

Arts, Excellence, and Warranted Self-Respect

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Funding for the arts is quite frequently commended by political philosophers and political pundits—whom I shall call ‘edificatory perfectionists’—as a policy that can incline people to improve their ways of life by taking advantage of cultural opportunities.¹ By contrast, this article advocates such funding because it can promote the occurrence of outstanding achievements and thereby help to bring about the conditions under which every citizen can be warranted in feeling a strong sense of self-respect. Such a rationale will be designated here as ‘aspirational perfectionism’. Naturally, the tenor of aspirational perfectionism would be especially plain in policies that establish competitions and prizes for excellence in the arts. However, for the purpose of sharpening the contrast between aspirational perfectionism and edificatory perfectionism, let us continue to focus on subventions disbursed by a system of governance to enable the producers or organizers of artistic events to price their tickets at affordable levels. Subsidies so aimed can indeed sensibly figure among the techniques plied by a system of governance in pursuit of the objectives of aspirational perfectionism.

Whereas edificatory perfectionists favour such subsidies as means of steering members of the public toward more sophisticated pastimes and lifestyles, aspirational perfectionists favor them principally as means of sustaining the sundry aesthetic ventures through which great accomplishments can emerge. In the absence of those subventions and in the absence of any private-sector subventions that would be of approximately the same scale and efficacy, the number of people in attendance at high-art events (with staggeringly expensive tickets) would dwindle to the point where most such events might lose their viability altogether. As a result, there would be a sharp diminution in the abundance of the fora wherein painters and composers and playwrights and authors and musicians and other practitioners of the high arts are able to present their endeavors to the public. Those endeavors would consequently be set back, as practitioners of the

high arts would struggle to come up with their livelihoods and with the audiences on whom they could try out their ideas. If public subsidies for events in the arts can avert such setbacks by keeping the events affordable and by thus providing the practitioners of the high arts with ample opportunities to gain attention for their offerings, the subsidies can encourage the aesthetic striving that is necessary for the attainment of excellence in the high arts. They can also promote a rich cultural tapestry that is itself a mode of societal excellence.

Of course, the scenario sketched in the preceding paragraph adverts to a number of empirical contingencies that might or might not obtain in any given society. For one thing, as has already been suggested, the likelihood or unlikelihood of adequate private-sector subventions for the arts in the absence of public subventions is obviously a matter that can vary from one society to another. That matter and the other contingencies recounted in the aforementioned scenario would have to be explored by the relevant officials in any system of governance before they could legitimately go ahead with disbursements of funding for the arts. Still, although the legitimacy of such disbursements will hinge partly on those contingencies, a situation in which the facts do militate in favor of public funding is not at all implausible. On the contrary, the facts can align in favor of some public subventions in many credibly possible societies.

Under the aspirational-perfectionist rationale for public financial support of the arts, any enhancement of the aesthetic sensibilities of the citizenry is a byproduct rather than a justificatory factor. Welcome though such a byproduct undoubtedly is, it does not contribute to the justificatory basis for the policy of public subventions. To invoke it as an element of that justificatory basis would be to evince the meddlesome mentality of edificatory perfectionism. That is, if a system of governance adopts a policy of funding the arts, and if one of its aims in doing so is to increase the urbanity of its citizens, its policy is tainted by the officiousness of a busybody. Its policy is a product of edificatory perfectionism rather than solely of aspirational perfectionism.

Nonetheless, although an aspirational-perfectionist system of governance that provides subsidies for the arts is not thereby endeavoring to refine the sentiments and outlooks of citizens, it is endeavoring to improve their lives in quite a different fashion. Its

¹ This article is a modified version of a portion of Chapter 8 from my book *Liberalism with Excellence* (Oxford University Press 2017). I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to republish this version of several sections from that chapter, which have been considerably modified and abridged.

immediate aim in supplying the subsidies is to nurture excellence in the arts by helping to ensure that audiences and livelihoods will be available to the practitioners thereof, but its underlying objective through the promotion of excellence is to enable every citizen to be warranted in harboring a robust sense of self-respect. Given the centrality of warranted self-respect to a good life (not only by the reckoning of aspirational perfectionists, but also by the reckoning of Rawlsians), aspirational perfectionism does indeed aim to make each person's life better. However, instead of trying in the manner of a busybody to elevate the lifestyle or sensibilities of each person, it tries to endow a society with estimableness on which the warranted self-respect of every member of the society can be partly based.

Thus, the aspirational-perfectionist rationale for the subventions envisioned here is considerably more complex than the edificatory-perfectionist rationale. Under either of those justifications, the immediate effect sought through the subventions is on the members of the public whose inclinations to attend high-art events will be triggered by the affordability of the tickets for the events. However, edificatory perfectionists seek that effect in the hope that the members of the public will be uplifted through their engagement with aesthetically sophisticated performances or exhibitions. By contrast, although an aspirational perfectionist can of course applaud the edification of members of the public and can perceive that it is a likely consequence of the policies which she commends, her prescriptions are not oriented toward it. Rather, aspirational perfectionists seek the attendance of members of the public at high-art events to sustain the flourishing cultural conditions in which the occurrence of outstanding feats of creativity is encouraged. In other words, the effect on the members of the public is sought for the sake of the resultant effect on the practitioners of the arts—composers, authors, playwrights, painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, and so forth—whose creative striving will be vitalized. In turn, that effect on the practitioners of the arts is pursued by aspirational perfectionists for the sake of the resultant effect on the warrantedness of everyone's sense of self-respect. Insofar as the vitalization of the creative striving undertaken by the practitioners of the arts does fruitfully lead to top-notch achievements, it will have imbued their society with a mode of excellence. If the society is likewise excellent in some other ways and is governed as a liberal democracy, it comprises the conditions under which every citizen can be warranted in feeling a high level of self-respect. (Of course, as this chapter will remark, the excellence of a society is only a necessary condition rather than a sufficient condition for the warrantedness of a strong sense of self-respect on the part of each citizen. Numerous specificities of the conduct of any particular individual will bear on whether she is warranted in harboring a strong sense of self-respect, and those specificities along with numerous specificities of her temperament will bear on whether she actually feels such a sense of self-respect.)

Naturally, some aspirational-perfectionist policies—for example, some prizes or fellowships or other such awards—will be more straightforwardly aimed at promoting the occurrence of outstanding achievements than are the subventions for the arts that have been pondered here. Public support for the arts and for other endeavors can be channeled by sundry routes. However, subsidies of the type contemplated here are important not only because they are familiar and because their immediate beneficiaries are quite numerous, but also because they can help to shape a rich medley of cultural offerings that will cumulatively constitute a form of excellence with which a society can be endowed. Thus, my outline of the aspirational-perfectionist rationale for such subsidies is an apt point of departure for my elaboration of aspirational perfectionism as an alternative both to edificatory perfectionism and to any position that opposes subsidies for the arts.

