SELF-ESTEEM: ON THE FORM OF SELF-WORTH WORTH HAVING

BY

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Abstract: Self-esteem is traditionally regarded as an important human good. But it has suffered a number of injuries to its good name. Critics allege that endeavours to promote self-esteem merely foster narcissism or entitlement, and urge that we redirect our efforts elsewhere. I argue that such criticisms are symptomatic of a normative decline in how we think and theorize about self-esteem rather than a defect in the construct itself. After exposing the shortcomings of alternative proposals, I develop an account of self-esteem that reflects what its supporters have in mind: a valuable form of self-appraisal worth fostering in others and ourselves.

1. Introduction

The term 'self-esteem' is sometimes credited to Hume, who counted 'a hearty pride, or self-esteem' among the natural virtues (Hume, 1739/2007, 3.2.2.11). While many items in our philosophical lexicon rarely venture beyond it, it is safe to say that self-esteem is not among them. Since the late 20th century, self-esteem has captured the public imagination; many view it as an essential ingredient in the good life. Indeed, the underlying hope of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem was that it would function as a kind of 'social vaccine', affording immunity against everything from domestic abuse to gang violence and unemployment (California State Department of Education, 1990). The self-esteem movement made its presence known well beyond California, of course. Private organisations also followed suit, with Dove launching The Self-Esteem Project. And (as many of us are no doubt aware) the self-help sections of bookstores have long been littered with advice for improving one's sense of self-worth.

Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 104 (2023) 686–719 DOI: 10.1111/papq.12434

This widespread interest in self-esteem is reflected in academic psychology, where it remains one of the discipline's 'oldest and most studied topics' (Pyszczynski and Kesebir, 2013, p. 124). Yet academic philosophers have contributed curiously little to the study of self-esteem, which has so far failed to fully capture their attention.[1] More often than not, the construct is introduced into the moral conversation only to be swiftly evicted from it. Once the philosophical dust has settled, self-esteem seems doomed to emerge as little more than the insignificant moral cousin of *self-respect*.[2]

Self-respect is a fundamentally moral relation; one that reflects a response to our *status worth*, the worth that we have *qua* persons. The self-respecting agent recognises her rights; she understands her entitlement to have her basic interests taken into account, and her claims against exploitative or degrading treatment. Self-esteem, by contrast, reflects a response to our *acquired worth*, the worth of what we *do with* our personhood – to our successes, or the standards that we live up to, say.[3] Its connection to the moral domain (particularly the deontic side of things) therefore strikes one as somewhat more tenuous. An agent's self-esteem could of course be grounded in her moral activities. But they need not be; someone could just as well extract her sense of self-worth from aesthetic or athletic pursuits. The philosophical preoccupation with self-respect, then, may appear perfectly understandable. Of all the problems that a time-pressed ethicist could devote her attention to, 'feeling good about yourself' really does seem like a blip on the moral radar. Focusing on self-esteem might seem to amount to little more than philosophical pettifogging.

To my mind, however, achieving a fuller understanding self-esteem is indeed a project of moral importance. While self-esteem has its fair share of supporters, it is not without its critics. Sceptics contend that self-esteem programmes have backfired spectacularly; far from promoting a meaningful

[1]As is always the case with generalisations, there are exceptions. Rawls's (1971) inclusion of self-esteem on his list of primary goods has inspired some investment in the topic amongst political philosophers (see §6) – although many maintain that it was really *self-respect* that Rawls was getting at here, or that it's what he ought to have been getting at, even if he wasn't (Thomas, 1978, Doppelt, 2009, Brake, 2013; cf. Kramer, 2017). Some moral philosophers writing in the early 2000s also took a keen interest in self-esteem's infiltration into the education system (e.g., Cigman, 2001, 2004; Ferkany, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2007, 2010; Smith, 2002, 2006).

[2]There have been many philosophical inquests into self-respect. See, for example, Dillon (1992, 1997), Massey (1983), Telfer (1968), and Darwall (1977).

[3]I take the distinction that I draw here between self-respect and self-esteem to reflect familiar fault lines. However – and regrettably – the literature lacks a unified terminology for each side of the divide. Indeed, not everyone uses the term 'self-esteem'. Some instead distinguish between two forms of self-respect: conative and estimative (Telfer, 1968), recognition and appraisal (Darwall, 1977; Doppelt, 2009, p. 133), objective and subjective (Massey, 1983), or recognition and evaluative (Dillon, 1997). The second item in each pair has many features in common with what I am referring to as self-esteem, whereas the first item more often bears the hallmarks of what I am calling self-respect. Complicating matters further is that Darwall himself, who is often credited with the distinction, seems to view self-esteem as lying wholly outside of it – as a different phenomenon altogether (Darwall, 1977, p. 48). In the interests of clarity, let me simply state that I am not using the term 'self-esteem' as *he* does; in my usage, 'self-esteem' captures (something closer to) what Darwall calls 'appraisal self-respect'.

sense of self-worth, such initiatives are sometimes thought to have simply yielded a generation of vain, entitled narcissists (Stout, 2000; Twenge, 2014; Twenge and Campbell, 2009). It can be tempting to infer from this that self-esteem is simply not worth promoting. But another lesson we may draw is that such initiatives were perhaps not promoting self-esteem at all – or not, in any event, self-esteem of the relevant kind.

In this vein, I want to propose that self-esteem's supporters are best interpreted as giving voice to a powerful normative idea: that there exists a valuable sense of self-worth that is worth promoting in others and ourselves. Self-esteem's detractors, however, point us towards an equally important (albeit non-normative) reality: that self-esteem of the kind that *one often sees* being promoted is something that we may legitimately doubt is worth promoting in anyone.

My task in this paper, then, will be to identify whether there truly is anything in the world that can answer to what self-esteem's supporters have traditionally had in mind. After having set the stage (§2), my ambition will be to develop desiderata for an account of self-esteem of the relevant, valuable kind (§§3–6). I want to arrive at these desiderata through a careful consideration of where extant accounts go wrong. Importantly, my criticisms of these proposals are intended in an exploratory rather than destructive spirit; I emphasise their flaws because I believe that a proper appreciation of these can help to move us away from familiar but ultimately undesirable ways of thinking about self-esteem. In §7, I sketch a path forward; I offer a novel account of self-esteem that homes in on a form of self-worth that is indeed valuable and worth having.

2. *Self-esteem: A tale of normative decline*

Self-esteem of the kind that interests me here reflects a way of being rather than a way of feeling; a character trait rather than an emotion. The latter is reflected in talk of 'boosts' to one's self-esteem. Such momentary feelings may be thought to correspond to the episodic emotion of pride.[4] It is less, clear, however, whether self-esteem of the kind that occupies my attention here (a character trait) corresponds to the character trait of pride. It certainly doesn't if one views pride as a sin of the sort that is often singled out for censure in religious writings. The trait that I have in mind bears a closer affinity with what Hume was getting at when he identified 'self-esteem' or 'pride' (he often spoke of them in unison) as a virtue (Hume, 1739/2007, 3.2.2.11) – and perhaps even with what Aristotle was pointing towards when he spoke of

[4]Interestingly, though, feelings of *other-esteem* seem meaningfully different from feelings of other-directed pride: for the latter plausibly require a kind of *positionality* that the former do not. I can esteem some celebrity for donating to charity. But it's questionable whether I can be proud of them for it.

'megalopsuchia' (Aristotle, 1987, IV.3.1124a1-2). This having been noted, my preference will be to resist tethering our investigation too closely to either Hume's or Aristotle's moral psychology. I want to tie it instead to existing practice; to ask what it is exactly that we today are meaning to get at when we tout the benefits of self-esteem and make efforts to cultivate it in ourselves and others – and precisely what moral and political philosophers are (or, perhaps, should be) meaning to get at when they incorporate the construct into their moral or political theories.

Qua trait of character, self-esteem seems to have a plausible (although not indisputable) claim to instrumental value, something which has to some extent been borne out empirically. Happiness and life satisfaction are common correlates of high self-esteem (Diener and Diener, 1995). Low self-esteem, by contrast, tends to keep less welcome company: from depression (Murrell *et al.*, 1991; Robinson *et al.*, 1995) to eating disorders (French *et al.*, 2001; Mintz and Betz, 1988). The case for self-esteem's instrumental value can also be made on philosophical grounds. Rawls went so far as to maintain that 'Without it, nothing may seem worth doing'. Even if an agent values certain pursuits, she may well 'lack the will to strive' for them inasmuch as she lacks confidence in her own potential or her projects (Rawls, 1971, p. 440; see also Ferkany, 2008, p. 121). Importantly, self-esteem seems to have a plausible claim to final value as well. To enlist a familiar test: we would surely prefer a world where someone had self-esteem to a world where they lacked it – even if such worlds were otherwise identical.

Importantly, the construct that is operational in such judgments very much seems to comprise a normative component. Notice that we usually reserve the term 'self-esteem' for forms of self-appraisal that strike as inherently *worthwhile*. Those whose high opinions of themselves reflect self-delusion are often better described as smug, arrogant, or conceited than as having self-esteem (Cigman, 2004, pp. 93–94). And people who ground their self-worth in what look to be unworthy things – natural beauty or inherited wealth, say – are typically charged with vanity or snobbery. We do not, then, typically attribute self-esteem to others merely on the basis of some *quantitative* judgment (how highly they rate themselves, say). Self-esteem seems to have important *qualitative* dimensions as well. We doubt whether someone truly *has* self-esteem insofar as we have cause to worry that her sense of self-worth is fragile, unresponsive to reality, or issues from a normatively questionable place.

