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Choosing Esteem

For a couple of decades now the ideas of self-esteem, body esteem, sexual esteem, the parity of esteem and several related themes have generated countless professional studies as well as best-selling books. Psychologists, therapists, philosophers, spiritual gurus, pseudo-scientists, and celebrities of many kinds advise us how to think about ourselves, how to overcome weaknesses, how to approach our physical and sexual images, how to manage stress and heal traumas. In short, reflecting on self-appreciation and self-esteem is supposed to help us know how to live. Yet those trendy interests do not seem to embrace the concept of esteem itself.[1] There are relatively few deeper studies focused on esteem as distinct from those very popular themes. Esteem definitely deserves more attention and systematic research.

The main purpose of this article is to explore one key aspect of the notion of esteem: whether it is a mental phenomenon that can be an effect of rational choice.[2] The study goes against the current of studies arguing that esteem — because of its various cognitive, emotional, and social features — cannot be deliberately chosen. It will be argued here that certain actions can generating the mental state of esteem. They constitute a process that can be intentionally initiated and developed.

[1] The relationship between esteem and self-esteem (as well as other related concepts) is, in fact, quite tricky. Terminological associations do not interconnect their meanings in significant ways. Esteem seems to be often as far from self-esteem as love is from self-love. More clarifications are needed here.

[2] I owe great thanks to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article. His critical comments and suggestions helped me to make my arguments more precise and complete.

Importantly, it is our intention to explore the notion of esteem as a cognitive and mental phenomenon, independently from its rich ethical sense. For most people within our Western culture esteem implies strong normative connotations. Like other notions of this kind — respect or trust or honor — it naturally generates some positive associations. People naturally grant some positive evaluations to the people they esteem or trust. They appreciate some traits of their characters and things they do. However, it can be argued that normative weight is neither universal nor crystal clear. Virtuous people as well as vicious gangsters follow certain principles of respect, trust, and honor. As we know, there have been individuals in history who were purely evil, yet were also esteemed, admired, and trusted. It seems, for example, that the members of the Manson Family genuinely admired their spiritual master. We consider it analytically justified to suspend the ethical assumptions while approaching the notion of esteem primarily as a mental phenomenon.[3]

1 Understanding esteem

In our common vocabulary esteem is associated with such notions as appreciation, respect, recognition, and others. Oftentimes its emotional and psychological character is emphasized, so it comes close to admiration, regard, and veneration. Sometimes it is viewed primarily as a moral or social value, next to renown, good reputation, prestige, honor, and fame. For centuries, those notions have constituted a powerful cluster of goals and values regulating the Western culture[4]. For some classic thinkers these values came from the very core of human nature. Human beings, it is said, desire appreciation, respect, and esteem. They need "good name" and decent reputation to live with themselves and among other people. According to John Adams, "a desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows is one of the earliest as well as the keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man." Immanuel Kant considered it a key element of morality and social life: "a craving to inspire in others esteem for ourselves" is "the real basis of all true sociality" and

[3] My methodological approach is inspired by economists, decision and game theorists, who explore ethical judgments as rational choices.

[4] Anthony Hermann and Gale Lucas lead an empirical research exploring an intercultural functioning of esteem. The experiments involving American and Japanese students recognized some interesting cultural differences. They conclude that esteem is particularly important for social functioning and life satisfaction in more "collectivistic cultures." Cf. Hermann, et al. 2008.

"the development of man as a moral creature"[5]. One finds these assumptions in our cultural heritage, philosophy, literature, art, and — perhaps most importantly — in common language and common sense.

Today we are well aware how important it is to be appreciated. It is one of the basic goods which is valuable in itself: every human being needs a certain level of positive appreciation from people around her and wants to avoid feelings of shame, disapproval, and hatred.[6] Equally important is an instrumental value of esteem.[7] It is very helpful in acquiring many other goods. When we enjoy respect of other people, our lives are easier, our interactions with them are more pleasant and effective. It is easier to cooperate with employers, employees, business partners, friends, and family members. When they have some positive esteem for us, they will probably trust us, listen to us, and enjoy our company. On the other hand, when we suffer some forms of disrespect, many goals can be more difficult to achieve. It might be much harder to get a job promotion, it may be difficult to find a trustworthy life partner, it may be just impossible to expect involuntary help in tough times. In general, being respected and esteemed helps to live a happy, peaceful, and comfortable life.

