# "Self-Esteem and Social Competition"

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Summary:

- This paper explores the relations between self-esteem and social competition. Self-esteem is a very important good and social competition is a widespread phenomenon. They are commonly linked, as people often seek self-esteem through success in competition. Although competition in fact generates valuable consequences and can to some extent foster self-esteem, empirical research suggests that competition has a strong tendency to undermine self-esteem. To be sure, competition is not the source of all problematic deficits in self-esteem, and it can arise for goods other than self-esteem. But the relation between competition and access to self-esteem is still significant, and it is worth asking how we might foster a desirable distribution of the latter in the face of difficulties created by the former. That is the question addressed in this paper. The approach I propose neither recommends self-denial nor the uncritical celebration of the rat race. It charts instead a solidaristic path to support the social conditions of the self-esteem of each individual. I proceed as follows. I start, in section 2, by clarifying key concepts involved in the discussion. In section 3, I identify nine mechanisms that support individuals' self-esteem and impose limits on competition. I focus, in particular, on the challenges faced by people in their practices of work. In section 4, I outline prudential and moral arguments to justify the use of the proposed mechanisms. Section 5 concludes with remarks on the role of social criticism in the processes of change favoring the use of the mechanisms.

# INTRODUCTION

- This paper explores the relations between self-esteem and social competition.

Q: How can we foster a desirable distribution of access to self-esteem in the face of the difficulties created by social competition?

- The approach I propose neither recommends self-denial nor the uncritical celebration of the rat race. It charts instead a solidaristic path to support the social conditions of the self-esteem of each individual.

I focus, in particular, on the challenges faced by people in their practices of work.

- Four parts of the paper:
    1. Preliminaries
    2. Mechanisms
    3. Normative arguments
    4. Social criticism

# 1. PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATIONS

## 1. Self-esteem

- In general, self-esteem is, or expresses, a positive self-appraisal, a sense of one's own worth.

- Schema:   Self-esteem is a relational phenomenon including the following components: an appraising individual, the same individual as appraised, some range of features of this individual being appraised, certain criteria of appraisal or esteem, certain attitudes and actions expressing this appraisal, and certain material and social circumstances. Self-esteem has various forms, which become visible as we characterize its elements further.

- Distinctions: between moral and non-moral forms of self-esteem, and between endowment-based and achievement-based self-esteem.

## 2. Social dimension of self-esteem

- Two key feeders of self-esteem: A sense of personal efficacy in one's activities and social recognition.

## 3. Social competition

- Self-esteem is often pursued in practical contexts shaped by social competition.

- Social competition: Forms of social activity in which those involved try to get certain things (such as jobs, monetary resources, prestige, etc.) which cannot be obtained simultaneously by all of them, so that some get them only if the others do not. (Broader: e.g. lottery; Narrower: e.g. soccer match).
- Rat race: When the self-esteem of competitors is significantly tied to winning in competition.

- Internal and external relations between self-esteem and social competition.

## 4. Descriptive and normative claims about self-esteem

- Distinction between actual and appropriate self-esteem.

# 2. MECHANISMS SUPPORTING SELF-ESTEEM AND LIMITING COMPETITION

- Some pros and cons of social competition.

- Three patterns of limitation of social competition: elimination, containment, reshaping.

- Nine mechanisms indirectly supporting self-esteem and limiting the existence or the impacts of the rat race:

    M1: reducing external pressures to compete

    M2: propping up a generalized social status

    M3: pluralizing merit

    M4: social combination

    M5: immersion

    M6: impersonal or impartial appreciation of value

    M7: emphasizing effort

    M8: intrapersonal rather than interpersonal comparison

    M9: pivoting on dignity

# 3. NORMATIVE ARGUMENTS

## 1. Mid-level devices

- The mechanisms can be viewed as mid-level devices, intermediate between specific policies and initiatives that activate them and prudential and moral principles or societal ideals that justify them.

- Some examples regarding the first relation (mechanisms-policies and initiatives): robust social rights, political liberties, civil and associational liberties and opportunity, support for workers' cooperatives, changes in labor law, distributive schemes tracking effort, changes in personal and social ethos, new educational curricula. More ambitious changes: universal basic income, experiment with democratic market socialism.

- Focus on the second relation (mechanisms-normative principles): Stepping back to frame normative inquiry about M1-M9 and their implementation.

## 2. Prudential considerations

- Convergence on M1-M9 from various theories of well-being.

- The argument as construed on an objectivist dignitarian view (linking self-esteem to activities featuring self-determination and self-realization).

- Avoiding the polar mistakes of self-obsession and self-denial.

## 3. Social justice

- In arguing for making use of M1-M9 effectively available in certain practical contexts (such as working activities), we would have to show three things:

1. That, in general, having access to the social conditions of self-esteem is an important interest that gives rise to pro tanto rights.

2. That, more specifically, shaping the contexts so that they feature availability of M1-M9 is a feasible and a reasonable focus for social reform and public policy.

3. That, all-things-considered, shaping the relevant contexts so that they feature access to M1-M9 is indeed (at least) permissible given the feasible alternatives and after taking into account the implications not only for self-esteem but also for other morally important interests and rights.

   • Objections and all things considered arguments about self-esteem and social competition. It would be better:

     (i) to avoid the recommended limits to social competition in order to respect people's liberty,

     (ii) to allow for the gains in production of enjoyable goods that competition incentivizes,

     (iii) to attend more fully to the claims of merit.

# 4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE

- Fostering the social conditions of self-esteem is partly  a matter of cultivating a new personal and social ethos. Social critique has a role to play in this process.


-  Two remarks regarding:

(i) The dialectic of self-esteem.

(ii) "Fundamental attribution error" and pivot on dignity through collective action.