Understanding Kant’s Duty of Respect as a Duty of Virtue

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Abstract
In the Doctrine of Virtue Kant declares that “Only an end that is also a duty can be called a duty of virtue” (MS 6:383). In the same text Kant refers to the duty of respect for others as a duty of virtue. It follows that the duty of respect must correspond to some end that is also a duty. What is this end? This paper endeavors to answer this question. Though Kant explicitly identifies two obligatory ends—one’s own perfection and the happiness of others (MS 6:385)—neither is a good candidate for the end which corresponds to the duty of respect. This paper examines two plausible candidates—others’ humanity and others’ self-esteem—arguing that the latter is preferable insofar as it accords better with what Kant says about the vice of defamation, respecting others in the logical use of their reason, and respectful beneficence.

Keywords
duty; duty of virtue; Kant; respect; self-esteem

I. The Taxonomical Puzzle

This paper aims to investigate a particular taxonomical puzzle from Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue. This particular puzzle arises when we pose the question: How is the duty of respect for other human beings classified in Kant’s system of duties? While Kant’s commentators sometimes apply the labels perfect and imperfect to the duty of respect, it is notable that Kant himself refrains from directly applying either of these terms.1 Though ethical duties to

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oneself are divided into the categories of perfect and imperfect, we do not find a similar division with regard to duties to others. Rather, duties to others are divided into the categories love and respect—both of which are identified as duties of virtue (MS 6:448; 6:462). With regard to the duty of respect, Kant explains that “although it is a mere duty of virtue, it is regarded as narrow in comparison with a duty of love, and it is the latter that is considered a wide duty” (MS 6:449-450). To say that a duty is wide rather than narrow is to say that the duty permits more latitude with regard to how it is fulfilled. What I want to focus on is Kant’s claim that the duty of respect is a duty of virtue. It might appear that Kant’s declaration that the duty of respect is a duty of virtue is sufficient to resolve our taxonomical query; however, this simple answer to the question posed above introduces a new question, which is the real puzzle.

The characteristic feature of a duty of virtue is the requirement to adopt an obligatory end or an end that is also a duty. According to Kant, practical reason represents certain ends as objectively necessary for all human beings, and “only an end that is also a duty can be called a duty of virtue” (MS 6:383). If the duty of respect for others is a duty of virtue and “only an end that is also a duty can be called a duty of virtue,” it follows that the duty of respect for other human beings must correspond to some obligatory end. What is this end? This is the taxonomical puzzle this paper aims to address. It is a genuine puzzle, for no obvious solution presents itself. In response to the question—What are the ends that are also duties?—Kant identifies only two ends: one’s own perfection and the happiness of others (MS 6:385). Neither of these ends appears to be a good candidate for the end which corresponds to the duty of respect. In the following section I will explore

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reasons for rejecting both of these obligatory ends as suitable solutions to the taxonomical puzzle.

Given that the end which is also a duty is the fundamental feature of a duty of virtue, identifying the appropriate end is essential to understanding Kant's duty of respect for others. Sections III and IV of the paper are devoted to examining two plausible solutions to the taxonomical puzzle. The first contends that the obligatory end that corresponds to the duty of respect for others is *others’ humanity*. Kant's description of the duty of respect in the *Doctrine of Virtue* is far more compatible with this solution than either *others’ happiness* or *one’s own perfection*. Nonetheless, I believe there is cause for reservation regarding this solution, which I describe in section III. The second plausible solution I consider contends that the obligatory end that corresponds to the duty of respect for others is *others’ self-esteem*. In section IV I make a case for this solution based on Kant's account of what the duty of respect for other human beings requires. I conclude by acknowledging that while *others’ self-esteem* enjoys much textual support as a solution to the taxonomical puzzle, it also raises questions about the relationship between self-esteem and the dignity of humanity. These questions merit more consideration than I can hope to provide here; however, I believe that merely noting the relationship between others’ self-esteem and the duty of respect reveals Kant’s often under-appreciated sensitivity to human vulnerability.

I recognize that one way to resolve the taxonomical puzzle is to maintain that Kant simply erred in labeling duties of respect for other human beings duties of virtue, or, as Marcia Baron has suggested, that duties of respect have only a “marginal status” as duties of virtue. I think this solution is acceptable only as a last resort. What I endeavor to do in this paper is take seriously Kant’s claim that the duty of respect is a duty of virtue in order to discover what follows from this.

