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SELF-RESPECT AND OBJECTIVITY: A CRITIQUE OF RAWLS

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SELF-RESPECT AND OBJECTIVITY: A CRITIQUE OF RAWLS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts
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By

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

RESPECT AND OBJECTIVITY: A CRITIQUE OF RAWLS

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls names two conditions as necessary and sufficient for an agent to have self-respect. I argue that Rawls's two conditions constitute an inadequate understanding of self-respect. Contrary to Rawls, I argue that self-respect requires moral desert, and that self-respect is a distinct concept from self-esteem.

KEYWORDS: John Rawls, Self-Respect, Self-Esteem, Moral Desert

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I. Introduction

A pervasive theme in moral and political thought is the belief that striving to achieve worthy things while avoiding shameful things at all costs is a central human good. In the mouth of Phaedrus, for example, Plato tells his audience that without this “sense of shame at acting shamefully, and a sense of pride in acting well...nothing great or fine can be accomplished, in public or in private.”¹ To the Greeks, this characteristic of striving to achieve the good while avoiding shame is the hallmark of an excellent human being, and without it the life of both the citizen and the state lacks all merit. Socrates’s response in the *Apology* to the would-be accuser captures this idea well. The accuser asks “Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?” Socrates responds “You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he is doing is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good man or a bad man.”²

Two themes emerge from these quotes. The first theme is the speaker’s recognition of a set of standards by which it is appropriate to judge himself and be judged by others as a subject worthy of either praise or blame. The second theme is the speaker’s belief that the person who is worthy of praise upholds those standards in a certain way, namely, as one who has internalized them – made them his own – and who thereby acts the way he does because he views himself as a person of good and honorable character. This belief, we

¹*Symposium*, translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 78d.

²*Apology*, translated by G.M.A. Grube and revised by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 28bc.

could say, is something that the person *feels*. He knows that he ought to be honorable, and this self-knowledge goes to the core of who he is. Therefore, if he were to betray those standards by which he measures his honor, he would feel ashamed because such a betrayal would also be a betrayal of his own self.

This need to view ourselves as persons who stand true to the values that we each hold dear and our belief that those values are worth upholding are not merely ancient concerns. In modern terms, we call this personal striving to achieve excellence and avoid shame “self-respect.” And although the idea of self-respect is a prominent concern in contemporary political philosophy, just as it was in fifth century Athens, the subjective ways in which modern democratic societies categorize and interpret excellence and shame means that we are far removed from the Greek understanding of this good. The above response by Socrates well illustrates the notion that one's entitlement to self-respect depends on whether or not one is exercising the virtues constitutive of a self-respecting life. But who – or *what* – determines these virtues? Does the agent determine these virtues for himself, or are they dictated from the outside, so that the agent's task is to make sure that his actions measure up to the standard of excellence that is given to him? Broadly speaking, the conflicting answers to this question are what radically differentiate the ancient understanding of self-respect and its relation to politics from that of modern democratic societies.

Unlike the Greeks, who believed that self-respect was something that one had to earn by measuring one's conduct and way of life against certain publically recognized standards of virtue, the modern interpretation of self-respect tends to focus on whether the individual has achieved his own set of personal goals and aspirations, because success in

these areas is what ensures his self-respect. Self-respect is possible, according to this modern view, regardless of whether the individual's goals and aspirations are recognized and accepted by the political community to which he belongs. Therefore, if achieving self-respect is not entirely a private affair, having it, at least, is not tied necessarily to the individual's acceptance of what we could call "public" or "civic" values. Respect for others is also measured on this basis of individual autonomy: I may personally dislike what other people choose to do, but, nevertheless, so long as they are not harming others in the pursuit of doing what they have chosen, I ought to respect them in the sense that I acknowledge and honor their right to autonomy and self-realization. Within a modern, pluralistic society such as ours, to honor and respect this right to individual autonomy is often thought to be the only way to maintain cohesiveness and promote justice. Otherwise, citizens would be at the mercy of a "might makes right" mentality for deciding how society is to be organized and governed.

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls argues that "self-respect and a sure confidence in the sense of one's own worth is perhaps the most important primary good" that a human being can possess (348).³ In fact, without this primary good of self-respect, life itself becomes worthless to the person who lacks it, and it is for this reason that the parties in the so-called *original position* "would wish to avoid at almost any cost the social conditions that undermine self-respect" (386). The subjective ways in which Rawls characterizes self-respect, however, makes it a highly personalized primary good, one that does not require the individual's participation in goods recognized and shared by the political community. Instead, political space exists solely to protect the private space wherein a citizen's self-

³*A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), hereafter referred to as *Theory*.

respect is realized. This emphasis on individual autonomy is also conceived by Rawls to provide the basis of our respect for one another.

My purpose in this paper is to argue for the inadequacy of Rawls's theory of self-respect. His theory is inadequate primarily for two reasons. The first is that it violates intuitions that most of us hold regarding what sorts of conduct and ways of living can count as being genuinely respectable. The idea that respect depends upon the state of one's character – upon whether one is behaving “like a good man or a bad man” – is deeply rooted in our moral psyche but is absent in Rawls's account. For Rawls, self-respect just *is* the feeling that one has respect. It is the confidence that one's aims and interests are worthwhile because they are those that make one feel good about oneself and one's way of life. This subjective characterization of respect, however, makes the price of respect far too cheap; our intuitions know its real worth. The second reason that Rawls's theory of self-respect falls short is because for Rawls self-respect is synonymous with self-esteem. But self-respect and self-esteem are not the same. Confusing them would have dire social consequences that most of us would want to avoid. In arguing for the inadequacy of Rawls's theory, I intend also to defend the notion that moral desert is a necessary condition for self-respect and to suggest that a society of truly self-respecting persons would be a more stable and just society than one in which Rawlsian self-respect is widespread.

II. Rawlsian Self-Respect and the Priority of Liberty

According to Rawls's theory of justice, the purpose of our political space is to guarantee and protect citizens' individual rights. Rawls, however, is not a libertarian. There are limitations to these rights, namely, the ones expressed by the two principles of justice as

fairness that Rawls claims would emerge from the deliberations that take place behind the so-called “veil of ignorance.” But these limitations are put in place solely for the purpose of giving citizens the maximal opportunity to pursue their own self-interests. In order to achieve this goal, Rawls argues that citizens ought to strive to maintain a value-neutral approach when engaged in public deliberation, meaning that the state should not promote one particular conception of the good over another. It is within this values-neutral arena that each citizen is to be granted the space to discover and fulfill his own life-plan, and thereby to secure her self-respect, without the threat of outside interference or coercion. As long as the state is successful in maintaining this balance, and no citizen is pursuing his life-plan in such a way that others are inhibited from doing the same, then each citizen has the opportunity to enjoy respect – for himself and from others. But what exactly *is* self-respect according to the Rawlsian view?

Rawls has two conditions for self-respect. The first is “A person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out.” The second is that there must be “a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions” (386). It is for the sake of preserving our ability to carry out our respective plans of life, and thereby secure our self-respect, that Rawls's two principles of justice as fairness emerge from behind “the veil of ignorance.” The first principle is that “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all” (265). The second, so called difference principle states that “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged...and b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of

opportunity” (266).

Given his understanding of self-respect, it is clear why Rawls is so concerned with establishing basic liberties as the first principle of justice as fairness. After all, what good is having a plan of life if one lacks the freedom to carry it out? Rawls goes on to argue in *Theory*, and in a subsequent body of work⁴ responding to his critics, that in order to safeguard the inviolability of the individual, justice as fairness must be conceived as a “deontological” theory of justice, a theory “that either does not specify the good independently from the right or does not interpret the right as maximizing the good” (26). Rather, the concept of right is established prior to the good and constitutes the central feature of Rawls's theory (28). In contrast, Rawls labels competing theories of justice where “the good is defined independently from the right” as “teleological” and “perfectionist” (22), meaning that these theories all have some preconception of what the goods are that justice is intended to protect, or they hold some prior theory of what constitutes human flourishing. The requirements of such theories, he claims, “override the strong claims of liberty” (286) because they each would seek to advance their own prior conception of the good at the expense of the individual and his liberty. Instituting their various tenets would therefore not be a concern to the parties situated behind the veil of ignorance. In fact, in order to protect the equal distribution of rights and liberties, the concern of those behind the veil of ignorance would be to prevent any one of these theories

⁴See in particular *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Lecture V, and “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985), 223-51. The former represents Rawls's most comprehensive restatement of his view of justice as fairness after years of responding to his critics and reworking many of the details of his ideas since the publication of *Theory*. The latter article well illustrates Rawls's attempt along this route to restate justice as fairness to be neither a comprehensive or metaphysical theory of justice, nor a theory about the nature of the persons to whom justice as fairness will apply. Rather, Rawls's idea is that justice as fairness can still maintain the priority of right based exclusively on an overlapping consensus of persons to whom the rules of justice will apply.

from becoming the dominant understanding of justice once the veil is lifted. Thus, Rawls concludes, “It is evident, then, that much the same argument that led to the principle of equal liberty requires the rejection of the principle of perfection” (288).

The priority of the right over the good is intended to give individuals the space to adopt plans of life consistent with their own values and interests and to give them the freedom to act in ways that will allow each person to actualize his plan and thereby secure his self-respect. These basic liberties, in turn, can be restricted if and only if doing so will lead to an even greater total system of liberty for all, a system that Rawls thinks would allow individuals to form and act upon whatever plans of life they may choose for themselves (28).

