

pride versus self-respect

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"Then for the first time, we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man."

Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*

I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

This is not an essay that analyses our normal concepts. Nor really one that suggests the natural facts that underlie our normal thinking. Instead, it is an essay about gaps, confusions, and explanatory failures in our usual ways of thinking. My claim is that there is something deeply wrong about the way we think about feelings of pride and their connection with the attitudes a person has toward herself and others. "We" means roughly and generally consumers of the philosophy we take seriously even if we don't buy much of it, participants in the societies that influence and are influenced by it, and more specifically me until I began working on this essay. (And I suspect the error extends to a large proportion of humanity. But I don't know enough for any confidence on this.) We miss something essential about human nature and the possibilities for a satisfactory life by ignoring a central form of self-respect. This kind of self-respect has some abstract features in common with pride and other emotions of self-evaluation, but its differences from them are

important and easily obscured by the comparison. One consequence is that we deprive ourselves of resources for describing some ways in which life can be deeply wounding.

### **pride, arrogance, approval**

Start with Aristotle. His account of *megalopsychia*, in the general family of pride, contrasts both with the kind of self-respect I shall elicit and with features of pride as we now usually think of it. He holds up a model of virtuous pride which consists in knowing how admirable one is. For Aristotle there is nothing wrong with letting everyone know that one knows how admirable one is, as long as one really is that fine. As he says:

The proud man, then, is an extreme in respect of the greatness of his claims, but a mean in respect of the rightness of them; for he claims what is accordance with his merits, while the others go to excess or fall short. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book 4 ch 3)

There is a cultural divide between Aristotle and most people who are likely to read this, perhaps because we grew up in a moral atmosphere influenced by the legacy of Christianity, which makes us uncomfortable with the depicted manner of his great-souled person, but it is relatively superficial as long as we think that pride does have an essential connection with the self attribution of virtues. Perhaps there is a virtue that Aristotle does not appreciate of being tactful about one's knowledge of one's virtues. And "pride" may miss

something as a translation of *megalopsuchia*. But the fact remains that there is a quality that Aristotle admires that involves an honest and explicit appreciation of what is noble about one.

Hume's account of pride is not *really* that different. In Davidson's modernizing words, Hume can be summarized as

... maintaining that, if someone is proud that he exemplifies a certain property, then he approves of, or thinks well of, others for exemplifying the same property. This approval is not to be distinguished from holding that anyone who has the property is to that extent praiseworthy, estimable, or virtuous. (Davidson 1973 p. 748, see also Ardal 1989, Baier 1978.)

Hume sums up a central point by saying "a hearty pride, or self-esteem, if well-concealed and well-founded," is a natural virtue (Hume 1739/1888 book 3, part 2, section 2.11; for clear and authoritative historical context, shaming my amateur version see Schmitter 2014.) Note the emphasis on concealment, which contrasts with Aristotle, but also the "hearty" and "well-founded", which tend in Aristotle's general direction. Pride taken as a virtue, distinct from arrogance or grandiosity, is shown when following Hume we tell someone we are proud of them. (Or when we speak of gay pride, black pride: the aim is really self-respect, only partly because it is a means to respect from others. Perhaps we say "pride" rather than "self-respect" here because we don't want to seem to mince words. Or perhaps pride is what

people need in order to get a lever on their self-respect. See below.)

So you are proud in a virtuous way if you know you are good but keep relatively quiet about it. Your private awareness of your quality might then be labelled as self-respect. This is just one thing we can refer to with "self-respect", though, and one I shall de-emphasise. I thus prefer Hume's label of self-esteem for what he is describing, with its direct contrast with conceit or arrogance, which are partly a matter of tactless candour about a person's attitude to herself, and partly a sign of comparing others unfavourably to herself. This terminology is continued in more recent discussions of pride, such as Taylor's careful discussion in chapter III of Taylor (1985). (See also her discussion of self-respect and self-esteem in chapter V, which as a product of the philosophy of its time is meant as a tidy version of what we normally mean.)

So summing up this conventional view shared with different emphases by a number of philosophers -- to Aristotle, Hume, and Taylor, already cited, we could add for example Isenberg (1949) -- we get delicately opposed virtues and vices which can hide behind the labels of pride and humility.