II. One's Own Perfection and Others' Happiness

As previously noted, under the heading *What Are the Ends that Are also Duties?* Kant writes “They are *one's own perfection* and *the happiness of others*” (*MS* 6:385). I want to begin by considering whether either of these

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obligatory ends could be the end which corresponds to the duty of respect. Admittedly, there is a sense in which all duties are subordinate to the duty of moral perfection, such that when we satisfy duties to others we simultaneously (partially) fulfill the duty to perfect ourselves morally. Nonetheless, it seems fairly easy to dismiss one’s own perfection as a plausible solution to the taxonomical puzzle. Given that the duty of respect for others is unambiguously other-regarding, it would seem that the corresponding obligatory end should be other-regarding as well.5

Others’ happiness is less easily dismissed. For this end is other-regarding and it is also true that failing to receive adequate respect from others is often detrimental to one’s happiness. This is seen most clearly when we consider the vices of defamation and ridicule.6 When our faults or shortcomings are exposed to public censure or mockery we experience the painful feelings of shame and degradation. Given our sociable nature, the judgments of others have an immediate effect on us. Kant explains this by saying that “providence has instilled the inclination [to honor] in us, and hence no man, even a great one, is indifferent to the opinion of others” (LE 27:408).7 In light of the psychological fact that being disrespected by others causes emotional distress and thus renders human agents less happy with their condition, it might appear that the other-regarding end Kant identifies at 6:385, others’ happiness, is the solution to the taxonomical puzzle.

Despite the initial appearance of plausibility, I think this solution will clearly not do. According to Kant, all human beings are entitled to respect from others as their due.8 Kant writes, “I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a human being; I cannot withdraw at least the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a human being, even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it” (MS 6:463). The same is not true of happiness. According to Kant, we deserve happiness only insofar as we are virtuous.9 But even when we are virtuous and thus deserving of happiness it is not the case that we are owed happiness from others.10 That is, we are not

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5 Mary Gregor, aware of the taxonomical puzzle, maintains that the end which corresponds to the duty of respect for other human beings is the moral world. I do not think this solution will do for the same reason that our own perfection will not do; it is not sufficiently other-regarding. See Gregor, Laws of Freedom, pp. 183-4.

6 See MS 6:466-7.

7 I thank Ernesto Garcia for bringing this passage to my attention.

8 See MS 6:435; 6:448; 6:462; and 6:464.

9 See KpV 5:110; R 6:46.

10 Whereas duties of respect are owed to other persons, duties of love are, according to Kant, meritorious. See MS 6:448.
entitled to demand of others that they promote our happiness, though we are entitled to demand that they show us respect. Thus the duty of respect is narrow, whereas duties of love are wide. In virtue of this asymmetry, it strikes me as extremely odd, if not inconsistent, to claim that we are obliged to respect others for the sake of preserving or promoting their happiness. Acknowledging a connection between being respected by others and being happy by no means commits us to the view that others’ happiness is what we aim at, or ought to aim at, in observing duties of respect. For these reasons I am inclined to think that others’ happiness cannot be the solution to the taxonomical puzzle.

III. Others’ Humanity

To resolve the taxonomical puzzle we need to look beyond the two obligatory ends Kant explicitly mentions at 6:385. This is no cause for concern. Despite the fact that Kant names only two ends in response to the question what are the ends that are also duties?, he nonetheless maintains that “there are indeed many objects that it is also our duty to have as ends” (MS 6:410).11 Thus, we do not deviate from the text if we consider other ends that it may be our duty to have in addition to others’ happiness and our own perfection.

The first plausible solution to the taxonomical puzzle that I would like to consider contends that the obligatory end that corresponds to the duty of respect for others is others’ humanity.12 I understand humanity to refer to a set of rational capacities, including the capacity to set ends and the capacity to be moral.13 There is substantial textual evidence which supports this solution. The dignity of humanity figures prominently in Kant’s account of the duty of respect. Kant explains,

Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is in turn bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time

11 Emphasis mine.
12 I thank Oliver Sensen for bringing this solution to my attention. This solution has been endorsed by Walter Schaller. See ‘Kant’s Architectonic of Duties,’ pp. 299-314. Schaller does not address the reservations I indicate below, nor does he consider any alternative solutions.
13 This, I take it, is the meaning of ‘humanity’ as it appears in the second formulation of the categorical imperative at G 4:429.
as an end...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. (MS 6:462)

It is because humanity has dignity rather than price that we are entitled to demand respect from every other human being.14 The status of humanity lies at the heart of the duty of respect. Thus, if we are looking for an appropriate obligatory end, others’ humanity is a most reasonable candidate.