III. Plans of Life

A critical assumption that Rawls makes about self-respect is that the self-respecting individual is so because he has an at-least-somewhat-laid-out plan for his life that he finds to be worthy of his time and efforts. Exactly what a plan of life is and how complete it would have to be to make self-respect attainable are questions that Rawls does not fully address. He does, however, go to some length to discuss what he calls “primary goods” and their distribution. These primary goods are ones that “every rational man is presumed to want” no matter what his plans might be (54). Such goods include liberty and opportunity, income, wealth, and – most important of all – self-respect (54). Exactly how each of these primary goods ought to be distributed in society in order for Rawlsian self-respect to be attainable is a matter of controversy; for example, Rawls has been roundly criticized for not thinking that potentially great socioeconomic inequalities allowed by the

difference principle would have no impact on citizens' self-respect.⁵ This controversy aside, however, Rawls is clear in arguing that no matter what else each of us may want out of life, some fair distribution of these primary goods – including an equal distribution of basic liberties – will be necessary if our aspirations are to be realized (361).

A distribution that is fair is one that gives all citizens the equal opportunity to pursue their respective life-plans and thereby secure their self-respect. Therefore, the happy, self-respecting person is the one who has a sufficient share of primary goods, with personal liberty being foremost, and who “is in the way of a successful execution (more or less) of a rational plan of life drawn up under (more or less) favorable conditions, and he is reasonably confident that his plan can be carried through” (359). But what determines whether a plan of life is rational?

Rawls acknowledges that different people will find happiness and fulfillment in pursuing different plans of life, depending on their natural abilities and circumstances, so that the rationality of any given plan of life is agent-relative. The same goes for the rationality of our choices, which depends for Rawls upon the desirability (to each one of us) of our aims and how well they secure a sufficient amount of the primary goods necessary to achieve those aims. In this schema, the happy individual's plan of life is *rational* “if, and only if, (1) it is consistent with the principles of rational choice when these are applied to all the relevant features of his situation, and (2) it is that plan among those meeting this condition which would be chosen by him with full deliberative rationality, that is, with full awareness of the relevant facts and after a careful consideration of the

⁵ For details of this debate, see Robert S. Taylor, “Rawls's Defense of the Priority of Liberty: A Kantian Reconstruction.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31(3) (2003), 246-71; and Jeanne S. Zaino, “Self-Respect and Rawlsian Justice.” *The Journal of Politics* 60(3) (1998), 737-53.

consequences” (358-59).

For Rawls, the “relevant facts” needed for an individual to make fully deliberative rational decisions are mainly facts about what that individual’s interests and desires are and what courses of action would produce the greatest net balance of satisfaction over time: the plan of life that would have the greatest likelihood of making a person satisfied with himself and satisfied with the choices he has made is, therefore, the one that would be most rational for him to pursue. The purpose of deliberation is to discover the plan that best organizes our interests and activities, thereby orchestrating them into a single plan of action that coheres gradually over the course of one’s lifetime. This discovery is made by examining what our desires and interests are now, deciding which of those we like or approve of the most, and then predicting – in light of our existing desires – what our future desires will be (364-65). Rawls believes that following such a plan would allow each of us to discover those activities and pursuits that we find to be enjoyable for their own sake and that give our lives the fullest sense of meaning and purpose. Thus the individual will be happy and self-respecting “when his plans are going well, his more important aspirations being fulfilled, and he feels sure that his good fortune will endure” (359).

So although the plan of life that is the most rational one to follow depends in some measure on the individual’s natural endowments and circumstances that are beyond his control, these things only matter relative to what the individual wants to do with his life. One might, for example, have the aptitude for a law career, and societal conditions might also favor that particular career move for those who qualify. If, however, after carefully thinking the matter through, the individual realizes that he does not have a desire to become a lawyer now (or at least does not have a desire to become a lawyer that is strong enough

to justify going to all the trouble to become one), and he does not wish to have it be a desire that he will have in the future, then it would be irrational and contrary to building his self-respect for this individual to pursue becoming a lawyer. He must decide on another plan for which he can also have reasonable expectations of success but one that will give him a genuine sense of fulfillment. The same would be true, of course, for those aspects of our plans of life that go deeper than what our careers will be, such as whether or when to commit to another person, whether or when to have children, whether to be altruistic, etc. We have seen, then, that to be happy, rational, and self-respecting in the full Rawlsian sense, one must have a guaranteed share of primary goods sufficient for executing a plan of life that is sufficiently laid out to encapsulate and fulfill our carefully thought-out innermost desires and aspirations for what we would like our lives to be. Without such a carefully constructed plan and a deep commitment to the rational deliberation necessary to formulate it, Rawlsian self-respect seems unattainable.

Is this a realistic – or even appropriate – standard for measuring self-respect? Regarding its appropriateness, Rawls's definition of self-respect has nothing whatsoever to say about the actual character of the person who respects himself and is respected by others. Instead, Rawls ignores completely the possibility that respect could involve prescriptions of character or behavior that go beyond adherence to the two principles of justice as fairness. As to whether Rawls's standard is realistic, the self-respecting Rawlsian individual would not only have to be far-sighted enough to judge early on what it is that he most wants out of life, he would also have to be quite diligent, methodical, and highly organized. He also would have to enjoy a fair amount of luck in his circumstances, making him one who has a life in many ways similar to that of, say, a tenured Harvard professor

with a nice income and high scholarly reputation.

But is this impression accurate? After all, Rawls acknowledges the obvious fact that individuals can often experience inner conflicts about what they most want out of life, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, for many of us to figure out what plan of life to pursue. He is also quick to point out that “We must not imagine that a rational plan is a detailed blueprint for action stretching over the whole course of life” (360). Rather, a suitable plan of life consists of “a hierarchy of plans” that can include any number of “subplans” to be filled in according to the dictates of our more permanent aims and interests at the “appropriate time” (360-61). As we shall see in a moment, even though Rawls qualifies his conception of planning in this way, he nevertheless is committed to the view that having a plan of life is a fundamental activity of human beings and that one can – and must – always have a plan of life directing one’s activities, even if the details or overall direction of that plan are not always immediately apparent.

For Rawls, therefore, self-respect is tied inextricably to our ability to plan out our lives successfully in ways that best accord with our more permanent interests, aims, and abilities, making self-respect a journey of self-discovery or self-realization: finding out what it is that each of us desires most that best matches with our abilities and then going for it. The Rawlsian self that pursues a plan of life based on whatever set of criteria that it finds to be most appealing is thus first and foremost a choosing self, with the basis of the self’s choices that lead to self-respect coming from within – from the self’s own desires, preferences, and calculations for success – and not from imposed standards of value or perfection.

Rawls is confident that we as autonomous individuals have the power to select

among the range of possible life-plans the one that best suits each of us, so that “It is clearly left to the agent himself to decide what it is that he most wants and to judge the comparative importance of his several ends” (366). All of this planning, however, would seem to require a great deal of self-awareness and introspection, making the happy, self-respecting Rawlsian individual appear, indeed, to be a cross between a speculative philosopher and a psychotherapist (or an evil genius – but more on that later). If this characterization is too far-fetched, hopefully it is at least clear that a self-respecting person for Rawls is one who has the foresight to know what he wants out of life, who has decided somehow that what he wants is worthwhile, and who has the freedom, the confidence, and the ability to make his plan of life succeed.

So what would Rawls say about cases where individuals either cannot make up their minds about what they most want out of life, or where they simply do not seem interested in formulating any sort of plan at all? Are such cases possible, and would persons who fall into either of these categories be incapable of self-respect? Throughout his treatment of deliberative rationality and how we plan out our lives, Rawls never considers these cases to be genuine possibilities.

Coming close to the first type of case, Rawls, as we have noted already, does acknowledge that planning can proceed in a piecemeal fashion and describes in outline form how it can be so, but he never considers cases where a person could reach a real impasse about what course to take in planning out his life. Our plans may be incomplete (366); we may not know what plan is the most rational one for us to follow (366); the one we do follow may not turn out to be the right one for us (366-67). But nowhere in *Theory* does the Rawlsian individual appear capable of falling into a state of genuine, long-lasting

perplexity regarding what his plan of life should be.

Instead, a rational decision about what to do with one's life is "always in principle possible," according to Rawls, with the only real difficulties being ones of "computation and lack of information" (484). This ability to choose always remains because the self is always prior to its ends (491), just as the principles of right are always prior to more comprehensive accounts of the good. Even the ends that become dominant for each of us are ones that are chosen freely from among "numerous possibilities" (491). The Rawlsian self may – and most likely will – encounter at some point incompatible aims and desires that clamor for attention and try to pull the self in opposite directions, each demanding to be realized at the expense of the others. When this occurs, the self must choose using all its powers of deliberative rationality, but reaching a decision is still assured because it is the self by itself that ultimately makes the choice.

As for possible cases where individuals either explicitly reject planning, or never have enough self-awareness to give the matter any thought at all, Rawls is mostly silent. It is reasonable to think that consciously deciding to have no plan of life at all – to have no goals or ambitions to drive one forward through life – is itself a form of planning and therefore would fall under Rawls's assumption that we are all life planners. Perhaps some of us know people who appear to be in this category, but, to me at least, this group does not seem to be nearly as large as the group that never gives a whit of thought or energy to the subject of planning. It seems likely that many simply float through life aimlessly; we could say of such people that inertia is their defining characteristic. And then, of course, there are many others who for reasons of mental disability or other handicaps seem to be altogether incapable of planning. Why does Rawls say nothing about them? Would he

think that there can be people out there who are like this, and, if so, would he deny that they could ever have self-respect?

I shall argue later that Rawls's commitment to what he calls the Aristotelian Principle best explains his silence. The Rawlsian self is not only a chooser but because of this principle he is, inescapably, a life planner as well who is always striving to hone his abilities and skills in accordance with his deepest desires and interests. We shall come back to this topic.

