

Self-Respect Is Incomplete Without Respect for Others

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In Kantian ethics, self-respect is a fundamental duty to oneself, embodying the commitment to uphold one's dignity as a moral agent. This commitment, which proscribes self-degradation, is inherently structured by both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. This paper argues that because the exercise of self-respect occurs primarily in the social sphere, a self-respecting person's regard for her own dignity is inseparable from how she relates to others. By analyzing how vices of disrespect toward others such as arrogance, defamation, and ridicule constitute the opposite of self-respect, and by developing an intersubjective account of dignity, this paper demonstrates that respect for others is a constitutive part of the Kantian duty of self-respect.

Keywords: Self-respect; dignity; servility; arrogance; sympathy.

Introduction

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*,¹ Kant characterizes self-respect (*Selbstachtung*) as a duty to uphold the dignity of humanity² within us (MS

¹ I use the following abbreviations: *GMS*= *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (in Kant 2011); *MS* = *The Metaphysics of Morals* (in Kant 1991); *LE*= *Lecture on Ethics* (in Kant 1997); *RGV* = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (in Kant 1998); *Päd* = *Lectures on Pedagogy* (in Kant 2007); *AL-F*=*Lecture of the Winter Semester 1775–1776* (in Kant 2013); *Anth* = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (in Kant 2007); *KpV*= *Critique of Practical Reason* (in Kant 2015).

² While Kant distinguishes the predisposition to humanity from personality (RGV 6:27-28), he holds that humanity possesses dignity by virtue of its capacity for morality (GMS 4:435), and, in discussing duties of virtue, he speaks of “one’s intelligible being (moral disposition)” and the dignity of humanity (MS 6:436, 462). I agree with Timmons (2017: 220n) that Kant employs *humanity* in a broad sense that includes personality in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Thus, to respect the dignity of humanity is to value the potential moral capacity inherent in all human beings. For

6:436). Notably, the distinction between *self-respect* and *self-esteem* is not always clearly maintained in Kant's texts. In this paper, I prefer the term *self-respect* because it better captures the idea of respecting one's potential capacity for morality as such. To respect oneself, Kant tells us, is to be a self-respecting person: someone who recognizes and affirms her own dignity, and who therefore is not servile, does not ignore her equal status and moral rights when compared with others.

A prevailing view in the secondary literature holds that the duty of self-respect is fundamentally a duty to oneself.³ On this understanding, self-respect is not primarily other-regarding, nor can it be reduced to a merely prudential concern for one's own well-being. Rather, it belongs directly to the agent's own moral perfection.⁴ But can self-respect truly be realized independently of respect for others? In this article, I argue that the common reading overlooks the social dimension of self-respect and its connection to our duties to others. To bring this dimension to light requires a reconception⁵ of self-respect that reveals its inherently social structure. Kant's text suggests a necessary connection between self-respect and respect for others (MS 6:462). I argue that this connection is constitutive: respect for others is internally related to the very concept of self-respect. In other words, the duty of self-respect already contains within itself the duty to respect others.

People who respect themselves, I argue, cannot fail to respect others: they won't focus exclusively on their own dignity, and they won't act arrogantly toward others. If we want to live up to the dignity of humanity, it would also seem to consist in feeling sympathy and anger when witnessing others being humiliated. Indeed, since respect for others is *constitutive of* self-respect, the duty of self-respect cannot be properly understood in isolation. I will therefore begin by analyzing the demands that self-respect places on the individual, and then show how this duty already contains, within its very structure, the requirement to respect others.

I proceed in five sections. I begin by elucidating the dual interpersonal and intrapersonal structure of Kantian self-respect. In the second section, I turn to the vices of arrogance, defamation, and ridicule. By examining how these vices are incompatible with self-respect, I offer a

debates on Kantian humanity and dignity, see Wood (1999: 118–121); Dean (2006); Møller (2024: 45–58); Willaschek (2024: 30).

³ The distinction between duties *to* and duties *regarding* is significant but will not be examined in full here. For present purposes, to say that self-respect is a duty to oneself is to say that it pertains fundamentally to one's own humanity as a moral agent. For discussions of the duty *tolregarding* distinction, see Timmermann (2006) and Johnson (2010).

⁴ See Timmermann (2006), Guyer (2010), Denis (1997, 2015), Massey (1983), Hill (1973, 2021), Wood (2008), and Timmons (2017).

