

# Self-respect, Self-esteem and the Demands of Justice

**Abstract.** The paper takes as its starting point John Rawls's claim that the social bases of self-respect is perhaps the most important primary good the distribution of which is governed by his principles of justice. There has been some debate about this claim in the literature and this debate has included important clarifications regarding the concept(s) involved. However, I think this discussion hasn't gone deep enough and this – relative – lack of depth has or at least might have important implications for our theory of distributive justice. To show this, I begin with Rawls's admittedly sketchy remarks about the significance of self-respect in his theory. After this I briefly describe the debate that followed: what emerges here is a distinction between two kinds of self-respect. While I think this distinction is in good order, I also think and subsequently argue, building on the work of Robin Dillon and Anna Bortolan, that it only scratches the surface of the complex phenomenon of self-respect. In particular, as these authors show, the self-respect complex is, in fact, a multi-layered phenomenon and the distinction as used misses its fundamental level: basal self-respect (Dillon) or self-esteem (Bortolan). In the finishing part of the paper I discuss these two proposals to show that Bortolan's version is the better one. All this then has clear relevance for the adjoining debate in political philosophy: all those who want to give an important role to self-respect in their theory of justice have potentially focused on the wrong target so far. This, I conclude, might well give rise to a new feminist critique of liberal egalitarian justice.

**Keywords:** John Rawls, primary good, self-respect, self-esteem, emotion, existential feeling, Anna Bortolan, Robin Dillon

## I. “Perhaps the most important primary good” – John Rawls on self-respect

John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness is, without doubt, the most influential theory in Anglo-American political philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This much is a platitude and so it is that Rawls's work has generated, over the decades, a small industry of commentary and critical scholarship. One (relatively) small part of this work has focused on Rawls's notion of self-respect and the important role, according to Rawls himself, the notion plays in his theory of justice. Here is how Rawls (1971, 440; cf. 1971, 107, 340; 1993, 318-9; 1999a, 386) puts the point originally:

“We may define self-respect ... to have two aspects. First of all ... it includes a person's sense of his own value [understood as] his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfil one's intentions.

When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavours. It is clear then why self-respect is a primary good. Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them ... Therefore the parties in the original position would wish to avoid at almost any cost the social conditions that undermine self-respect.”

A ‘primary good’ for Rawls, is an essential component of, and means to, every person’s ability to freely choose and effectively pursue some conception of the good life (in later work, after Rawls’s turn to the ‘political’, this has become the ability to live as free and equal persons in political society) (Rawls 2001, 58-9). There are several primary goods, among them income, wealth, opportunities and the basic liberties. But, as the above quote shows, the social bases of self-respect – not self-respect itself since that is a personal, psychological matter that cannot be distributed by the institutions of the basic structure of society<sup>1</sup> – enjoy a special role. This is because, as Rawls puts it above, they determine both our *capacity* to pursue our conception of the good life as well as our *confidence* to carry out this pursuit. As Rawls sums up his claim: “Without [self-respect] nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them”.

Rawls’s striking claim about the outstanding importance of the social bases of self-respect has naturally led to discussion on (1) what exactly is included in the notion of self-respect, and on (2) what the distributive implications of a properly understood concept of self-respect are. I aim to contribute to this discussion primarily by taking the discussion further with respect to (1) but I will also offer some remarks regarding (2). Of course, it is not, nor can it be, my aim here to do this on the basis of a detailed account of what went on (and is still going on)

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<sup>1</sup> The basic structure includes “the political constitution and principal economic and social arrangements”. See Rawls (1993: 258, 282-3).

in the debate. Luckily, only one part of the debate is important for me: that, regarding (1), it was soon established that Rawls hasn't disambiguated two different accounts of self-respect and that, regarding (2), this has detrimental consequences for his theory of distributive justice.

