *aidos*, saying that "Shame may be said to be conditionally a good thing; if a good man does such actions, he will feel disgraced," although "the virtues are not subject to such a qualification. And if shamelessness—not to be ashamed of doing base actions—is bad, that does not make it good to be ashamed of doing such actions."¹⁴ Respect in the sense of *aidos* or shame is, then, also in this case the sign of an asymmetrical relation. Having broken the rule of justice, the unjust but not totally shameless man will feel his inadequacy and therefore implicitly recognize the superior authority of justice.

¹²Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), IV.1128 b.

¹³Ibid., V, 1131 a.

¹⁴Ibid.

2.3. Pietas and Veneratio

The vertical dimension of respect assumes a stronger role in Latin antiquity and achieves its maximum expression in Christianity. There is no immediate correspondence between *aidos* and any single word in Latin since it can be translated as *reverentia*, *observantia*, *veneratio*, and even *pietas*. In the *Aeneid*, with respect to Aeneas and Hector, we learn that “[b]oth men were noted for courage, and both for remarkable prowess. / Righteousness was more Aeneas’ domain (*ambo animis, ambo insignes praestantibus armis, hic pietate prior*).”¹⁵ In terms of respecting the gods of the family and the homeland, Aeneas is more worthy than Hector and therefore deserves both the honor of command and that of creating a lineage and a city. Aeneas is king because he is *just, pious, and excellent in arms*—a comprehensive synthesis of the virtues belonging to those who deserve respect:

No man was ever more just than our ruler: his name was Aeneas.
 No man was ever more righteous,
 more valiant in arms and in combat
 (*Rex erat Aeneas nobis, quo iustior alter
 nec pietate fuit nec bello maior et armis*).¹⁶

In this perspective, respect is a virtue and an attitude, implying the recognition of both a theological and a political hierarchy, connected through the idea of *pietas*.

In a different strand, we find in Seneca the notion of *veneratio*, but with an interesting twist binding the *vertical* and *inward* dimensions together. In observing a man who remains immovable when confronted by dangers and storms, standing above other human beings, “will you not be overcome with reverence (*veneratio*) before him? Will you not say, ‘Something is there that is so great, so exalted, that we cannot possibly believe it to be of the same kind as that paltry body it inhabits? A power divine has descended on him.’” And yet, Seneca admonishes us not to praise a man for qualities belonging to another:

Praise in him that which nothing can take away and nothing can confer—that which is distinctive about the human being (*quod proprium hominis est*). Do you ask what that is? It is the mind, and rationality perfected within the mind. For a human being is a rational animal. Hence his good is complete if he fulfills that for which he is born. But what is it that this rationality requires of him? The easiest thing of all: to live in accordance with his own nature.¹⁷

What demands respect, in this perspective, is neither the presence of a divine nature in man nor the devotion due to Gods, but rather the superior dignity that comes to man by way of his reason. Every man should recognize and respect this *inner su-*

¹⁵Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Frederick Ahl (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), XI, vv. 291–92.

¹⁶Ibid., I, vv. 544–45.

¹⁷Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, translated with an introduction and commentary by Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015) 41.8 (p. 124).

periority, which is akin to the capacity to stand firm in the face of tribulations and dire times. This is something that is simultaneously both universal and particular: every man is *capable* of such a courageous stance, but not everyone is actually so brave and strong. Only the truly brave deserve respect. And at the same time, what makes human beings capable of deserving respect is a universal human feature, i.e., reason. In this typically Stoic perspective, the hierarchical and the egalitarian dimensions of respect are both present, in a kind of connection that will be taken up again, much later, by Kant.

Within Christianity, the dialectic between these two dimensions finds a peculiar solution. Christians, as Augustine forcefully argued in his *De Civitate Dei*, did not accept the *veneratio augustea*, which implied that tribute—in the form of the honors and devotion due to God—should be paid to a man, the emperor. Only the transcendent and unique God deserves such veneration, and in front of Him all men should bow, regardless of their status. Therefore, respect in absolute terms is due only to God, and to no man in the same degree and form. And yet, all men are equals in their relation to God, meaning that, for example, no man can take full command of another and make him his slave.