⁵ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for clarifying the distinction between the extension reading and the reconception reading of self-respect, and for pointing out a confusion between these two approaches in my earlier argument. Those comments have helped me to sharpen the core thesis of this article considerably.

negative argument: to disrespect others is to disrespect oneself. This establishes that self-respect cannot coexist with disrespecting others. However, this negative claim alone does not yet tell us why self-respect positively requires respecting others. The third section then builds the positive argument. Drawing on the intersubjective structure of dignity—that the dignity I respect in myself is the same dignity I must respect in all others—I demonstrate that respect for others is not merely compatible with self-respect but constitutive of it. In other words, self-respect necessarily includes respect for others, not as an external derivation but as an internal requirement. The fourth section addresses a potential objection: that the duty of self-respect is too demanding, and that it would therefore lead us to condemn those who suffer moral failure. In response, I argue that self-respect, properly understood, does not demand such condemnation. On the contrary, its inherent requirement to value the rights of all persons compels a necessary sympathy for those whose rights are trampled on yet who cannot resist. Finally, I address two possible objections to my argument: first, that the real world’s complexity compels us to compromise Kantian self-respect, and second, that sympathy for the servile risks *rationalizing* their moral failure.

1. *Kant’s definition of self-respect*

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant holds that all human beings equally possess dignity by virtue of their humanity. This dignity directly grounds the duty of self-respect. Such a duty consists in treating oneself as the equal of every other person (MS 6:435) and thus requires one to uphold one’s dignity rather than demean oneself for personal benefit. The feeling of noble pride is not the ground of this duty but rather a natural accompaniment that arises when we recognize ourselves as fulfilling it. “Humanity in his person,” as Kant puts it, “is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other man, but which he must also not forfeit” (MS 6:435), and if we fail to defend our dignity, this means we choose to forfeit our dignity and instead make ourselves into a thing,⁶ which is servility.

Servility, by contrast, is an attitude whereby one believes that one is inferior to others,⁷ “waiving any claim to moral worth in oneself, in the belief that one will thereby acquire a borrowed worth” (MS 6:435). As a result, one also waives the right to demand respect from others and seems thereby to tacitly allow others to insult and demean one, thus regarding the violation of one’s human dignity by others as mor-

⁶ Bunch (2014: 82) holds that if we cannot claim the respect that dignity authorizes us to claim, this means we throw away our humanity and become a thing.

⁷ Some scholars, Timmons (2021: 179) and Stark (2022: 271) share this view. In contrast, Massey (1983: 65) understands servility as behavior motivated by desire rather than by a belief in one’s moral inferiority.

ally acceptable.⁸ However, a servile person's subjective waiving of their claim to respect does not in fact relieve others of their duty to respect that person's dignity.⁹ For dignity, as an inalienable right possessed by everyone, cannot be waived. There is thus an asymmetry here: an invitation to be mistreated does not give others a right to mistreat.

In his influential work, Thomas E. Hill, Jr. (1973) provides three vivid illustrations of how individuals fail to recognize their own dignity and rights: (1) Uncle Tom, who believes that Black people cannot possess the same rights as white people; (2) the self-deprecating man, who thinks he must earn his rights through hard work; and (3) the deferential wife who regards herself as an obedient wife who serves her husband.¹⁰

According to Hill, human beings have basic moral rights, and each person's recognition of his moral rights is a reflection of his self-respect. Servility, the opposite of self-respect, entails a failure to properly acknowledge or uphold one's moral rights. This comes in two forms: "one resulting from misunderstanding of one's rights and the other from placing a comparatively low value on them. In either case, servility manifests the absence of a certain kind of self-respect. The respect which is missing is not respect for one's merits but respect for one's rights" (Hill 1973: 97).

But is the moral failing of servility merely a failure to recognize one's moral rights? The answer is clearly no. Servility is reprehensible not simply because we are misunderstanding our rights, but because we engage in a form of *moral self-repudiation*, an act of *denying our own dignity* from a moral standpoint, constituting a profound self-abasement or "the deliberate and so culpable devaluing of oneself" (Dillon 2004: 200). Consequently, the most fundamental demand of the duty of self-respect is the *affirmation of one's own worth*. (Obviously, there is a further question about whether misusing one's body or humanity, through acts such as gluttony or lying, entails a loss of self-respect, although we can set aside that issue for present purposes.)

In his remarks on how to teach children to perform the duty to oneself, Kant suggests that one can violate one's dignity either by drinking or by other unnatural vices that degrade oneself below the animals, or by groveling before others (Päd 9:489). I take it that Kant's point is that the duty of self-respect lies in acknowledging the inherent dignity of one's rational nature and acting in ways that affirm this value.¹¹ From this standpoint, it might seem that any immoral behavior, regardless

⁸ Self-respect represents our moral attitude toward those who insult or harm us, such as "how I ought to let others treat me" (Bacin 2013: 263).

⁹ I am grateful to the reviewer for this suggestion.

¹⁰ This influential view has been considered and challenged by some scholars, see Boxill and Boxill (2015).

¹¹ Denis (2015: 215) offers a similar view, holding that the objective principle of self-esteem consists in acting in accordance with the dignity of humanity.

of how minor, can be seen as a failure of self-respect,¹² insofar as it involves treating one's humanity as a mere means, which is "destroying ourselves merely to achieve contingent ends" (Dean 2006: 138).

