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# Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political\*

*Robin S. Dillon*

Most of what is morally interesting about human life is played out in the domain of the emotions. (RONALD DE SOUSA, *The Rationality of Emotion*)<sup>1</sup>

Self-respect is surely among the morally interesting and personally significant dimensions of human life. Individuals who are blessed with a confident respect for themselves have something that is vital to living a satisfying, meaningful, flourishing life, while those condemned to live without it or with damaged or fragile self-respect are thereby condemned to live constricted, deformed, frustrating lives, cut off from possibilities for self-realization, self-fulfillment, and happiness. And that sentence is often served through debilitating emotion. When the abiding flavor of your life is shame or self-contempt; when you have a profound and pervasive sense of yourself as inadequate, pathetic, like dirt; when your life feels meaningless, your activities of little value, your abilities minimal, your character base; when feelings of worthlessness swamp everything else—when living feels like this, living well is impossible.<sup>2</sup> But not only impoverished self-respect is enacted in emotion; de Sousa's claim suggests that all the dramas of self-

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1. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), p. 17.

2. To be sure, not all who lack self-respect feel miserable as a result; I focus on that sort of experience for reasons that will become clear. For other ways of lacking self-respect, see my "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992): 125–39.

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respect—developing and maintaining it, suffering blows to it and struggling to rebuild it—are “played out in the domain of the emotions.” Clearly, if we are to flourish, the dramas must play out on certain emotional stages rather than others.

Just as clearly, if we are to understand self-respect, we must understand its emotionality—or so it is my aim in this article to show. In particular, I will argue that the emotional dimensions of certain dramas reveal self-respect to be more complexly structured than previous discussions of the concept have acknowledged. To set the stage for that denouement, I will begin by sketching an account of self-respect that incorporates emotionality more centrally than do most other accounts. Since other discussions of self-respect, when they attend to emotions at all, typically note connections to pride, shame, and resentment, I will focus on the explanation the account gives of these emotional contours: there are two kinds of self-respect, and pride, shame, and resentment differentially enact different kinds. But while this account correctly explains significant areas of the emotional terrain of self-respect, it is nevertheless inadequate, in particular because it cannot explain certain familiar cases of recalcitrant anomalous emotions. In the second section of the paper, I set out three such cases of individuals, all women, whose self-respect is damaged in a particular way, which we might characterize by saying that they know but cannot feel their worth. I will argue that the damage playing out in these cases is best explained by positing a third kind of self-respect, an emotionally laden substratum for the other two that structures their possible enactments. That the cases all involve women is no coincidence, and in the final sections of the paper, I explore the roots and possible remedies for damage to self-respect to which women are particularly subject in a sexist society. The aim there is to show that to understand self-respect fully, we must understand not only its moral and emotional character but its profoundly political nature as well.

## I

To arrive at a satisfactory understanding of self-respect, we will begin with an account that takes emotionality seriously from the start.<sup>3</sup> There is much that is right in this account, so its inadequacies will not give us cause to scrap it completely, but they will position us to rethink some important questions about the nature of self-respect and the way it is anchored in and anchors our lives. The account has three main

3. The account set out in this section extends the account I have developed in earlier essays. See *ibid.*, “Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1992): 105–32, “Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect,” *Hypatia* 7 (1992): 52–69, and my “Introduction,” in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, ed. Robin S. Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–49.

elements: the first is a general view of self-respect and emotion that is distinctively different from the view commonly forwarded in the philosophical literature; the second is a robust delineation of the structure of self-respect; the third is the incorporation into that picture of some familiar analyses of pride, shame, and resentment.

Elizabeth Telfer once noted that “the first problem concerning self-respect is that of its category: what kind of a thing is it?”<sup>4</sup> Taking the idea that it is a “thing” too seriously, most contemporary philosophical discussions identify self-respect as a distinctive, highly intellectualized psychological entity, a narrowly specified set of beliefs and judgments about or attitude toward oneself, which typically gives rise to certain other psychological states, such as desires or emotions, or to certain ways of acting. Emotions such as pride, shame, and resentment are thus seen as customary but not essential effects of self-respect. This view is, I believe, mistaken. For reflection on fine-grained descriptions of self-respecting individuals urges that self-respect is not a discrete entity but is rather a complex of multiply layered and interpenetrating phenomena that compose a certain way of being in the world, a way of being whose core is a deep appreciation of one’s morally significant worth.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, self-respect is better understood as comprising all those aspects of cognition, valuation, affect, expectation, motivation, action, reaction, and interaction that together constitute what we might call “an appreciative mode of being toward and with oneself and the world with regard to one’s worth.”<sup>6</sup> On this view, pride, shame, and resentment are among the elements constitutive of being a self-respecting person.

The notion of worth is the organizing motif for self-respect, but in the dominant Western tradition, two kinds of worth are ascribed to persons, which makes for two kinds of self-respect.<sup>7</sup> The first kind of

4. Elizabeth Telfer, “Self-Respect,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 114–21, reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

5. Note that not all that is encompassed by the notion of worth is included in the domain of self-respect, but only morally significant worth. This, I would argue, is one of the differences between self-respect and self-esteem. For the purposes of this paper, however, I leave aside the analysis of “morally significant worth.” And for simplicity, I refer in the rest of the paper simply to ‘worth’.

6. I use both prepositions, despite the awkwardness, to convey the idea that self-respect encompasses both a more objective perspective on or stance toward one’s self and the more intimate experience of living with oneself. I use both objects to express the idea that respecting oneself is also a matter of how one understands one’s place in the world and one’s relation to other things, including other people, as well as how one lives with others.

7. The idea that there are different kinds of self-respect is common in the philosophical literature. See, e.g., Telfer; Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Servility and Self-Respect,” *Monist* 57 (1973): 87–104, and “Self-Respect Reconsidered,” in *Respect for Persons*, Tulane Studies in Philosophy, vol. 31, ed. O. H. Green (New Orleans: Tulane University

worth, status worth, derives from such things as one's essential nature as a person; membership in a certain class, group, or people; social role; or place in a social hierarchy. What Stephen Darwall calls *recognition self-respect* centers on status worth,<sup>8</sup> and resentment and shame are among the emotions enacting it. The other kind of worth is merit, the measure of quality of character and conduct, which we earn or lose through what we do and become. *Evaluative self-respect* is oriented around merit;<sup>9</sup> pride and shame are among its elements. Let's consider each a bit further.