My study does not demand a strict definition of esteem but several of its significant factors have to be noted. Even when me leave aside its ethical meanings some philosophical aspects are relevant here.

The evaluative factor. Esteem is primarily a cognitive concept, belonging to a broad class of such notions as beliefs, observations, judgments, opinions, and the like.[8] It is based on one's evaluation of another person's qualities. When I esteem a person, I believe that she or he has some qualities I appreciate. Sometimes the qualities can be quite specific: I esteem her for being wise or brave or creative. I believe she is that kind of person, she displays such qualities, and she behaves in certain appropriate ways.

[5] Quoted after Lovejoy 1961: 193, 200; cf. also Brennan and Pettit 2004: 23-25. Among the most recent historical studies on the idea of esteem, Haara and Lahdenranta's work on Puffendorf and Adam Smith deserves special attention; cf. Haara et al. 2018.

[6] John Rawls introduces both self-esteem and the esteem of others in his assumptions of primary goods; cf. e.g., Rawls 1971, par. 67.

[7] For an interesting discussion on the benefits of esteem, see Brennan and Pettit 2004: 26-33.

[8] In order to introduce our limited arguments, we cannot, however, engage in contemporary philosophical debates concerning the "cognitive acts" and operations. Many functions of human mind remain pretty much unknown yet; the philosophy of mind and epistemology overlap today with psychology, biology, neurology, and other sciences. The current state of affairs in this subject is already very complicated and changing fast. Multiple theories approach human cognition and perception from different perspectives. Hopefully, the progress in these disciplines will also refine our understanding of esteem.

Sometimes the qualities may be seen as a more general set: I esteem someone for being a caring and wise parent or a talented and hard-working athlete. In the former case it is pretty difficult to define precisely the criteria of good evaluation; there are too many subtle factors of parenthood to explain them. In the latter case, the criteria can be pretty obvious: beloved athletes win Olympic medals and beat world records. Usually, additional knowledge of context is involved: I esteem my idols because I understand how difficult it is to become such a wise parent; I also know a bit how demanding athletic training is, how many sacrifices must be made for years. There are many such little assumptions, opinions, and observations in every case of esteem.

The deserving factor. We esteem people *for* something. We regard them highly for something they have done or for something they represent (although in such cases we also need to know what they have done to represent that something). Esteem must be well-deserved and well-grounded; esteem not justified in any way would be rather odd. It may be perhaps a notable difference between respect and esteem. We can respect someone for being a scientist or a German or a parent or just a human being but something more is needed for genuine esteem. A person we esteem acted in certain ways to acquire and deserve our esteem. So we esteem great chess players and great artists for their achievements (although in some cases it may be sometimes unclear what kind of achievements deserve high appreciation). In that sense, esteem has cognitive and rational grounds.[9]

The emotional factor. Esteem often includes some emotional component. Esteem and admiration are positive feelings we have for certain individuals.[10] It is exciting, for instance, when my favorite athlete performs well and wins another competition. It is always pleasantly exciting to spend some time with the professional celebrities I esteem. Like all emotional states, esteem can vary in intensity. It can be quite light: I esteem my colleague for being punctual because it makes our cooperation so smooth. It can be stronger: I really adore my intellectual mentor and would passionately defend her against fierce criticisms. Moreover, the emotion of esteem involves not only those who esteem. There are also people who crave being esteemed. However, it seems that all these diverse cases of esteem do not transgress certain limits of intensity. It is naturally far from passionate fascinations

[9] Brennan and Pettit (2004: 21-23) distinguish a similar concept of "directive attitude" assuming that the agents can act to deserve more respectful evaluation.

