

Self-esteem vs. Self-respect

Reflections on Ethics and Morality

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This title refers to two key forms or categories of motivation, namely self-esteem and self-respect, that are very familiar to us and are basically psychological and sociological issues that have been dealt with by experts in those fields. But they can also lead us into reflections on the two main traditions in the theory of ethics (sometimes called metaethics) viz., teleology and deontology. These may also be familiar terms to many of you but I will unpack them a little. The first, the teleological (from *telos* Greek for end or aim, i.e. action for an end, striving for the good life) is the leading idea in ethics, as in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good . . . " Put simply, every agent acts for an end not only for immediate ends but also for a final end that we desire for its own sake. Ends in view become means to further ends and they interlock in a life-long pattern. The good then is that at which all things aim^[1] The word ethics, incidentally, derives from *ethos* -- originally seat in Greek and then character and now a cultural disposition. We should also make a distinction between anterior ethics, theoretical or metaethics, that is being discussed here, and posterior ethics, familiar to us in the rules of professional behavior, conflict of interest, etc. The deontological comes from the Greek for need and means obligation, duty or norm, and is best seen in theories that try to spell out or justify obligatory absolutes, as in the work of Immanuel Kant.

My approach here is to present my take on some reflections of the philosopher, Paul Ricoeur [1913-2005]. Early in his career, he specialized in German philosophy, and after being captured in the war he survived for 5 years in a POW philosophers barracks (where he was allowed to read German philosophy). Subsequently he was professor in the history of philosophy at the Sorbonne and then dean of the new University of Nanterre, now Paris X. He left Nanterre in 1970 after a painful incident when a Maoist group blamed him incorrectly for bringing police on campus and poured a pail of garbage (the *poubelle*) on him. At the University of Chicago, he was appointed to the the Nuveen Chair 1970-1990, where he was in the department of philosophy, the committee on social thought and the school of divinity.. Author of 30 some books and numerous articles, translated into English (some by myself) and many other languages, among his distinctions was the Kluge prize in the Humanities, awarded by the Library of Congress in 2002. Also, he won the Paul VI award from the Vatican. Incidentally, he was a Huguenot, and published many studies on biblical interpretation. He is known in France for introducing phenomenology and hermeneutics there, as well as for being a political mediator in his later years. I found him to be a sound, thorough scholar and an original thinker not a system-builder but systematic. His range was awesome: Philosophy of History, of language, of psychoanalysis, literature, aesthetics, biblical interpretation. Here I am utilizing a few items from three chapters of his book, *Oneself as Another*. ^[2]

As to my theme, there is a question first of all, whether the two terms, self-esteem and self-respect, are really distinct, or is it a distinction without a difference? Some dictionaries define one in terms of the other. In any case they are both frequently considered only in negative terms, e.g., in the OED. Ricoeur's take is that both should be seen as basically positive. Thus, at first glance it would seem that self-esteem would not lead to an ethical position; and in fact it often strikes us as being self-oriented to the point of being selfish or a case of narcissism, egotism, arrogance--or pernicious pride. But Ricoeur points out that when we ask about self-esteem, we're talking not about our own accomplishments so much as about shared evaluations of our competencies and our abilities to initiate changes in the world. We are talking about common standards of excellence, and rules of comparison between different outcomes. More important, he says, we share our evaluations because of our caring solicitude. Before any obedience to duty, and at a stage prior to the symmetry of friendship, we have already and spontaneously responded with sympathy to others in their sufferings, in their incapacities to the authority of the visage, the face of the other. [3] (Here and elsewhere, Ricoeur shows his debt to the work of his friend, Emanuel Levinas, the great Jewish philosopher). In other words, to self-esteem, solicitude adds a lack which makes us need the other, need friends: by the rebound effect of solicitude on self esteem, the self perceives itself as a self among others. This mutuality is characterized by reversibility, unsubstitutability and similitude. We reverse roles by saying I and you interchangeably. Also, we see the other as the anchorage of her discourse and as irreplaceable in our affection and esteem, as shows up in the irreparable character of the loss of the other and thus we learn of the irreplaceable character of our own life; it is first of all for the other that I am irreplaceable. and we are also similar: I cannot esteem myself without esteeming the other as myself. This means that there is an equivalence: esteem of the other as oneself and esteem of oneself as another. We find, then that self-esteem is not the same as esteem of me; in it we recognize the need of mediation by others it is dialogical rather than monological.

