FROM SELF-RESPECT TO RESPECT FOR OTHERS

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The leading accounts of why we should respect others and what it takes to do so tend to assume the following picture: Persons have a rational nature, which is a marvelous thing, so they should be respected like other objects of “awesome” value, and accordingly cherished, treasured, protected, exhibited, honored and so on.\(^1\) It is commonplace to take Kant as the deep inspiration, if not an outright adherent, of this kind of view, which emphasizes his exceedingly compelling and widely influential claims about the “objective”, ”unconditional”, “incomparable”, and “absolute worth” of persons, whose “dignity” is “above all price”, “without equivalent”, and places severe constraints on how we may be treated (\(G\) 4:434-6; \(MM\) 6:435-6).\(^2\) These famous remarks are taken by Wood (2008) and Donagan (1977) to articulate a special kind of metaphysical, agent-neutral and intrinsic value that all persons are thought to share in virtue of their rational nature. This value is distinctive because it gives everyone sufficient reason to respect, not just promote or maximize, the dignity of all. We respect ourselves and others by, for example, choosing not to violate or sacrifice dignity in exchange for things that we merely desire or find useful, by refusing to weigh and balance or trade-off “amounts” of dignity, and by exemplifying, appreciating and protecting this value in everyone.

Against this backdrop, disagreement persists over what, more specifically, it takes to respect persons as persons. Stephen Darwall (1977), Ronald Dworkin (2000), Alan Donagan

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\(^1\) This way of describing and labeling the “awesome” conception of respect comes from, but is not endorsed by, Hill (2000).

\(^2\) I will refer to Kant’s texts with the following abbreviations followed by the Academy volume and page number: \(G\) –Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals; \(CPrR\) – Critique of Practical Reason; \(MM\) – The Metaphysics of Morals; \(R\) –Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings; \(A\) – ‘Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View’; \(C\) –Collins’s Lecture notes; \(H\) –Herder's lecture notes; \(I\) –‘Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective; and \(V\) –Vigilantius's lecture notes.
(1977) and Allen Wood (2008) argue that to respect persons as persons is to treat them in all the ways that they ought to be treated; Joseph Raz (2001) claims that we respect others by believing they are intrinsically valuable and protecting them from harm or damage; Harry Frankfurt (1999), Bernard Williams (1973) and Robin Dillon (1992b) contend that to respect others as persons is to take proper account of their individuality; Joel Feinberg (1970) thinks of respect for persons in terms of respecting their rights, and Sara Buss (1999) suggests that respecting others in this way involves acknowledging their dignity in our practical deliberations.

There is much to admire in this “awesome” conception of respect, which regards persons as having an intrinsic, absolute and objective worth that must always be respected and never sacrificed or violated. It opposes purely consequentialist thinking; it refuses to compare or aggregate relative amounts of dignity; it rejects the idea of ‘negative responsibility’ that we are just as responsible for what we fail to prevent as what we do ourselves; it insists on agent-centered restrictions that disallow, for example, murdering one person to prevent five murders; it emphasizes honoring, cherishing, exhibiting and other ways of responding to value that are not just promoting or protecting it; and it is able to generate, in a direct and compelling way, more specific moral requirements about coercion, deception, murder, slavery, discrimination, rape, ridicule and humiliation.

While Kant is appropriately acknowledged as the catalyst for much of the contemporary interest in respect for persons, some have worried that neither contemporary moral philosophers nor Kant himself should accept the traditional picture. First, that account assumes, as an apparently ungrounded starting point, that persons have a metaphysical, intrinsic value that
merits respect, without offering a deeper justification or grounding of this value. 3 Second, while the **ideal** of respecting the dignity of persons can generate important **presumptive** prohibitions on murder, rape, torture, etc., the traditional picture seems to lack the structure and specificity to produce a determinate, consistent, and coherent **system** of moral requirements. 4

These concerns have led some of Kant’s commentators, including O’Neill (1975; 1990), Engstrom (2009), Singer (1961) and Sensen (2009), to attribute to him a radically different conception of basic respect for persons. Their strategy is to downplay the passages where Kant seems to endorse the “awesome” conception and reinterpret them in light of the assumption that the Formula of Universal Law (FUL) – “Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (G 4:421) – is Kant’s most fundamental moral principle and the foundation for all his other moral requirements. On this view, the Humanity Formula (FH) – “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G 4:429) – is taken to be essentially equivalent to FUL by prohibiting maxims that others could not possibly share, rather than as commanding us to respect an “awesome” value we find in ourselves and others. 5 Similarly, Kant’s vivid claims about the absolute and incomparable dignity of persons are read in a deflationary way, as saying that to have dignity just is to be free and among the set of people who must be able to will maxims as universal laws, which means that respecting the

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3 Allen Wood (2008, pp. 54-60), for example, reads the passage in GW2 where Kant says that because we each recognize our own rational nature as an end in itself, we must recognize all persons as ends in themselves, as **revealing or uncovering** to us an antecedent objective value we and others already possess rather than as an argument that justifies or grounds that objective value itself. Korsgaard’s (1996, p. 106-132) influential rendering of this argument is different but nonetheless depends crucially on an assumption I hope to avoid, that when rational agents will ends they thereby make those ends valuable in an agent-neutral sense.