To simplify the explication of the first, let me focus just on dignity, the form of status worth all persons have simply in virtue of being persons. Recognition respect for oneself as a person involves recognizing and valuing oneself as a being with dignity, appreciating the moral constraints to which the dignity of persons gives rise, and living in light of this normative self-understanding. Just what does that involve? Since the dominant Western conception of personhood grounds dignity in three things—equality, agency, and individuality—there are three correlative forms of recognition self-respect. First, taking it that all persons have equal fundamental moral worth and standing in the moral community, which entitles each to respect from all, recognition respect for oneself as a moral equal involves living in light of an understanding of oneself as an equal person among persons.<sup>10</sup> The

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Press, 1985), pp. 128–37; Stephen J. Massey, “Is Self-Respect a Moral or a Psychological Concept?” *Ethics* 93 (1983): 246–61. In what follows I develop the distinction drawn by Stephen Darwall in “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88 (1977): 34–49. All of these essays are reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

8. Darwall. Note that respect grounded in status worth is but one of several species of recognition respect, not all of which have correlative forms of self-respect, and that the different sources of status worth yield different configurations of recognition self-respect; see my “Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration.” In what follows, I concentrate on recognition respect for oneself as a person. Note also that, inasmuch as the concepts of respect and self-respect rest on the essentially contested concepts of personhood and the morally significant worth of persons, different conceptions of persons and their worth yield different conceptions of respect and self-respect. In this paper, I focus on the conceptions that have dominated contemporary Western democratic society and hence contemporary Western philosophical discussions of self-respect. In “Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect,” I explore the ramifications of trans-theoretic variations in the conception of personhood. For an exploration of differences between Western and Indian ways of conceptualizing persons, worth, and self-respect, see Koyeli Gosh-Dastidar, “Respect for Persons and Self-Respect: Western and Indian,” *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 5 (1987): 83–93.

9. I take this term from Stephen D. Hudson, “The Nature of Respect,” *Social Theory and Practice* 6 (1980): 69–90. Darwall's term is ‘appraisal self-respect’.

10. The locus classicus for this view is, of course, Kant: “man regarded as a person . . . is exalted above any price . . . he possesses . . . a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world: he can measure himself with every other being in the world and value himself on a

repertoire for living thus includes having a conception of certain treatment by others as one's due as a person and other treatment as degrading or beneath the dignity of persons, desiring to be treated appropriately by others, and resenting mistreatment. For resentment is standardly defined as anger felt on being wronged in a way that affronts one's dignity. Those who understand themselves to be morally entitled as persons to certain treatment are disposed to resent what they regard as indignities; thus, in a morally imperfect world, the liability to resentment is an integral feature of recognition self-respect.<sup>11</sup>

Recognition self-respect also involves a proper appreciation of ourselves as agents. The repertoire here includes taking seriously the responsibilities we have as persons, especially the responsibility to preserve and manifest our dignity.<sup>12</sup> So, the self-respecting person regards certain forms of thinking, feeling, desiring, and acting as befitting persons, and regards other forms as degrading, and she expects herself (and other persons) to adhere to the former and avoid the latter. Finally, recognition self-respect involves properly appreciating the moral significance of being one's own person by, among other things, striving to live according to a conception of a life that gives expression to the ideals and commitments of and is expressed in the pursuits and projects that define and befit one as the particular person one is. The self-respecting person thus also holds herself (though not others) to certain personal standards and expectations, the disappointment of which she would regard as a degrading self-betrayal. The liability to shame is part of recognition self-respect in its agentic and individualist forms.

Shame is given two distinct analyses in the philosophical literature. One (the other is treated below) identifies it as a self-protective emo-

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footing of equality with them"; *Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 99. See also Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect"; Laurence Thomas, "Self-Respect: Theory and Practice," in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), pp. 174–89; and Bernard R. Boxill, "Self-Respect and Protest," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1976): 58–69. The latter three are reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

11. For discussions of resentment and self-respect, see, e.g., Michael Pritchard, *On Becoming Responsible* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), chap. 5, which draws on Joseph Butler's Sermon 8, "Upon Resentment" (in *Fifteen Sermons*, ed. T. A. Roberts [1722; reprint, London: S.P.C.K., 1970] and on Peter Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" (in *Freedom, Resentment, and Other Essays* [London: Methuen, 1974]); and Laurence Thomas, *Living Morally* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), chap. 6.

12. I discuss this more fully in "How to Lose Your Self-Respect." Note that it is possible for someone to have a mistaken view of her place in the moral world or care little about how others treat her and yet to have a keen sense of her other responsibilities and fulfill them out of respect for herself. That is, it is possible to respect oneself as an agent without respecting oneself as an equal. Massey describes such an individual in "Is Self-Respect a Moral or a Psychological Concept?"

tion, a warning that one's worth and identity are threatened by failure (real or apparent) to live up to one's standards and expectations.<sup>13</sup> Being or doing what is shameful is self-disrespectful, but feeling shame on such occasions is self-respecting, for through it one takes responsibility for oneself and demonstrates continued commitment to one's standards, thereby respecting oneself as an agent and an individual, whereas shamelessness would be doubly disrespectful of oneself.

Turning now to evaluative self-respect, its heart is confidence in one's merit as a person, which rests on an evaluation of oneself in terms of a normative self-conception—the view one has of the sort of person one ought to be or that it would be good to be, and of the kind of life such a person should live. As (recognition) self-respecting persons, we embrace and endeavor to live in accord with norms of character and conduct that configure a life appropriate to ourselves as persons among persons, agents, and individuals. But we also stand back to reflect on ourselves, asking whether we have merit: are we living congruently with our normative self-conceptions? And we care about the verdict; it matters to us that we be able to “bear our own survey,” as Hume says.<sup>14</sup> The values embedded in one's self-conception, the thinking, feeling, and acting involved in developing and refining it, evaluating oneself in its light, redirecting one's living as necessary, feeling pride or shame as appropriate: these are dimensions of evaluative self-respect.

Emotional pride is typically analyzed as pleasurable self-satisfaction arising from the belief that one's worth is confirmed or enhanced by one's characteristics, achievements, or possessions.<sup>15</sup> The connection with evaluative self-respect is via the normative self-conception. To the extent that we measure up by its standards of achievement and excellence of character, our merit is enhanced or confirmed and we deserve to feel proud.<sup>16</sup> Shame, by contrast, enacts the sense of oneself

13. See Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), chap. 3; and John Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique,” *Ethics* 93 (1983): 225–45, reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

14. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 620.

15. See, e.g., *ibid.*, bk. 2, pt. 1; Arnold Isenberg, “Natural Pride and Natural Shame,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10 (1949): 1–24; and Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, chap. 2. Taylor in fact denies a connection between self-respect and emotional pride, arguing that the connection actually holds between self-esteem and pride. However, while Taylor is right that there is a conceptual difference between self-respect and self-esteem, it is also the case that there is no agreement about precisely what the difference is. I discuss some differences in “Introduction,” in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

16. Note that pride does not always enact evaluative self-respect, for it can be unjustified, nor does it enact only evaluative self-respect, since its possible grounds are wider than quality of character and conduct. Note, too, that normative self-conceptions typically also include criteria of minimum acceptability and that to behave a certain way

as a lesser being. For on the second familiar analysis, shame involves a negative assessment of self-worth predicated on a negative assessment of some central feature of one's self.<sup>17</sup> Some accounts hold further that we feel shame only when we believe ourselves condemnable for not living up to "a standard of our own election."<sup>18</sup> The two analyses of shame thus give it a dual role: it marks abiding recognition self-respect while registering diminished evaluative self-respect.