I nonetheless believe there is some cause for reservation regarding this solution to the taxonomical puzzle. One source of reservation comes from Kant’s general description of ends that are also duties. In the introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue Kant writes,

An end is an object of the choice (of a rational being), through the representation of which choice is determined to an action to bring this object about…But if I am under obligation to make my end something that lies in concepts of practical reason, and so to have, besides the formal determining ground of choice (such as right constrains), a material one as well…this would be the concept of an end that is in itself a duty. (MS 6:381; emphasis mine)

Prominent in Kant’s account of ends that are also duties is the idea that an end is something that must be freely adopted by an agent (“only I myself can make something my end” (MS 6:381)), as well as the notion that the representation of the end determines an agent to an action by which the object is brought about.15 Recall that the taxonomical puzzle arises when we consider the concept of a duty of virtue and then observe that Kant applies this label to duties of respect for other human beings.16 An end that it is a duty to have is the defining feature of a duty of virtue. The plausibility of others’ humanity as a solution to the taxonomical puzzle thus depends on how well this end accords with Kant’s understanding of ends that are also duties.

Let us begin with the first characteristic. In what sense can others’ humanity be my end? As I see it, X can be said to be my end provided that X provides me with reason for action, I value X, and have the appropriate attitudes and feelings vis-à-vis X. It seems clear enough that others’ humanity

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14 See also MS 6:435.
15 See MS 6:384-5.
16 It is worth noting that Kant refers to duties of respect as duties of virtue on multiple occasions. See MS 6:488; 6:450; 6:462; 6:465.
can provide an agent with reason for action (or reason for refraining from acting in certain ways). Insofar as another's humanity is my reason for action—for instance, when I resist the temptation to make a false promise out of respect for another and not fear of the repercussions—it seems reasonable to claim that the other's humanity is my end. What I intend to do is acknowledge the value of another's humanity, just as when I comply with the duty of beneficence what I aim to do is promote another's happiness.

On the other hand, it is easy to see that others' humanity is not an end that we “bring about” through our action like others' happiness or our own perfection. Rather, humanity is described as a negative end, an existent end, an end in itself. Speaking of rational nature (humanity) Kant explains that “the end must here be thought not as an end to be effected but as an independently existing end, and hence thought only negatively, that is, as that which must never be acted against” (G 4:437).

Insofar as others' humanity is not an end that we bring about by our actions, it appears to lack one of the key features Kant identifies with obligatory ends. But perhaps this deviation, while undeniable, is nonetheless appropriate. Unlike duties of love and imperfect duties to ourselves, Kant tells us that the duty of respect for other human beings is only a negative duty. If the duty of respect is only a negative duty, it seems reasonable that the corresponding obligatory end would be a negative end, that is, an end that we must refrain from acting against rather than an end we promote or attempt to “bring about.”

But Kant’s description of the duty of respect as strictly speaking negative is somewhat peculiar. In particular, one might wonder whether it makes sense for a duty to be both negative and a duty of virtue. A negative duty is commonly understood as a duty to refrain from acting in certain ways or having certain (vicious) dispositions, whereas a positive duty is a duty to perform certain kinds of actions or to cultivate certain (virtuous) dispositions. A duty of virtue, as previously noted, is a duty to adopt an obligatory end. Insofar as adopting an obligatory end is clearly a doing rather than a refraining, duties of virtue appear to be unambiguously positive duties.

If a duty of virtue cannot be a negative duty, then we are forced to conclude that Kant, in describing the duty of respect for others as both a duty of virtue and a negative duty, has made contradictory claims. Fortunately, there is another explanation. Rather than making contradictory claims,

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I believe that Kant is relying on a somewhat non-standard account of negative duty. Consider the following passage:

The only objective division of duties to oneself will, accordingly, be the division into what is formal and what is material in duties to oneself. The first of these are limiting (negative) duties; the second, widening (positive duties to oneself). Negative duties forbid a human being to act contrary to the end of his nature and so have to do merely with his moral self-preservation; positive duties, which command him to make a certain object of choice his end, concern his perfecting of himself. Both of them belong to virtue, either as duties of omission (sustine et abstine) or as duties of commission (viribus concessis utere), but both belong to it as duties of virtue. (MS 6:419)

Here Kant explicitly declares that certain negative duties to oneself are also duties of virtue. However, the duties to which Kant refers require more than just refraining from acting in certain ways. It matters a great deal why one refrains from acting in morally inappropriate ways. Consider, for instance, the perfect duty to avoid servility. It is not sufficient that we refrain from allowing others to tread with impunity on our rights. We must do so for the right reason, that is, we must regard ourselves as possessing dignity and a “sublime moral predisposition.” Moreover, if negative duties to oneself are duties of virtue, they must establish some obligatory end that we are required to make our own.