4 Rawls (1999); Hill (2000).

5 Korsgaard (1996), Herman (1993b) and O’Neill (1975; 1990) agree on this much although they diverge about the precise relationship between FUL and FH.
dignity of persons is to refuse to act on maxims, in the form of universal laws, to which they could not possibly consent (Sensen 2009).

According to its proponents, this “universalizability” picture of respect provides the determinacy and structure Kant favors without appealing to an antecedent substantive value, but it faces its own set of criticisms. The reading it gives of the *Doctrine of Virtue* and *Groundwork* passages about dignity seems strained; there are longstanding questions about whether so much emphasis should be placed on the “lying promise” example when interpreting the Humanity Formula as a whole⁶; and it is difficult to see how this picture can generate the more particular duties of respect to oneself and others in the specific way that Kant derives them in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, which is most evidently by appeal to a value or worth that should not be thrown away, disavowed, belittled, defiled, etc. In addition, from a commonsense perspective, the correct moral explanation for not ridiculing or humiliating others seems more a matter of refusing to violate or dishonor their dignity rather than avoiding maxims that, if they were universal laws, others could not possibly agree to.

I aim to explore whether there is a new and different interpretation of Kant’s views about basic respect for persons that (1) does not appeal to an ungrounded metaphysical value, (2) is suitably structured and determinate, but also (3) captures the ideas about the incomparable and absolute value of persons that so many of us find important and inspiring.⁷

My novel reconstruction of Kant’s *argument* for respecting others as persons is of interest to moral philosophers and Kant’s commentators alike. It provides a richer understanding of his well-known texts regarding respect in the *Doctrine of Virtue* and his less familiar discussions of

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⁷ A different and interesting attempt to avoid the “awesome” conception of respect without reducing FHE to FUL can be found in Dean (2006; 2009).
respect in *Lectures on Ethics*; it uncovers some wonderful ideas that commentators and readers of Kant may have missed about why we should respect others; it challenges some commonsense moral views about how, in particular, to respect others; and it reveals a deep justificatory priority in Kant’s moral framework for *rational self-regard*, which is, I claim, what ultimately justifies and grounds other-regarding moral requirements when combined with our rational dispositions to universalize our maxims and reciprocate with others.

Briefly, here is a deep and pervasive argumentative strategy, which shares certain similarities with modern contractualist thinking, that Kant employs to argue both for the duties of respect for others and, it turns out, for the duty of beneficence as well. Kant begins by assuming that, as rational persons, we have several *substantive* and *self-regarding* dispositions of reason that are part of our rational nature, including ones to avoid servility, to be free, to perfect ourselves and even to promote our own happiness (although we have no duty to do so). We also have deep moral predispositions to reciprocate with others and, more generally, to act only on maxims that all fully rational people, if they were rational, could will as universal laws. Our self-regarding rational dispositions provide *standards of rational willing* that determine what each of us would will as universal law – a fully rational person could not rationally will to sacrifice her basic needs, take up servility, become a slave or abandon all opportunities for self-development. Other-regarding moral requirements are therefore those that each one of us would will as universal laws in light of our various substantive and self-regarding rational dispositions. Because of our rational interests in our own happiness and self-respect, we all would rationally will *other-regarding* duties of beneficence and respect.

My plan is first to review some basic points about the content, structure and place of the duties of respect toward oneself and others in Kant’s normative ethical theory. Second, I
develop and illustrate this argumentative strategy by showing how it adds a new twist to the usual way of interpreting Kant’s account of the nature and grounds of the duty of beneficence. Third, I argue that, according to Kant, we are rationally disposed to respect ourselves, which means our reason drives us to value ourselves in a special sort of agent-relative way, as having a dignity that is above any price and inalienable, without relying on an antecedent metaphysical value or yet implying that others must value us in that way as well. Fourth, I note some subtle and important observations Kant makes about how susceptible we are to basing our sense of our own worth on the low opinions of those who have an inflated sense of their own value. Kant thinks, in particular, that when others place a low value on us or outright demand that we lose respect for ourselves, this has a tendency to undermine our own self-respect. Fifth, I claim that, according to Kant, we would all insist on duties of respect for others that afford us the moral freedom to respect ourselves as we are rationally disposed to do and, sixth, I conclude by suggesting that my interpretation resolves several traditional puzzles about those duties.

1. Universal and Particular Respect

Kant rejects the widespread view, which is common among adherents of the “awesome” picture of respect, that to respect others is to treat them in all the ways persons ought to be treated. In addition to our duties of respect toward ourselves and others, Kant thinks we have duties of other kinds as well. We have duties of love, which are wide rather than narrow (MM 6:449); when duties of love are satisfied, they generate corresponding obligations in others (such as duties of gratitude) whereas fulfilling duties of respect need not do so (MM 6:448); and failing to satisfy them is mere lack of virtue (except in cases of principled refusal) whereas failing to fulfill duties of respect is vice (MM 6:464). Kant thinks we are also subject to legally enforceable rules and rights that regulate and protect our external freedom, which are matters of
right and justice rather than respect. And, Kant says that we have imperfect and positive duties of self-perfection, whereas our duties of self-respect are characterized as perfect and negative (MM 6:419; 421; 467).