Admittedly, less-than-approving usages of the 'self-esteem' are not unheard of. The journalist Bryan Appleyard does not shy away from describing Adolf Hitler and his ilk as 'mass murderers with very high esteem indeed' (Appleyard, 2002, cited in Cigman, 2004, p. 94). Some have even suggested that the term may have reached a stage of near-polysemy (Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 251, 254). But this is in fact consistent with the above observations; for self-esteem is plausibly a 'dual character concept',

a concept that has both descriptive and normative senses attached to it, which while connected, are nonetheless independent (Del Pinar and Reuter, 2015).

To illustrate, consider 'artist', which is often classified as a dual character concept. In its descriptive sense, 'artist' simply picks out a person who produces works of art (perhaps for a living). But in its normative sense, 'artist' is reserved for those who live up to certain ideals; those with genuine creativity or aesthetic insight, say. Sometimes, this divide is marked by saying that not all artists (descriptive) are *true* artists (normative). I would propose that we apply the same analysis to 'self-esteem'. Perhaps someone with a fragile and ill-founded sense of self-worth has self-esteem in *some* sense (descriptive), but they would not strike as us having *true* self-esteem on reflection (normative). The investigation that follows, then, should be read as homing in on this more normatively meaty sense of the term (the normative sense of the dual character concept). As I hope will emerge throughout the ensuing discussion, it is this more normatively-laden sense of self-esteem that it is most charitable to take its supporters to have been picking up on.[5]

Declarations such as Appleyard's, moreover, do not seem to me to reflect a deficiency in self-esteem itself, but rather, a decline in our methods of understanding it. For Hume, the virtue of self-esteem was 'well-founded' (Hume, 1739/2007, 3.2.2.11); he regarded 'over-weaning conceit' or excessive pride as a vice (3.3.2.1). When James introduced the construct into psychology, he described self-esteem in terms of the ratio of one's *successes* to one's goals (1890, p. 54). Yet self-esteem's long-established ties to the real-world were severed with its operationalisation in the 1960s, when Rosenberg (1965) proposed to construe it along purely *subjectivist lines:* simply as a positive feeling of self-worth. Today, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is among the most widely used measurements of self-esteem. This instrument relies exclusively upon self-report; it merely gauges how people perceive themselves, paying little mind to whether those perceptions are accurate or well-supported.

Unfortunately, it is the latter construal of self-esteem that has edged its way into the public conversation. And while following psychologists' insights is usually something to be commended, one can't help but wish that in this case, public bodies had taken their cue from moral philosophers as well. As Twenge (2014, p. 74) observes, self-esteem programmes had a tendency to 'encourage children to feel good about themselves for no particular reason' (Twenge, 2014, p. 74). This casts self-esteem as a free-floating and

[5]For further discussion, see Cigman (2004, p. 95), who takes 'reasonable' or 'situated' self-esteem to simply reflect our 'ordinary evaluative concept', and contrasts this with various 'simplication[s] and corruption[s]' of it.

unsubstantiated positive feeling; one that need not be grounded in anything at all.

Self-esteem, then, very much seems to suffer from a dual inheritance problem. While it has a venerable history as a construct of value, it has also been stretched to cover phenomena that lack its qualitative or normative core, and which aren't plausibly valuable at all. My ambition in this paper will be to recover the notion of self-esteem as an important human good; to usher self-esteem of the relevant, valuable sort back into the spotlight.

Some may want to press me[6] on why we ought to bother ushering self-esteem of any sort back out of the shadows. Perhaps this ambition was understandable during the 1990s, in the wake of optimism about self-esteem's transformational potential. But now we really ought to know better. Aside from certain links of the kind alluded to above (for instance, between high self-esteem and life-satisfaction), Baumeister *et al.*'s (2003) meta-review found little evidence for the more sweeping declarations that were once made about self-esteem's wide-reaching significance. Compounding this is the concern (voiced by the aforementioned critics) that efforts to promote self-esteem may turn out to promote qualities that are not personally worthwhile. Given all this, the construct of self-esteem seems practically impotent at best – and practically pernicious at worst.[7]

One strategy for overcoming the practical impotence problem would be to concentrate our energies upon other constructs in the psychological neighbourhood. Kristjánsson (2010), for example, focuses his attention upon (i) self-confidence and (ii) *domain-specific* self-esteem. The latter denotes an agent's self-appraisal in *specific* areas of life; for instance, her 'academic self-esteem', or her 'athletic self-esteem'. Whereas there are only *modest* correlations between *global* self-esteem and desirable life-outcomes, there are *strong* documented correlations between *domain-specific* self-esteem and achievements in those domains, and between self-confidence and achievements more generally (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 112–114).[8]

[6]As an anonymous referee did; I thank them for urging me to do more to motivate the project.

[7]Yet another further worry–voiced by Smith, 2006 – is that emphasising the good of self-esteem risks devaluing other traits that are in turn presented as standing in opposition to it; for instance, shyness or diffidence. I do not have space to address this worry here, although I'm persuaded by Ferkany's (2008, pp. 130–131) assessment of it.

[8]It's worth noting, if only in passing, that it's not clear that we should always be deterred by modest correlational findings. As Ferkany (2008, p. 124) observes in his response to Kristjánsson, small correlations can (in certain contexts) still be meaningful and relevant to guiding our choices, even if they are not scientifically exciting.

An alternative strategy – the one that I intend to pursue here – is to tout an *enriched* conception of global self-esteem that *builds in* elements such as self-confidence and domain-specific self-esteem (thus eschewing the simplified subjective conception).[9] This way of proceeding inherits the benefits of the earlier strategy; it mitigates the impotence problem, insofar as there are empirically well-established links between these latter constructs and good life-outcomes. It also helps to address the perniciousness worry that accompanies efforts to cultivate self-esteem: the real issue with these initiatives isn't that they were attempting to promote self-esteem, but that they were operating with an impoverished understanding of it.

Cigman (2004) and Ferkany (2008) respond to the perniciousness worry along broadly similar lines when discussing the incorporation of self-esteem (subjectively construed) into educational initiatives. Unlike these philosophers, my interests here do not lie primarily with the use of self-esteem in curriculum-building. The rationale for my project is more closely tied to the usefulness of self-esteem in moral and political theorising. As we shall see, many philosophers take self-esteem to reflect an important human good; perhaps even one to which everyone ought to be entitled as a matter of justice. But can we ultimately arrive at a conception of self-esteem that justifies this assessment? Moreover, just how much social support does this good require? And can it really be construed in such a way that it both remains valuable and available to all? These questions are worth asking. It is also worth asking whether self-esteem ought to form part of our conception of the good life – whether, for instance, it ought to make it onto an objective list in one's theory of well-being. The answer to this question will presumably depend upon precisely what we take self-esteem to be.

A further rationale for the project is more practical in character. In light of Baumeister *et al.*'s (2003) meta-analysis, it is implausible that global self-esteem (construed along subjectivist lines) truly reflects some sort of eudaimonic panacea. But that empirical reality hasn't dissuaded people – for instance, companies like Dove or many contemporary Schools – from seeking to promote it. Are these efforts then simply pointless or deluded? My project offers an opportunity for charitable interpretation on this front. What these individuals are likely seeking to promote is *true* self-esteem – self-esteem that is valuable and worth having. And my discussion offers insight into precisely what that might involve. Alternatively – and if these attempts to promote self-esteem ultimately do turn out to presuppose the subjective conception – then my project offers a much needed call for course

[9]Kristjánsson (2010 p. 117) considers this strategy, and voices doubts as to whether we really can fashion a new concept of global self-esteem that is both empirically respectable and in keeping with ordinary usage. However, I disagree with him that the concept that I am seeking to analyse is wholly new, or out of step with ordinary usage. As I argued earlier, and as others (e.g., Cigman, 2004, p. 95) have indirectly suggested, self-esteem seems to reflect a dual character concept (one that we already have), and my focus lies with its normative sense.

correction: we should be steering our efforts in the direction of a more normatively-laden conception of self-esteem.

3. *The purely subjective view*

I've suggested that Rosenberg's operationalisation of self-esteem reflected a normative decline in our understanding of it. So it will be useful to begin the critical discussion by way of substantiating that assessment. On this approach – what I will call the Purely Subjective View (PSV) – 'self-esteem reflects perception rather than reality'; 'it may be commensurate with an individual's attributes and accomplishments or these feelings of self-worth may have little to do with any sort of objective appraisal' (Zeigler-Hill, 2013, p. 2; see also Baumeister *et al*., 2003, p. 2). Thus, if I arrive at a positive self-evaluation on the basis that I judge myself to be artistically-talented and athletic, the proponent of PSV takes me to have high self-esteem – *whether or not* I am in fact artistically-talented and athletic.

Now, not *all* is unwell with PSV. Indeed, it has two notable advantages. The first is that PSV provides everyone with *a fighting chance* of securing self-esteem. Not an *equal* chance, mind you. Some may well have more difficulty judging themselves worthy than others. Still, there are fewer *obstacles* to achieving self-esteem given how PSV understands it. One need neither fall into others' good graces nor excel in one's chosen field – indeed, one need not accomplish anything in particular at all. Whatever the agent does, what matters it that *she* judges herself favourably according to *her own* standards.

Why take this to be *an advantage,* though? Why think that true self-esteem must be something that everyone has a fighting chance of securing? One way to appreciate this is to consider our reactions to those who suffer from inadequate self-esteem. We do not, I submit, simply *give up* on the child who struggles in her studies, has trouble making friends, and finds herself lacking any special talents. We do not swiftly dismiss such people as a lost cause. Instead, we find ourselves wanting to (and indeed, believing that we *can*) *help* such persons – help them to identify *something* from which they can extract a sense of self-worth. This suggests that self-esteem is something we take everyone to be capable of achieving – even if it may come more easily to some than to others.