Thus, as a duty to oneself, self-respect is a duty to treat our humanity as an end that has both *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* aspects. In its interpersonal sense, self-respect is a duty that is characteristic in its object (it is a response to one's inherent dignity) and in its content (it avoids servility or false humility, affirming *my* equal standing with others). Used in its intrapersonal sense, self-respect refers to the requirement of safeguarding the dignity of one's humanity.¹³ Clarifying this point is crucial for a proper understanding of the duty of self-respect. It prevents the conflation of all failures of self-respect with servility, and resists the temptation to use servility as a blanket explanation for all phenomena of self-disrespect.

To this point, I have approached the duty of self-respect from the standpoint of how one treats oneself. I now turn to the duty of respecting others: in what sense does respecting others constitute part of the duty of self-respect? Before addressing this question, I must first examine how the vices that involve disrespecting others are incompatible with the duty of self-respect.

2. *Disrespecting others, disrespecting oneself*

I have argued that the affirmation of one's own dignity required by the duty of self-respect is determined in relation to others, namely, seeing oneself as an equal among equals. This section will further argue that a person who disrespects others, for example, by treating them arrogantly, cannot be a person with genuine self-respect. I will then show, one by one, why the vices of arrogance, defamation, and ridicule are fundamentally incompatible with self-respect.¹⁴

Arrogance. It is commonly held that arrogance toward others is an excess of self-respect, and servility a deficiency, with true self-respect being the mean between them. This section rejects that picture. I argue that the arrogant person lacks self-respect. Arrogance towards others often manifests in interpersonal interaction through an exaggerated sense of self-value and an expectation that others will bow and scrape. Kant saw this arrogance as a kind of madness or foolishness (MS 6:466; AL-F 25:1306; LE 27:458; Anth 7:217), and it leads people not to a genuine sense of pride in their dignity, but to "strive after *the*

¹² Massey (1983: 67–68) contends that all immoral acts entail a lack of self-respect, because they involve failing to treat oneself in a manner befitting one's moral capacity.

¹³ Kantian self-respect entails not only Darwall's recognition self-respect (respect for humanity's dignity as a constraint) but also an appraisal self-respect that requires making oneself worthy of honor through *merit* (LE 27: 665). For the distinction between two kinds of self-respect, see Darwall (1977: 47–49).

¹⁴ I am very grateful to the reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

reputation of honor” (Anth 7:273), a *passion*—what he called “*Mania for honor*” (Anth 7:273). An act of arrogance, which constitutes a fundamental denial of others’ humanity because it “demands from others a respect it denies them” (MS 6:466), not only injures their self-respect¹⁵ but also constitutes a failure of self-respect in the arrogant individual.

An arrogant individual seeks to bolster their sense of superiority by belittling others, which is precisely a marker of deficient self-respect because they not only “freely follow his inclinations” (LE 27:345) but also seek validation through comparisons or external approval to feel confident in their own worth. In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Kant asserts that when we command others to honor us or when we think less of others, we run the risk that the other people will hold us in contempt. The idea behind this argument is that there is a paradox in the arrogant individual:

Such arrogance always betrays little understanding, for it is the act of a fool not to strive for the possession of true worth by self-mastery and the trustworthy performance of duty on principle but, rather, to seek honour in casual outer circumstances, paying no respect to one’s humanity, and thus demeaning himself (LE 27:667).

The arrogant individuals, who project an image of superiority, believe themselves to be above others. In reality, however, they are deeply dependent on external validation, which ultimately reveals a fundamental lack of confidence in their own intrinsic worth. As Dillon rightly points out, “The deeper problem is that he cannot regard any being as an end in itself, as unconditionally deserving of respect, himself included” (2004: 201). In this meaningless pursuit, they *enslave* themselves to the opinions of others, becoming prisoners of their own making. Moreover, by equating their value with these elusive external accolades, they have, in essence, abdicated the very claim to their human dignity. Therefore, while we might describe arrogance as an excess of self-respect, it is more accurately understood as a form of its failure. That is to say, arrogant persons lack self-respect because they fail to recognize that they possess a human dignity that is certain and requires no external praise.

Defamation. It is commonly thought that the disrespectful act of spreading rumors about others harms their self-respect, because it deprives them of what Fahmy (2013) calls moral privacy. However, I argue that when a person defames another, she also shows disrespect

¹⁵ One might argue that a person with genuine self-respect would be immune to such arrogance. However, this overlooks a fundamental human nature: we are social beings, inherently vulnerable to the judgments of those around us. This is especially true in intimate relationships or situations of power imbalance, where others’ condescension and dismissal can make even the most secure individual question their own worth: Am I really worth nothing? A particularly evident example is *gaslighting*: after enduring long-term suppression and denial from others, the victim will inevitably begin to doubt their own abilities to make judgments, and even the validity of their emotional needs. See Stark (2022).

toward herself. This can be seen by examining the structure of the defamatory act itself:

- (1) When S defames P with respect to some fact F, S makes a judgment that F is a morally defective state of affairs, and that F will arouse negative moral judgments about P in others.
- (2) S does not discuss F openly in P's presence. Moreover, S's motive is neither to protect the audience from harm by P, nor to promote P's moral improvement.
- (3) Rather, S's aim is simply to damage P's reputation.

