

# Self-Esteem and Ethics: A Phenomenological View

ANNA BORTOLAN

*This paper aims to provide an account of the relationship between self-esteem and moral experience. In particular, drawing on feminist and phenomenological accounts of affectivity and ethics, I argue that self-esteem has a primary role in moral epistemology and moral action. I start by providing a characterization of self-esteem, suggesting in particular that it can be best understood through the phenomenological notion of “existential feeling.” Examining the dynamics characteristic of the so-called “impostor phenomenon” and the experience of women who are involved in abusive relationships, I then claim that self-esteem fundamentally shapes the way in which self and others are conceived, and the ethical demands and obligations to which they are considered to be subjected. More specifically, I argue that low self-esteem—which in the experience of women may be rooted in particular assumptions regarding gender roles and stereotyping—can hinder autonomy, make it difficult to question other people’s evaluative perspectives and behaviors, and attribute to others responsibility for their actions.*

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## AN OPEN QUESTION

The ethical relevance of self-esteem has been for some time a widely discussed topic in the field of psychology and social policy. A significant event in this context was the constitution in 1986 of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos 1989). One of the main aims of the task force was to investigate the role of self-esteem in areas of moral, social, and political importance such as crime and violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and educational failure. The investigation conducted by the group concluded that low self-esteem is one of the factors responsible for the emergence of a variety of antisocial and self-destructive behaviors, a claim on which various studies thereafter have also agreed (for example, Donnellan et al. 2005; Wild et al. 2004).

Hypatia vol. 33, no. 1 (Winter 2018) © by Hypatia, Inc.

Despite this, the idea that low self-esteem can have negative consequences in the moral, social, and political realm while high self-esteem has positive effects in these domains has also been challenged,<sup>1</sup> with some scholars arguing, for example, that it relies on inconsistent evidence (Baumeister et al. 2005). Due to these contrasting views in the relevant literature, the need for conceptual clarification and further theoretical investigation of the nature of self-esteem appears particularly pressing, and philosophers are in a position to contribute in various ways to such an enterprise.

In this context, the present study aims to conduct a phenomenological exploration of the role played by self-esteem in moral experience, suggesting that it fundamentally modulates our evaluative outlook on ourselves and others, and arguing that low self-esteem can lead to a variety of ethically negative consequences. As such, my account supports from a philosophical perspective the idea that the nurturance and maintenance of self-esteem can have significant positive effects on various dimensions of our personal and interpersonal life.

I will start by providing a phenomenological characterization of self-esteem, claiming that, although self-esteem is an experience that is essentially affective in character, such an experience differs in significant ways from “emotions of self-assessment” (Taylor 1985) such as pride, shame, and guilt. In particular, I will suggest that self-esteem is best understood not just as an episodic emotion among others, but rather as a pervasive background sense of one’s worth and of one’s ability to deal with life’s challenges and opportunities. On this basis, I will maintain that the phenomenological notion of “existential feeling” (Ratcliffe 2005; 2008; 2010) is most suited to account for the structure of self-esteem and for the extensive influence it exerts on cognition and action.

Examining the dynamics characteristic of the so-called “impostor phenomenon” (Clance and Imes 1978), and the way in which the evaluation of self and others is affected by low self-esteem in the case of women who are involved in abusive relationships, I will then claim that self-esteem radically shapes the way in which self and others are conceived, and the ethical demands and obligations to which they are considered to be subjected. More specifically, I will argue that the low self-esteem that women often experience due also to the existence of particular assumptions about gender roles and stereotyping can hinder their autonomy. In addition, I will highlight how experiences of low self-esteem can make it very difficult to question other people’s viewpoints and behaviors and to ask them to account for their actions.

## A THEORY OF SELF-ESTEEM

### SELF-ESTEEM: NEITHER EMOTION NOR DISPOSITION

In the philosophical literature, the notion of self-esteem is usually associated with that of positive self-evaluation. In her book devoted to the analysis of emotions of self-assessment, Gabriele Taylor (1985), for instance, characterizes self-esteem as a way of conceiving of oneself as worthy. According to her, “[t]he person who has

self-esteem takes a favourable view of himself, while he who lacks it thinks of himself in unfavourable terms: he is not worth much" (Taylor 1985, 78). In a similar vein, Trudy Govier views "basic self-esteem" as a non-comparative, inner sense of one's worth (Govier 1993, 113), a belief in one's own fundamental acceptability as a person (112). The concept of self-esteem that emerges from these accounts is one in which self-assessment is central: self-esteem, from this perspective, consists in or is strongly dependent upon considering the self to be valuable in certain respects.