A second advantage of PSV is that it doesn't make self-esteem too socially precarious. According to PSV, our self-esteem need not stand or fall with how we fare in the court of public opinion; it rather rests upon how we fare in the court of our own judgment. Procedurally speaking, then, one need pay no mind to what others think in forming a positive opinion of oneself. It's plausible that self-esteem (of valuable kind we're after) should be capable of floating *somewhat* free of social feedback in this way. Consider those who seem a little *too* sensitive to what others make of them. (Mrs Bucket from

Keeping up Appearances readily comes to mind.) As Yanal notes, such agents seem paradigmatically *lacking* in self-esteem (Yanal, 1987, p. 370). On the flipside, consider a member of a minority group who manages to preserve her sense of self-worth in a prejudicial culture. Such a person strikes one as having *good* self-esteem. This is, admittedly, a form of self-esteem that is heroically self-wrought; there's little doubt that an agent's self-image often *is* influenced by how others treat her. And practically speaking, we should obviously target bigoted environments rather than just expect their victims to persevere. My point is simply that it would be *no bad thing* from the perspective of self-esteem if a victim of prejudice *were* resistant to social feedback in this way.

There are, then, two features of PSV that bode well for it: it yields opportunities for everyone to secure self-esteem, and offers safeguards against social precarity.[10] Upon reflection, however, I think that these two features – or, more perspicaciously, the manner in which they are manifest here – are in fact bugs. A further important setback of PSV is that it licenses the wrong sorts of responses to failure. As will become apparent, each of these three shortcomings are symptoms of one and the same underlying disease: PSV's striking insensitivity to the appearance–reality distinction.

Let me work backwards now through these three worries. What is intended, exactly, by the suggestion that PSV licenses the wrong responses to failure? What *should* the relationship between failure and self-esteem be? I now want to suggest that the two ought not be informationally encapsulated from one another; failure should be capable of influencing both what we choose to ground our self-esteem in and the degree of esteem in which we hold ourselves.

Beginning with the first of these, it seems clear that certain kinds of failures (or evidence of imminent failure) ought to steer us in different directions. Reporting on my own experience as a member of a young Jewish girls' basketball team, it became clear to me early on that the sport simply wasn't my calling. I could enjoy it as a *hobby,* of course. However, and at a very modest height – which, incidentally, put me among the tallest in the team – I clearly would have done myself a disservice if I'd persisted in the illusion that I'd one day become enough of a star to earn my way into the NBA or one of Nozick's thought experiments. According to the sort of thinking encouraged by PSV, however, I may very well have done my self-esteem a disservice by failing to revel in my (barest showing of) basketball talents. FROM the perspective of self-esteem, *obstinacy* may very well have been a preferable response here. I might have simply chalked up my failures to incompetent refereeing, dishonest opponents, or inept coaches – all while persevering in

[10]A further advantage is that PSV makes room for a kind of *pluralism*, although I delay discussion of this until §4, at which stage comparisons will become useful.

the belief that I was destined for basketball greatness.[11] PSV fails to recognise anything *deficient* about a form of self-esteem that is preserved in this way; for self-esteem is, on this view, a matter of perception and not (necessarily) reality.

Yet there clearly *is* something deficient about clawing onto self-esteem in this way. Indeed, this is the very feature of self-esteem movements with which their detractors have historically taken issue: that they propose to secure self-esteem by *immunising* people from harsh realities and difficult truths (Twenge, 2014, ch. 2, 3). We often do ourselves a disservice by failing to recognise our limitations. The person who recognises her lack of aptitude for basketball and moves onto greener pastures would seem to have a more desirable form of self-esteem than the person who stubbornly persists with the sport and refuses to acknowledge her limits, propping up her self-worth with lies and fantasy. The proponent of PSV can of course acknowledge that the former person may be *happier* in the long run. Yet she fails to acknowledge a further important truth: that this person exhibits a form of self-esteem that seems more valuable *qua* self-esteem.

Turning now to the second aspect of responding appropriately to failure, it's plausible that failure should also be capable of influencing the degree of esteem in which we hold ourselves. If my ventures in basketball have merely yielded participation trophies, then I should not hold myself in high regard for my sporting talents. (Although I may of course adopt a positive attitude towards my efforts.) Likewise, if I've acted contrary to my moral values, then I should not seek to preserve my self-esteem by means of conveniently adopting different moral standards that just so happen to countenance my actions instead. These methods of psychological jiu-jitsu would seem to have no place in life of the self-esteeming agent. Indeed, the capacity to *recognise* our failures and *feel* ashamed of them seems positively essential to self-esteem. Following Dillon (1992, p. 127) (see also Telfer, 1968, pp. 119–120), shame is itself an expression of valuing; what is (partly) constitutive of *having* values or standards is reacting appropriately on those occasions when one disappoints them. Self-esteem is intimately tied up with our standards; we judge our own worth (partly) on the measure of whether we abide by the normative terms that we set for ourselves. If an agent never reacts appropriately when she fails to abide by these standards, then it is no longer clear that she truly *has* any standards by which to measure herself at all.

Let me now move on to consider the manner in which PSV immunises self-esteem against social feedback. Given PSV, an agent can preserve self-esteem in the face of *personal* failure by ignoring or exaggerating her

[11]Some hedging is needed here; I don't mean to peddle the doxastic voluntarist claim that we can believe whatever we like. I only assume that we're sufficiently talented at motivated reasoning and wishful thinking to sometimes think better of ourselves than the evidence warrants.

evidence – and she can preserve self-esteem in the face of *social* failure in much the same way. Now, as I've said, *some* robustness against social feedback can be a good thing. But if an agent's self-esteem can only be maintained by way of cutting herself off from the social world entirely (as PSV permits her to do) then it is no longer clear that what she maintains is self-esteem of the kind worth having.[12]

To illustrate, consider *Futurama*'s Zapp Brannigan, who dismisses pants as 'for the weak' and refuses to wear any, ignoring Lieutenant Kif Kroker's protests of disgust. Zapp also has a curious talent for failing to notice when women do not share his romantic intentions; he persists in pursuing Leela, despite her obvious disinterest. Zapp clearly has a high opinion of himself; he readily embraces his (unearned) reputation as a military hero and regards himself as God's gift to women. But this opinion is something that he is only able to maintain by way of skilfully ignoring or discounting particular bodies of evidence. I submit that Zapp Brannigan is *not* someone whom we would ordinarily view as having self-esteem (or if one prefers, *true* self-esteem). 'Self-esteem' does not seem quite the right word to reach for here – as opposed to, say, 'smug', 'conceited', or 'delusional' (Cigman, 2004, pp. 93–94). Self-esteem of the kind that we're after is something that we value. But we surely don't value the state of self-delusion in which Zapp Brannigan and others like him find themselves. Indeed, we often pity such people.

So far, the basic issue with PSV is that it allows us to *bootstrap* ourselves into self-esteem, rather than taking personal failures or social feedback on board in a productive way. Some worries with boot-strapping are prognostic. The road to achievement often involves *recognising* failure rather than ignoring it. Forms of self-esteem that are built upon false beliefs about one's abilities may therefore stifle personal growth (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 51). We might also worry that such forms of self-esteem are apt to come crumbling down as soon as the delusional edifice does – that they are apt to be *unstable* (Dillon, 1992, p. 131; Twenge, 2014, p. 91; Kristjánsson, 2010, p. 104). But even when such returns to Earth are not forthcoming, there is a further problem still. Self-esteem is at bottom a response to worth – presumably, to worth that is actually there. We want to judge ourselves worthy because we *have* achieved our goals or lived up to our standards; not simply because we *believe* ourselves to have achieved these goals, or because we live up to whichever standards we happen to have conveniently adopted for the day.[13] Likewise, few if any of us *want to* be like Zapp Brannigan; we want to be esteemed by others – not merely to believe that we are objects of admiration where we are really objects of ridicule.

[12]It is often observed that some degree of social sensitivity in this context seems important. See Yanal (1987, p. 373), Mason (1990, p. 94) and Smith (2002, pp. 95–96).

[13]That PSV divorces self-esteem from reality is a common complaint. See Dillon (1992, p. 131), Cigman (2004, p. 95), Kristjánsson (2007, p. 249; 2010, p. 106), and Kramer (2017, p. 324).

All of this strongly suggests to me that self-esteem of the kind worth having simply cannot be a wholly subjective affair. Indeed, each of PSV's problems seem traceable to a single overarching flaw: its having allowed self-esteem to run completely untethered from reality.

4. *The Jamesian view*

James understands self-esteem as a sense of self-worth that is determined by the ratio of an agent's successes to her goals (1890, p. 54). The basic idea here is disarmingly simple: the more (or less) one achieves what one sets out to achieve, the higher (or lower) one's self-esteem. There are two dimensions to The Jamesian View (henceforth, 'JV') – one subjective, another objective. Beginning with the former, there is an important sense in which the individual sets her own terms for self-esteem; it is for her to decide which goals ought to enter into the calculation – what ought to feature in the denominator. But there is an objective element to JV as well. As far as one's successes (the numerator) are concerned, the world has the final say: either one succeeds or one doesn't.