Whether F is a flaw invented by S or a real defect of P, it should not be a reason for P to be disrespected by others. By spreading P's defect and inviting others to join in judging P, S shows an intention to deprive P of the respect to which P is entitled. Thus, following Aquinas (1920: II-II, q. 73), we might understand defamation as a form of *secret theft*, namely the theft of the respect that another deserves. It is precisely in this secret theft that the defamer loses her own self-respect.

First, (1) shows that the defamer possesses the capacity for rational judgment: she can distinguish right from wrong. Yet (2) and (3) show that she freely chooses to do wrong. The defamer therefore actively chooses to degrade the humanity in her own person—the humanity that is essential to human nature—into a mere tool for harming others to satisfy her own inclinations. Or, in Kant's terms, her person is governed by her inclinations, and she thereby makes herself “lower even than the animals” (LE 27: 345). In this sense, she fails to meet the demands of self-respect.

Second, the secretive nature of defamation reveals precisely that the defamer lacks an inner sense of her own worth. In other words, she is unaware of her own dignity. That is why she dares not compete openly, nor confront directly, but can only fill the void of her inner worth by stealing the honor of others, “since in that case our own faults seem small” (LE 27: 458). Hence, the defamer not only externally deprives others of the dignity and honor they deserve; through her very act, she also displays the fact that she is unaware of her own dignity. This is, without question, a failure of self-respect.

Ridicule. Ridicule makes others' pain or mistakes the object of one's own amusement. Unlike defamation, which is conducted behind the back of its victim, ridicule occurs in the presence of the person ridiculed. For precisely this reason, it damages the victim's self-esteem far more severely than calumny does, since the victim is forced to hear these malicious jokes firsthand. Ridicule thereby signals to its target that one has forfeited any claim to respect by virtue of one's own failings, and in so doing, it wholly denies the victim the moral standing to be taken seriously as a member of the moral community (Fahmy 2013). If calumny is a secret theft of another's dignity, then ridicule is its public counterpart. In ridiculing others, the agent treats her own humanity merely as a means of gratifying her malicious inclinations.

Moreover, the scoffer thereby reveals her true moral character: she has no grasp of the dignity of humanity. It is precisely for this reason that she needs to ridicule others in order to satisfy her sense of superiority. Therefore, the ridiculer's sense of self-worth is inherently unstable: she requires both a victim and an audience to sustain it. When there is no one left to mock, her self-worth simply evaporates. This dependence on external conditions reveals precisely that she lacks genuine self-respect. A person with true self-worth does not rest it on the failures or embarrassments of others; she need not ridicule anyone to assure herself that she is good, because she has already grounded her value on a basis that requires no comparison.

From this analysis of arrogance, defamation, and ridicule, it becomes clear that those who fail to respect others are also lacking in self-respect. This is evident in two respects. First, arrogance, defamation, and ridicule share a common structure: each seeks to ground one's self-worth in the negation of another's dignity. In arrogance, the agent elevates herself by refusing to acknowledge others as equals. In calumny, she feeds her vanity by tarnishing another's reputation. In ridicule, she derives a sense of superiority from making others appear foolish. What unites these attitudes is that the agent's self-worth is fundamentally comparative and depends on the perceived inferiority of others. This reveals that such agents fail to recognize the inherent dignity of their own humanity. In short, they lack genuine self-respect.

Second, by following their own inclinations and allowing self-love to become the principle of legislation, they fall into a state of self-conceit, a condition that stands in clear opposition to genuine self-respect. Consider the following passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

But it *strikes down* self-conceit altogether, since all claims to *esteem for oneself* that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted because certainty of a disposition in accord with this law is the first condition of any worth of a person, and any presumption prior to this is false and opposed to the law. Now, the propensity to *self-esteem*, so long as it rests only on sensibility, belongs with the inclinations which the moral law infringes upon. (KpV 5:73; emphasis mine)

This passage tells us that the legitimacy of one's claim to dignity, such as declaring that one respects oneself, depends entirely on whether one has first satisfied the demands of the moral law, for example, the duty to respect others. Any presupposition of self-respect that precedes this is "false and opposed to the law". It is only by acting in accordance with the moral law, and thereby living up to the demands of human dignity, that we are entitled to claim self-respect.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is important to note that this is not to say that self-respect *simpliciter* is equivalent to obeying the moral law. There is indeed a sense in which self-respect is equivalent to (or follows from) the respect for the moral law within us, and in this sense, it is a feature that all rational beings, as such, unavoidably possess. But this is not the sense of self-respect with which the present paper is primarily concerned. If self-respect were understood in this way, then the claim that self-respect includes