The acknowledgment of the centrality of evaluation to self-esteem, however, also raises some questions, as it needs to be clarified what kind of experience is here at issue. Is self-esteem to be understood as a cognitive state? As a particular belief or judgment that has the self as its focus?

Although cognition certainly plays an important role in this context, it appears that feelings too are cardinal to the structure of this experience. The positive self-evaluations that are recognized to be constitutive of self-esteem do not have the form of emotionally neutral states. On the contrary, these evaluations are "felt"; they are experiences by which we are affected in characteristic ways.<sup>2</sup> Self-esteem, in other words, is fundamentally affective in character.

Affectivity, however, is a heterogeneous dimension of experience, and it is important to understand exactly what kind of affect self-esteem should be identified with. As far as this point is concerned, because of its focus on the self and its evaluative nature, it may seem promising to conceive of self-esteem as analogous to "self-conscious emotions" (Tracy, Robins, and Tangney 2007) like pride, shame, and guilt.

A close examination of its structure, however, reveals that self-esteem differs from these emotions for various reasons. First, self-esteem does not appear to possess a specific intentional object. Whereas pride, shame, and guilt are usually connected to specific behaviors, actions, or features of the self,<sup>3</sup> self-esteem does not possess such a particular focus. For example, we can say that we are proud of having passed a difficult exam or ashamed of having failed to do so, or that we feel guilty about the lack of tact we have shown during a conversation, but it does not seem correct to say that we experience self-esteem with regard to something specific in the same way.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, emotions—and self-conscious emotions too—often have an episodic structure (Lewis 2000), whereas self-esteem is a long-lasting affective experience. Feelings of pride, shame, and guilt can arise quickly and last just for a few moments, but it does not seem possible to say that we experience self-esteem only for such a short time. In fact, other feelings can be present or not, but it seems that self-esteem—be it low, moderate, or high—cannot be absent. We do not constantly feel proud, ashamed, or guilty, but we always have an implicit sense of our value and capacities. Finally, self-esteem seems to influence our cognitive and practical life more extensively than self-conscious emotions. For example, self-esteem appears to be associated with the experience of other affects, such as feelings of confidence and empowerment, sense of security, pride, and contentment, or when it is lacking, powerlessness, insecurity, sadness, anxiety, depression, and self-doubt. In addition, self-esteem seems to extensively impact on our attitudes and behaviors. For instance, when experiencing high self-esteem we may be more willing to trust our intuitions and ideas and to challenge

received wisdom, while low self-esteem may incline us to second-guess ourselves and be less comfortable in expressing and handling disagreement.

The fact that self-esteem cannot be identified with an emotion and the acknowledgment that it plays such a strong motivational role (Dillon 2013) in our lives may be seen as suggesting that self-esteem is to be understood as a disposition. From this perspective, self-esteem would be what inclines us to think, feel, or act in certain ways when certain circumstances occur.

A dispositional account would do justice to various aspects of self-esteem; however, identifying self-esteem with a disposition, or set of dispositions, would fail to adequately depict the phenomenology of self-esteem. This is the case because dispositions become phenomenologically salient only when they are manifested, whereas there is always an experiential aspect to self-esteem. Even when we are not reflectively aware of it, self-esteem pervasively shapes our personal and interpersonal experience, so that, if it were not there, we would feel very differently about ourselves, others, and the world.

Such an account can be clarified by taking into consideration a distinction put forward by Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman. Discussing the case of anger, they differentiate between bare dispositions and other forms of long-lasting affect that only occasionally come to the foreground of experience, but are not merely dispositional. As they explain:

even between times of out-and-out anger toward you, I can still be angry at you where this anger is not merely dispositional anger. My anger might only occasionally rise to the surface. When it does, it might not be fully formed as anger at you or even as anger at all. . . . And when below the surface, it can be there simmering away, troubling the waters. It can serve as part of my standing emotional, background conditions, often unattended to, but fully there as part of my world. (Stocker and Hegeman 1996, 23)

Like one of the forms of anger described by Stocker and Hegeman, self-esteem cannot be conceived as merely dispositional.<sup>5</sup> It is rather an essentially felt experience, but one whose characteristic structure, as previously argued, cannot be identified with that of an emotion either. I will claim in the next section that the notion of “existential feeling”—coined by the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe and widely applied in contemporary phenomenological studies of affectivity and psychopathology—is rather better suited to account for self-esteem.