Aristotle famously distinguishes universal justice, which is virtue in its entirety, from the more familiar particular justice, which is a specific virtue, having to do with paying debts and fulfilling promises, that stands alongside courage, temperance, and generosity.8 Similarly for Kant, perhaps the Categorical Imperative may be described as a principle of respect in a thin and formal sense, but Kant thinks there are mid-level duties of respect in a thicker sense that follow from the supreme moral principle and forbid the more specific wrongs of humiliating, ridiculing and debasing others. We disrespect someone in this more familiar way when we mock him for his religious convictions, degrade him by forcing him to engage in compromising acts, embarrass him by making him prostrate himself before us, and address him with racist epithets that tell him that he is a despised animal in our eyes. More specifically, Kant claims we have duties of respect against arrogance, not to “demand that others think little of themselves in comparison with us” (MM 6:465), defamation, not to “to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others” with “no particular aim in view” (MM 6:466), and ridicule, not to engage in “[w]anton faultfinding and mockery” (MM 6:465).

Respect is a separate moral category, for Kant, because he thinks we can demean, debase, humiliate or otherwise disrespect someone by actions that are not immoral in other ways, such as ridiculing them with otherwise innocuous words and gestures, snickering at them behind their backs, calling attention to publicly accessible but embarrassing information about them (e.g. choices they have made, relationships they have), etc. On Kant’s view, we may also use actions

8 In Nicomachean Ethics V.1–2 (1129b—1130b5) Aristotle (2000) distinguishes between these two forms of justice.
that are already immoral as ways of disrespecting others. You may disrespect me by continually showing up late or not at all to our scheduled meetings even though you promised to be on time, for example, or stealing my books in plain view of others may be your way of humiliating me.

It is also worth noting that Kant has in effect two concepts of respect. One of them is respect as a “feeling” that is forced from us by the moral law and by those who exemplify it in their actions (MM 6:394; MM 6:402; CPrR 5:72-80). No one can have a duty to acquire this feeling, but we should all make ourselves worthy of it. The other is respect as valuing ourselves and others as persons with dignity. As I see it, Kant assumes that we have a duty to respect ourselves in this sense and argues from this that all have a duty to respect others in this sense as well.

2. Beneficence

It is tempting, as many do, to interpret Kant as offering very different justifications for the duty of beneficence and the duties of respect for others, one emphasizing the Formula of Universal Law – it would be self-defeating to will a maxim of non-beneficence as a universal law\(^\text{10}\) – and the other emphasizing the Formula of Humanity – demeaning or ridiculing someone violates their dignity and so fails to treat them as ends in themselves.\(^\text{11}\)

As I read Kant, however, his conception of the nature and grounds of beneficence is deeply analogous to his account of the nature and grounds of respect for others, so a reexamination of the former will shed new light on the latter. The isomorphism I see is not achieved by subordinating one of the Formulas of the Categorical Imperative to the other; rather, it retains essential features of both FUL and FHE.

\(^9\) Atwell (1982) argues that this is the only notion of respect, for Kant, and that the particular duties of respect for others derive from it.


Although there is disagreement over how to interpret the argument Kant gives for the duty of beneficence in the *Doctrine of Virtue* (*MM* 6:393), his commentators tend to agree on this basic picture: In order for any of us in our world to be happy, we need the help of others, so we could not will a universal law allowing us to refuse to make help others, at least sometimes and to some extent. The trouble, as Herman (1993a, p. 45) points out, is that even if no one could ever play Mozart’s Sonatas, run a strike it rich, or taste a fine Whiskey without significant help from others, these contingent and prudential facts about the ends we may happen to set and our need for assistance in attaining them are not the sorts of considerations that, for Kant, could ground a *moral duty* to set the happiness of others as one of our ends. A common strategy in response to this puzzle is to argue that rational agents *necessarily* will the satisfaction of their basic needs, which explains why it matters morally that we all need the help of others to protect our rational capacities (Hill 2002b; O’Neill 1985; Herman 1993a). This proposed solution, however, leaves unexplained why we have a duty to make the happiness of others one of our ends, rather than just provide them with mutual aid when they are in dire need. Once my basic needs are provided for, it would certainly be nice for others to further my non-moral plans and projects, but why does Kant think they are morally required to promote my wellbeing, at least sometimes and to some extent? Advocates of the “awesome” conception, such as Wood (2008, p. 232-3), can appeal to the agent-neutral value of humanity in this connection, let’s see whether there is a different, less committal, way of understanding Kant’s argument for the duty of beneficence.