Arrogance, backbiting, and ridicule, which are vices of disrespecting others, first presuppose one's own supreme and superior status so that they can grant themselves the right to demean and mock others, thereby refusing to fulfill the duty of respect one owes to them. At the core of such conduct lies a form of self-conceit in which the agent takes the satisfaction of her own sensible inclinations as the principle of legislation and pretends that this inclination can license her to demean others, a point on which Russell (2020) argues that self-conceit involves a fantasy of dictatorial authority. Kant makes it clear that this attitude of living "without any rule, merely following the inclination one has devised for oneself" makes a person "the most abhorrent of objects" (LE 27:346). Consequently, disrespecting others is not merely a denigration of them but also a denigration of the agent herself because, through self-conceit, it becomes difficult for her to meet the demands of human dignity.

I have now shown that arrogance, defamation, and ridicule are not merely violations of duties to others; they are themselves manifestations of a failure of selfrespect. A person with genuine selfrespect could not engage in such conduct. However, this section has only completed a negative argument: a person with selfrespect does not do X (i.e., disrespect others). What remains to be shown is that a person with selfrespect does do Y (i.e., actively respects others), that is, that respecting others is itself a constitutive element of selfrespect. The next section will develop this positive argument.

3. *Self-respect as relational*

On the issue of self-respect and respect for persons, Adam Cureton approaches this from the perspective of *reciprocity*, and he suggests that the duty of self-respect leads to respect for others because we need to respect others in order to gain their respect, thereby protecting our own self-respect. As he says,

We are rationally disposed to pursue our own happiness and respect ourselves, but also to give the same help and respect to others in return for their help and respect, so duties of beneficence and respect for one another are justifiable to everyone in virtue of our self-regarding rational concerns. (Cureton 2013: 182)

In short, Cureton's view is that I respect you because I was hoping you could respect me, as self-respect is very important to me. If I un-

respect for others would amount to nothing more than an analytic proposition, carrying no independent argumentative weight. This paper is concerned with a different sense of selfrespect: namely, the individual's duty to live in a manner befitting her own moral agency, and to express in her actions and attitudes an appropriate regard for her own dignity. Understood in this sense, selfrespect is not something that everyone automatically possesses; rather, it requires active cultivation. Hill (2021: 238) offers a detailed explanation of these two kinds of respect.

derstand him correctly, Cureton's argument rests on a condition of reciprocity: we respect others in the expectation that they will reciprocate, thereby helping us to achieve self-respect. This renders respect a conditional and instrumental act of exchange. If the other person is entirely incapable of returning respect, a rational agent would have no reason to respect that person. This position, however, conflicts with Kantian ethics. Consider a patient in a vegetative state. Within Cureton's framework, no possible return is available; therefore, a rational agent would have no reason to respect such a patient. Yet for Kant, the objects of respect are all rational beings, regardless of whether they can reciprocate. We have a duty to respect a vegetative patient not because his respect could bring me anything, but because he himself possesses a dignity that deserves respect. Thus, Cureton's reciprocity model cannot account for the unconditionality of the duty to respect persons.

Thus, I contend that any reciprocity-based approach to the relationship between self-respect and respect for others is misguided. Respect for others is not instrumentally related to self-respect but constitutively so; that is, respecting others forms part of what it means to respect oneself. To clarify this point, we must reconsider the structure of the concept of dignity.

When a person refuses to be servile and insists on her own dignity, what exactly is she asserting? She is asserting that, as a rational being, she possesses a noncomparative and absolute value that cannot be diminished by others. The key point is that this assertion is not an exclusive one. To claim "I have dignity" is not to claim that "only I have dignity". On the contrary, the very concept of dignity carries with it a universal commitment. If I have dignity, then every rational being of my kind has the same dignity.

It can be seen that dignity itself possesses an *intersubjective* structure. That is to say, the concept of dignity already presupposes a relation between *you and me*. As Kant puts it, when my self-respect gives me the right to demand respect from others, I ought also to take on the duty to respect them in return (MS 6:462). Hence, to respect the dignity of one's own humanity implies respecting the dignity of the humanity in others. This is not an externally imposed requirement. Rather, it follows from the fact that the concept of dignity itself admits of no exceptions. It is in this sense that self-respect already contains respect for others. This is what I mean by a *reconception* of self-respect. Respecting others is not an additional requirement that extends outward from self-respect. It is instead a constitutive part of self-respect itself. The answer becomes clear once we note that for Kant, the nature of respect for *my humanity* is identical to respect for *everyone's humanity*. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says:

Every man has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow men and is *in turn* bound to respect every other But just as he cannot give him-

self away for any price (this would conflict with his duty of self-esteem), so *neither can he act contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others*, as men, that is, he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other man. (MS 6:462; emphasis mine)

What is truly required by self-respect cannot be separate from respecting others. Sometimes Kant says self-respect and respect for others are mutually related; sometimes he suggests that self-respect requires us to protect others' self-respect: in either case, self-respect requires us to respect others.¹⁷ If our duty to respect ourselves is constructed so as to enable us to recognize that we share an equal moral status with all others, then respecting others is not an additional requirement derived from self-respect, but rather a constitutive element of self-respect itself. For to anyone who would claim that we can respect our own humanity while denying others, we can always ask: "Do we truly respect the dignity that is owed to everyone?" Since the humanity we respect in ourselves is the very same humanity shared by all rational beings, then if a person fails to respect others, he is not someone who has self-respect but has not yet extended it outward; rather, he could never have possessed genuine self-respect in the first place. Failing to do so would amount to a contradiction in our moral attitude toward humanity itself.