#### SELF-ESTEEM AS AN EXISTENTIAL FEELING

Self-esteem, as shown above, is different from self-conscious emotions; however, looking at affects like pride, shame, and guilt when trying to provide an account of the structure of self-esteem is not a futile move. Indeed, although the discussion of self-conscious emotions often focuses on intentional and episodic affective states, some scholars have argued that feelings such as shame and guilt can also have a different

form. An example of this is provided by Sandra Bartky's account of how shame is often experienced by women:

I shall maintain that women typically are more shame-prone than men, that shame is not so much a particular feeling or emotion (though it involves specific feelings and emotions) as a pervasive affective attunement to the social environment, that women's shame is more than merely an effect of subordination but, within the larger universe of patriarchal social relations, a profound mode of disclosure both of self and situation. (Bartky 1990, 85)

Whereas emotions are usually conceived as short-lived reactions to particular features of the self or the environment, the specific form of shame described by Bartky in this passage does not have such a directionality and appears to be a more long-lasting and pervasive state than episodic shame. The idea that self-conscious emotions do not always have intentional objects, but rather can take a more general and deeper form is also supported by Ratcliffe's account of guilt (Ratcliffe 2010).

Ratcliffe observes that although we often "feel guilty about" something, it is also possible to just "feel guilty," or to feel "irrevocably guilty" (Ratcliffe 2010, 607) without this guilt being directed at any particular object, and he suggests that the latter is the case, for example, in some forms of severe depression. This particular type of guilt is not a circumscribed, transient affect, but rather has a deep and wide-ranging effect on the person's life. According to Ratcliffe, when irrevocable guilt is present, the person loses the ability to conceive of herself as not culpable—not being guilty is no longer perceived as a possibility for her—and her painful present condition thus seems "inescapable" (615).

Ratcliffe suggests that this type of guilt, as well as other affects that have generally received less attention in the field of philosophy of emotion (2005; 2008), can be characterized through the notion of "existential feeling." In my opinion, such a notion provides us with a theoretical framework through which the main features of self-esteem can also be made sense of, and in the following I will illustrate why this is the case.

Ratcliffe's concept of existential feeling further develops some central aspects of Heidegger's account of moods, an account on which Bartky's view on shame also draws (Heidegger 1927/1962). According to Heidegger, moods are non-intentional affects that shape our relationship with the world as a whole and determine the various ways in which things can "matter" to us. From this perspective, attention is drawn to the fact that, in order to encounter particular things as meaningful in a certain manner, we already need to inhabit a world where that form of meaningfulness is allowed for. For example, Heidegger suggests that in order to encounter something as "threatening," we need to already be experiencing the world as a space in which threat is a possibility (176), and argues that it is the experience of a particular mood that makes it possible to constitute the world as such a space.

Ratcliffe's existential feelings share with Heideggerian moods the important feature of being responsible for structuring our experiential field: in Ratcliffe's words, they are "presupposed spaces of experiential possibility" (Ratcliffe 2005, 45) that

allow us to perceive ourselves, other people, and objects as salient in various ways. Existential feelings do not have specific intentional objects, but rather determine “what kinds of intentional state it is possible to have” (Ratcliffe 2010, 604), and because of this, Ratcliffe suggests that their structure is best understood as being “pre-intentional” rather than merely non-intentional.

But what exactly does pre-intentionality amount to? In order to clarify this concept, it is helpful to consider Ratcliffe’s account of feelings of hopelessness (Ratcliffe 2013). Ratcliffe acknowledges that we may often experience a loss of hope with respect to particular possibilities—for example, I may lose the hope that the book proposal I have submitted will be accepted or that it will be sunny during the holidays. However, Ratcliffe claims that feelings of hopelessness do not always have an intentional structure, and can rather have a pre-intentional character. According to him, this is the case in some instances of severe depression, where not only specific forms of hope seem to have disappeared, but a loss of the “possibility of hoping” itself is experienced (Ratcliffe 2013, 605). In sum, and as exemplified by certain forms of hopelessness, when in the grip of a particular existential feeling, the person loses (or acquires) the capacity to experience “kinds” of possibilities and not just some particular instances of them (Ratcliffe 2012, 28) and this is what is at the core of the notion of pre-intentionality.

For various reasons, the notion of existential feeling is thus more suited than that of emotion to account for the structure of self-esteem. As pointed out above, self-esteem is not about anything specific, but is not a mere non-intentional state either. Like the existential feelings described by Ratcliffe, self-esteem can shape the range of thoughts and behaviors of which we are capable and should then be attributed a “pre-intentional” character. In addition, although Ratcliffe maintains that some existential feelings, like emotions, can be short-lived, he also acknowledges that others may last for longer periods or even a lifetime (Ratcliffe 2008, 55), which makes the notion compatible with that of self-esteem also from the point of view of its temporal profile.

