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## **‘Having faith in your self’ Self-respect and human dignity**

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*Tsotsi*

The South African winner of an Academy Award, ‘Tsotsi’<sup>1</sup>, deals with the hard life of a gang member in a township – ‘a place without hope, where life has no meaning and survival is the only thing that matters’, as the movie-trailer tells us. His life changes however, as soon as after hijacking a car he discovers a baby on the backseat and takes it home with him. Until then he is leading a life of despair, violence and rivalry, in which he tries to forget the traumas of his past and has no hope for the future. Orphaned at early age, (his mother died on AIDS) he survives by robbing and killing. In one scène, after an outbreak of heavy violence after he was asked about his past, one of Tsotsi’s gang members explains to a rival thug that ‘Tsotsi never went to school. He doesn’t understand decency.’ Then he asks the rival: ‘Do you know about that, Fela? Decency? Can you even spell it?’ It is a key scène in the movie. Decency stands for dignity, the sense of human worth as self-respect. Tsotsi’s story is about the way he gains esteem for himself.

Tsotsi is not a realistic film but a modern myth, a 21st century *Bildungsroman* for the globalized world, situated in a South African township. A theatrical imagination of what a human being needs, and which powers and resources he has in himself, to enter from the the bottom line of humanity into the moral community, and become a dignified member of it ( even though that means, as in Tsotsi’s case, being arrested for murder).

Gavin Hood, the movie’s director, says that the story is about ‘redemption, forgiveness, exploring your own identity, trying to become a self-aware person instead of just hiding behind some mask or either anger or shyness or whatever it is.’ Self-awareness does not stand here for self-consciousness in a cognitive sense of the word, but for moral self-esteem and self-respect: being aware of the fact that you are a human being equal to other human beings, that you are to be kept responsible for your own deeds, that you have plans and projects to

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<sup>1</sup> Tsotsi as a character represents the tsotsi (= gangster) culture in townships in general. Cf. the contribution of MacMaster in this volume.

be respected. To be self-aware here means to be conscious of your own human worth.

Ttotsi is a story about individual self-realization under tough conditions. It explains perhaps a part the world wide success of the movie. It is not only about a boy who, though sunken deep, sinks on the bottom of his soul a new well of human worth, but also about the definition modern culture gives of it: being an individual, responsible agent, equal to others. Only those capable of meeting these conditions are entitled to understanding, love, respect and a fair trial when they trespass the laws of the moral community.

Though Tsotsi is undeniable South-African, Gavin Hood intended to make a universal movie about what it means to become human. ‘These themes of redemption and forgiveness and so on are universal and timeless,’ he says. But the story is not about you and me in general. It is not about youngsters growing up in a harmonious and prosperous family, loved by their parents, capable of discovering and developing their aspirations and talents. The story is about young people who don’t have the resources and the means to believe in themselves. The conditions they grew up in, deprived them of self-respect, labeled by John Rawls as a ‘primary social good’. That is why they cannot be ‘self aware persons’, as Hood puts it, but are driven by anger and shyness. They are worthless in their own eyes, because they believe to be worthless in the eyes of others.

In this paper I want to explore the notion of self-respect as an essential mark of human dignity. What exactly is this *self* that deserves respect, and what does the *respecting* of this self mean? How people can acquire self-respect, if they never had it?

### *Dignity and self-respect- a social construction*

Charles Taylor defines dignity as ‘the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us’. (Taylor 1989, 15) Someone with dignity deserves respect. Historically, the meaning of dignity is closely related to the concept of honor (cf. Tsotsi’s ‘decency’). Dignity belongs to the discourse of social morality, which defines someone’s status and merits within a community. Who owes dignity, merits its praise, who has lost her, its blame.

In modern times dignity (1) has been *personalised*, by becoming less and less a taken for granted possession based on social standing. Honor is seen as essentially personal. (Kekes 2002, 109v.) Dignity and worth are obtained on the basis of personal talents and achievements, highly estimated by modern culture. That makes dignity far deeper rooted in the personality, than it was in the aristocratic past. Under modern conditions dignity has become a *moral* concept, more than a social one, and self-esteem en self-respect the subjective expression of individual worth. (Kekes 2002, 113)

Dignity not only personalized, but also (2) *universalized*. In the human rights tradition and the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) dignity does no longer depend on one's social status within a concrete community, but is based on the fact that one is a human being, whether understood a rational agent (Kant) or as a creature of God. Dignity transcends membership because one is a member of the family of humankind. Being a human being suffices for having human dignity.