In particular, a distinction has been drawn between what I will call recognition and evaluative self-respect and this has given rise to the 'standard critique' of the Rawlsian approach (as Stark (2012) dubs this objection). Rawls, recall, needs the social bases of self-respect as a primary good (most important or not; for now we can set this matter aside and return to it later) since it is these goods the distribution of which is governed by his principles of justice. That is, if Rawls is right, the provision of self-respect becomes a matter of justice and the institutions of the basic structure of society can be judged on the basis whether they sustain self-respect. Rawls then argues that this is indeed so in the system he has devised.<sup>2</sup> The critics, however, disagree. They argue that Rawls is wrong for the (social bases of) self-respect he identifies as a primary good is not the (social bases of) self-respect his system is devised to distribute: namely, Rawls, in the quoted passage above, identifies evaluative self-respect as the relevant primary good but his distributive system targets instead recognition self-respect.<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this paper is not take side in this debate. While I think this distinction is in good order, I also think, building on the work of Robin Dillon and Anna Bortolan, that it only scratches the surface of the complex phenomenon of self-respect. In particular, as, in particular, Dillon shows and I reproduce in section II, the self-respect complex is, in fact, a multi-layered phenomenon and the distinction as used misses its fundamental level: basal self-respect (Dillon) or self-esteem (Bortolan). In the final substantial part of the paper (section III) I will discuss these two proposals to show that Bortolan's version is superior in explanatory power to Dillon's. All this then has clear relevance for the adjoining debate in political philosophy: all

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of how this happens, see Shue (1975); Cohen (1989); Wolff (1998).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion – sympathetic or critical – of this argument, see Thomas (1978); McKinnon (2003); Eyal (2005); Doppelt (2009); Labukt (2009); Moriarty (2009); McTernan (2013); Stark (2012); Schemmel (2019).

those who want to give an important role to self-respect in their theory of justice have, it seems, focused on the wrong target so far. Moreover, this conclusion, as I briefly point out in section IV, might well give rise to a new feminist critique of Rawlsian justice.

## II. Two kinds of self-respect – and a third one

Let me first briefly describe the basic distinction in question.<sup>4</sup> *Recognition self-respect* involves an “understanding of oneself as having intrinsic worth and moral status just in virtue of being a person, and of the moral constraints that personhood entails” (Dillon 2001, 66). Personhood has intrinsic worth, at least in the Western tradition, in virtue of three things: equality, agency, and individuality. Accordingly, we can distinguish ‘interpersonal recognition self-respect’ that consists in seeing ourselves as persons of equal dignity. The corresponding emotion when this form of recognition self-respect is violated is resentment – this is standardly defined as anger felt on being wronged in a way that affronts one’s dignity. The second form of recognition self-respect, based on the agential aspect of personhood, is ‘agentic recognition self-respect’. This includes “taking seriously one’s responsibilities as persons, especially the responsibility to manifest one’s dignity as a person” (Ibid.). Finally, ‘personal recognition self-respect’ “involves appreciating the importance of being one’s own person by striving to live according to a conception of a life that defines and befits one as the particular person one is.” (Ib.) In both these latter forms, the emotion that enacts recognition self-respect is shame understood as a self-protective emotion<sup>5</sup>: it is a warning “that one’s worth and identity are threatened by failure (real or apparent) to live up to one’s standards and expectations as a person (agent, individual).”

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<sup>4</sup> I follow here Dillon (1997, 228-232) and (2001, 66-7) who, like many others, builds primarily on Darwall (1977). In the general literature on self-respect the most relevant references are: Telfer (1968); Hill (1973); Hudson (1980); Sachs (1981); Massey (1983); Middleton (2006). These authors all accept the distinction, although they might use different terminology. (A notable exception is Meyers (1995) who attempts to provide a unified account of self-respect.) In his later work Rawls acknowledges the distinction but tries to steer clear of it (he proposes to use the term ‘self-worth’ to steer clear of the problem). See Rawls (1999b), p. 260

<sup>5</sup> There is another form of shame in the literature and we will come to that soon.

*Evaluative self-respect*, as the qualifier gives away, consists in taking up a certain evaluative stance towards our self.<sup>6</sup> This stance consists in a certain normative self-conception and evaluative self-respect expresses our confidence in our merit based on this self-conception. “Evaluative self-respect contains the judgment that one is or is becoming the kind of person one thinks one should be or wants to be, or more significantly, that one is not or is not in danger of becoming the sort of person one thinks one should not be or wants not to be” (Ibid. 67). In contrast with recognition self-respect which is an inherently moral concept, our evaluative ideals can be both moral and non-moral. The relevant emotional reaction to diminished evaluative self-respect is another form of shame: when the way we see ourselves as we actually are clashes with the way we would like ourselves to be, we regard our self as less worthy or unworthy of evaluative self-respect and this gives rise to the emotional response of shame. On the other hand, when we hold, upon evaluation, that our worth (merit) is confirmed because our actual self is in line (or even supersedes) our normative self-conception, it is appropriate for us to feel pride.<sup>7</sup>