## II

On the account just sketched, the emotions of pride, shame, and resentment enact recognition and evaluative self-respect (or its loss) under certain circumstances. However, that this account is not quite right is shown in its inability to explain certain familiar cases of damaged self-respect, where the damage plays out in the domains of pride, shame, and resentment. Consider the following.

1. Anne is a successful professional for whom being a member of her respect-worthy profession is central to her self-conception. Among the standards to which her evaluative self-respect is staked are those she rightly takes to define quality in her profession, and she lives in accord with them, earning the respect and admiration of colleagues whom she respects and admires. Nor has she sold her soul for success: she consistently refuses to do what she thinks no self-respecting person would do. Anne thus lives congruently with reasonable standards that are central to her normative self-conception and so has good grounds for evaluative self-respect. Yet she cannot feel the worth of what she does and is. She cannot feel proud of herself or take pleasure in her accomplishments or feel satisfied with her life. Instead, she feels wholly inadequate and undeserving: each success feels like a fluke, those who praise her are only being nice. Anne is harshly critical of herself, dwells incessantly on her failures, feels that

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may not be an achievement but the least one expects of oneself. A positive self-evaluation here yields not pride but contentment or self-acceptance.

17. See Isenberg; Taylor; Hill, "Self-Respect Reconsidered"; John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," and "Guilt and Shame," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 426–28; Sandra Lee Bartky, "Shame and Gender," in her *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83–98; John Kekes, "Shame and Moral Progress," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 13, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1988); Susan Miller, *The Shame Experience* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1985); and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 440–46, which is reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

18. Isenberg, p. 16. Rawls and Kekes are among those who share this view; Bartky is among those who challenge it.

her screw-ups give a better picture of her than her so-called successes, and fears the inevitable unmasking of her mediocrity. Anne's emotional experience of herself testifies to a lack of evaluative self-respect. At the same time, however, she *knows* that she deserves to take pride in her accomplishments and that she lives self-acceptably. She *believes* she is respect-worthy and regards her lack of self-acceptance as ungrounded and disrespectful of herself. She is ashamed of her emotional incongruity; yet try as she might, she cannot bring her emotions into line with her beliefs, so she is ashamed of what she regards as weakness of will. As if her first-order lack of self-respect weren't enough, she respects herself even less for lacking it.

2. Beth is a woman who, since becoming a feminist, has worked on changing her values and self-conception, for she regards her old values and self-conception as oppressive. In particular, rejecting the patriarchal view of women's bodies, she is committed to loving her natural femaleness and regards pride as a fitting response to her embodied being. Yet she is ashamed of her body. Her shame, however, does not come from recognizing that she fails to live up to her standards. Beth's standards and self-concept have been changed for years; but knowing that it is good to be female hasn't changed the fact that she feels dirty when she menstruates and can't look at her naked body without disgust. The changes in her beliefs and values have done nothing to heal her shame about her body. What is worse, because her shame is discordant with her feminist principles, she feels she has somehow failed as a feminist. So Beth is ashamed of her body and ashamed of her shame.<sup>19</sup>

3. Carissa has a good understanding of her place in the world; she knows she has intrinsic worth as a person and desires morally appropriate treatment. She lives an ordinary but lucky life: she has never been treated in ways that indicate that others believe her to be of no moral consequence, so she has little ground for resentment. Yet resentment is one of the overwhelming flavors of her life. Carissa routinely feels resentment about things she cannot reasonably regard as disrespectful. For example, she resents it when clerks wait on other people who arrived at the counter just when she did; she resents telephone solicitors, people who ask her for favors, and especially people who own nicer homes or have better jobs than she. Now Carissa does not believe herself to be wronged; she knows her resentment is ungrounded. But try as she might, she cannot help but feel aggrieved. What is more, she thinks her resentment says something awful about her: unjustified resentment is a form of disrespect of other people. So, she is ashamed of her resentment and ashamed of herself for being the kind of person who can't stop feeling that way.

19. I owe this case to Claudia Murphy.

There are several things to note here. First, the first-order emotions of these women are inappropriate: Anne should feel proud and self-accepting, Beth should not feel ashamed of her body, Carissa ought not to resent those who've done her no wrong. Moreover, their first-order emotions seem to manifest a lack of self-respect. Yet we cannot say simply that they do not respect themselves, since their explicit beliefs and second-order emotions affirm their worth and deny the appropriateness of the first-order emotions. But the discord between their avowed, reflective beliefs and judgments about their worth and their first-order emotions is puzzling. Even more puzzling is the extent to which the anomalous emotions are persistent, even recalcitrant, impervious to rational criticism, argument, and reconceptualization. It is also important to recognize the power of these emotions to affect the quality and shape of these women's lives in ways that their explicit beliefs and judgments do not. Though I have only sketched their stories, it is not hard to imagine the perturbations reverberating throughout their entire ways of living. Nor is it hard to imagine the debilitating effects of the psychological discord and the incessant self-castigation. These cases show the power of the emotional dimensions of being toward and with oneself with regard to self-worth. Their explicit beliefs notwithstanding, it is reasonable to say that the self-respect of these women is seriously damaged and their lives disfigured as a result.

These cases, then, set us the task of explaining how the emotional dimensions of self-respect can be inappropriate, belief-independent, persistent, and so very powerful. The account set out in the previous section, however, is inadequate to that task. For although it gives emotions a more central role in self-respect than do other accounts, it has no way of explaining emotional incongruity, for it takes knowing and feeling one's worth to be interwoven in the self-respect complex. Moreover, what it says about the specific emotions involved seems not to apply in these cases. For it holds that resentment enacts recognition self-respect when one believes one's dignity has been assaulted through wrongful treatment. But Carissa does not believe this, and it is more plausible to think that her resentment belies insecurity about her worth (rather as protesting one's innocence too much betrays a sense of guilt). Nor does the account make sense of Beth's shame. Shame is supposed to manifest diminished evaluative self-respect and persisting recognition self-respect: one takes oneself to (appear to) have less merit as judged by one's standards, yet respects one's dignity as an agent by holding oneself accountable to them. But Beth's shame is not connected to her standards this way. She can identify the norms of perfection and judgments of defectiveness that underlie her shame, but she does not identify *with* them: they are not her norms or judgments but are experienced as alien and imposed. Beth's case calls into

question the idea that shame arises from self-assessment in light of one's normative self-conception. As for Anne, while it is true that self-respecting persons needn't always take pride in their accomplishments, Anne's inability to take pride in anything she does, combined with the pervasive lack of self-acceptance, is grounds for thinking that she does not adequately appreciate her merit. She apparently can identify her merit intellectually, but it does not register in feeling, and that diminishes the quality of her life. The account cannot explain why her merit does not register emotionally or why it matters that it doesn't.

