

Self-esteem: Why? Why not?

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There is a proper mode of self-esteem that is beneficial to each individual and there is a mode being propagated worldwide today that can be very harmful. First let us take a summary look at this latter mode, which has in a short time come to dominate the psychological and educational thinking under which most modern young people are formed. Then we will: 1) note the growing secular criticism being directed toward it; 2) analyze its fundamental anthropological defectiveness; and 3) see how a realistic self-esteem, in which positive and negative elements combine, is necessary to each person if he or she is to have psychic and spiritual health, and how this distinctive form of self-esteem is in fact inherent in a Christian spirit properly assimilated. Finally we will consider, with some concrete examples, how harmful self-esteem philosophy can make its way into Catholic religious education manuals.

The modern self-esteem movement

The 1960s marked the most significant watershed of modern times. "Liberation" was the dominant theme and sparked many phenomena that are still with us and, in many cases, still growing: an anti-authority mentality, the sexual revolution, drug culture, student revolt and radical feminism, for example.

The idea of "right" or "wrong" in personal behavior was rejected. Each one must be free, entitled to set his or her own standards or to have none at all. Every judgment is individual and totally subjective. The "tyranny of relativism" was fast taking over. In practice, it rules our world today. Objective truth, truth that can be the shared possession of each one, no longer exists or can no longer be found. We have nothing in common; each one is "liberated," "unconnected," on his own: a world and a law to himself.

The roots of this well-nigh universal subjectivism can be found in philosophical, theological and political trends that have developed over the centuries, and of which studies and critiques abound. However, the growth of contemporary relativism-subjectivism has been accompanied and given new impetus by a peculiarly modern movement that shows little intellectual depth, but has proved extraordinarily powerful and pervasive on a broad popular level.

This is the "self-development" movement that within a few decades has become the guiding force and psychological icon of the Western semi-intellectual world. It is

establishing a whole culture of its own. In a sense, it is the main cult characterizing popular secularist evangelism. The self-improvement manuals that now proliferate in bookstores everywhere bear this out.

Its more immediate roots are to be found in the "humanistic psychology" school of the 1960s whose theories of personal development and fulfillment have come to dominate the thinking of a vast number of U.S. educationalists as well as psychologists and therapists. The Encyclopedia Britannica comments on it thus: "The humanist is concerned with the fullest growth of the individual in the areas of love, fulfillment, self-worth, and autonomy; maturation is considered a process during which one establishes and follows one's own system of values." Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) is regarded as the father figure of this movement (also known as "human potential movement"); for him "the goal of therapy or education is...esteem and self-actualization...The person reaching self-actualization will have fully utilized his potential."

Since the 1980s, this movement has grown in an extraordinary fashion, mainly under the key mottos of "self-worth" and "self-esteem." It dominates popular psychology; it leads masses of people to see "self" as the center of the universe, and "self-contentment" as the condition of psychic health and indeed the very goal of life. Low self-esteem, on the contrary, is seen as a negative and even pathological condition. Not a few psychologists and sociologists hold it to be the main cause of ailments that range from drug abuse to racial prejudice to poor educational performance.¹

Moreover (and this is most important), its continuing spread seems guaranteed by the fact that it inspires most current teacher-training courses as well as the educational programs given in Western primary and secondary education.

Experience as judge of the Roman Rota (1986-1999) gave me a deeper awareness of how the movement was spreading. For the years I served at the Rota, nearly all the cases of marriage nullity coming from the United States and the English-speaking world in general were grounded in a plea of consensual incapacity. Perusing and weighing case after case, what particularly struck me was finding so many psychological evaluations of character (and judgments of marital capacity) centered on alleged inadequate self-worth, poor self-image or defective self-esteem. Even more striking was to find these evaluations coming from Catholic personnel working at the local or national level as judges, marriage counselors, and psychological or psychiatric experts. Over subsequent years, most striking of all has been verifying the extent to which this self-esteem philosophy has been absorbed by many Catholic educationalists, and hence is leaving its mark on curricula for primary and secondary schools (including religious education programs), and indeed on the formative spirit present in some religious houses or seminaries.