More could, of course, be said about this distinction and how its different elements exactly play out.<sup>8</sup> But, as foretold, my focus in this paper is different. For, whichever way the distinction is constructed, I think that by focusing on it, we miss important features of the complex phenomenon we are dealing with. I think already Rawls’s sketchy remarks about the importance of self-respect point in the direction that something fundamental is missing from

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of self-respect is often dubbed in the literature ‘self-esteem’ but I am unsure about this move and therefore do not make use of it here. It is an open question what exactly separates self-respect and self-esteem and, as far as I can tell, there is no consensus on this in the literature. I think what is clear is that self-esteem is an affective phenomenon, whereas self-respect is more on the cognitive side. Psychologists seem to agree, see Roland & Foxx (2003). For philosophical discussion of the possible differences, see Sachs (1981); Dillon (2013).

<sup>7</sup> No doubt, much more should be said about these emotions. What I think is important to note is that shame is an emotion that is not exclusive of the self-respect complex. See, for example, Zagzebski’s (2004), pp. 153-9 analysis of what she calls the sense of obligation in which shame (and guilt) figure prominently. Another point to note is that living up to one’s standards might, if those standards involve a minimum level, lead to contentment and self-acceptance and not pride. See Dillon (1997), p. 231 fn. 16.

<sup>8</sup> One matter is that, orthogonal to the distinction between the two kinds of self-respect, there is the distinction between the empirical (psychological) and normative version of the concepts: it seems clear that one can have self-respect of either kind, although one shouldn’t have them. As Schemmel (2019), p. 634 points out, this distinction is a particularly important one for Rawlsians and, more generally, for theories of justice.

our analysis (it is perhaps not without reason that the clause ‘most important’ in Rawls’s claim about the social bases of self-respect has not been given the attention it deserves in the literature). Rawls says, recall, that “Without [self-respect] nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them”. I find it hard to believe that the distinction at hand is able to give us the material that can fulfil this fundamental orientation function. For one thing, which type of self-respect would have this function and why not the other? Or if somehow the two together do this, then how exactly do they ‘cooperate’? For another, if there is any kind of hierarchical structure here present, then it is more likely that recognition self-respect is more basic and not evaluative self-respect that clearly figures in Rawls’s quoted remarks.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps most importantly, I find it hard to believe that self-respect, in either form presented here, could do the job. We need, it seems to me, something less intellectualized and reflexive; we need something more primordial, basic and underlying. Something, in short, that exists below the conscious surface constituted by self-respect of either the recognitional or evaluative kind.

Of course, these are only speculative remarks. Is there any ‘hard’ evidence? For many years now Robin Dillon has argued that there is. Her argument centres on the existence of recalcitrant anomalous emotions of people who, as she puts it, “know but cannot feel their worth” (Dillon 1997, 227). She gives three examples but I will only reproduce here one of them – namely, the case of Anne (Ibid. 232-3):

“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

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<sup>9</sup> It is often claimed that recognition self-respect is the basis for evaluative self-respect, see e.g. Darwall (1977), p. 193. There is also some agreement from the psychology side, see Roland & Foxx (2003), p. 271. The claim appears reasonable since it is hard to believe that one could have a normative self-conception without understanding oneself as a person of moral worth.

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 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."

Although Dillon doesn't point this out, I think it is clear that Anne has what is normally called 'impostor syndrome' (although the syndrome exists also among men, it is much more typical among women).<sup>10</sup> What is the problem with Anne? It is that her first-order beliefs are not in line with her first-order emotions: she, rightly, believes (in fact: knows) that her life is in line with her normative self-conception, i.e., she should feel (evaluative) self-respect, she should

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<sup>10</sup> Bortolan (2018), p. 70 fn. 9 also makes this point and provides references. We will come to her important analysis later.

feel proud and self-accepting, yet she doesn't. Instead, she feels (second-order) shame at what she considers to be her failure to have the right (first-order) emotional response. What is more, this is not an episodic phenomenon for Anne: the incongruity between her emotional response and her belief (knowledge) doesn't go away; it is "persistent, even recalcitrant, impervious to rational criticism, argument, and reconceptualization" (Ibid. 234). And the effect on Anne's life is, or at least we can imagine it to be, damaging, even debilitating (if it continues unimpeded).