The key assumption, as I read it, is that our pursuit of happiness is not just a contingent feature of us, something we happen to go for, but instead a necessary part of our *rational*
As rational persons, we are rationally disposed, not merely driven by external forces or contingent inclinations, to will our own happiness (within otherwise permissible constraints). Although Kant seems to shift among various conceptions of happiness, if happiness is understood as the satisfaction of one’s (permissible) ends (CPrR 5:431) then it would be impossible and so irrational for someone to have particular ends but refuse to will that they be satisfied, for to have an end, according to Kant, is to will its object.\(^\text{15}\) As rational persons, we therefore necessarily seek the satisfaction of our own (permissible) ends (\textit{G} 4:415, 430; \textit{MM} 6:391; \textit{CPrR} 5:25; 34; \textit{R} 6:6, 47; \textit{An} 7:326). Imperatives, however, are constraints on our wills; they tell us what we must do even though we might not (\textit{G} 4:413). It follows that there can be no \textit{duty} to pursue our own happiness (\textit{MM} 6:386-388, 451; \textit{CPrR} 5:93; \textit{R} 6:6), since we necessarily do so anyway without needing any command to do so. Even so, Kant thinks we are still \textit{rationally required} to try to be happy (without the added element of constraint that would be part of a \textit{duty} of self-love). Kant thinks we are rationally disposed and have good reason to make ourselves happy – our pursuit of happiness is described, for example, as “good” (\textit{R} 6:58) and “necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being” (\textit{CPrR} 5:25).\(^\text{16}\)

With the assumption that it is part of our rational nature to pursue our happiness in hand, we can reinterpret Kant’s argument for the duty of beneficence as follows: (1) It is rationally necessary for us to will our own happiness, so we all are rationally disposed to pursue our own set of permissible ends and protect our ability to do so – this is part of what it is to be a rational person, according to Kant. (2) We live in a world, however, in which pursuing these \textit{self-regarding} rational dispositions requires the help of others. (3) The Hypothetical Imperative

\(^{14}\) See Hill (2002c) and Engstrom (2009).
\(^{15}\) Hill (2002c) makes this point to explain the asymmetry between our duty to promote the happiness of others and having no duty to pursue our own happiness.
\(^{16}\) See also \textit{CPrR} 5:61; 5:110; \textit{G} 4:415-16 and \textit{R} 6:6.
requires that we will the necessary means to our ends. (4) Help from others, according to Kant, is a necessary means to our own happiness, which we are rationally required to will, so we are all also rationally disposed to seek and insist on help from others. (5) The Formula of Universal Law requires us to act only on maxims that we could rationally will as universal law. (6) Each one of us, if fully rational, necessarily wills the help of others in pursuing our own happiness. Therefore, (7) we could all, if fully rational, will as universal law a minimal duty of beneficence to set the happiness of others as one of our ends. In doing so, we are securing our own ability to further our aims and projects while ensuring that everyone else can pursue their own happiness as well.

FUL has long been charged with being an empty formalism, in part because it does not, as traditionally interpreted, specify standards that determine what maxims could be willed as universal laws and so leaves open the possibility that people could or could not will maxims as universal laws on the basis of ignorance, short-sightedness, contingent wants and desires, and other irrational or non-rational considerations. As I interpret FUL, however, our rational nature, including our rational predisposition to pursue our own happiness, determines what we could will as universal laws, so that principle is Kant’s way of bridging the gap between substantive and thick rational self-regard and other-regarding moral requirements.¹⁷

This interpretation of Kant’s argument for the duty of beneficence has the added advantage that it provides a more compelling explanation for why that duty has the content that it does. A duty requiring extreme self-sacrifice from some people to satisfy the “champagne” tastes of others, or one requiring us always to help others except when we are fulfilling a duty favoring a different option (Baron 1995; Cummiskey 1996) arguably could not be rationally

¹⁷ O’Neill (1990) raises questions about moral theories that rely on hypothetical consent, but I think her challenges can be met.
willed by everyone as a universal law because those who stand to lose under either scheme would be significantly diminished in their ability to fulfill their rational disposition to seek their own happiness. A more modest duty, such as Hill’s (1992a; 2002b) proposal that we give mutual aid and help one another sometimes and to some extent seems better suited to protect the ability of all to pursue their own happiness.\textsuperscript{18}

Further support for this reading comes from a later, and rarely discussed, passage where Kant elaborates on his discussion of beneficence and explicitly draws an analogy between it and the duties of respect for others:

\textit{Moderation} in one's demands generally, that is, willing restriction of one's self-love in view of the self-love of others, is called \textit{modesty}. Lack of such moderation (lack of modesty) as regards one's worthiness to be \textit{loved} by others is called \textit{egotism (philautia)} (\textit{MM} 6:462).

Kant has already argued that, because we are rationally disposed to make ourselves happy and we need some help from others to do so, we could all will a universal law to make the happiness of others one of our ends. Kant makes the further commonsensical claim that although we are rationally disposed to pursue our happiness, it is possible that we can do so too fervently, in ways that interfere with the ability of others to pursue their own non-moral ends. This mutual interference and conflict is not merely due to limited space and resources but also results from our tendency to regard our own happiness as more important than others and to demand that they go beyond the basic requirements of morality and sacrifice their own plans and projects in order to help us pursue our ends. Not only does our rational pursuit of our own happiness mean that

\textsuperscript{18} A further possibility, which is closer to the views of Baron and Cummiskey than to Hill’s regarding the latitude allowed by the duty of beneficence, is to say that we are required to help others unless there are strong moral reasons to do otherwise, where these reasons can be provided by our own happiness.
we can each will a duty of beneficence requiring active *support* from others, argues Kant, it also means that we can will a universal law of modesty that *protects* us from excessive demands for our help and so makes us better able to pursue our own set of permissible ends. We are being unjustifiably egotistical, therefore, when we demand that others labor away at our ends, beyond what beneficence or justice require, at the expense of their own plans and projects, although we are still free to graciosly invite others to help us and fairly compensate them for their efforts.