Timmermann (2006: 508), however, invokes the vivid metaphor of "desert island duties" to explain duties to the self. In his view, the ground of duties to the self does not depend on moral interaction with others, nor does it vary with the presence or absence of others. Understood in this way, self-respect, as a duty to oneself, seems to concern only one's own rational nature, while relations with others are merely contingent and external consequences.

Nevertheless, the intersubjectivity of dignity implies that even if the ground of the duty of self-respect does not arise from interaction with others, our understanding and *fulfillment* of this duty still intrinsically involve relations with others. "Desert island duties" successfully rules out the mistaken view that the duty of self-respect originates from the contingent needs of others, yet this should not be misunderstood as claiming that the duty of self-respect can be realized in complete isolation from others. A person who lives forever on a desert island, though still under a duty not to commit suicide or not to treat himself as a mere instrument, would fail to understand why servility is a form of self-harm, for this moral phenomenon itself presupposes the presence of others. Thus, the desert island metaphor reveals the ground of duties, but it does not deny the social dimension of self-respect mandated by the intersubjectivity of dignity. A person who has self-respect must also respect others. This must express a necessity: it is not the case

¹⁷ A similar view is briefly suggested by Wood (2008: 174), who holds that, in relation to others, our duty of self-respect is twofold: we must avoid both arrogance and a servile disposition.

that someone with self-respect will more easily respect others, as Denis (1997: 343) suggests, that one's attitude toward oneself affects how one treats others. Rather, respecting others is a necessary condition of being a person with self-respect.

So far, I have reconceived the duty of self-respect without blurring the distinction between duties to oneself and to others. Both duties share the same ground—the dignity of humanity—whose intersubjectivity entails that recognizing one's own dignity just is recognizing the dignity of others. Yet they remain distinguishable by their objects: duties to oneself are directed at one's own rational nature, and duties to others at the rational nature of others.

Given that self-respect not only concerns oneself but also intrinsically demands respect for the personality and dignity of others, a question follows: how should we treat those who fail in their duty of self-respect? Common discourse tends to condemn such moral failures, assuming that the lack of self-respect results solely from personal weakness or choice, for which the individual alone is to blame. This view, however, ignores the significant role of social circumstances in shaping self-respect. Accordingly, I will argue that a genuinely self-respecting person ought not to despise those without self-respect, but instead to regard them with sympathy. It is in this sense that the duty of self-respect is a duty we owe to all persons.

4. *Self-respect with sympathy*

In this section, I argue for a deeper social implication of Kant's duty of self-respect: precisely because this duty itself incorporates a regard for the dignity of others, this regard elicits sympathy, which in turn precludes the blaming of those who fail in self-respect. Consider the case of servility as a failure of self-respect.¹⁸ First, we must first clarify what opposing servility means for the self. The duty of self-respect suggests that we are entitled to *feel* noble pride in our humanity and *demand* respect from others,¹⁹ which can prevent people from being treated as mere means.²⁰ When others demand that we debase ourselves, the duty of self-respect requires us to firmly believe in our equal moral standing with anyone. In the face of humiliation, our innate sense of dignity will inevitably evoke moral anger. More importantly, while we may pursue our own happiness and purposes, we must never sacrifice our dignity for external gains. Put simply, the duty of self-respect requires us to stand up for our claim to respect before others.

¹⁸ For reasons of space, I focus here on servility. But the discussion is meant to apply also to other cases of failures of self-respect.

¹⁹ This idea is inspired by Fahmy's (2013) view that we can understand the respect and dignity entitled to us by asking what vices deprive us of.

²⁰ Boxill (1995) argues that protesting injustice expresses self-respect. I follow this view, understanding servility as the acceptance of inferiority, which undermines respect for persons.

Admittedly, in certain situations, servility may appear in a *cunning* form: Either I might be fully aware of my own dignity, yet choose to act obsequiously for personal interests, or I might be completely unaware that such behaviors constitute servility and will inflict harm upon my self-respect. However, whether one merely performs servility or genuinely believes oneself to be inferior, or even acts out of sheer ignorance, the very moment they place their own dignity beneath the feet of others constitutes servility, a fundamental violation of one's duty to self-respect.²¹ As Kant puts it, "bowing and scraping before a man seems *in any case* to be unworthy of a man" (MS 6:437; emphasis mine).