What is the explanation for Anne's case? As Dillon points out, one could be irrationality, and, moreover, this would be an explanation that introduces no new element in our picture. The point would simply be that Anne's emotional reaction is not rationally appropriate since her emotions, construed as involving a cognition (belief or judgment), would involve a belief that either contradicts her avowed belief in her own worth or would be a belief that doesn't fit its - what is typically called - formal object (Dillon speaks instead of the emotion's 'tracking reality'). Dillon's response is that the first scenario doesn't apply to Anne's case. She points out that its truth would require that we discount Anne's avowed beliefs or posit disavowed beliefs as her true beliefs, neither of which looks like a sensible idea. Moreover, Anne's continuous struggle to bring her emotions in line with her avowed beliefs shows that these are her real beliefs, Dillon submits (and I agree).

How about the second scenario? One option here is that Dillon thinks that this doesn't apply to Anne's case because her lack of pride is not an emotion proper. I am not sure. It is clear from the description of Anne's case that Dillon construes this as an affective state with a belief content: "she feels wholly inadequate and undeserving: each success feels like a fluke, those who praise her are only being nice." Can we talk about this state as an emotion that has the job of fitting its formal object (track reality)? If we can, Dillon has failed to show us that this scenario doesn't apply to Anne's case. But perhaps the missing explanation could go like this. The question is what exactly the formal object of Anne's first-order emotional response is.

I think it isn't that her accomplishments are not up to scratch by her own standards. I think that, as Dillon says about another example (of unwarranted resentment) she discusses, "emotions identified by prevailing standards as inappropriate may in fact reveal important aspects of the world that accepted beliefs and justifications hide or mystify" (Ibid. 237 following Jaggar 1989). Anne's case is, recall, an instance of impostor syndrome and this syndrome, especially in the case of women, have often to do with how institutions so structure the social and political landscape that women are led to a wrong assessment of the causes of their success (as is the case with Anne). Perhaps then Anne's lack of pride is not irrational, after all. It is perhaps social and political institutions that make sure that she predicates her sense of worth on standards that these very institutions conspire to insure she cannot apply to herself (as a woman). Perhaps Anne's lack of pride, correctly, picks out these underlying structures of social reality.

So, what is then 'wrong' with Anne, if it is not irrationality? Dillon thinks that her troubles stem from the fact that she only *intellectually* understands her worth and not experientially. The former kind of understanding is one we are familiar with: it involves forming beliefs that are inferentially related to each through their propositional content. In contrast, *experiential* understanding "involves experiencing something directly and feeling the truth of what is experienced" (Ibid. 239). Her example concerns the difference between (intellectually) knowing that a loved one is dead (based on what one hears from others) and, upon visiting her body in the morgue for the first time, fully (experientially) understanding this fact by feeling its truth as her death becomes real for one. As with Anne: she intellectually understands her worth but she doesn't feel it as real. But what exactly is this experiential understanding?

Dillon construes it as a form of perception, as a mode of seeing. In contrast with propositional representation, experiential understanding is construed as non-propositional cognition that also has an affective aspect. In the case of self-respect, this self-understanding is

locked on the self: it is a normatively interpretive self-perception, a form of seeing one's self *as* worthy (or not), instead of 'just' cognizing *that* it is worthy (Ibid. 340-1). Finally, such experiential self-understanding, according to Dillon, can "comprise unarticulated presuppositions implicit in certain ways of being in the world. That is, our ways being in the world implicitly involve multiply layered sets of presuppositions that constitute nonpropositional frameworks for interpreting the world" (Ibid. 340). This underlying base structure is then responsible for structuring and shaping our conscious, explicit, intellectual understanding. Consequently, in case of conflict, this base structure is resistant to modification through reflection, criticism, or reconceptualization.