Criticism of the movement began early on and has grown in scope and intensity.²

¹ For a very good overview, see Nicholas Emler, *Self-esteem: The Costs and Causes of Low Self-worth*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001, pp. 17-34.

² Cfr. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner, 1979); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How*

We will consider this criticism under several headings. At the end I will try to offer a Christian view according to which true self-esteem—in a delicate combination, as we have suggested, of positive and negative elements—is fundamental to the development of a genuine Christian life whereas modern secular self-esteem renders such a life impossible.

A. Secular criticism

1) *Educational critique.* American public or state education seems impregnated with the idea of promoting unqualified self-esteem, also as a means to academic success. It has become axiomatic for many educationalists that only those who feel good about themselves will do well in their studies, while those handicapped with poor self-esteem are bound to do badly. More and more researchers are questioning this thesis, the shaky foundations of which seem apparent to common sense itself.

All education is based on the premise that people, especially when young, have capacities for growth in knowledge or in practical abilities, and that their life will be richer if they are encouraged and helped to develop these. Educational work would be frustrated if students lacked motivation towards development; e.g. if they lacked either awareness of their various potentialities or the conviction that the effort to develop them was worthwhile. It is good that they have some means of verifying their progress and are sincerely praised for their successes, made aware of their defects, and encouraged to do better still. Otherwise they are likely to remain stuck, and in any case fall well behind their potential.

If an educational system is over-competitive and too centered on grades or prizes, students who are no more than average may become discouraged and lose motivation—unless their teachers have and can communicate a value system according to which a person's worth is measured not mainly by intellectual or physical prowess, but by human qualities that are within everyone's reach such as loyalty, sincerity, understanding, generosity. But it is also true that outstanding students or athletes too can lose motivation and begin to stagnate if their perspective is too narrow and they settle for being kings of their own small terrain. Only a teacher with a rich value system is in a position to motivate all of his or her students.

This latter point merits special attention. If the prevailing values in a society are money or fame or power, and these shape that society's educational system, then not only does society itself easily become a rat-race but the majority of students are simply not going to make it. Given this, one can more easily understand why many people grasp at the straw of "being a success on your own terms"; they define being a success not as a matter of rating high with other people but as rating high with yourself, whatever others may say. In fact, it is taught that it is bad form to say anything negative. But this is to build on the sand of self-deception.

Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

So, while prioritizing self-esteem may be a good technique in certain psychological practices, especially with persons inclined to chronic depression, it does not follow that the same holds true for education. After all, low self-esteem normally entails dissatisfaction with oneself. Is that necessarily a bad thing? May the opposite not be at least as bad? I recall the comment many years ago of an American educator: "American young people are self-contented; and contentment in youth is a terrible handicap." It follows; if I am happy with myself as I am, why should I make any special effort to be otherwise, why indeed should I want to be otherwise?

Self-esteem philosophy is closely tied to the "values clarification movement" that again has become widespread in civics, social ethics and even religious courses. Briefly this holds that students should not be offered objective standards of right and wrong as regards personal behavior. To do so is considered indoctrination. Rather each one is to be simply encouraged to identify what, according to his or her goals in life, seems effective based above all upon what makes him or her "feel good." The practical lesson is: as long as it makes me feel good, it is good, at least for me.³

Applied to education, the value-free philosophy holds that children—from their earliest years—should be free to create and choose their own "values" and that their moral freedom is violated if teachers presume to teach or advocate particular virtues such as honesty, justice or chastity.

2) *Social critique.* In the May 2003 number of a journal of the American Psychological Society, four prominent academic psychologists published a broad review of the supposed benefits of self-esteem.⁴ Having looked at all the existing studies on self-esteem, they found no significant connection between feelings of high self-worth and academic achievement, interpersonal relationships or healthy lifestyles.

