

‘HAVING FAITH IN YOURSELF’ SELF-RESPECT AND HUMAN DIGNITY¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of self-respect as an essential mark of human dignity. What is this self that deserves respect and what does respecting it mean? How can people acquire self-respect when they never had it? With John Rawls, self-respect can be considered as a “primary social good”. It is highly conditional: Its distribution depends on the quality of the communities people live in. What conditions have to be met? This paper concentrates on a more “existential” condition: The connection between self-respect and having a plan of life. Using the movie Tsotsi as an illustration, it is argued that only those able to imagine a self-esteemed future for themselves acquire it. Faith in oneself is a prerequisite of self-respect. Theologically speaking, people’s dignity does not rest in their rationality (Kant) nor on their social merits, but in the fact that they are called by God to live as his creatures coram Deo.

Key words: Dignity, Faith, Film *Tsotsi*, J Rawls, Self-respect

‘Tsotsi’

The South African Academy Award winning film, “Tsotsi”,² deals with the hard life of a gang member in a township – “a place without hope, where life has no meaning and survival is the only thing that matters”, as the trailer of the movie tells us. However, his life changes after he discovers a baby on the backseat of car he hijacked and takes it home with him. Up to then he lead a life of despair, violence and rivalry in which he tried to forget the traumas of his past and had no hope for the future. Orphaned at early age (his mother died of AIDS), he survived by robbing and – eventually – by killing. In one scene, after an outbreak of heavy violence after he was asked about his past, one of Tsotsi’s fellow gangsters explains to a rival thug that “Tsotsi never went to school. He doesn’t understand decency”. Then he asks the rival: “Do you know about that, Fela? Decency? Can you even spell it?” It is a key scene in the movie. Decency stands for dignity, the sense of human worth as self-respect. Tsotsi’s story is about the way he gains esteem for himself.

“Tsotsi” is not a realistic film but a modern myth, a 21st century *Bildungsroman* for the globalised world, situated in a South African township. A theatrical imagination of what a human being needs and what powers and resources he/she has in him-/herself to enter, from the bottom line of humanity, into the moral community and become a dignified member of it (even though, in Tsotsi’s case, that eventually means being arrested for murder).

¹ Paper prepared for a Stellenbosch University and Protestant Theological University Kampen consultation on “Human dignity at the edges of life” on 14-15 August 2006 at Stellenbosch.

² *Tsotsitaal*, or *isiCamtho*, is a variety of languages spoken mainly in the townships of the Gauteng province of South Africa, such as Soweto. It is a pidgin of Zulu, Sesotho, Tswana, Afrikaans, English and some of the other languages spoken in this multilingual country (such as Italian, Kiswahili, etc.). Although originally associated with the criminal subculture (“tsotsi” refers to an urban thug), its recognition has spread with the growing popularity of kwaito music (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsotsitaal>). Cf. also MacMaster’s contribution on gangsterism in this volume.

Gavin Hood, the movie's director, says that the story is about "redemption, forgiveness, exploring your own identity, trying to become a self-aware person instead of just hiding behind some mask of either anger or shyness or whatever it is". I guess self-awareness does not stand here for self-consciousness in a cognitive sense, but for moral self-esteem and self-respect: Being aware of the fact that you are a human being equal to other human beings, that you are to be held responsible for your own actions, that you have plans and projects to be respected. To be self-aware here means to be conscious of your own human worth.

"Tsotsi" is a story about individual self-realisation under trying conditions. This perhaps partly explains the world-wide success the movie had. It is not merely concerns an adolescent who, though he had sunken deep, sinks a new well of human worth in the bottom of his soul, but also modern culture's definition of a dignified life: Being an individual, responsible agent equal to others. Only those capable of meeting these conditions are entitled to understanding, love and respect, and to a fair trial when they break the laws of the moral community.