1. Societal excellence and warranted self-respect

Perhaps the aspect of aspirational perfectionism most in need of clarification and defense is the connection which it postulates between the excellence of a society and the warranted self-respect of the individuals who belong to that society. Why would the warrantedness of anyone's sense of self-respect depend partly on the occurrence of great accomplishments by other people in his society? If somebody has not been at least tenuously involved in any of those accomplishments, why would the occurrence of them make any difference to the warrantedness or unwarrantedness of his feeling a high level of self-respect? Are aspirational perfectionists preposterously suggesting that individuals should take credit for the feats of others in whose exploits they have not participated at all? Are aspirational perfectionists suggesting that warranted self-respect is partly a vicarious property?

These and related questions may seem to pose serious difficulties for aspirational perfectionism. They manifestly have to be addressed. One thing to be noted straightaway is that these questions are ethical rather than psychological. They are about the warrantedness of certain attitudes rather than about the likelihood that such attitudes will be held. Aspirational perfectionism is premised on ethical claims about warranted self-respect rather than on empirical claims about self-respect. (John Rawls did not sufficiently differentiate the former claims from the latter in his famous discussions of self-respect in Part Three of *A Theory of Justice*.)² Nonetheless, despite the crucial differences between ethical assertions about warranted self-respect and empirical assertions about self-respect, we can fruitfully approach the ethical matters by briefly mulling over some empirical matters. My empirical observations will be at an elementary level and are meant to be suggestive as a transition to my ethical argumentation; they are decidedly not presented as the premises of an argument from which some ethical conclusions would be derived in defiance of the 'is'/'ought' divide.

1.1. Pride in the accomplishments of others

Although the notion of taking pride in the accomplishments of other people can initially seem outlandish, it is in fact instantiated in many commonplace settings. Some of the most resounding instances arise from the fervor felt and exhibited by the followers of teams in various sports. Across many societies, people tend to identify themselves with teams on the basis of numerous different factors: current residence, past residence, institutional affiliation (often determinative in relation to collegiate sports, for example), national affiliation (often determinative in relation to Olympic sports and other international tournaments), and so forth. Myriads of people take great pride in their cherished teams, and they tend to feel better about themselves and their lives when their teams are faring especially well. Of course, such pride is not always entirely vicarious. Spectators who attend some sporting event can contribute quite significantly to the flow of play by cheering vociferously for their favored team and by showing disfavor for the rival team. Still, the principal responsibility for victories by a successful team belongs to the athletes who make up the team, and no direct responsibility at all for those victories is attributable to followers of the team who have not attended any of the games or matches. All the same, countless devotees of teams who do fall into the not-having-attended category take pride in their teams' triumphs. Their doing so is an everyday feature of life in most countries.

² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press 1971).

As has been noted, one of the factors that can lead people to associate themselves enthusiastically with a team is national affiliation. That factor, like each of the other factors mentioned above, extends far beyond the confines of sports. Patriotic sentiments, whether in perniciously chauvinistic forms or in more salutary forms, typically involve the taking of pride in others' achievements as well as in one's own achievements. Many people in Finland take pride in the musical accomplishments of Jean Sibelius, who was himself ardently patriotic; many people in England take pride in the magnificent plays and poetry of their countryman William Shakespeare; many people in the United States take pride in the ethical and oratorical greatness of their compatriot Abraham Lincoln; many people in South Africa take pride in the towering stature of Nelson Mandela as a statesman; many people in the Netherlands take pride in the formidable roster of superb painters among their countrymen, ranging from Rembrandt to Vincent van Gogh; and so forth. Patriotism is a pervasively felt attitude or set of attitudes whereby people feel better about their lives because they perceive themselves as belonging to a country that is admirable. Patriotism does not always involve hearty support for the currently reigning government in one's country; indeed, one's resistance to a government's policies or demands can be impelled by one's sense that the ruling officials have deviated from some commendable values or traditions of one's country. Still, although patriotism does not always translate into support for the system of governance that currently prevails in one's country, it leads people to feel lifted above their solitary lives by dint of their being linked to a nation whose institutions or traditions or fellow citizens are perceived by them as laudable.

Numerous people who enter major universities—whether to study or to teach—quite rapidly come to feel proud about the intellectual feats of their predecessors or contemporaries. Universities and many of their members brag about Nobel Prizes and other high-profile awards and achievements attained by those predecessors or contemporaries. They do so partly because the institutions gain prestige from the amassing of such awards and achievements, and because the members materially benefit from belonging to prestigious institutions. However, more generally, a lot of the people who study or teach at a major university derive pride and gratification from their connections to such a center of learning with its illustrious exploits. Their awareness of those exploits can invigorate them in their own striving for academic excellence. (Of course, as has already been observed, some of the non-academic accomplishments attributable to universities—most notably their sporting triumphs—can also engender great pride in many of the members thereof.)

Like national allegiances and institutional affiliations, regional and local ties are often operative in inclining people to experience greater esteem for themselves by reference to the achievements of others. A host of examples could be adduced here, but three literary instances from England will suffice to illustrate the point. The county of Dorset promotes itself as 'Hardy country'; the county of Hampshire and the city of Bath compete to promote themselves as 'Austen country'; and the county of Warwickshire around the town of Stratford-upon-Avon promotes itself as 'Shakespeare country.' Doubtless, the promotional ventures of these regions and municipalities are undertaken principally in order to encourage potential tourists to visit. However, anyone who visits these places can quickly discern that many of the people who have been brought up in them—not just the tour guides—genuinely harbor feelings of pride from residing where such eminent writers worked.

Heretofore my examples of vicarious pride have pertained chiefly to some outstanding accomplishments attained by individuals or by small sets of individuals. However, people also take pride in

great collective accomplishments of others and in glorious features of the natural environment. For instance, many inhabitants of the English city of York (or Ely or Canterbury) experience a somewhat heightened sense of self-esteem as a result of living in the proximity of one of the grandest cathedrals in the world. People who are not religious at all and who do not participate in the maintenance of the York Minster (or Ely Cathedral or Canterbury Cathedral) can nonetheless feel better about themselves as they daily savor its magnificent architecture in their midst.

Similarly, numerous residents of the states in the upper Midwestern portion of the USA have long taken pride in the flagship public universities which their legislatures have established. When describing this phenomenon, the sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman directly analogized the outlooks of citizens in the Midwestern states to those of people who dwell in European cathedral cities: 'Like medieval cathedrals, public universities in these states seem to have become symbols of communal solidarity, a focus of civic pride, and a tribute to faith in ideas that transcend the here and now' (1977, 173). Even citizens who have not studied or taught at the flagship university in their state can look upon its excellence as a source of gratification accruing to everyone who abides there.

