

Article Title: "Self-Respect and Protest"

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Publication Info: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6.1 (1976): 58–69

Reading Level: Easy

Thesis: Protesting injustice may be a useful (even necessary) means of showing and discovering/confirming that one has the appropriate amount of self-respect.

Key Definitions:

No technical language used--if pairing with recommended complementary texts, may want to spend time talking about 'resentment', 'self-respect', 'rights', 'authenticity', but fairly ordinary-language uses here

Elements of self-respect alluded to here: cognizance of rights to which one is entitled (61), willingness to demand those rights be respected (61), appropriate emotional response to injustice and insult (61)

Brief Summary

THE SETUP (58-59)

Must a person protest his wrongs? Is futile protest self-respecting?

Booker T. Washington / W. E. B. Dubois debate

Washington: protesting injustice not self-respecting when one cannot right it

“advertising his wrongs” betrays weakness for relying on sympathy of others

Dubois: protest not an appeal for sympathy; failing to protest eventually leads to loss of self-respect, requires “persistent demand for essential equality”

Boxill's claim: following Dubois, people have reason to protest their wrongs not only to stop injustice but also to show self-respect and to know themselves as self-respecting

WASHINGTON'S VIEW (59-60)

All agree that black protest would have been provocation to white South
provocation challenges audience's moral claim to enjoyed status/unjust advantage

Washington's calls for reform:

did not make the challenge that protest makes,
did not press the claim that black people are victims of racial injustice,
leveraged Christian idea that inflicting injustice greater evil than suffering it is

Reply: (1) No reason to accept that perpetrator suffers greater evil than the victim,
(2) Perpetrator has duty to respect victims' rights

Washington's view on why protest isn't always called for:

- Person who insistently protests against his own condition may appear self-centered/self-pitying
- Self-respecting person is self-reliant and avoids self-pity
- Having rights does not necessarily justify constant reiteration that one has them

BOXILL ON WHAT THE PROTESTER DEMANDS (61)

Boxill rejects seeking-sympathy view: claiming rights is claiming what one can demand and exact, sympathy cannot be demanded

Protester expresses not self-pity but resentment

Protester demands noninterference, not help (negative rights conception?)

Protester expresses righteous and self-respecting concern for self

Self-respecting person naturally inclined to protest injuries

FOUR SUGGESTED REASONS FOR THE SELF-RESPECTING TO PROTEST (61-65)

But would he always have good reason to protest, even when futile?

Why can't a self-respecting person pretend servility if beneficial?

Suggestion 1: reason to protest to make others recognize that protester has rights

- Why should he care that others share his conviction, rather than merely caring that they not infringe his rights?
- Self-respecting person need not want to make others moral

Suggestion 2: self-respecting person wants others to respect him because he wants to remain self-respecting

- Unopposed injustice invites victims to believe they are without rights
- Yet the self-respecting would disdain need for confirmation from reassurance/recognition of others (self-respecting person cannot be satisfied to depend on opinions of others)
- Washington: Better route to respect (from others) through becoming economically valuable community members, rather than through protest
- Boxill agrees: protest is an affirmation, not an argument, and not always persuasive

Protest called for when argument and persuasion is past?

Suggestion 3: Perhaps protest designed to compel others to acknowledge protester as moral being

- Slave who steals, elicits punishment and through it recognition as moral being
- Protest need not be designed to promote conciliation
- Not clear that oppressor must treat protestor as moral being (if not ignored, could simply be denied rights or treated as moral being in analogical sense)

Suggestion 4: affirming one's rights necessary to keeping sense of own value because doing so is essential part of self-respect

Why should one affirm what one believes?

- Authenticity not an obvious explanation
- Even if authenticity matters, why would he have to say what he is?
- Self-respecting person's value doesn't hinge on protesting

SELF-RESPECT AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE (66-69)

Protest is an indifferent way of getting others to acknowledge and thereby confirm that one has worth

- But may be good way to confirm that one has faith in one's own worth

No one with self-respect wants to lose that self-respect

Self-respecting person does not merely have belief in worth, feels secure about belief

Not the case that self-respecting person must be so confident as to take it for granted

Possible to fear not having real self-respect

- Needs evidence to support belief in one's self-respect
- Cannot assume that apparent servility is masked resistance
- Only consummate artistry can permit a person continuously and elaborately to pretend servility and still know that he is self-respecting
- Knowledge of self requires occasionally shedding that mask
- Powerless but self-respecting person driven to make others take him seriously

Protest affirms that individual has rights, gives evidence of own self-respect

Protest not meant to persuade others but to shore up own belief

Partly explains why protest often unaccompanied by argument—what is relevant to claim of self-respect is not whether he has rights but whether he believes he has them

Possible Applications:

- General moral epistemology, unit on self-knowledge and character
- Unit on resistance to oppression
- Unit exploring Strawsonian idea of resentment, Feinberg on rights, Darwall on respect
- Unit on moral damage (e.g., Tessman's *Burdened Virtues*)
- Unit on respect/self-respect
- Course or unit on intersectionality
- Course or unit on protest

- Course on political philosophy
- Course on oppression/injustice

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- W. E. B. Dubois – “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others”
- Stephen Darwall – The Second-Person Standpoint
- Robin Dillon – “Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political” or “How to Lose Your Self-Respect”
- Tom Hill – “Servility and Self-Respect”
- Carol Hay – “The Obligation to Resist Oppression”
- Daniel Silvermint – “Resistance and Well-Being”
- Bernard Boxill – “The Responsibility of the Oppressed to Resist Their Oppression”
- Given thread on need for others to recognize rights, perhaps recognition literature as foil to Boxill’s claims
- Lorde – “Uses of Anger”
- Cherry – “Anger is Not a Bad Word” (Tedx Talk)
- Srinivasan – “Aptness of Anger”
- Anderson - Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress
- Neilsen – “Power and Public Speech”
- Nussbaum – Political Emotions

Possible Class Activities:

- Get class to generate list of elements of self-respect (drawn from essay and common understanding). Interesting to do this ahead of the reading.
- In groups, generate examples of cases where it is obvious that a failure to protest would signal a lack of self-respect and cases where we would hesitate to say that
- Character and self-awareness - get students thinking about what aspects of themselves/their character they cannot know for certain before being tested (easy examples regarding courage, loyalty), get them to produce hypothetical scenarios that would show those features.
- Watch “How to Survive a Plague”
- Watch: Fox news clips criticizing BLM protests

What Traditional Texts Might This Replace???

- Discussion/replies to Nietzsche's depiction of *ressentiment*?
- Feinberg - "The Nature and Value of Rights"
- Hill – “Servility and Self-Respect”
- Pieces on civil disobedience