Though "Tsotsi" is undeniably South-African, Gavin Hood intended to make a universal movie about what it means to become human. "These themes of redemption and forgiveness and so on are universal and timeless", he says. However, the story is not about you and me, privileged academics. It is not about youngsters growing up in a harmonious and prosperous family, loved by their parents, capable of discovering and developing their aspirations and talents. The story is about young people who do not have the means to believe in themselves. The conditions they grew up in and face daily deprived them of self-respect, of the human good John Rawls labelled a "primary social good". With their background they can hardly ever grow into "self aware persons", as Hood puts it, but are living a life driven by anger and shyness. They are worthless in their own eyes, and are believed to be worthless by others.

In this paper I want to explore the notion of self-respect as an essential mark of human dignity. What exactly is this *self* that deserves respect, and what does *respecting* this self mean? How people can acquire self-respect when they never had it?

Dignity and Self-respect - a Social Construction

Charles Taylor defines dignity as "the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us".³ Someone with dignity deserves respect. Historically the meaning of dignity is closely related to the concept of honour (cf. Tsotsi's "decency"). Dignity belongs to the discourse on social morality, which defines a person's status and merits within a community. Who owes dignity, merits its praise, who has lost her, its blame.

In modern times dignity (1) has been *personalised*, by becoming less and less a possession that is taken for granted, based on social standing. Honour is seen as essentially personal.⁴ Dignity and worth are obtained on the basis of personal talents and achievements which are highly estimated by modern culture. That makes dignity far deeper rooted in personality than was the case in the aristocratic past. Under modern conditions dignity has

³ Ch. Taylor 1989. *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 15.

⁴ Kekes, J 2002. *The Art of Life*. New York: Cornell University, 109f.

become a *moral*, more than only a social concept. Self-respect is the subjective expression of individual worth.⁵

Dignity also became (2) *universalised*. In the human rights tradition and the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) dignity no longer depends on one's social status within a concrete community, but is based solely on one's being human, whether understood as a rational agent (Kant) or as a creature of God. Dignity transcends community membership since one is a member of the human family. Being human suffices for having human dignity.

The possible discrepancy between the factual dignity a concrete community attributes to an individual and *de iure* dignity that is independent of social recognition, is the result of a long process of individualisation with roots in Judaism and Christianity. With modernity's human rights discourse it spread globally. Central notions in the Reformed tradition, e.g. justification by grace alone and the priesthood of all believers, supported this spiritual development.

Even when – as in the Hebrew prophetic tradition – individuals are expelled from their communities, they may retain their self-respect. The community might be wrong, the prophet right. An individual may be right in the name of a better community and God may be on his/her side. Even when someone does not receive the due social dignity, she/he nevertheless is owed moral dignity. This moral individualisation must be considered a moral gain. People can claim their intrinsic human worth, despite it being denied by their social communities.

However, the distinction between social and moral dignity should not be taken to extremes, as the different uses of the concept of worth in modern culture may tempt us to.⁶ On the one hand worth is *status worth* and is derived from one's membership of a certain class, group, or people. As was said earlier, in the modern world, influenced by the human rights tradition and Christian faith, moral status worth no longer is attributed on the basis of social status, but by the simple fact of being human. On the other hand worth is *merit*, the measure of quality of personal character and conduct, which we earn or lose through what we do and become within concrete communities. It is based on our abilities and talents, our successes and failings, our luck and misfortune which are acknowledged (or not) by our social environment.

Referring to these different contexts of the meaning of worth some authors make a conceptual distinction between self-respect and self-esteem. *Self-respect* is seen as the subjective *internalisation* of the dignity belonging to status worth (in modern context: One's membership of the human community). *Self-esteem* is the internalisation of social merit in the concrete context of particular communities. Following this distinction, self-respect is an egalitarian notion, independent of personal achievement. It is based on the moral dignity that all humans equally are entitled to as rational beings or creatures of God. Self-respect can be regarded as a kind of *reverentia*, *Achtung* for the humanity (*Menschheit*) in ourselves (Kant). On the other hand, self-esteem is a meritocratic concept, much more contingent on people's particular circumstances and self-experience. People's achievements may vary enormously and may the way it is valued within their communities. The level of self-esteem not only depends on one's talents and achievements (their objective situation), but also on one's ambitions and the standards one imposes on oneself (their subjective evaluation). High ambitions and few talents result in low self-esteem, low ambitions and many talents in high self-esteem.