Elements of the natural environment can elicit cognate attitudes. For many people who live in places with spectacular natural scenery, the breathtakingness of the environment serves to reinforce their self-esteem. This role of the natural topography was poignantly captured in June 2014 by Nashreem Ghori, who hails from Pakistan. Speaking to a *Washington Post* reporter one year after a massacre perpetrated by Taliban terrorists against foreigners who were climbing in the northern mountains of Pakistan, Ghori lamented the precipitous decline in the flow of tourists and climbers to his country. Inhabitants of northern Pakistan were of course suffering financially from that decline, but they were more profoundly undergoing a collapse in their morale. As Ghori explained: 'We have so little to be proud of, so if there is something as impressive as this [namely, the mountainous terrain of northern Pakistan], and foreigners come praise it, it's a psychological lift.'³ Because people so often identify themselves with the locations in which their lives unfold, the prepossessing features of those locations combine with individuals' own doings as determinants of their levels of self-esteem.

In short, although the idea of vicarious pride might at first seem queer when it is broached *in abstracto*, a bit of reflection indicates that vicarious pride is manifested ubiquitously in everyday life. Of course, the pervasiveness of the practice of taking pride in the accomplishments of other people (and in the grandeur of natural environments) is consistent with the proposition that every instantiation of that practice is unwarranted. My empirical observations in this subsection are consistent with that proposition. Even more obviously, those observations are consistent with the proposition that *some* instances of the aforementioned practice are unwarranted; indeed, that latter proposition is plainly true. Nevertheless, what the observations in this subsection help to underscore is that the bolstering of people's self-esteem through the achievements of others is not something opaque to us as if it were occurrent only in possible worlds that are highly remote from actuality. It is such a widespread phenomenon that we largely take it for granted.

3 Tim Craig, 'One Year after Shocking Terrorist Attack, Pakistan's Peaks Bereft of Foreign Climbers' *Washington Post* (29 June 2014) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/one-year-after-shocking-terrorist-attack-pakistans-peaks-bereft-of-foreign-climbers/2014/06/29/b72beaa8-f7b6-11e3-a006-946fd632f9f1_story.html>.

1.2. Is vicarious pride ever warranted?

As has already been remarked, the discussion in the preceding subsection is not a set of premises from which some ethical conclusions can validly be derived. The 'is//ought' gap precludes such a derivation from empirical claims. Still, although no ethical conclusions directly follow from those claims, the role of the preceding subsection in drawing attention to the familiarity of vicarious pride is of relevance here. Notwithstanding that some instances of vicarious pride are unwarranted—sometimes egregiously unwarranted—the pervasiveness of such pride and the benignity of many of its manifestations should incline us to be surprised if no solid arguments could be advanced to support the warrantedness of some of its instances.

Unlike the instinct for revenge, which is probably as widespread as the tendency to take pride in the achievements of one's fellows, the latter tendency is not inherently oriented toward the harming of others. Indeed, it is frequently not so oriented. As the comment by Nashreem Ghori makes clear, the experience of feeling good about oneself by reference to the accomplishments of one's fellows or to the beauty of nature does not have to involve any denigration of other people. It does not have to involve any nasty gloating or sneering—types of conduct that are indicative of insecurity rather than of warranted self-respect. When an individual has reinforced his sense of self-respect by associating himself with some modes of excellence achieved by others, he can become more appreciative of excellence in its diverse forms. Such an effect is not inevitable in each particular case, but it is always possible and is not at all fanciful. As Rawls contended: 'When men are secure in the enjoyment of the exercise of their own powers, they are disposed to appreciate the perfections of others.'⁴ Rawls characteristically presented his readers with an excessively sweeping empirical assertion, but his thesis becomes much stronger if the disposition to which he referred is understood as a credible possibility rather than as something that always obtains.

Vicarious pride, then, is separable (though not always separate) from any malign attitudes toward others. Important though that point is, however, it does not per se suffice to establish that some instances of such pride are warranted. We still need to address the further ethical question whether the strengthening of one's self-esteem through one's association of oneself with the outstanding achievements of others is ever tenable. That question can be sharpened into two concerns. First, would the enhancement of one's self-respect amount to taking credit for the exploits of others? Second, would it amount to a display of a person's inadequacy, where the person relies on those exploits to compensate for the insufficiency of her own doings as a basis for her sense of her own worth? Let us designate the first of these queries as the 'Credit Concern' and the second as the 'Inadequacy Concern'.

1.2.1. A first concern addressed

A response to the Credit Concern is quite straightforward. Although some instances of vicarious pride are doubtless impelled by delusions on the part of people who have hoodwinked themselves into thinking that they deserve credit for achievements to which they have not contributed, there are no grounds for thinking that all or even most instances are of that kind. In countless credibly possible situations in which the self-esteem of individuals is reinforced through the splendid exploits of other people or through the captivatingness of natural beauty, the individuals in question are not under any illusions that they are personally responsible for the greatness with which they associate themselves. Worth noting also is that not all

instances of vicarious pride are purely vicarious. As has already been mentioned, some of the devotees of teams in various sports do contribute in certain ways to their teams' victories by attending games or matches with clamorous ebullience. When the devotees feel better about themselves with reference to those victories, they are taking pride in triumphs for which they can accurately claim some small shares of the credit. Much the same is true of quite a few of the stonemasons who make repairs in the magnificent edifices of Cambridge and Oxford colleges.⁵ They take pride not only in the results of their own labors, but also in the overall exquisiteness of the architecture which they have helped to preserve.

1.2.2. A second concern addressed

Somewhat more complicated is the second of the two queries broached above, the Inadequacy Concern. Like the Credit Concern, the Inadequacy Concern is accurate in relation to certain instances of vicarious pride. Some individuals who experience such pride are undoubtedly seeking to offset and obscure their own failures by absorbing themselves with the successes of other people. However, such self-deception is scarcely the only possible factor that can prompt a person P to feel a heightened sense of self-esteem through the accomplishments of other people. Instead of unworthily trying to play down any of his own shortcomings, P can simply be recognizing that the trajectory of his life comprises far more than solely his own doings. It also comprehends many of the doings of people who stand in sundry relationships to P. Any satisfactory assessment of the estimableness of P's life will need to advert to the fortunes of those people, even though such an assessment will of course be focused primarily on P's own endeavors.

Because P is positioned in the relationships just mentioned, P himself and other people aptly identify his fortunes partly with the fortunes of his contemporaries and predecessors and successors who are linked to him through those relationships. Gauging the goodness of P's life partly by reference to the activities of some of his contemporaries and predecessors and successors is apt inasmuch as his relationships with them augment the luster of his life through their successes and detract from the luster of his life through their failures. Perhaps the most obvious examples of relationships that produce such effects by intertwining people's lives are those of typical families. If P as a member of a typical family generally fares well in his undertakings, and if the other members of his family fare badly, the goodness of his life will have been lessened by the dismalness of their lives. Of course, the quality of P's life is primarily determined by his own accomplishments and setbacks; but its estimableness is diminished by the lackluster fortunes of people with whom P is significantly associated. Conversely, if P generally fares well and if the members of his family also fare well, the goodness of his life will have been augmented by their flourishing. As Rawls affirmed, '[w]e need one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for their own sake, and the successes and enjoyments of others are necessary for and complementary to our own good.'⁶ (1971, 522–23). To be sure, the term 'partners' in this statement by Rawls should be construed loosely. Even in some families—and *a fortiori* in larger and more diffuse groups—the members might seldom come into contact with one another and might not collaborate with one another in any structured fashion. Still, in a typical family and in any of the sundry other groups that Rawls designated as 'social unions'⁷ (1971, §79), the members are partners at least in the sense that their

⁵ This empirical claim is based on my conversations with several such masons in Cambridge.