When we turn back to consider the duties of respect for others, we find exactly the same argumentative structure at work, one that explains why we have duties to respect one another and also what, in particular, it takes for us to do so.

3. **Self-Respect**

Kant’s argument for the duties of respect toward others, as I interpret it, relies on a thick and substantive conception of what it takes to respect ourselves. As in the case of beneficence, Kant aims to argue from the *self-regarding* rational dispositions that persons have in virtue of their rational nature to other-regarding moral requirements about how to treat other persons who possess the same rational self-concern.

If we are to understand Kant’s account of how and why we must respect others, we must look to his account of the perfect duties to oneself, which Kant characterizes as the “highest duties of all” (*V* 27:604). The perfect duties to oneself are most naturally read as a set of rational requirements about how to value ourselves in a special sort of way, as having a dignity that is above any price, without equivalent and inalienable (*MM* 6:435; *MM* 6:465).19 When we

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mutilate ourselves, give over to lust, or prostrate before others, for example, Kant thinks we value ourselves in a lesser and inferior way, as we value things with a price or equivalent.20

The “awesome” conception assumes that we must avoid defiling, debasing or otherwise disrespecting ourselves because we have an agent-neutral, intrinsic value that we must be respected by everyone. A different and novel way of interpreting the perfect duties to oneself, however, is as a set of substantive and self-regarding rational requirements that merely tell us how we are to value ourselves (what attitudes to have about ourselves, what self-regarding actions to take, etc.) without presupposing that we have an antecedent intrinsic worth that must be respected by others as well. The substantive and self-regarding rational principles of self-respect, on this view, only generate reasons for a person to treat herself in certain kinds of ways, but they do not necessarily generate reasons for others to do so as well – just because we are rationally required to value ourselves in this way does not entail that others must value us in that way as well. The “awesome” conception, in other words, correctly specifies what it takes to respect ourselves properly, but Kant sees the need for further argument to explain how people who are rationally disposed to respect themselves in this way should treat one another. Here are a few points of clarification.

First, consider, by analogy, three possible views about the value of someone’s happiness.

1. She is rationally required to pursue her happiness because the non-moral ends she sets for herself are antecedently and objectively valuable. (2) By setting some non-moral ends, she thereby confers objective value on them and so generates agent-neutral reasons for herself and others to to further her ends (Korsgaard 1996). (3) Setting non-moral ends merely makes them valuable to her by generating agent-relative reasons for her to satisfy them without necessarily

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20 Proponents of this basic conception of self-respect include
doing so for others as well, so a further moral principle like the duty of beneficence is needed to explain what reasons others have to help her pursue those ends (Hill 1992a; 2002b). My proposal regarding self-respect is like (3) – the perfect duties to oneself are not justified by an antecedent value we all share; valuing ourselves as persons with dignity does not by itself confer an agent-neutral value on ourselves that must be respected by others; instead, when we value ourselves appropriately, this gives us reasons to treat ourselves with dignity and leaves as an open question how others are to treat us.

Second, Kant thinks that it is part of the nature of a rational agent to “value himself by a low as well as by a high standard” (MM 6:435) – although our reason drives us to attribute ourselves “insignificance as a human animal”, we are also rationally disposed to ascribe ourselves “dignity as a rational human being” and refuse to “disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being” (MM 6:435). As rational persons, we do not value our rational nature because it is antecedently valuable; rather, our own rational nature is valuable to us because we are rationally disposed to value it (MM 6:436).

Third, according to Kant’s theory of value, to value myself as a person with dignity is to recognize, accept and follow a cluster of rational prescriptions about how to treat myself, including the self-regarding duties against suicide, lying, servility, etc. Treating ourselves with respect therefore involves satisfying substantive requirements of reason against defiling, debasing, dishonoring or otherwise disrespecting ourselves. By analogy, Kant’s emphasis is on the rational choices involved in cherishing and treasuring something than on any attitudes and feelings that may be part of doing so.

Finally, if we abandon any objective values that are antecedent to principles of reason, we need some kind of explanation for why these substantive and self-regarding rational dispositions,
to avoid defiling, debasing or dishonoring ourselves, are part of the nature of a person with reason. Unfortunately, Kant does not attempt a deeper justification of these self-regarding duties of respect in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, and perhaps he would merely point to the “fact of reason” (*CPrR* 5:151-2; 155-6). One proposal, which I cannot develop here, is that across his works Kant is trying to characterize a conception of what it is to be a person of reason that is radically different from the Humean or rational choice conception and is closer to our commonsense understanding of a ‘reasonable’ person. As Kant portrays her, an ideally rational person has strong interests in fulfilling her rational dispositions not only to live, be free, be happy, perfect herself and respect herself but also to protect the physical structures that underlie these dispositions and bring about the social conditions that are needed for her to exercise them well.