<u>Virtues</u>	<u>Vices</u>
self-respect/esteem	abasement
knowledge of one's capacities	overestimation of one's capacities
appreciation of the value of others	ignorance of the value of others
humility of manner	Denigration of others

It may often be unclear whether someone is exhibiting one of these virtues or the corresponding vice, for example whether someone is being honest about the benefits she can bring to a shared project or exaggerating her capacities for the sake of her own status or advantage. And it is routinely unclear whether a particular ascription of pride or humility alludes to the left column or the right column. Moreover, even when in speaking of pride we are clearly praising or condemning, it is usually pretty ambiguous what the relative weighting of the component virtues or vices is. That is just to say that these are quite subtle concepts and our speech and our thoughts about ourselves and others are usually rough and hasty.

They are subtle concepts because they are concerned with striking a delicate balance. On the one hand it is a good thing if people understand their capacities and their limits, and motivate themselves both to develop their capacities and to act where their contribution is most valuable. On the other hand it is a bad thing if people overestimate what they can do, and if they present themselves in ways that restrict the possibilities of others. Seen this way it makes sense that these virtues, like many others, hover between

feeling and manner. Their effects are found both in a person's attitude to herself and others and in her social behaviour.

Pride, thus understood, can be made intelligible by attributing any quality that one values to anything one is connected with. Indeed, as Hume points out, the valued quality can be pretty tenuously connected to oneself. Though tone deaf oneself, one can be proud that one's granddaughter is an excellent violinist. It is just the fact that she is one's own granddaughter that allows pride. (I am following Davidson in rephrasing Hume's view in terms of being proud that something is the case rather than proud of an object, thus separating the fact of which one is proud from the connection with oneself.) But we can tighten the interpretation towards a specifically moral version by requiring that the quality in question is a generally accepted moral value and the connection with oneself is simply that one instantiates the quality. Then we have *a version of self-respect*. (It is not the only version. Another will be more important.) It is the realization that one is capable of doing good and often lives up to one's moral aspirations. Self-respect -- if understood in this way -- is to respect for others as pride is to admiration. And just as pride can take the pathological form of arrogance self-respect can take the pathological form of smugness. This special and probably not very idiomatic self-respect would then be a mild and moralized version of pride.

To sum this up, suppose we could have the conceptual and emotional agility

to assess what is useful and admirable about ourselves accurately, avoiding unnecessary display of the assessment beyond what is needed to make shared projects go well, and avoiding unjustified or pointless comparisons between ourselves and others. Then we would often be proud in a self-and other-respecting way. No arrogance, no false humility, no invidious comparisons, just accurate thinking and a satisfaction that would flow from it. If only.

But even if these acrobatics were easy, there would still be something missing, something vital. In the remainder of this paper I try to be clear about what it is.

### **shame and guilt versus regret**

Pride is often discussed in conjunction with retrospective moral emotions such as regret, remorse, shame, or for that matter embarrassment. (Taylor 1985 chapters 2, 3; Morton 2013 part 4.) These emotions are often labelled as retrospective because their central examples usually concern a person's reflecting on her past actions, but they can also apply to present and even to anticipated actions: this is particularly so for shame and embarrassment. And indeed pride, regret, remorse, and shame have a number of features in common. For present purposes it is the contrasts between shame and guilt on the one hand and regret on the other hand that are most informative. One

contrast concerns the objects of these emotions. One regrets doing a particular act or series of acts or that a particular event occurred. Less so for guilt. It can also be directed at a pattern of behaviour over a period of time. Even less so for shame. One can be ashamed that one was a certain way, for example prejudiced or self-centred, in a large part of one's life. (Shame can be occasioned by and directed at a particular action, but the shame is that one was a person who could do it.) There is also a contrast between the points of view intrinsic to these different emotions. With regret, one typically looks back oneself on the past and wishes that it had not been so or that some alternative had been available. With guilt one brings to mind some real or imaginary authority figure – God, parents, the law, bearing in mind that these may be imagined in order to gain an external attitude to oneself – and one brings to mind the disapproval they would have if they knew what you were up to. (The assumed judgment doesn't have to be towards the past: one can feel guilty while transgressing.) With shame and embarrassment one also brings to mind a possible or actual point of view, but it is more literal. The person condemning or even just laughing at you is real or easily available, and if you can block their finding out the emotion is at least diminished. (For a discussion of this with evidence see chapter 2 of Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011.) These two contrasts are loosely connected, because an imaginary point of view on one's actions can take a more comprehensive perspective, even bringing together things that no real human judgment would unite. But the connection is loose, and partly as a

result there is a lot of room for variation in the retrospective emotions easily available in different cultures. (This is a theme of Morton 2011, where I use the device of imagined points of view to structure the variety of possible retrospective emotions and to summarise the distinctions between them made by such writers as Williams and Taylor.)