IV. Shame and Validation

If self-respect is having a life-plan that one finds to be worthwhile coupled with the means to carry it out, means that are protected by the two principles of justice as fairness, then how can a person lose his self-respect? For Rawls, the flip side of self-respect is shame, which he defines as “the feeling that someone has when he experiences an injury to his self-respect or suffers a blow to his self-esteem” (388). Broadly speaking, we experience such a blow when our long-term plans do not go the way we wish. If an agent's actions fail in some way to allow the agent to fulfill his plan of life— that is, the plan defined by the set of values according to which the agent desires to act – then he will experience feelings of shame and regret. When this occurs, the agent's life can lose all meaning and purpose, causing the agent to “sink into apathy and cynicism.”⁶ According to Rawls, the shame we experience when our plans go awry comes primarily in two forms: natural and moral (388). Natural shame results from the absence or loss of “exclusive goods” – that is, goods that mainly benefit each of us as individuals – either from not having or failing to use properly

⁶*Ibid.*

“certain excellences” that we and others would find it rational for us to have (389). Moral shame, on the other hand, is the failure to exercise in one’s actions certain “virtues” required by the agent’s plan of life, virtues which not only the agent himself prizes as excellences but that are also considered as such by those to whom he looks for measuring his sense of self-worth (390).

Rawls defines these natural and moral “excellences” as the set of characteristics and abilities that it is rational for everyone to want to have, and to want others to have as well, because they can be appreciated and enjoyed not only by the person who has them, but also by others with whom that person associates (389). As Rawls puts it, the excellences “form the human means for complementary activities in which persons join together and take pleasure in their own and one another’s realization of their nature...they are the condition of human flourishing” (389). These excellences are not only what enable us to carry our plans of life to fruition. They are also the attributes that others who share similar life-plans and interests to our own admire and benefit from when they associate with us, thereby supporting the “self-esteem” of each person in the association (389). Therefore, both types of shame involve “an especially intimate connection with our person and with those upon whom we depend to confirm our sense of our own worth,” (388). Rawlsian shame, then, is a unique “feeling of the diminishment of self” (390) that takes place under the public eye. It is akin to embarrassment. And since it apparently can undermine self-respect like nothing else can, preventing it is of utmost concern for the parties in the original position, all of whom are conceived to act on behalf of their best rational self-interests. Avoiding any societal conditions that could possibly serve to undermine the citizens' self-respect is thus a primary goal of justice as fairness (390).

Two important new aspects of Rawls's theory of self-respect emerge from his treatment of shame. The first is his conflation of self-respect and self-esteem; the second is his observation that self-respect has a communitarian component. We shall explore the former aspect a bit later. Let us now examine Rawls's communitarianism.

Although Rawls's two conditions for self-respect make no mention of the need for validation from others within the community, it is clear from his treatment of shame and from other passages dealing with self-respect in *Theory* that the sense of worthiness that a self-respecting person must feel regarding his plan of life, and the confidence he must have that he can fulfill his plan, require the approval of at least some of his peers. While the two principles of justice as fairness are supposed to make it possible for the members of a well-ordered society to make their plans of life and provide them with the opportunity to realize their respective plans, the members' strict adherence to these principles in their dealings with one another is, by itself, not sufficient to ensure their mutual respect, much less each member's self-respect. Rawls concludes that not only must each one of us have a sense of worth and confidence in ourselves but "our self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others. Unless we feel that our endeavors are respected by them, it is difficult if not impossible for us to maintain the conviction that our ends are worth advancing" (155-56). Therefore, in Rawls's vision of a well-ordered society all the members – in addition to committing themselves to the public conception of justice defined by the two principles of justice as fairness, and finding the basis of their self-respect in "the publically affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties" (477) – will need to do more: they will have to develop their confidence and discover the worth of their plans in the shared aspirations and opinions of others. In other words, to respect oneself one must also be

respected, and to be respected one must have membership in a community of like-minded individuals who find worth and happiness in similar life pursuits. Rawls refers to these various communities as “social unions,” and a well-ordered society, in his view, “is itself a social union. Indeed, it is a social union of social unions” (462).

All of this sounds like an inspiring vision for the possibility of respect for oneself and for others in a pluralistic society. As Michael Sandel has pointed out, Rawls’s intent in writing *A Theory of Justice* in the first place was to formulate and establish a public conception of justice for a modern democratic society that could be affirmed by and made equally justifiable to all its citizens, regardless of their different backgrounds, beliefs, and socioeconomic status.⁷ No small task, to be sure. And while Rawls’s efforts are commendable, I now hope to show that the subjective nature of his theory of self-respect not only contradicts certain moral intuitions we hold, but the inherently competitive nature of self-esteem, which Rawls conflates with self-respect, also undermines the possibility for mutual respect among the members of the various social unions that constitute modern societies.

V. Subjectivity and Self-Respect

Note that one of the most salient features of Rawls’s understanding of self-respect and shame is its subjectivity. As Martha C. Nussbaum has pointed out, for Rawls “Shame is a feeling or emotion, self-respect a sense of worth, a feeling of capacity, an inner conviction. According to this account, apparently, a position that is not felt as shameful is not so. And if you feel your plan of life to be a worthy one and feel confident that you can carry it out,

⁷ *Justice: What’s the Right Thing To Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 141-42.

that appears sufficient to make you a person of self-respect.”⁸ If Nussbaum is correct, then when it comes either to assessing an individual’s claim to self-respect or speculating on what caused his life to become shameful, it would be irrelevant to consider conditions of desert, the objective worth of the individual’s plans and pursuits, the truth of his beliefs, and the real worthiness of his desires and interests. Rawls concludes as much when he writes “It is our plan of life that determines what we feel ashamed of, and so feelings of shame are relative to our aspirations, to what we try to do and with whom we wish to associate... Thus we should say that given our plan of life, we tend to be ashamed of those defects in our person and failures in our actions that indicate a loss or absence of the excellences essential to our carrying out our more important associative aims” (390). While the excellences, as we have noted already, are considered by Rawls to be mutually beneficial from any person’s perspective, those benefits derive from their usefulness within a person’s plan of life, a plan made in concert with others who share similar aspirations. There may be many excellences from which to choose, but, apparently, there is nothing approaching a categorical imperative to choose any particular ones. They do not derive from a universally normative conception of what is good and excellent for human beings to do or to become. Thus, while a happy and self-respecting individual will realize certain excellences in his plan of life, all that seems to matter about self-respect and shame from a Rawlsian perspective are that (1) the individual has a plan of his aspirations sufficiently laid out that he finds to be worthy of his time and energies, (2) his plan of life does not violate the two principles of justice as fairness, (3) he has the confidence and the liberty to pursue his chosen plan, and (4) he has membership in a social union that values his plan of

⁸ “Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity.” *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, Ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 398.

life and validates him for pursuing it.

Given the subjectivity of Rawls's account, the capacity to form a satisfying plan of life that secures self-respect does not necessarily require an individual to question whether the values and desires that he has are the ones that he ought to have, any more than it requires him to judge whether his plan of life is objectively worthy for him to pursue. Instead, the only normative condition that a self-respecting person's plan of life must satisfy is a negative one: it must not violate the principles of justice. This is a normatively thin condition. And as we have seen already, a plan of life is the best and most rational one for a Rawlsian individual to choose, provided it is the one he would have chosen if he possessed full information. Rawls says of such a plan that "It is the objectively rational plan for him and determines his real good" (366). Therefore, this would be the plan that would guarantee self-respect to the fullest extent. If this is true, then a proposed plan of life is the right one for a person to pursue – and therefore determines his real good – provided he knows enough about its details and consequences to have made a clear-eyed decision whether to pursue it. Apart from not violating the two principles of justice as fairness, then, it seems that one simply has to know what one is about to do before one does it to qualify as self-respecting.

Considerations about the merit or worthiness of a plan of life that would form part of the "full information" of that plan only matter if they are sufficiently compelling to the individual who is contemplating carrying it out. For example, if living by what one considers to be an objective moral code and developing the kind of character that conforms to that code are things that the individual thinks are important and desirable for him to do, then the content of that code will necessarily be important pieces of information that that

person will need in order to form what is for him the objectively rational plan of his life. But, presumably, if these moral considerations are unimportant to the person forming a plan, and he knows enough about them to know that they are unimportant to him, then he has satisfied Rawls's condition for full rationality. If Rawls is consistent, this would be the case even if the rest of us have very strong objections and/or reasons for finding this person's plan of life to be abhorrent or irrational.

The full information that the individual needs, then, to form the most rational plan for his life is primarily information about his own desires, interests, and circumstances. It is mostly introspective. Objectivity only matters in all cases for making assessments of the individual's abilities and probability for success in fulfilling his plans. Otherwise, as we have seen, so long as the individual is satisfied with the values and desires that he already has, he is reasonably confident that they are the ones he would have chosen if he had full knowledge of his situation, he has membership in a social union that validates him, his plan does not violate the principles of justice as fairness, and he possesses enough knowledge about his abilities and circumstances to feel optimistic that his plan can be realized, then his happiness and self-respect seem assured.

In a passage from *Theory*, Rawls adamantly affirms his subjective characterization of self-respect by denying that publicly recognized standards of excellence and judgments about the relative merit of a pursuit should be relevant to the issue of respect:

To be sure, men have varying capacities and abilities, and what seems interesting and challenging to some will not seem so to others...Judged by the doctrine of perfectionism, the activities of many groups may not display a high degree of excellence. But no matter. What counts is that the internal life of these associations is suitably adjusted to the abilities and wants of those belonging to them, and provides a secure basis for the sense of worth of their members. The absolute level of achievement, even if it could be defined, is irrelevant. But in any case we are to reject the standard of perfection as a political principle, and for the purposes of justice avoid any assessment of the relative value of one another's

way of life (387-88).

It is important to understand why Rawls argues that we should reject standards of perfection in our collective political life. He makes this claim not because he thinks that standards of value and theories of human perfection are unimportant but, rather, because he wishes to protect the individual's right to determine within the boundaries of justice as fairness the course of his own life. Rawls believes this is the only way that self-respect can be possible for all the members of a diverse society, and this leaves him open to the possibility that individuals can genuinely find their happiness in pursuing very different plans of life, given their different talents, circumstances, and interests. Such diverse ways of living, he believes, could be genuinely good for the different parties that choose to live in those ways.