On the contrary, they concluded, high self-regard is very often found in people who are narcissistic and have an inflated sense of popularity and likableness. Such self-aggrandizing beliefs, the authors noted, exist "mainly in their own minds" (p. 20). But they don't tend to stop in their own minds. It is not hard to figure out the likely social consequences of a sense of high personal self-worth accompanied by a strong conviction of being right in the "values" one holds or follows, and these consequences can be grave. One of the most evident is that people with exaggerated estimates of self-worth often become hostile when others criticize or reject them. "People who have elevated or inflated views of themselves tend to alienate others....

³ I have a great regard for the term "values"—properly understood and used; in fact a book of mine entitled *Man and Values* is due out soon. But I am aware that many writers use the term loosely, and some indeed would substitute it for the traditional notion of "virtues." Clarification here is indeed called for. A "value" is something you appreciate or admire; or perhaps, at a lower scale, something you find useful. A "virtue" is a habitual ability you *acquire* by effort. The terms have totally different meanings. We used to think of values as positive; at the same time as we admitted a hierarchy among them, material values being generally considered inferior to values of the spirit. We even spoke of "anti-values." Now, anything is a value if one chooses to consider it so and others are expected to respect and even applaud the choices you make according to those personal "values" of yours.

⁴ Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success, Happiness, or Healthier Lifestyles?" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4, no. 1 (May 2003), pp. 1-44).

In some studies, narcissism led to some negative qualities such as increased aggression in retaliation for wounded pride" (ibid.).

Roy Baumeister of the psychology department at Florida State University asked at a recent annual convention of the American Psychological Association,

Is it important to raise children with high self-esteem? ... No. Self-esteem does not really accomplish all that much.... I think of high self-esteem as an emotional resource, as a "stock" of good feelings. It comes in handy once in a while. If something bad happens, or you get discouraged, then it helps you to bounce back, and makes you more resilient. On the other hand, extremely high self-esteem—and, in particular, narcissism—can be self-defeating and harmful to others. Narcissism is associated with a sense of superiority over others, a feeling of entitlement, of deserving special treatment just because of who you are..., thinking you are better than you actually are, and thinking that you are better than other people. Simply thinking that you are good at things that you truly are good at is not a problem. But to think you are good when you're not—as with the narcissist—is dangerous when it's unfounded, exaggerated, and unstable.⁵

It is "self-defeating" with regard to a personal sense of worth because, unless you live as a hermit, you are in constant contact with people who don't share your own conceited opinion of yourself and, unless you are extremely obtuse, you realize that your sense of self-worth is under constant questioning, and you resent it. Such resentment sows the seeds of all sorts of anti-social attitudes and reactions.

To quote Professor Baumeister again; asked what he considered a healthier alternative to promoting high self-esteem in children, he replied:

Instead of high self-esteem, I believe in promoting contingent self-esteem. This means that your self-esteem actually reflects your achievements. So if your child does something good, then she should be told that it's good and be given recognition for it. Problems occur when children are told that they are great no matter what they do—because the parents are afraid that they'll damage their kids' self-esteem if they point out what they did is bad. This is what creates narcissism. We are starting to see kids who were raised this way entering college, and they are a pain to deal with....They believe they're good even when they're not. It is much better to have self-esteem that is contingent on genuine achievements. ...my advice is to forget about self-esteem and concentrate on teaching your children self-control. Self-control over emotions and behavior has been shown to be much more effective than high self-esteem in making people successful throughout their lives.⁶

A society made up of people with high self-esteem and little or no self-control is like a heavily sown minefield. If one mine blows up it is likely to start an explosive chain reaction all around it.

So there is good reason to call into doubt the assumption, hitherto given almost universal acceptance by psychologists, that low self-esteem always has negative

⁵ Carol Milstone, *National Post*, March 23, 1999.

⁶ Ibid.

consequences for oneself and for others.⁷ In fact it is now being seen that at least an equally solid case can be made for the opposite thesis: high self-esteem, at least if unqualified, has negative consequences for oneself—self-absorbed narcissism—and for others.