⁵ *Ibid.* 113.

⁶ For the following see page 227f. of RS Dillon 1997. "Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political." *Ethics*, Vo. Q07. No.2, 226 – 249.

Self-respect	Status worth	Egalitarian (universal)	Moral	Dignity
Self-esteem	Social merit	Meritocratic (personal)	Social and psychological	

Rawls and the Conditions for Self-respect

However, by isolating self-esteem and self-respect in such a radical manner from one another, the socially constructed character of morality is left out of sight. It suggests that morality is an abstract, universal phenomenon, floating somewhere above the particularities of social life in a metaphysical heaven. However even the intrinsic dignity attributed in the human rights tradition and in Christianity to all members of the human race, is a socially constructed moral claim, dependent on the – however minimal – support it receives within concrete communities of right and/or faith.⁷ Human dignity that is not powerfully advocated by communities or their minority groups, cannot be appropriated by their members in their sense of self-respect and be claimed by them as a moral right. For that reason I prefer to keep the terms self-respect and self-esteem together in one discourse, though I consider the former as a moral and the latter as a more psychological concept.⁸ Self-respect is moral self-esteem.

The moral philosopher John Rawls strongly contributed to the stimulation of the reflection on dignity and moral self-respect of the splendid metaphysical isolation of the Enlightenment project of a “universal morality”. He states that the ability of individuals to respect themselves morally is heavily dependent on their concrete social and political circumstances. He views self-respect neither as the consciousness of something we morally are required to have and maintain, nor as feeling socially recognised merit which we may have or not have, but as an *entitlement* social institutions are required to support and not undermine for justice’s sake.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls argues that self-respect, like rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth, is a “primary good”, something that *rational beings want whatever else they want*, because it is vital to the experienced quality of individual lives and to the ability to carry out or achieve whatever projects or aims an individual might have. Moreover, it is a *social* good, one that individuals are able to acquire only under certain social and political conditions. Self-respect is a good to be distributed in a just way. Certain social, political and psychological conditions must be fulfilled, in order to realise self-respect. Self-respect is therefore conditional. Rawls argues that individuals’ access to self-respect is to a large degree a function of how the basic institutional structure of a society defines and distributes the social bases of self-respect.⁹ He claims that self-respect –

⁷ The Church may be defined as the community of protest that, based on its faith in the resurrection of Jesus as God’s act of dignifying the despised, attributes human dignity to all those denied dignity in the world.

⁸ Cf. J Rawls 1972. *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 422: “... There should be for each person at least one community of shared interests to which he belongs and where he finds his endeavours confirmed by his associates.”

⁹ These include “the messages about the relative worth of citizens that are conveyed in the structure and functioning of institutions, the distribution of fundamental political rights and civil liberties, access to the resources individuals need to pursue their plans of life, the availability of diverse associations and communities within which individuals can seek affirmation of their worth and their plans of life from others, and the norms governing public interaction among citizens.” (RS Dillon 2003. “Respect”. In Edward N Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2003 Edition)*. Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2003/entries/respect/>

“perhaps the most important primary good”¹⁰ – is a prerequisite for a good life. However much one might collect the things that make life attractive, without self-respect human life is not worthwhile. Without self-respect all desire or activity is empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism.¹¹

What does self-respect include? Firstly, according to Rawls, “a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out”. Secondly, self-respect implies “a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfil one’s intentions”.¹² To put it differently, self-respect presupposes are:

- (1) that people do have plans with their lives that they want to realise;
- (2) that they believe in being capable of it in so far as it depends on themselves,
- (3) that they strive for the realisation of these deepest intentions is worthwhile.¹³

Up to now, it might seem that the notion self-respect is a morally neutral one. Rawls does not judge the life plans or intentions people have. How about the plan of living in a gang and funding the fulfilment of your life plan by crime? Is Tsotsi not a proud and respected person within his group, with a high level of psychological self-esteem?