In addition, Ratcliffe conceives of existential feelings as essentially bodily feelings (Ratcliffe 2005; 2008), an aspect that can do justice to another feature of self-esteem, namely the fact that it appears to be closely connected to our bodily sense of potentiality. Central to self-esteem is indeed an experience of oneself as able to exert an influence over the external world through one’s own actions and to cope with the circumstances of everyday life (Branden 1994). This is akin to what has been described by Jan Slaby through the notion of “sense of ability” (Slaby 2012). According to him, this is a bodily feeling “of one’s capacity to act or to come to grips and cope with what affects one,” an “embodied sense of capability” that grounds and shapes our outlook on reality (152). Slaby suggests that the sense of ability is a “modifiable sense of ‘I can’ and ‘I cannot’” that structures our experience of self, others, and the world and that can thus be understood as an existential feeling (153).

The sense of ability Slaby describes appears to be a core feature of our experience of self-esteem, and, as such, his account further supports the idea that self-esteem is to be thought of as an existential feeling rather than an emotion.

However, conceiving of self-esteem through the notion of existential feeling is also compatible with the fact that more complex cognitive and, in particular, evaluative states are integral to the structure of this experience. It has indeed been claimed that existential feelings can be “conceptually sophisticated” (Slaby and Stephan 2008, 510) and that sometimes they cannot be separated from the self-narratives in which they are incorporated (Ratcliffe 2016). The phenomenological account of existential feelings, in other words, recognizes the strong interdependence of affective and cognitive processes and highlights how the way in which we feel shapes, and is itself shaped by, our thoughts, beliefs, and judgments.

The emphasis on the interconnection between affectivity and cognition is particularly relevant to the experience of self-esteem, insofar as intersubjectively negotiated evaluations of the self, which can be influenced by a plurality of sociocultural narratives, are central to its structure.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the notion of existential feeling not only makes it possible to account for the structure of self-esteem as an affect, but is also able to accommodate the role played by cognitive and narrative processes in its constitution.<sup>7</sup>

#### SELF-ESTEEM AND MORAL EXPERIENCE

In the first part of this study I have suggested that self-esteem differs from emotions and dispositions in significant ways, claiming that it is best understood as a pervasive and long-lasting affect that fundamentally modulates our experience. This claim will now be further illustrated and developed by taking into consideration how low self-esteem can affect self- and other-evaluations and actions in ethically relevant domains. In particular, I will draw attention to the experience of successful women who feel like “impostors” and of women who are involved in abusive relationships.

#### THE CASE OF THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

The notion of “impostor phenomenon” first appeared in a study published by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. Having worked for a number of years in therapeutic and academic contexts with a cohort of over 150 women who were considered to be very successful academically or professionally, the authors had observed that many of these women did not experience any “internal sense of success” (Clance and Imes 1978, 241).<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, despite their achievements, they doubted their intelligence and tended to consider their successes as being due to luck or mistakes committed by others, seeing themselves as “impostors,” who did not deserve the recognitions they had received. A first-person account of the phenomenon reported in a study conducted by Rory McElwee and Tricia Yurak highlights this dynamic:

my program/major is perceived to be ‘the best’ with the highest-quality students enrolled in it. On numerous occasions, the girls in my program

have been told we're 'so bright and outstanding' by professors, advisors, etc. Many feel only the brightest students make it into the program and by being here, it proves our intelligence and character. They assume we're all responsible, organized, hard-working, dedicated students. However, that's not the case... I felt ashamed. I was with 2 dozen girls who were bright and great people and I felt like I didn't measure up to them. Like I shouldn't be here and I'm probably wasting somebody's time. (McElwee and Yurak 2010, 188–89)

Various studies have drawn attention to the existence of a correlation between low self-esteem and the impostor phenomenon (Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, and Leonhardt 2016), and such a correlation can be accounted for on the basis of the account of self-esteem I provided in the first part of this article. There I characterized self-esteem as a background feeling that radically influences our cognitive and practical experience. Drawing on Ratcliffe's account of existential feelings, I suggested that self-esteem has such a significant impact because it possesses a "pre-intentional" character, namely it constrains the range of intentional states that it is possible for us to experience. As such, when self-esteem is low, it is very difficult for the subject to consider and endorse positive self-evaluations and experience emotions, such as pride and self-contentment, which are reflective of those evaluations.