This liberal approach to human flourishing and self-respect is grounded in Rawls's strong commitment to what he considers to be the objective principles of justice as fairness. As we have noted already, Rawls's theory of justice does not seek to specify, promote, or maximize any particular conception of the good. Instead, the only account of the good that truly interests Rawls in *Theory* is the notion of goodness that motivates the parties in the original position to establish the two principles of justice as fairness and to explain as rational their preference for securing a fair share of primary goods for all. Rawls labels this notion the "thin theory" of the good (348).

While Rawls does suggest that a more comprehensive account of the good would be essential for understanding such important concepts as the moral worth of persons and the worth and place of actions that go beyond adherence to the minimal demands of justice (349), nevertheless, his "full theory" of the good is one necessarily preceded by the

establishment of the principles of justice as fairness (349). It is these principles that set limits to what notions of the good are acceptable for the citizens of a democratic society to pursue (347-49). Indeed, they even are used for “defining the other moral concepts in which the notion of goodness is involved...[so that] we may appeal to them in explaining the concept of moral worth and the goodness of the moral virtues” (349). It is from this standpoint of a full account of the good built upon and constrained by the principles of justice that Rawls claims we should avoid making value judgements of one another’s way of life, even though, admittedly, some ways of life may seem base to many of us.

VI. Self-Respect, Intuition, and the Need for Desert

Does Rawls’s conclusion that the absolute level of one’s achievements is irrelevant to the question of whether one has self-respect ring true to our moral intuitions regarding how self-respect is secured and maintained? Is all that really counts for understanding the concept of mutual respect that the internal life of associations of like-minded people be suitably adjusted to their abilities and wants? Does gaining a genuine sense of self-worth from others demand nothing more than simply making sure that one has their approval? I think the answer to all of these questions is no.

Contrary to Rawls’s assertions, I believe that his account of self-respect leaves out a crucial component to which we often appeal when examining both our own lives and the lives of others to determine whether we are respectable. That component is desert. To give Rawls credit, he does make the trenchant observation that having respect for oneself and for others demands a personal commitment on each of our parts to desire to act in ways that will secure our respect. To have respect, in other words, requires intentionality on the

agent's part; we do not become respectable haphazardly or by accident. But to fathom whether an agent has self-respect, it is simply irrelevant to ascertain whether or not the agent is confidently pursuing a laid out (to one degree or another) plan of life, because having a life-plan and having the confidence to carry it out are not necessary conditions for having self-respect. Contrary to what Rawls claims, the intentionality displayed by the truly self-respecting individual concerns the way he conducts himself in his public and private affairs, based on beliefs he has about himself and about what constitutes right and noble conduct. We can call this way of acting based on beliefs about what is noble and right his *chosen code of conduct*. He may also have a carefully laid out plan for his life, in the Rawlsian sense of planning, about which he is confident. Or he may not. It does not matter one way or the other.

Therefore, Rawls is right that activities and conduct that lead to self-respect must be considered rational and good from the self-respecting agent's point of view, but the agent's point of view is not the only thing that matters. We are missing something vitally important in our account of self-respect if we focus exclusively on what the agent (or those around him) think about the way he chooses to live. Instead, successfully to conduct oneself in a certain way in accordance with a commitment that one has made to act in that way is only one of two necessary conditions that together are sufficient for leading a genuinely self-respecting life. The second condition is that one's chosen code of conduct must truly be respectable and would remain so regardless of what the agent – or anyone else – thinks. This second condition sets the bar high for having self-respect. A person could be committed to a code of conduct that he believes is right, rational, and respectable down to the very core of his being – and his commitment would, indeed, count for

something when assessing his entitlement to respect. Nevertheless, this person could be wrong, and if he is wrong, no amount of fervent feeling or moral conviction could change that and make his way of life respectable. In fact, the person's conduct could, depending on how wrong he is, be devoid of respect *because* he believes with the utmost intensity that his shameful way of life is worthy of respect and admiration.

In the final section of this paper, I shall explore the seemingly harsh consequences of postulating moral objectivity as a necessary condition for self-respect. I shall bite the necessary bullets and yet argue that it is not as harsh and judgmental as it may seem to believe that respect must have a morally objective component.

Suffice it to say in the meantime that satisfying these two conditions – being committed to a code of conduct that one finds to be worthwhile and good and having it be the case that that chosen code of conduct actually is objectively worthwhile and good – are necessary and sufficient for one to have genuine self-respect. And to have genuine self-respect entails that one deserves to have it because one can have self-respect in no other way than to earn it. Therefore, the view that Rawls ignores, and that I wish to defend in the remainder of this paper, is that self-respect requires that one must *always deserve* – in the full moral/ethical sense of the term – the respect that one gets. To begin to see this, we must first understand how Rawls's understanding of self-respect fails to account for our everyday moral intuitions about how respect is earned and maintained.

VII. The Need for Desert Illustrated

To see how Rawls's failure to include desert in his treatment of self-respect leaves his theory unable to account for moral intuitions that even Rawls himself holds regarding self-

respect and shame, consider the following three cases offered by Nussbaum.⁹ In each one, the agent satisfies all of Rawls's conditions for having self-respect and yet, from the point of view of an outsider, to claim that the agent's self-respect is genuine and that the agent has a life worthy of respect appears dubious. In the first case, a person who is dissatisfied with her life because she knows that through her own fault she is not reliably exercising certain "excellences that are valuable" to her, undergoes a religious conversion or receives therapy; she emerges feeling better about herself and her life, even though she continues to fail to exercise those same excellences that remain within her reach.¹⁰ In the second case, a factory worker labors day in and day out for General Motors performing a dull, repetitive task to help make a product over which he has no control; nevertheless, he feels proud and content with his lot, believing that he is exercising his capacities to the fullest and that he is making a valuable contribution to the supposedly noble cause of free market capitalism.¹¹ The third case considers the life of Aristotle's female slave who happily spends all of her days dusting off the books in her master's library and ensuring that he has the peace and quiet he needs for contemplation. This slave never does her own practical reasoning and has no desire to do so, believing that what is good and best for her to do is to blindly follow

⁹ Nussbaum actually presents four cases in her article. In what is her third case, she describes a person who works for Nixon's reelection campaign based on "objectively false beliefs" this person has about the goodness of Nixon's character. Her work gives her strong feelings of self-respect, even though she would not experience those same feelings if she realized that her beliefs about Nixon are false. I am not convinced that this is a strong counterexample to Rawls's view, however, because this naïve campaigner would immediately drop her support for Nixon, if she became aware that her beliefs about Nixon are false. Thus, from a Rawlsian point of view, her plan of life that includes working to reelect Nixon may not be the plan that is most rational for her to follow, because it was formed based on mistaken beliefs that she herself would reject if she had access to the "full information" required to make a fully informed rational decision. If she either did not care one way or the other about Nixon's character, or if she has actively taken steps to ensure that she is never exposed to evidence that would cast his character in a bad light because she is too weak or partisan to handle the truth, and she feels good about her suppression of this evidence, then her case would offer a stronger counterexample to the viability of Rawls's view.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, 398.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Aristotle's commands.¹²

Nussbaum presents these cases to highlight the distinction between felt and genuine self-respect, by showing that a person's life can be shameful even though the person himself feels no shame. But due to the "insistent subjectivity" of Rawls's account of self-respect, Nussbaum believes that his view is unable to account for this distinction. In the first case, for example, so long as the agent's perspective on her life has truly been altered by fashionable therapy or a religious conversion, it should not matter from a consistent Rawlsian point of view that she now feels good about the fact that she continues to fail to exercise those excellences that remain achievable. After all, recall that for Rawls shame is only relative to our aspirations, to what we wish to do and with whom we wish to associate. Therefore, only change what the agent wants to do, and, so long as she now feels good about herself and her unreformed life, Rawls has no grounds for objecting to her claim to self-respect. Of course, if the excellences in question are minor (such as being neat and tidy), then perhaps it would not be an issue, and we could agree that her self-respect is genuine. But if they are major (such as loving one's children), then failing to exercise them would seem like just grounds for denying that this person has genuine self-respect, regardless of how good she may feel about herself.

We consider this lack of shame over things that are shameful to be a vice that we call "shamelessness," best captured in everyday speech by the admonition "You should be ashamed of yourself!"¹³ Nussbaum observes that to say this to someone is not merely to utter a cliché but is rather a "central part of our practice of moral education," a part that we would have to jettison from our vocabulary of appraisal if we accept Rawls's subjective

¹² *Ibid*, 399.

¹³ *Ibid*, 402.

characterization of self-respect and shame.¹⁴ If self-respect is really about nothing more than the feelings and sense of worth of the individual, then Nussbaum concludes

The agent who feels good about what he does just *is* self-respecting; the agent formerly called shameless becomes a man of genuine self-respect. A political design aimed at distributing the social conditions of self-respect could accomplish a lot simply by erasing, or failing to cultivate, the sense of shame, and/or the aspirations with which shame is connected.¹⁵

Rawls, of course, would oppose this conclusion. But his opposition exposes a serious problem for his understanding of self-respect. On the one hand, as we have seen, his two conditions for self-respect say nothing about the agent having to pursue a plan of life considered to have worth and value in and of itself, apart from whatever the agent might think. And to protect each person's self-respect, he also wishes "to reject the standard of perfection as a political principle, and for the purposes of justice avoid any assessment of the relative value of one another's way of life" (388). But on the other hand, he is committed to the view that certain ways of life could not possibly be conducive to a genuinely self-respecting life. Rawls makes this commitment in two ways: his belief in what he calls the "Aristotelian Principle" (to be explained in a moment) and his assertion that the possibility for self-respect demands an equal distribution of basic liberties. His belief that self-respecting agents must be motivated by the Aristotelian Principle and his requirement that a truly self-respecting person must be exercising individual liberties, when taken together or separately, tacitly introduce the concept of desert into his understanding of self-respect. And along with the concept of desert we can see that Rawls also has some preconceived notions about the respectability of certain ways of living. Thus it turns out

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Nussbaum's italics.

that Rawls himself is a perfectionist, albeit an uneasy one. He has every right to be so because his perfectionism – and the moral objectivity it entails – does not sit well with his subjective treatment of self-respect. This is a crucial flaw in his theory.