However, according to Rawls, two empirical conditions for self-esteem should be fulfilled and both – but certainly the second one – implies a moral judgment on the psychological feeling of self-esteem people have: “(1) having a rational plan of life in exercising of which we take pleasure¹⁴ and (2) finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed”.¹⁵

Self-respect thus presupposes that people partake in communities where they confirm one another freely and mutually in who they want to be. Without respect for and received from others, no self-respect is possible. However, in his gang Tsotsi forces his gang members with violence and intimidation to recognise his person and actions in order to get the esteem he does not get in the outside world. His person and actions are feared not “appreciated and confirmed by others”.¹⁶ His self-esteem is based on deterrence. It is not a *good* self-esteem.

How can Tsotsi be made aware of the grace of good self-respect? It does not make sense preaching to him that he is created in the image of God, or reading Kant to him, or proclaiming the admirable Bill of Rights of the 1996 South-African Constitution, article 10, without the social recognition of his dignity. His self-respect cannot be isolated in a metaphysical safe haven, abstracted from the social context in which it is constructed.

¹⁰ Rawls, *ibid.* 440.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ In the formulation of Yanal, 364: “A person will have a good self-esteem to the extent he believes his major qualities to have positive values, that is, to the extent he believes his goals are worth attaining, his abilities for attaining those goals are adequate, and his actual accomplishments are worthwhile”. In RJ Yanal 1987. “Self-Esteem.” *Nowa*, Vol. 21. No.3 (Sept. 1987), 363-379.

¹⁴ That is the simplified content of Rawls’s “Aristotelian Principle”: “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity”. (Rawls, *ibid.* 426)

¹⁵ Rawls, *ibid.* 440.

¹⁶ “Many youths in the townships feel the need to take revenge on the society which they believe has caused them so much pain. With very little opportunity for breaking out of the circle of poverty, feelings of not belonging and of being unwanted grow. Because it is so difficult to get a job, people feel like failures and their self-esteem decreases. Non wonder then so many youths drift into gangsterism.” (L Nott, *et. al.* 1990. *Gangs. The Search for Self-respect.* Cape Town: NICRO, 4.

Many theorists have acknowledged this social political condition of self-respect and elaborated on it. People should be members of a decent society that have institutions that do not humiliate people.¹⁷ People's self-respect necessarily depends on the recognition by others and therefore are vulnerable to being misrecognised or ignored.¹⁸ A number of theorists have used the concept of self-respect to examine the oppression by dominant cultures of women, people of colour, gays and lesbians, and other marginalised, stigmatised or exploited groups.¹⁹ They described a broad range of political instruments that should be developed in order to give these people back their self-respect.

Plans of Life

In the rest of this paper I will concentrate on the first, more "existential" condition Rawls mentions, i.e. the connection between self-respect and having a rational plan of life. I think Rawls hereby points at an essential ingredient of self-respect that cannot be the result of political top down instruments, but requires the strengthening of moral imagination within communities and individuals themselves. Only those that are able to imagine a self-esteemed future for themselves will have it.

Rawls borrowed the conviction that "a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan" from Josiah Royce. Having a plan of life is synonymous with having an identity. An individual says who he/she is by describing his/her purposes and aims, "*what he intends to do with his life*".²⁰ Subsequently, if one is aware in one's purposes in life and of all the relevant facts (among them one's talents and limitations) and carefully takes into consideration all their consequences, one has a *rational* plan of life.²¹

At first glance Rawls's idea of a plan of life looks like a rather elitist notion, typical of white Anglo-Saxon higher educated middle class males concerned about their professional careers. Women for example evaluate the course of their lives much more in terms of relationships than in terms of plans.²² Severely deprived or traumatized groups and persons cannot afford rational life plans. They only have one concern: How to survive today. "What they intend to do with their lives" – seems to be a luxurious exercise of self-reflection that they seldom practice. Would Tsotsi and his friends ever meet such a standard?

However, I still think that by linking self-respect to life planning Rawls expresses a valuable intuition, also imaginable in Tsotsi's myth. I think he is right in stipulating that people in some way or other need to develop a conscious care for "what they intend to do with their lives" in order to estimate respect of themselves. Self-respect implies that people build a relationship with themselves over time and stand by themselves. This is what I mean when I say that people, in order to obtain self-respect, have to believe in themselves.