There is one more dimension of the cases that eludes the account, namely, the gender dimension. I am especially concerned with these cases because they are not imaginary; moreover, not only are "Anne," "Beth," and "Carissa" pseudonyms for real women, but it is no accident that the three cases involve women. Their stories are all too common among women, and there is reason to be concerned about analyses that ignore gender dimensions of the problem they exemplify. The impetus for thinking about these cases came from my realization that so many of the women I know suffer damaged self-respect that plays out in anomalous emotions. For few of the women I know is self-worth as much of a nonissue as it seems to be for men of my acquaintance; more often our sense of worth is the lived affirmation of our lesser worth. The claim advanced here is not new: damaged self-respect is a gendered phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> To say this is not to make the

20. To be more accurate, damaged self-respect is integrally connected with oppression. The claim that damaged self-respect is a gendered phenomenon requires, of course, more than anecdotal support. There are, however, some difficulties with empirical support. The first is that empirical research is carried on by psychologists, whose term of use is "self-esteem" rather than self-respect. I have argued elsewhere that the two are distinct; however, there is no agreement among psychologists or philosophers about whether there is a distinction and if so what it is. Still, many of the psychological studies I've looked at define "self-esteem" in ways that overlap with self-respect, so it is reasonable to look at that evidence. However, there is reason to worry about gender bias in psychological studies of self-esteem, since the standard definitions and measures (Coopersmith's and Rosenberg's, for example) omit gender considerations and are predicated on a model of the healthy self that is clearly male-biased (Kaschak). Further, empirical research relevant to damaged self-esteem is indirect, through work on shame and on psychopathologies such as depression and eating disorders, both of which are typically analyzed as involving damaged self-worth. There is, however, reason to suspect gender bias (and race bias) in diagnosis of psychopathology. Finally, much empirical work on gender and self-esteem is racially biased, omitting women of color. These methodological concerns are somewhat addressed by looking at studies which are explicitly sensitive to gender and race considerations, and there the evidence is clear. Women with traditionally feminine gender identification are more likely to have low self-esteem than men (Travis). Women are more likely to exceed men on reports of shame (Brody and Hall, Lewis). Women suffer depression at rates two to three times higher than men; the gender difference is consistently confirmed in epidemiological and clinical studies, is not an artifact of reporting, genetics, or hormones, and holds across racial

false claim that all and only women suffer from damaged self-respect. Rather, it is to claim that, other things equal, women are more likely than men to have damaged self-respect and that the factors that undermine self-respect, as well as the configuration and meaning of the damage, are likely to be different for women and men. It is also to claim that damage is an effect of the subordination of women in a patriarchal society and that the sabotage of women's self-respect is a principal means by which subordination is effected. Thus, we cannot fully understand damaged self-respect without taking its gender dimensions seriously.

So how might we explain these cases? One obvious explanation (especially since it's women!) is that these are cases of irrationality.<sup>21</sup>

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and ethnic lines and cross-culturally (Jack, Russo and Green, Ritter, Matlin, Unger and Crawford, Travis). Ninety to ninety-five percent of those suffering from eating disorders are women. Two-thirds of teen self-mutilators are girls; the etiology is the same as for eating disorders (Orenstein). The most extensive national survey on gender and self-esteem in adolescence, done by the American Association of University Women (*Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America: A Call to Action* [Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women, 1991]), found that during adolescence the self-regard of girls drops further than boys' and never catches up; teen girls are much more likely than boys to say they are "not good enough" to achieve their dreams; although girls consistently report lower self-esteem than boys, Latina girls' self-esteem drops much lower than that of Caucasian girls, while the self-esteem of African American girls is higher than that of Caucasian girls though still lower than that of African American boys. All of these studies agree that the best explanation for the findings is that they are the effects on women of living in a sexist society. See Leslie Brody and Judith A. Hall, "Gender and Emotions," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland (New York: Guilford, 1993); Dana Jack, "Silencing the Self: The Power of Social Imperatives in Female Depression," in *Women and Depression: A Lifespan Perspective*, ed. Ruth Formanek and Anita Gurian (New York: Springer, 1987); Elyn Kaschak, *Engendered Lives: A New Psychology of Women's Experience* (New York: Basic, 1992); Helen Block Lewis, "The Role of Shame in Depression in Women," in Formanek and Gurian, eds.; Margaret W. Matlin, *The Psychology of Women*, 2d ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987); Peggy Orenstein, *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Anchor, 1994); Kathleen Y. Ritter, "Depression in Women," in *Women, Relationships, and Power: Implications for Counseling*, ed. Ellen Piel Cook (Alexandria, Va.: American Counseling Association, 1993); Nancy Felipe Russo and Beth L. Green, "Women and Mental Health," in *Psychology of Women: A Handbook of Issues and Theories*, ed. Florence L. Denmark and Michele A. Paludi (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993); Karen W. Saakvitne and Laurie Anne Pearlman, "The Impact of Internalized Misogyny and Violence against Women on Feminine Identity," in Cook, ed.; Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan, *Women and Self-Esteem* (New York: Anchor, 1984); Cheryl Brown Travis, *Women and Health Psychology: Mental Health Issues* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1988); and Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford, *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

21. They might also be explained in terms of bad emotional habits, weakness of will, or bad faith, i.e., insufficient commitment to the standards these women claim to embrace. (Amélie Rorty discusses "akrasia of the emotions" [also known as "irrational conservation of emotions"] in "Explaining Emotions," in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie

The charge of irrationality could take three forms. The cognitivist approach that now dominates philosophical theorizing of emotion holds that emotions have a core of propositional thought (standardly, beliefs or evaluative judgments) which carries their intentionality, differentiates them one from another, and makes them liable to assessment as rational or irrational, reasonable or unreasonable.<sup>22</sup> Emotions are irrational or unreasonable insofar as the propositional thoughts at their core are irrational or unreasonable, that is, insofar as the thoughts in turn result from some fault in the reasoning process. So we might explain the incongruity either in terms of irrational cognitions in the emotions or in terms of conflict between the beliefs of the first-order emotions and other beliefs. Take the latter first. On that explanation, Anne, for example, both believes and does not believe that she has grounds for pride, which is irrational. Note that this move requires ascribing to Anne a set of beliefs carried in her emotions, beliefs which she explicitly disavows, that not only conflict with her avowed beliefs but that are, to explain the power of the emotions, her real beliefs about her worth, the disavowals notwithstanding. The problem with this move is that we have no reason, aside from trying to explain the anomalous emotions, to discount her avowals of belief or to posit disavowed beliefs as her true beliefs. Moreover, her second-order self-evaluations and emotions, and her struggles to correct the first-order emotions, provide strong evidence that her real beliefs about her worth are what she says they are.