To see it illustrated, consider how Rawls would respond to Nussbaum's contented, yet alienated, factory worker and Aristotle's happy slave. Rawls's move is to deny that individuals could possibly feel self-respect by devoting their lives to such drudgery. He bases this claim on the assumption that an individual's plan of life "will lack a certain attraction for him if it fails to call upon his natural capacities in an interesting fashion" (386). Rawls calls this assumption about the character of our motivations the "Aristotelian Principle." The principle is stated as follows: "[O]ther things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity" (374). Given the choice between two activities that one could do equally well, Rawls believes a person would naturally "prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations" (374). Although the specific nature of these activities and the level of achievement reached certainly would vary, depending on the innate capacities and interests of each person, he believes, nevertheless, that a person "tends to be more confident of his value when his abilities are both fully realized and organized in ways of suitable complexity and refinement" (387). As we have seen already, the more confident each of us is of our own value the more our self-respect grows.

If the Aristotelian Principle is true, therefore, then an otherwise reasonably intelligent and able-bodied individual could not possibly have a genuine sense of self-respect – and, presumably, could not expect to enjoy the respect of others – if the

intellectual (or, perhaps, physical) level of his activities falls below (how far below is an open question) his natural and developed talents and capabilities. As alluded to earlier, I believe the Aristotelian Principle also explains why Rawls is silent regarding the possibility that it never occurs to some people to formulate a plan for their lives. Given the principle, we naturally prefer the complexity and refinement that comes from planning out, instead of floating through, life.

Behind Rawls's belief in the Aristotelian Principle lies an optimistic view of human nature, one on which we cannot possibly find genuine satisfaction in low forms of contentment. Along with Nussbaum, however, I find the plausibility of such optimism to be dubious.¹⁶ It is telling that Rawls himself provides virtually no argument to support the Aristotelian Principle. Rather, he states "We need not explain here why the Aristotelian Principle is true. Presumably complex activities are more enjoyable because they satisfy the desire for variety and novelty of experience, and leave room for feats of ingenuity and invention" (374). Later on he refers to the principle simply as a "natural fact" (376), and no further support is offered beyond a rather casual observation that the principle "seems to be verified by the spontaneous play of children and animals which shows all the same features" (377).

But even if Rawls's optimism is justified and the Aristotelian Principle is true, it is difficult to see how the principle is relevant to his understanding of what constitutes self-respect, given his two conditions. As Nussbaum points out, if self-respect is really about nothing more than the agent's own feelings and subjective experience, then how could it make sense to pass judgments on which activities will and will not provide real

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 402.

contentment?¹⁷ Therefore, the question of whether the Aristotelian Principle is true should not matter to Rawls, if he is consistent, because if his definition of self-respect is true, the principle would be irrelevant for assessing whether a person's self-respect is genuine. As we have seen, the feeling that one's plan of life is worthwhile and that one has the confidence to carry it out are the only stated conditions that Rawls gives for having self-respect. No doubt there are people out there who are highly motivated in the ways that Rawls claims; many others, however, probably are not. But no matter. So long as all are satisfied with their respective plans of life, Rawls should not care one way or the other. From a consistent Rawlsian position, self-respect should be just as accessible to a proud and alienated factory worker, to a happy and contented slave, or to a lazy thirty-something dropout who prefers to frivol away his days watching internet pornography and playing video games in his parents' basement rather than getting a job as it is to the dedicated brain surgeon, to the concert pianist, or to the moral philosopher – so long as all of these individuals are satisfied and content with what they are doing (or not doing).¹⁸

Now suppose that the Aristotelian Principle not only is true, but that Rawls is right in believing that the person of self-respect will necessarily meet its requirements. This should not be a stretch. Our intuitions about self-respect would indeed tell many of us that something like the Aristotelian Principle must be true for evaluating a person's claim to feel genuine self-respect. Suppose further that Rawls's two conditions for self-respect are

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 401.

¹⁸ It would do no good to argue that the happy slave or the lazy dropout could not be self-respecting because, after all, where would such people find others who would affirm their sorry ways of living? Within a highly diverse and well-connected society such as ours, there is no shortage of so-called "social unions" available that will cater to and affirm whatever plans of life that one can imagine. Individuals can always find others who will boost their sense of self-worth, if they look hard enough.

the right ones. From the standpoint of our moral intuitions, does it then follow that the person who has a plan of life that he finds worthy of his time and energies, who is confident that he can carry out his plan, and who is motivated according to the Aristotelian Principle is necessarily a person of self-respect? And would such a person necessarily command respect from others?

Imagine a person running for President of the United States whom we shall call The Clever Politician. The Clever Politician is a man of exceeding natural abilities and practical intelligence who is especially gifted at persuading others to act according to his wishes. Perhaps when The Clever Politician embarked on his successful political career he was motivated by a genuinely altruistic desire to help others, but over time his desires have become corrupted to the point where all of his activities, all of his formidable skills of persuasion and rhetoric are now directed toward the goal of winning the presidency – purely for the sake of securing his own power. Although due to fear of backlash he will act within the bounds of the law as it exists during the current election season, he will otherwise do – and certainly will say – almost anything to get votes. He will lie; he will cajole; he will bully and he will seduce. Satisfying Rawls's two conditions for self-respect, The Clever Politician believes that his plan of life is most certainly worth carrying out – in fact, his always-robust sense of self-worth is enhanced greatly when he believes he is doing everything he can to come out on top – and, after seeing the latest polls, he is more confident than ever in his ability to realize his intentions. Furthermore, the activities necessary to realize his intentions motivate The Clever Politician to utilize and develop his talents to ever-increasing levels of sophistication and complexity, thereby satisfying the conditions of the Aristotelian Principle.

From the standpoint of our moral intuitions, is The Clever Politician a man of self-respect? Should The Clever Politician feel ashamed of himself for the way he is behaving? Should The Clever Politician's supporters, who respect him for his supposed strength and the deft ways he outsmarts his opponents at every turn, feel ashamed of themselves for admiring and voting for such a man? Although I dare say most of us would feel differently, I believe a consistent Rawlsian would have to conclude that The Clever Politician is, indeed, a man who is living a genuinely respectable life, and that his supporters, too, should not feel ashamed for showering him with their admiration, campaign contributions, and votes.

The supporter of Rawls might object that The Clever Politician's actions must surely violate the principles of justice as fairness in some way that would allow the supporter, on Rawlsian grounds alone, to reject The Clever Politician's claim to respect. One possible example might be that the material inequalities that could result from The Clever Politician's rise to power would violate the difference principle. This would be the case if these inequalities are to The Clever Politician's sole advantage, or to the advantage of him and his cronies, and not to the advantage of the least well-off.

What is and is not to one's advantage, however, is not such an easy thing to determine, if one accepts Rawls's conception of self-respect (or maybe it is too easy). Although Rawls clearly means "advantage" in the economic and material sense when outlining the difference principle, social welfare and prosperity only matter for enhancing the possibilities for individuals to achieve their respective plans of life. Therefore, if The Clever Politician is so clever that he is able to convince the least well-off in America – without violating their basic liberties – that voting for him and supporting his policies are

actually to their greatest advantage (and maybe he, too, is arrogant enough to believe this) to the point where they all become his supporters and believe, in their collective heart of hearts, that The Clever Politician truly cares about them and feels their pain, then how is Rawls to say that they are wrong? It is even possible, given Rawls's view, that The Clever Politician's supporters could derive the greatest sense of self-respect they have ever experienced as the result of supporting him and his policies. After all, they feel empowered; they feel cared for; they feel that they are part of something great. For the Rawlsian, then, it is difficult to show how the difference principle is being violated. If this is the case, and objectivity and considerations of desert also have no place in determining whether an agent's plan of life is respectable or shameful, then I believe the supporter of Rawls is left with little choice but to affirm the genuineness of The Clever Politician's sense of self-respect and the self-respect of his supporters. Therefore, even if the Aristotelian Principle could be relevant for ascertaining the genuineness of a person's claim to have self-respect – which would make Rawls a perfectionist, despite himself – without bringing moral considerations to the table, the principle fails to satisfy our common sense intuitions regarding what sort of life can be respectable.

The cases of Aristotle's happy slave and The Clever Politician also cast serious doubt on Rawls's claim that individual liberty, including the liberty to determine one's own plan of life, is necessary for self-respect. If self-respect is about nothing more than the agent's own feelings and subjective experience, then why does Rawls claim that an equal distribution of publically affirmed rights and liberties must form the basis of self-respect in a just society? (477) Presumably, given his commitment to the Aristotelian Principle, it is because he believes that a society of slaves could not possibly be a society of genuinely

self-respecting individuals. If the ideal Rawlsian self is fundamentally a choosing self, as I have suggested, then it is easy enough to see why for Rawls the self must have the freedom to choose the plan of life that best fulfills its desires and lives up to its values.