I want to elaborate on this intuition by developing a modest theory of the self and of self-realisation inspired by the work of Soren Kierkegaard. We need theories of the self and self-realisation that not only express long term life plans of university professors, but also cover the selves of survivors. Kierkegaard, strongly rooted in the Lutheran tradition that every human has his/her own divine vocation to fulfil, tried to offer one. In his theory of the

¹⁷ Margalit, A 1996. *The Decent Society*. Cambridge Mass. London: Harvard University Press.

¹⁸ Honneth A 1994. *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

¹⁹ Cf. RS Dillon 2003.

²⁰ Rawls, *ibid.* 408.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cf. MU Walker 2003. *Getting Out of Line: Alternatives to Life as a Career*. In MU Walker, *Moral Contexts*. New York/Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 189-203.

self every individual is supposed to develop a relationship to him-/herself. Having a plan of life, in Kierkegaard's terms, implies that one is called to care about what one intends to do with one's "self". Some kind of self-differentiation, expressed in the more or less conscious basal appreciation of the self, is presupposed.²³ But what do we mean by "self"?

The Constructed Self

Broadly speaking, in modern philosophy three paradigmatic approaches to the self can be distinguished, which Joel Kupperman calls the Theories of Enduring Self, No Self en Constructed Self.²⁴ The first claims that people have a self from the moment of birth till that of death (and, for those believing in a hereafter, from then on till eternity). They have to appropriate this self by becoming conscious of it. Despite surface changes in one's life and in one's character and personality, a deeper real self remains, keeping one the same person. This theory solves the problem of continuity of personal identity (I am the same person as the baby I once was and the old man I will be; Ricoeur's *mêmeté*) and makes plausible the immortality of the soul. We stay who we are in eternity. But this theory is problematic since:

- 1) it hardly accounts for the fundamental changes that people may undergo during the course of their lives;
- 2) it inappropriately reflects the uniqueness and authenticity of the self (identity as Ricoeur's *ipseité*). When my self already lies waiting for me in eternity, how can it be *my* self?;
- 3) knowledge of this self is difficult to come by. How can I know that I have an enduring self and how do I get acquainted with it? Perhaps others declare that I have/am one, but I cannot discover one even by introspection.

The metaphysical theory of self-respect that grounds the intrinsic worth of humans in an eternal essence supports the Enduring Self. Kant reminds one of this theory, but in his own view it is not my authentic self but my humanity in me that deserves my awesome respect.

Another solution to the problem of the self to deny its existence. The Theory of No Self is defended by Buddhism but also by empirical philosophers who follow David Hume. The self is an illusion, writes the latter in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739/1740); it is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions"²⁵ Empirically we can discover neither unity nor continuity in the constant flux of psychical experiences, on the basis whereof something like an integrating self might be taken for granted. However, despite its intellectual clarity, the problem with this approach is in its counterintuitive relationship with ordinary social and language practices. People – even those who deny its existence – somehow manage to have selves.²⁶ Morally, we are forced to defend people's individual responsibility for their actions. By declaring someone to be a self we acknowledge that, whatever changes take place in the course of one's life, one should be held accountable for being the same person over time. If one is mentally healthy, oneself is also ready to do that.

How can one acknowledge the problems of the Theory of the No Self, without falling back upon the Theory of the Enduring Self? A third approach is more convincing. It states

²³ Cf. Dillon's definition of basal self-respect: "An appreciative mode of being toward and with oneself and the world with regard to one's worth." (Dillon 1997, 228).

²⁴ For the following see pages 19-46 of J Kupperman 1991. *Character*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁵ Hume, D 1969. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739/1740. London: Penguin Books, 300.