The possible tension and discrepancy between the factual dignity a concrete community attributes to an individual and the dignity *de iure*, independent of social recognition, is the result of a long process of individualization, with roots in Judaism and Christianity. Even when / as it occurs in the Hebrew prophetic tradition – individuals are expelled from their community, they may keep their self-respect. The community might be wrong. You may be right in the name of a better community, and God may be on your side. Even when you don't get the social dignity you deserve, you owe your moral dignity nevertheless. This moral individualization must be considered a moral gain. People can claim their intrinsic human worth, despite its denial in their social communities.

However, the distinction between social and moral dignity should not be pushed to its extremes, as the different use of the concept of worth in modern culture may tempt us to do. (For the following see Dillon 1997, 227v.). On the one side, worth is *status worth*, and is derived from one's membership in a certain class, group, or people. As I put earlier, in the modern world, influenced by the human rights tradition and Christian faith, moral status worth is no longer attributed on the basis of a specific social status, but by the simple fact of being a member of the human race.

On the other side, worth is *merit*, the measure of quality of personal character and conduct, which we earn or lose through what we do and become. It is based on our abilities and talents, our successes and failings, our luck and misfortunes, which are acknowledged (or not) by our social environment. Referring to these different contexts of meaning of worth some authors make a conceptual distinction between self-respect and self-esteem. *Self-respect* is seen as the subjective *internalization* of the dignity belonging to status worth, *self-esteem* the internalization of social merit. Self-respect is an egalitarian notion, independent of personal achievement. Moral dignity is based on human equality as rational beings or creatures of God. Self-respect is a kind of *reverentia*, *Achtung* for the humanity (*Menschheit*) in our selves (Kant). Self-esteem however, is a meritocratic concept. People's achievements may vary enormously. The level of self-esteem depends not only on someone's talents and potentialities, but also on one's ambitions and the standards one imposes

oneself. High ambitions and little talents result in low self-esteem, low ambitions and many talents in high self-esteem.

### *Rawls and the conditions for self-respect*

However, by isolating self-esteem and self-respect in such a radical manner, the socially constructed character of morality is lost out of sight. Even the intrinsic dignity attributed in the human rights tradition and in Christianity is a socially constructed moral claim, dependent on the – how minimal it might be – support within concrete communities of law and/or faith.<sup>2</sup> Dignity that is not advocated by a community or a minority thereof, cannot subjectively be appropriated in an enduring way as self-respect.<sup>3</sup>

The moral philosopher John Rawls strongly contributed to draw the reflection on dignity and self-respect out of its splendid metaphysical isolation. Rawls pleads that the ability of individuals to respect themselves is heavily dependent on their social and political circumstances. Rawls views self-respect neither as the consciousness of something we are morally required to have and maintain, nor as a feeling we may have or not have of our socially recognized merit, but as an *entitlement* that social institutions are required by justice to support and not undermine. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971) he argues that self-respect, just as rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth, is a “primary good,” something that *rational beings want whatever else they want*, because it is vital to the experienced quality of individual lives and to the ability to carry out or achieve whatever projects or aims an individual might have. It is, moreover, a *social* good, one that individuals are able to acquire only under certain social and political conditions. Self-respect is a good to be distributed in a just way. Certain social, political and psychological conditions must be fulfilled, in order to realize self-respect. So self-respect is conditional. Rawls argues that individuals' access to self-respect is to a large degree a function of how the basic institutional structure of a society defines and distributes the social bases of self-respect.<sup>4</sup> He claims that self-respect – ‘perhaps the most important primary good’ (Rawls 1991, 440) – is a

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<sup>2</sup> The Church may be defined as the community of protest that, based on its faith in the resurrection of Jesus as God’s act of dignifying the despised, attributes human dignity to all those whom it is denied in the world.

<sup>3</sup> Both terms, self-respect and self-esteem, the moral and the psychological, we want to keep together in one discourse. Cf. Rawls 1971, 442: ‘... there should be for each person at least one community of shared interests to which he belongs and where he finds his endeavors confirmed by his associates.’