Consequently, Kant’s description of negative and positive duties of virtue (6:419) is actually somewhat misleading. Both kinds of duties command as well as forbid. Both command agents to adopt obligatory ends and to act in ways that are consistent with regarding the end as one’s own. Thus, when Kant declares that the duty of respect for others is a negative duty, we should not infer from this that the duty requires only the refraining from certain actions and not positive action. Rather, when Kant describes a duty of virtue as a ‘negative duty’ what he appears to mean is that the duty refers to some obligatory end that we can “act against” (undermine, diminish, violate), but not one that we can “bring about” (promote). What the particular duty will require of us will depend on context. Not acting against

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18 I am inclined to agree with Thomas Hill that the real defect of servility primarily concerns one’s attitude, not one’s actions. See ‘Servility and Self-Respect’, in Thomas E. Hill, Jr., Autonomy and Self-Respect (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 4-18.

19 This is not surprising insofar as commanding and forbidding are often two sides of the same coin. To command something entails forbidding the opposite. For instance, to command silence is to forbid speaking. Also worth noting is that Kant’s description of negative duties to oneself as formal is peculiar as well, given that Kant describes the duty as a duty of virtue and maintains that duties of virtue are material. See MS 6:383; 6:394-5.
a particular obligatory end may sometimes require positive action, a point which I hope to make more evident below and in the following section.

Thus, while others’ humanity, unlike others’ happiness or one’s own perfection, is not an end that we bring about through our actions, it also does not appear to be obviously inconsistent with Kant’s broader understanding of obligatory ends.20 I think this is sufficient to dispel the original reservation regarding others’ humanity as a solution to the taxonomical puzzle.

A second source of reservation regarding others’ humanity comes from difficulty in reconciling this end with certain claims Kant makes about the duty of respect for others. It is not hard to see why an existent end like others’ humanity, an end Kant tells us we must never act against (G 4:437), gives rise to a duty not to exalt ourselves above others (MS 6:449). However, it is less obvious why this negative end requires the kind of sensitivity to another’s respect for his own understanding that Kant includes under the duty of respect.

Kant maintains that we have a duty to respect other human beings even in the logical use of their reason (MS 6:463). We are obliged not only to refrain from calling another’s errors absurdities but also “to suppose that his judgment must yet contain some truth and to seek this out, uncovering, at the same time, the deceptive illusion...and so, by explaining to him the possibility of his having erred, to preserve his respect for his own understanding” (MS 6:463). To suppose that an erroneous judgment contains some truth and to seek this out is to do more than simply refrain from certain disrespectful behavior. It is to take pains to preserve another agent’s self-respect. A failure to suppose that another’s erroneous judgment must contain some truth does not appear to be a case of treating her humanity as a mere means or exalting oneself above her. Why then does Kant contend that this is required by the duty of respect?

A similar problem arises when we consider the vice of defamation. According to Kant, defamation is not the equivalent of slander—false reports that are injurious of others and punishable by law—but rather the “intentional spreading (propalatio) of something that detracts from another’s honor...even if what is said is true” (MS 6:466). Again, spreading true information that detracts from another’s honor appears to be neither a case

20 Also worth noting is Kant’s claim that “it is in itself a duty to make man as such one’s end” (MS 6:395) Though I will refrain from speculating about what it might mean to make man as such one’s end, it is not obviously the case that this is an end that one can “bring about” through one’s action. Kant’s understanding of ends that are also duties thus appears to be able to accommodate more than one kind of end.
of treating her humanity as a mere means nor exalting oneself above her. Why then does Kant regard defamation as a vice that violates the duty of respect for other human beings? If we adopt *others’ humanity* as the solution to the taxonomical puzzle, I think we will have a hard time explaining at least some of what Kant says in his description of the duty of respect. I explore this source of reservation further in the following section.

In spite of the reservation described above, I believe that *others’ humanity* remains a plausible solution to the taxonomical puzzle. This is to say that I do not regard the reservation as decisive grounds for rejecting the solution. I do, however, consider it to be reason for considering alternative solutions.