As I hinted in §2, JV looks to be superior to the alternative conceptions of self-esteem (like PSV) that it ultimately spawned. We can now see why: on the face of it, JV would seem to carry all of PSV's advantages without its associated costs. JV seems consistent with everyone having a fighting chance of securing self-esteem. (Presumably, just about everyone is capable of identifying *some* endeavour in which success is likely to be forthcoming.) Moreover, self-esteem is not socially precarious on the Jamesian view. There is no need to consult others in deciding which goals ought to feature in the denominator. It is for *us* to decide 'what we back ourselves to be and do' (1890, p. 45).

A further advantage of JV is that it makes room for a kind of *pluralism*. JV places no constraints upon *which* successes an individual can legitimately ground her self-esteem *in;* one need not aspire to become a neurosurgeon, a poet laureate or a prime minister. I take this pluralist element to be important for several reasons. For one thing, it helps us to avoid a slide into *elitism,* reserving self-esteem only for those whose accomplishments are particularly noble or rare. This would, predictably, compromise the possibility of everyone having a fighting chance of securing self-esteem. Pluralism is also useful in ensuring that one's account remains consistent with different conceptions of the good. It would be odd if an agent's self-esteem came apart from her own standards *entirely*. Following Yanal, self-esteem should surely be *self*-esteem (Yanal, 1987, p. 369; see also Massey, 1983, p. 249; Chazan, 1998, p. 48). Even if others value our projects, it is likely to be difficult to extract any sense of self-worth from projects that we do not value ourselves.

Importantly, JV also manages to avoid PSV's primary shortcoming: the absence of a reality check. Insofar as JV incorporates an objective element, there is less scope for agents to bootstrap themselves into self-esteem. Given JV, our failures *should* impact upon our self-esteem, reducing the ratio of our successes to our goals. An agent may still manipulate her evidence or ignores her failures, of course. But the proponent of JV will rightly regard such exercises as ways of preserving a mirage rather than as ways of preserving self-esteem.

Having sung JV's praises, I now want to draw attention to its two main flaws: (i) the *kind of* pluralism for which it makes room, and (ii) its licensing bootstrapping and other problematic responses to failure (albeit responses of a different sort to those permitted by PSV). Regarding (i), it will be useful to first appreciate the defects in the pluralism that *PSV* supports. This will help us to understand both the sense in which JV improves upon PSV and the sense in which it does not improve upon it quite enough.

PSV places no limits upon the *grounds* of self-esteem. It allows that an agent may ground her self-esteem in fairly trivial capacities; her ability to tie her own shoelaces, or to make instant coffee, for example. Indeed, PSV is consistent with grounding one's self-esteem in things that don't even reflect capacities at all, such as one's natural beauty or socio-economic status. Now, we might understandably take *moral* offence to an agent's having extracted her self-esteem from these features of herself. But there is a morally neutral way to oppose these alleged grounds for self-esteem as well. It is plausible that self-esteem ought to be grounded in *our agency*.[14] Indeed, I think it is precisely for this reason that neither beauty nor wealth strike us as suitable bases for *other-esteem;* we wouldn't (sincerely) *credit* someone for their natural beauty, or for their having been born into a wealthy family. Presumably, this is because such a person simply hasn't *done* anything to be beautiful or wealthy at all.[15]

The problem for PSV, then, is that it delivers pluralism at the cost of *triviality*. Put differently, it secures pluralism by *cheapening* self-esteem. But a form of self-esteem grounded in non-agential features strikes one as unmerited at best – and as vanity or snobbery at worst. And a form of self-esteem grounded in trivial capacities hardly strikes one as valuable at all.

JV fares better on this front; for it does not allow self-esteem to be grounded in such things as natural beauty or inherited wealth. Self-esteem's numerator is, recall, our *successes* or *accomplishments* – and being born into a particular economic class is no accomplishment at all. But the proposal does not sidestep the triviality problem entirely, and this is owing to the subjective side of the fraction. JV does not place any limits upon the *sorts of* goals

[14]I revisit this idea in §5 and will have more to say in support of it in §7.

[15]Obviously, I might sincerely praise someone for their make-up or fashion-sense – these can reflect aesthetic achievements, after all. My claims above concern (for example) simply being born with a symmetrical face or a nice figure.

that can make their way into self-esteem's denominator; these may very well include ambitions to tie one's shoelaces. Many instrumental considerations speak against being wholly permissive in this regard; being too indiscriminate about the grounds of self-esteem might risk undervaluing true accomplishments, or fostering narcissism rather than a meaningful sense of self-worth (Baumeister *et al*., 2003, p. 39; see also Smith, 2002, p. 92). But whether or not these concerns materialise, we should also question the value of a form of self-esteem that can be purchased so cheaply; one grounded in goals that we have only achieved on account of having set our sights so low.

This brings me to JV's second shortcoming, which concerns the bootstrapping that it allows for. Self-esteem is, according to JV, determined by the ratio of our successes to our goals. JV does not allow an agent to preserve self-esteem simply by refusing to acknowledge her failures as PSV does – that is, by messing with the numerator. But she *can* preserve self-esteem by trivialising her goals, or by backing herself to do less – that is, by changing the denominator.[16] Obviously, adaptive preference worries loom large here (Nussbaum, 2000). A young girl who is repeatedly made to feel that women are hopeless at math or make for poor doctors might be primed to see failure in her future even when it isn't there. And she might respond by setting her sights low, restricting her goals to those that she takes herself to be more likely to achieve. The proponent of JV views such manoeuvres as simply one means of increasing self-esteem. But this seems wrong. Someone who increases her sense of self-worth by systematically lowering her expectations for herself wouldn't usually strike us as having self-esteem – let alone a valuable incarnation of it.

Perhaps some will regard such malleability as a *selling point* of JV, as James appeared to. Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that surrendering one's goals could be '… as blessed relief as to get them gratified' (James, 1890/1983, p. 54). Now, in one respect, I think this is perfectly right. As I argued in §3, tempering our expectations is sometimes well-advised. Yet it is surely *not* well-advised in those cases where others have simply failed to recognise our potential. Here, being too quick to temper our ambitions can reflect *inadequate* self-esteem.

I want to conclude my discussion of JV by noting an additional respect in which the proposal supports the wrong responses to failure (and indeed, success): its inattention to the role of luck. The problem, simply put, is that JV focuses on *whether* we fail or succeed to the exclusion of *how*. Consider someone whose success to goal ratio is high (and who therefore ought to have high self-esteem according to JV), where those successes are largely due to good luck: a businessman who swiftly moves into the upper tiers of his father's company, for instance. Compare that person to someone whose success to goal ratio is low (and who therefore ought to have low self-esteem

[16]Kristjánsson (2007, p. 249; 2010, p. 104) briefly registers this worry as well.

according to JV), where that lack of success is largely owing to bad luck: for example, a talented pianist of colour living in a deeply racist society. Given the means by which the businessman succeeds in his career, his high self-esteem strikes one as somewhat unearned; and given the means by which the pianist fails in hers, her lack of self-esteem likewise appears out of step with what it should be. James's ratio is blind to this sort of historical information about how self-esteem's numerator comes to be what it is. And yet, that information seems utterly crucial to determining whether an individual *ought to have* self-esteem to the degree that she does.

5. *The socio-comparative view*

Advocates of PSV and JV view self-esteem as a highly *personal* affair. To their minds, the standards relevant to self-esteem are our own. The Socio-Comparative View (SCV) reflects a departure from this way of thinking; it takes self-esteem to be a deeply *interpersonal* phenomenon.

Among SCV's proponents is Nozick (1974), who treats other-esteem as a model for self-esteem. According to Nozick, there are certain qualities that society values, and these qualities form the basis for other-esteem and self-esteem alike (pp. 239–246). Importantly, Nozick also takes other-esteem – and by extension, self-esteem – to be inherently *comparative*: '… we evaluate how well we do something by comparing our performances to others' (p. 240). We do not, for instance, merely esteem someone for being *able* to cook, but for being *better than average* at cooking. For Nozick, then, self-esteem is a sense of self-worth that is grounded in our faring above average on particular dimension(s) that our society values.

There are two main selling points of SCV. First, the proposal seems well-placed to secure pluralism without triviality. There are many qualities that society values, and so, the bases for self-esteem are likely to be consistent with different conceptions of the good. And these qualities are unlikely to be trivial ones like the ability to tie one's shoelaces – such abilities simply aren't socially valued. Second, SCV sidesteps the boot-strapping problems that beset PSV and JV. For Nozick, self-esteem is about *actually* faring better than others on socially valued dimensions – not merely *believing* that one does. SCV thus evades PSV's obstinacy problem. The self-esteeming agent must, moreover, cultivate not just any qualities, but socially valued ones. This leaves less room for simply setting one's sights low. So SCV seems to avoid JV's bootstrapping problem as well.

Now to the bad news. There are three notable shortcomings of SCV, the first being that the proposal does not reign in the triviality problem quite enough. SCV takes the grounds of self-esteem to simply be whichever qualities society values. Social opinion is the final arbiter on this front. Yet leaving society to do the talking here is itself a recipe for triviality; for society can – and

indeed, often does – value things that it shouldn't. Consider the list of potential bases for self-esteem that Nozick himself offers:

> '… aesthetic appreciativeness, aesthetic attractiveness, intelligence, athletic prowess, physical grace, degree of sympathy with other persons, quality of orgasm …' (Nozick, 1974, p. 243)

Some of these ought to strike us as less suitable bases for esteem than others. It's not at all clear, for instance, that we should esteem others – let alone ourselves – for their 'aesthetic attractiveness' or 'physical grace'.[17] Such qualities seem too disconnected from agency to warrant esteem.

