

Formal Application for the Philosophy Honors Program

Candidate:

Dignity and Self-Respect

Self-respect is crucial for living a good, flourishing life. But what exactly is it? Defining the term can be difficult, as there are so many different interpretations of self-respect. In my honors project, I will work first on characterizing self-respect, establishing what exactly it is and what sort of thing it is (whether it is subjective or objective, a moral notion or a psychological one), and differentiating it from other concepts such as self-esteem. In a second section, I will further discuss the morality of self-respect. Do we have a moral duty to be self-respecting, as we have a duty to respect others? Does self-respect lead to respecting others? The third chapter will center around the effects on self-respect from social institutions such as education and government. Finally, I will focus on one particular implication of the right understanding of self-respect: namely, the subject of forgiveness, and whether forgiveness always supports or rather sometimes undermines the ability to respect oneself.

I. Self-Respect

Robin Dillon makes many distinctions between types of self-respect, including recognition self-respect, evaluative self-respect (which itself she describes as having several subtypes), and basal self-respect. I'm not sure all these distinctions are useful. We certainly don't make all these distinctions in ordinary speech. It might be helpful to use different terms for these different notions, so I'm going to understand self-respect as an appreciation a person has for her own inherent worth in virtue of being a person, along with a desire to preserve this appreciation and a disposition to act in ways that protect or

uphold it. (This corresponds roughly to what Dillon identifies as recognition self-respect.) I'll use the term 'self-esteem' to refer to positive feelings and thoughts a person has toward herself on the basis of some of her abilities or traits, such as that she's good at telling jokes, or that she has nice hair (akin to what Dillon calls evaluative self-respect). I'll take self-esteem to mainly be a psychological notion, something that can fluctuate through time as we gain or lose abilities (and can be happy or upset about such). But self-respect is something we can have and should have consistently, so long as we're persons. This makes self-respect a moral notion, a philosophical notion, because we have certain rights and responsibilities in virtue of being persons.

Another debated issue is whether self-respect is an objective concept or a subjective one. If self-respect is objective, then there are certain beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions a person must have to be self-respecting. Someone who thinks of himself as a lesser sort of being, whose interests and well-being are less important than those of others, would not count as having self-respect. If self-respect is a subjective concept, then a person is self-respecting as long as he believes he is not tolerating treatment that he feels is undeserved or demeaning, regardless of whether his or others' judgments about himself are accurate. I will work to sort out this dispute. I will also argue against Thomas Hobbes, who believes that one's view of oneself has no moral significance.

II. Moral Obligation

While some may consider self-respect to be merely a psychological matter, I have determined that this is an aspect of self-esteem, while self-respect falls entirely under the subject of morality.

Immanuel Kant's claim that we have a moral duty to never treat other people as a means to an end, to respect others as persons, is fairly well-known. In a similar way, Kant also believes that we have a moral duty to respect ourselves as persons, a duty that derives from our dignity as rational beings. "This duty requires us...to act only in ways that are consistent with our status as end in ourselves, and to refrain from acting in ways that abase, degrade, defile, or disavow our rational nature." (Kant).

I agree with Kant; I believe that we do have a duty to achieve self-respect (and that it is importantly connected to respect for other persons), and that we have a duty to refrain from anything that would go against or undermine our inherent worth as human beings. No self-respecting person would willingly be a slave, because that shows an inability to recognize one's inherent worth as a person, and not as an object to be used or sold.

John Rawls believes that self-respect is *not* something we are morally required to have, nor is it a feeling we necessarily have, but that it is a right that social institutions are required to uphold and not undermine. He claims that access to self-respect depends, to a large degree, on how the basic institutional structure of a society defines and distributes the social bases of self-respect, such as the messages about the relative worth of citizens within the society, the distribution of fundamental political rights and civil liberties, access to the resources individuals need to pursue their plans of life, etc. In other words, Rawls's view is that the ability of individuals to respect themselves is heavily dependent on their social and political circumstances; and thus, individuals likely shouldn't be morally obligated to respect themselves, as there are several factors that could prevent self-respect from being possible. I do agree that society can indeed undermine self-respect and should be prevented from doing so. But perhaps Kant's theory can be integrated here, and perhaps

individuals still have an obligation to achieve self-respect no matter what their societal situation might be: if an institution is corrupt and degrades the self-respect of certain persons, perhaps those persons have a moral obligation to rise up and demand the correct standards that would provide them with the ability to respect themselves.

III. Societal Implications

Society can, in fact, have a strong impact on its residents' self-respect. I agree with Rawls that societal structures ought to provide persons with the means for self-respect; however, this does not always occur. In the third chapter I'll look at the implications of my previously discussed delineations for self-respect for policies or practices in institutional structures such as politics, education, and society as a whole. In particular I intend to discuss Rawls further, as well as including some of Robin Dillon's works on feminist theory.

IV. Forgiveness

Among the implications of our discussion of self-respect, I intend to focus especially on the subject of forgiveness. There are a number of different philosophical accounts on the nature of forgiveness, and on many of them, forgiveness involves overcoming feelings of indignation or resentment. On my view, resentful and indignant feelings that persist in a victim after being wronged by another person can, in some cases, reflect self-respect. Conversely, a tendency to forgive too readily can be indicative of a lack of self-respect. A person might think that forgiveness is always good and is always called for in response to an offense. But I will argue that in some cases forgiving is not the right thing to do. Some acts should not be forgiven because the acts or their perpetrators are too evil or because the wrongdoers only feign apology and repentance, while privately minimizing and excusing themselves for what they did. And in some cases forgiving undermines self-

respect. Forgiving all wrongs thus is not virtuous. Maintaining self-respect requires preserving an attitude of unforgiveness in some kinds of instances. Particularly in cases in which wrongs committed against a person display an attitude according to which the victim is not a person with inherent worth, forgiveness is uncalled for. In such cases, to forgive would constitute a failure to appreciate and to stand up for one's dignity as a person.

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