Who after all is more bothersome to others? The shy and withdrawn person, possibly with an inferiority complex, who feels he has nothing to show, or the one who just knows he is superior? Undoubtedly the latter. One can ignore (or perhaps one can even help) the person who feels he has nothing to show. But the "superior" person can seldom be ignored. The self-assertive, braggart, know-all, I'll-handle-everything type can be a very uncongenial neighbor or colleague. He is disliked but not easily avoided. Moreover, there is far greater evidence that persons with an exaggerated high opinion of themselves pose a far greater threat to others than those with little sense of self-worth. It would be instructive to consider the degree of self-esteem possessed by men such as Hitler, Stalin or Mao Tse-tung, and the effects it produced.

Consider the social implications of the following titles I noted recently in the "Self-improvement/Motivation" section of a supermarket book store: *Why Pride Matters More than Money*; *You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought*; *Do What You Are*; *How to Win with High Self-Esteem*; *First Break all the Rules*; *How to Say No: Kick the Disease to Please*. I didn't glance through the books but, with titles like that, one wonders if the messages contained tend to produce a mindset favorable to social peace.

In short, the overall results of the modern self-esteem movement are bad, for both the individual and for society itself. This conclusion should cause no surprise because—as I think we can proceed to show—the presuppositions of the whole movement are in fact mistaken, from the viewpoint both of secular anthropology and of the Christian understanding of life.

B. Anthropological criticism

We grow and fulfill ourselves through an outward-directed process: through appreciation of (and response to) objective values, to be discovered in other people and in the world around us. Our minds and hearts are broadened according to the worth of these values and our own ability to admire and assimilate them. Then these values become our own and we are truly enriched.

We do not grow through an inward-directed process of self-admiration and self-contentment. That process leaves us trapped in the small prison of a self, unqualified and unenriched by higher values. If we choose, we can admire the uniqueness of our own self; but it is a unique poverty of mind and heart that we are admiring. Nothing is growing in us except a groundless self-esteem. And the more that grows, the more we shrink. We may feel we are growing but it is growth like that of the frog in the fable. The end is inevitable; the balloon-self swells and swells and swells until, over-

⁷ Cf. Emler, 12.

inflated with hot air, it bursts.

Self-defined personal identity. Who am I? What am I worth? We can never really evade these questions of personal identity and value. Humanistic psychology provides easy answers. I am what I am, and I assess my worth according to my own values—that is, according to what makes me feel good. Moreover, by life-entitlement, I should feel good and I should have a high self-esteem. In other words, the unconditional self-esteem I am entitled to, and the inviolate sense of personal identity and self-worth that are mine, are totally "self-defined," according to my feelings or preferences of this moment or the next.

What sense of identity can a person have according to this approach, or what sense of worth is he or she entitled to? As much as they like, obviously. But is there any measure of real identity or real worth in all of this?

Each person is something. But, more importantly, he or she is becoming something, becoming someone a little or a lot different from what he or she was a day or a week or a year earlier. Hence the inadequacy of identifying oneself by simply saying, "I am what I am." That is an affirmation not of identity but of a personality in constant flux, because from moment to moment we all change, like it or not. Personal identity is as much, perhaps more, a matter of the future than of any static present. Hence it is more to the point to say, "I am someone with potential, I am what I can come to be." Life is growth and challenge, not stagnant and sterile self-contentment.

The key to growth is admiration: not for self, but for what is better than self. We all stand in need of models outside and higher than ourselves. Thank God, they are there—if we can find and recognize them. All of us meet people who are better than ourselves, at least in some respect. We admire the talents or good qualities they have, and then may be led on to emulation; so we grow.

But it is this very capacity of self-forgetful and enthusiastic admiration for other people that is so conspicuously absent in the modern world. We are taught not to compare, and yet we do compare. And if we are not capable of admiration we take refuge in jealousy or denigration. If we have not been taught to appreciate and applaud the good qualities other people have and we lack, then we feel humbled by our deficiency and most likely take refuge in explaining away the qualities or in rejecting the persons. The hostility that this disturbance to our self-esteem engenders is a potent anti-social factor.