These dynamics appear to be at the core of the experience of people who feel like impostors. Due to the way in which self-esteem constrains our mental states, people who have low self-esteem struggle to give due consideration to facts and feedback that are in contradiction with their negative affective self-evaluation. Being unable to acknowledge their successes as such, they rather give interpretations of events that minimize or explain away their achievements—for example, by describing them as the product of luck or mistakes—and this enables them to maintain an outlook on reality that is consistent with their low self-esteem.<sup>9</sup>

These dynamics are ethically relevant for two main reasons.<sup>10</sup> In the first place, people who conceive of themselves as impostors also tend to consider themselves as morally reprehensible in various respects. For instance, they might feel guilty for having taken undeserved recognition or for having accepted rewards that, in their view, should have gone to someone else. In addition, they may feel uncomfortable because of the allegedly false beliefs that are fostered by their successes (McElwee and Yurak 2010). This is exemplified, for instance, by the following statements made by participants in the study McElwee and Yurak conducted:

"I would rather have him know the truth"; "I did not want people to think I thought I was something I was not"; "[I would want to tell] just so they know how I feel about myself"; "I just didn't want them to think I was smarter than I actually am"; "I want people to just take what I am for face value." (McElwee and Yurak 2010, 191)

Secondly, people feeling like impostors struggle to take into adequate account and appropriately evaluate self-related information. They need rather to redescribe



reality in order to make it fit in with the very negative view they have of themselves, and this may hinder their ability to think and act as autonomous agents. In order to best understand this point, it is helpful to draw a parallel with Paul Biegler's account of autonomy and its disruptions in patients who suffer from depression (Biegler 2010; 2011).

According to Biegler, in order for someone to be autonomous, it is necessary that justified beliefs could be held with regard to "material facts," namely facts that are relevant to that particular person's decision making (Biegler 2010, 181). In Biegler's opinion, due also to the way in which cognition can be altered by the negative moods characteristic of depression, the autonomy of people who suffer from the illness can be threatened in various ways. For example, the depressed person may struggle to realize that her negative moods can be misleading (Biegler 2011, 75), as well as failing to accurately evaluate the role played by stressful events as depression-inducing factors and how to deal with them (Biegler 2010, 184). The ability of the depressed person to access and assess self-relevant information can thus be hindered, and this negatively affects her autonomy and "epistemic" (Radden 2013, 96) and practical agency.

For people who experience the impostor phenomenon, low self-esteem can damage autonomy and agency in similar ways. As shown above, due to the way in which their cognitive and affective outlook is altered, people who feel like impostors fail to objectively evaluate their achievements, and this includes a wrong assessment of the causes of their success: rather than acknowledging that it is because of their own efforts and skills that these successes have been achieved, the responsibility is attributed to external factors such as luck or other people's mistakes. As such, it is difficult for the person who suffers from the impostor syndrome to hold justified beliefs about the significant life events that she undergoes, and this also affects her capacity to draw upon relevant information when making important decisions and to act accordingly. For example, because she does not have an accurate understanding of her abilities and potential, the person who feels like an impostor may be less likely to undertake ambitious projects, embark on new enterprises, or engage in competitive processes.

The idea that deep alterations of self-esteem can be detrimental to the person's autonomy is also in line with the insights into the relationship among self-esteem, self-trust, and autonomy put forward by Govier (1993). Drawing upon Diana Meyers's work (Meyers 1989), Govier argues that the notion of autonomy is to be conceived of in procedural terms. In particular, from this perspective, autonomy is identified with the ability to control one's own life, and such an ability is considered to depend on the possibility of understanding one's cognitive and affective states, determining one's identity, and orienting one's actions accordingly (Govier 1993, 103). Govier maintains that lack of self-trust would jeopardize these dynamics and thus threaten the individual's autonomy. In her opinion, a person trusts herself when she believes herself to be "competent" with regard to her ability to think and operate in the world and, more specifically, with regard to her "perceptions and observations, interpretation of events and actions, feelings and responses, values and evaluation, memory, judgment" and a variety of other cognitive and behavioral activities (Govier 1993, 107–108). According to Govier, "[b]asic self-esteem is a necessary condition of core

self-trust” (114) and self-trust can contribute to the preservation of basic self-esteem (113–14). As such, when self-esteem is low, trust in oneself and the possibility of acting as an autonomous agent that its grounds are also negatively affected, and this, in turn, can further weaken self-esteem itself.

As exemplified by the experience of people who suffer from the impostor syndrome, low self-esteem can be detrimental to the person’s capacity to access and make use of important self-relevant information, which, in turn, may further lower the person’s confidence in her own cognitive, affective, and agentic abilities, thus hindering her autonomy as a moral and epistemic agent. Significant alterations of the way in which other people are experienced are also involved in this process, a dynamic that becomes particularly visible in the case of abusive relationships discussed in the next section.