[10] The role of emotional admiration and reverence in moral knowledge and judgments has become recently a rich area of study. Maria Vaccarezza and Linda Zagzebski delivered some inspiring ideas. However, even in their most extensive studies they do not include esteem and do not relate it to those leading emotional notions. Cf. Vaccarezza 2019; Zagzebski 2015, 2017.

some people feel for their idols. Esteem does not turn into obsession. Thanks to that relatively modest nature esteem can be easier approached within the sphere of rationality and decision-making.[11]

Social esteem. Finally, esteem is a relationship between people: those who esteem others and those who are esteemed. As such it is also a social phenomenon, involving individuals, groups, social norms, and institutions. We evaluate and appreciate people according to such social norms; the socially established criteria make us think who is good or bad, who deserves esteem or not. The social perspective has therefore dominated the scientific literature in the area. Sociologists, social philosophers, and social psychologists view the notions of social esteem, respect, and recognition as closely related, yet treat the idea of esteem with extreme caution. For instance, Axel Honneth in his renowned and very influential studies of recognition (*Anerkennung*) distinguishes social esteem and respect as the key forms of recognition (Honneth 1996; 2018). His analyses of the norms regulating "the systems of social esteem" and the laws of "social esteem allocation" are deeply rooted in the theories of labor and class divisions found in Hegel, young Marx, and the Critical Theory school of thought (Honneth 2007: 74-76, 257-61, and passim).[12] The robustly social phenomena of recognition, respect, and social esteem have become very productive as the objects of research, while a more elusive notion of individual esteem has not attracted so much attention.

In this brief study I have to put aside the social dimensions of esteem and emphasize its primarily individualistic character. I agree with Brennan and Pettit who assume that the attitudes of esteem and disesteem "should always be taken as attitudes that one person has towards another" (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 16). It seems to be a very natural assumption in this study, since rational choice is a distinctively individual phenomenon. We deal here with one's individual perception of reality, individual knowledge, individual reflection and decision, individual interactions with other individuals.

[11] Stephen Darwall's concepts of "recognition respect" and "appraisal respect" introduce the distinction between a more cognitive fact of recognition and a more emotional appraisal one could roughly identify with esteem (Darwall 1977). Brennan and Pettit emphasize that their evaluative esteem is sharply distinct from the emotional attitudes of admiration and affection (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 16-22). These distinctions are maintained here.

[12] Similarly, Mattias Iser explores love, respect, and social esteem as key distinct notions. The effects are a bit confusing, since in his framework the concept of individual esteem would awkwardly fit somewhere between love and respect. Cf. Iser 2019; cf. also Jütten 2017.

2 The problem of choice

The possibility of choice can be seen as the most fundamental condition of human life. It is necessary in all our everyday mundane actions as well as the highest achievements of humanity. Our private deeds, morality, law, social and political institutions are all based on a possibility of choice for every individual to decide what to do and how to live. Does the notion of esteem fit that domain of human conscious decisions and actions?

Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit are the scholars who undertook the challenge to explore the relationship between these two profound phenomena. In their excellent studies they reach somewhat disturbing conclusion that esteem — as a cognitive notion, a form of evaluation — cannot be subject to choices and intentional decisions.

> An evaluation is, . . . , something that is justified, and usually occasioned, by the character of the object assessed. It is an essentially involuntary response to how that object is taken to be. Evaluators may be able to decide whether or not to make an evaluation but having decided that issue in the affirmative, it is no longer a matter of choice as to whether they form a positive or a negative attitude: that matter has to be determined by how things present themselves.[13]

"The character of the object" and "how things present themselves" are decisive here. It is not a matter of our choice whether we have "a positive attitude" or not.