Unfortunately, however, this freedom to choose a plan of life does not actually entail that the plan the self chooses must be one of its own making. Indeed, the plan has to endow the individual with a sense of worth, of optimism and confidence that said plan is the best fit for him and is also attainable. But as the above cases illustrate, it seems possible for one happily to adopt and follow as one's own a plan of life that is dictated from the outside. There certainly appears to be no logical reason why this could not be so. And given enough time, exposure, and persuasion it is not unreasonable to think that at least some persons could be brought to the point where they actually would *want* to choose a slavish existence, one where they abdicate their agency, so that their chosen plan of life – that which gives them a sense of self-worth – really amounts to nothing more than living according to the wants and desires of others. This possibility is not at odds with Rawls's two conditions of self-respect. All a person's plan of life is, when it comes down to it, is what Rawls says it is in his first condition: "a conception of his good." One may, at some point, have to choose a particular conception of the good to become *his* conception of *his* good, but it is not unreasonable to think that this choice could consist merely in assenting to the desires and designs of others who are clever and persuasive enough to convince one that one's own conception of the good should also be his. As we have noted already, this is certainly the case with The Clever Politician's supporters, many of whom may derive what they consider to be a great sense of self-respect by voting for their candidate, a candidate who tells them whatever they want to hear and makes them believe that his own

ideals and aspirations should also be theirs.

I believe the only way out of these conundrums is to appeal to something that Rawls explicitly tries to exclude from his theory of self-respect: the concept of desert. For those of us who believe that self-respect not only requires deliberation and choice on the agent's part but also that his choices must be the morally upright ones – and not just the ones that the agent feels are worthwhile and desirable – The Clever Politician and his supporters are ineligible for self-respect (though most of them probably not nearly to the same degree as the one whom they support). They are ineligible for respect for the same straightforward reason that the happy slave and the lazy dropout are ineligible: they simply do not deserve it. They have no grounds to respect themselves any more than they have grounds to demand that we respect them. Even Rawls's own understanding of self-respect cannot escape this conclusion. Why else would he assert the need for personal freedom, and why else would he commit himself to the Aristotelian Principle, unless he had concluded that certain ways of living are unbecoming for a self-respecting human being? But even if one accepts the need for freedom and high levels of personal achievement to have respect, without also requiring that the agent be a certain kind of morally upstanding person who seeks to have a character that embodies high ideals, one has no grounds to deny that a sophisticated, hard-working sociopath can have a sense of self-respect as genuine as that of Socrates or Mother Theresa. For these reasons alone, I conclude that we sufficient grounds to reject Rawls's account of self-respect as inadequate.

VIII. Self-Respect, Not Self-Esteem: Finding an Alternative to Rawlsian Self-Respect

There are, however, certain features of his account that we should want to preserve in our

alternate account. As mentioned earlier, I believe Rawls is right in asserting that to have self-respect, and also to be respectable in the eyes of others, requires freedom and deliberation on the part of each person. I cannot be someone else's pawn and have self-respect, and I also cannot respect other pawns.¹⁹ Rawls, too, is on to something with his commitment to the Aristotelian Principle: self-respect does seem to require that I strive to better myself as I go along, in order to achieve that which I have determined is worth pursuing. If I were to choose what will become most important in my life based on what is most easily attainable, so that I do not really have to do much, this would seem like a cop out and unworthy of mine and others' respect.

These good things – personal freedom, commitment, deliberation, the bettering of oneself – are all, therefore, part of what it means to have a genuine sense of self-respect; and Rawls is right to include them in his account. But the lack of the concept of moral desert in his account means that for Rawls self-respect really amounts to nothing more than self-esteem. We have noted this already in Rawls's explanation of shame where he uses the two terms almost synonymously. For example, recall his definition of shame as “the feeling that someone has when he experiences an injury to his self-respect or suffers a blow to his self-esteem” (388). Later on he says that the lack of excellences “will wound one's

¹⁹ My use of the term “pawn” to describe those who act without freedom or deliberation is not meant to include those who are under an obligation of some reasonable kind to follow orders without question – at least up to a certain point. A volunteer soldier, for example, or even a soldier who did not volunteer for duty, yet accepts his temporary loss of freedom as a duty he owes to his country, may follow orders without necessarily questioning them and still be persons whose actions merit respect. For that to be the case, the orders a soldier follows would have to be non-blameworthy; the cause for which he follows them would have to be non-blameworthy; and the soldier would have to be following them either because of some choice he made at some point in the past when he was free to follow non-blameworthy orders for the sake of a cause he thinks is worthwhile and that is worthwhile, such as serving one's country, or the soldier is following them because, though drafted, he can realize that following these orders is the right thing for him to do. Pawns, on the other hand, are like automatons: always unthinking, doing whatever they are told or blindly following whatever whim enters their minds without questioning anywhere along the way if what they are doing is right or not. They are devoid of agency.

self-respect” because it tends “to undermine both our self-esteem and the esteem that our associates have for us” (390-91). Nowhere in *Theory* does Rawls distinguish between the two terms.

Contrary to Rawls, I believe an adequate account of self-respect must make a distinction between self-respect and self-esteem because these two terms actually describe different things. Self-respect, as I am using the term, describes, in part, the positive self-estimation of one’s character. If I have a genuine sense of self-respect, this means – on my end – that I have evaluated the kind of person that I am, how well I measure up to the values and standards that I believe ought to guide my life, and have concluded based on all of this that my character is worthy of my own respect. The genuineness of my self-respect, as I have postulated above, also depends on those values and standards that I think ought to guide my life being the values and standards that are objectively worthy for a human being to pursue. Therefore, I hold myself in high regard – but not because of any talents, abilities, or confidence I have to carry out a plan of life that I find to be worthwhile. Rather, I think the standards by which I measure my respect are good and worthy in and of themselves, and I value myself enough to want to be considered good and worthy when measured against them. Having a true sense of self-respect, then, is not about having a plan of life that I feel good about and having the confidence to see it through. Rather, to use Aristotelian conditions, it is about conducting myself in a certain way – namely, the right way – and at the right time, in the right amount, for the right reasons. That is what it means to have a good and self-respecting character.

My plans for what I want my life to be may go awry; circumstances may destroy the confidence I have in my ability to achieve my life-goals. But even in such dire straits,

it is still possible for me to respect myself. In fact, my sense of self-respect may grow in the midst of adversity, if I have good reasons to believe that I have suffered and handled it all in what I consider to be an objectively noble fashion. This single-minded concern with the state of one's character – even in the midst of severe trials and tribulations – is what Socrates displays when he stands before the Athenian court. His concern is not whether he lives or dies. Rather, he focuses exclusively on whether he is “behaving like a good man or a bad man.” For Socrates, only if he were to behave like a bad man would he feel ashamed of himself and lose his self-respect because to behave badly would betray the values that govern his life and define who he is. To behave badly, in other words, would be the betrayal of his own self. Therefore, shame is not the failure to achieve one's plan of life; it is the failure to *be* a certain kind of person. As Robin Dillon puts it, “If shame is a loss of self-respect, then self-respect involves the judgement that one measures up to one's standards, is living congruently with one's values, or is becoming the kind of person one thinks it is worth being.”²⁰ I agree with Dillon. I would only add that for one's self-respect to be genuine one's standards and values must really be the right ones, and that the kind of person that one thinks it is worth being must also truly be the kind of person that is it worth one's effort to be. To be truly ashamed, then, is to know or fear that one is becoming the kind of person one thinks it is not worth being – and for one to be right in that assessment.

All of this makes self-respect and its potential loss a deeply personal journey. I may respect myself in the general sense that I recognize and appreciate my value as a person, but to have genuine self-respect is to have “respect for one's self, considered both

²⁰ Robin Dillon. “How to Lose Your Self-Respect.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April, 1992, 125-139), 127.

as a person and as *this* person, *myself*.”²¹ I may believe that the values and standards which I desire to have shape my character are categorical. And if my self-respect is genuine, then, at least for someone in my circumstances, those values and standards are objectively worthy ones for me to have. But it is the particular way in which I live out those values and standards and allow them to shape me, within the unique circumstances and situations of my own life, that helps determine whether I deserve any respect.

Self-esteem, on the other hand, is not the positive self-evaluation of one’s character but the positive self-evaluation of one’s talents, abilities, and circumstances relative to those of others. According to Michael Walzer, self-esteem has a relational component to it that is lacking in the case of self-respect.²² Self-respect, as we have seen, involves measuring oneself against certain normative standards that one believes are good and worthy in and of themselves. If one is satisfied that one has upheld those standards, then one will think that one has thereby earned some measure of self-respect. The standards alone are the basis of comparison for self-respect, and the only part of ourselves that we are concerned with measuring is our character. Thus, says Walzer, “I respect myself not with reference to other people but with reference to a standard; at the same time, other people can judge, by the same standard, whether I have a right to respect myself.”²³ And since it is the case that “Once we know what the norm is, we measure ourselves against that”²⁴ to determine whether we are entitled to self-respect, instead of trying to find the answer by comparing ourselves to other people, Walzer concludes that “Self-respect is a

²¹ *Ibid*, 133. Dillon’s italics.

²² ²² Michael Walzer. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (Basic Books, 1983), 274.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 275.

good that we can all have – and it is still very much worth having.”²⁵ This should be welcome news to anyone who, like Rawls, cares deeply about making sure that self-respect is possible for everyone to enjoy.