Allowing society to dictate the terms for self-esteem carries other unwelcome consequences. The issue isn't simply that society may value things that it shouldn't; it may also value things that we don't (Chazan, 1998; cf. Massey, 1983, p. 249; Yanal, 1987, pp. 370, 372). Consider Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, who marries well and works his way up to a magistrate position, earning the respect of his community. Many people admire Ilyich. And yet, he does not admire himself; for Ilyich's central life choices were dictated by others' standards rather than his own. As Chazan notes, 'There is one sense in which we should say that he did not choose his own life, despite the fact that he made all sorts of important decisions regarding it' (Chazan, 1998, p. 48). Insofar as Ilyich fares well on dimensions that his society values, SCV regards him as a man with a secure basis for self-esteem. On this way of seeing things, then, it is utterly mysterious why Ilych is lacking in self-esteem. But it is surely not mysterious at all. As Ilych does not value these qualities as others do, it is easy to see why he does not esteem himself on this basis.

The second pitfall of SCV is easy to spot: far from giving *everyone* a fighting chance of securing self-esteem, the proposal makes self-esteem into a zero-sum game; 'one person's self-esteem will result in another person's sense of worthlessness' (Mason, 1990, p. 94; see also Govier, 1993, pp. 112–113; Bernick, 1978, p. 112). Clearly, not all of us can fare better than (sufficiently many) others on dimensions that society values. It therefore stands to reason that not all of us will have opportunities for self-esteem. This exclusionary result seems to be owing to Nozick's having taken other-esteem as a model for self-esteem; for other-esteem plausibly is a zero-sum game. We esteem others for being above average, and not everyone can be above average (Brennan and Pettit, 2000). But while this feature of *other-esteem* may strike us as an inescapable social fact, it is far from clear that the same is true of *self-esteem*. Perhaps not everyone will have the opportunity to earn esteem from others. But it may have at least been hoped that everyone would have the opportunity to earn esteem *from themselves*.

[17]'Quality of orgasm' obviously raises question marks as well – although it's unclear to me whether Nozick intends to refer here to orgasms experienced or bestowed. In the interests of keeping everything above board, I'll simply leave this interpretive exercise to the reader.

The third problem for SCV is related to the second; the proposal makes self-esteem far too *socially precarious*. Insofar as society dictates the very grounds of self-esteem, others have a constitutive role to play in determining our sense of self-worth. And they will presumably have a procedural role to play as well; cultivating – and indeed, maintaining – self-esteem will presumably entail some form of social comparison. One can see this process at work in an example that Nozick himself offers: a villager fancies himself a talented basketballer until Jerry West comes to town – at which point (Nozick thinks), this villager's self-esteem ought to take a nosedive (p. 240). Cultivating self-esteem therefore seems to involve (i) ensuring that one's traits are socially valued and (ii) continually comparing oneself to others along these dimensions. Yet far from being a portrait of a self-esteeming agent, this seems closer to a picture of someone with *deficient* self-esteem. There is, following, Yanal, '… the temptation is to say that someone who continually relies on the evaluation of others of his excellences and accomplishments *lacks* good self-esteem' (Yanal, 1987, p. 370).

6. *The Rawlsian view*

Rawls's (1971) discussion of self-esteem is well-known, featuring, as it does, in his well-known theory of justice. Rawls counts self-esteem among – or indeed, atop (p. 440) – his list of primary goods; much like basic political freedoms or wealth, it is construed as an all-purpose means for pursuing one's conception of the good life. Self-esteem, then, falls within the purview of justice; a society's institutions are to be judged (in part) by the manner in which they support and distribute self-esteem.

Now, Rawls's coverage of self-esteem is primarily concerned with its operation within a *well-ordered society*, wherein institutions are regulated by principles of justice. And this presents me with a logistical difficulty; for one may object to my proposing to examine Rawls' view of self-esteem (henceforth, 'RV') in isolation from his wider theory. I do not intend to take RV completely out of context. With that said, I also cannot afford to immerse myself in all accompanying controversies.[18] In what follows, then, I walk a middle path, drawing upon the broader context of Rawls's discussion only when necessary.

For Rawls (p. 440), self-esteem has two components: (1) 'a person's sense of [their] own value' – in particular, a conviction that their life plans are worthwhile – and (2) confidence in their ability to carry these out. It's easy to see why the first component is necessary; if self-esteem is primarily about

[18]These include such things as whether self-esteem (or even its social bases) truly qualifies as a primary good (Yanal, 1987, note 16; Doppelt, 2009, pp. 131–135; Kramer, 2017, pp. 326–331), and whether Rawls's focus is (or should be) self-esteem rather than self-respect (see note 1).

living up to one's values or standards, then one presumably needs to *have* values or standards. It's also hard to dispute the importance of the second component; aspiring to be an academic while endlessly doubting whether one is 'good enough' would seem to signal inadequate self-esteem. As far as its broad outlines are concerned, then, I don't find much to grapple with in RV. My grapple lies with the details.

According to Rawls, there are two important ingredients to the first component of self-esteem: '(1) having a rational plan of life … that satisfies the Aristotelian principle; and (2) finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others' (p. 440). Let me begin with the first ingredient, what Rawls calls 'the Aristotelian principle' (henceforth, 'AP'). AP is an empirical claim about human psychology; it tells us that 'other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate and trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity' (p. 426). On Rawls's way of thinking, then, our sense of self-worth will, *ceteris paribus,* be more secure to the extent that we hone our complex abilities. Someone capable of great feats of mathematics would regard her life as 'dull and empty' (p. 429) – and would lack adequate self-esteem in turn – were she to spend it selling Avon products door to door.

While Rawls appears to find AP intuitively plausible (pp. 431–432), he offers a deeper rationale for its inclusion within an account of self-esteem – one which brings us to the second ingredient. Rawls thinks it is 'impossible' for us to regard our own projects as worthwhile if they aren't sufficiently appreciated by others (p. 441). And to his mind, others will value our projects 'only if what we do elicits their admiration or gives them pleasure', as activities that 'display intricate and subtle talents, and manifest discrimination and refinement' do (p. 441). It is for this reason that not just any capacities or projects can serve as bases for self-esteem. Self-esteem depends upon the esteem of others, and the esteem of others depends in turn upon our having cultivated abilities that are complex or refined.

Onto my grapples. The first of these pertains to Rawls's contention that not just any project is admissible as far as the grounds of self-worth are concerned; only those that satisfy AP qualify. Now, the introduction of *some* restrictions in this context is no bad thing; we do not want to include *trivial* capacities among the bases of self-esteem. Nonetheless, the manner in which Rawls proposes to winnow down the options here strikes me as misguided. To begin with, I am suspicious that AP reflects an empirical fact about human psychology. My Avon saleswoman (suppose) forgoes an opportunity to become a mathematics professor. But it's far from obvious that she will regard her life as 'dull and empty' as a result, or suffer from a lesser sense of self-worth than she would have had she entered into academia. She may very well relish the opportunity to develop her marketing and people skills, even if these capacities

manifest less 'discrimination and refinement' than her mathematical ones. Contrary to what many philosophers would like to think, the unexamined life can indeed be worth living. While Rawls has certainly escaped *triviality,* then, one might worry that he has done so at the cost of veering dangerously close to *elitism*.

In fairness to Rawls, he does acknowledge that developing complex abilities often requires a heavy investment of time and energy, and that the trade-off between investment and returns may not always be worthwhile (pp. 430–431). His remarks concerning AP, then, do not yield the prediction that people will always pursue *maximally* complex-ability-involving life plans – sometimes, these may simply be too costly. Rawls would likely say that the Avon saleswoman regards the mathematics-oriented career as yielding too little return on her investment. This would be consistent with AP. However, and while I don't doubt that such trade-offs happen, I think we ought to resist viewing them as the only available pathway. It seems perfectly possible that the Avon saleswoman simply *values* the sales life more than the academic one, even while *believing* that the latter would indeed justify the heavier investment costs.

My remaining concerns pertain to Rawls's second ingredient: being 'appreciated and confirmed by others'. For Rawls, certain 'natural assets and abilities' like 'imagination and wit' qualify as *excellences*; they are not merely good for us, but good for others as well. Because these talents and abilities 'are appreciated by those with whom we associate', they take 'pleasure … in our person and in what we do', which, in turn, 'supports our self-esteem' (p. 443). This is, recall, a key rationale for using AP to narrow down the grounds for self-esteem; self-esteem depends upon the esteem of others, and we cannot hope to gain their esteem if we do not develop abilities that elicit their pleasure and admiration.

For Rawls, then (as for Nozick) there is an important *interpersonal* dimension to self-esteem. This might lead us to worry that RV may yield a similar form of social precarity – and indeed, similar exclusionary results – as SCV does. Not everyone can boast talents or abilities that elicit others' admiration. And those who do will presumably have far better prospects of securing self-esteem than those who don't.

Thankfully – and perhaps, predictably – Rawls is not blind to such problems, and he has measures in place to mitigate them. One of these is to relativise AP to each individual (p. 441). If my life plan is primarily focused upon, say, a career icing donuts, then it will satisfy AP so long as donut-icing is complex *given my* capabilities.[19] Another is to emphasise that societies

[19]It has been pointed out to me that donut-icing is in fact a far more complex and demanding activity than many tend to think. In any case, it is only an example, and the reader is free to substitute their own.

comprise diverse people with diverse interests who form their own associations:

> '… 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' (pp. 441–442).

Put differently: while the donut-icer may not earn the admiration of nuclear physicists, she can at least expect to earn the admiration of her fellow donut-icers.