This egalitarian perspective is maintained in a complex synthesis with the hierarchical one within the medieval feudal system. Every political and social authority derives from God through the mediation of the Church: an emperor must be crowned by the pope, and this chain of command is continued for all vassals down to the lowliest servants. But, at the same time, all men are equals with respect to their worth concerning salvation and damnation, regardless of their role in society. Respect is due, so to say, *vertically*: first to God, and then to His representatives in both the spiritual (the Church) and the political sphere (the Empire), but in the end it is due to every man on a *horizontal* axis, where equality depends on the fact that *we are all equally inferior to a transcendent superiority*.

This synthesis was highly instable in two senses. It derived strictly from a theological view that implied both revelation and a single universal church, which modernity fragmented into many; and it laid the foundations of respect within a theological and political cosmic order rather than in the person himself. Respecting in this perspective lies either in recognizing that a superior authority is legitimated by God, or in recognizing that we are all subject to God in the same way. The move towards the centrality of the subject that took place within modernity could not hold these tenets for long, and this led to a progressive and radical transformation of the idea of respect.

2.4. *Modernity, or Cordelia*

An example of this modern turn towards the subject and his interiority may be taken from Shakespeare. In *King Lear*, we see a tragedy generated by a paradoxical form of *disrespect* shown by a daughter to a father and a king. The refusal by Cordelia to offer her devotion and *reverentia* to her father in the way a subject would offer them to a king is the expression of an inner dimension where any exterior form of devotion is inadequate to signify the love she feels. Gonerill and Regan behave like vassals

in a feudal order, exaggerating their devotion to the king in order to obtain benefits, while Cordelia claims the authenticity of a love that offers nothing as testimony of devotion: “Nothing?—Lear asks astonished—How? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.”¹⁸ Cordelia is the symbol of a subjectivity that demands recognition and respect for itself and not for her position in society, or her devotion to the king or to God. A hint of this connection of respect and love is found in the words of the king of France, who is so struck by Cordelia’s temper that he falls in love with her, even though she has been rejected by her father, and thus branded an outcast and a pariah: “’Tis strange that from their cold’st neglect / my love should kindle to inflamed respect.”¹⁹ Well beyond hierarchical respect, and even beyond egalitarian respect, love takes recognition a step forward, to the inner reality of character and individuality,²⁰ where a power lies that no order and no hierarchy can place under their complete command: the power of freedom.

The move towards the individual in ethics, as well as in other fields of philosophy, was fostered by a number of authors of early modernity. Among the influences that paved the way to the Kantian turn is the Wolffian school, and particularly Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, whose manuals of ethics (*Ethica philosophica*, 1740 and *Initia philosophiae practicae primae*, 1760) Kant used for his lessons. Central to these authors was not only the notion of obligation, which Kant obviously received and transformed, but also the idea of *perfection*, in the form of the duty to perfect oneself. In this perspective, the idea came from practical reason, not from metaphysical knowledge or divine command, and this represents a move towards a search for the source of respect within the subject. Kant rejected the idea of perfection as the source of normativity but adopted the point of view of the acting subject as its locus.

Similarly, the sentimentalist perspective, which Kant adopted for some years during the 1760s, made a strong case in favor of sentiments and feelings as the source of the moral distinction between good and bad. Hume and Smith converged on the idea that there is no external power that suggests how the individual ought to recognize virtue and vice. In particular, Smith considered respect as the expression of the recognition of what is owed to others:

What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour.²¹

These signs of disrespect are not a violation of an external order or authority, but rather an assault on an inner power of the subject, which is perceived through sympathy

¹⁸William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, Vol. 17 (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), Act I, scene I, 90.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 265.

²⁰Carla Bagnoli, “Respect and Membership in the Moral Community,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2007): 113–28 doi: 1 0. 1 007/s 1 0677-006-9053-3.