If we take for granted that rational persons are disposed to value themselves as persons with dignity only in a way that generates what are often called ‘agent-relative’ reasons to treat herself accordingly, we are a step closer to understanding Kant’s powerful argument for why self-regarding rational agents must respect others as well.

4. Self-Respect out of bounds

The perfect duties to oneself are a cluster of self-regarding requirements of reason that are meant to keep us from affording *too little* respect to ourselves – we must not, for example, debase, dishonor or prostrate ourselves. As rational persons, we are rationally disposed to satisfy these requirements and so to afford ourselves adequate respect.

Recall that the next step in Kant’s argument for the duty of beneficence, once he established that we are rationally disposed to pursue our own happiness, was that we can do so only with the positive help of others. Self-respect is different, however, because Kant thinks that each of us is capable of achieving an adequate sense of our own worth without the appreciation,
admiration, reverence or “positive high esteem” of other people (MM 6:467). This explains a puzzling feature of the duties of respect toward others, which is why they are only negative duties enjoining us to avoid interfering with others (MM 6:459). John Rawls (1999) has plausibly argued that in our world we can achieve proper self-respect only when we are part of a community that affirms, appreciates and values us. For Kant, however, there is no need to fawn over, flatter or otherwise help others to respect themselves, as there is a positive duty to help them pursue their happiness.

The justification Kant gives for the duties of respect toward others is analogous to his argument against making excessive demands on others to sacrifice their non-moral ends for the sake of our happiness. Kant emphasizes that, in our world, having too much respect for ourselves, valuing ourselves too highly, has a tendency to undermine the self-respect of others. It’s not that we require positive help from others in order to have self-respect; nor do we need their good wishes, beliefs, or feelings to do so. What we need is for others to refrain from infringing on, interfering with or undermining the respect we must have for ourselves, which they do by placing too high a value on themselves and a corresponding low value on us. Even in the case of beneficence, issues of self-respect arise because the ways that others help us can be humiliating – Kant warns against “any appearance of intending to bind the other by” such acts, favors practicing beneficence “in complete secrecy”, and enjoins us not to try to make others happy “in accordance with my concepts of happiness” (MM 6:454).

According to Kant, we are very susceptible to arrogance and to basing our own worth on the opinions of others (R 6:26-7; C 27:349; H 27:41; H 27:44). Just as placing too much importance on our own happiness at the expense of others can interfere with the ability of others to pursue their plans and projects, so self-conceit on the part of others can and often does
interfere with the respect we have for ourselves. For example, we should not, according to Kant,
disrespect ourselves by “needing and asking for others' beneficence” because in doing so we
place ourselves in the “inferior position of a dependent in relation to his protector” and so violate
our “real self-esteem (pride in the dignity of humanity in one's own person)” (MM 6:459).

Let’s consider in more detail why Kant thinks self-conceit is so pervasive and troubling.
He says:

Self-conceit and timorousness are the two rocks a man runs into, if he departs, in one
direction or the other, from the moral law (C 27:351).

Egotism, we saw, is defined as making excessive demands on others to improve one’s
own *happiness*. Self-conceit or *arrogantia* is analogously defined as “lack of modesty in one’s
claims to be respected by others” (MM 6:462) and “an unjust desire to acquire superiority for
oneself over others” (R 6:27; cf. MM 6:434, 464; CPR 5:116; C 27:349-350; V 27:620). One
element of Kant’s conception of arrogance or self-conceit is that of valuing ourselves *too highly,*
either with regard to others (MM 6:465) or to the moral law (CPR 5:73). The other is that by
harboring an inflated opinion of our own worth, we thereby regard ourselves as superior to
others, which disposes us try to dominate others and to demand that others value themselves less
than they should (MM 6:462; MM 6:465). Self-conceit, in Kant’s sense, is thus distinct from
more commonsense notions of puffed up posturing or inflated evaluations of one’s talents.

Even though we are rationally disposed to value ourselves as persons with dignity in
virtue of having a rational nature, Kant thinks we also have certain natural tendencies that lead us
to self-conceit, arrogance or what he sometimes calls “unsocial sociability” (I 8:20). First, we
are “very much inclined to take others as the measure of their own moral worth” (C 27:349; H

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21 Robin Dillon (2004; 2007) calls this ‘interpersonal arrogance’ and nicely points out ways in which being arrogant
is itself a way of failing to have proper respect for oneself.
We tend to value ourselves on the basis of our popularity or fame and conclude that having them makes us better than those who do not. Second, we are inclined to “look for preeminence in trifles” such as “smart clothes”, “a fine carriage”, “titles”, “positions”, appearing “genteel” and other “externals”, so we tend to base our self-worth on our success in collecting these things “of no account” and come to regard ourselves as having precedence over those if we have more things of price than they do (C 27:457-8; cf. H 27:41 MM 6:436-7; R 6:27). Third, every person has a natural propensity to think himself morally good by “tinker[ing] with the moral law, till he has fashioned it to suit his inclinations and convenience” (C 27:465; cf. CPrR 5:73-4; R 6:29) or refusing to “compare [his moral worth] with the law” (MM 6:435). Once we convince ourselves that we are morally good people, and value ourselves on that basis, we tend to regard ourselves as superior to others (MM 6:460).