### IV. Others’ Self-Esteem

In this section I would like to consider a fourth solution to the taxonomical puzzle. According to this solution, *others’ self-esteem* is the obligatory end that corresponds to the duty of respect for other human beings. I believe this solution to the taxonomical puzzle is strongly suggested by Kant’s explication of the duty of respect for others, though perhaps less obviously so than *others’ humanity*. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

> 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. (MS 6:462; emphasis mine)

In order to demonstrate the plausibility of this solution, I will need to say something about what self-esteem means in this context, as well as what it would mean to make *others’ self-esteem* one’s end. The case for this solution to the taxonomical puzzle requires carefully examining Kant’s account of what the duty of respect for others calls for and forbids.

According to Kant, the duty of respect for others is a duty to recognize and acknowledge the *dignity* of humanity in every human being. Dignity here is understood as “a worth that has no price, no equivalent for which the object evaluated (aestimii) could be exchanged” (MS 6:462). In virtue of the dignity of our humanity, we have a legitimate claim to respect from others.21

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21 For a much more thorough discussion of the relationship between dignity and respect see Oliver Sensen, ‘Kant on Duties Toward Others From Respect (§§37-44),’ in A. Trampota,
But here we must ask: What exactly is the nature of the respect that dignity permits us to demand from others? This is not a simple question to answer, in part because Kant’s account of the duty of respect is given primarily in negative terms. Rather than focusing on what respect requires, Kant is primarily concerned with what respect forbids. To answer the question regarding the nature of the respect that dignity allows us to demand from others we have little choice but to look to the three vices Kant identifies as those which violate respect for persons. If these vices truly are failures of respect, then we can begin to answer the question—what is the nature of the respect that dignity permits us to demand from others—by answering the question—what do these vices deprive others of?

The first vice that Kant mentions is arrogance. According to Kant, arrogance is an attitude whereby one believes that she is entitled to treat others with contempt (MS 6:465). When arrogance is understood this way, it is fairly easy to see that it constitutes a failure to respect human beings. For Kant contends that “To be contemptuous of others” is to “deny them the respect owed to human beings in general” (MS 6:463) and to judge them to be worthless (MS 6:462). The vice of arrogance is thus clearly a failure to recognize that other human beings have a dignity, that is, a worth that has no price. By definition, arrogance deprives others of the respect owed to them. Unfortunately, Kant’s explication of this vice does little to illuminate the nature of the respect we are authorized to claim from others. The remaining two vices, while less straightforward, are more helpful in answering this fundamental question.

Consider the vice of defamation. Kant defines defamation as “the immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others...the intentional spreading (propalatio) of something that detracts from another’s honor...even if what is said is true” (MS 6:466). It is certainly a commonly held view that it is rude and disrespectful to gossip, but why should we think that this behavior constitutes a failure to acknowledge the dignity of humanity? I do not treat the other as a mere means by spreading some information about her. Defamation is also not a denial of the equal worth of the other, like arrogance. In spreading information that reflects poorly on another I need not question or deny the way in which she is equal to all others. For being equal

to others in virtue of one’s humanity is thoroughly compatible with being unequal with regard to one’s moral worth.22

Unfortunately, Kant’s own explanation is not very helpful. Kant maintains that defamation

...is contrary to the respect owed to humanity as such; for every scandal given weakens that respect, on which the impulse to the morally good rests, and as far as possible makes people skeptical about it. The intentional spreading (propalatio) of something that detracts from another’s honor—even if it is not a matter of public justice, and even if what is said is true—diminishes respect for humanity as such... (MS 6:466)

Kant’s explanation strikes me as unhelpful insofar as it fails to explain why the intentional spreading of something that detracts from another’s honor constitutes a failure to give that person the respect she is entitled to claim from every other. The explanation Kant provides refers to the general effect defamation has on others. Defamation, he tells us, “diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy (shying away from human beings) or contempt the prevalent cast of mind” (MS 6:466). This account is similar to what Kant says about the vice of ingratitude. Ingratitude, we are told, deters agents from future beneficence (MS 6:459). Yet this cannot be the whole explanation for why ingratitude is contrary to duty. Ingratitude is a failure to give one’s benefactor what she is entitled to, and the same must be true for any vice that violates the duty of respect for others. “[A] failure in the duty of respect infringes upon one’s lawful claim” (MS 6:464). If defamation does not entail treating another as a mere means or the denial of her worth, what is it that defamation deprives one of that she is entitled to claim as her due?