Pride is on the regret side of this divide and self-respect on the guilt/remorse side. Pride is about something specific, a capacity or accomplishment or other source of status that one values. Self-respect is less specific. It is directed at general features of one's worth, much as shame can be. And it adopts an external point of view which may not be that of any actual person, much as guilt can. To turn the emotion into a thought it is not so much "I approve of this about me" as "an objective point of view would approve of this about me" or "I am approvable in this respect". This is not to say that self-respect and lack of self-respect cannot be triggered by particular attitudes of particular people to particular qualities and acts. Notoriously, praise or criticism by someone one trusts, admires, or is close to, particularly by a parent to a child, can have deep and often lasting effects on a person's general sense of her worth and capacities. (Fair and kindly presented specific criticism is good, all-purpose undermining even when fair and often when meant kindly is bad: the problem is keeping them apart.)

Ascriptions of moods and states of character interact in a complicated way with these distinctions about occurrent emotions. A person can be prone to

regret or be in a regretful mood, and then she is likely to regret many specific and unrelated actions and facts. (That is what a regretful mood is: a mood in which the person is inclined to emotions of regret.) But it is not because there is a single very general or very consequential thing that is regretted but because the person's character or mood makes her do a lot of regretting. Similarly, someone may be proud just as a matter of character, not proud particularly of this or that but inclined to be proud of many things. And in a proud mood, perhaps brought on by being proud of some particular accomplishment, she becomes, perhaps temporarily, a proud person. Self-respect does not need to be mixed into moods or states of character to acquire this generality. It already has it, because in contrast to emotions such as pride, regret, or guilt, it is a long term disposition rather than a passing state.

Self-respect is a moral emotion in a rather weak way. At its heart is the thought that one is objectively acceptable, which I take as imagining some respected point of view which smiles on one. And this is vulnerable to awareness that one has done wrong, so that a respected attitude to one would not be benign. It is very diffuse in that it does not need a focus on any particular act, or even any attribute. (Contrast it to pride in this respect, especially along the lines of Davidson's Hume, where one is proud that something in particular is the case.) In fact it is even less definite than this may suggest, since self-respect brings a confidence that future aims and

activities are also likely to be alright (acceptable, approved of from an external point of view).

### **absences and wounds**

We speak of lack of pride and wounded pride almost as often as of pride, and of lack of self-respect, injured self-respect, and diminished self-respect. The sense of self-respect which is not a special kind of pride is more accessible in these negative uses. (Though the terms remain deeply ambiguous. I don't think we could use "self-respect", or that matter "pride", "regret" and the others, with a chance of communicating unless by considering what we know of the person we are describing and employing some empathetic simulation to tune the words to the particular case.) Consider someone who just generally feels bad about herself, pessimistic about her capacities and prospects. (In later parts of this paper I discuss things that can precipitate this.) We are likely to say that she has diminished self-respect, but less likely to say that her pride is wounded or that she is less proud. The former would usually suggest a more specific focus, and the latter would usually describe her manner rather than how she feels and thinks. Indeed it is intuitively plausible, though rather pop-psychological, that her diminished self-respect may lead to a compensatingly *more* prideful manner. You need a very strong self-respect to act humbly among overbearing people.

Just as there need be no easily discernible cognitive or motivational reason why someone has a proud character or is in a proud mood, there may be no easy non-physiological reason why someone's self-respect is low. That's just the way she is. The injury to self-respect may be temporary or long-term, minor or catastrophic.

These are absences and reductions of self-respect, and they make a particular kind of self-respect salient. Keeping these particular absences and reductions in mind, we can tease out the more elusive positive concept that can be hard to separate from a kind of pride. Absence of absence. Suppose that a person has a blow to her self-respect and then recovers. What she has recovered is self-respect as she previously had it, of the relevant kind to be contrasted with pride. She is now more at peace with herself. Suppose that a person is feeling and functioning in the normal human range and then has a catastrophic decline in her self-respect. (It has to be catastrophic, because the normal human range is so wide.) Then what she has lost is self-respect in the intended sense.