Yet it's not clear to me that either of these qualifications fully answers to our concerns. The donut-icer's self-esteem may be buttressed by rubbing shoulders with her fellow donut-icers. But as Thomas (1978, p. 261) points out, each member of such a group may still '[view] her abilities to be very minimal' in comparison to the talents of *non-members*. Donut-icers are presumably well aware that nuclear physicists are admired by people both within *and beyond* their own association. Certain projects may require abilities that not everyone has, and may be more widely esteemed as a result. It's not clear that taking refuge in one's own association can fully shelter a person from this fact.

It may be protested that these concerns are unlikely to materialise in Rawls's *well-ordered* society (p. 536). In this context, the physicist's more widely admired talents are less likely to translate into greater political influence or wealth – so the donut-icer will experience fewer injuries to her self-worth in Rawls's society than she would in a society where they did so translate. But this seems to merely soften the blow. It's not clear why these background conditions should prevent the donut-icer from recognising that her contributions simply do not yield as much admiration from others as the physicist's does – and from having her Rawlsian self-esteem (which is, recall, *tied to* such admiration) impacted upon in turn.

This leads onto a broader underlying worry threaded through the others: Rawls seems to *outsource* self-esteem to a problematic degree. Perhaps associations of the like-minded and the like-talented can form a bulwark against injuries to one's sense of self-worth. But what if they are nowhere to be found? Following Yanal, it seems that unless one has '… qualities that happen to be valued by a certain group at that time, one is out of luck with high self-esteem' (Yanal, 1987, p. 368). Moreover, and even if such supporting associations are available, it seems undesirable to predicate one's self-esteem upon them in any case. If one *does* boast excellences that *are* suitable grounds for self-esteem, then why is that not yet enough? Why should one's self-esteem be hostage to others' appreciation of these qualities? Many a great writer or inventor has persisted with a project that was dismissed by

their contemporaries. We admire these people not merely for their accomplishments, but for their capacity to recognise their value in a world that did not. I don't mean to suggest that such heroic forms of persistence are common – nor that they come easy. But they are far from being impossible. And an adequate account of self-esteem should, I think, be capable of recognising the sense in which it is not merely conceivable but *admirable* for individuals to look beyond whatever their society's associations happen to value.

7. *Working towards a better future*

The journey has been long, but (I hope) worth it. Reflecting upon different accounts of self-esteem has yielded the following desiderata for a more promising proposal:

Pluralism

Whatever we identify as suitable bases for self-esteem, our account ought to be consistent with different conceptions of the good. In doing so, we are better positioned to capture the element of *self*-evaluation that is central to self-esteem; the standards by which an individual measures herself ought to be her own. Of course, we don't want to maintain that anything goes; doing so *trivialises* self-esteem, which in turn belies its status as a response to worth. But we do not want to go too far in the other direction either. By leaning too heavily into elitist impulses, we risk denying some people a fighting chance of securing self-esteem.

A Fighting Chance

Everyone ought to have a fighting chance of securing self-esteem, even if it may come easier to some than to others, and even if it is available to different people to different degrees. Our account ought not entail that self-esteem is by its nature something that few people can reasonably hope to achieve.

Appropriate Responses to Failure

The self-esteeming agent shouldn't be too quick to infer from a lack of success that she is worth less or worthless. And while her self-esteem ought to be robust enough to withstand failure, it should not be so robust as to compromise her capacity to recognise it.

Social Sensitivity

Although the self-esteeming agent should be socially sensitive – capable of taking others' feedback on board in a productive way – her self-conception shouldn't be *too* beholden to what others make of her. How she fares in others' eyes will and sometimes should influence how she fares in her own. But she should also recognise when the standards by which others measure her are unsuitable or unfair.

In what follows, I devote the bulk of my philosophical efforts to our first desideratum; for I believe that getting this one right is in fact the key to getting the others right as well.

7.1. PLURALISM

I've suggested that we should want to rule out the following as suitable bases for self-esteem: (i) 'non-accomplishments' like natural beauty or inherited wealth, and (ii) 'trivial accomplishments', such as tying one's shoelaces. It's easy to see why (ii) ought to be disqualified; if self-esteem is a response to worth, then presumably, it ought not be grounded in unworthy things. But it is less easy to see why this consideration ought to disqualify qualities like beauty or wealth. Are the latter *not* objects of our wants or our values? They are certainly widely pursued.

The primary rationale for excluding non-accomplishments was hinted at earlier: qualities like beauty or socio-economic status are untethered from our agency. These are things we *happen to be* rather than things that we *do* or *make of* ourselves. And it seems to be for precisely this reason that we do not esteem others for them. Perhaps we like wealthy people, or gravitate towards those with a symmetrical face. But we certainly don't *credit* them for such things, or hold them in particularly high regard on account of them. Or, to the extent that we do, I don't think this reflects our considered judgments. Suppose there are two authors of equal literary talent, but my patterns of evaluation and recommendation happen to favour the more attractive one. Were someone to point this out to me, then I surely ought to *correct for* this disparity.

So, it seems that self-esteem ought to be grounded in our agency in some way, and this would seem to rule out non-accomplishments. But how to fill this in? My proposal is that we simply identify *accomplishments* or *achievements* themselves (I use these interchangeably) as the grounds for true self-esteem. Achievements are typically construed as instances of success through competence. To borrow one common example: an archer's hit qualifies as an achievement insofar as his success (his hitting the target) is owing to his competence (his archery skills). It's admittedly debatable what 'competence' in this context consists in, and what exactly it takes for success to be 'owing to' it. In what follows, I will work with an account on which achievements are instances of *success explained by ability* (Greco, 2010).

This choice is purely pragmatic; most if not all construals of achievement are fit for the purpose to which I intend to put the phenomenon here – namely, supplying us with a principled basis by which to exclude non-accomplishments from the grounds of self-esteem. Beauty or wealth may be desirable outcomes. But a symmetrical face is certainly not the result of anything that deserves to be called competence. If the grounds of true self-esteem are achievements, then, those grounds cannot include outcomes – however desirable – that are not explained by one's abilities.

Importantly, these achievements must be valued by the agent herself if they are to ground her self-esteem. My success at writing philosophy papers and filling out endless bureaucratic forms are both explained by my competence; each requires time-management skills and concentration. Thus, each qualifies as an achievement. But I wouldn't propose to extract a sense of self-worth from filling out forms. This isn't merely because philosophy is more intellectually demanding. I wouldn't value filling out forms even if it *did* require further problem-solving skills, precisely because I do not value this task in any way. (Indeed, I attach considerable *disvalue* to it.)

Yet grounding self-esteem in achievements would only seem to push our problems back one step. If we set the bar for achievement too high, then we risk elitism. And if we lower it, then we risk triviality. Indeed, some may worry that the bar for achievement is quite low enough already. On the above definition, tying one's shoelaces *would* qualify as an achievement, so long as one's success were explained by one's shoelace-tying abilities and one valued this task.

A natural solution to the latter worry is to specify that it is only *valuable* achievements that matter to self-esteem. We can lend further substance to this claim by drawing upon the well-known idea that achievements are valuable to the extent that they are *difficult* in some way. But difficult *for whom*? Unfortunately, this choice point spawns further trouble.

On the one hand, we might think – following Bradford (2015, p. 27) – that to qualify as a valuable achievement, the activity simply needs to be difficult *for the person performing it* – to require significant effort *from them*. This is nicely showcased in the TV Series *Atypical,* where the protagonist Sam – an individual with autism – forms meaningful personal relationships, attends college, and moves out of home. While these tasks may be relatively easy for most people, they are not quite so easy *for Sam*; each of these familiar aspects of life raises distinct sorts of challenges for him, and effort is needed to overcome them. And it is for precisely this reason that the viewer regards these as bona fide accomplishments of which Sam ought to be proud. Interestingly, these considerations would seem to apply to my shoelace-tying example as well; as Hirji observes, this could very well be an achievement for someone with advanced Parkinson's (Hirji, 2019, p. 527).[20]

[20]Compare Mason's (1990, p. 93) suggestion that someone 'might gain self-esteem merely by thinking that they have performed some valued activity to the best of their ability'.

On the other hand – and as both Hirji (2019) and von Kriegstein (2019) forcefully argue – some things seem to qualify as valuable achievements even when they *aren't* difficult for the person performing them. It would be difficult *for me* to play soccer well, but it is certainly not difficult *for Christiano Ronaldo*. To this, it may be replied that it was *once* difficult for Ronaldo, and that his true achievement lies with his having finessed his talent over the years. But there are problems with this route. Even if *the path* to greatness reflects an achievement, the greatness itself is surely an achievement as well. As Hirji notes, it may very well be the effortlessness that *makes* someone's display of skill feel like an achievement to them (Hirji, 2019, p. 537). Moreover, and even if we suppose that I'd devoted just as much effort as Ronaldo has to the sport, it's implausible to think that I could ever match his degree of skill. Following von Kriegstein (von Kriegstein, 2019, p. 48), it seems more implausible still to suppose that our achievements would thereby be *equally* valuable. There appears, then, to be a sense of difficulty that isn't relativised to the individual, but instead to (something like) what *most* people are capable of accomplishing (von Kriegstein, 2019, p. 61).

Some may want to insist that it only the former, agent-relative sense of difficulty that ought to matter; so long as Ronaldo and I invest equal effort, our achievements are equally valuable (Bradford, 2015, p. 62). While this is an admirably 'egalitarian' view of achievement, it seems to run against familiar patterns of evaluation (Hirji, 2019, p. 532; von Kriegstein, 2019, p. 49). Those who rise to soccer stardom are *paradigmatic* examples of people who have achieved something especially valuable. It would do Ronaldo a great disservice to maintain that his achievements are no more valuable than my own.