However, Ricoeur then points out, the dialogical, the dyadic You and I, does not yet include the anonymous third person, and so it is that from solicitude there emerges a sense of justice, since only just institutions can assure the equality that makes everyone an each as in to each his own. Justice, then refers to the extension of interpersonal relations to the anonymous third, the sans visages, the faceless. These points are summed up in Ricoeur's definition of ethics or the ethical intent that is found already in nuce in self-esteem: A searching for the good life, with and for others, in just institutions. Hence the three components: the good life, solicitude and a sense of justice.

But ethics and self-esteem embedded in it would in this light seem to have no restraints, nor rules, unless we count the inchoative, vague universals we call values, which are also implied in esteem. But, these are open to debate and are always contextual. Understand, as mentioned above, we are talking here only of anterior ethics, not posterior ethics in which you deal with particular rules of professions. There is a lot more to be said on these rules but not here.

Consequently we must go to the side of self-respect. Respect is from the Latin to look again, presumably as in taking time to consider, regard; dictionaries sometimes equate it with esteem; we might say then that it is a generalized esteem. Notice that there is a

certain distance, a detachment implied in respect in contrast to an enthusiasm, an engagement implied in esteem. Self respect is a recognition of the dignity, the worth of ourselves along with everyone else. Thus, self-respect, it turns out, is basically deontological {from the Greek for lack, need, i.e. necessity or obligation} as can be seen with the help of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. For Kant (who, incidentally, never used the term ethics), morality, Morality (La morale in the French) is seen in terms of the universalizing principle of the Categorical Imperative: Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.^[4] A simpler variation would be: So act that the maxim of your action can be considered a universal rule a rule for everyone. Much as in the Golden Rule, (which Kant incidentally rejects) we have violated our duty unless our rule of action passes the test of consistency, suppose everyone did the same e.g., to lie when it would free us from some threat. This is a rational formalism proceeds only by the logical rules of inference, of consistency.

This is the first formulation. But there is a second (and a third) formulation of the Categorical Imperative in Kant, So act that you treat the humanity in every person as an end in itself and never as a means merely. Ricoeur finds here in this text^[5] the notion of respect for the person as an end in itself, including oneself, the underlying concept of self-respect. For Kant, respect is the only component of motivation that is not a matter of inclination or feeling; or better, it is a distinct moral feeling: we feel esteem, we don't feel respect in the same sense. We take it on, I would say, as a rational attitude and as such it is universal in its application. In self-respect we treat everyone as possessing an inherent dignity or worth.

Thus, in parallel with the case of self-esteem, there are three components of self-respect in this moral sense: universality, the person as an end in itself and justice as right, as institutionalized, i.e., equality. Each of these can be unpacked, especially justice, which Ricoeur takes up in extended discussions, particularly regarding John Rawls procedural notion of justice as fairness. Rawls, as we heard from Dick Cusick in an earlier talk, gives us a formalism, much like Kant's that includes a modern version of the social contract the original position (behind the veil of ignorance) the difference principle and the maximum rule (the parties are supposed to choose the arrangement that maximizes the minimum share).^[6] But all this, for Rawls, would give us a purely procedural concept of justice. Ricoeur's account is quite thorough here and in two other books, but it also involves a critique that anticipated the alterations in the theory that Rawls himself made -- adjustments in the direction of diversity of goods and values, i.e., distributive justice that is tailored to cultural conditions.

Summing up but also going forward, I might quote this claim of Ricoeur: (1) That self-esteem is more fundamental than self-respect, (2) that self-respect is the aspect under which self-esteem appears in the domain of norms, and (3) that the aporias of duty create situations in which self-esteem appears not only as the source but as the recourse for respect, when no sure norm offers a guide for the exercise hic et nunc of respect. ^[7] Thus there is a kind of dialectic between the two concepts, self-esteem and self-respect.