It seems unlikely (almost impossible) that high self-esteem should be combined with high esteem for others. Self-admiration tends to limit the capacity for admiring others—who then so often appear as rivals. There again we see how individualistic or exaggerated self-esteem is hostile to community-building. Almost inevitably inducing diffidence towards others, it tends of its nature to have little awareness of a common good, to be adverse to the loyalty characteristic of real friendship. We could add that it tends particularly to be hostile to the idea of any life-commitment to another—and to others—such as are involved in getting married and forming a family.

C. Christian criticism

Secular criticisms apart, a philosophy that holds that each one must actualize or fulfill one's self through centering on self-worth and autonomy, establishing one's own system of values and reaching one's potential—simply by "being oneself" and being content with oneself—is just not compatible with Christianity. However, in Christianity such a mindset might possibly find the solution to all its inherent weaknesses and illogicalities, and even the way out of them.

Ultimately and at the very core of this philosophy there lies a fundamental fear of isolation. If I don't love myself, no one will love me. The truth of course is that the more I love myself in a self-centered way, the less likely it is that others will love me. Yet there is always one exception: God. God loves us, also with our self-centeredness; but he tries to draw us out of it. That is what Jesus means with the gospel injunction about "denying self." Self-denial really means selfishness-denial. It is not my true self that I must say "no" to, but my poor self-engrossed self, foreign to love and admiration and wonder.

Unqualified self-esteem leads to more and more self-isolation. And ultimate self-isolation is hell. The person who is encouraged to esteem and love himself first, gradually becomes incapable of esteeming or loving anyone else; incapable, that is, of any real community. He is convinced he loves himself, and that that is enough. Both convictions are illusions. With death comes reality, and the time for illusions has passed. Then he discovers not only that it is not enough to love oneself, but that the love he thought he had for himself was not truly love at all; or rather that the self he loved is not worth loving, and that worthless self now becomes an object of self-contempt. But that is what he has chosen and that is what he has to live with.

Lucifer esteemed and loved himself—so he thought. And he rebelled against the idea of being called to love anyone higher than himself. And so he "reigns in hell." Reigns over what? Over souls as mean and miserable and isolated as himself. Each one of us has a tendency that could draw us down into that. God saw our predicament and he himself came to save us, to give us the model of true fulfillment through self-giving love.

It is not that self-esteem has no place in the life of a Christian. On the contrary, it is something essential, provided it is true and leads a person out of and not into self-enclosure. The Christian's self-esteem, his or her sense of self-worth, is both simple and extraordinary, inasmuch as it combines two very contrasting extremes. On the one hand I, as a Christian, know that I am a son of God; on the other, I know that I am a sinner in need of redemption. There is no greater sense of dignity and worth, and no greater sense of misery and danger. If I die loving God and others, I am saved. If I die, loving just myself, I am lost. Christian education and formation—lifetime tasks—are fundamentally aimed at helping me take stock of my dignity, to grow in it with God's help and at the same time to fight against all inbuilt tendencies such as vanity, envy, greed or lust that turn me in on myself.

Presence in religious education manuals

This is a sort of postscript - added because it is quite startling. Self-esteem or self-worth ideas of a thoroughly secularist nature inspire educational texts in widespread use for Catholic religious instruction in not a few countries. I had the occasion some time ago to go through the books used in one country as a common syllabus for all Christians (including Catholics) for primary religious education. The Grade One book (for six-year-olds) opens not with God but with "Myself." A tone of unqualified self-acceptance is already set in the same book: "God is happy with us"; "Thank you Lord for making me just as I am."