> I cannot freely decide to think well of you in any area. I cannot decide to attribute virtuous dispositions like honesty or loyalty to you but equally I cannot decide to ascribe virtuous action or to see your performance in dance or chess or mathematics as examples of virtuoso achievement. (2004: 52; 2000: 84)

The argument reveals the essence of cognitive attitudes and esteem in particular. Brennan and Pettit reformulate their thesis in various ways: I cannot admire or esteem people just because I decide to; "I cannot choose to evaluate them positively or negatively and I cannot choose to hold them in esteem or disesteem" (2004: 52); one "cannot sensibly provide esteem as a matter of voluntary choice" (2000: 84); people "cannot decide to give esteem here, to withhold it there" (2000: 83).

In other words, Brennan and Pettit define their idea of esteem in terms of actual merit and merit only. We grant esteem (or disesteem) only to people who deserve it. People who perform valuable deeds and display admirable qualities deserve rewards, praise, honors and esteem. People whose behavior

[13] Brennan and Pettit 2000: 84, 91; 2004: 50-55.

is immoral, harmful or thoughtless deserve condemnation, punishment and disesteem. Thus, esteem depends entirely on the person who is evaluated and not on the person who evaluates. The former has to display the qualities that deserve positive judgment and recognition. Those who judge cannot control these qualities.

There are numerous studies in the literature of the subject arguing that other forms of cognition display the same qualities. Trust is given as a model example. Trusting approach to others is an outcome combining external facts and their evaluations, so it cannot be chosen at will. Russell Hardin develops that point:

> Trust is a cognitive notion, in the family of such notions as knowledge, belief, and the kind of judgment that might be called assessment. All of these are cognitive in that they are grounded in some sense of what is true. These cognitive notions — and trust, in particular — are not a matter of choosing: we do not choose what is to count as true, rather we discover it or are somehow convinced of it. (Hardin 2002: 7; cf., 2006: 17)

Facts are independent from our will so if trust is based on observations and judgments about the external world it must be also independent from our will and control. In particular, the trustworthiness of a trustee is a key element of an actual situation. A person facing a situation of dependence on the decisions of someone else usually has some knowledge concerning that person, and that knowledge determines whether one takes risk and has trustful expectations. The character and actions of the trustee are not a matter of our choice and trust develops independently from our wishes and wills. There are always some risks associated with a particular person in a particular situation. Trust means nothing else but positive evaluations of such risks. Hardin places trust among concepts that cannot be "a matter of choosing": "I just do or do not trust to some degree, depending on the evidence I have. I do not, in any immediate instance, choose to trust." (Hardin 2002: 59). Other studies devoted to trust follow these lines. Niklas Luhmann, for instance, declares that it is "not possible to demand the trust of others; trust can only be offered and accepted"; thus, he proceeds, it makes no sense to ask for trust because no one can really intentionally give it (Luhmann 1979: 43). Of course, such conclusions should not be taken as universal and unconditional. We deliberately decide and do things that contribute to our trust or distrust for other people. From a rich literature devoted to the subject we learn that under *some* conditions, in *some* situations, and in *some* interpersonal interactions trust and distrust emerge within the sphere of partial rational control.[14]

[14] In a pivotal study, Richard Holton shows how choice can play a role in the relationships of trust and distrust. He tells a picturesque story. "Suppose you run a small shop. And suppose

The cognitive nature of esteem (and trust) is not the only difficulty associated with the idea of choosing to esteem (or to trust) other people. More problems have been already hinted in the previous section. Thus, the emotional character of esteem also limits the possibilities of rational control. Feelings and sensations are hardly ever the things we choose. Our feelings about favorite food, favorite music, and favorite people are beyond such control. And, *vice versa*, we do not choose what is disgusting and unbearable for us. Thus, we do not rationally choose to fall in love or to enjoy someone's company or to admire Bach's music. Similarly, the feeling of esteem cannot be steered towards some people we select to admire. The cognitive and emotional phenomena of this kind can hardly be controlled.