<sup>4</sup> These include ‘the messages about the relative worth of citizens that are conveyed in the structure and functioning of institutions, the distribution of fundamental political rights and civil liberties, access to the resources individuals need to pursue their plans of life, the availability of diverse associations and communities within which individuals can seek affirmation of their worth and their plans of life from others, and the norms governing public interaction among citizens.’ (Dillon, Robin S., "Respect", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2003 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2003/entries/respect/> )

prerequisite for a good life. How much one might collect of all the things that make lives attractive, without self-respect human life is not worthwhile. Without self-respect all desire or activity is empty and vain, and do we sink into apathy and cynicism. (Rawls 1997, 440)

What does self-respect include? Firstly, according to Rawls, 'a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out.' Secondly, self-respect implies "a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions" (Rawls 1971, 440). So good self-respect presupposes that

- (1) people do have plans with their lives they want to realize;
- (2) that they believe in being capable of that, in so far it depends on themselves,
- (3) that they strive for the realization of these deepest intentions is worthwhile.<sup>5</sup>

Two empirical conditions for good self-esteem should be fulfilled, according to Rawls:

- (1) having a rational plan of life in exercising of which we take pleasure<sup>6</sup> and
- (2) finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed.' (Rawls 1971,440)

So self-respect presupposes that people partake in communities where they confirm one another mutually in who they want to be. Without respect for and received from others no self-respect. It doesn't make sense preaching Tsotsi that he is created in the image of God, or reading Kant to him or proclaiming the South-African Constitution or the Declaration of Human Rights without the social recognition of his dignity. His self-respect cannot be isolated in a metaphysical safe haven, abstracted from the social context in which it is constructed.

Many theorists have acknowledge this social political condition of self-respect and elaborated on it. People should be members of a decent society, whose institutions do not humiliate people. (Margalit 1996) People's self-respect necessarily depends on the recognition of others and so is vulnerable to being

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<sup>5</sup> In the formulation of Yanal: 'A person will have a good self-esteem to the extent he believes his major qualities to have positive values, that is, to the extent he believes his goals are worth attaining, his abilities for attaining those goals are adequate, and his actual accomplishments are worthwhile.' (Yanal 1987, 364)

<sup>6</sup> That is the simplified content of Rawls's 'Aristotelian Principle' (Rawls 1971, 426): 'other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.'

misrecognized or ignored. (Honneth 1995) A number of theorists have used the concept of self-respect to examine the oppression of women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and other groups that are marginalized, stigmatized, or exploited by dominant cultures. (cf. Dillon 2003) They described a broad range of political instruments that should be developed in order to give these people their self-respect back.

### *Plans of life*

In the remainder of this paper however, I want to concentrate on the first, more 'psychological' condition Rawls mentions: on the connection between self-respect and having a rational plan of life. I doing so, I think he points to an essential ingredient of self-respect, that cannot be restored only by political top down instruments, but requires a balanced multi-dimensional approach.

Central to the development of self-respect is the broadening of the personal perspective of survivors like Tsotsi and his gang members. Only those will have a self-esteemed future, which are able to imagine one for themselves. From Josiah Royce, Rawls borrowed the conviction that 'a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan. Having a plan of life is a synonymous with having an identity. An individual says who he is by describing his purposes and causes, *what he intends to do with his life.*' (Rawls 1971, 408) If someone is aware in his purposes for life of all the relevant facts (among which his talents and limitations) and takes into careful consideration all the consequences, he has a *rational* plan of life. (Rawls 1971, 408).

At first sight, Rawls's idea of a plan of life looks a rather elitist notion, typical for white Anglo-Saxon higher educated middle class males, concerned about their professional career. Women for example evaluate their life course much more in terms of relationships than in terms of plans. (cf. Walker 2003). Severely deprived or traumatized groups and persons cannot afford rational life plans, they only have one concern: how to survive today. 'What they intend to do with their lives' – seems to be a luxurious exercise of self-reflection they seldom practice. Would Tsotsi and his friends ever meet that standard?

However, I still think that by linking self-respect to life planning Rawls expresses a valuable intuition, also imagined in Tsotsi's myth. I think Rawls is right in stipulating that people in some way or another need to develop a conscious care for 'what they intend to do with their lives' in order to estimate of respect themselves. Self-respect implies that people build up a relationship with themselves in time, and that they stand by themselves. This is what I mean when I say that people in order to obtain self-respect have to believe in themselves.

I want to elaborate that intuition a bit further by developing a little theory of the self and self-realization, based on Kierkegaard. We need theories of the self and self-realization that do not exclude people without the explicit conscious, long term life plans of university professors, but also cover the self of survivors. Having a plan of life is to care about what you intend to do with your life. A first presupposition in this context is that people do not only have relationships with others but also a relationship with themselves, in which the one with others is reflected. Some kind of differentiation in the self, expressed in the more or less conscious basal appreciation of the self, is implied.<sup>7</sup>

But how about the self that asks for self-respect?