⁶ Rawls (n 2) 522–23.

⁷ *ibid* §79.

⁴ Rawls (n 2) 523.

diverse activities cumulatively determine the character of their group to which they all are linked.

In a typical family, the members interact frequently and intimately. In any typical larger group, the members interact less frequently; in a group on the scale of a nation, most of the members will not encounter one another directly at all. Still, despite the limitedness of any direct or intimate interaction among most of the citizens of a sizeable nation, they are partners in the expansive sense that has just been specified. Their conduct cumulatively shapes the ethical character of their society, and that ethical character is a determinant—usually an ancillary determinant, though sometimes a central determinant—of the overall ethical quality of each citizen's life. Even when somebody fiercely dissociates himself from the society to which he belongs, the trajectory of his life (including his dissociation of himself from his society and his perception of the need to dissociate himself therefrom) will have been inflected in its ethical bearings by the collectivity which he now ferociously excoriates. His very denunciation of that collectivity is expressive of the stake which he has had in its fortunes.

Given the importance of a society in affecting the overall course of the life of each individual who belongs thereto, its members have good reasons to feel better about themselves when other members enhance the society's stature through their accomplishments. On suitable occasions, they have good reasons to partake in the practice of experiencing vicarious pride. So widespread throughout the world, that practice is often solidly justifiable. This point is particularly pertinent at the level of ideal theory, as Rawls recognized: 'In a fully just society persons seek their good in ways peculiar to themselves, and they rely upon their associates to do things they could not have done, as well as things they might have done but did not ... It is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether ... Yet the good attained from the common culture far exceeds our work in the sense that we cease to be mere fragments.'⁸ As Rawls's meditations on social unions serve to accentuate, the fundamental misconception underlying the Inadequacy Concern is the notion that all limitations on a person's abilities and achievements are a cause for consternation. Some such limitations are indeed a cause for dismay, but the sheer finitude of each person is not. Instead of compensating for ignominious inadequacies, the outstanding feats that warrantably elicit vicarious pride are such as to complement and enrich the contributions made by other citizens to the overall luster of their society from which every citizen can benefit.

1.2.3. An apparent objection

By pointing to facts that markedly contrast with those which I have highlighted in §1.1, a wary reader might impugn my effort to ground aspirational perfectionism on the warrantedness of some instances of vicarious pride. Such a reader would submit that, although the attainment of excellence by certain people can heighten the self-esteem of many of their fellow citizens, it can also produce much more deleterious effects. In response to the great achievements of illustrious predecessors or contemporaries, some people can feel daunted and demoralized because their own talents seem to them paltry in comparison. Alternatively, or additionally, some people can feel envious and embittered as they sense that their own exploits have been overshadowed by the remarkable accomplishments of certain predecessors or contemporaries or successors. Far from enhancing the self-esteem of the people who develop these negative attitudes, the remarkable accomplishments in question

have substantially impaired their self-esteem. Whether or not such reactions are as common as the practice of taking pride in the great achievements of others, they certainly are familiar.

Any objection to aspirational perfectionism along these lines would be misconceived. As has been emphasized, the empirical observations advanced in §1.1 are not premises from which this chapter has sought to derive ethical conclusions. Rather, in arriving at ethical conclusions, this chapter has inquired whether any of the patterns of behavior recounted in those empirical observations are warranted or not. My ethical conclusions, reached through ethical reasoning, are an answer (an affirmative answer) to that ethical inquiry.

Now, the empirical observations in the penultimate paragraph above—which of course are consistent with the observations in §1.1, even though their tenor is markedly different—are likewise not premises from which any ethical conclusions can validly be derived. If they are to be parlayed into a challenge to aspirational perfectionism, they will have to be subjected to ethical scrutiny like the scrutiny to which the observations in §1.1 have been subjected. That is, we have to ask whether people are ever warranted in responding to the outstanding achievements of others by feeling daunted and demoralized or envious and embittered. Such attitudes do indeed detract from people's self-esteem, but are the reductions in self-esteem ever warranted?

On the one hand, if the self-esteem of some person Q is currently at an inordinately high level, his exposure to some sterling accomplishments by other people might salutarily decrease his self-esteem to an appropriate level. He might come to be accurately attuned to his own limitations and merits. If so, the diminution in his self-esteem is warranted. Of course, any such diminution could easily go too far. If Q does become demoralized because of his shedding of his illusions about his abilities, he will unwarrantably have gone from one excess to another. Nonetheless, if his exaggerated estimation of his own talents is lowered to an apt level without plummeting further to a level of despondency—and without leading to a sour-grapes sense of resignation or sullenness—the reduction in his self-respect will have been warranted.

On the other hand, if the self-respect of Q is currently at an apt level (or even if it is not), and if he becomes dispirited or seethingly envious in response to somebody else's towering achievements, his reaction is unwarranted. A reaction of either type may be humanly understandable, but it is ethically unworthy. If Q does indeed fall prey to dejected torpor or to envy, he is exhibiting his own ethical weakness by focusing his appraisal of himself largely on the fact that he is not someone else.

Somebody with a warranted sense of self-respect focuses her appraisal of herself on what she is and does: on her abilities, on her accomplishments, and on her relationships with other people and her surroundings. (Of course, if her accomplishments fall well short of what could reasonably be expected on the basis of her abilities, she is warranted in lowering her sense of self-esteem commensurately.) Given that her level of self-respect is pegged accurately to her own abilities and accomplishments and relationships, that level is not degradingly centered on the fact that she lacks someone else's abilities or on the fact that she has not performed someone else's deeds. Unlike Q in the preceding paragraph, a person with a warranted sense of self-respect will have attained that sense positively by reference to what she does and is—including her relationships with other people—rather than negatively by reference to her not having done what somebody else has done.

In sum, although the empirical observations at the outset of this

⁸ *ibid* 529.

subsection are true, they cannot be parlayed into any conclusions that are problematic for aspirational perfectionism. It is quite likely that some people will become demoralized or bitterly envious in response to the outstanding achievements of others, but such self-abasing reactions are always unwarranted as an ethical matter (even if they are psychologically understandable). Any curtailment of someone's self-esteem that is attributable to such reactions is unwarranted. When a person harbors a proper level of self-respect, that level will have been bolstered rather than sapped by the sterling exploits of others in her society.