Now take the second move: the irrationality is located within the first-order emotions. They contain cognitions that are false or at least unwarranted, that fail, we might say, to track reality. Since Anne's, Beth's, and Carissa's avowed beliefs do track reality, their emotions seem especially irrational by contrast. But are the emotions so irrational? Arguing for emotions as epistemological resources, Alison Jaggar notes that emotions identified by prevailing standards as inappropriate may in fact reveal important aspects of the world that accepted beliefs and justifications hide or mystify.<sup>23</sup> Consider Carissa's resentment of

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Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980]; Bartky discusses the bad faith charge in "Feminism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," in her *Femininity and Domination*.) I won't pursue these suggestions, however, since they don't really explain the divergence of emotions and beliefs in these cases, or its persistence in the face of distress and sincere efforts to change, or the power of the emotions to so profoundly shape the lives of these women.

22. For an illuminating discussion of cognitivism and emotion, see John Deigh, "Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions," *Ethics* 104 (1994): 824–54. I draw on Deigh in what follows.

23. Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 144–45.

owners of nice homes. This would be appropriate only if she were wronged and her dignity insulted by people who own nicer homes, but they have done her no wrong. And her feeling that it's not fair that they have nicer houses is inappropriate, for what could be fairer in a capitalist system than that those with money to buy what they want can do so, while those who don't, can't? But consider the possibility that she is wronged, though not by those particular homeowners, by considering the plethora of ways in which social institutions conspire to insure that certain classes of individuals could never afford nice homes. The reality is that Carissa's housing possibilities have been significantly constrained by forces beyond her control. Why is this relevant? Because Carissa understands as well as anyone that, despite the official rhetoric about human equality, the social worth of people in a capitalist society is essentially competitive and materialist: worthiness depends on having more than others. And she understands that she is powerless to affect her social worth. Her resentment is mistaken that those who own nicer homes have wronged her and affronted her dignity. But her sense that she has been wronged and her dignity undermined is not mistaken; in a way, she has been set up: encouraged by social institutions to predicate her sense of worth on bases that social institutions conspire to insure cannot be hers.<sup>24</sup> Her resentment is misdirected but not wholly unwarranted—it arises from evidence-processing functions and makes sense of the world as her explicit beliefs do not. And the conflict between belief and emotion accurately reflects conflicting social messages about worth.

Irrationality seems not an accurate diagnosis of the problem here, at least not the gross irrationality of believing what is obviously false or believing both  $p$  and not- $p$ . But there is a third way for an emotion to be unreasonable (a better term here): by being unresponsive to reason. An emotion can be unreasonable, that is, by persisting even after sound reasoning and securely anchored true belief that ought to dispel it are brought to bear on it. And an emotion need contain no false belief or judgment for it to be unreasonable in this way.<sup>25</sup> Two questions then arise: whence came these emotions in the first place, and why do they persist despite sound rational criticism? To answer such questions, we need a richer analysis of self-respect, one that takes seriously the emotionality playing out in these cases.

24. For an illuminating discussion of the ways in which social institutions limit access to socially defined bases of self-respect, see Michele M. Moody-Adams, "Race, Class, and the Social Construction of Self-Respect," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 251–66, reprinted in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*.

25. This is the crux of Deigh's objection to contemporary cognitivism about emotions; "Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions," p. 851.

## III

To motivate a better analysis, let me begin with three distinctions. First, I have said that these three women know but cannot feel their worth; yet if we take the emotionality seriously, then there is a strong desire to say that these can't be cases of individuals unqualifiedly knowing that they have worth: the power and persistence of their first-order emotions suggest that they don't really understand their worth. But we don't have to choose. Distinguishing two modes of understanding, call them "intellectual understanding" and "experiential understanding," allows us to say that individuals can both understand and not really understand their worth.<sup>26</sup> Intellectual understanding involves having beliefs which one has reason to accept as true, then coming by inference to have other beliefs which one takes to be true in virtue of their logical relation to warranted beliefs, where the believing, inferring, and assessing need not engage emotions. Experiential understanding involves experiencing something directly and feeling the truth of what is experienced. A common phenomenon illustrates the difference. I can know that a loved one has just died, having been informed of the facts by an unimpeachable source. As I make the trip home, I get used to the idea that she is dead. But seeing her body for the first time is a great and surprising shock. Only when I am face to face with her death and emotionally caught up in it does the fact that she is dead become real for me. Of course I knew she was dead; but standing at her coffin I really know it, and my emotional engagement partially constitutes the understanding. Now, there are surely many things that can be understood only intellectually. But just as surely there are some things which, if we understand them only intellectually, we don't understand properly. In such cases, intellectual understanding by itself is defective understanding. This is true of our cases. The three women hold correct beliefs and made correct inferences, so they may be said to have an intellectual understanding of their worth. But Anne's successes are not as real to her as her failures and inadequacies; Beth is emotionally caught up in a view of her body as disgusting, not her belief that it is fine. Thus we can say both that they (intellectually)

26. Cheshire Calhoun distinguishes "believing intellectually" and "believing evidentially," the latter being a matter of feeling or experiencing things in a certain way, in "Cognitive Emotions?" in *What Is an Emotion? Classic Readings in Philosophical Psychology*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun and Robert C. Solomon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 335–36. Michael Pritchard draws a similar distinction between "intellectual understanding" and "participant understanding," where the latter mode involves the engagement of one's sentiments, in *On Becoming Responsible*, chap. 3. Michael Stocker differentiates beliefs from "emotional thoughts," which can conflict with beliefs and in which something is emotionally present and taken seriously or felt to be the case, in "Emotional Thoughts," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987): 59–69.

understand their worth and that they don't really understand it, because their experiential understanding is off kilter. Unqualified self-respect requires appropriate experiential understanding.

But experiential understanding need not involve beliefs and judgments. Some critics of cognitivist theories of emotion have called into question the standard identification of cognition—the mental process of knowing and understanding—with thought expressed in propositional representations (beliefs, judgments) which have a truth value.<sup>27</sup> The critics take a broader view of cognition: propositional representations are but one form knowledge can take, and mental processes and faculties, including evidence-processing and reality-representing functions, need not involve propositional structures to yield understanding. On this broader view, the emotions felt by the three women encode nonpropositional self-understandings that are at odds with their explicit beliefs and judgments but in ways that do not involve gross irrationality. Beth's shame need not involve a belief that she is defective for it to express an understanding of herself as defective, an understanding she can explicitly disavow. Further, insofar as these emotions are broadly cognitive, they can be nonveridical and yet not without justification or warrant; they can make sense. So we can ask, "What warrants them? What sense do they make?"

The third distinction helps explain the recalcitrance and power of this experiential understanding. Some understanding is explicit and representational, lying at or below the psychological surface and articulable in propositional structures. But much of it comprises unarticulated presuppositions implicit in certain ways of being in the world.<sup>28</sup> That is, our ways of being in the world implicitly involve multiply layered sets of presuppositions that constitute nonpropositional frameworks for interpreting the world. They shape conscious experience and can conflict with avowed beliefs and judgments without themselves being explicitly represented in or even representable to the individual. Insofar as it invisibly structures explicit understanding, this implicit understanding is resistant to modification through reflection, criticism, or reconceptualization.