Let us consider the vice again. The subject of defaming speech is, first and foremost, exposed. Her faults or less than honorable behavior are made the subject of ordinary conversation. Notably, this spreading of information is not done for the sake of some moral end, such as justice, but rather, it is simply gossip, a stimulating diversion from one’s own affairs. In exposing facts about another’s conduct, the defamer invites others to pass judgment on the agent. Defamation thus deprives one of a certain kind of privacy; we might call this moral privacy. Kant’s account of defamation

22 It is also difficult to see defamation as a case of exalting myself above others, certainly much more difficult than arrogance. Though it could be the case that my motivation for spreading information is that I wish to appear superior next to another’s poor example, it could just as easily be true that I wish the other to appear as low as I know myself to be.
suggests that we are entitled to have our moral lives remain private, at least insofar as matters of justice are not at stake. He goes as far as to contend that “a mania for spying on the morals of others (allotrio-episcopia) is by itself already an offensive inquisitiveness on the part of anthropology, which everyone can resist with right as a violation of the respect due him” (MS 6:466).

One might wonder why Kant considered this kind of privacy significant enough to merit protection under the duty of respect. Why think that encroaching on another’s moral privacy constitutes a failure to acknowledge the dignity of humanity? I believe the answer to this question must appeal to facts about human psychology, in particular, the fact that having a private sphere is essential for maintaining self-respect. To maintain a private sphere is to keep certain things (our physical bodies, medical histories, thoughts, hopes, disappointments, etc.) concealed from public view. We may choose to share these things with our intimates or with no one at all. But without a private sphere we become mere public spectacles like fish in an aquarium. We lose a kind of dignity. This fact about human psychology explains why we are apt to find certain reality television programs disturbing. I have in mind here programs where the participants permit cameras to record nearly every aspect of their lives, including “confessionals” where they describe their personal thoughts and feelings, all for the sake of providing entertainment to millions of strangers. We are inclined to think that anyone who would exchange so much of their privacy for monetary gain or celebrity must be lacking in self-respect.23

The moral privacy that Kant is concerned with in the Doctrine of Virtue is especially important insofar as public exposure of one’s dishonorable conduct is especially damaging to one’s self-respect. Now, it is certainly true that merely recognizing that one has behaved dishonorably should be accompanied by the pains of conscience and some diminishment in one’s self-evaluation. But public exposure of one’s misdeeds—or even one’s misfortune—adds something new, namely a form of shame that comes from being seen by others as dishonorable or pitiable. (Notably, this is a feature of human nature, not rational nature.) It would appear that we are obliged to respect others’ claim to moral privacy, and thus refrain from defamation, so as not to cause damage to their self-respect.24

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23 Anyone on the other side of this bargain likewise appears to be lacking in respect for others.

24 I will postpone for the moment the connection between others’ self-respect and the dignity of humanity.
The third and final vice Kant mentions is ridicule. Ridicule is defined as “the propensity to expose others to laughter, to make their faults the immediate object of one's amusement” (MS 6:467). Again, while the notion that ridicule is disrespectful agrees with the common view, this does not yet explain why ridicule constitutes a failure to acknowledge the dignity of humanity.

Kant writes that, “holding up to ridicule a person’s real faults, or supposed faults as if they were real, in order to deprive him of the respect he deserves, and the propensity to do this, a mania for caustic mockery (spiritus causticus), has something of fiendish joy in it; and this makes it an even more serious violation of one’s duty of respect for other human beings” (MS 6:467). Though Kant asserts that ridicule deprives the agent of the respect he deserves, there is no explanation for why this is true. Again, I propose that by answering the question—what does ridicule deprive one of?—we can discover the nature of the respect we are entitled to claim from others.

As I see it, ridicule is morally problematic in at least two ways. First, it is problematic in virtue of what it expresses. To engage in ridicule is to treat another as a joke, a source of amusement. To do so is a failure to take the agent seriously as a rational being with a moral calling. We take others seriously in this respect when we have certain expectations about what they will do (e.g. keep their promises), when we condemn their immoral actions, and when we presume that they are capable of self-improvement. But to regard another’s faults as a source of amusement is to deny the agent the kind of gravitas she merits simply as a member of the moral community.

Ridicule also strikes me as morally problematic in virtue of its effects on the agent. Ridicule causes humiliation, shame, and embarrassment. It injures one’s pride and sense of self-worth. Ridicule thus appears to deprive agents of their claim to be free from unnecessary and avoidable harms to their self-esteem.