²⁶ Kupperman *ibid.* 39.

that the self is a construction, build-up during a life time. The "Constructed Self" starts forming very primitively in early youth as a kind of framework in which experiences are labelled as *our* experiences. The childish self is a "place-marker".²⁷ It more or less integrates/connects experiences saying: This here is me and that is not me (anymore). It is, borrowing from Kant, like "the 'I think' that accompanies all my representations". The "early I" has a transcendental status: It cannot be experienced itself it but precedes all my experiences by making them possible. The first self is a kind of shadow that accompanies my acting and thinking. However, this is just the first self; its only the beginning of the story. Growing up, it is not satisfied with a place in the shadow of life. It does not only accompany my thinking and acting, but invests itself in them as well, by processes of identification. Its memories of yesterday form the basis of its plans and projects for tomorrow, and these are in turn the material for those of the day after tomorrow. The self invests itself in its biography. It becomes a personality, acquires character.

In developing, the self gets a dual character. It not only stands for the integrating instance of experiences, but also for the experiences in which it is involved themselves. One may say with Kierkegaard that "*the self is a relation which relates itself to its own self*".²⁸ The self is neither thing nor substance. It is the relation in which someone relates himself to the substance of his life. A relation that reveals itself in the choices and commitments of its own concrete life. The "Constructed Self" is build up during its life course. It starts with almost nothing, and it cannot be foretold how and with how much it will end up. One may call the raw material from which the "Early Self" constructs itself a – as Kupperman coins it – *proto self*, a loosely structured "psychological field", with characteristic mental or neuro-physiological properties. The psychological field of the new-born develops in directions fitting the tendencies of a child's nature. It develops habits and characteristic attitudes. Singularity is unmistakable, however, without the authenticity of a relatedness to itself.²⁹ Let's call this self a "First Self". In all rights a self, but a starter's self which wants to grow and flourish.

How people develop from childhood to adulthood and how their constructed selves eventually turn out depends on what their life course offers them. Did they have time and chances to make something out of themselves? Were the primary conditions (food and shelter, intimacy and safety) met? Did they experience trauma? Were they allowed to develop the capabilities needed for a life worthy of human dignity,³⁰ did they exploit their talents and acknowledge their limitations? Though the process of construction of the self varies according individual differences, it is not an individual affair. It is structured by social conditions and normative cultural expectations imposed on self-definitions and -ideals. Nobody creates him- or herself *ex nihilo*. Class, gender, religion, and culture are constitutive factors in constructing the self.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 40.

²⁸ SA Kierkegaard 1941. *The Sickness Unto Death* [1849]. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=2067>. Cf. Kupperman, *ibid.* 40.

²⁹ Until this stage in the argument the Theory of Enduring Self claims a justified support: already as a child every human being possesses a self. However, it is a primary, a *proto self*, that is likely to develop during the years into a more or less complex constructed self.

³⁰ Martha Nussbaum mentions in her capabilities approach to justice ten of them: Life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one's environment. (Cf. MC Nussbaum 2006. *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge/London: The Bellknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 76ff.)

Minimal Persons

However varied the cultural or social setting of self-construction, people always develop a kind of “First Self”. All people distinguish themselves as separated individuals, with a unique time-space continuity and unity. They all develop a subjective perspective on reality, in which their experiences (e.g. head ache or anger) are theirs alone. So, even if they did not have an opportunity to develop more than a “First Self”, they deserve the full respect of others of their human dignity. Self-respect, the respect for one’s own dignity, however can only develop when people are able to create a more or less long-lasting relationship with themselves.³¹ One therefore does not need elaborate and conscious “rational life plans”, as Rawls seems to indicate. I suppose self-respect is much more widespread and common: Where- and whenever people become *concerned about how their lives go* they develop self-respect, because from that instance on they possess a “Second Self”: They develop a relationship over time with the substance of their lives, with their “Constructed selves”.

Conscious planning for the future is not decisive here, but the underlying self-differentiation in the self. Out of concern for the future people, transcending the momentary character of their survivalism, imagine themselves in time. They initiate a rudimentary form of self-representation by imagining who they were yesterday and wondering if tomorrow they will be able to be the same as they were today.