The social context of esteem (even when they are distinctively individual) creates yet more obstacles. Social conventions and norms state how we evaluate things. They are independent from the will and choices of individuals. It is often self-evident what the judgment ought to be and the judge cannot change it. We evaluate students according to their grades and school efforts. We evaluate plumbers according to their capability to repair our leaking sinks. We evaluate physicians according to their ability to cure people and to save lives. And so on. These criteria are obvious and indisputable for most students, plumbers, physicians, and everyone else. The rules of honor and esteem work that way. Medieval knights expected other knights to behave in certain ways. To have failed these expectations meant dishonor and shame. Gentlemen and ladies expect other gentlemen and ladies to behave in honorable ways. So do Christians, doctors, educated people, parents, macho men, and other social groups. Even thieves and computer hackers have some principles they respect in fear of shame and disesteem. The social norms of esteem, honor, and respect rule the world, we do not rule them.

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you discover that the person you have recently employed has just been convicted of petty theft. Should you trust him with the till? It appears that you can really decide whether or not to do so. And again it appears that you can do so without believing that he is trustworthy" (Holton 1994: 63). Holton is overcautious in his argumentation. He notes that „in *some* circumstances we can decide to trust" and then "there is *some* room for choice," hence his example of choice to trust seems to be an exceptional possibility. In fact, the choice makes sense only when it initiates a long lasting process of building trust and trustworthiness. There is no *act* of trusting. It is an act of giving a chance, opening a fragile possibility to build trust in a long run. It is a mere first step in a long journey. In his later works Holton develops an original approach to moral and social psychology that is close mine. He shows that many cognitive and volitional acts are best understood within a broader framework of mental processes; his continuous notions of "the willing, the wanting, and the waiting" best describe developing human feelings and attitudes (Holton 2009: x, and *passim*).

3 Developing esteem

Just as we merely sketched the difficulties of choosing esteem, we can only briefly sketch our main argument. The possibilities of choosing and developing esteem as a state of mind are limited but not excluded. In fact, the phenomenon of esteem between people embraces elements to be chosen and there are numerous purposeful activities to develop esteem as well as similar cognitive capacities.

One has to note that the cognitive factor — "the character of the object," "how things present themselves" (Brennan and Pettit), and "what is to count as true" (Hardin) — is not so simple and clear. First of all, our knowledge about any person is never absolute. We never know all the facts about one's life; we can never be sure about one's intentions and thinking; our sources of knowledge are usually uncertain; we cannot and we do not trust unconditionally what people say about themselves and others. Even when we think we know a lot about someone, we can be mistaken in many ways. The facts supporting our knowledge might be misunderstood or just non-existent. In the past it was sometimes difficult to acquire some tangible knowledge, today — in the world of the Internet — the endless stream of information makes it really hard or impossible to pick "what is to count as true." The information is usually uncertain, unreliable, and confusing. It is often manipulated and misleading. In the social media, "how things present themselves" can be very far from what is true. We found our evaluations on very shaky grounds.

Although "the character of the object" is the foundation of most evaluations and judgments, its meaning is also not always crystal clear. It must be obviously implied that "the object" deserves esteem because its "character" is good in some way. Philosophers for centuries have wrestled with the problem of merit as the criterion of evaluations and judgments; their conclusions are usually rather cautious and skeptical.[15] In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* David Hume hints that merit would be the best principle of distribution in a good society. It would be the "most obvious thought" to give everyone what he or she deserves; such rules and laws would serve both moral good and public interest. But this "most obvious" idea would be naively mistaken: "so great is the uncertainty of merit, both from its natural obscurity, and from the self-conceit of each individual, that no determinate rule of conduct would ever result from it" (*Enquiry*, III, ii). It is hard to disagree. It is usually quite difficult to evaluate how much good someone provides and even more difficult to evaluate how much good she

[15] For a neat contemporary account, see, e.g., Miller 1998.

deserves. Merit is often an intrinsic feature no one can see or test. We usually know too little to evaluate; we are uncertain about one's motivation in doing this or that; our criteria of judgment may not fit the particular case; they may be unclear or unfair; our moral values may be too demanding or too loose. Doubts are countless. The knowledge justifying someone's esteem is never self-evident, it is usually rather unclear "how things present themselves."