Kant’s accounts of defamation and ridicule as failures of respect suggest that what we are entitled to demand from others, by way of respect, is the following: first, that we always be taken seriously as rational agents with a moral calling; second, that our moral privacy not be encroached upon; and third, that we be spared unnecessary and avoidable harms to our self-esteem. I take this to be evidence that others’ self-esteem is a plausible

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25 This is, as Kant acknowledges, fully compatible with friendly banter. See MS 6:467.
26 These claims supplement the requirement never to treat humanity as a mere means.
solution to the taxonomical puzzle. The following passages from the
*Doctrine of Virtue* provide additional support for this solution, as well as
further insight into the nature of the self-esteem at issue.

The first passage is one that I have previously quoted. Prior to explicat-
ing the three vices that violate the duty of respect for other human beings
Kant maintains that we have “a duty to respect a human being even in the
logical use of his reason” (*MS* 6:463). In accordance with this duty we are to
“suppose that [another’s] judgment must yet contain some truth and to
seek this out, uncovering, at the same time, the deceptive illusion…and so,
by explaining to him the possibility of his having erred, to preserve his
respect for his own understanding” (*MS* 6:463; emphasis mine). What Kant is
advocating here is a kind of sensitivity to the ways in which human beings
are vulnerable to the judgment of others. A harsh critique, especially from
someone in a position of authority, might cause me to lose respect for my
own faculties.

Kant’s remarks on the relationship between the duties of love and
respect also provide support for thinking that others’ self-esteem is a plau-
sible solution to the taxonomical puzzle. He writes,

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> [Love and respect] are basically always united by the law into one duty, only in
> such a way that now one duty and now the other is the subject’s principle, with
> the other joined to it as accessory.—So we shall acknowledge that we are
> under obligation to help someone poor; but since the favor we do implies that
> his well-being depends on our generosity, and this humbles him, it is our duty
to behave as if our help is either merely what is due him or but a slight service
of love, and to spare him humiliation and maintain his respect for himself.

(*MS* 6:448-9; emphasis mine)

While beneficence is concerned with coming to the aid of someone in
need, respect, joined as an accessory, advises us to practice beneficence in
a way which does not injure the agent’s respect for himself. According to
Kant, a beneficiary necessarily stands a step lower than his benefactor
(*MS* 6:456; 458). Receiving a favor or benefit from another thus has a hum-
bling effect insofar as one is placed in the inferior position, which injures
one’s self-esteem (*LE* 27:696). In the most extreme cases, feelings of inferi-
ority manifest as hatred and resentment toward one’s benefactor who has
not only placed us in the inferior position, but has burdened us with a
debt of gratitude as well.27 “The only way left, therefore, to confer a benefit

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27 While Kant has many interesting things to say on the subject of gratitude and ingrati-
tude, I limit myself here to reporting his views and will make no attempt at analysis, critique,
or defense.
without injuring the sense of honour,” Kant explains, “is to so wrap it up that it would seem a duty of friendship if the other were to accept it, so that only a duty is being met” (LE 27:697). This cloaking of beneficence, as Kant indicates in the *Doctrine of Virtue* passage above, is required by the principle of respect for other human beings.

These passages, along with vices of ridicule and defamation, lead me to the conclusion that the kind of self-esteem Kant is concerned with is not strictly speaking *moral self-esteem*, that is, the esteem for oneself that arises from consciousness of the dignity of one’s humanity. According to Kant, a human being regarded as a person “can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them” just in virtue of the dignity of humanity (MS 6:434-5). This cannot be the kind of self-esteem that Kant is concerned with in the latter part of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, for this form of self-esteem cannot be injured or diminished by comparison with others.28

What Kant appears to be concerned with in his discussion of the duty respect for other persons are the ways in which we are unequal to others and the impact this has on our self-appraisal. We are unequal in our faculties of understanding, in our material resources, in our talents, and moral worth. The self-esteem that Kant wants to protect concerns how we are seen and judged by others—something closer to what Kant sometimes calls *honor*.29

What kind of end is others’ *self-esteem*? There is a sense in which others’ self-esteem is an end that we could “bring about” by bestowing praise and esteem on others. But this is inconsistent with what Kant says about the respect we are obliged to give every other human being. According to Kant, “I am not bound to revere others (regarded merely as human beings), that is, to show them positive high esteem” (MS 6:467). Rather, Kant’s explication of the duty of respect suggests that we are obligated merely to avoid damaging the self-esteem of others—not necessarily to positively promote it. Complying with this duty will require (negatively) refraining from certain

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28 The following passage from Kant’s lectures on ethics appears to deny this: “It is therefore contrary to the true love of honour to accept benefits, since the worth of humanity in our own person is thereby diminished, and we let ourselves be put by the other in a state of dependency...” (LE 27:696). I believe this passage must be read as hyperbolic insofar as it is at odds with so much of what Kant says about the value of humanity. Perhaps what Kant intends here is that, in receiving benefits, we feel as if the worth of humanity in our own person has been diminished.