1.2.4. Another apparent objection

Wary readers might thus press forth with a different objection to my grounding of aspirational perfectionism on the warrantedness of some instances of vicarious pride. Such readers might point out that, when somebody has grown up in disadvantaged circumstances and has risen above those circumstances to achieve success in some field(s) of endeavor, he will be warranted in harboring an especially high sense of self-esteem. He can rightly pride himself on his fortitude and talents that have enabled him to overcome the obstacles which he would not have encountered if he had grown up in more auspicious circumstances. Wary readers might also point out that somebody who campaigns effectively against injustices can aptly take satisfaction in what he has done to rectify wrongs. An ancient Hebrew prophet such as Amos or Jeremiah, or a modern-day prophet such as Martin Luther King or Václav Havel or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, could quite properly take pride in his forthright condemnation of iniquity under conditions of grievous peril and persecution. Had such a prophet lived in a better society with much less severe injustice, there would probably have been fewer occasions for him to display his courage and eloquence.

Unlike the riposte to my theorizing that has been plumbed in §1.2.3, this new riposte—which I will henceforth designate as the 'Struggling Against Adversities Objection'—presents some empirical claims that are already subsumed into ethical propositions about the warrantedness of enhanced levels of self-respect under certain kinds of circumstances. Still, the purport of the Struggling Against Adversities Objection is not entirely clear. It appears to be directed against my thesis that the warrantedness of a high level of self-respect for each person in any society depends partly on the occurrence of outstanding achievements within the society. That thesis does stand in need of further defense, which it will receive in §1.3 of this chapter. By contrast, the arguments in §1.2 have been marshaled not in support of that thesis but in support of an anterior proposition: namely, the proposition that people can sometimes warrantably take pride in the great accomplishments of others who belong to their society. At any rate, although the Struggling Against Adversities Objection is somewhat premature, three rejoinders to it are pertinent even at this stage.

1.2.4.1. Illegitimate measures

First, this article is primarily a work of political philosophy. Its argument about the warrantedness of some instances of vicarious pride is ultimately in the service of conclusions about the proper role of any system of governance. More specifically, those conclusions pertain to the ways in which any system of governance is both morally obligated and morally permitted to bring about the conditions under which every citizen can be warranted in harboring a strong sense of self-respect. Even if the Struggling Against Adversities Objection were correct in suggesting that every citizen could be so warranted as a result of coming to grips with obstacles posed by injustices or by natural hardships such as disabilities, no system of governance would ever be morally permitted to inflict injustices on citizens for the sake of providing them with

opportunities to meet the ensuing challenges. No system of governance can ever legitimately perpetrate injustices for any purpose—not even the purpose of promoting the incidence of warranted self-respect.

The dialectical situation here is somewhat akin to that which confronted the apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans. Quite early in that letter, Paul noted that some of his opponents had accused him of propagating the message that sinful behavior is permissible and even commendable because it gives rise to occasions for the working of God's redemptive grace: 'And why not do evil that good [in the form of God's forgiveness and salvation] may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying' (3:8). When Paul returned to this matter subsequently in the letter, he emphatically affirmed that sinful behavior is never permissible even when it is undertaken in pursuit of benign ends (6:1–2): 'What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?'

In short, even if the Struggling Against Adversities Objection were unproblematic in all other ways, it would not be broaching a prospect on the basis of which any system of governance could ever legitimately act. Aspirational perfectionism is located within an array of deontological constraints. Each such constraint is absolute in that it is always and everywhere morally binding. Contraventions of a deontological constraint are never morally permissible even if they are somehow promotive of good consequences such as the strengthening of a person's warranted self-respect. Yet a system of governance would blatantly violate deontological constraints if it were deliberately to afflict people with poverty or disabilities or other serious hardships in order to furnish them with opportunities to surmount those hardships. Hence, the Struggling Against Adversities Objection does not cast any doubt on the proposition that every system of governance is morally obligated and morally permitted to avert or remedy injustices rather than to generate them.

1.2.4.2. Warranted self-respect impaired

In any event, the Struggling Against Adversities Objection errs in suggesting that a country where prophets need to rail against iniquities is a land in which a system of governance has secured the conditions under which every citizen can be fully warranted in harboring a strong sense of self-respect. Specifically, what is missing is the mode of excellence that consists in the realization of the requirements of justice. Of course, a society can attain that mode of excellence without being perfectly just; however, a society debased by injustices on a scale that elicits well-founded prophetic remonstrations is not a community whose members can warrantably take pride in their status as members. It is not surprising that what suffuses the declamations of the Hebrew prophets, in addition to a sense of truculent indignation, is a sense of shame. Although the prophets were not personally responsible for the depravity against which they inveighed, they were warranted in feeling ashamed of belonging to a community that had succumbed to such depravity.⁹ A prophet could recognize that the trajectory of his life included his membership in a deeply unjust society, and he could warrantably conclude that that trajectory was tarnished *pro tanto*. Notwithstanding that he could warrantably derive satisfaction from his own indefatigability in condemning and countering the heinous

⁹ Having encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1942, Bishop George KA Bell wrote that Bonhoeffer was 'completely candid, completely regardless of personal safety, while deeply moved by the shame of the country [Germany] he loved.' George KA Bell, 'Foreword' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM Press 1959) 7.

wrongs committed by his fellow citizens, the conditions for the full warrantedness of a robust sense of self-respect on his part (or on the part of any of his fellow citizens) were not in place.

1.2.4.3. Insusceptibility to generalisation

Even if the other shortcomings in the Struggling Against Adversities Objection were to be pretermitted, the objection would fail because the conditions which it recounts as potentially underpinning the warrantedness of a strong sense of self-respect are not susceptible to being universalized. A society *S* in which every member acts as a prophet who aptly fulminates against injustices is not possible—partly because the basic life-sustaining functions of a society would not be adequately fulfilled in *S* if every member were devoting his time and energy to prophetic denunciations,¹⁰ but even more importantly because *S* would no longer be properly subject to such denunciations if everyone within it were firmly and appositely opposed to injustice. In a situation where every member of *S* is endowed with the moral uprightness of Amos or Havel or King or Bonhoeffer, there would not be any suitable targets for prophetic reproaches. (Throughout this discussion I have been assuming that prophetic rebukes are grounded on correct principles of morality. Such an assumption is safe in application to the rebukes uttered by the four men just named, but it fails in application to some other prophets. For example, the Hebrew reformer Nehemiah trained his ire on his countrymen partly because of their inter-ethnic marriages. Insofar as his tirades were benightedly rooted in a xenophobic moral outlook, he could not warrantably feel a heightened sense of self-esteem by dint of his having engaged in them.)

Likewise insusceptible to being universalized are the conditions under which a person can warrantably feel a strong sense of self-esteem as a result of having overcome special hardships on the way to a successful life. If everyone were subject to some limitation or adversity, then no one could correctly claim to have transcended any *special* disadvantage by virtue of succeeding in the presence of that limitation or adversity. A disadvantage is not special or distinctive if everyone shares it; to assign oneself special kudos for flourishing in spite of it would be akin to assigning oneself special kudos for flourishing in spite of one's inability to fly by flapping one's arms.