Moreover, the choice to evaluate something or someone is not a decisive act making any further decision-making invalid. In fact, after having decided to pass a judgment, one faces a number of features, details, and additional conditions to be chosen. New decisions have to be made and they often constitute extended sequences where one choice generate more choices and even more choices. It is up to the evaluator to decide which details and conditions are meaningful and which are meaningless. She has to answer many questions: what is her point of view, what aspects she wants to evaluate, which criteria of judgment should be applied, which methods of cognition are to be used, and so on. People who esteem other people select at least some factors of evaluation. They decide to admire some elements of a person's character and to ignore others. Most art lovers, for instance, esteem Pablo Picasso as one of the most creative minds in the history of art. It does not matter to them that he was also an arrogant bully, a compulsive womanizer, and a naive Communist in his political views. Albert Einstein has rightly become a symbol of scientific genius and the fact that in his private life he was a rather difficult person does not diminish that universal esteem. Similar controversies can be noted about most figures in politics, business, science, sports, and entertainment. Charles de Gaulle, Thomas Edison, Muhammad Ali, and Charlie Chaplin have been loved by some people and hated by others. Apparently, lovers and haters apply different criteria to evaluate them. "Things present themselves" very differently for different people. They decide to emphasize some factors, overlook others, and remain ignorant of some others. They see things from different angles, describe in different languages, and rank under different conditions. They are very selective about what they care to know and take under consideration. It is ultimately their choice what would matter for them and how to evaluate it.

It is of course also true that the criteria of judgment are usually socially determined and we cannot just change them at will. They are determined by our culture, traditions, laws, and habits. The notions of honor and respect, for instance, are related to social groups and their conventions. However, the social background still leaves us a wide range for individual decision-making. Social conventions limit our choices, but do not make choices impossible or irrelevant. We have to actively participate in evaluating "how things present themselves." There are many social norms and conventions we could

choose from. For instance, the opposing commentators of Bill Clinton's extramarital affair apparently respected different evaluations of political and professional behavior. His defenders might claim that he behaved according to the principles of effective politics, while the rules of marital fidelity do not belong to these principles. His critics had a different choice of criteria. For them honesty, decency, and marital fidelity belonged to the principles of good politics. The two camps had different views concerning which social rules should be taken into account and how to define them. These differences are familiar to everyone. Everyone belongs to a variety of social groups and it is often difficult to simultaneously satisfy the expectations and rules of all these groups. Meeting the expectation of one group often means violating the expectation of another. At one point every child learns that gaining esteem of his peers differs from gaining esteem from his parents. These two things can be in sharp conflict. In contemporary culture countless factors determine public appreciation and fame. Merit is one of these factors, but not the only one. In fact, it seems that today there are many people who acquire appreciation and prestige without having achieved anything remarkable. It is sometimes totally unclear why some people become publicly recognized or even immensely famous. Their success seems to be without merit. Some of them are just lucky to have their "fifteen minutes of fame." Others are unlucky and fall into infamy without obvious reasons.

In short, a potential esteem-giver is a judge who decides which criteria of evaluation — usually uncertain, unclear, fragmentary, possibly biased, and limited by social conditions — to apply in a particular case: *the choice of the criteria of judgment is a decision of the judge*. Her decision may go in any chosen direction, producing esteem or disesteem, trust or distrust, enthusiasm or disgust or cold indifference. One may argue that esteem is usually *selective* and often purely subjective, respecting some elements and neglecting others. When I esteem someone as a scholar or an athlete, I generally do not care about her parenting skills or spending habits. I can be, actually, quite critical of some aspects of her private life but her professional genius is still my main criterion of judgment. Our esteem is selective and it cannot be different.[16]

The choices people make to confer esteem are not exclusively mental. One can undertake specific actions to make esteem building possible. Any relationship of esteem demands primarily the necessary condition of *attention*. We choose whether to pay attention to someone's activities. By paying attention we give her an opportunity to be noticed, evaluated, and recognized for her efforts. It may seem as not much but being noticed is an