This is an almost universal feature of the *homo sapiens*, the moral philosopher Owen Flanagan assumes: People have intentions, develop self-images, are actively and consciously concerned about the continuation of their own lives in the short and longer term. In every culture, under any conditions, these are the minimal qualities of human beings as persons. We might call them as Flanagan does “minimal persons”. Minimal persons are human beings in full dignity who “*care how their lives go*, and this involves caring about the satisfaction of their desires over time, which in turn involves epistemic guidance of behaviour.”³²

The concern for the first necessities of life invites people to develop an enduring self-representation which stretches itself in time. One has to evaluate the self that one was yesterday, make plans in order to become the self one wants to be tomorrow. “Minimal persons” normally do not have rational life plans, and they need them in order to live the life of a complete self. They may be expressing the care for themselves in a “nexus of plans” and smaller or bigger projects they commit themselves to,³³ rather than in an overall career plan.³⁴

Self-realisation

Although the survivor does not commit him-/herself to long term projects, he/she may care about how his/her life goes. But, in caring about him-/herself he/she is a relation to him/herself. In this self-concern lies the seed of self-respect. However, this self-respect can develop only if he/she takes the relation to the self – his/her “Second Self” – seriously over time. Self-respect brings with it the desire for self-realisation.

³¹ Self-respect might therefore be classified within Nussbaum’s sixth capability, practical reason: “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life”. (Nussbaum, *ibid.* 77). This formulation however, as I try to make plausible below, is still too “Kantian” in the sense that it presents self-relatedness too much as a conscious process of reasoning.

³² Flanagan, O 1991. *Varieties of Moral Personality. Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge (Mass.)/London: Harvard University Press, 64.

³³ *Ibid.* 68.

³⁴ The philosopher Isaiah Berlin emphasised in an interview on the occasion of his 88th birthday, that he “never ever made plans for his life. I just did one thing after another and used the possibilities that arrived. In fact, I lead an unplanned life”. (cited by J Baars 2006. *Het nieuwe ouder worden. Paradoxen en perspectieven van leven in de tijd*. Amsterdam: Humanistic University Press, 223).

Writing about *Self-Fulfilment*, Alan Gewirth argues that self-fulfilment starts with distinctiveness, care for the future, and self-differentiation.³⁵ "The self that enters into self-fulfilment is a continuing or enduring embodied entity that is aware of itself as a distinct person, that can anticipate the future for itself, and that has desires on which it can reflect." In order to "fulfil" your self, Gewirth states, you have to evaluate the care you take "for how your life goes" in the light of your so called second order desires.³⁶ Self-realisation implies that one's concern for the future is carried by goals and ideals that transcend today's survival. In other words: Anybody who cares about tomorrow has a self, anyone who cares about the day after tomorrow is practicing self-realisation. "After tomorrow" stands for the future still beyond reach, an abstract extrapolation of our deepest desires rather than of our self-control at the moment. Perhaps this is what Rawls meant when he argued that having a rational plan of life is an empirical condition for self-respect. Only a person who "intends to do something with his life" has self-respect.³⁷ Only those committed to the day after tomorrow develop self-respect. They have plans for their lives; they want to be enduring selves of certain quality.

What individual life plans look like will vary according to social and cultural contexts. In Tsotsi's myth it is the sudden care for a child that awakens his moral imagination and his desire to live a moral life. It makes him remember his own past, the care he received from his mother. It makes him hope for a personal future with the young mother that takes responsibility for "his" baby. One may find the plot of the story incredibly melodramatic: The tough, violent guy, clumsily caring for a tender, little baby. However, the link between his care and his self-respect becomes more plausible when one imagines him returning home to feed the baby in the time perspective of his biography: As soon as he yields to the moral appeal made by this fragile and dependent human, he is more than a survivor. He deeply desires a future for this baby, so he has to care how his own life goes, in order to care for it. The concern for others makes him faithful to himself. On that moment he fully enters the moral community: Being faithful to himself makes him also worth being cared for by others.