Kant's response may seem strikingly austere and is open to criticism, as it appears to neglect the fact that servility, whether conscious or out of ignorance, is often a product of social oppression. Erica Holberg argues that Kant overlooks a critical reality: in certain contexts, the inability to maintain or even recognize self-respect stems not from individual defect but from systemic structures. As she says, "The concern is that insofar as Kantianism fails to acknowledge the ways immersion in oppressive social environments can warp an individual's understanding of what she is owed and capable of as a moral agent, it perpetuates the cruelty of unjust social systems in the guise of respecting individual autonomy" (Holberg 2017: 304).

If it is obligatory for every individual, then a failure to uphold this duty constitutes a moral failing, rendering the person liable to reproach—such as being asked, "Why do you demean yourself?" or "Why do you not resist?"—implying that they ought to have done better. Moreover, placing the full burden of action on the oppressed neglects the significant sacrifices often entailed in acts of resistance. For instance, refusing to ingratiate oneself with a colleague or superior may lead to the loss of steady employment, potentially exacerbating the individual's precarity. It is in this context that scholars such as Serene Khader suggest that concerns regarding self-respect should not be decisive in judging whether agents ought to comply with oppressive norms. What matters, she contends (2021: 240), is that the oppressed individual continues to regard themselves as equal and the system as unjust, a perception that, in itself, performatively constitutes an act of resistance.

From these debates, it becomes evident that the obligation to respect oneself is not fundamentally disputed. Rather, the crucial questions become: What does it truly mean to respect oneself under structurally unjust conditions? Is the failure to resist the individual's responsibility? And are we justified in condemning those who are unable to rebel?

While I have considerable sympathy for their concerns, I must concede that the Kantian duty of self-respect does indeed offer a stringent answer to the first two questions. Although Kant does not explicitly

²¹ As Hay (2011: 39) contends, while ignorance may excuse a servile person from *blame*, it does not absolve them of the *obligation* to resist oppression.

address systemic injustice in his discussion of this duty, we can infer from his remarks—“Be no man’s lackey. Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights. Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. Do not accept favors you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar” (MS 6:436-437)—that servile behavior is precisely directed toward those in positions of social dominance, such as the wealthy who control resources or the powerful who can violate others’ rights with impunity.

If this reasoning holds, we may conclude that the Kantian conception of self-respect demands that even within an oppressive social context, when facing dominant parties like the powerful or the wealthy—though Kant does not explicitly call for resisting oppression, which distinguishes his view from Hay’s (2011) interpretation—we must express this rejection *externally* by refusing to submit, tolerating no humiliation, and avoiding indebtedness. If we nevertheless act in ways contrary to our own dignity, Kant would hold us fully responsible for such moral failure. As he starkly puts it, “Complaining whining, even crying out in bodily pain, is unworthy of you, especially if you are aware of having deserved it” (MS 6:436-437).

It is reassuring that, despite Kant’s stringent demands regarding duties to oneself, this does not imply that he believed individuals failing to act self-respectfully deserve blame from others.²² Kant’s discussion of sympathy helps clarify why a person can be responsible for their servile actions yet not be blameworthy, affecting a clear separation between responsibility and external blame.²³

Kant distinguished between two objects that evoke human sympathy: the suffering of others and the injustice they endure. The former leads us to feel sorry for their misfortune, a kind of sympathy that can be understood as passive, in which one merely involuntarily feels the suffering of another; however, the anger aroused by witnessing others being humiliated or having their rights violated is a *noble* form of sympathy (AL-F 25:606), and this constitutes active sympathy. This active sympathy proves that we deeply cherish and recognize the absolute value of rights themselves. Indifference towards a victim of insult indicates a fundamental disregard for the rights of humanity. As Kant puts it, “those who do not have such sympathy, do not highly value the right of other human beings.” (AL-F 25:606)

Now, let us apply this argument to the problem of victim-blaming. Suppose that there is a person who is trapped in a servile relationship with their supervisor, submitting to every unreasonable demand and

²² Baron (1985: 393) holds that wrongness is distinct from blameworthiness.

²³ While Blöser (2015) has worked to separate responsibility from blameworthiness, her argument fails to persuade Holberg (2017: 301), who maintains that Kantian responsibility is inseparable from moral praise or blame. This paper addresses Holberg’s concern by treating Kantian sympathy as a practical resource, deliberately bypassing its metaphysical foundations.

enduring verbal abuse without resistance. What we should do for that person is to feel anger at the injustice they face and extend care and understanding by acknowledging their struggles, helplessness, and pain from their own perspective. Suppose you once lived in servility yourself but are now striving to fulfill Kant's duty of self-respect. In such cases, we ought to respond with sympathy toward this person and feel more keenly their emotional and moral anguish—not blame them for failing to resist their supervisor. This is because, according to Kant's sympathy, we need to place ourselves in others' positions to genuinely grasp their suffering. Therefore, as individuals who have struggled against servility ourselves, we are better able to understand the difficulty, sacrifice, and courage required to reject such submission. If sympathy not only allows us to better understand, even communicate, the pain of wounded self-respect, but also enables us to see the other side of their story: the hidden struggles behind their choices, then we cannot adopt a condescending attitude to blame those who fail to fulfill the duty of self-respect.