[16] One may argue that esteem by definition should be seen as selective and conditional. The cases of totally unconditional admiration are rare and would be rather close to passionate love or obsession.

obvious condition for any subsequent appreciation. When we meet a person and ask for her name, place of origin, and profession we already give some amount of initial respect. By paying attention we display positive intentions, making possible further cognitive effects.[17] The decisions to pay attention have usually logical and practical consequences. We usually choose whether to extend our attention into a more focused *reflection and deliberation*, whether to develop any opinion about a newly met person. After having an initial brief look we have to decide whether to take a closer look. More choices have to be made: which pieces of information to take into consideration or not, what are the goals of our consideration and deliberation, what should be the criteria of evaluation, and so forth. Some factors may be relatively light, when we make a mere look at someone's body language; some can be more serious when we decide to proceed with more exploration and calculation of some pros and cons. Especially when we notice some attention from the other side, our reflection may intensify. In effect, we may decide (or even be forced) to initiate an *interaction*. Many possibilities here. Expressing our growing interest is usually a significant action, marking some level of acceptance and a potential step towards appreciation. It makes a big difference whether we decide to show our interest and reveal our potential respect or choose to keep that potential in hiding. Expression usually looks for some reaction of the other side and hence encourages further interactions. The next step of interactions can be thus mutual *communication*. A face-to-face conversation opens the countless possibilities to acquire more knowledge about each other, to establish personal and professional ties, to invite cooperation, to make commitments. These are the countless increments gradually building esteem and gaining it.

The foregoing brief passage intends to illustrate that esteem can (and should) be seen as a lasting mental process, not an individual act. There is obviously no such a thing as an "act" of giving esteem to someone. There is also no direct or immediate decision to give esteem or disesteem. The choices of attention and evaluation are the facets and phases of a continuous process of choosing, reflecting, deliberating, reasoning, building, and

[17] Brennan and Pettit note the possibility that some activities can facilitate the emergence of esteem. People cannot intentionally provide esteem itself, yet some helpful "surrogate" actions can be undertaken. They call them "esteem services." Giving attention is one of them: "if I do look at the evidence, and it speaks for a certain evaluation, then that evaluation and the associated level of esteem *will be wrung from me, willy nilly*" (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 52, 55-64; also 2000: 89-90). The authors' facetious language displays even more clearly that for them esteem is beyond the reach of rational choice and control. It is somehow done but without my will. It somehow happens without my full control. Contrary to them, I argue that one does not need to sit and wait until esteem "will be wrung from me, willy nilly." One makes more decisions and steps to develop the process of esteem giving and acquiring.

securing esteem towards other individuals. It is a phenomenon developing and evolving in time.[18]

One can recognize some obvious "processual" qualities of esteem. Characteristically, it is a process that can *self-generate* its own development. As La Rochefoucauld put it, "we always like those who admire us" (*Reflections*, maxim 294), so mutual appreciative attention can become a starting point of more advanced engagements. Someone's attention and esteem naturally boosts both my own self-esteem and a positive attitude to that person. The very fact that a person esteems me motivates me to give her at least some polite attention and often more than just attention. I may be willing to view her as a person of some value. After all, everyone prefers to be admired by valuable individuals rather than by worthless losers.[19] My esteem can generate yours. Your esteem can generate mine. To some extent, we both can intentionally and rationally control our actions and our minds. When I evaluate your attitude towards me as favorable I may be willing to design my criteria of evaluation favorably towards you. I will choose to take into account and emphasize your achievements and to forget about your failures. You can do the same in your evaluation of my efforts. We can exchange these esteem-generating favors as well as esteem itself. These cases of the mutual exchange of respect and recognition seem to be one of the most important mechanisms of a well-ordered society.