In sum, although the Struggling Against Adversities Objection purports to highlight certain conditions under which everyone could be warranted in harboring a high level of self-esteem, those conditions cannot be extended to everyone—either because they cannot be extended to everyone *tout court* or because they cannot be extended to everyone while still performing the role ascribed to them by the Struggling Against Adversities Objection. By contrast, feeling proud about the great achievements that occur in a society is something that everybody within the society can warrantably do. In other words, when aspirational perfectionism specifies certain conditions that are necessary for the warrantedness of a strong sense of self-esteem on the part of everyone in a society, it is adverting to conditions that can be applicable to everyone simultaneously. Thus, far from undermining the tenets of aspirational perfectionism, the Struggling Against Adversities Objection helps to reveal one of the strengths of those tenets.

2. Why is societal excellence necessary?

In the preceding paragraph, I have again referred to the aspirational-perfectionist proposition that the warrantedness of a high level

¹⁰Note that, when Amos took up his calling to be a prophet, he had to leave behind his occupation as a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees (Amos 7:14–15).

of self-respect for each person in a society depends partly on the occurrence of outstanding accomplishments which endow the society with excellence. Let us designate that proposition as the 'Societal Warrant Thesis.' In §1.2, I have argued in favor of one of the presuppositions of the Societal Warrant Thesis: that is, I have argued that each person in a society can warrantably take pride in any splendid feats of human endeavor by others who belong to the society. Let us designate that presupposition as the 'Taking Pride Premise.' However, although the vindication of that premise is necessary for the vindication of the Societal Warrant Thesis, it is not sufficient. Some further argumentation is needed, since the warrantedness of each person's taking pride in any sterling achievements by members of her society does not per se establish that the occurrence of such achievements by members of her society is necessary for the full warrantedness of her harboring a strong sense of self-respect.

To see why the occurrence of great exploits by oneself or by other members of one's society is necessary for the warrantedness of one's maintaining a high level of self-respect, we should note that the considerations in favor of the Taking Pride Premise also militate in favor of a converse proposition. If some person *P* would be warranted in feeling better about herself by virtue of belonging to a society that is endowed with excellence, then conversely she would be warranted in feeling worse about herself by virtue of belonging to a society that is devoid of excellence. Suppose that the country to which *P* belongs is drably mediocre, or suppose that it is worse than mediocre (perhaps because it has long been convulsed by a civil war with atrocities on all sides). In that event, given that the connection between *P* and her country is an important constituent of the overall trajectory of her life—even if, or perhaps especially if, she views her country with disdain—she will be warranted in lowering her sense of how well her life has gone.

Of course, if *P* has managed to attain success in many of her endeavors, any warranted lowering of her self-esteem in response to the mediocrity or depravity of her country will most likely leave her warranted self-esteem at quite a high level. Nevertheless, the level would have been even higher and more solid if it had not been held down by the failings of the society to which *P* belongs. Had her country been a place of excellence in which she could warrantably have taken pride instead of warrantably feeling abashed or dismayed about her connection to it, her warrantedness in feeling good about herself and in pursuing her projects with gusto would have been strengthened. Thus, even for a successful person like *P*, the full warrantedness of her experiencing a strong sense of self-respect depends partly on the flourishing of her society.

Naturally, if *P* had been a towering genius such as Shakespeare or Beethoven or Albert Einstein, the warrantedness of her harboring an extremely high level of self-esteem would not have been perceptibly impaired by her belonging to an otherwise unaccomplished society. Had *P* been of that caliber in her achievements, those achievements alone would have endowed her society with excellence. However, the vast majority of people are not even close to the rank of towering geniuses (or toweringly great athletes). For them as for *P*, more modest degrees of success are their personal bases for the warrantedness of their self-respect. For them, then, the excellence of their society is necessary for the full warrantedness of their feeling robustly good about their lives.¹¹ Here we can see that, although

¹¹A somewhat similar observation has been made by Robert Yanal: 'Spinoza, exiled and excommunicated, *could* have had good self-esteem. Yet such instances strike us as heroic (or perhaps a little mad), but in any event beyond the pale of how normal people operate.' (emphasis in original) (Robert Yanal, 'Self-Esteem' (1987) 21(3) *Noûs* 363, 368).

aspirational perfectionism might initially seem to be an elitist doctrine, its concern with enabling everyone to be warranted in feeling a solid sense of self-respect is quite strongly egalitarian.

2.1. A focus on warrantedness

As in §1.2, the focus throughout the present discussion has been on the warrantedness of individuals' feelings of self-respect rather than on those feelings themselves or on individuals' judgments about the quality of their society. That is, in two principal ways the focus of the present discussion has been objective rather than subjective. First, I have not been addressing any array of empirical questions about the conditions under which people will tend to experience high levels of self-respect. Such questions, which fall within the domain of social psychology, are of some interest here—as can be inferred from my observations in §1.1—but they do not have any determinative bearing on the ethical matters into which I am enquiring. As this article has sought to make clear, the property under investigation here is not the psychological property of self-respect; rather, it is the ethical-cum-psychological property of warranted self-respect. Hence, the present discussion has not been seeking to support the proposition that the endowment of a society with excellence through the occurrence of outstanding accomplishments is necessary for the experiencing of a high level of self-respect on the part of each person who belongs to the society. Instead, the present discussion has been seeking to support the proposition that the endowment of a society with excellence through the occurrence of outstanding accomplishments is necessary for the warrantedness of a high level of self-respect on the part of each person who belongs to the society. Whereas the former proposition is an empirical claim, the latter is an ethical thesis.

Second, the nexus between a society's excellence and the warrantedness of a strong sense of self-respect for each member of the society is objective in that the decisive property on the former side of that nexus is actual excellence rather than perceived excellence. What matters for the warrantedness of a strong sense of self-respect on the part of any particular person in a society S is not whether the person perceives S as endowed with excellence, but whether S actually is endowed with excellence. Of course, as my reflections in §1.1 suggest, actual excellence and perceived excellence frequently coincide. There are no grounds for thinking that there is always or usually a discrepancy between the two. Nonetheless, some sterling feats might long be ignored or contemned, even while some mediocre achievements or evil deeds are erroneously regarded as wonderful. More broadly, a country might be lauded by many of its citizens as estimable notwithstanding that it is in fact bleakly mediocre or viciously corrupt, and a country might be despised by many of its citizens as paltry even though it in fact comprises an array of outstanding accomplishments and instances of natural beauty. Such incongruities between actuality and perception might not arise very often, but they are always possible. When discrepancies do arise, actuality takes priority over perception in determining whether a heightened degree of self-respect on the basis of societal excellence is warranted for each person in S or not—and in determining whether a lowered degree of self-respect on the basis of societal shabbiness is warranted for each person in S or not.