In case of self-esteem, however, the basis of comparison is other people, not standards. Specifically, we examine either how well other people do certain things or to what degree they possess certain mental, physical, or social characteristics that we care about and want to have for ourselves, hence the relational component that Walzer points out. We build up (or tear down) our self-esteem on the basis of things that go well beyond the purview of self-respect and also the building blocks of self-esteem (often times) go well beyond the ability of one to control. As Stephen Darwall explains, “Those features of a person which form the basis for his self-esteem or lack of it are my no means limited to character traits, but include any feature such that one is pleased or downcast by a belief that one has or lacks it.”²⁶

Since the basis of comparison when measuring one’s self-esteem is other people and their talents, abilities, relationships, and positive attributes, rather than some set of normative standards that are available to all, it naturally follows that one can have and protect one’s self-esteem if and only if one believes that one is well-off in some area that one cares about that gives one self-esteem compared to others to whom one has access. Therefore, if I perceive that there are people around me who all have a greater degree of good things that I care about and want for myself to a degree that is not possible, then it is likely that my self-esteem will suffer. We often try to prevent such blows to our self-esteem by taking steps to hide the inequalities that exist between ourselves and others. Some of

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Stephen Darwall. “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (1977, 36-49), 48.

these preventative measures are quite familiar. For example, trying to protect everyone's self-esteem explains the motivation to make sure that every student in the class gets an A and that every child on the softball team gets a trophy, regardless of whether all those students actually studied hard enough to earn an A and regardless of whether every child on the team can play softball well enough to merit recognition.²⁷ The fear, of course, is that if some are rewarded for their natural abilities and accomplishments – or even their work ethic – while others are not, the self-esteem of those who receive less accolades could suffer, and no one wants that to happen. Other ways we often try to prevent blows to our self-esteem include removing ourselves from situations where we feel that our self-esteem could be threatened by having our perceived shortcomings exposed. In other instances, we may try to convince ourselves that we do not really want the talent, trait, attribute, or relationship that someone else has that is making us feel less than satisfied with ourselves. We may use the other fellow's good fortune as inspiration to better ourselves in ways that will truly enhance our self-esteem or, if that does not work, then we may try to inflict a blow to his self-esteem that we hope will make ourselves feel better.

Building and maintaining one's self-esteem, then, is an inherently competitive practice in a way that the practice of respecting oneself is not. Whereas, given the inherently competitive nature of self-esteem, it seems improbable that a large and diverse society could make self-esteem easily attainable for all, without a heavy-handed dose of social engineering aimed at mitigating the disparities in income, education, and economic and social opportunities that could breed envy and resentment among the populace.

²⁷ Or we could go the other way around and reward no one for anything. The intent would be the same: making sure, from the perspective of each individual, that no one is perceived to be any better than anyone else.

Although Rawls would deny that his understanding of self-respect²⁸ is inherently competitive in nature, he is aware of the danger posed by envy, which he says is caused by “a lack of self-confidence in our own worth combined with a sense of impotence” (469). Thus if a person can maintain his self-confidence and sense of his own worth – which he will be able to do if he has self-respect – then feelings of envy will be kept at bay. Rawls believes this can be true, even in a society that allows a high level of economic inequality. As Jeanne Zaino puts it, for Rawls “self-respect can be attained if a person acts within his or her means. One’s sense of worth is not dependent on adjustments, radical or otherwise, in a person’s social situation.”²⁹ In other words, as long as a person focuses on his own plan of life that he finds worthwhile, if he can maintain the confidence to carry it out, and if he has membership in a social union that affirms his self-worth, his socioeconomic status will not affect his self-respect.

Rawls’s denial that socioeconomic status can affect self-respect is implicit in his definition of envy as “the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages” (466). Envy, then, according to Rawls’s view is not caused by any real harm that is done to us. Instead, it is caused by the realization that there are others who have more goods than we do, which, in turn, can breed hostility. But rather than calling for radical equality in society as the way to diminish envy and promote self-respect, Rawls claims that “self-respect is secured by the public affirmation of the status of equal citizenship for all,” with economic

²⁸ In this discussion of self-respect and self-esteem, for the sake of brevity and ease I use the term “self-respect” when referring to Rawl’s theory, since that is the term he uses most frequently. The reader should keep in mind, however, that this term, as it is used here and by Rawls himself, is synonymous with “self-esteem.”

²⁹ Zaino, 739.

disparities allowed to continue up to a certain point (478).³⁰ Since everyone cannot enjoy the highest status in society, and since the only way “to improve one person’s position is to lower that of someone else” (478), the best way to promote self-respect for the greatest number of people is by equally assigning those primary goods that can be equally assigned: basic rights and liberties and the equal status of citizenship (478). Rawls, therefore, (mostly) rejects the idea that there is any connection between socioeconomic status and self-respect.

According to Zaino, however, Rawls’s conception of self-respect is inconsistent due to an implicit hierarchy of primary goods that he introduces into his thinking. Only basic rights and liberties are to be equally distributed, whereas income, wealth, and power are not. “Thus there emerges a subtle ordering of sorts, in which some primary goods are seen as more important than others, although by definition all primary goods are intended to aid people in pursuing their rational life plan and their conception of their good.”³¹ And although Rawls believes that potentially large disparities in income and wealth will not affect people’s access to self-respect, Zaino points out that the social unions which are supposed to validate the self-worth of their members will be made up of groups of people who are all “relative equals” in income, abilities, and socioeconomic status.³² Zaino’s observation is highly plausible, given that what binds each social union together are the

³⁰ Rawls does not say much about where he would draw the line for allowing these material inequalities to continue. Concerning the difference principle and the potentially wide economic disparities it could allow, Rawls says “Although in theory the difference principle permits indefinitely large inequalities in return for small gains to the less favored, the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive in practice” (470). For him, that excessiveness would be the point where “excusable envy” could easily arise (478). Rawls defines *excusable envy* as “a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently” (468). This proviso is unhelpful because we are left to ponder under just what circumstances would it be unreasonable to expect someone (*anyone?* *This person?* *Those people over there?*) to feel differently about his or her situation?

³¹ Zaino, 742.

³² *Ibid*, 746.

shared interests, desires, and life plans of their members; and it seems unlikely that individuals who are highly unequal in income and wealth would share similar life plans. So given that in a Rawlsian society the citizens will receive the validation needed for self-respect primarily from those who are their relative equals, Zaino concludes that Rawls needs to figure out some way to ensure that if lower class people were to venture out of their own insulated socioeconomic circles, they would not be crestfallen and upset by the inequalities they would encounter.³³ After all, an individual's plan of life may only seem worthwhile in a certain socioeconomic context surrounded by relative equals who share similar plans. But only let that person discover how much greater and more worthwhile his plans could seem to be if only he had access to greater financial means, and then ask him if his current plan still appears as worthwhile to him as it did before he learned too much about how the "better half" in his society lives.

Despite Rawls's optimism that social and economic inequalities will not necessarily breed envy and thereby damage people's self-respect, the fact that his theory depends upon segregating citizens into social unions whose members are mostly equal to one another seems to prove otherwise. Since these spheres of equality are a necessary means for individuals to have their self-respect, and the equality shared among the members of each social union is partly what binds that union together, it follows that Rawlsian self-respect requires a far greater degree of social and economic equality than Rawls realized.

The reason why such equality would be necessary is to stave off envy. If significant inequalities existed among the members of a social union, how could those with less means feel confident in their abilities and secure in their likelihood for success when they see that

³³ *Ibid.*

their peers who share a similar plan of life will have it so much easier than they will in achieving their goals? Although Rawls claims that a rational person is not subject to envy, “at least when the differences between himself and others are not thought to be the result of injustice and do not exceed certain limits” (464), he also states that “The means of status, so to speak, are fixed, and each man’s gain is another’s loss” (478). If this is true, then how can it possibly be the case that being subject to envy is irrational? If the only way that someone can get ahead in this world is by someone else falling behind, then it seems entirely rational for me to monitor closely the greater good of others in order to see if their having those goods means that I will get less. And if I determine that I will get less because they get more, why would it be irrational for me to envy what they have and take whatever steps I deem necessary to ensure that I get more of what they have? Thus if envy, as we have noted, is “the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages,” but yet “each man’s gain is [always] another’s loss,” then it is hard to see how Rawls is not contradicting himself.

Therefore, despite his efforts to the contrary, Rawlsian self-respect remains highly vulnerable to rampant societal discord and resentment caused by envy. This dire predicament is the result of Rawls’s conflation of self-respect with self-esteem. If a society decides that one of its primary objectives should be to nurture and maintain self-esteem in the life of every citizen, the inherently competitive nature of self-esteem will leave, as I see it, only three possible solutions for accomplishing this goal. None of them, however, seem all that promising, and all of them – the last one especially – would strike many as morally objectionable. The first solution is to usher in radical egalitarianism by means of social

peer pressure and, most likely, massive government intervention and regulation. The second solution is for the leadership of that society to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the various social unions remain segregated as much as possible. The third and final solution is the one favored by The Clever Politician: the lucky “One Percent” could take whatever steps are necessary to convince the rest of the populace that a slavish existence, where those who are worse-off blindly serve the needs and wants of those at the top, is the best possible plan of life for them to achieve.

None of this, however, is to imply that self-esteem, in and of itself, is a bad thing. On the contrary, having self-esteem in the right amount, and in its proper context, actually can be a very good thing. If I really do possess abilities and talents for an activity or profession that could positively affect my own life and/or the lives of others, then having enough self-esteem to give me the confidence to undertake that activity or to enter that profession is a positive attribute by any reasonable measure. The problem is not self-esteem *per se*; the problem is confusing self-esteem with self-respect. I can have both. But having healthy self-esteem, I think, demands having genuine self-respect. Self-esteem unmoored from self-respect, or self-esteem seen as equivalent to self-respect is where problems occur, because if one’s sense of self-worth is tied exclusively to one’s level of self-esteem, then one is left envious and relentlessly seeking either to one-up others or else to pull others down to one’s level. Both scenarios leave the person focused exclusively on outcomes, rather than on developing his character so that he can become respectable. This person might become a success in the material sense of that term, but he will not be a person who merits his own, much less others’, respect.