While recognizing the cognitive nature of esteem, we must assume that — like any other phenomenon based on knowledge — it can be systematically *learned*. The process of esteem building resembles very much the regular process of learning. It is true that learning is not something we can directly control and steer; we cannot just decide one day to be knowledgeable or ignorant. We can, however, choose to enter the process of learning. We decide to study, listen to advice, practice our knowledge, use it, and test it to improve. The process is usually slow, tedious, and sometimes futile. Ultimately, its effectiveness depends on many factors beyond our choice and control — our intelligence, natural talents, learning abilities, the skills of

[18] The discrepancy between a "act" and a "process" is perhaps a reason why some studies on cognitive notions — esteem and trust including — place them outside the sphere of intentional and rational "acts." We tend to think about choices and decisions as singular "acts," while it is rather awkward to think about "acts of esteeming" or "acts of trusting." It is then tacitly implied that esteem or trust cannot be chosen and decided. When we realize that these phenomena are extended in time, the problem of choice acquires different meaning. In his excellent work *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* Holton (2009) redefines numerous psychological phenomena from that perspective but, unfortunately, he never touches esteem. More study would be needed to check whether his paradigm applies to esteem as well.

[19] There are even empirical studies demonstrating that: „We want to be esteemed most by those we esteem most highly" (Wurster 1961).

the instructors, the cultural and social environment — but we still believe we can deliberately and rationally make progress and learn. It seems that the same process of learning can improve most cognitive abilities: respect, judgment, recognition, trust, and others.

Similarly, as a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social factors, esteem can be also *cultivated*. As such, it resembles respect, trust, toleration, friendliness, openness, solidarity, and so forth. Those feelings are also interconnected with cognitive and social background, so they cannot be fully controlled but there are many ways and techniques leading to their development. The process is again usually long lasting and tedious. In fact, we do develop those feelings and abilities throughout our whole lives and our control is limited. We try to cultivate them in our children but effects vary and sometimes disappoint. The potential success is always uncertain and usually quite limited because it depends on numerous independent factors: our personalities, personal experience, social environment, cultural background. For some people cultivating positive feelings can be like learning a foreign language, sometimes may resemble a psychoanalytical therapy. We hope, however, that even persons extremely suspicious and prejudicial can, in a long run, develop the abilities to respect, trust, empathize, and cooperate. Some choices can be made, some of them can be successful. Many obstacles limit our control but we are able to extend and refine our abilities to establish positive interconnections.

In this short piece we have managed to merely scratch the surface of the problem but some tentative conclusions can be sketched. There are three aspect we have managed to introduce as a moderate contribution to the subject. Firstly, I have approached the notion of esteem as a phenomenon *independent from its moral connotations*. Brennan and Pettit demonstrated such possibility but hardly anyone followed their pioneering perspective. Secondly, and contrary to these authors, I have argued that esteem can be considered a phenomenon *involving intentional and rational control*. It is founded on numerous choices and decisions to make: choosing the criteria of our judgments, deciding whether to consider and reflect on the options, and how to interact with people we might possibly esteem, respect, and trust. Thirdly, I also argue that the esteem generating actions constitute *a consistent process* that can be directed, learned and cultivated. These are quite promising conclusions opening the possibilities of further studies and recognizing some practical capabilities to strengthen the power of esteem in our society.

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Choosing Esteem

Abstract

Esteem can be seen among basic goods every individual seeks in life, yet its philosophical status has not been satisfactorily explored. There is, in particular, a problem vital to the notion's practical viability: whether esteem can be a matter of deliberate choice. This study argues that despite some problems exposed by critical studies on cognitive phenomena, esteem — as a complex cognitive, emotional, and social notion — is not beyond our intentional and rational control. In fact, it is founded on numerous choices and decisions to be made, especially while choosing the criteria of our judgments and deciding how to interact with people we might possibly build, give, and gain esteem. Importantly, esteem has to be viewed as a continuous cognitive process, hence we can even recognize some systematic ways of educating and cultivating it. It is a promising conclusion, suggesting that some positive forms of interpersonal relations — esteem and trust among them — can be generated and developed among people.

Keywords: esteem, cognition, trust, choice.