



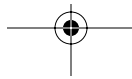
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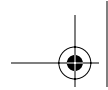
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## PRIDE AND SELF-CONTEMPT

**M**any of us interested in both Christian theology and psychology often come to a crossroads on our journey. Frequently our theological understanding of the dynamics of sin is greatly influenced by the Augustinian tradition with its accent on pride as the primary human problem. This tradition asserts that as we refuse to trust God, we substitute ourselves as the center of our existence. Ignoring our Creator, we egocentrically attempt to control reality. We think more highly of ourselves than is warranted. From this angle, grandiosity is the self's nagging tendency. Conceit and arrogance are natural outgrowths of not realizing our limitations in relationship to our Source as well as others. Humility and care for others are the important qualities lacking in our self-preoccupations and self-elevations. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this self-centeredness is a form of idolatry identified as sin. This inevitably throws our lives out of balance. Various inordinate desires or addictions emerge because we have lost our center in God. Pride, or God-replacement, is our primary problem.

Yet many of us have also experienced problems with low self-esteem or deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy. These problems don't quite match the Augustinian pride portrait. Out of negative feelings about ourselves, we may have consulted the helping professions, which are often highly influenced by the humanistic psychotherapies. We've been told that far from





having a problem with pride, we are struggling with self-hatred and a need for self-acceptance. Surely the Augustinian emphasis on pride is wrong. Our major problem is low self-esteem or even self-contempt. Destructive, hurtful behavior toward others stems from this negative view of ourselves. We cannot love others, we are told, until we love ourselves. This low evaluation of self must be transformed into self-acceptance. Then, and only then, will we be able to respond to others in a healthy manner. Thinking of ourselves more highly than we should is not our basic problem; instead, our predicament involves a low evaluation of ourselves. Again, the Augustinian pride thesis is wrong.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, these two views of the self and its most fundamental problem have been in conflict. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, for instance, departs from Freud by insisting that low self-esteem, a lack of self-love or even self-contempt is our primary problem.<sup>1</sup> For Fromm, self-love does not always lead to narcissism. According to Freud, however, self-love is the turning of the libido back on ourselves. Hence, self-love and love of others are antagonistic. Put differently, if we love ourselves, we have nothing left for others.

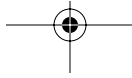
Moving away from this position, Fromm argues that a profound distinction exists between “self-love” and “selfishness.” He states it eloquently:

Selfishness and self-love, far from being identical, are actually opposites. The selfish person does not love himself too much but too little; in fact he hates himself. This lack of fondness and care for himself, which is only one expression of his lack of productiveness, leaves him empty and frustrated. He is necessarily unhappy and anxiously concerned to snatch from life the satisfactions which he blocks himself from attaining. He seems to care too much for himself, but actually he only makes an unsuccessful attempt to cover up and compensate for his failure to care for his real self. Freud holds that the selfish person is narcissistic, as if he had withdrawn his love from others and turned it toward his own person. It is true that selfish persons are incapable of loving others, but they are not capable of loving themselves either.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.





Thus, unlike Freud, Fromm believes that self-love is pivotal for our ability to love others. Again, self-love is not the enemy of caring for others. Instead, it is a *lack* of self-love that sets the stage for a devouring self-preoccupation. This, in turn, leads to an exalted view of our own importance. Thus, pride is not the most basic problem as the Augustinian tradition has stressed.

Fromm finds agreement among other psychotherapists. Theodore Rubin, for instance, describes the manner in which self-contempt, rather than self-love, is humanity's primary enemy:

People will actively depreciate, demean, and put themselves down generally, with almost complete ease and with little or no awareness of the destructive aspects and results involved. The same people may speak of feeling demoralized, depleted, weak, helpless, hopeless, frightened, vulnerable, fragile, incapable, or self-doubting, without making any connection at all between these symptoms and their own attacks upon themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Rubin further adds that "all neurotic manifestations are in fact incarnations of self-hate."<sup>4</sup> He speaks for a wide section of the helping professions.

Psychoanalyst Ralph Greenson, on the other hand, maintains the Freudian position that self-love is dangerous.<sup>5</sup> He argues that self-love involves a "turning in on oneself" in such a manner that outward investments of love become impossible. While he recognizes the importance of self-respect and self-care, he adamantly resists notions of "self-love."

Neo-Freudian Alfred Adler believes that feelings of inferiority are inevitable and built into the very structure of human development.<sup>6</sup> The mere fact that we each begin our lives as small creatures while adults tower over us provokes feelings of inferiority. Also, it may seem to children that adults are in complete control of their fate. In other words, our feelings of inadequacy as we try to move about in an adult world have biological roots. This

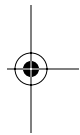
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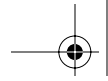
<sup>3</sup>Theodore Rubin, *Compassion and Self-Hate* (New York: David McKay, 1975), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup>Ralph Greenson, *The Technique and Practice of Psychoanalysis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968).

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Adler, *The Science of Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).





sense of inadequacy, however, is not pathological if it can be a prodding source of motivation for excellence. It can trigger a striving for self-mastery.

The problem is that for some individuals this feeling of natural inferiority does not promote a striving for superiority. Instead, it leaves them feeling weak, powerless, inadequate and even hopeless. To compensate for these pathological feelings, a “superiority complex” is erected.<sup>7</sup> Because the feelings of inferiority fail to motivate a movement toward growth and are instead a devastating indictment, some individuals develop a false sense of superiority. This is a spurious mask used to escape the fears of inadequacy, a compensation for a sense of failure.

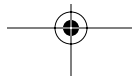
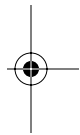
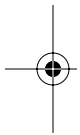
For Adler, once again, some feelings of inferiority are healthy. However, when those feelings cluster into an inferiority *complex*, development is arrested and enormous energy is poured into maintaining the “superior” image. It is not “normal” to have a superiority complex. It is normal to strive for superiority in the sense that we each ambitiously strive to be our best. Yet an inflated image of ourselves always has deep-rooted feelings of inferiority working behind the scenes. So, an overvalued self, for Adler, is an attempt to escape the painful negative feelings concerning our true worth.