Dillon coins the term *basal self-respect* to refer to this "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" (Ibid. 241). Basal self-respect is crucial: its heart is "our most profound valuing of ourselves". As Dillon puts it, "Whereas recognition self-respect expresses, "I matter because I am a person", and evaluative self-respect expresses, "I matter because I have merit", basal self-respect expresses simply, "I matter"" (Dillon 2001, 68 fn. 45). If our basal self-respect is secure and positive, we have faith in ourselves, we have confidence in ourselves, we are secure of our worth. But when it is damaged, "basal valuing is incessant whispering below the threshold of awareness: "you're not good enough, you're nothing"" (Dillon 1997, 242). And because this 'whispering' happens at the most fundamental level, it is uncompromising and potentially unchangeable even when lifted to the level of consciousness. Since this is the base, when it is gone or is just partially eradicated, the effects are psychologically and even morally debilitating: for, such a person experientially understands herself as (near) nothing, as (near) worthless. "Damaged basal self-respect", writes Dillon, "creates a damaged self" (Ib. 243). Anne's emotional problem is a case at hand: her anomalous emotional reaction has, as its base, her damaged basal self-respect.

### III. Basal self-respect or self-esteem?

I think the main problem with Dillon's account is her last step. Experiential self-understanding, *as she construes it*, appears to me just too intellectualized, too reflexive and, in fact, too cognitive to carry out the function she endows with it – to be this base, primordial, fundamental structural organizing device that shapes all our conscious experience. Notice, for example, that if one understands experiential understanding in the way Dillon does, that is, along perceptual, non-propositional and affective lines, one might, despite Dillon's negative view of cognitive theories of emotion, easily find friends with advocates of *perceptual* theories of emotion. They hold that emotions are affective evaluative perceptions ('felt evaluations') with non-propositional content and explicitly point to the explanation of recalcitrant emotions as a virtue of their account.<sup>11</sup> However, I find it hard to believe that experiential understanding would somehow be just another cognitively (in this case: perceptually) construed emotion. What would explain why some of these emotions, most of them in fact, exist on the conscious, intellectual, representational level, whereas a special species of them somehow constitutes our experiential understanding of the primordial, prereflective, basic kind Dillon identifies with basal self-respect? Beyond well-sounding metaphors, Dillon offers no further help on this front.<sup>12</sup>

Dillon's failure, I submit, consists in trying to keep too much of her account of recognitional and evaluative self-respect. In her analysis, recall Anne's example, we have, on the one hand, cognitions (beliefs) and, on the other hand, emotional responses (shame, pride). Experiential understanding, certainly what concerns basal self-respect, is supposed to be a clean

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<sup>11</sup> See especially the work of Sabine Döring (2003, 2007). There is also interesting connection to Zagzebski's (2004), Chapter 2 notion of thick affective concepts as well as to certain recent work on virtuous cognition as in Little (1995) and (1997). I write about these theories in more detail elsewhere, see (redacted).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, a lot depends on the details that are not provided. For example, is experiential understanding not only not propositional but also not representational (and hence has no intentional content and formal object)? At one point, Dillon (1997, p. 240) suggests this, but this idea appears nowhere else in her account. Besides, if we do go down this road, it becomes hard to see what distinguishes her account from Bortolan's. And my question also remains: experiential understanding is something that also occurs on the conscious level; what explains that the very same attitude can also function in the primordial, prereflective way Dillon's account needs?

break with this, but it isn't, as we saw: basal self-respect is still construed along cognitive lines (it is a mode of seeing, recall), albeit with an affective character. Hence, if I am right that this is not 'basic' enough, the natural move is to go further 'below' (consciousness) and 'beyond' (cognition). I think Anna Bortolan's recent work on what she calls<sup>13</sup> self-esteem can instruct us how to do this. In Bortolan's view (2018, 58), self-esteem is an essentially felt experience that is not episodic, but long lasting effecting our cognitive and practical life more extensively and profoundly than self-conscious emotions (such as shame, guilt, pride or resentment). It is, further, objectless, not targeted at anything specific, as self-conscious emotions typically do; it is more like a mood than an emotion.<sup>14</sup>

Bortolan (Ibid. 60-2) argues that the state she has in mind fits the phenomenon Ratcliffe (2008) calls 'existential feeling' (who, in turn, builds on Heidegger's account of moods). According to Ratcliffe, guilt feelings can be existential and so can be feelings of hopelessness. In both cases, one's feeling is not targeted at anything particular. One can just feel guilty or just feel all loss of hope (feel the loss of the possibility of hoping), say, when one is severely depressed. What is special about existential feelings is that they have no intentional structure; they are pre-intentional in the sense that their primary function is to construe our experiential field: to determine what kinds of intentional state it is possible for us to have. Bortolan thinks that self-esteem does the same thing: "[it] can shape the range of thoughts and behaviours of which we are capable" (Ib. 61) Moreover, just like existential feelings, self-esteem is an essentially bodily feeling. It is closely connected to our "bodily sense of potentiality": "it is an experience of oneself as able to exert influence over the external world through one's own