### **some moral discoveries**

Right action consists, we might think, in helping people get what they want, respecting their autonomy, giving them pleasure rather than pain, and cooperating with them for mutual benefit. Moral theories in philosophy differ

in which of these they make central and how they account for the importance of the less central ones. (For utilitarianism the central concept is the pleasure/pain balance, for contractarianism cooperation, and for Kantian ethics autonomy.) But the essence of morality is taken, both in philosophy and I think in most of our everyday thinking, to lie in these areas. I think that moral philosophy is missing a basic shift of attitude here. For in recent decades we have without putting the pieces together discovered that we have overlooked something important. Here are some of the pieces.

Rape, and sexual abuse of children. No one decent has ever thought that these were anything but reprehensible. But the grounds for thinking this have shifted. In the time of my childhood, at any rate, these would be seen primarily as violations of autonomy, breaches of social norms that we would expect to be respected, and as inflictions of short-term pain and discomfort. (Susanna Braund points out to me that in Roman culture the rape of a daughter or a servant is taken as an offence against the paterfamilias, and in Greek culture the rape of a woman in the temple of a goddess will usually lead to the goddess' anger at the woman for defiling her space rather than at the rapist. One is reminded of reports of contemporary cultures in which rape victims are charged with adultery.) But, fairly recently, we have come to see a basic thing that is missing from these reactions. The victims are often damaged in a deep and long term way, which is sometimes seen as akin to post-traumatic stress. They can be prone to depression, irrational feelings of

guilt, a sense of being bad and unworthy, and in some cases suicidal tendencies. Sum it up by saying that their self-respect is damaged. (They may find it difficult to trust and respect others, too, but one factor here may be that they do not think of themselves as suitable partners in a compact.)

(A conjecture: the Catholic Church never dreamt of anything but condemnation of abusive priests. But it took the grounds for the condemnation to be forbidden sex rather than terrible wounding. Though this is a conjecture, some support is given by the papal document *Sacramentum Poenitentiae*, which takes the crime to be a violation of the commandment against adultery. A confession: until I was perhaps thirty I thought that rape was wrong because it is a violation of autonomy, not because it damages its victims.)

Similarly we thought of torture as the infliction of great pain, which it usually is. But in so doing we ignored the great injury to a person's conception of herself, of which there is now abundant evidence. (For a philosophical assessment see Bernstein 2015.) We misconceived traumatic stress along the same lines (Kashdana 2006).

These are large dramatic issues. But there are more ordinary everyday versions. We have learned that corporal punishment of children does not make them become well-adjusted and well-behaved adults. (See the literature summary in the "end corporal punishment" site listed in the bibliography.) They find it harder to transmute their self-respect into respect for others. A vitally important topic is that of subtle implicit prejudice. There is now a lot of evidence that having one's attention drawn to one's membership in a group thought to be less capable reduces one's performance on tasks requiring attention and skill (Steele and Aronson 1995). And an explanation, also with evidence behind it, is that there are cognitive consequences of activating a diminished sense of one's worth (Schmader 2008.)

The common theme here is that we have misunderstood some kinds of harm, ways in which people can be damaged. It was not obvious, except perhaps with considerable hindsight, that these injuries would be as damaging as they are. It took evidence, and conceptual progress, before we could see what was right before us. And the natural way of summing up what we have learned is that self-respect is a delicate thing and damage to it affects people more than we had realized.

It is conceptual speculation, but it is tempting to suggest that there is a deep and systematic divide between two categories of wrong. On the one hand there is the frustration of people's desires, the infliction of pain inasmuch as

that is something that they very much do not want, and more general violations of social contracts. And on the other hand there is damage to the way people think about themselves and the resources they can summon to live their lives. This can come in small as well as dramatic forms, as in everyday denigration. We might call these two kinds of wrong frustration and atrocity. Is there a thoroughgoing contrast between them? Would it be moral progress to distinguish them explicitly? I suspect so, but it would take more than what I am saying here to make a definite case. (Card 2002, Morton 2004. Card appreciates the point I am now making better than I did then.)

An ironical note is that the irrationally inflated sense of one's own worth, a tendency to arrogance, with many exceptions on both sides more common among men than among women (Bleidorn 2016), is some protection against letting comment, criticism, or the impact of plain fact, impact on one's sense of one's value. We might say that irrational pride can armour self-respect: delusion has its uses.