The emergence of humanistic psychology in the twentieth century strongly emphasized the problems of an undervalued self. A basic sense of inadequacy, often internalized early in life, sets the stage for negative feelings toward ourselves. Unfortunately, even well-intentioned families often communicate conditional acceptance to children. These “conditions of worth” invariably lead them to believe in their own inadequacy. Humanistic approaches to psychotherapy are based on the assumption that the self desperately needs nurture, support and acceptance in order to gain self-regard. Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Fritz Perls have been significant leaders in a movement that quickly became part of popular culture. It flooded bookstores with titles on how to love ourselves, take care of ourselves, nurture ourselves and gain self-esteem. The underlying message seemed to be that *everyone* has a problem with a deep-rooted sense of inferiority.

This notion of low self-esteem as the fundamental human dilemma also spread into churches and synagogues throughout America. Sermons be-

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 31.





came less focused on confronting parishioners about their egocentricity and far more focused on addressing the “real” issue—a failure to love themselves. Perhaps Robert Schuller became the most visible of a new breed of clergy looking more at our feelings of inadequacy than our pride. The conviction seemed to be the same, whether in ecclesiastical communities or the helping professions: people need to learn to value themselves. Once we do that, most of the other problems we face will take care of themselves.

Educational institutions and parents also became very concerned with children’s self-esteem. This was the key for unlocking each child’s potential, a way of tapping the natural resources within each person. Teachers and parents tried to ensure that kids “felt good about themselves.”

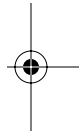
In addition, a new clinical interest emerged concerning the problem of shame.<sup>8</sup> Much of the literature identifies shame as something quite different from guilt, with which it has often been lumped together. Toxic shame, as it is often called, is the condition of feeling flawed, defective and inadequate as a person. It is a deeper problem than guilt in that it attacks *us* rather than our behavior. Guilt has the more limited task of pointing out what we have *done*. Not content with that, shame indicts us for who we *are*. Developmentally, it precedes guilt because shame can be experienced even before a child understands the differences between right and wrong. Put simply, it is saying “*I am bad*,” even before I am able to understand that what I *did* was bad. It convicts the entire self. Its purpose is exposure and condemnation, not education.

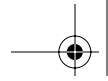
Through PBS specials and popular psychological literature, individuals such as John Bradshaw focused public attention on this problem of shame. This is, of course, another way of talking about low self-esteem or a negative view of self. Bradshaw’s bestseller *Healing the Shame That Binds You* diagnoses shame as the universal human dilemma. Childhood experience *before* the shaming process began is understood as a state of pure innocence, not unlike the Garden of Eden before the Fall.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, shame is in-

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<sup>8</sup>Much of this work has been popularized by individuals such as John Bradshaw. See especially his *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Health Communications, 1988). Much of Bradshaw’s work is based on Gershen Kaufman’s *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, Vt.: Schenkman, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>Terry D. Cooper, “The Psychotherapeutic Evangelism of John Bradshaw,” *Pastoral Psychology* 44, no. 2 (1995): 73–82.





ternalized and, consequently, needs to be healed. Thus, this “original pain,” as Bradshaw calls it, replaces the traditional theological understanding of “original sin.”<sup>10</sup> The point is that this process is something that is done *to us*. It is an outside-in maneuver. “Salvation,” for Bradshaw, is closely tied to grieving what was done to us and reconnecting with this original state of innocence he calls “the inner child.”<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of a fall into toxic shame differs from a traditional strand in Christian thought that emphasizes *our* responsibility for our dilemma. Typically, in the Christian tradition, our fall is tied up with our own freedom and often with the refusal to trust God in the face of anxiety. It is not so much a story about what is done *to us* as it is a story of our own mishandled anxiety. To put it directly, this traditional viewpoint would say the following to our culture: “Look, it does not matter if we have perfect, non-shaming parents, schools that offer nothing but encouragement and overall environments that are quite therapeutic. We still have the problem within ourselves—namely, acting in destructive ways because of the anxiety that is simply part of being human.” At times, Bradshaw seems to move toward Pelagianism in his belief that if we could simply correct faulty parenting and eliminate the shaming process, children would live “above” dysfunction.<sup>12</sup> This seems to minimize the internal conflict that inevitably arises no matter what the external conditions. A central theme in the Adamic story is that the first couple *had* a healthy situation, yet they still acted in self-centered ways. While Bradshaw provides a much-needed awareness of the importance of a nurturing environment, he seems, at times, to minimize the power of the self’s capacity to act destructively even in ideal circumstances. This optimistic tendency in the humanistic perspective, which Bradshaw has certainly absorbed, will be critiqued in more detail later.

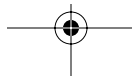
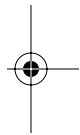
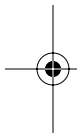
The differences between the overvalued and undervalued self are not simply a tension between religion’s pessimism and psychotherapy’s optimism, however. This split exists within each of the disciplines. Freud, espe-

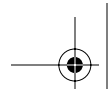
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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 75

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>12</sup>This reference to Pelagianism points toward the fifth-century monk Pelagius, who believed that human beings are capable of keeping God’s commandments without any additional assistance from God’s grace.





cially in his later writings, certainly emphasized a rather dismal portrait of the self.<sup>13</sup> The primitive impulses of the id must be checked by social restraint or civilization would not be possible.<sup>14</sup> Inordinate self-love, selfishness and aggression are natural inclinations within the human psyche. These must be restrained and controlled. The id has no self-regulating capacity, so without the benefit of social restraint, we would all be savages. Such is the nature of our primitive instinctuality.

Against this Freudian pessimism about human nature, the humanistic psychologies of Rogers, Maslow, Perls and others were framed. There were, of course, others such as Jung, Horney and Fromm who had a less negative view of personhood and who helped make the emergence of humanistic psychology possible. But it is hard to overestimate the radical differences between a Freudian and Rogerian perspective of the self. Rogers's biographer, Howard Kirschenbaum, sums up this difference in a quote by Rogers:

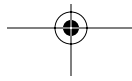
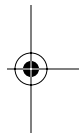
So when a Freudian such as Karl Menninger tells me (as he has, in a discussion of this issue) that he perceives man as "innately destructive," I can only shake my head in wonderment. It leads me to all kinds of perplexing questions. How could it be that Menninger and I, working with such intimate relationships with individuals in distress, experience people so differently?<sup>15</sup>

Rogers goes on to make an interesting speculation about why he and Freud differ so much in their basic views of the self. Admitting that this is only a hypothesis, Rogers suggests that even though Freud came to understand some of his own hidden dimensions through self-analysis, he was not able to fully accept those dimensions on his own. In fact, all of us are limited in what we can discover on our own. Once patterns of self-depreciation have been established, it takes another person to empathize with our inward journey in order for full self-acceptance to be possible. As brilliant as Freud's self-analysis was, it lacked the warmly accepting relationship that makes the disowned parts of the self easier to embrace. Rogers continues his speculation:

<sup>13</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilizations and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Howard Kirschenbaum, *On Becoming Carl Rogers* (New York: Delta Books, 1979), p. 250.