### *The Constructed Self*

In modern philosophy three paradigmatic approaches of the self, labeled by Kupperman as the theory of Enduring Self, the No Self and the Constructed Self, can be distinguished. (for the following, see Kupperman 1991, 19 – 46) The theory of the Enduring Self claims that people carry a Self from the moment they are born until the moment they die (and for those who believe in a here after, from then on until eternity). They have to appropriate this self by becoming conscious of it. Despite the changes in our lives on the surface of our character and personality, a deeper, real self lies below, making that we stay the same person as we were. The theory not only solves the problem of continuity of personal identity ( I am the same person as the baby I once was and the old man I will be; Ricoeur's *mémeté*), but also makes plausible the immortality of the soul. We will stay who we are in eternity. Problematic in this theory however, is (1) that it hardly gives account of the fundamental changes that people can undergo during their course of life; (2) that it is inappropriate to reflect the uniqueness and authenticity of the self (identity as Ricoeur's *ipseité*). When my self lies ready for me in eternity, how about it being *my* self?; (3) that knowledge of this self is difficult to get. How can I know that I have an enduring self, and how do I get acquainted with it? Others perhaps declare that I have/am one, but I cannot discover one even in introspection. The metaphysical theory of self-respect that grounds the intrinsic worth of human being in an eternal essence defends the Enduring Self. Kant reminds of that theory, though in his view it is not my authentic self but humanity in me, that deserves my awesome respect.

Another solution of the problem of the self is by denying its existence. The theory of No Self is defended by Buddhism, but also by empirical philosophers who follow David Hume. The self is an illusion, the latter writes in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739/ 1740), it is 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions.' (Hume 1969, 300) Empirically we can discover neither

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dillon's definition of basal self-respect: 'an appreciative mode of being toward and with oneself and the world -with regard to one's worth.' (Ethics, 228).

unity nor continuity in the constantly changing flux of psychical experiences, on the basis of which something like an integrating self might be taken for granted. However, despite its intellectual clarity, the problem in this approach lays in its counterintuitive relationship with ordinary social practice and language (even that of Buddhists). People somehow manage to have selves. (Kupperman 1991, 39) Morally, we are forced to defend people's individual responsibility for their actions, even those executed yesterday. By declaring someone a self we acknowledge the fact that, whatever the changes during a life course, he can be kept accountable for being the same person over time. If he is mentally healthy, he himself is ready to do that.

How can we recognize the problems of No Self, without falling back upon the Enduring Self? A third approach is more convincing: the self is a construction, build up during a life time. The Constructed Self starts in early youth very primitively as a kind of frame work in which experiences are labeled as *our* experiences. The childish self is a 'place-marker' (Kupperman (1991, 40)). It integrates experiences in a more or less connection. It says: this here is me and that is not me (anymore). It is, borrowing Kant, like 'the "I think" that accompanies all my representations'. The early I has a transcendental status: it cannot be experienced itself, but precedes all my experiences by making them possible. The first self is a kind of shadow that accompanies my acting and thinking.

However, this is just the first self; its story just starts. Growing up, it is not satisfied with a place in the shade. It does not only accompany my thinking and acting, but invests itself in them as well, by processes of identification. Its yesterday memories are the basis for its plans and projects for tomorrow, and they are on their turn the material for those of the day after tomorrow. The self invests itself in its biography. It becomes a personality, acquires character. In developing the self gets a dual character. It not only stands for the integrating instance of experiences, but also for the experiences themselves, in which it is involved. One may say with Kierkegaard: 'the self is a relation which relates itself to its own self.' (Kupperman 1991, 40, cf. Kierkegaard 1941, ch. 1). The self is neither thing nor substance. It is the relation in which someone relates himself to the substance of his life. A relation however, that only can reveal itself in the choices and commitments in which a self expresses its attitude toward its own concrete life.

The Constructed Self is being build up during its life course. It starts with almost nothing, and it cannot be said how en with how much it will end. One may call the raw material from which the early self constructs itself a – as Kupperman coins it – *proto self*, a loosely structured 'psychological field', with characteristic mental or neuro-physiological properties. This psychological field develops in directions fitting the tendencies in child's nature. It develops habits and characteristic attitudes. Singularity is unmistakable, however,

without the authenticity of a relatedness to itself. Until this moment the theory of Enduring Self claims a justified support: already as a child every human being possesses a self; however: a primary, a *proto self* that is likely to develop during the years into a more or less complex constructed self. Let's call this self a First Self.