²¹Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), II, iii, 1.

and requires an attitude of impartiality. Sentiments are definitely a subjective source, such that what is owed respect is to be found within the individual. Yet, it is not easy to ground a universal prescription on the presence of such sentiments, which may be called into question in the case of certain individuals. Not everyone feels sympathy, and in general we sympathize with some views and persons and not with others.

Finally, Rousseau laid a strong emphasis on the subject as the source of normativity. He was the first to clearly identify the *will* as the foundation of moral and political normativity, and therefore to put individual freedom at the basis of morality and politics:

To the acquisition of moral status could be added, on the basis of what has just been said, the acquisition of moral liberty, this being the only thing that makes man truly the master of himself; for to be driven by our appetites alone is slavery, while to obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom.²²

The move towards reorienting the direction of respect from an outer order to an inner power is a strong line in modern moral philosophy. Kant further developed this line of thought and reconnected it directly with the notion of respect, creating a systematic link between its hierarchical and egalitarian dimensions.

2.5. *The Kantian Turn: The Authority of Freedom* (From Outward to Inward Respect)

Kant adopted Baumgarten's manuals, read Hume and Smith, and was heavily influenced by Rousseau. His efforts in ethics were mainly concentrated on the attempt to find the foundations for the self-determination of the will (*Bestimmungsgrund des Willens*), which he found in the moral law, expressed by the categorical imperative. The mere existence of the categorical imperative within every person's conscience (*Bewußtsein*) is a fact of reason (*ein Faktum der Vernunft*), i.e., a direct awareness of the supreme rule of a will determining itself. Now, in his much discussed argument for the demonstration of the reality of freedom,²³ Kant contends that the fact that we are aware of this rule implies that our will can determine itself, i.e., that it is free, or more precisely *autonomous*: it generates by itself its own rule (Yost suggests that this amounts to a "practical demonstration" of freedom of the will).²⁴ In this sense, Kant says, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, while freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law. Now, by way of this theoretical foundation, Kant recognizes freedom as an inner power having no other conditions but the one it creates for itself, which is nothing but a rule of practical-non-self-contradiction

²²Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

²³Citations of Kant refer to the pagination of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the German Academy of Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–). Translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Abbreviations: *KpV*—*Critique of Practical Reason*; *LE*—*Lectures on Ethics*; *MM*—*Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, *KpV* I, 1.

²⁴Benjamin S. Yost, "Kant's Demonstration of Free Will, or How to Do Things with Concepts," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2 (2016): 291–309 doi: 10.1017/apa.2016.12.

(we might express it: “Act so that, in your acts of free willing, you always act freely and remain free”). This kind of power is superior to any other power to be found in persons (inclinations, desires, sentiments). Therefore, the awareness of the presence of such a power raises *respect* (*Achtung*), which is a sentiment of awe for a superior dimension that every person discovers within herself.

Nowhere is Kant more adamant in emphasizing the power of freedom than in this passage from the *Lectures on Ethics*:

But the inner worth of the world, the *summum bonum*, is freedom according to a choice that is not necessitated to act. Freedom is thus the inner worth of the world. But on the other hand, insofar as it is not restrained under certain rules of conditioned employment, it is the most terrible thing there could ever be.²⁵

Awareness of this tremendous power, by way of awareness of the law by which my will determines itself, generates a sentiment of respect, in the sense of the perception of a superiority. As a person, I recognize within myself something unrestrained, higher than my inclinations and untouchable by outer constrictions. In Kant’s perspective,

Respect (*reverentia*) is, again, something merely subjective, a feeling of a special kind, not a judgment about an object that it would be a duty to bring about or promote.²⁶

Respect for the law, which in reality is respect for one’s own freedom,

is not the incentive to morality; instead it is morality itself subjectively considered as an incentive inasmuch as pure practical reason, by rejecting all the claims of self-love in opposition with its own, supplies authority to the law, which now alone has influence.²⁷

Self-respect, the attitude resulting from the perception of the superior power of freedom within myself, becomes the grounding notion of all forms of respect.