Hence, though he might come to know and to some extent understand the hidden and denied aspects of himself, I question whether he could ever come to accept them fully, to embrace them as a meaningful, acceptable, and constructive part of himself. More likely he continued to perceive them unacceptable aspects of himself—enemies, whom knowing he could control—rather than as impulses which, when existing freely in balance with his other impulses, were constructive. At any rate I regard this as a hypothesis worthy of consideration.<sup>16</sup>

While Freudians might wince at such a statement, it grows out of Rogers's deep conviction that we discover ourselves most deeply in relationship to an accepting other. Hence, Freud's attempt to achieve self-acceptance in the isolation of his own analysis is similar to Luther's attempt to gain a sense of grace through the ascetic practices in a monastery. To put it religiously, we cannot muster up our own grace. It has to be mediated to us by a power of acceptance greater than we are.

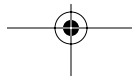
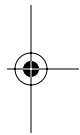
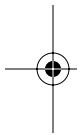
#### PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICS OF THE "LOW SELF-ESTEEM" ARGUMENT

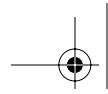
Psychological perspectives other than Freudian ones are also critical of humanistic psychotherapy's optimistic evaluation of the self. An example is the work of Paul Vitz, whose not-so-subtly titled book *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* came out in 1977 and was revised in 1994.<sup>17</sup> As the title indicates, Vitz believes that selfist psychology has become a secularized religion of self-adoration. By "selfist psychology" he refers primarily to the influence of Rogers, Maslow, Rollo May and Fromm.<sup>18</sup> He argues that a radical preoccupation with individual rights has led our culture to believe that concepts such as duty, obligation, restraint or inhibition are rooted in a primitive way of thinking. Vitz attacks the core of the human potential movement—namely, the belief in the innate goodness of the self or the actualizing tendency. He argues that the forces emerging from biological evo-

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>17</sup>Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.





lution do not reveal the kind of one-directional growth tendency that is a sacred assumption in humanistic psychology.

For Vitz, self-esteem is not our primary problem. In fact, a genetic tendency toward selfishness may well blind us to the collective moral wisdom of the past.<sup>19</sup> Vitz believes that humanistic psychologists such as Rogers blame the social order for trying to sabotage human growth and expansion. Society is accused of distorting the individual's basic goodness. But the human potential movement forgets that the social order is humanly constructed and maintained.<sup>20</sup>

As an experimental psychologist, Vitz is upset that the humanistic psychotherapies are trying to ride on the coattails of psychological science. However, he does not think this unscientific optimism is limited to psychology. It has appeared in various religious circles as well. In fact, he believes that antecedents to humanistic psychology lie in the Protestant liberalism of the earlier part of the twentieth century. Vitz thinks one of the precursors of humanistic psychology was New York minister Harry Emerson Fosdick. His widely read book *On Becoming a Real Person*, written twenty years before Carl Rogers's *On Becoming a Person*, offers familiar themes for Rogers's later book.<sup>21</sup> Both Fosdick and Norman Vincent Peale made self-fulfillment a central thrust of their theologies.<sup>22</sup> In fact, according to Vitz, Fosdick admits that the idea of *integration* seems to have replaced the concept of *salvation*.<sup>23</sup> The important thing to remember here is that the notion of self-realization was heavily preached from New York pulpits. For Fosdick, all of us have a basic urge toward wholeness. Sin is more a matter of confusion and lack of focus than an inclination toward evil.<sup>24</sup> Integration, for Fosdick, derives from self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-love.

<sup>19</sup>Vitz has been heavily influenced here by Donald Campbell's 1974 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association, later published as "On the Conflicts Between Biological and Social Evolution and Between Psychology and Moral Tradition," *American Psychologist* 30 (December 1974): 1103-26.

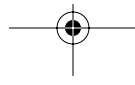
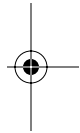
<sup>20</sup>Terry D. Cooper, "Self-Awareness or Self-Absorption: How the Sociology of Knowledge Can Help Counselors," *Counseling and Values* 26, no. 4 (1982): 275-80.

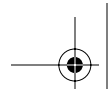
<sup>21</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Becoming a Real Person* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943); Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

<sup>22</sup>See, for example, Harry Emerson Fosdick, *As I See Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932); Norman Vincent Peale, *The Art of Living* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1937).

<sup>23</sup>Harry Fosdick, cited in Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, pp. 99-103.

<sup>24</sup>Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, pp. 99-103.





I believe that Vitz overstates the case that Rogerian therapy automatically leads to self-worship. In fact, self-worship contradicts the very nature of what both Maslow and Rogers identify as self-actualization. Self-actualizing individuals are focused on a project or vision larger than the self. They never make self-actualization their primary goal. Vitz overlooks the significant number of people who have been liberated *from* self-preoccupation through Rogerian therapy. These are individuals who have found in an empathic relationship the ability to accept those parts of themselves that they had disowned and that had kept them self-obsessed. In short, Vitz completely ignores the implicit discovery of grace in Rogerian therapy. As Thomas Oden and Don Browning have pointed out so well, the Rogerian therapist often mediates a level of acceptance that is ultimately grounded in God.<sup>25</sup> Part of what has traditionally been called a “bondage to sin” is indeed a prison of self-preoccupation in which we are struggling to be acceptable. The release from this captivity can be a powerful experience in the presence of one who implicitly mediates our ontological acceptance. Instead of encouraging self-worship, this can free us to live, care for others and get on with our lives without excessive self-focus.

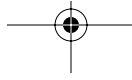
Nevertheless, Vitz has written an interesting and challenging book that calls into question the possible naivete of the whole self-help culture. Surely he is accurate in pointing toward a tendency in our culture to make our own private “growth” the most important thing in the world. Whether or not it is fair, however, to lay that at the doorstep of Rogers or Maslow is quite another matter, one we will investigate later.