Now, while Ricoeur finds that the two traditions teleological and deontological -- cannot be merged despite much effort by many over the course of history, nevertheless their interrelationship can be examined and they can be correlated. One way I found to correlate the two traditions, understood in terms of their introductory concepts, is to

rewrite a famous dictum from Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason (not his ethics): Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind. Revised here it would come out: self-respect without self-esteem is empty; self-esteem without self-respect is blind. In other words, we might say that self-esteem is the generator in which our basic concerns and interests are activated and motivated along with our fellow-feeling, our solicitude; and self-respect, in turn, is the ground on which we submit these intense personal feelings to the test of universalization and obligation the referee, we might say, that blows the whistle on overeager self-esteem.

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This recourse to the claim that self-esteem is more fundamental than self-respect entails that, while no full synthesis of the two traditions (teleology and deontology) is available, or even possible, there still is a mediating position, namely, practical wisdom, *phronesis* in Aristotle's Greek (often translated but not accurately as *prudence*.) For moral action in tough cases Ricoeur calls them tragic cases, not mere dilemmas we should go back to Aristotle and his notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom or wisdom in action -- that is, where the acting person is guided by the wise man or woman, the *phronimoi*, who can, based on experience and good practice, utilize the just mean.^[8] Practical wisdom means that the general rules of morality cannot be bypassed but that they do not automatically apply without exception -- that the moral judgment in a situation takes on a severe gravity that is reinforced by the added impetus of well-weighed conviction. He describes practical wisdom, then, as consisting in inventing behaviors which will best satisfy the exception which solicitude demands in betraying the rule as little as possible. ^[9]

The conflicts confronted by practical wisdom arise in many areas institutions, autonomy, personal relations, politics, etc. For example, fairness as equal distribution obviously produces conflict, especially if we try to take equality mathematically. Ricoeur disagrees also with the opposite position, contextualism or communitarianism, as held by Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, who claim that there is no unitary (uniform) justice but only spheres of justice.^[10] Ricoeur agrees that we must consider not just cultural differences but the irreplaceable singularity of each person in our decisions their circumstances and situations but always with an eye to the universal. A key here is commitment: our commitment to the other, as we can see in an example from the end of life: the truth owed to the dying: Out of compassion, a gap seems to open up between letting a dying person know his real condition and hiding it from him. There is no simple solution; a middle ground must be found depending on the situation, personalities, etc.

A more difficult issue, at the beginning of life, is, of course, abortion: one path would be following rigidly a biological criterion in which person and life are indissociable, i.e. assign a right to life to the embryo in the sense of chance to live. Ricoeur says about this: The distinction we have been proposing throughout this work between identity as sameness and identity as selfhood should authorize us, if not to ignore the biologic

argument, at least to dissociate it from the underlying substantialist ontology. [11] The opposite would be to attach human dignity to fully developed capacities like autonomy, so that only adults are persons; but where the embryo can be protected by a decision of community. Ricoeur then says: respect in the current debate should be understood as accompanied by a minimum logic of development that adds to the idea of capacity that belongs to a logic of all or nothing, that of aptitude which admits of degrees of actualization. He adds to this a lengthy and subtle discussion of bioethics in the zone of prudential judgment (following the work in bioethics of Dr. Anne Fagot) which ends with the assertion that critical solicitude is the form that practical wisdom takes in the region of interpersonal relations. [12] In effect, again we must try to find a middle ground between person and thing. We need a progressive ontology, he says, that recognizes that an embryo is a being in development, whose capacities will be actualized over time.[13] That is, besides the biological criteria, which we must take into account, we must also take into account the phenomena of thresholds and stages as embryonic growth is recognized in experience.

In conclusion: if we needed more challenging ethical questions to discuss, I think we would agree that there are too many right at hand: we might think immediately of war and environmental issues. But those issues have already appeared here and will arrive for further discussion, I am sure, in other PCC talks.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book One, translation W. D. Ross (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1094.
2. Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another*, translation K. Blaney (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990).
3. Ricoeur, op. cit., pp. 192-194.
4. Kant, Immanuel, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translation J.W. Ellington, (New York, Hackett Publishing, 1993), p. 30.
5. Ricoeur, op. cit., pp. 203-204.
6. Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) p. 61 and passim.
7. Ibid. p. 169.
8. Aristotle, op. cit., p. 1094a, 1- 3.
9. Ricoeur, op. cit., p. 269.
10. Ibid., p. 252.
11. Ibid., p. 271.
12. Ibid., pp. 271-272.
13. *Ibid.*