2.2. A first role of justice

As has been underscored in §1.2.4.1 above, the prescriptions issued by aspirational perfectionists are located within a matrix of deontological constraints. Hence, one way in which the value of justice bears on the promotion of excellence for aspirational-perfectionist purposes

is that it imposes a set of restrictions on the routes by which those purposes can legitimately be pursued. Injustices can never permissibly be perpetrated for the sake of endowing a society with excellence that will help to constitute the conditions under which every member of the society can warrantably feel a robust sense of self-respect. Indeed, were injustices to be perpetrated in furtherance of such an aim, they would be counterproductive; the warrantedness of any heightening of everyone's self-respect is an ethical property that cannot be realized through unethical means. Such an upshot is a corollary of the general resistance of deontological principles to any end-justifies-the-means rationale.

2.3. A second role of justice: Rawls on social unions

To discern another way in which the value of justice bears on the promotion of excellence for aspirational-perfectionist purposes, we can turn to *A Theory of Justice*. Although Rawls of course did not have in mind aspirational perfectionism as such, and although he naturally centered his discussion of justice and excellence on his own principles of justice (whereas I am prescinding here from questions about the specific contents of the correct principles of justice), his ruminations on the implementation of justice as a mode of excellence are valuable for aspirational perfectionism conjoined with any credible liberal-democratic account of justice. His ruminations are set within the contractualism of his theorizing, but—suitably construed—they can be incorporated into a resolutely non-contractualist approach to matters of justice and political legitimacy.

The final chapter of *A Theory of Justice* is entitled 'The Good of Justice', and it contains numerous piquant and perceptive lines of thought that could fruitfully be explored at this juncture. However, the only line of thought that will be highlighted here is from Rawls's account of social unions. Rawls applied the designation 'social union' to any group in which the members share some fundamental end(s) and in which the activities of the group are valued for their own sake. He made clear that the sharing of a fundamental end is consistent with a high degree of competitiveness among the members of a social union. For example, although the teams in a sporting league such as the National Basketball Association all strive to outperform one another, they are united by the aim of engaging in strenuously contested games wherein their sport is played with commendable proficiency.

Having expounded the nature of social unions in general, Rawls proceeded to characterize a well-ordered society as a social union of social unions: 'The main idea is simply that a well-ordered society (corresponding to justice as fairness) is itself a form of social union. Indeed, it is a social union of social unions. Both characteristic features are present: the successful carrying out of just institutions is the shared final end of all the members of society, and these institutional forms are prized as good in themselves.' Because every person in a well-ordered society is possessed of a motivationally efficacious sense of justice, 'the members of a well-ordered society have the common aim of cooperating together to realize their own and another's nature in ways allowed by the principles of justice ... Each citizen wants everyone (including himself) to act from principles to which all would agree in an initial situation of equality.'¹²

The first aspect of a well-ordered society as a social union—the fact that its members share the end of sustaining the operations of just institutions—is a corollary of Rawls's general conception of a well-ordered society. Slightly more complicated is the second aspect, the fact that the operations of just institutions in such a society are inherently good. Rawls set out to explain why 'the fundamental

¹² Rawls (n 2) 527.

institutions of society, the just constitution and the main parts of the legal order, can be found good in themselves once the idea of social union is applied to the basic structure as a whole.¹³ He began his explanation by adverting to the propensity of citizens in a well-ordered society ‘to express their nature as free and equal moral persons, and this they do most adequately by acting from the principles that they would acknowledge in the original position.’ Because citizens in a well-ordered society act in accordance with the basic status attributed to them by any liberal-democratic reckoning—namely, their status as free and equal persons—they endow their society with the mode of excellence that consists in instantiating the ideals of liberal democracy. ‘When all strive to comply with [correct principles of justice] and each succeeds, then individually and collectively their nature as moral persons is most fully realized, and with it their individual and collective good.’¹⁴

Continuing his explanation of the inherent goodness of the just institutions that prevail in a well-ordered society, Rawls submitted that ‘a just constitutional order, when adjoined to the smaller social unions of everyday life, provides a framework for these many [smaller] associations and sets up the most complex and diverse activity of all.’ Subsumed within such a framework, the projects of private individuals and associations are harmonized in relation to one another through their common subjection to principles of justice that are administered by the officials of the constitutional order: ‘Thus the plan of each person is given a more ample and rich structure than it would otherwise have; it is adjusted to the plans of others by mutually acceptable principles. Everyone’s more private life is so to speak a plan within a plan, this superordinate plan being realized in the public institutions of society.’ Rawls emphasized that the overarching institutional framework of a well-ordered society, with its coordination of the activities of individuals and associations, does not impose any comprehensive doctrine such as Roman Catholicism. Instead, it is guided only by the end of giving effect to the requirements of justice. Its superordinate plan consists in that very end: ‘The regulative public intention is ... that the constitutional order should realize the principles of justice.’¹⁵ In much the same way that the diverse individuals who belong to a well-ordered society share only the end of sustaining the operations of the society’s just institutions, the workings of those institutions are all oriented toward the end of implementing the correct principles of justice.

As Rawls reached the culmination of his reflections on the inherent goodness of the realization of justice in a well-ordered society, he drew connections between the moral virtues of the governing institutions in such a society and the moral virtues of the citizens who support those institutions:

We have seen that the moral virtues are excellences, attributes of the person that it is rational for persons to want in themselves and in one another as things appreciated for their own sake, or else as exhibited in activities so enjoyed ... Now it is clear that these excellences are displayed in the public life of a well-ordered society ... [M]en appreciate and enjoy these attributes in one another as they are manifested in cooperating to affirm just institutions. It follows that the collective activity of justice is the preeminent form of human flourishing. For given favorable conditions, it is by maintaining these public arrangements that persons best express their nature and achieve the widest regulative excellences of which each

is capable. At the same time just institutions allow for and encourage the diverse internal life of associations in which individuals realize their more particular aims. Thus the public realization of justice is a value of community.¹⁶

2.4. A second role of justice: Summing up

As has already been remarked, several aspects of Rawls’s meditations on the goodness of justice—such as his contractualist appeals to the selection of principles of justice in the Original Position—should be set aside. One problematic aspect not mentioned in the opening paragraph of §2.3 above is that his pronouncements on the nature and goodness of any well-ordered society are pitched entirely at the level of ideal theory. Still, the insights to be gathered from his pronouncements can be extended beyond the confines of well-ordered societies where every citizen is unfailingly supportive of just institutions and their requirements.

Most prominent among those insights is that the operations of the institutions which implement the requirements of justice in a liberal democracy are an outstanding collective accomplishment. Both on the part of legal-governmental officials and on the part of ordinary citizens, the patterns of self-restraint involved in the workings of just institutions are prodigious. Every generally law-abiding person who belongs to a society governed by a liberal-democratic regime can warrantably take pride in those workings. Of course, in any actual liberal democracy—as opposed to a well-ordered Rawlsian society—the operations of the prevailing institutions are imperfectly just, and the compliance of citizens with the just requirements of those institutions is likewise imperfect. Nevertheless, in any society whose system of governance is liberal-democratic to a high degree and whose citizens are largely faithful to the values of liberal democracy, the realization of those values through the system of governance is a mode of excellence in which every generally law-abiding citizen can warrantably take pride. It is a mode of excellence that *pro tanto* enhances the life of every generally law-abiding person who belongs to the society. In any actual liberal democracy, where citizens naturally tend to concentrate on the shortcomings of the regnant institutions, many of them sometimes lose sight of the magnitude and preciousness of the achievement that consists in the sustainment of those institutions. All the same, they can warrantably derive satisfaction from that achievement—as the overall trajectory of the life of each generally law-abiding person P is made better by it. Because the course of P’s life is inevitably affected (for better or for worse) by the tenor of the system of governance that presides over the society with which P is associated, the adherence of such a system to the values of liberal democracy is something that bolsters the level of self-respect which P can warrantably feel.