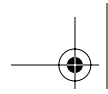
David Myers is another respected psychological voice who opposes the thesis that an undervalued self is humanity’s primary problem. In his major works on the topic, *The Inflated Self, Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* and his frequently used text, *Social Psychology*, he argues precisely the opposite point.<sup>26</sup> Instead of depending on the Freudian pessimism concerning the human condition, Myers believes that research in social psychology confirms a traditional biblical portrait of humanity as fundamentally selfish and

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<sup>25</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *Kerygma and Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); Don S. Browning, *Atonement and Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>26</sup>David G. Myers, *The Inflated Self* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980); *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Social Psychology*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).





self-centered.<sup>27</sup> As one of his titles obviously implies, Myers sees the basic human problem as self-inflation rather than self-degradation. In other words, we think too highly of ourselves. Like Vitz, Myers believes that humanistic psychology has compounded our problems by its thesis that low self-esteem is our most basic problem. Unwarranted pride and egotism are the real dangers.

Myers proclaims that the findings of research psychology are quite sobering. They tend to challenge rather than build up the human ego. As Myers puts it, “To us proud individuals in a self-righteous culture, it is shocking to discover that one of the brute facts of human nature is our capacity for illusion and self-deception.”<sup>28</sup> We are easily corrupted by a self-serving bias. This blinds us to an accurate picture of ourselves as well as the world. For Myers, this tendency toward selfishness is aptly demonstrated by evolutionary psychologists such as David Barash and Donald Campbell.<sup>29</sup> Myers believes the findings of evolutionary psychology support his thesis that pride and selfishness are primary, though he balks at the position that they are “built into” our basic nature. As a Christian psychologist, he believes the human condition is somehow a fallen one, and he contends that if selfishness is part of our original makeup, then we cannot really be held morally responsible for it.

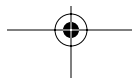
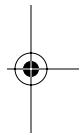
Social psychologists have been the ones to provide convincing evidence that this selfish tendency exists. They have found this self-serving bias in both individual and group attitudes. This self-serving bias can especially be seen in attribution theory, which deals with how each person or group explains or accounts for their own and others’ behavior. Put directly, to what do we *attribute* our behavior? Sometimes it is ourselves and sometimes it is others. Myers believes that these studies conclusively reveal a pattern. We humans tend to attribute positive behaviors to ourselves and negative behaviors to external factors. We take credit for the good things that happen to us and blame the bad things on outside considerations. A self-serving, self-justifying tendency is apparent. “Although it is popularly believed that most people suffer from the ‘I’m not OK-You’re OK’ syndrome, research

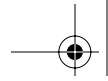
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<sup>27</sup> Myers, *Inflated Self*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.





indicates that William Saroyan was much closer to the truth: ‘Every man is a good man in a bad world—as he himself knows.’”<sup>30</sup>

So we tend to accept credit for our successes and blame outside factors for our failures. Almost invariably, for instance, students who do well on an exam attribute it to their hard study and intelligence. When they do poorly, however, they often argue that the test was not a reliable indicator of their knowledge or ability. Other studies have indicated a tendency to overvalue the accuracy of our beliefs and judgments.<sup>31</sup> Myers is convinced these studies demonstrate that individuals are far more troubled by a superiority complex than an inferiority one. We regularly see ourselves, at least according to conscious report, in a far better light than we see others. In one survey of college faculty, for instance, 94 percent saw themselves as better than the average colleague.<sup>32</sup> In survey after survey, self-report indicated a very high estimate of self in comparison to others. Myers makes this interesting remark:

Note how radically at odds this conclusion is with the popular wisdom that most of us suffer from low self-esteem and high self-disparagement. We are, to be sure, strongly motivated to maintain and enhance our self-esteem and we will welcome any message which helps us do that. But most of us are not groveling about with feelings that everyone else is better than we are. Preachers who deliver ego-boosting pep talks to audiences who are supposedly plagued with miserable self-images are preaching to a problem that seldom exists.<sup>33</sup>

Myers *does* recognize, however, that some individuals genuinely suffer from low self-esteem. He further believes that these are the persons likely to show up in a therapist’s office. What he objects to, however, is the therapist generalizing from these interactions that low self-esteem must be *the* human problem. Again, persons with low self-esteem are a very small segment of our culture.

It is precisely at this point that social psychologists and psychotherapists often bump heads. In hearing about the evidence for a “superiority com-

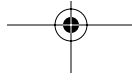
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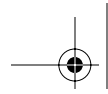
<sup>30</sup>William Saroyan, quoted in Myers, *Inflated Self*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup>See Myers, *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*, especially chap. 21.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Myers, *Inflated Self*, p. 24.





plex” in social psychology research, many psychotherapists are likely to respond, “Of course individuals will sound this way in the context of a survey where their defenses are up.” They will often tell a researcher what they would *like* to believe about themselves or what may sound like self-confident healthiness. But it is in the safe environment of psychotherapy, not a cold, quick interview process, that we discover what people really think about themselves. Thus, psychotherapists have an opportunity to get to know individuals at their deepest levels because they are privy to a world unknown to social research. When the defenses begin to drop and the person reveals what is going on below the surface, many therapists find that the primary problem is *not* self-inflation.

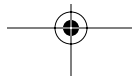
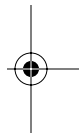
Social psychologists will no doubt reply that psychotherapy disclosure represents a temporary condition of persons who have been wounded by life and appear broken. Put simply, they are “down on themselves.” But are these persons this way outside of the one or two hours each week that they are in therapy? Further, even if these individuals legitimately struggle with low self-esteem, countless others in our society would not go near a psychotherapist’s office because they do not believe they have “problems.” These persons attribute their difficulties to the environment or to others.

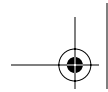
Psychotherapists will then counter that this so-called sense of superiority is a thin veneer born out of defensiveness and self-alienation. These persons have learned to hide their woundedness and deep-seated feelings of inadequacy behind a facade of social confidence. Peel it off, and we will find an anxious individual who is trying to cope behind a mask of security. In short, only when the aching issue of the unacceptable self has been addressed are we free to get on with our lives without a gnawing self-preoccupation. Pain in my leg absorbs me until I deal with it. Once it has been medically addressed, I can then walk away from the hospital without thinking about it.