So: which sense of difficulty ought to count for the purposes of determining the value of an achievement – and ultimately, the grounds of true self-esteem? It strikes me that this need not be a winner-takes-all situation. As von Kriegstein (2017, p. 30) observes, we seem to value different achievements for different reasons; some because they require an impressive investment of effort, others because they require little effort, and in doing so showcase an impressive degree of skill. My own preference, then, is to adopt something like Pritchard's (Pritchard, 2010, p. 23; cf. von Kriegstein, 2019) disjunctive solution to the difficulty puzzle: valuable achievements reflect successes that are explained by *either* the agent's significant ability (as Ronaldo's soccer-playing is), *or* significant effort on the agent's part (as in Sam's case).

Before moving on, it's worth supplementing the above with some important clarifications.[21] First, there is nothing in the difficulty requirement that entails that one must push the limits of human ingenuity, or exert oneself to the maximum degree possible. It would not be out of place for an agent to derive her self-esteem (partly) from her undertakings in rock-climbing, even

[21]I thank Jules Holroyd for helpful discussions here.

if she didn't test her limits when doing so. Second, I have (for the sake of expository ease) often spoken of achievements in isolation, as though they lack any narrative or normative thread. This is misleading. In truth, we plausibly value most of the achievements that ground our self-esteem because they tie into our more general values or our wider life projects. The agent who ties her shoelaces while suffering from advanced Parkinson's, for instance, may value this achievement insofar as it figures into a wider project of maintaining independence.

Moving on now, the difficulty requirement seems to me to rein in the triviality problem. But what of our exclusion worry? We cannot simply pretend that the first of our difficulty-disjuncts isn't there. And insofar as it is there, we have understood difficulty (and thus, valuable achievement) partly in comparative terms, and risked making self-esteem into a zero sum game once again. Presumably, those gifted with the raw talent of Ronaldo are going to be capable of achieving far greater things than the athletically challenged. Will some not therefore have more opportunities for self-esteem than others?

I think the inevitable answer to this question is an affirmative one. However, our task here is not make self-esteem perfectly equal, but to give everyone a fighting chance of securing it. And I believe that our disjunctive notion of difficulty meets this brief reasonably well. On this way of thinking, interpersonal-comparative difficulty is not the only sort of difficulty there is. We can also ground our self-worth in things that are difficult *for us;* for these still qualify as valuable achievements. So we have not quite fallen into the comparative trap; on our view, not *all* grounds of self-esteem need rest upon a comparison with others.

The disjunctive notion of difficulty therefore mitigates exclusionary concerns, even if it does not eliminate them entirely. But I think we can do better still. Sometimes, a failure to achieve our goals rests upon a failure in our environment rather than a failure in us. (Consider: the brilliant paper that always lands on reviewer two's desk.) Other-times, we may owe more to a favourable environment than we should like to admit. (Consider: the mediocre paper that luckily finds a sympathetic referee.) In the former case, one's lack of achievement does not seem to warrant a lowering of esteem. And even if some bump to self-esteem ought to be forthcoming in the latter case, it seems plausible to insist that that bump ought not to be particularly high.

It is for precisely this reason that the self-esteeming agent should not merely ground her self-esteem in her achievements, but also be capable of recognising luck where it is operational. Recognising the role of luck in success prevents self-esteem from sliding into arrogance. Likewise, recognising the role of luck in failure prevents self-esteem from descending into a paralysing sense of worthlessness. Indeed, and because luck is always operational to some degree, we might very well want to understand achievements themselves as successes that are explained *more by* abilities than by luck (Carter, 2016). I would propose that we contrapose this lesson to failures:

failures that are owing more to *bad* luck than to one's *lack of ability* ought not to impact upon self-esteem any more than successes that are owing more to *good* luck than to one's *possession of* ability should.[22]

The point I am getting at here is that true self-esteem very much seems to require *attentional dispositions* of a particular kind. The self-esteeming agent must be disposed to pay attention to environmental factors in shaping her successes and her failures. Her eyes must not merely be focused on her own accomplishments or setbacks, but on the role of her surroundings in scaffolding or obstructing the pursuit of her goals.

These attentional dispositions will be helpful in a number of respects. Consider Pritchard's observation that even '… the most glorious failures often … involve related achievements' (Pritchard, 2010, p. 19). Someone who fails to make it as a professional violinist might still develop significant musical ability in the process. These 'related achievements' will often be suitable grounds for self-esteem as well. And an agent will be better placed to notice them insofar as she is already directing her attention to her abilities as well as her environment. Attentional dispositions also support one of the factors that Rawls (rightly, to my mind) identifies as an important ingredient in self-esteem: *confidence in our ability* to achieve our goals. Insofar as an agent can recognise when her failures are owing more to her hostile environment than to her lack of capacity, she is less likely to conclude that she simply 'doesn't have what it takes'.

Before proceeding to our other desiderata, let me address a potential concern: why restrict ourselves to achievements? This choice becomes especially puzzling once we recall that the *episodic emotion* of self-esteem is near-synonymous with pride. It seems perfectly appropriate for someone to take pride in their non-agential qualities as well as their achievements; in their 'booming voice' or agreeable disposition, for example (Fischer, 2020).

Several points can be made in response. First, it is worth keeping in mind that our focus here concerns self-esteem in its *normative* guise ('true self-esteem'). So we need not deny that an agent *could* ground her self-esteem in her non-agential qualities. We need only deny that this would reflect *true* self-esteem. Second, the line between agential qualities and non-agential ones is often blurred. Maintaining an agreeable or optimistic disposition in a world such as ours may *very well* constitute an ongoing achievement that can legitimately ground true self-esteem. (This is in keeping with the common suggestion that character traits reflect skills that we need to work on.) Finally, our focus here is not an episodic emotion, but a richer, more encompassing and longer lasting form of self-appraisal. It is one thing to momentarily feel good about oneself for having a booming

[22]I take this to be one way of spelling out Yanal's thought that agents should not allow their self-esteem 'to be raised or lowered by circumstances over which they had little control' (Yanal, 1987, p. 375).

voice. It is quite another to construct a more general self-orientation upon features such as these. We may want to allow for the fittingness of the former while advising against the latter.

7.2. OTHER DESIDERATA

It is my contention that once we've gotten *Pluralism* right, our other desiderata begin to fall into place as well – although further details will sometimes be needed.

A Fighting Chance.

By grounding self-esteem in valuable achievements, we provide everyone with opportunities to cultivate a sense of self-worth. On our view, self-esteem cannot be grounded in beauty or wealth. So, there is less room for these aspects of the natural lottery to exclude certain people from securing it. And insofar as achievements can be valuable in virtue of being difficult for the agent herself, we make further room still for people of varying degrees of raw talent to identify a basis for self-esteem. Moreover, and inasmuch as the self-esteeming agent has the relevant attentional dispositions, she notices when her failures are owing more to a defect in her surroundings than to a defect in herself. So our picture does not permit unforgiving environments to cordon off the possibility of self-esteem entirely either.

None of this is to deny that our environments have an important role to play in buttressing our sense of self-worth. No one doubts that a society with fewer prejudices would be beneficial from the perspective of self-esteem. Rawls is, moreover, surely right that it would likely be easier to maintain self-esteem in a society that valued a plurality of life plans (cf. Bernick, 1978, p. 115; Ferkany, 2008, pp. 127–128). Nonetheless, and these considerations notwithstanding, what is needed in this context is an account of self-esteem of the kind that is worth promoting in others and ourselves. Presumably, such an account must be capable of providing practical guidance; it is little help to be told that there exists a form of self-worth that can *only* be promoted in a socio-political environment that departs substantially from our own. We should want self-esteem to be achievable in the world as it is, and not merely in the world as we want it to be.

In this respect, then, I think that we really ought to be taking our cue here from Rousseau (1955) rather than from Rawls. Where Rawls takes the need for external recognition for granted, Rousseau cautions against *amour propre* run amok. Focusing too much on our comparative social standing risks breeding animosity and resentment; we arguably stand to gain by not holding our self-esteem overly hostage to the tick of social approval. Despite the stigma that sometimes attaches to manual vocations, Rousseau emphasised that these can often be among the most personally satisfying, and proposed that we'd do well to learn to extract value from projects that aren't socially popular.

Appropriate Responses to Failure.

Insofar as we view valuable achievements as the grounds of self-esteem, we can rightly view an agent's obstinacy in the face of failure as a means of preserving a fantasy rather than as a means of preserving a valuable sense of self-worth. An agent cannot, then, secure self-esteem simply by responding inappropriately to her evidence or by refusing to appreciate her limits. Resorting to such evidence-tinkering may well yield *some* form of positive self-regard; but it will not yield true self-esteem, which is grounded in valuable achievements.

Of course, we should not want the self-esteeming agent to be *too quick* to infer personal limitations from failure either. We shouldn't want her estimation of her own potential to diminish simply because a hostile environment prevents her from noticing or nurturing it. Attentional dispositions are of particular help here. Someone who properly appreciates the role of her environment in restricting what she's able to accomplish is less likely to lose confidence in her abilities.

Yet this will only get us so far. Someone who can appreciate that the world is hostile to her dreams might avoid a heavy loss to self-esteem when she fails to achieve what she sets out to. But she also loses out on an opportunity to cultivate her sense of self-worth. Sometimes, we invest a great deal of personal stock in realising a very particular goal. Recognising that sometimes the world simply isn't fair no matter how brilliant or hard-working one is might prevent us from feeling utterly worthless when we fail. But it also apt to leave us in a paralysing personal limbo; if not *that* dream, then what?