IX. Summarizing the Argument Against Rawlsian Self-Respect

Rawls's theory of self-respect has two major flaws that give us ample grounds to reject it. The first is his failure to include desert as a necessary condition for having self-respect. This is highly problematic because without the concept that one must deserve the respect that one receives, Rawls's theory is unable to account for certain moral intuitions that most of us – including Rawls himself – hold about what sorts of lives can qualify as worthy of respect. Rawls's tacit way of dealing with cases like Nussbaum's is to state that an equal distribution of publically affirmed rights and liberties is the basis for self-respect and to introduce the Aristotelian Principle as a way to explain how individuals naturally are motivated to improve themselves. But adding these conditions makes Rawls a perfectionist, despite his best efforts to the contrary. Therefore, if Rawls wishes to remain consistent that desert should play no part in determining what ways of living can and cannot be genuinely respectable, then he should reject the Aristotelian Principle and abandon his reliance on an equal distribution of publically affirmed rights and liberties as necessary grounds for having respect. In that case, people who happily live lives of drudgery, underachievement, and debasement could qualify for Rawlsian self-respect, thus violating our intuitions. If, on the other hand, Rawls is willing to accept his inconsistency and retain both the Aristotelian Principle and the need for equally distributed rights and liberties but continues to reject the notion that moral desert is relevant to self-respect, then his theory again violates our intuitions because The Clever Politician and the happy, voluntary slave would both have to count as genuine cases of self-respect.

The second major flaw in Rawls's theory is that he equates self-respect with self-esteem, when in fact they are quite different. Self-respect, properly understood, pertains

to one's character, requires desert, and is non-competitive in nature. Self-esteem, however, pertains to one's abilities and circumstances, has nothing to do with desert, and is highly competitive. Rawls's implicit hierarchy of primary goods in which fundamental rights and basic liberties are equally distributed but income and wealth are not entails that Rawls does not think that potentially great socioeconomic inequalities among the citizens of a society would necessarily be detrimental to everyone having the chance to achieve self-respect. The division of society, however, into various social unions whose respective members presumably would be roughly equal in socioeconomic status, but who also would be aware of the material inequalities that would exist between different unions, likely would transform these unions into breeding grounds for envy and resentment unless they remain segregated. And Rawls's belief that rational individuals would not be subject to envy, provided that socioeconomic differences are not thought to be the result of injustice and do not exceed certain, unspecified limits, does not fit well with his idea that the means of social status are fixed and, therefore, one person can only gain something good at the expense of someone else. Thus for a society that wishes to make achieving Rawlsian self-respect for all of its citizens a primary goal, there are three available options. The latter two, at least, would be considered highly objectionable by most people. The options are radical egalitarianism, radical segregation, or the acceptance of slavish life-plans by the vast majority of the population. In carrying out any one of these options, it seems likely that the rights and liberties of the individual would need to be severely curtailed, a consequence that Rawls, given his commitment to the protection of personal liberty, would wish to avoid at all costs. For all of these reasons, therefore, we ought to reject Rawls's account of self-respect.

X. Conclusion

There is no doubt that a society of persons who truly respect themselves and one another would be a tremendously important good and very much worth seeking. Recall that there are two necessary conditions that together are sufficient for one to have the kind of self-respect I have outlined and defended in this paper. The first condition is that one must successfully conduct oneself in a certain way that one finds to be worthy of his efforts in accordance with a commitment that one has made to act in that way. The second condition is that one's chosen code of conduct must truly be respectable and would remain so regardless of what anyone thinks.

A chosen code of conduct is truly respectable and builds good character if and only if it is an objectively worthy way for a human being to conduct himself. Admittedly, this second condition will be hard for many people to accept. In particular, if it is true that a necessary condition for self-respect is that one's chosen code of conduct must be an objectively worthy way for a human being to act, then this stringent condition would have two consequences that many will find objectionable. The first consequence would be that, at any given moment in history, there are vast numbers of well-meaning people out there living their lives in what they consider to be worthwhile and respectable ways but, in fact, their conduct and their characters do not merit as much respect as they think. The second consequence would be that, unless one has sufficient reason to believe that one is correct about the morally objective facts of the matter, one may never know for sure whether one is acting in a genuinely respectable way (at least the same level of uncertainty – maybe more – would apply to our assessments of others as well). For many, these can be bitter

pills to swallow.

But it may not be as bad as we think. If this second condition is true, there are still at least three reasons to be (at least somewhat) optimistic about our prospects for having respect and for being reasonably confident that we have it. The first reason is that the everyday experience of living life indicates that our characters can deserve respect to varying degrees. There is no good reason to think that one either is entitled to complete respect or else one's life is a total lost cause. I dare say that most of us have people in our lives for whom we have great respect, yet we also can see that their characters are flawed in certain ways. (Who knows? Those same people might even feel the same way about us!) The fact that when it comes to those whom we love and respect we usually are willing to take the bad along with the good, with the amount of respect we have for them varying according to how egregious we assess their faults to be, is a strong indication that deserving and having respect is not an all-or-nothing affair. There may be many ways to miss the mark and fail to deserve genuine respect. But there may be just as many, if not more, ways to at least come close enough to hitting the mark that we truly earn some measure of respect in the process. Thus there may only be a few fully respectable saints in our midst, but, on the bright side, we probably will not have that many genuine SOBs to deal with either.

Furthermore, in making the claim that all who desire to have true respect must commit themselves to acting in ways that are objectively worthy ways for human beings to act does not entail that every person whose character deserves respect must be living in exactly the same kind of way as everyone else whose character also deserves respect. It is likely that there are certain character traits and codes of conduct that genuinely self-respecting people have in common, but the particular activities and ways of living in which

those traits and codes of conduct manifest themselves can be different. It is also possible that a person's character can be worthy of respect for reasons that would not apply to another person of perhaps equally respectable character. Therefore, our entitlement to respect cannot always be measured using the same criterion because we all come from unique backgrounds and circumstances that affect us in different ways.

Contrary to what Sandel has called the "unencumbered" Rawlsian self that is prior to its desires, circumstances, and choices,³⁴ we have good reasons to believe that each self is actually a deeply embedded, encumbered self, due to the interconnected, complex web of social, genetic, and cultural bonds into which that unique self is born and raised. These things affect how each self sees the world and understands its experiences. They also affect to at least some degree the sort of character that each self will develop, including the capacity of the self's character to deserve self-respect. While I believe that there are objectively worthy ways for a human being to conduct himself, and that each person must successfully conduct himself in at least some of those ways in order to deserve respect, it seems unlikely, due to the self's embeddedness, that any person's character will exhibit all the same genuinely respect-worthy qualities we would find in the character of someone else who also deserves respect but who lives in the midst of circumstances that are different from those of every other person.

The second reason for some optimism is closely related to the first. While it may be true that we will never know for sure the extent to which our characters deserve to have genuine respect, it seems very likely that we are also not left completely in the dark. Getting the big picture right – at least in our own case and in the cases of those whom we

³⁴ Michael Sandel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd Ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xiv.

know well – should not be all that difficult. While reasonable people can certainly disagree over a variety of ethical, political, and life questions, we agree on far more than we sometimes realize. And we have good reasons to think that our intuitions in these broader cases normally have access to the truth. For example, would any serious person doubt that one who is quick to be kind and generous toward others is thereby living in a way that is non-respectable? Exactly what constitutes kindness and generosity and to what extent these virtues ought to be guiding principles for one's life, can lead to reasonable disagreements from time to time, but very few of us would ever doubt that exhibiting these virtues, at least as a general rule, is a worthy and respectable thing to do.

The third reason for optimism is that one does not have to be some kind of moral realist, much less a philosopher of any stripe, to deserve self-respect. Although a self-respecting person has to be deeply committed to conducting himself in ways that are objectively worthy for a human being, this does not entail that that person must hold certain philosophical presuppositions about the moral objectivity of his way of life. If I am a truly self-respecting person, I may think that the same values and standards that have shaped my character ought to shape the character of others as well, and I may take appropriate steps to try to convince others to share my convictions and way of acting. But none of that seems necessary for me to be entitled to self-respect.³⁵ I must act in ways that I think are right, and those ways must be right to at least some extent in order for me to deserve respect. But the reasons for which I think that a right action is right can vary to some degree without such variations affecting my claim to deserve self-respect. For example, I may think that God has called me to act in a certain way, or I may be trying to follow the categorical

³⁵ Unless, of course, it turns out that sharing the good news of moral realism with non-believers is an objectively worthy moral imperative that genuinely self-respecting individuals ought to obey in all circumstances.

imperative, or maybe I am an Aristotelian who thinks that my actions are contributing to human flourishing, and so on. Or perhaps I am simply a humble person who does not speculate very much on the reasons for why I do what I do, but I try, in general, to follow what my conscience dictates (and it turns out that my conscience is right a good bit of the time in what it tells me to do). All of these reasons that explain our right actions can make one deserve self-respect to at least some degree.

If respect can be deserved to varying degrees by all people in a variety of different situations, and we have good reasons to believe that our intuitions very often do have access to the moral facts of the matter, then it is reasonable to think that many people who hold a wide variety of different beliefs can all have self-respect. There is no single belief system, no single culture or way of living and doing things that has the market completely cornered on knowing what codes of conduct will produce the most upstanding and respectable characters. The requirement of objectivity for self-respect does not demand intolerance and narrow ways of thinking and believing.

For these three reasons, I believe we can have at least some optimism that our lives can have self-respect and that we often can be reasonably confident of when we have it.

Finally, if conducting oneself in way that is truly respectable – that is, to act in an objectively worthy way because one thinks it is the way that one ought to act – is a necessary condition for self-respect, what does it mean to act in that way? A chosen code of conduct is an objectively worthy way for one to act if and only if it promotes the kind of personal growth and happiness appropriate to one's inherent worth as a human being. Simply to be human is to deserve a certain level of great respect. Therefore, one should always strive to act in ways that are respectful toward one's own self, as well as to other

selves, because that is what our human nature deserves. We all have incredible worth just by virtue of being human. If one strives always to develop one's character to be truly worthy of one's own respect and the respect of others, then one is thereby acknowledging the worth and value of what it means to be human.³⁶

³⁶ I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the members of my committee, Clare Batty, Arnold Farr, and David Bradshaw for their time and for their willingness to help me complete this project. I am especially grateful to my esteemed and respect-worthy advisor, David Bradshaw, for his many helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

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