This practical sentiment is an emotive recognition of a power within the will, or rather of the will itself, and is identical with the moral law, only in the form in which the latter is perceived in human beings through emotions. We will see later that it is not necessary to restrict the idea of respect only to sentiments. Kant himself, as we have seen, considers respect as a kind of emotive resonance of the moral law, which is the overarching principle of morality and the basis of the attitude of the virtuous person. We might say, then, that respect is the same thing as the moral law, only in its emotive dimension. But in this case, why not consider it as a formulation of the principle itself? It seems that it is so only because of the artificial separation that Kant

²⁵LE 344.

²⁶MM 402.

²⁷KpV 76.

notoriously made between inclinations and reason that he felt obliged to consider respect as *no more than* a sentiment, and not as a principle and an attitude as well.

In any case, this move completes the turn which modernity imposed upon the structure of respect: while *aidos*, *reverentia*, and *pietas* were oriented towards an external order conferring authority on the higher levels, the modern conception of respect places the superior power to which deference is due *within the acting subject*, along the lines we saw rather embryonically sketched in Democritus and Seneca. In any case, the passage from outward to inward respect is made *without denying the original hierarchical structure of the concept*: respect is still the recognition of a superior power, but this power resides within every person. This creates the premises for a foundation of egalitarian respect *within* the relation of power constituting the core of the original hierarchical notion. The Enlightenment fixes this move on a solid ground, recognizing in freedom the universal superior power to which respect is always owed. From that point onwards, Western culture has recognized that every person deserves respect, whatever her role in society and politics. But at the same time, this framework saves the origin of the notion in the relations of power giving rise to it and offers a foundation for social hierarchies without implying any legitimization of discrimination. Respect is due both equally to every person and differentially to each person according to her status or role or power. However, the differences are legitimate only insofar as they result from autonomous acts of the persons involved and through procedures reflecting the respect that every person has for her own autonomy. Self-respect, which is the key notion here, is a hierarchical notion, inasmuch as it springs from the recognition of the superior, i.e., unconditioned (*Unbedingte*) power of freedom within each person. Therefore, self-respect as a hierarchical notion grounds respect for others as an egalitarian principle.

We have now arrived at a situation where respect is understood as the result of a dynamics of power starting within every person and expanding into the social sphere. The recognition of the inward hierarchy (indeed, a moral hierarchy) oriented towards freedom gives rise to both the egalitarian stance at the moral level and the hierarchical structure of society in political terms. Yet, respect seems to have further dimensions that transcend the human sphere.

3. RESPECT BEYOND PERSONS?

Common language nowadays seems to have absorbed the idea that respect is owed not only to persons but, at least to a certain degree, to non-human animals and even to the living and non-living environment. How can we accommodate this extension within the genealogy of respect? The Kantian turn has led us towards a quite anthropocentric view of the concept, but we need not follow him in this restriction. In fact, Kant has highlighted a general structure that can be extended beyond persons. The fundamental meaning of respect in this perspective is, again, the hierarchical one. In fact, we can recognize the same original structure of the idea at work in the language of respect for animals and nature, even though we must distinguish between different forms and degrees of respect. Here is how we can detect that structure.

We recognize freedom as an independent power, and we recognize that other persons are independent from our own power. Artifacts, from this point of view, deserve some respect as the expression of the freedom of persons, be they individual artists or communities expressing their values in monuments or works of engineering expressing technical ingenuity. The independence of the creative power of human beings is recognized as a part of their freedom from mere impulses and as an expression of both rationality and feelings. In a sense, art and historical relics are a testimony to a superior ability that we respect in a way *analogous* to our respect for persons.