Yet for Myers, “The self-serving bias is the social psychologist’s new rendition of the forever underappreciated truth about human pride.”<sup>34</sup> He sees many similarities between this pattern of self-justification and the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of sin. He likes Langdon Gilkey’s description of sin:

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 38.





This then is the religious meaning of sin, far different from the usual meaning given it by the legalist mentality. Sin may be defined as an ultimate religious devotion to a finite interest; it is an overriding loyalty or concern for the self, its existence and its prestige, or for the existence and prestige of a group. From this deeper sin, that is, from this inordinate love of the self and its own, stem the moral evils of indifference, injustice, prejudice, and cruelty to one's neighbor, and the other destructive patterns of action that we call "sins."<sup>35</sup>

This inordinate self-love and preoccupation with the self is a form of idolatry. This idolatry, in turn, sets up patterns of self-deception designed to maintain a positive image of the self even if it involves dishonesty, bias and prejudice. We simply don't see ourselves as we really are. Our problem is not low self-esteem. Augustine was right about pride.

Many neo-Freudian and humanistic psychotherapists will, of course, stubbornly disagree. For them, when persons get to know themselves at a deep level, which necessitates a safe and empathic atmosphere, self-bias will fade because they will once again connect with who they truly are. They will drop their self-defenses. As the fear and estrangement, out of which they created these fictions about themselves, dissolve, they will no longer overestimate their own worth. Put differently, pride is not the primary problem.

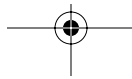
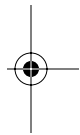
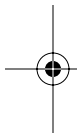
#### SOCIAL CRITIQUES OF SELF-CENTEREDNESS

Cultural historian Christopher Lasch, in examining many of the social hopes of the 1960s, believes that a cynicism about genuine social change became apparent in the 1970s. As a consequence, our culture took a drastic turn inward.<sup>36</sup> Lasch indicts American culture as narcissistic and argues that we have lost a sense of historical continuity. Disenchanted with the possibilities of social renewal, we've embraced the maddening personal growth industry. A sense of historical rootedness in a process larger than ourselves is sacrificed.<sup>37</sup> The isolated, separated individual cut off from the past and unconcerned with the future is epidemic in American narcissism. An un-

<sup>35</sup>Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 232-33.

<sup>36</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), pp. 3-30.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-7.





derlying feeling that history begins with me permeates our mindset. Skepticism about the wisdom of the past and a lack of responsibility toward the future are central features of American culture. Personal experience is elevated as the only criterion for truth. This new consciousness of the self causes people to retreat from political and social involvement. Mental health is understood as renouncing all inhibitions and indulging all desires. This is a far cry from Freud's far more modest goal of therapy—to love and to work. The new brand of narcissism differs from the kind of rugged individualism in America's nineteenth-century transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau. Unlike the rugged individualists who stand on their own, narcissists need a constant audience to reflect back an exaggerated self. Narcissists depend on others to validate their self-esteem. The individualists of the nineteenth century aim to conquer the wilderness, which happens to be *outside* the self.

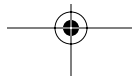
Thus, says Lasch, therapy has become a new religion that feeds the “awareness worshippers.” Two things, in particular, have ushered in the replacement of religion by therapy. One is simply the decline of religious commitment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The other is the inflation of Freud, which has turned therapists into secular priests. In a fascinating article entitled “The Sacrifice of Freud,” Lasch has argued that today's pop therapies have sacrificed Freud's passion for truth, honesty and objectivity.<sup>38</sup> Instead, an ever-expanding, joyful self is the new object of devotion.

Transforming therapy into religion misses a very important point: pop therapies are antireligious. Lasch correctly reminds us that religion tries to bring us into the context of our meaning in the overall scheme of things, that is, how we fit into a puzzle much greater than the isolated self. It seeks an all-encompassing interpretation of reality as a whole. According to Lasch, therapy, on the other hand, often wants to reduce reality to individual awareness. Therapy is unequipped to handle questions about ultimate meaning, purpose, the direction of the cosmos and so on.

Lasch makes a crucial distinction between the existentialist understanding of “authenticity” and the self-indulgence of narcissism. Existentialism's key insights into the self (from Kierkegaard to Sartre) all indicate a certain

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<sup>38</sup>Lasch, “Sacrificing Freud,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 22, 1976, p. 11.





critical stance that looks at the self without drowning in it. By contrast, the popularity of “confessional” literature reflects a preference for narcissistic self-exposure over insight.

Edwin Schur is another social critic who doesn't think very highly of our “awareness culture.”<sup>39</sup> Schur believes that people are being led to believe that the origins of all their problems reside within their own psyches. The possibility of social change is “cooled out” as individuals are “therapized,” and hence the status quo remains the same.<sup>40</sup> Schur is more concerned with the assumptions underlying the awareness craze than with the therapies themselves. This invitation for people to take responsibility for everything in their lives blinds them to the political and institutional powers around them. It encourages solipsistic inattention to those very structures that oppress. Individuals thus interiorize socioeconomic problems. The isolated “self” is viewed as an endless resource of problem-solving ability. Counseling thus serves a very important function: It cools out anger and rage over socioeconomic injustice. Instead of marching, we're talking about our childhoods. Thus, therapy functions as a tool of the status quo. Clients are told that they can “control” the problem by “choosing” to not be upset by it.

Schur tells us much about how the journey into self is a retreat from social involvement. However, he needs to realize also that social activism can be a retreat from the frightening inner world. Lasch, for one, criticizes him for setting up an unrealistic dichotomy between “personal” and “social” issues.<sup>41</sup> A good example of this retreat from inner issues is the social activism in the sixties when the death-of-God movement was so popular. Lacking a theological object of devotion, many seminarians and clergy hungered for something in which they could place their loyalty. The civil rights movement provided such an opportunity. Social activism, although very important, became, at least for some, a way of running away from a crisis of faith.

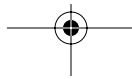
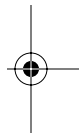
Schur's critique of psychotherapy is very similar to Marx's critique of religion.<sup>42</sup> Marx was frustrated with religion because he thought it was an ob-

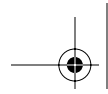
<sup>39</sup>Edwin Schur, *The Awareness Trap: Self-Absorption Instead of Social Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>42</sup>Terry D. Cooper, “Karl Marx and Group Therapy: An Old Warning About a New Phenomenon,” *Counseling and Values* 29, no. 1 (1984): 22-26.





stacle to social change. It keeps people preoccupied with an *afterlife* and, hence, decreases an interest in this world. In a similar manner, psychotherapy can be obsessed with an *innerlife*. Thus, therapy, like religion, maintains the status quo.