Combining the three distinctions, the idea of experiential nonpropositional understandings of self and worth implicitly presupposed

27. See Deigh, "Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions"; Calhoun; Susan E. Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), chap. 2; and Richmond Campbell's critical notice of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, by Allan Gibbard, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1993): 299–324.

28. See Mark H. Bickhard and John Chambers Christopher, "The Influence of Early Experience on Personality Development," *New Ideas in Psychology* 12 (1994): 229–52; V. F. Guidano and G. Liotti, *Cognitive Processes and Emotional Disorders* (New York: Guilford, 1993); Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); and Calhoun.

in ways of being in the world constituted by emotional enactments helps to explain our cases by suggesting something important about the nature of self-respect. To develop the suggestion, let me focus on evaluative self-respect. Recall that this involves regarding oneself as able to “bear one’s own survey” satisfactorily or admirably. Whether one can bear one’s own survey depends on what one is like, one’s norms of self-evaluation, and the fit between the two. But it also depends on what one takes the survey to show; and someone who has good grounds for a positive self-evaluation may nevertheless interpret the evidence as grounds for uncertainty about her worth or confirmation of inadequacy. This should remind us of the etymology of *respect*: to look again, to look back at. Respect is most fundamentally perceptual, a mode of seeing; and all seeing is interpretation, a seeing of something *as* something, as having a certain significance. Clearly, self-respect depends on interpretive self-perception. But more than this, the etymology urges the idea that self-respect is itself a mode of normatively interpretive perception of self and worth.

Putting the pieces together, the three cases point to a more fundamental orientation toward the self that underlies recognition and evaluative self-respect, a prereflective, unarticulated, emotionally laden presuppositional interpretive framework, an implicit “seeing oneself as” or “taking oneself to be” that structures our explicit experiences of self and worth. Let me call the way of being toward and with oneself that is constituted by this implicit interpretive framework *basal self-respect*. My hypothesis is this: the distortions of recognition and evaluative self-respect played out in Anne’s, Beth’s, and Carissa’s anomalous emotions arise from damaged basal self-respect.<sup>29</sup>

Basal self-respect concerns our primordial interpretation of self and self-worth, the invisible lens through which everything connected with the self is viewed and presumed to be disclosed, that is, experienced as real and true. The experiential understanding it constitutes develops first and sets the warp into which the threads of our experience are woven to create the layered understandings of self and self-worth in which we are always swaddled. And it continually reverberates throughout the self, profoundly shaping all those aspects of cognition, valuation, affect, expectation, motivation, and reaction that bear on one’s worth. In particular, it is the ground for the other kinds of self-respect, inasmuch as it serves as the interpretive medium for anything one could take as relevant to recognition and evaluative self-respect,

29. Since developing this account, I have found it to be congruent with a number of analyses in psychology, most notably Guidano and Liotti; and Seymour Epstein, “Emotion and Self-Theory,” in Lewis and Haviland, eds. What Thomas calls “basic psychological security” also points in the direction of basal self-respect (*Living Morally*, pp. 61, 242).

thereby structuring their conceptual, emotional, and behavioral possibilities.

The heart of basal self-respect is 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, the unexpressed and unquestioned (indeed, unquestionable) assumption that it is good that I am. But when damaged or insecure, basal valuing is incessant whispering below the threshold of awareness: "you're not good enough, you're nothing." And where basal self-respect is weak or distorted, recognition of personhood is small comfort, cognizance of merit a hollow consolation, for the basal interpretation is uncompromising: this is what *I am* most fundamentally, and nothing I do or become can change that fact, nothing can alter its implications. And because this primordial valuing sets the basic terms for all subsequent conceptualizations of self and worth, it retains its power to control self-understanding and self-valuing even if we manage to excavate it and lift it to consciousness.

It is difficult to overestimate the power of damaged basal self-respect. For the need to value oneself is among the deepest human needs, so where strong and positive basal self-respect does not develop and thrive, still some form of self-valuing may take root and strain to survive if the individual is to survive. For example, where an individual's basal orientation toward her worth is uncertainty, she may struggle to cultivate evaluative self-respect by trying to be perfect, for then she might be good enough. But should a positive sense of merit develop, it will be fragile, in need of continual construction and constant shoring up, and it will be distorted and distorting. For in such a case, everything is a matter of self-respect, everything a potential source of failure and shame, everything cuts to the bone: if she yells at her daughter out of exhaustion and frustration, she's a horrible mother; if she forgets an appointment, she's hopelessly incompetent. The individual stakes her worth on everything, the stakes are always high, and her basal sense of self guarantees that she'll lose, for no matter what happens, she can't but interpret it as proof of unworthiness.

This struggle for self-respect, fragile and doomed, may breed a form of moral self-indulgence. For in such a struggle, the individual's consciousness of herself expands: the most important thing in the world is her inadequacy; her all-consuming project is to find some value for her self; other things, other people, matter only in relation to her worthlessness. But to be blessed with secure basal self-respect is to be able move through life oblivious to issues of self-worth—for the issues have always already been resolved—to be free to attend to the independent value of other people and things.

Damaged basal self-respect is psychologically debilitating; the implicit self-condemnation continually gnaws at one's spirit. It is morally debilitating, deforming one's valuing and value-discerning abilities. It also distorts one's very identity. For the person with damaged basal self-respect experientially defines herself as worthless: she *is*, to herself, nothing much. And how she construes herself has a profound impact on the shaping of her self and the trajectory of her living. Who and what a person is is largely a function of who and what she understands herself to be and to be aiming to become; who and what she takes herself to be and to be becoming is largely a function of the significance she takes her self and life to have. That is, self-respect is as much prophecy as acknowledgment; basal self-respect is self-fulfilling prophecy. Damaged basal self-respect creates a damaged self. Joan Didion writes, "to have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything."<sup>30</sup> To lack it comes close to having nothing. Absent secure positive basal self-respect, one's life is much less than it might be, and it is experienced as less.

#### IV

Self-respect is commonly regarded as a personal phenomenon, a matter of the psychology and conduct of the individual; self-respect problems are commonly viewed as personal problems, matters of personal inadequacy or intrapsychic defect; the relief of self-respect problems is commonly seen as a matter of personal responsibility: though others may help, the ultimate responsibility to effect change in herself is seen as the individual's alone. And she is either held fully accountable for failures to reform her sense of self-worth—she's not trying hard enough—or not accountable at all—she's neurotic, irrational. But it is a mistake to think that issues of self-respect are wholly issues of personal psychology or responsibility.