However, once again analogously, we can recognize that living beings and nature are not completely under our control, that they are an *independent power* confronting us. When we consider nature on the whole, and especially living nature, we must admit that it exceeds our individual powers and that it requires a certain degree of prudence, even fear, when we are faced with it. A literary expression of this fear and prudence is found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the river and the life surrounding it (plants, fish, animals and even humans) possess a wild, threatening force that the crew cannot but recognize, paying homage to this imbalance of power. This is a form of respect. Our technology is close to having achieved complete dominion over many aspects of life, but the complex of different forms in which life develops remains, at least for now, beyond our grasp, and we must *recognize* this.

Now, freedom belongs to a different order of power, but since it is real only as a characteristic of a peculiar kind of living beings, i.e., persons, it cannot be totally detached from life in general. And life exhibits a similar asymmetry between our power as living beings and its complex, magnificent, superior and rather menacing power. Thus, we recognize *the difference in power* still existing between our *embodied* freedom and nature on the whole and admitting of a hierarchy demanding a certain kind of respect, albeit different from the respect we owe to persons. At the same time, we recognize that, as we belong to the community of persons as autonomous agents, so we belong to the community of the living, as we also live. And we are part of nature (even inanimate nature) as physical bodies inhabiting the world. There is a thin but clearly comprehensible equality between us and the living in general, and even between us and the world as such: we live, as the living do, and we exist, as even the non-living do. And yet, the whole of the living and of the non-living remains as an independent power exceeding our forces, and this we must prudentially recognize before attempting to manipulate or exploit it for our needs. There is always a potential conflict with nature, a clash of powers, as there is in human relations. And respecting the differences is a key to recognizing the similarities as well.

4. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MORALITY, SOCIETY, POLITICS, BEAUTY, AND NATURE

The reconstruction of the genealogy of respect enables us to sketch a *theory of respect* where the various strands of the notion are held together by reference to an

original core. The concept of respect has revealed a complex structure, based on the evolution of a hierarchical notion into one with a strong egalitarian dimension. I suspect that a purely conceptual or linguistic analysis would not have yielded the same results. A similar kind of argument concerning the notion of dignity has been suggested by Jeremy Waldron,²⁸ who explains how the idea of dignity may have resulted from a modification of the idea of rank. The notion of respect may have followed a similar and partially connected route, moving from a hierarchical structure to a more complex one in which hierarchy and equality stand in a systematic relation. I would suggest that, in ethics at least, linguistic analysis is not enough to understand the meaning of such a complex and stratified concept as respect and that the long and winding road through history, in a genealogical vein, is necessary (or at least very helpful) to detect the insights that a philosophical vision must bind together in a theoretically coherent framework.

We are now in the position to build a comprehensive understanding of the idea. We have to define the core meaning and its extensions in different directions, being careful to detect the presence of the basic notion in its transformations. Western culture has made a long journey from an understanding of respect as a hierarchical relation towards a vision of it as an egalitarian one and has even extended this vision to include living beings and nature. This inheritance is highly valuable and extremely important for our times. Connecting it with its theoretical and historical roots is not only the exercise of truth but also reflects a much needed attitude for morality and politics.

Now, the results of our research can be sketched as follows. Respect is generated by the recognition of an asymmetry: an asymmetry of power, in the most general terms, but also in different ways depending on the kind of power being recognized. Respect is, in itself, precisely this recognition and the behaviors that it entails. More broadly, respect is simultaneously a sentiment, a principle and an attitude.

First of all, starting from its moral meaning, respect is the recognition of the will as an unconditioned power within every person. *Unconditioned* is the key word here: if freedom of will is a characteristic of persons as such (and let us assume here that it is, holding in abeyance the dispute concerning determinism), it seems clear that it must be conceived of as the capacity to detach oneself from inclinations, stimuli, and external influences so as to determine oneself to action. Autonomy is a power *independent* of any condition (*das Unbedingte*, Kant says) and able to cause its own movement, i.e., decision and action. Therefore, recognizing autonomy as an independent power raises respect *within* the acting subject, first as the emotional response to the perception of such an independent authority within herself. Self-respect, is thus original and prior to respect for others. Kant was right to identify respect first as a sentiment, although it is not necessary to adopt his stark division between emotions and practical reason. As the emotional side of the recognition of freedom and of its principle, we can easily and legitimately admit a convergence between the principle of autonomous will and emotions: to act according to a