Cultural historian Jackson Lears makes a similar argument in his discussion of the “cult of experience” so epidemic in contemporary American life.<sup>43</sup> He argues that amid spiritual confusion, intense experience can become an end in itself. Unable to find larger meanings outside the self, Americans often become what Lears frequently calls “enmeshed in morbid self-consciousness.”<sup>44</sup> By exalting “authentic experience” as an end in itself, American culture has moved from the nineteenth-century concern with salvation to the twentieth-century preoccupation with personal fulfillment. This highly exaggerates the significance of the self.

Psychology watchdog and social critic Martin Gross, in his biting critical *The Psychological Society*, argues that the new psychology has led us to believe there would be no failure, no unhappiness, no crime and no malevolence if we could just “adjust” our psyches.<sup>45</sup> He argues that the new psychology has elevated “adjustment” to a metaphysical condition. But instead of providing a greater sense of stability, this preoccupation has led to greater anxiety and insecurity. The term *sick* has rendered the traditional notion of sin obsolete.

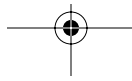
Gross, unlike Lasch, also includes Freud in the development of our psychotherapeutic intoxication. In fact, perhaps his most interesting thesis is that believers in the religion of the hidden psyche are always looking for the “true person” who peeks through the unconscious every now and then. Our unconscious only becomes clear when we speak to a therapist-priest, who helps us with this revelation. In this religion of the unconscious, our conscious mind is a “second class being,” a puppet controlled by the unconscious. We can determine our present and future *only* if we learn the mysteries of psychology. Like a primitive witch doctor, the therapist offers to help us for power and money. Gross likes Jerome Frank’s comment that the mental

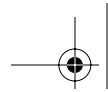
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<sup>43</sup>T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place for Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Martin Gross, *The Psychological Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).





health industry creates its own customers.<sup>46</sup> And like Lasch, Gross insists that our psychological society is not truly individualist, but self-absorbed.

Wendy Kaminer is another recent social critic of how psychotherapy, and particularly the recovery movement, has led individuals down an unfortunate path of navel-gazing.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, this self-absorption has deepened a sense of powerlessness and the maintenance of the status quo. Incidentally, Kaminer is not particularly critical of Alcoholics Anonymous, but she thinks this valuable recovery program has been hijacked to deal with a variety of emotional problems for which it was never well suited. For instance, she despises the word *codependent*. Her book *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional* contains a vicious indictment of an American culture that is more concerned with "getting in touch with its inner child" than getting in touch with their representatives in Congress.<sup>48</sup> For Kaminer, it's dangerous to put our faith in self-help experts. Further, the ever-expanding definitions of *addiction* and *abuse* encourage our preoccupation with victimization. As a result, we stay imprisoned within the confines of "self-exploration." Again, note the irony. While becoming more and more intoxicated with "self," we are actually conforming to covertly authoritarian self-help experts. Why? Because even though a self-absorbed culture may *seem* to encourage individuals to find their own answers, they really rely on a mystique of expertise. They encourage people to look outside themselves for standardized instructions. Like Lasch's narcissistic culture, Kaminer's self-help movement does not really seek rugged individuality.

Kaminer's theme is similar to that of social critic Charles Sykes's *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of American Culture*. Sykes describes the marketing tools of our self-preoccupied culture: "It defines as symptoms traits that are not exceptionally unusual, creates anxiety about them, and promises help. That formula, repeated over and over, is the mark of the therapeutic culture . . . and the foundation of the addiction-recovery industry."<sup>49</sup> Sykes also criticizes modern culture for taking age-old dilemmas and turning them into

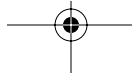
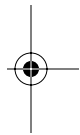
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<sup>46</sup>Jerome Frank, cited in Gross, *Psychological Society*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup>Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Charles Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decline of American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).





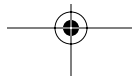
“psychological problems” that can be solved. Again, “experts” create a need for their own product. And because they connect rationality with denial, mental health gurus are able to dodge any rational challenges.

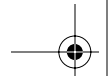
Lasch, Schur, Lears, Gross and Kaminer all believe we are entirely too focused on ourselves. Many other critiques of American culture charge essentially the same indictment against our self-absorption. This celebration and exaltation of the self turns us away from important realities which are larger than the autonomous ego. Self-exaltation distorts a social, historical and cosmic perspective of our own significance as persons.

#### ROGERS AND NIEBUHR AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE DEBATE

The controversy between an overvalued and undervalued self came to a very interesting crossroads when Carl Rogers was asked to review Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Self and the Dramas of History* for the *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* in 1956. The piece was then picked up, along with respondents’ commentary, by *Pastoral Psychology*, and most recently published in *Carl Rogers—Dialogues*.<sup>50</sup> Although written nearly a half-century ago, the issues raised in this discussion are just as relevant today. This is an extremely important “meeting of minds” because it brought to light the conflict between one of the greatest twentieth-century commentators on the “overvalued self” (Niebuhr) and perhaps the greatest twentieth-century spokesperson for the “undervalued self” (Rogers). Representing the Augustinian tradition, Niebuhr, who has profoundly influenced social ethicists, politicians and clergy, opposes the leader of humanistic psychology, the person who has probably influenced the practice of psychological counseling more than any American in the past century. Many students in theological schools, and pastoral counseling training programs in particular, have been heavily influenced by *both* these thinkers. Even when the influence is not direct, it is hard to discuss modern understandings of self-deceit or sin without Niebuhr lurking in the back-

<sup>50</sup>Carl R. Rogers, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Self and the Dramas of History*,” *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, no. 1 (January 1956); reprinted in *Carl Rogers—Dialogues: Conversations with Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, B. F. Skinner, Gregory Bateson, Michael Polanyi, Rollo May, and Others*, ed. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). References are to the Kirschenbaum and Henderson reprint.





ground. Furthermore, Carl Rogers's work, while not always studied directly, undergirds nearly any counselor education training program in America. Many of us interested in *both* Christian theology and psychotherapy have gotten a healthy dose of Niebuhr on the human condition, only to be introduced to Rogers's opposing position in counseling. The question quickly becomes, How does "sin" fit in with "self-actualization"?