How people develop from childhood till adulthood and what their constructed selves eventually look like, depends on what happens in their life course. Did they have life time and chances to make something out of themselves? Were the required primary conditions (food and shelter, intimacy and safety) fulfilled? Did they experience traumas? Did they acknowledge their talents and limitations? Though the self construction process varies according to individual differences, it is not an individual affair. It is also structured by normative cultural expectations imposed on self definitions and -ideals. Nobody creates him – or herself *ex nihilo*. The self's substance is for a large part socially constructed by compelling cultural frame works. Gender, religion, class and culture are constitutive factors in becoming a constructed self.

### *Minimal persons*

How diverging the cultural or social setting of self-construction may be, people always develop a kind of First Self. All over the world people distinguish themselves as separated individuals, with a unique time-space continuity and unity. They all develop a subjective perspective on reality, in which their experiences (head ache for example, or anger) are theirs and not belonging to others. Even if they don't develop more than a proto self, they possess the First Self that deserves the dignity of each member of the human family. Self-respect however, has only a chance to develop in those minds that are able to relate themselves to themselves within communities.

Rawls wants to reserve self-respect for those with 'rational life plans'. I suppose that self-respect is much more widespread and common: wherever and whenever people get *concerned about how their lives go* they develop self-respect, because from then on they have a Second Self: they developed a relationship with the substance of their lives, their constructed selves.

Decisive here is not conscious planning for the future, but basal self-differentiation in the self. Out of concern for the day of tomorrow, people, transcending the momentary character of their survivalism, imagine themselves in time. They then initiate a rudimentary form of self-representation, by imagining who they were yesterday and wondering if tomorrow they will be able to be the same as they were today. This is an almost universal feature of the homo sapiens, Owen Flanagan assumes: people have intentions, develop self-images, are actively and consciously concerned about the continuation of their own lives on short and longer term. In every

culture, under any conditions, these are the minimal qualities of human beings as persons. We might call them ‘minimal persons’. Minimal persons are full human beings who ‘*care how their lives go*, and this involves caring about the satisfaction of their desires over time, which in turn involves epistemic guidance of behavior.’ (Flanagan 1991, 64)

The concern for the first necessities of life invites people to develop an enduring self-representation which stretches itself in time. They have to evaluate the self they were yesterday, make plans in order to become the self that they want to be tomorrow. ‘Minimal persons’ normally don’t have rational life plans, and they don’t need them either to live the life of a complete self. They may be expressing the care for themselves in a ‘nexus of plans’ and projects to which they commit themselves (Flanagan 1991, 68), rather than in an overall career plan.<sup>8</sup>

### *Self-realization*

The survivor is an example of a ‘minimal person’. Though he does not commit himself to long term projects, he possesses a Second Self, because he cares how his life goes. He has, no better: he is a relation to himself. In his self-concern lies the germ for his self-respect. His self-respect however only can develop, if he takes his (second) self seriously. The extent of self-respect – here we take a second step in the argument – depends on the extent to which the Second Self realizes itself in a more or less conscious way. Self-respect implies the desire for self-realization.

Writing about *Self-Fulfillment*, Alan Gewirth argues (1998, 13) that it starts with distinctiveness, care for the future and self-differentiation. ‘The self that enters into self-fulfillment is a continuing or enduring embodied entity that is aware of itself as a distinct person, that can anticipate the future for itself, and that has desires on which it can reflect.’ In order to ‘fulfill’ your self, Gewirth states, you have to evaluate your own care ‘for how your life goes’ in the light of your so called second order desires. (Gewirth 1998, 13)<sup>9</sup> Self-realization implies that one’s concern for the future is carried by goals and ideals that transcend today’s survival.

In other words: anybody who cares about tomorrow has a self, anyone who cares about the day after tomorrow is practicing self-realization. ‘After tomorrow’ stands for the future still beyond reach, an abstract extrapolation of our deepest desires rather than of our self-control. Yet I think this is what Rawls really meant when he argued that having a rational life plan of life is an

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<sup>8</sup> The philosopher Isaiah Berlin accentuated in an interview on the occasion of his 88th birthday, that he ‘never ever made plans for his life. I just did one thing after another and used the possibilities that arrived. In fact, I lead an unplanned life.’ (cited by Baars 2006, 223)

<sup>9</sup> ‘It can evaluate these desires on the basis of second order desires that take account of its relevant abilities and capacities.’ (Gewirth 1998, 13)

empirical condition for self-respect. Only that person has self-respect who 'intends to do something with his life.' (cf. Rawls 1971, 408) Only those have self-respect, who commit themselves to the day after tomorrow. They have plans with their lives; they want to be enduring selves of certain quality. How life plans look like, will differ according to social and cultural contexts and vary individually. Care for the future of your child, the desire to become a saint, making a career, short term, long term – in any case: persons who are making plans, possess second order ideals that require permanent commitment.