In this (second order) desire to survive today in order to care for and to be cared for tomorrow, the seed of self-realisation slumbers. On the basis of the projected self one really intends to be, self-knowledge will developed. Today's self will be judged in the light of the self that one wants to be tomorrow. One will grow in self-esteem but also in the experience of shame, when the real existing self does not meet the standards of the ideal one.³⁸

Having Faith in One's Self

Having a perspective on the future is a decisive condition for developing self-respect. Without imagining a probable future self, one cannot appropriate the task of self-realisation as a personal mission. Self-realisation is no luxurious privilege of an intellectual and cultural elite, but the expression of an elementary human desire to endure as a person. One's humanity is qualified by the fact that one can be a "purposive agent" (Gewirth). Self-respect is the positive relation people maintain with their own sense of purpose. It implies

³⁵ Gewirth, A 1998. *Self-Fulfillment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.* The self 'can evaluate these desires on the basis of second order desires that take account of its relevant abilities and capacities.' (Gewirth 1998, 13) Second order desires are those that express one's real, ultimate wants and goals. You refuse a cigarette (first order), because you want to live a long and healthy life (second order).

³⁷ Rawls, *ibid.* 408.

³⁸ For a profound phenomenology of shame "as a sign of disunion and estrangement" ("Zeichen der Entzweiung"), cf. Bonhoeffer, D 2005. *Ethics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 6*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 304.

belief in themselves, that their plans are worthwhile carrying out, but also in their abilities to do so. "To have self-esteem is to have a secure sense of one's own merits, and thus includes having the conviction that one's plans and purposes are worthwhile and that one has the ability to carry them out".³⁹

At this point the matter stops being personal and existential, and starts to become political. One is not born with moral self-esteem; material, social and educational conditions are to be met and fulfilled. Self-respect as a primary social good needs political arrangements, economic conditions; justice and daily bread. It needs caring fathers and mothers, and caring communities that make people experience that their past and their future really matter, make them feel that they are welcome as full members of the moral community.

From the perspective of a course of life, these conditions are to be met in permanent learning processes. Education is the only door that leads to self-respect. So education programmes are needed in order to appropriate the grammar of social life, to develop insight into the fact that ends can become means to other ends, to acquire knowledge of one's own talents and limitations - in order to obtain self-awareness and self-confidence. "Tsotsi never went to school. He doesn't understand decency, can't even spell it." If care for and being cared for by others is the initial condition for Tsotsi's self-respect, education is the one for his self-realisation. Education helps to develop a time perspective, the awareness that there is not only a today to care for how your life goes, but also a tomorrow and a day after tomorrow.

A theory of self-realisation that includes both a concept of self-differentiation and -relatedness (Kierkegaard), and of self-development, may be helpful in clarifying the concrete social conditions of self-respect.

A final remark in conclusion. Kierkegaard makes a distinction between two ways in which one may relate one self to oneself. One may have faith in oneself, or one may be lost in despair (*Verzweiflung*) about oneself. Having faith in oneself, according to Kierkegaard, implies that people consciously choose, with passion and energy, to take up the relation to the substance of one's life as a task to fulfil. They take responsibility for their particular lives, with its possibilities and limitations. This act of ethical self-realisation has nothing to do with a person being well-to-do. Servants and barbers, ministers and sales persons - according to Kierkegaard, it does not matter how big your starting capital as an "Empirical Self" is. The extent of one's privileges is not decisive for one's dignity, but the passion with which one relates to one's self and commit oneself to one's particularity. Being in despair means, consciously or unconsciously, not wanting to take up the challenge of living a life course.

Kierkegaard's philosophical vocabulary can translated into the Christian concept of vocation. People's dignity do not rest in their rationality (Kant) nor on their social merits, but on the fact that they are called by God to live their lives as his creatures *coram Deo*, together with others. Their self-respect is implied by and derived from this vocation. Theologically, respect for one's own dignity can be regarded as a form of implicit religion. Passionately having faith in one's self is having faith in one's Creator, it is responding to the Voice that called one into a life of one's own. One might say that the moment Tsotsi starts to believe in himself, he situates himself before God. I think that the reverse is true also: Having faith in God contains an implicit ethics. Those who have faith in God believe that no human child is born in vain, but that every child is entitled to live a full life in self-respect and dignity.

³⁹ Gewirth, *ibid.* 95