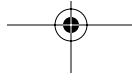
Rogers expressed agreement with much in Niebuhr's work. His central problem with Niebuhr's analysis, as we can clearly guess, concerned Niebuhr's insistence on the primacy of pride and inordinate self-love in humans. Rogers voices his disagreement well:

It is in his conception of the basic deficiency of the individual self that I find my experience utterly at variance. He is quite clear that the "original sin" is self-love, pretension, claiming too much, grasping after self-realization. I read such words and try to imagine the experience out of which they have grown. I have dealt with maladjusted and troubled individuals, in the intimate personal relationship of psychotherapy, for more than a quarter of a century. This has not been perhaps fully representative of the whole community, but neither has it been unrepresentative. And, if I were to search for the central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them, it is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable. To be sure, in some cases this is covered by pretension, and in nearly all these feelings are covered by a facade. But I could not differ more deeply from the notion that self-love is the fundamental and pervasive "sin."<sup>51</sup>

Based on his own experience in psychotherapy, clinical research and observations of people, Rogers is definitely convinced that Niebuhrian pride is never the primary problem. The undervaluing of self is what needs to be healed. This is accomplished through an accepting, empathic relationship in which a person is offered unconditional positive regard, or at least as close to unconditional positive regard as we humans are capable. Rogers goes on to describe this type of relationship and its effects:

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 210-11.





Actually it is only in the experience of a relationship in which he is loved (something very close, I believe, to the theologian's *agape*) that the individual can begin to feel a dawning respect for, acceptance of, and, finally, even a fondness for himself. It is thus that he can begin to feel love and tenderness for others. It is thus that he can begin to realize himself and to reorganize himself and his behavior to move in the direction of becoming the more socialized self he would like to be. I believe that only if one views individuals on the most superficial or external basis are they seen as being primarily the victims of self-love. When seen from the inside, that is far from being their disease. At least so it seems to me.<sup>52</sup>

Another way of framing this issue asks, do we human beings do destructive things to others out of a sense of strength or weakness?

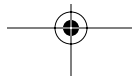
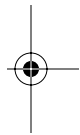
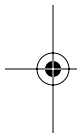
#### REENACTMENT OF THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

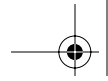
An interesting question lurking beneath this inquiry is whether or not this disagreement between Niebuhr (representing the Augustinian tradition) and Rogers represents another version of the ongoing Pelagian controversy. As a matter of fact, in his discussion of Rogers's review of Niebuhr's *Self and the Dramas of History*, Walter Horton makes a very interesting observation:

Carl Rogers takes such an "accepting" and permissive attitude toward his counselees that it appears to him as though their nature were fundamentally wholesome, needing only to be released from shackling external bonds in order to heal and save itself by its own internal powers. This at least leans in the direction of Pelagian self-salvation. Reinhold Niebuhr lays such stress upon the essential helplessness of man, and his utter dependence upon divine grace, fears complacency so like the very devil, that he can cry, "Cursed be the man that putteth his trust in man!" Could any view be more opposed to Pelagian optimism than this Augustinian pessimism?<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>53</sup>Walter Horton, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Carl R. Rogers: A Discussion by Bernard M. Loomer, Walter Horton, and Hans Hofmann," in *Carl Rogers—Dialogues*, ed. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 219.





In reading this comment, Rogers, who was asked to respond to his respondents, humorously remarked, “I even found it interesting to learn that I am seen as a Pelagian. It is useful to know the labels for one’s heresies.”<sup>54</sup>

This idea that the Rogers–Niebuhr dispute in some way recycles the Pelagian controversy is worth pursuing. Pelagius, a highly controversial fifth-century monk, occupied most of Augustine’s energies in the later part of Augustine’s life. Pelagius held that we come into this world morally neutral and are not the carriers of Augustinian “original sin.”<sup>55</sup> While Augustine argued that Adam’s sin was passed down to us thorough the mechanism of sexual intercourse, Pelagius believed that Adam’s sin affected Adam only. Furthermore, Augustine’s notion of original guilt, that we somehow all participated in Adam’s sin, was, for Pelagius, ridiculous. Adam set a bad example, which means that after his fall, we have to serve God in a hostile, nonsupportive environment. This sinful environment makes obedience tough, but not impossible. The power of self-determination is crucial, and it can be strengthened through pious practices. The world around us may be full of corruption, but we as individuals are not.

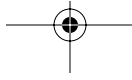
As a fifth-century monk, Pelagius was shocked by the moral laxity of his time.<sup>56</sup> He encouraged a stricter asceticism. He emphasized human freedom to do good works, apart from God’s supernatural grace. Why? Because we have already been equipped with the grace necessary to obey the commandments of God. This is the grace of our nature, a reliance on our God-given capacities.

Human freedom necessitates the capacity for good or evil; hypothetically, humans *must* be able to live above sin. God has endowed humanity with the gift of free will, which is a form of natural grace. The capacity for goodness and the inborn ability to actualize this goodness resides within each of us, apart from any appeal to supernatural grace. Put simply, we have the equipment intact, but the desire to use it is completely *our* responsibility. We don’t need external help in fulfilling our inherent potential. Grace is not necessary to heal

<sup>54</sup>Carl Rogers, “Concluding Comment,” in *Carl Rogers—Dialogues*, ed. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 223.

<sup>55</sup>Pelagius, “Letter to Demetrius,” in *Theological Anthropology*, ed. and trans. J. Patout Burns (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). For an excellent account of Pelagius’s thought, see Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968).