29 See LE 27:408-11.
kinds of behaviors, like ridicule, as well as (positively) softening our judgments of others and presenting our beneficent conduct as if it were a slight service of love or a duty of friendship. Others’ self-esteem is thus a negative end, though not in precisely the same sense as others’ humanity. For though we may fail to give others the respect they deserve, we do not thereby diminish their humanity. The same is not true with regard to others’ self-esteem. Our words and deeds have a direct impact on another’s self-esteem.

Insofar as the duty of respect for others is a duty to avoid damaging others’ self-esteem, self-knowledge will be crucial. For whether our words and deeds damage the self-esteem of others often depends on how our words and deeds are perceived, that is, how we come across. How we come across is a function of many different features of the interpersonal exchange, too many to address here. Let us consider just one example. Certain idiosyncratic features of one’s personality might strongly suggest particular attitudes that are hostile to others’ self-esteem. For instance, a shy demeanor may present as indifference, just as an irreverent sense of humor can be confused with dismissiveness. A frank manner of speech can come across as callous or even cruel, whereas a deep commitment to high standards could be perceived as contemptuous of others and their faults. It may be hard to change certain features of one’s personality. However, if I am aware of how my mannerisms lend themselves to false perceptions I can, at the very least, warn those with whom I interact. Those who have known me for years will recognize my shyness for what it is, but I should anticipate misperception from those new to my acquaintance. Concern for the self-esteem of others combined with this kind of self-knowledge will manifest itself in overtures such as the following: “Please don’t mistake my frankness for a callous or malevolent attitude. Despite efforts at improvement, I am woefully unskilled at the art of tactful presentation. I recognize that my comments may sting, and I regret this.” This remark seeks to minimize damage to the other’s self-esteem by explicitly acknowledging that the other’s feelings are a matter of importance to the speaker.

In light of the evidence above, I am inclined to think that others’ self-esteem is the best solution to the taxonomical puzzle. Admittedly, this solution to the taxonomical puzzle raises some interesting questions about the relationship between self-esteem and the dignity of humanity. In particular, why think that damaging the self-esteem of another (either

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30 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.
intentionally or unintentionally) is inconsistent with acknowledging the dignity of her humanity? The best I can hope to do here is to make some gestures toward an explanation.

The question before us concerns the relationship between preserving another’s self-esteem and acknowledging the dignity of humanity. As far as I can see, the most obvious connection is a psychological one. If I feel inferior to those around me in virtue of my weaker faculties of understanding, my indebtedness to a benefactor, or my own dishonorable conduct, I may be less inclined to recognize the dignity of my humanity. And if I fail to recognize the dignity of my humanity, I lose my moral identity. Thus, when Kant writes that we must not act “contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others” (MS 6:462), perhaps what he means is that we must not jeopardize that which is psychologically necessary for human moral identity.

V. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to identify the most plausible solution to the taxonomical puzzle. I have argued that others’ self-esteem, while not the most obvious solution, is the one best supported by the available textual evidence. According to this solution, the duty of respect for other human beings is a duty to avoid damaging others’ self-esteem. We fulfill this duty by refraining from actions that clearly aim at diminishing another’s self-esteem (e.g. arrogance), as well as by being sensitive to the ways in which we might unintentionally injure another’s regard for himself. This solution to the taxonomical puzzle reveals Kant’s sensitivity to certain psychological features of human beings, namely our vulnerability to the opinions of others, and goes some way toward explaining what respecting humanity (rational nature) requires in the human case.

Whether or not I have made a convincing case for endorsing a particular solution to the taxonomical puzzle, I hope I have at least made a compelling case for thinking that the taxonomical puzzle merits further attention.31

31 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 2010. I am grateful to the session participants for their comments and questions, with special thanks owed to Oliver Sensen and Ernesto Garcia. I also wish to thank an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this paper.