#### THE CASE OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Women who are involved in abusive relationships often struggle to maintain an independent evaluative outlook on their partners and the relational dynamics they experience. It is difficult for women who are emotionally or physically abused to trust their own feelings and judgments and to recognize and condemn the unacceptable violence to which they are subject. On the contrary, the person who is experiencing the abuse can come to endorse the evaluative point of view of the abusive partner, sharing to various degrees his views of herself, others, and the situation. For instance, women may endorse their partners’ idea that they are somehow culpable for the events that led to the deterioration of the relationship and ultimately to the abuse.<sup>11</sup> This becomes visible, for example, in the first-person report provided by one of Robin Norwood’s patients, trapped for years in a destructive relationship with her husband:

“I was getting so sick by then that I actually thought, *This is my fault; I shouldn’t have made him so angry*. I was still taking the blame for everything, trying to fix the unfixable.” (Norwood 2009, 64–65)

And, in the words of one of the participants in a study conducted by Andrew Baly:

“always defend defend defend (.) you know- ‘he’s not really like that he’s not really (.) that bad (.) he’s just going through problems’ and stuff like that.”<sup>12</sup> (Baly 2010, 2304)

Women who are involved in abusive relationships often experience low self-esteem and self-trust (Anguilar and Nightingale 1994; Clements, Sabourin, and Spiby 2004), and, as is the case with the impostor phenomenon, it may be because of this experience that the person’s evaluative perspective on self and others may in this context be radically altered (Govier 1993). Due to its pre-intentional character, low self-esteem constrains the range of cognitive and affective states that can be undergone, thus making it very difficult for the person who experiences it to conceive of herself in ways that are in contrast with her negative self-assessments. As a result, women who are abused by their partners may be more likely to experience guilt and to

attribute to themselves the responsibility for the abuse. To this extremely negative attitude toward the self corresponds the tendency to evaluate others in ways that are positively biased. Various scholars draw attention to the fact that women who are victims of abuse often depict their partners as possessing a “dual identity,” a “beast/prince” (Baly 2010) nature where an ultimately good and innocent character is thought to be hidden behind aggressive and violent behaviors. Such excuse for the partner, suggesting that he is not fully responsible for his actions, is exemplified, for instance, by the following report from one of the participants in Baly’s study:

“I’ve had to (..) you know (..) deal with feelings of guilt (..) you know that I haven’t been able to help him (..) that I haven’t been that I didn’t stay with him and (..) you know (..) try and (..) fight harder to sort him out... I’m not-I shouldn’t have to feel responsible for him (..) and yet (..) that’s how I-I feel as if he’s (..) another child.” (Baly 2010, 2303–04)<sup>13</sup>

The dynamics just described as central to the experience of women in abusive relationships are likely to depend, at least in part, on the presence of specific social and cultural views regarding gender roles and stereotyping.<sup>14</sup> Of particular relevance in this respect is the tendency to attribute to women the role of primary emotional carers. Women have traditionally been considered to be responsible for providing emotional support to others and especially their male partners through a plurality of activities. The notion of femininity has frequently been associated with the ability to listen, advise, encourage, and provide material and psychological comfort in times of distress. Women, as Bartky argues, have been expected to do “the work of emotional repair” (Bartky 1990, 103), looking after other people’s emotional well-being to make sure that they maintain the ability to cope and a positive conception of themselves.

Bartky observes that this situation carries both epistemic and ethical risks, as the pressures women experience in the role of principal emotional supporters may lead them to unduly discount the validity of their own moral and intellectual perspective and to replace it with that of their partners. A woman, Bartky argues, may renounce her view of the world and endorse the view of the world “according to him”, including his values (Bartky 1990, 111–12), thus leading to potentially negative consequences for her autonomy and integrity.

As far as ethical matters are concerned, for example, a woman who is in the position of emotional carer might be expected to protect the people she cares for from being hurt and to nurture their self-love, and this might make it difficult to attribute responsibility for morally blameworthy actions when needed. As argued by Cheshire Calhoun also through the consideration of the experience of women involved in abusive relationships (1992, 118), there are ethical difficulties and risks associated with women’s “emotional work”. As she explains:

Both rerouting others’ actions by managing their emotions and taking the emotional sting out of moral abuse are morally risky forms of emotional work. In protecting people from moral abuse or from its emotional sting once it happens, we may simultaneously be protecting from moral

reproach and from being taken to moral task those who perhaps need it most. Virtuous emotional work must tread the fine line between protecting the deserving from harm and refusing to protect the undeserving from reproach. (Calhoun 1992, 121)

Interpersonal relationships and the responsibilities attributed to women within them can thus have a dramatic impact on the way in which we view, and, in particular, evaluate ourselves, an idea that has often been put forward in philosophical and psychological accounts of self-esteem. According to Axel Honneth (1992), for instance, self-esteem depends on the social recognition of one's traits and abilities, which is achieved by means of belonging to a community where certain values are shared. According to him, in order for the individual to be able to undergo certain experiences and to see himself in a certain way, it is necessary that particular forms of intersubjective relation are in place (Honneth 1992, 92–130), and the positive social evaluation of one's achievements and abilities is what enables the “feeling of self-worth” (129) with which self-esteem is to be identified. In a similar way, in the field of psychology, the “sociometer hypothesis” (Leary et al. 1995), claims that self-esteem is a mechanism that monitors the extent to which the individual is included in the social domain and motivates him to avoid “rejection or exclusion” by others (518). In other words, according to this hypothesis, self-esteem depends on one's “inclusionary status” (Leary et al. 1995, 519) and functions to promote the maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships.