As should be evident from earlier portions of this article, my claim here about the bolstering of each person’s warranted self-respect is not an empirical conjecture about the likelihood that each person will be materially better off as a result of the sway of a liberal-democratic system of governance in his or her society. On the one hand, there are quite strong and familiar correlations between liberal-democratic systems of governance and material prosperity. On the other hand, such correlations—important though they are—are not directly to the point here. My claim about the bolstering of each person’s warranted self-respect is focused on the inherent moral quality of liberal-democratic governance rather than on the beneficial consequences that are likely to ensue causally therefrom.

Rawls well captured two of the ways in which the inherent moral

13 *ibid* 527–28.

14 *ibid* 528.

15 *ibid*.

16 *ibid* 528–29.

quality of liberal-democratic governance raises the level of self-respect which each generally law-abiding person in a society can warrantably feel. In the passages quoted in §2.3 above, he frequently declared that a liberal-democratic system of governance enables its citizens to realize their nature as free and equal persons. His contentions to that effect should be construed as making two main points. First, each person under a liberal-democratic system of governance is treated with the respect due to somebody who is a rationally deliberative agent possessed of the two Rawlsian moral powers. Second, each person under such a system of governance is morally and legally required to exercise the self-restraint that is due to other rationally deliberative agents. Being required to exercise such self-restraint is a hallmark of one's status as a free and equal person, as is being treated with commensurate forbearance by everybody else. Patterns of reciprocal forbearance among citizens, and patterns of forbearance in a government's interaction with citizens, give expression to the status of every sane adult as a free and equal person. Rawls grasped and indeed emphasized that those patterns of forbearance increase the level of self-respect which every generally law-abiding person is warranted in experiencing. Having reminded his readers that his 'account of self-respect as perhaps the main primary good has stressed the great significance of how we think others value us', he proclaimed that a key 'basis for [warranted] self-esteem in a just society is ... the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties.'¹⁷ He elaborated: 'In a well-ordered society then self-respect is secured [partly] by the public affirmation of the status of equal citizenship for all.'¹⁸ Of course, in addition to referring to the fundamental rights and liberties of citizenship, Rawls should have referred here to the fundamental responsibilities thereof. Each citizen's status as a free and equal person—along with the quantum of warranted self-respect that is appurtenant to that status—is upheld not only through her being endowed with the fundamental rights and liberties, but also through her being expected and required to accept that each of her fellow citizens is endowed with those rights and liberties.

For a further regard in which the sway of a liberal-democratic system of governance elevates the level of self-respect which everyone in a society can warrantably harbor, we need to go somewhat beyond Rawls in the direction of aspirational perfectionism. As has already been remarked, the sway of such a system—notwithstanding its imperfections—is a sterling collective achievement that should elicit feelings of pride in every generally law-abiding member of the society over which the system presides. Because the trajectory of the life of each such member includes her association with a country in which that great achievement has occurred and been sustained, each such member can warrantably conclude that her life has gone better by dint of the association (quite apart from any material benefits that have causally accrued to her as a result of it). *Pro tanto*, she can warrantably feel better about herself and her projects than she otherwise could.

Conversely, of course, somebody who belongs to a society governed by a repressively illiberal regime can warrantably conclude that her life has gone worse by dint of her links to that society (quite apart from any material hardships that have beset her as a result of the regime's grim oppression). Because the overall course of her life includes her connection to the country ruled by that regime, it is marred by the collective failure of the citizens of that country—among them, most notably, the regime's officials—to uphold the values of a liberal democracy. As has been underscored in §1.2.4.2, this point about the ethical worsening of a person's life is independent of her supportiveness or unsupportiveness of

the tyrannical regime. On the one hand, the trajectory of her life will be substantially worse ethically if she has been complicit in maintaining the regime's grip on power. On the other hand, my point here has not been about her personal responsibility for the regime's persistence or any of its iniquities; rather, this paragraph is about the collective responsibility of her fellow citizens with whom she is associated as a member of their community. Even if she has been like one of the prophets discussed earlier (King or Havel or Bonhoeffer) in struggling gamely against the despotism of the system of governance in her country, her life that has been elevated by her struggling is worsened ethically by the need for her struggling—because the need for her struggling is a product of a collective failure on the part of a community to which she belongs.

2.5. Concluding remarks on multiplicity

As can be gathered from the foregoing reflections on any just system of governance as a mode of excellence, the outstanding achievements and features that can imbue a society with estimableness are multifarious. Perfectionists of all stripes have mostly concentrated on aesthetic and intellectual modes of excellence, but, hugely important though those modes of excellence are, they are only some of the possibilities that are serviceable for the purposes of aspirational perfectionism. The realization of the values of liberal democracy through a system of governance that treats its citizens as free and equal persons is another mode of excellence. It is a precious collective accomplishment. Athletic feats and ventures of exploration can be still further modes of excellence, and sundry other areas of human endeavor—such as mountaineering or chess or restaurateurship or tailoring—might likewise produce great achievements in which all the members of a society can warrantably take pride. Moreover, the diversity of ethnic/religious communities and practices sought by multiculturalists can constitute an entrancing medley that is itself a mode of societal excellence. Much the same can be said about a rich tapestry of cultural offerings in a society whose citizens can warrantably look upon that tapestry as a source of pride (on top of its lucrativeness as a cynosure for tourists). Furthermore, mountains or mighty rivers or other magnificent topographical features can warrantably bolster the self-esteem of the people who live in countries that are graced by such features. People can similarly feel proud about wonderful gardens and other places of great beauty in their society. All these modes of excellence can serve the ends of aspirational perfectionism.

Though Rawls never quite invoked the notion of vicarious pride that is central to aspirational perfectionism, he highlighted the multiplicity of modes of excellence and the synergetic interaction among them when they occur alongside one another in any society. As he wrote in the final paragraph of his ruminations on social unions, which I have partly quoted earlier:

[W]e cannot overcome, nor should we wish to, our dependence on others. In a fully just society persons seek their good in ways peculiar to themselves, and they rely upon their associates to do things they could not have done, as well as things they might have done but did not ... It is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether. The collective activity of society, the many associations and the public life of the largest community that regulates them, sustains our efforts and elicits our contribution. Yet the good attained from the common culture far exceeds our work in the sense that we cease to be mere fragments.¹⁹

¹⁷ *ibid* 544.

¹⁸ *ibid* 545.

¹⁹ *ibid* 529.