In Tsotsi's myth it is the care for a child that awakens his time perspective. It makes him remembering his past, the care he received of his mother. It makes him hope for a future with the woman that is ready to take over the care for the baby. One may find the plot of the story incredibly melodramatic: the tough guy, clumsy caring for a little baby. The link between care and self-respect becomes more plausible when one does not read the picture of Tsotsi returning home to feed the baby spatially (how softening...) but in time perspective: as soon he yields for the moral appeal made by a fragile and dependent human being, he is no longer a survivor. He wants the other to be living tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and thus will be caring for how his own life goes on, in order to care for the baby. The concern for others makes someone faithful to one self.

In this second order desire to survive today for being able to care tomorrow lays the germ for self-realization. On the basis of the projected Self who one really intends to be, self-knowledge will be developed. Today's self (Self on time 0) will be judged in the light of the self that one wants to be tomorrow and the day after tomorrow (S on t1, t2, t3...tx). One will grow in self-esteem, but also be ashamed of oneself when the real existing self does not meet the standards of the ideal one.

### *Having faith in your self*

Decisive condition for developing self-respect is having some future perspective. Without the imagination of a probable future self, one cannot appropriate the task of self-realization as a personal mission. Self-realization is no luxurious privilege for an intellectual and cultural elite, but the expression of an elementary human desire to endure as a person. One's humanity is qualified by the fact that one can be a 'purposive agent' (Gewirth). Self-respect is the positive relation people maintain with their own purposiveness. It implies that they believe in themselves: in that their plans are worthwhile to be carried out, but also in their abilities to get them realized. 'To have self-esteem is to have a secure sense of one's own merits, and thus includes having the conviction that one's plans and purposes are worthwhile and that one has the ability to carry them out.' (Gewirth 1998, 95)

Though a prerequisite of a good human life, self-respect does not say anything yet about the moral quality of the communities in which it is sustained and promoted. In that sense, self-respect is a non moral notion. Self-respect requires further moral qualifications in order to make it good: ultimately, only good communities can promote good self-respect.

One does not get born with self-esteem, its conditions are to be met and fulfilled. Self-respect as a primary social good needs politics and economics, justice and daily bread. But in order to be appropriated subjectively, it also needs pedagogy. One needs to appropriate the grammar of social life, develop insight in the fact that ends can become means to other ends, to develop knowledge of one's own talents and limitations - in order to get self-aware and self-confident. 'Tsotsi never went to school. He doesn't understand decency, can't even spell it.' If care for and being cared by others was his existential condition for self-respect, education is the one for his self-realization. It helps to develop a time perspective, the awareness that there is not only today to care how your life goes, but also a tomorrow and a day after tomorrow. A theory of self-realization, which includes a concept of self-differentiation (Kierkegaard) as well as self-development, perhaps offers a plausible framework that makes clear what are the empirical conditions of self-respect.

A final remark in conclusion. Kierkegaard makes a distinction between two ways in which one may relate one self to oneself. One may have faith in oneself, or one may be despairing about oneself. Having faith in oneself implies that people consciously choose, with passion and energy, to take up the relation to the substance of one's life as a task to fulfill. They take responsibility for their particular life, with its possibilities and limitations. This act of ethical self-realization has nothing to do with someone's well to do ness. Servants and barbers, ministers and sales men – it does not matter, according to Kierkegaard, how big your starting capital as an 'empirical self' is. Decisive for your dignity is not the extent of privileges, but the passion with which someone relates to one self and commits itself to its particularity. Being in despair means, consciously or unconsciously, not wanting to take up the challenge of living a life course.

In a philosophical vocabulary, Kierkegaard is retranslating here the Christian concept of vocation. People's dignity does not lay in their rationality nor in their social merits, but in the fact that they are called by God to live their lives before God together with others. Their self-respect is derived from his vocation. Theologically, belief in your own human dignity may be regarded as a form of implicit religion. Having faith in your self is having faith in God.

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