One upshot of the previous section is that to understand self-respect we must attend not only to the surface manifestations but also the subterranean wellspring. The source of some damage to self-respect is an implicit interpretive framework of self-perception whose organizing motif is worthlessness. And this framework, I want now to argue, is not a private phenomenon but is a feature of the historical and sociopolitical situatedness of individuals. Self-respect may be damaged not because individuals fail to have appropriate thoughts and emotions but because they fail to have an appropriate situation, one that would support the construction of a basal framework for positive valuation. A second upshot is that insofar as individuals are not responsible for the configurations of their basal frameworks and may have

30. Joan Didion, "On Self-Respect," in *Slouching toward Bethlehem* (New York: Washington Square, 1968), pp. 124–25.

little power to reconfigure them, they are not blamable for consequent distortions of recognition and evaluative self-respect.<sup>31</sup>

To say that self-respect is a sociopolitical construction is to say not only that it develops and plays out against the backdrop of social and political contexts, but more important, that it is constituted by and reflects prevailing forms of social and political life.<sup>32</sup> The nature and meaning of self-respect and how it is constituted and expressed, both at the level of individual experience and at the level of concept, is a function of social relationships and the structure and functioning of the social institutions among which we live. Sociopolitical factors have especially profound effects on self-respect at the basal level.

Basal self-understandings arise from evidence-processing and reality-representing functions, but they are not intellectual constructions. Rather, basal frameworks are constructed in the complex, emotionally charged interplay of self, others, and institutions which begins long before we are capable of conceptualizing self, worth, persons, institutions, and the relations among them, and it shapes and delimits our conceptual schema. It begins long before we are capable of exercising agency, and it shapes and delimits our agentic capacities. The sculpting of basal understanding of self and worth happens in me, but it is not

31. One might object here, as an *Ethics* editor did, "the fact that a source of self-respect is political will not settle the extent of the agent's responsibility, if any, for failed self-respect. In some cases where the excusing cause is political, still, all things considered, one may judge that the individual should have done more to preserve self-respect and is to a degree blameworthy." However, while this objection does hold for evaluative and recognition self-respect, it misses the point regarding basal self-respect. For the point is not that the excusing cause of damaged basal self-respect is a political one (and, suppressed premise, a political cause obviates responsibility), but rather that what is damaged (by political causes) is basal self-respect, which, as the fundamental interpretive medium, is what makes it possible or impossible for one to do anything to build, preserve, receive support for, etc., the other two kinds of self-respect. I return to this point in the last section.

32. I draw here on the large body of work in philosophy and psychology on the social construction of emotion and personality, especially in connection with gender. In psychology, see, e.g., Kaschak; Travis; Brody and Hall; Unger and Crawford; Keith Oatley, "Social Construction in Emotions," in Lewis and Haviland, eds.; Doris Howard, ed., *The Dynamics of Feminist Therapy* (New York: Haworth, 1986); M. Butler, "Guidelines for Feminist Therapy," in *Handbook of Feminist Therapy*, ed. L. B. Rosewater and L. Walker (New York: Springer, 1985); Hannah Lerman, "The Limits of Phenomenology: A Feminist Critique of the Humanistic Personality Theories," in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Appraisals*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: Guilford, 1992); Rom Harre, ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). In philosophy, see, e.g., Bartky, "Shame and Gender"; Jaggar; Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing, 1983); Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (Boston: Reidel, 1983).

something I do. It is, moreover, not something that happens just “in me.” For basal frameworks are implicit in ways of being that are relational, interactional, institutionally structured and enacted. Basal frameworks, that is, are as much *ours* as mine.

Basal self-understanding is a natural interpretive response to the experiences of being a valued and valuable, or unvalued and valueless, person among others who are valued and valuable.<sup>33</sup> One context of framework construction is our experiential history of interactions with other people, particularly those with whom we have our earliest relationships. The basal sense of self is emotionally structured because construction begins in the interplay of powerful emotions constituting those early relationships. Long before we are capable of intellectually understanding self-worth, before we can examine, evaluate, and affirm or reject others’ responses to us, we experience, absorb, and “metabolize”<sup>34</sup> their love and acceptance, their joy in our existence and delight in what we are and do, or their indifference, disappointment, irritation, or disgust with us. One important source of secure positive basal self-respect is unconditional parental love.<sup>35</sup> In such love, if we’re lucky enough to get it, we first experience ourselves as unconditionally valuable, which is the core of basal self-respect. Without it, basal self-respect is starved and stunted from the start.

Now it may be obvious that self-understandings are not things we create all on our own in a social vacuum (though it is surprising how often this is suggested in the philosophical literature) and that our sense of worth is significantly shaped by how we are valued by others, especially certain others. But if we focus on family relationships, we still see self-respect as essentially personal, developing in the context of close personal relationships. It is essential to recognize that basal interpretive frameworks are also constructed in and by social, cultural, and political contexts, which for many categories of persons are contexts of oppression. And in such contexts, even unconditional parental love must manifest itself through the prism of oppression.<sup>36</sup> Where subordination and devaluation of a category of persons pervades social, cultural, and political reality, we should expect, other things equal,

33. I am indebted to Richmond Campbell for this point. The primordial human experience of being a valued and valuable person among valued and valuable persons is not only the experiential source for an individual’s basal, recognition, and evaluation self-respect but is also the ground of the very concepts of recognition and evaluative self-respect, which are socially constructed out of that collective experience, in light of other socially constructed (hence historically, culturally, and ideologically variable) concepts, such as personhood, personal identity, agency, the good life, and so on.

34. The term is Audre Lorde’s, in “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” in her *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1984).

35. See Thomas, *Living Morally*, chaps. 2 and 3.

36. I owe this way of putting the point to Laurence Thomas.

the respect such persons can have for themselves to be shaped in particular ways. Since a basic principle of male-dominant society is “what is female is worth less,” there is good reason to think that forces of social subordination are powerful molders and injurers of basal self-understanding of women in a male-dominant society. As over a quarter-century of feminist scholarship has painstakingly and painfully established, to grow up female in male-dominant society is to be immersed in a sea of discourses, practices, and interactions—including violent and abusive ones<sup>37</sup>—which saturate us with messages of devaluation, only some of which we explicitly recognize. Messages we cannot fully discern, comprehend, examine, and reject intellectually—perhaps because we haven’t yet developed the requisite intellectual tools—can invade and deform our psyches as we absorb, digest, and assimilate them into our deepest experiential self-understanding. Motifs of female worthlessness that structure and are enacted in social institutions and the contexts of everyday life thus can come to structure and be enacted in basal self-valuation. And since basal self-interpretation inevitably informs self-construction, then where the basal framework codes inferiority due to deep and longstanding forms of social oppression, the result of self-construction is a diminished self: women become the lesser beings the dominant worldview defines us to be.