²⁸Jeremy Waldron, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2012).

maxim that avoids self-contradiction, and is therefore universalizable, is the same as respecting the will in its autonomous power. "Respect every person" is as good a formula for the fundamental principle of morals as the categorical imperative. Furthermore, respecting oneself and others becomes an attitude in virtuous people, a behavior springing from freedom and expressing the capacity to live at a superior level of awareness.

This original structure of moral respect (inwardly hierarchical, outwardly egalitarian) offers the theoretical foundations for social and political respect. Social relations are inevitably based on different kinds of hierarchies: we need to establish authorities, to write laws and have them respected, to create institutions that express the freedom of citizens but that also exert a power over them. These hierarchies can be based on mere strength (or on economic or political power) but their legitimation comes from the only source of legitimation available among persons: their autonomy. Social structures and institutions therefore have a supreme rule in the principle of respect for autonomy, although the practical meaning of this kind of respect in its various contexts and circumstances is not always easy to define. Still, there is no contradiction between admitting differences of treatment between people and respecting them. The implicit and sometimes explicit contract that binds societies together is based upon mutual respect even when hierarchies are established, even when they derive from conflicts, as Hegel pointed out. Conflicts are a part of social and political interaction, as well as a part of the dynamics of respect: the *obtaining* of respect is not a straightforward task; it can require effort, struggle and sacrifice. Furthermore, grounding respect in autonomy enables us to expand its sphere: artifacts and works of art are expressions of freedom, of which creativity seems to be a peculiar form. And there are hierarchies here as well. A work of art, for example, is more worthy of respect than a rough sketch, since the former includes more creativity than the latter.

Thus far, it has been relatively easy to connect the various forms of respect to its central meaning. But when it comes to the idea of respecting living beings and the environment, we must make a leap. As we have seen, it seems to be a safe leap, although it is important to recognize that respecting autonomy is a different matter from respecting animals and the environment. It is analogous, but not identical. We have no right to use animals and nature for inordinate and superficial reasons since we owe them *some* respect. Yet, it is clear that the very fact that we, as autonomous agents, have a responsibility towards them puts us in a peculiar situation. Our freedom exhibits a power of a different order in comparison with that of nature: we have learned how to detach ourselves from our immediate needs and to develop knowledge and technologies in order to manage these needs in a way that nature cannot. And yet, in doing so we sometimes impose our needs upon other living beings and upon nature. We establish a hierarchy, thanks to our freedom and ingenuity. But freedom, in turn, imposes upon us a responsibility for all beings—a responsibility that we cannot disregard. It is not only that nature can be damaged by our work. We must recognize that nature itself is a power and that as such it deserves a certain respect, at least in the form of prudence and attention, if not care. And as already mentioned,

we, too, belong to nature, and this creates a link not only to the hierarchical notion of respect, but to the egalitarian one as well—although in analogous, not identical terms compared to the equal respect we owe to persons. We owe equal respect to living beings and nature only inasmuch as we ourselves are living and natural beings: it would be disproportionate to respect animals and mountains as we do persons.

A modulation of respect in these senses is possible if we maintain the original intertwining of hierarchical and egalitarian respect as the core meaning, recognizing that history shows that respect is both a descriptive and a normative concept and indicates, simultaneously, the actual relations of power and their normative horizon.

Respect is a norm embedded in the *reality* of persons. We do and must respect ourselves and others: morally as autonomous agents, socially as partners in a community, politically as citizens of a country, aesthetically as artists and historically as builders of long-lasting monuments. We do and must respect ourselves and other animals as living beings, and, last but not least, we do and must respect ourselves and the environment as natural bodies.²⁹

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