One section-heading is "Working for God: Developing Self-esteem in Ourselves and Others." If we recall the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18), the Gospel itself makes the point that highly developed and complacent self-esteem shows a pride that makes a person unacceptable to God. Yet when this parable is invoked (for nine-year-olds), it is in the context of the need to be "at peace with oneself," and there the impression is that the Pharisee is in a better state than the tax-collector. "The Pharisee felt at peace with himself. The tax-collector was not at peace with himself. He could not raise his face to heaven. We should have peace in our hearts." Following this the children are asked in the "Exercise": "The Pharisee prayed that he was not like the tax-collector. Who could not raise his face to heaven?"

The twelve-year-olds are told, "Self-esteem is our identity (who we are).... What we think of who we are is our self-esteem." This is, to say the least, a very confused and confusing statement. What we think of who we are often does not correspond to what we really are. The Pharisee again is a clear example.

This tone emerges more strongly in the upper books, precisely at the age when self-contentment becomes a potent obstacle to human and Christian growth. "Value others for what they are and encourage them to develop their self-esteem." This is the very heart of the humanistic psychology approach. Each one is right just as he or she is, and no one should ever suggest that they should be different!

Awareness of one's unique worth and talents is presented as necessary for "self-esteem" (considered central to psychological health). "We should be happy with the different talents God has given us"; I should "appreciate my talents"; I should "love and appreciate myself." In this view, personal development appears to begin with what each one is or has. Growth in self-esteem is then the sign and test of true development: I am of worth because I am me, I am unique.

The goal of Christian education is not growth in self-esteem, but growth in Christ, which is inseparable from the consciousness of being a sinner in need of redemption, inseparable also from the idea of self-denial, and from seeking not one's "own system of values" but the Gospel law given to us by Christ—the "law of freedom" (James 1:25). "Self" cannot be the starting point for development or growth as a Christian—for whom everything starts with what God gives in terms not so much of natural talents (which inevitably vary) but of the supernatural gifts of redemption, grace and calling, which are extended to everyone. On this basis even the person with no sense of exceptional human talents (and perhaps especially such

a person), can develop a full Christian life.

A key point maintained by the "self-actualization" philosophy is that each one is entitled to judge himself by his own standards and not by the standards of anyone else. Christianity teaches, on the contrary, that one should judge oneself—because one will be judged—by the standards that Jesus Christ has given to us in his teaching.

The root of healthy self-esteem is not to think well of yourself, or to have others (apparently) praise you. It is to be convinced that you are of worth because you know someone loves you, and loves you even if others don't and even if you are tempted (the ultimate temptation) to believe that you are not worth loving at all.

Hence Christian self-esteem is not a mood or a feeling about oneself, and less still a result of a comparison with others.⁸ It is a fact, the positive side of which far outweighs the negative.

Secular psychology and sociology tend to divide "self-esteemers" into those with high and low self-esteem, and they discuss the advantages or disadvantages of each type. Christianity proposes a simpler and more comprehensive view of self-worth into which the negative elements in each one of us—our objective defects and our sins—are integrated and absorbed into the positive fact and the glorious awareness of being a child of God.⁹

Secular psychologists and educationalists offer a plethora of programs to raise self-esteem; but practically all involve turning a blind eye to one's objective limitations and weaknesses. Only the Christian view of self takes account of both my defects—my petty self-centeredness—and of God's unconditional love for me.

Excessive self-esteem, as we have remarked, easily tends to alienate others. Only the thick-skinned and totally self-satisfied person (like the Pharisee) does not notice this. The almost automatic reaction of the self-admiring person, when he or she realizes that others do not share in that admiration and perhaps even regard them with a certain contempt, is one of resentment, even rage. If their lives become so dogged with such evident failures that their self-esteem crumbles, there is a real danger that it can turn into self-pity, which is one of the most isolating, demoralizing and self-destructive of attitudes related to self.

⁸ Cf. Emler, pp. 7-8.

⁹ We can note how this fits in with the generalized psychological opinion that self-esteem is very principally dependent on a perceived degree of *acceptance by others*, in the first place by parental acceptance (cf. Emler 44ss).