To settle on an inflated opinion of ourselves, due to our popularity, external possessions or supposed moral purity, is in part, according to Kant, to acquire certain dispositions of thought and action. When we value ourselves more highly than others, we are disposed to treat ourselves better than we treat them, to express how we evaluate them relative to ourselves, to tell them and others how we think they should evaluate themselves, to claim that others should value us as their superiors, and even to demand on occasion that a supposed inferior “think little of themselves in comparison with him” (MM 6:466).

When those who are not arrogant in Kant’s sense encounter self-conceited people, we are very susceptible to their opinions about our supposed inferior status relative to them. We tend to accept their low evaluations of us, and adjust our sense of our own worth accordingly, in spite of our rational predisposition to find our self-respect rooted “in morality; not in calculating on the opinion of other people” (H 27:44). While we may not require active help from others in order
to assign ourselves an incomparable, absolute worth in virtue of possessing a rational nature, Kant thinks that the natural propensity to self-conceit in others tends to undermine the respect we are rationally disposed to have for ourselves.

The deeper point, however, is that even if someone were to manage stoicism in the face of arrogant people and remain unshaken by their low opinions of him, Kant is still concerned with self-conceited people who solicit (MM 6:465), make claim (MM 6:462) or demand that “others think little of themselves in comparison with him” (MM 6:466), “throw himself away in order to slave for my end” (MM 6:450), “concern themselves with one’s importance” (MM 6:465), or give us “a respect” that we deny them (MM 6:465). Rational people are predisposed to value themselves as persons with dignity, so they are rationally disposed to insist on and protect a prerogative to value themselves in this special way.

Even when the opinions, intonations or suggestions of others roll off my back, their demands that I lose respect for myself are incompatible with my rational dispositions to respect myself and to have and exercise a prerogative to do so.22 When we make demands on others to lose self-respect, according to Kant, we claim that they owe it to us to think less of themselves.23 But in light of their rational disposition to value themselves as a person with dignity, they could not accept any principle that required them to do so. Moreover, demanding that others lose their

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22 For a different but related discussion of the interconnected family of concepts that includes ‘demands’, ‘claims’, ‘rights’, ‘authority’ and ‘respect’ see Darwall (2004; 2006).
23 In the Doctrine of Right, Kant says that if there is a justified system of property rights then I can legitimately demand that you return what you borrowed from me (MM 6:299); a minimally decent government can make demands on its people for the continued preservation and functioning of the state; (MM 6:322); the police in such a system can demand to view the charter of a club or association within its borders (MM 6:325); our innate natural freedom and equality allow us to demand that others treat us accordingly as members of society (MM 6:315); and if I am in grave danger and you can save my life at little cost to yourself then the duty of mutual aid (presumably) justifies me in demanding that you do so. But if I demand something of yours without having the right or freedom to do so, for example, or demand government reform (rather than asking for it) or demand that others do us a few small favors that you do me some small favor, I would be infringing on your property rights, violating the rights of the government, and infringing on your freedom to be beneficent as you see fit.
self-respect, or even demanding that they acquire it, conflicts with their rational disposition to insist on and protect their own freedom to respect themselves properly. I am rationally disposed to regard it as my responsibility, not anyone else’s, to value myself as a person with dignity, according to Kant, so I cannot accept a principle that says I owe it to anyone other than myself to acquire self-respect.24

When slave-owners, for example, demanded that their slaves view themselves as inferior to whites, they were not just expressing their opinion that the slaves lacked dignity or trying to persuade or give reasons for them to adjust their self-conceptions. They were also claiming that slaves owed it to whites to regard themselves as inferior and they were taking themselves to have the freedom to place such claims on the slaves, whereas Kant thinks no slaves could accept moral principles implying either one of these possibilities. Even those abolitionists who demanded that slaves respect themselves as persons with dignity were attempting to pressure, coax and coerce the slaves by violating prerogative that the slaves were rationally disposed to protect in themselves (Douglass 1982; 1987).

Arrogant people, in Kant’s sense, not only pose a threat because of their potential to cause us to lose respect for ourselves, but their demands that we do so conflict with our predispositions of self-respect. What we need, according to Kant, are universally acceptable moral principles that protect us from arrogance and self-conceit by affording everyone the moral freedom to respect ourselves in the ways we are rationally disposed to do and requiring each of us not to violate this freedom in others. This, according to Kant, is what it is to respect one another as persons, which requires us to “[limit] our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person”, “keep myself within my own bounds”, refrain from “exalting oneself above

24 For a related discussion of the connections between self-respect and arrogance in Kant see Dillon (2007).
others” and refuse to “demand that another throw himself away in order to slave for my end” (MM 6:449-50).