This connects with points Bernard Williams makes about acting with integrity. In a well-known passage, Williams emphasizes that every person has

projects or attitudes which ... he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about. ... [To think otherwise is to] neglect the extent to which his projects and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with

which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity. (Williams 1973, pp. 116-117.)

Williams thus takes moral agents to have a grasp of what their lives are about and what their constitutive projects and attitudes are. He is clearly thinking of adult and reflective agents, but I am sure he would not insist that the grasp be conscious or articulate. People can also less explicitly and consciously grasp and endorse who they are, and unless this is deeply embedded in their motivation it is hard to see how the identification could exert much hold on them. It would seem like superficial role-play. These are not themselves self-respect but they are provide the materials for it, without which there is nothing for self-respect to endorse. (See also Taylor 1985, chapter 5, which is explicit about the link with self-respect and the susceptibility to shame and guilt that it generates.)

### **love, depression**

There are other concepts that have some features in common, though I think the connections are not as tight as one might suppose. One is love. To have a robust self-respect is a like loving oneself, given a suitable version of love. Or more mildly to take oneself to be lovable or worthy of love. A distinction analogous to Darwall's (1977) distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect is helpful here. Recognition respect is directed at people (and other things) inasmuch as they are people and respect is appropriate to

agents as such. In this it is like the Kantian notion of dignity, which everyone is owed. It can't be withheld from a person on the basis of their individual nature. Appraisal respect, on the other hand, is directed at people (and other things) for particular features and capacities that they possess. One does not respect the testimony of a liar, though we should try to react in a way that respects her dignity as a person. Similarly, what we might call recognition loveability is what is due to a person independently of their particular details, and what we might call appraisal loveability depends on their particular appeal to the person making the attribution. My appraisal loveability in my own eyes is how fond I am of myself, on the basis of the features that evoke affection in me, and that is in the family of pride. My recognition loveability in my own eyes is how much I think I deserve to be loved, on the basis of being a human person. That is in the family of self-respect. But it is more intellectual, more a thought than a feeling. I can acknowledge that as a person with moral status I am in the category of things that can be, indeed ought to be, loved, and at the same time find my self respect deficient. In a pattern we have seen before, it may be a feature of many people's psychology that an injury to their appraisal loveability may set off an injury to their recognition loveability. But the connection will often not hold, and in any case they are quite different concepts.

There is another connection between love and self-respect. Love between two people requires that they have similar or congruent conceptions of what can

be a basis for valuing another. At any rate if they grasp this in very different ways that will be a barrier between them. Without it, they can cooperate and aid one another to achieve present shared aims -- tasks for friends and colleagues -- but they will find it much harder to maintain one another's capacity for coherent action through changes of desire, since the basis for self-respect includes future and possible projects as well as present ones. (A test: can one intuit presents for the other which it would surprise the other to find that they come to like.)

Another concept related to self-respect, with an opposite connection, is depression. Depressed people often have low self-respect. (Psychologists tend to say low self-esteem. The terms are often used synonymously. But I would say self-esteem is lacking when someone falls short in some way they consciously value while self-respect is lacking when they have a sense, which they may never articulate, that they are not very worthy.) But the connection is not at all universal. Many depressed people feel well about themselves, though they despair of their condition (Kernis 2008.) It seems likely to me that the connection runs in the other direction and is psychological rather than conceptual: depression will often disable resources that would enable one to maintain one's self-respect. (This is controversial, and the psychological literature is fragmented. There are too many mysterious components of both depression and self-respect/self-esteem. For an attempt at separating some of the strands, which does not deliver an ideal message

for what I am saying, see Orth and Robins 2013. For a contrasting view see Baumeister 2005.)

### **functioning**

It doesn't have to be morally framed. There is practical functioning, which cannot proceed without a sense that one's projects, including idiosyncratic ones, are worth proceeding with. And there is social interaction, where a failure to offer one's own priorities as things to negotiate about is disastrous. There is long-term planning, where one must anticipate what one will aim at in the future and make accommodation for it even when it differs from what one wants now, given that future aims are worth making room for because they are one's own future projects. In all of these, and others, self-respect is an essential resource and damaged self-respect is crippling.

You can have too much pride, both for moral and for practical reasons. And conversely you can have too much humility; some degree of humility is good. But you cannot have too little humiliation; no degree of humiliation is good. And you cannot have too much self-respect. The more you have, the better you will function to achieve your ends, and the better you will treat everyone else.

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