It seems that we should want self-esteem to be more robust than this. A single unrealised dream shouldn't be capable of making or breaking it – particularly so in a world that often brings disappointment and failure. This suggests to me that self-esteem will likely require *evaluative dispositions* of a certain kind as well. A tendency towards normative tunnel vision seems like a recipe for inadequate self-esteem. By staking her self-worth on the realisation of a single goal, an agent lends undue power to her failures, allowing them to obliterate her self-worth entirely. An agent who is disposed to cultivate and value *a variety* of life projects, by contrast, can respond in a more productive manner. She will not simply dwell on broken dreams, but will be capable of moving onto other pastures that she is able to view as similarly worthwhile. Self-esteem, then, very much seems to require some degree of *normative flexibility;* the capacity to value *a range* of life projects.[23]

Social Sensitivity.

Our account takes the grounds of self-esteem to be valuable achievements that the agent herself values. It is possible that some valuable achievements aren't socially valued, but they can be grounds for self-esteem all the same –

[23]See Paul (2022) for an illuminating discussion concerning the rationality of having a 'plan B' when pursuing difficult goals in particular.

provided that the agent values them herself. Our account, then, does not allow social opinion to play a constitutive role in determining the grounds of self-worth. But questions remain concerning its *evidential* or *procedural* roles. Just *how* sensitive ought self-esteem be to the esteem of others?

We shouldn't want to condone simply ignoring others' feedback altogether (recall Zapp Brannigan). But we should not want our sense of self-worth to stand or fall with the esteem of others either; for they may well be prejudiced or misinformed. This is admittedly a difficult balance to strike. But I think that the disjunctive notion of difficulty that we've built into the notion of valuable achievements – into, that is, the grounds of self-esteem – might at least make some progress towards achieving a comfortable resting place.

One feature that can make an achievement difficult – and hence, valuable – is its requiring significant effort from the agent herself. (To revisit our earlier example: only Sam has full insight into just how challenging it was for him to transition to living independently.) In such cases, it seems that we will often be epistemically better placed than others to judge the value of our achievements, and hence, their suitability to underwrite our sense of self-worth. While others may dismiss our accomplishments, we should in such instances be prepared to fall back on our own judgment.

This insight does not quite carry over to our other sense of difficulty, however. Others may well have more information than we do regarding how difficult a particular accomplishment is for the average person. So there will sometimes be a stronger case for affording social feedback greater evidential weight as far as the latter notion of difficulty is concerned. With that said, it's important to appreciate that even in these cases, we will often still have access to evidence that others lack; evidence concerning our related achievements, for example – especially insofar as we are disposed to pay attention to these. We might also have independent reason to doubt the reliability of certain people's judgments. (Some may have a reputation for prejudice.) So while we certainly ought to take others' judgments regarding the value of our achievements seriously, we should be wary of simply deferring to them. A more principled response in such cases will likely be to conciliate on the evidence yielded by personal and interpersonal feedback.

7.3. PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

In summary, the following are what I take to be the key elements of *true* self-esteem, or self-esteem of the valuable kind we're after:

1. It is grounded in valuable achievements that the agent herself values.
2. It consists in having certain attentional dispositions; most notably, the disposition to pay attention to the relative contribution of luck and ability to one's successes and failures.

3. It consists in having certain kinds of cognitive dispositions; most notably, the disposition to be confident that one is capable of achieving one's goals.
4. It consists in having certain kinds of evaluative dispositions; most notably, a disposition to value a variety of life projects.

Some may want to say that it is only really the first item that reflects what self-esteem *is*; viz., a form of positive self-regard that is grounded in valuable achievements that the agent values. The remaining items may simply be thought to reflect the tools that are typically needed to *have* self-esteem in a world such as ours. There is room for disagreement on this score. Consider an agent who achieves something valuable, but mistakenly chalks up her success to dumb luck, or who doubts that she is capable of achieving comparable things in the future and who will lose her sense of self-worth entirely if she does not. Does she truly *have* self-esteem but merely lack the instruments for its upkeep? Or does she rather *lack* self-esteem? Myself, I prefer the latter assessment; our achievements cannot suffice for self-esteem – we must also be disposed to react to them in appropriate ways.[24]

A more pressing challenge for the proposal is that it seems excessively book-keeping in character; perhaps self-esteem is not merely a matter of what is attended to or believed, but what is *felt*. In an insightful, discussion, Dillon draws attention to a range of persons who 'know but cannot feel their worth' (Dillon, 1997, p. 239). Consider her well-established professional, who earns the respect of her colleagues but continues to feel 'wholly inadequate and undeserving' (Dillon, 1997, p. 232).[25] Or her feminist, who feels ashamed of her body despite having intellectually rejected traditional standards of beauty.

There are different lessons that we might draw from such cases. One is that our proposal is simply unfit for purpose. By all appearances, the professional and the feminist satisfy all the items on our checklist – but for all that, they still suffer from what looks to be low self-esteem. It's not clear to me, however, that these characters truly *do* satisfy our checklist. Dillon's professional seems to lack the relevant attentional dispositions; for she appears to have paid undue attention to the role of luck in her success. It's no surprise that she struggles to attribute these successes to her abilities as a result. And the feminist seems to accept on some level that self-esteem can be grounded in beauty. But beauty is not an achievement, let alone one that she herself values.

[24]This is to some degree in keeping with Yanal's (1987, p. 375) description of self-esteem as having 'the logical contours of an Aristotelian virtue'; as '[emanating] from properly functioning capacities'. His accompanying suggestion is that we might wish to distinguish 'secondary' self-esteem (our self-estimations) from 'primary self-esteem' (our capacities for arriving at such estimations).

[25]Ferkany (2008, p. 124) motivates incorporating an emotional element with a similar example.

An alternative lesson is that the account is not so much wrong as incomplete; we must incorporate emotional factors as well. Dillon herself suggests that these characters suffer from damages to a 'more fundamental orientation toward the self' – what she calls 'basal self-respect'.[26] This reflects

> '… our most profound valuing of ourselves. The worth it grants and takes for granted is intrinsic and unconditional, wholly independent of performance or character and so unlike merit, but simpler, less inferentially constructed, more intimate than status worth. When secure and positive, basal self-respect involves an implicit confidence, an abiding faith in the rightness of my being …' (Dillon, 1997, p. 242)

I am sympathetic to Dillon's (1997, p. 241) suggestion that self-esteem may be impossible in the absence of basal self-respect. Indeed, I am inclined to view basal self-respect as just that: as a precondition for having (true) self-esteem, rather than something that is part and parcel of it. Following Dillon, it seems to be partly *because* these individuals suffer from damaged basal self-respect that they have special difficulty with their self-esteem; that – to transpose matters into our own framework – they struggle to form the relevant attentional dispositions, or to ground their self-worth in what they truly value rather than what others do.

I am prepared for the possibility that not everyone will be partial to this way of seeing things. Perhaps some will want to insist that we do somehow find a way to build 'basal self-respect' into the conditions for self-esteem.[27] Yet I fear that to do so would be to send self-esteem into the jaws of its detractors once again. It is one thing to have a basal, unconditional feeling that one is good and worthy – a foundation that is then tempered through the lens of the attentional dispositions and real-world accomplishments that constitute self-esteem. It is quite another to construe this unconditional feeling of worthiness as part of self-esteem itself. This seems to mark a path back to something in the spirit of PSV – and to all of its attendant problems.

But perhaps the account on offer is not quite as emotionally barren as it first appears. Features (1) and (4) both appeal to attitudes of *valuing,* and it is an open question whether valuing ought to be analysed in terms of beliefs. Tiberius (2000), for example, takes value commitments to reflect particular kinds of *pro-attitudes* (specifically, pro-attitudes that we take ourselves to have reasons for having). I have intentionally remained neutral on exactly what attitude valuing involves, and it is worth noting that this opens up the opportunity for filling in the account in less belief-centric ways.

[26]Compare Cigman's (2001) concept of 'basic self-esteem'.

[27]An alternative strategy that I don't have space to fully explore here understands self-esteem itself in more explicitly emotional terms (Ferkany, 2008, p. 123; Kristjánsson, 2010, p. 121; Bortolan, 2018).

8. Conclusion

Self-esteem started out life as a construct that plausibly reflected something of great value. And yet, it is now all-too-often spoken about in terms that leave it utterly mysterious why it should be considered valuable at all. My ambition here has been to steer us away from these undesirable but increasingly familiar ways of thinking about self-esteem, and to reinstate the concept to something resembling its former glory. Admittedly, the path forward that I've have sketched leaves certain questions unanswered. There's no doubt more work to be done in filling in – or perhaps, even adding to – our checklist. And perhaps there's further work to be done when it comes to winnowing down valuable achievements as well. The view is, then, somewhat more 'big picture' than I should like. But one cannot accomplish everything that one might wish to within a single paper. (Not even, sadly, in a paper as long as this one.) If nothing else, I hope that this work inspires something of a re-orientation in our ways of thinking about self-esteem. As for self-esteem's detractors, I hope that it leads them to reflect upon whether it really is self-esteem that is the true villain in their story. Perhaps the true villainy rather lies with the many impoverished ways in which we have proposed to understand it.[28]

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[28]Acknowledgements: For feedback on this paper, I am grateful to audiences at the University of Stockholm, the University of Helsinki, The University of Leeds, the Royal Institute of Philosophy's 'The Practical, the Political and the Ethical Seminar Series', and the University of York's 'Workshop on Happiness, Utility and Well-Being'. For helpful discussions and/or comments on the work, I am especially grateful to Catherine Audard, Edward Elliott, Mollie Gerver, Jules Holroyd, Gerald Lang, R.A. Rowland, and Pekka Väyrynen.

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