5. Kant’s argument for the duties of respect toward others

Kant’s argument for why we should respect others in these ways is contained in the following quote:

But just as he cannot give himself 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 human beings, that is, he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being. Hence there rests on him a duty regarding the respect that must be shown to every other human being (MM 6:462)

Pulling the various threads together with some of Kant’s background assumptions, we can now state Kant’s argument for the duties of respect toward others as follows. (1) According to the conception of what it is to be a rational person that Kant describes, such persons are rationally disposed to respect themselves, that is, to value themselves as persons with an absolute, incomparable dignity that is above all price and without equivalents. We do not perceive within ourselves a metaphysical, intrinsic value; instead we are predisposed to recognize and accept a cluster of rational prescriptions about how to act with regard to ourselves, including ones against debasing, defiling or prostrating ourselves, without thereby requiring others to do so as well. (2) Our rational disposition to respect ourselves tends to be thwarted and undermined by those who regard themselves as more valuable than we are, which we all unfortunately have a natural propensity to do. Not only do the low opinions of others cause us to value ourselves less than we should, but their demands that we lose respect for ourselves are incompatible with our rational dispositions to respect ourselves and the corresponding rational
disposition to have and exercise the freedom to do so. (3) We are rationally required to will the necessary means to our ends. (4) Therefore, we are rationally required to will that others refrain from expressing low opinions about our worth, demanding that we lose respect for ourselves, and any other acts that threaten to undermine our self-respect. (5) The Formula of Universal Law, which we are rationally disposed to accept, requires us to act only on maxims that we could will as universal laws. (6) What each of us could rationally will as universal laws depends on our substantive and self-regarding rational dispositions. (7) Therefore, each of us, if fully rational, could accept universal laws forbidding others from acting in ways that undermine our self-respect, that is, we could all rationally will Kant’s duties of respect toward others.

The duties of respect toward others depend on the conjunction of the rational self-regarding disposition to respect ourselves and the rational disposition to universalize, reciprocate and grant the same to others, which is a very different from the way O’Neill and others understand and use FUL. As they see it, FUL prohibits us from acting on maxims that, if they were made into universal laws of nature, no one could possibly consent to as laws of permission or requirement. By contrast, I understand FUL to be a principle of reciprocity that relies on independent standards of rational self-regard that determine what we and others could rationally will as universal law. All rational people are disposed, in virtue of their rational nature, to will her own freedom, self-respect, life, ability to think for herself and much else, so it would be irrational for a person not to protect her own life or her self-respect. But rational people are also disposed to afford protections and opportunities to others if they are willing to do the same. The duties of beneficence and respect for others are justified on these grounds – we are rationally disposed to pursue our own happiness and respect ourselves, but also to give the same to help others and respect them if they are willing to do the same for us, so duties of beneficence and

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respect for one another are justifiable to everyone in virtue of their self-regarding rational concerns.

6. Conclusion

This argument captures much of what is inspiring about the “awesome” conception of respect regarding the specific ways in which we must respect others, and it does so by emphasizing and reinterpreting a central aspect of the “universalizability” conception of respect, which is that the duties of respect toward others are justified on the basis of what we could rationally will as universal law.

I end by briefly noting how this interpretation of Kant’s basic argument for the duties of respect toward others helps to resolve three longstanding puzzles.

First, Kant often uses the language of rights when discussing our duties of respect toward others. He calls the act of demanding that others lose respect for themselves “unjust” (MM 6:465), and says that doing so “infringes upon one's lawful claim” (MM 6:464), violates “a right to which he cannot renounce his claim” (MM 6:464), and constitutes an attempt to deprive him of what he “deserves” (MM 6:467; cf. MM 6:449). Kant recognizes clear differences between what we own, which belongs to right and is defined by legally enforceable principles of property that govern our external freedom without taking account of motives, and the principles that regulate and protect our self-respect from others, which belong to ethics and so are unenforceable principles for personal motivation and deliberation. His suggestion, however, is that we have something like an ethical right to respect ourselves properly by regarding ourselves as persons with dignity. This right is not enforceable by law or protected by a court, but like other rights, it is strict, it is more or less determinate, and violations of it are clear enough (at least to our conscience) when they occur and are strictly forbidden.
Second, Kant insists that the duties of respect toward others are only negative, which makes more sense if we understand them as protections from the ways others can interfere with and undermine the respect we have for ourselves. Those who aim to go beyond Kant’s own views might employ a similar argument for the conclusion that we do have positive duties to affirm and appreciate the value of others because, contrary to Kant’s own view, we need such public affirmation in order to maintain an adequate sense of our own worth.  

Finally, Kant has long been criticized for his apparent failure to discuss in much detail prohibitions on profound moral wrongs such as rape, torture, holding people in prolonged captivity and racial and sexual discrimination. These types of acts are wrong on many of grounds, and a number of them, I suspect, can be captured by Kant’s ethical theory, but Kant’s discussion of respect for others highlights a particularly egregious element of these acts that should figure into an overall moral explanation for why they are wrong. In addition to the pain and suffering that these acts typically involve, part of what is so heinous about raping, torturing or discriminating against someone is that the assailant is attempting to cause the victim to lose respect for herself, to become servile, to see herself as an object for his enjoyment or benefit. And, what may be worse, the attacker is by his deeds demanding that the victim cease to value herself as a rational person with dignity and so, on Kant’s view, profoundly disrespecting their victims.

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25 Rawls (1999) argues along these lines.
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