<sup>56</sup>Pelagius, “Letter to Demetrius.”





human nature because human nature is not sick. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with us. We are not depraved creatures with broken wills as Augustine argued. The first foundation for a spiritual life, therefore, is to recognize our strength. Pelagian natural integrity resembles the Rogerian self-actualizing tendency. Historical theologian Stephen Duffy points out that Pelagius was shocked by the loose living of the Roman Christians and that a *negative anthropology only made matters worse*: “To hold that people could not help sinning seemed to Pelagius demeaning to humans and an insult to their Creator.”<sup>57</sup>

Duffy goes on to say that Pelagius probably did *not* see his own perspective as “optimistic.” Moreover, there *is* a sense in which Pelagius had a notion of original sin, though it’s not inherited:

It must be noted, however, that Pelagius probably would not think his an excessively optimistic view of the human condition. He sees a cumulative intensification of the grip of evil upon the human race and upon the individual’s capacity to avoid sin. Individual acts of sin snowball into social sin, thus people find themselves enslaved by sinful habits and customs and surrounded by bad examples. In this sense, one might almost claim that Pelagius ultimately did have a doctrine of original sin, because sin as social habit and custom infects us from childhood and imposes a kind of necessity of sinning, even for one who begins the course free of inherited sin. In fact, habit has such a gridlock on humanity that the Law was rendered powerless to liberate us and had to be replaced by the Law of Christ. Humans are responsible for this state of affairs; nearly all contribute to the fund of evil social habits.<sup>58</sup>

Rogers too, as we shall later see, does *not* believe his view of the human condition to be overly optimistic. In fact, he describes the “fall into self-alienation” as practically inevitable. He calls this discrepancy between our actual experience and our self-awareness “incongruence.” This estrangement from ourselves leads us toward destructive (sinful) behavior.

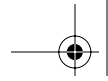
Augustine, of course, had a very different view of humanity’s fall. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were in a state of righteousness and friend-

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<sup>57</sup>Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Michael Glazier, 1993), p. 85.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.





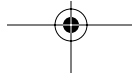
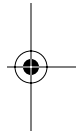
ship with God. They were immune from physical illness and death, possessed exceptional intellectual gifts and had nonpassionate, non-“animalistic” sex, Augustine writes. They were free. While the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*) was not part of their makeup, they did have the ability *not* to sin (*posse non peccare*). Endowed with an inclination to virtue, their lives were perfectly ordered. The body was subject to the soul, the desires were subject to reason and will, and the will to God. Nothing impeded the love of God.

But pride, the desire to be their own God, moved them to distort what God had made. The first sin, for Augustine, was almost unimaginable, because Adam and Eve were free unequivocally. There was absolutely no reason for it. Its reprehensible nature changed the human condition.

For Augustine, it is absolutely necessary that God’s Spirit recreate the fallen will and retrieve its ability to love God first, thus ordering our lives. For Pelagius, on the other hand, we have our minds, the capacity to choose right from wrong, the law and the example of Jesus. What more do we need? He believed that Augustine’s notion that only God can work good in us undercuts the very possibility of morality.

From 412 until his death in 430, Augustine attempted to eliminate the errors of Pelagianism. To him its central error was profoundly dangerous: the works-righteousness monk utterly minimized the significance of divine grace. Pelagius insisted on the human ability to keep God’s commandments. Since God had provided this capacity in creation, no “extra assistance” was needed. This view did not take seriously the plight of human helplessness; it eliminated original sin and therefore reduced the salvific work of Christ. The end result of Pelagian optimism, for Augustine, was the same sort of pride exhibited by both Satan and Adam.

The Pelagian controversy marches on and on. The issues raised by this conflict reappeared in the Protestant Reformation, then later created a division between the Jansenists and the Jesuits in the seventeenth century. It has prevailed in various concerns within twentieth-century theology. The conflict does not seem to go away because it involves fundamentally different views of human potential. The Augustinian view does not seem far from Freudian pessimism; the Pelagian view is more optimistic about our created nature.





While a fifth-century monk and a twentieth-century psychotherapist may seem to have little in common, I find some of the parallels between Pelagius and Rogers fascinating.

**Pelagius**

Denounces original sin; human beings are not “oriented” toward sin.

Acknowledges the collective power of habit.

Defines sin as violating our created nature.

Uses references to “holy men” in the Hebrew Bible, i.e., Job.

Argues that the probability of sin arises from external pressures.

Moves away from Augustinian predestination.

Claims that our original nature is “graced” and can be trusted.

Says the fall has not disturbed our created potential.

Holds that nothing in human nature needs to be “fixed.”

Argues that our desires are not disordered.

**Rogers**

Denounces Freudian pessimism about human nature’s inherent destructive tendencies.

Acknowledges the power of “conditions of worth” leading to incongruence.

Defines incongruence as violating the organismic growth tendency.

Supports Maslow’s reference of self-actualizing people.

Argues that the probability of incongruence arises from social expectations.

Moves away from Freudian intrapsychic pessimism.

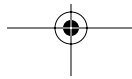
Claims that our organismic tendency moves in a healthy direction.

Says there is an undeniable, innate actualizing tendency.

Holds that the human organism is completely trustworthy.

Argues that our instincts are not dangerous.

Despite these similarities, on one central issue the Pelagian position and the Rogerian position markedly differ. Contrary to popular criticism, Rogers does *not* believe that we can “save ourselves.” While we are born with an inherent actualizing tendency, once we fall into distorted awareness, acceptance (grace) must be mediated to us. Self-acceptance and the healing of our self-estrangement comes as a result of *being* accepted and understood, and not from our own heroic efforts to accept ourselves. Healing is relational, not individual.





### THE LARGER ISSUE: SIN AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

There is a larger issue at stake here than whether a theological anthropologist such as Niebuhr can find a point of contact with a humanistic psychologist such as Rogers. The deeper issue is how we relate an emphasis on prideful self-assertion and grandiosity with a focus on the underdeveloped self. How can we talk, in the same breath, about prideful sin and low self-esteem? Can we meaningfully appropriate insights from the Augustinian-Niebuhr tradition as well as an alternative perspective that identifies our problem as undervaluing ourselves? Further, does “pride” or rebellious self-assertion have a monopoly on our understanding of sin, or do we need to look at other attitudes and forms of behavior to form a more comprehensive picture of human estrangement?

Initially, the prospect of comparing a traditional Christian view of sin with the notion of self-actualization may seem like quite a challenge. In my efforts, I must not in any way minimize the differences. Yet it is my hope that a greater understanding can emerge from examining this tension. The challenge will be to show that *both* the Augustinian emphasis on pride and the humanistic emphasis on low self-esteem, however different, have something extremely important to say about the human condition.

Before any sort of integration of positions can be offered, however, we must clearly understand the polar opposition and explanatory power of both the overvalued-self perspective, as well as the undervalued-self thesis. We will first turn to the self-exaltation position, the traditional Augustinian argument, which has been richly illuminated by Reinhold Niebuhr.