It follows that sympathy for others reflects a regard for their dignity, and this regard is precisely the moral concern of a person with self-respect: I value not only my own dignity but also yours. Even if another has voluntarily forfeited his or her dignity, I still have an obligation to respect and defend it. By contrast, if a servile person has internalized an unjust system of oppression, her lack of self-respect will inevitably lead her to demean others who are in the same oppressed situation; she will fail to recognize the dignity of others.²⁴ Thus, a person who strives to defend her own self-respect under oppressive conditions will recognize the struggle involved in upholding human dignity. She will also recognize that others in the same situation who lack self-respect are the result of an unjust order that distorts human moral connection. Although she may regard these failures of self-respect as morally wrong, she does not condemn or entirely reject the person herself. Instead, our compassionate response and our insistence that “this is not how the world should be” is an expression of fundamental respect for their personhood. It affirms our belief that, beneath the layers of oppression, they retain the potential capacity for morality and deserve our respect.

In my view, the dignity of each person is interconnected. Our commitment to upholding our own dignity necessarily involves a concern for the dignity of others. This is the obligation that a self-respecting individual must strive to fulfil. Only by respecting the dignity shared by all can self-respect be fully understood as a concern that is not merely self-regarding but also other-regarding, thereby satisfying the call for care toward all humanity that Kant issues at the conclusion of his *Lectures on Pedagogy*: “In our soul there is something that makes us take an interest 1) in our own self, 2) in others with whom we have grown up, and then also 3) an interest in the best for the world must come to pass” (Päd 9:498).

²⁴ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

5. Objections

Perhaps the most obvious objection to a stringent duty of self-respect is that it fails to account for necessary compromises under duress. As established, Kant's duty of self-respect is stringent. While the theory of sympathy may prevent victim-blaming, this does not address a more fundamental question: can Kantian self-respect admit any compromise?

I argue that temporary compromise is permissible only as a provisional strategy that must be directed toward future action. This posture involves, first, a firm inner conviction during periods of compliance: one must consciously affirm that the situation is unjust and that their compromise is a strategic sacrifice, not a moral surrender. Second, true self-respect demands action; it inherently motivates us to alter or flee unjust structures when possible.²⁵

Let me now turn to a second possible objection, which concerns whether sympathizing with servile individuals risks *rationalizing* their immoral conduct. Experiences from daily life give us reason to think that when confronted with substantial temptations of benefit, most people have already decided to set aside their personal dignity. We tend to believe that those who obtain great benefits through various servile acts and subsequently indulge in hedonistic pleasures are not worthy of our sympathy. Although we might pity the immense ordeal they endure to please others, sympathizing with them seems to overly romanticize their servility while overlooking the fundamentally deplorable nature of their moral character.

According to Kant, "we must sympathize with the other's right, but not with the physical ill" (AL-F 25:606). This same principle can be applied to these individuals without glorifying their servility. Kant observes that "a fawning servility is likewise not indifferent to me" (LE 27:342). Considering that Kant also views misanthropy as a vice and to avoid the pitfall of victim-blaming, sympathy can be seen as the appropriate response to their servile acts. Such sympathy operates on two levels: first, I sympathize with the fact that they fail to recognize their own personal dignity as so precious that they would trade it as a commodity.

Second, when we witness servility in others, our sympathy does not seek to justify their actions; rather, it constitutes a sense of disappointment towards the thwarted moral expectation—they ought not to have acted this way. What we sympathize with is none other than the supreme human dignity that they have actively trampled upon, yet which ought to have remained inviolable. Far from contradicting our moral judgment, the capacity for sympathy, in this Kantian sense, in and of itself conveys our disapproval of the servile conduct.

²⁵ I agree with Hay (2011: 34) that while internal resistance can protect one's rational nature from oppression, it leaves oppressive structures intact; external resistance is therefore necessary.

Conclusion

I have been emphasizing a neglected aspect of Kant's duty of self-respect: that self-respect necessarily involves respect for others, and thus a concern for the humanity of all people is internal to self-respect itself. In light of human fragility, we sometimes feel *powerless* in defending both our own dignity and that of others, a powerlessness stemming partly from social injustice and partly from a lack of moral courage. In either case, even when we occasionally experience moral failure, we must not lose confidence and courage in our own moral capacity, for doing so would plunge us into what Kant describes as the cowardly form of servility. More importantly, self-respect is essentially the practice of regarding oneself as an equal among human beings. Because this equal status demands recognition from both oneself and others in the very act of interaction, self-respect necessarily entails respect for others.

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