The alterations of self-esteem experienced by women who are involved in abusive relationships are an example of the very close connection that exists between the way in which we experience and evaluate ourselves and our interpersonal relations, and one that is consonant with the emphasis placed on the social dimension by various accounts of self-esteem. It is possible to wonder, however, whether the case of the impostor phenomenon also fits this theoretical framework. *Prima facie*, it may seem that the diminution or lack of self-esteem experienced by people who feel like impostors is not the effect of a lack of social recognition, but rather takes place despite the existence of positive interpersonal feedback. At the core of the impostor syndrome is indeed a misalignment between the way in which one sees oneself and the way in which one is seen by others in social domains such as the academic and professional. However, the existence in this context of various forms of positive intersubjective feedback does not rule out the possibility that the low level of self-esteem experienced by the person who considers herself an impostor is dependent upon intersubjective dynamics. In this respect, of particular relevance may be, for example, the personal relationships with significant others developed from early childhood, and gender-related expectations conveyed through these relationships (Clance and Imes 1978, 242–45).

When assessing the role played by interpersonal dynamics in shaping the individual's self-esteem, it is also important to distinguish between the explicit and implicit messages and feedback to which one can be exposed. In this respect, for example, it is possible that even when recognition is openly given to one's achievements—for

example, through the granting of a good grade or a promotion—the person’s abilities and successes may be put into question or dismissed through other comments or behaviors that may be less overt but not less perceivable.

A person’s achievements can thus not only be valued in different ways by the various people one is in a relationship with, but the explicit recognition of such achievements may also be undermined through subtler dynamics, which may be more difficult to resist or manage due to their covert nature. Because of this, the alterations of self-esteem that mark the impostor phenomenon may also be determined by particular intersubjective experiences, thus providing a further example of the intimate relationship that exists between self-evaluation and the social dimension.

#### PROMOTING SELF-ESTEEM

I have here provided a phenomenological analysis of the impact self-esteem can have in the ethical domain. I started by suggesting that self-esteem is an affective form of experience that is difficult to account for within existing taxonomies of affectivity. I then moved to show that Ratcliffe’s notion of “existential feeling” is better suited to account for the characteristics of self-esteem. Existential feelings are conceived as “pre-intentional” forms of experience, namely affects that are not directed at any particular object but have the power to constrain the range of intentional states that can be entertained. I maintained that such characterization can accommodate the main features of self-esteem, and makes it possible to account for the impact that this form of experience has on our cognitive and practical life.

In the second part of the article I identified various ways in which self-esteem can influence morally relevant evaluations and behaviors, discussing two specific examples and suggesting that the view of self-esteem provided previously can adequately account for the dynamics that are in play in these cases. First I focused on the “impostor phenomenon.” I claimed that, due to the pre-intentional character of the feelings of (low) self-esteem she experiences, the person who feels like an impostor is unable to conceive of herself as worthy, and is thus led to challenge evidence to the contrary by crafting distorting explanations of her circumstances. This process, I suggested, poses a threat to the person’s autonomy and agency.

I then considered the experience of women involved in abusive relationships. I claimed that, due to the way in which their evaluative outlook is constrained by low self-esteem, it might be difficult for women in these circumstances not to see themselves and their situation through their partners’ eyes, and to condemn the violence to which they are subject. I then concluded by suggesting that this dynamic is rooted in the presence of sociocultural views and practices concerning the role of women as primary emotional carers, thus corroborating the idea that interpersonal relationships can have a primary influence on the person’s self-esteem.

By identifying the ethical implications of low self-esteem at both the personal and interpersonal level, this study is consonant with the psychological and sociological

accounts that have emphasized the importance of fostering self-esteem in order to prevent phenomena such as interpersonal abuse and violence. Self-esteem appears to be fundamental to our ability to trust our own epistemic and moral perspective, to the capacity to adequately assess other people's points of view, and to hold them responsible for their misdeeds. As such, self-esteem is a phenomenon that possesses ethical significance, and its nurturance is something from which we cannot prescind when concerned with the conditions that promote autonomous moral reasoning and behavior.

## NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Society of Women in Philosophy Ireland in December 2016, and at the SWIP UK Panel at the Joint Session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society in July 2017. I am grateful to the audiences at these events for their feedback. I would also like to thank Anastasia Scrutton and Paddy McQueen for helpful comments on previous drafts of the manuscript. Many thanks also to the anonymous referees for their comments. This research was conducted as part of the project "The Phenomenology of Self-Esteem," funded by the Irish Research Council [GOIPD/2016/555].

1. For an overview of this debate, see, for example, Dillon 2013.
2. Various phenomenologists have defended the idea that certain feelings can be evaluative. I have explored this view with regard to its relevance for our understanding of moral experience in Bortolan 2017.
3. In the literature on self-conscious emotions, it has been argued that shame involves an evaluation of the self as a whole rather than an evaluation of specific traits and behaviors (Lewis 1992). As I suggested elsewhere (Bortolan 2017: 486), this idea can be challenged as it is possible to identify instances of shame which have only particular features of the self or actions as their focus and not the self as a whole.
4. I do not deny that specific circumstances—for example, giving a bad lecture, or receiving a journal rejection—could trigger temporary changes in our self-evaluations, but what takes place in these cases is a fluctuation of self-confidence rather than a change in self-esteem.
5. For this reason, it seems that the notion of character trait, which is often defined in dispositional terms (for example, Goldie 2000), is also not appropriate to account for the structure of self-esteem. In addition, character traits usually undergo only limited variations during a lifetime, whereas self-esteem does not possess the same degree of stability, being sometimes subject to temporary shifts.
6. By "narrative," in this context, I mean any historical, autobiographical, or fictional story—made available in either written or oral form, or through other representational means—with which we may come into contact in the course of our lives.
7. The view of self-esteem I develop in this study has various aspects in common with Robin Dillon's account of "basal self-respect." Dillon defines this form of self-respect as "a prereflective, unarticulated, emotionally laden pre-suppositional interpretive framework, an implicit 'seeing oneself as' or 'taking oneself to be' that structures our

explicit experiences of self and worth” (Dillon 1997, 241). Basal self-respect is, from this perspective, a fundamental sense of one’s own value on which depends our ability to recognize our worth as persons (“recognition self-respect”) and our being successful in living a life that we deem good (“evaluative self-respect”). The analysis I present in this article corroborates Dillon’s idea that there is a form of self-focused affective experience that is prior to, and has the power to constrain, the judgments we make about our value and achievements. However, my account differs from hers insofar as I suggest that what plays this role is self-esteem and not self-respect. This is the case because I think that self-respect can have only a reflective and cognitive character. In my view, self-respect is thus one of the ways of relating to oneself that are enabled by self-esteem. In addition, although I agree with Dillon that self-respect is a “normative concept” (Dillon 2013), as it has to do with our dignity as persons, it seems to me that the ability to see oneself in such terms can develop only if a more basic, non-normative experience of the self as having the capacity to deal with the demands of everyday life and meet one’s goals is already in place. Finally, also distinctive of my account is the claim that a particular form of bodily experience is integral to the background feeling from which our self evaluations stem.

8. The impostor phenomenon has been shown to be experienced also by men (Rohrman, Bechtoldt, and Leonhardt 2016). A philosophical exploration of the specific dynamics which may characterize such an experience would exceed the scope of this article, but some of the insights here developed may be relevant to research on the topic.

9. The idea that the dynamics involved in the “impostor phenomenon” are connected to alterations of a basic form of affective experience is another aspect in regard to which my account appears to overlap with Dillon’s views on basal self-respect. In her article, Dillon does not explicitly mention this phenomenon. However, she describes analogous dynamics in her discussion of the case of Anne, a woman who has achieved success and recognition in her profession, but despite this “feels wholly inadequate and undeserving” (Dillon 1997, 232). Dillon interprets this situation as one that arises from a lack of basal self-respect, whereas in my account I suggest that it is a disruption of self-esteem that is at the origin of this experience.

10. For a broader account of the relationship between existential feelings and moral experience, see Bortolan 2017.

11. Floretta Boonzaier draws attention to the fact that both partners often use terms such as “fight” and “argument” to describe the violent dynamics present in the relationship, a linguistic choice that, in her opinion, expresses the idea of there being a joint responsibility for the events that are recounted (Boonzaier 2008, 196).

12. Emphasis and interpolations in the original.

13. As Baly (2010) argues, these ways of explaining the abuse make it more difficult for the victim to leave the relationship. On the contrary, the attribution to the abusive partner of moral responsibility is associated with self-reliant behaviors that enable the women to leave.

14. Such views appear to be powerfully expressed in some of the narratives to which we are exposed since infancy. Think, for example, of the centrality of the “dual identity,” “beast/prince” trope to a fairy tale such as *The Beauty and the Beast*.

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