The damage is further reinforced by myths about the private nature of deficient self-respect. Psychological oppression, which Sandra Bartky describes as “the internalization of intimations of inferiority,” is made effective through mystification, “the systematic obscuring of both the reality and agencies of psychological oppression so that its intended effect, the depreciated self, is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis.”<sup>38</sup> Anne, Beth, and Carissa experience damage as personal deficiency and futilely seek relief in personal reformation. They believe what criticisms of them (“irrational,” “weak-willed”) affirm, that it is their fault that they feel defective and can’t bring their emotions into line with beliefs and judgments about their human worth and merit which they know are well grounded. Such responses ignore and conceal the political dimensions of self-respect. Not only does mystification set up second-order self-castigation and shame that reinforces the original sense of diminishment, but it also generates the debilitating self-absorption that keeps individuals from identifying and struggling against the real causes of their plight.

I have written as if basal self-understanding were homogeneous, but that needn’t be the case; perhaps it rarely is. For an individual’s history of interactions and relationships may form a richly variegated

37. See Kaschak; Russo and Green; and Saakvitne and Pearlman.

38. Bartky, “Psychological Oppression,” p. 23.

tapestry, and the sociopolitical realities in which she participates may be complexly multiplicitous; these circumstances may yield an array of basal interpretative frameworks, which could be variations on a theme or mutually inconsistent. In the construction of a particular individual's self and self-respect, one framework might dominate, many might interact in various ways or even shift kaleidoscopically. Perhaps one child's first and enduring experience of herself as unqualifiedly mattering to those who matter most to her immunizes her against social devaluation or empowers her to struggle effectively against it, while another's experiences may be not fully coherent, which may translate into ambivalence and inconsistency at the basal level or between levels.

I have called Anne, Beth, and Carissa's first-order emotions "anomalous," but in a real sense they are not, for feelings of inadequacy, defectiveness, and being wronged are appropriate for individuals living a subordinated-group existence. Their emotions, that is, disclose the prevailing devaluation and subordination of women in a patriarchal society. But the divergence of emotions and beliefs recapitulates ambiguities in the sociopolitical valuing of women, that is, contradictions between the official story of equality and the devaluation actually instantiated in the myriad circumstances of women's lives. Of one truth about their value as persons these women have an intellectual understanding; another they absorbed at the basal level and understand experientially. They believe what they are supposed to believe about themselves, but they also feel what they are supposed to feel. Realized in the configuration of their basal self-understanding and playing out emotionally is "the 'generalized condition of dishonor' which is women's lot in sexist society."<sup>39</sup>

## V

Can damaged self-respect be transformed? What can be done to prevent damage and enable individuals to develop strong, appropriate self-respect? Such questions are not easy to answer; I can make only a few speculative suggestions.

First, just as it is important to recognize that, in contexts where devaluation of women is systematic and pervasive, individual women are likely to suffer damage at the basal level, so it is important to recognize that other forces affect self-respect for better and worse and play out differently in different individuals. I have focused on gender, but subordination occurs along axes of race, class, ethnicity, sexual

39. Bartky, "Shame and Gender," p. 85. The phrase in single quotes she attributes to Hussein Abdulahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (New York: Plenum, 1985), p. 122.

orientation, age, religion, and so on ad nauseam, which form interlocking systems of oppression that affect different individuals differently and are structured on multiple levels: personal biography, the group or community level, and the level of social institutions.<sup>40</sup> An individual may experience devaluing subordination along some axes but not others, more on some levels than others; privileging along some axes may mute or recast devaluation experienced along others; affirmation on one level may stave off denigration at another.<sup>41</sup> Differences among individuals in the histories of construction and current configurations of basal frameworks make an easy, “one-size-fits-all” fix unlikely. Nor is there likely to be a simple way to prevent damage, other than the simple-to-say solution of transforming society so that all individuals can grow up valuing themselves unconditionally, a “solution” which gives little practical advice for supporting self-respect here and now. If amelioration is possible, it will have to attend to the details of contexts in which damage develops and plays out.

Now, pessimism. Insofar as damaged self-respect arises from a basal interpretation that codes lesser worth, and insofar as basal frameworks structure conceptual, emotional, and behavioral possibilities for self-perception, self-valuation, and self-construction, deformed basal being toward oneself may be infeasible and insistently self-reinforcing. It may be that basal self-understanding precludes individuals’ doing anything to alter that understanding and that the interpretive framework transforms all ameliorative attempts into reinforcement. It may be, that is, that the damage is permanent.

Nevertheless, insofar as damage is not destruction and individuals are not wholly constituted by their subordination or damaged self-respect, there may yet be resources and power for remediation. Where basal self-understanding is deformed, what is needed is for a more adequate interpretative framework to become operative. Let me suggest three ways this might happen. First, inasmuch as both strong and damaged basal self-respect play out in emotions, it may be that reconfiguring basal frameworks requires emotional work. In particular, unconditional love may not only engender and sustain strong basal self-respect but ameliorate damage as well. But it is unlikely that one could love oneself into self-respect.<sup>42</sup> For the person who is urged to

40. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 225, 227.

41. It is important to note (as one reviewer did) that when gender works together with other factors—for example, race or ethnicity—being female might in fact make one less liable to damaged self-respect. With regard to race and ethnicity, however, I’ve found no evidence to support this hypothesis and much that suggests the opposite. See, e.g., the essays in Lillian Comas-Díaz and Beverly Greene, eds., *Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 1994).

42. For two claims that one can and must love oneself into self-respect, see Lorde, pp. 172–75; and Collins, pp. 107–13.

love herself into self-respect is precisely the one whose deep interpretation of her self is “unlovable.” One might call on basal self-respect to support recognition self-respect threatened by oppression, but a prescription of self-loving to heal the basal sense of oneself as unlovable is a cruel Catch-22. But where I cannot love myself to self-respect, perhaps we can. As basal self-respect first takes shape in the context of emotional relationships, so some damage may be ameliorated through loving relationships attuned to particularities and contextuality of self-respect predicaments.

Here lies a second suggestion: inasmuch as basal frameworks are implicit in ways of being in the world, it may be that changing one’s way of being in the world can effect a framework change that yields an improved way of being with oneself. A change from a self-obsessive mode to one that centrally involves attentive care for others—a valuing-others way of being—might make valuing oneself a real possibility. Taking on the responsibility to help others climb out of the depths may result in one’s having climbed out with them.

Finally, since basal self-understanding is constructed in and reflects prevailing sociopolitical contexts, improving the contexts may yield improved self-understanding. In particular, it may be that active political engagement with others to eliminate or transform social forces responsible for deforming self-respect can bring about situations in which more adequate normative identities and self-understandings are possible.<sup>43</sup> In blurring the boundaries between “me” and “we” and between emotion and politics, replacing the view of self-respect as a private, personal phenomenon with one that stresses our collective responsibility for the self-respect of all of us, we may find what each of us needs to flourish.

43. See Susan Babbitt, “Feminism and Objective Interests: The Role of Transformation Experiences in Rational Deliberation,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).