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<sup>13</sup> For the reason mentioned earlier (note 6), I do not intend to take side on the question whether the attitude Bortolan describes indeed qualifies as self-esteem. I simply follow her own usage. After all, what matters is the attitude's fittingness to our needs and not how it is called. It is worth noting that Bortolan draws a clear parallel between her work and Dillon's and in doing so points out that in her view "self-respect can only have a reflective and cognitive character". See Bortolan (2018), p. 70 fn. 7.

<sup>14</sup> I am aware that some, like Goldie (2000), argue that moods have objects. However, this is not the place to deal with this question. See Bortolan (2017) for some relevant discussion.

actions and to cope with the circumstances of everyday life” (Ib.) Finally, despite its primordial affective nature, self-esteem is compatible with more complex cognitive and evaluative states that, on perhaps a higher, more conscious level, are integral to the structure of the experience of self-esteem. According to Bortolan (Ib. 62), her account “recognizes the strong interdependence of affective and cognitive processes and highlights how the way in which we feel shapes, and is itself shaped by, our thoughts, beliefs, and judgments.”

I am not in a position, given space constraints, to argue in more detail for Bortolan’s account over Dillon’s. I have already provided a negative consideration (namely, that I think Dillon’s account doesn’t go ‘far enough’). I think more positive considerations follow Bortolan’s treatment of Anne’s example and from the fact that much of what is in Dillon’s own description is also reproduced in Bortolan’s (but there are differences, as Bortolan Ib. 69 fn. 7 points out). Regarding Anne’s case, Bortolan (Ib. 70 fn. 9) sees it as an instance of the impostor syndrome, which she discusses in detail. According to her, the syndrome is best explained as caused by damaged self-esteem and therefore, I take it, the same applies to Anne’s situation. Self-esteem constrains the range of intentional states that it is possible for us to have and since Anne’s self-esteem is low (or absent), it is very difficult for her “to endorse positive self-evaluations and experience emotions, such as pride and self-contentment, which are reflective of those evaluations” (Ib. 63).

#### **IV. Concluding remarks**

I have begun this paper with Rawls’s claim that the social bases of self-respect is “perhaps the most important” primary good in his theory of justice. The rest of the paper has deliberately moved away from political philosophy in order to provide a better, more nuanced account of self-respect. I did this following some more recent work in the literature, which argue that we must move beyond the generally accepted distinction between recognition and evaluative self-

respect. There must be, namely, more to the self-respect complex, a more fundamental level must exist that underlies and governs our experience of the two kinds of self-respect. I have presented two alternatives for this level, Robin Dillon's account of basal self-respect and Anna Bortolan's account of self-esteem. Without providing as much as argumentation as the subject would deserve, I've tried to show that Bortolan's account is better than Dillon's.

It is now time to draw the lessons for political philosophy. The immediate lesson is simple. Should either proposal be correct, much of the literature on self-respect as a primary good has missed its target. What scholars should – or, at least, should *also* - be writing about is whether and how distributive justice can (and/or should) promote self-esteem. To my knowledge, there is, presently, no such study in the literature. Of course, one might think that something as primordial and fundamental as self-esteem cannot be influenced through the design of the basic structure (to take a Rawlsian approach). But this is certainly not what Dillon or Bortolan think. It is a significant part of their work to show how the promotion of basal self-respect and self-esteem is also a social and political question (cf. esp. Dillon 1997, section IV). The other lesson is less immediate and is certainly not obvious from my sketchy discussion in this paper. It is that, as Dillon (Ib. 235) puts it, “damaged self-respect is a gendered phenomenon”; it is intimately connected, namely, with oppression. Bortolan clearly agrees: her discussion of the connection between self-esteem and moral experience focuses on the impostor syndrome and abusive relationships, both involving mainly women. In short, through studying and using their work, we might be also working towards another feminist criticism of liberal egalitarian theories of justice.

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