

FOR THE RECORD

In the January issue of "Liberty," Dr. Michael R. Edelstein published an article entitled "The Trouble with Self-Esteem," in which he mischaracterizes and then attacks my theory of self-esteem.

To anyone familiar with the writings of Dr. Albert Ellis, the intellectual influence on Dr. Edelstein is obvious. Dr. Ellis has been misrepresenting my views for over three decades (ever since our debate in New York City in the 1960s) and the Liberty article seems to follow in that tradition, although I must acknowledge that Dr. Edelstein and I are now pursuing a rather benevolent e-mail "conversation" aimed at seeing if greater mutual understanding is possible.

In his article, Dr. Edelstein writes: "Branden maintains that we're worthwhile human beings if we make good choices, act honestly and act with integrity. We can then esteem ourselves highly because we can tell ourselves, in Branden's words, "I coped well with the basic challenges of life."

Elsewhere in the article he implies that my approach is expressed in this view: "a person judges his performance to be good, then he forms a higher opinion of HIMSELF, not just his performance. Then he basks in the glow of contemplating what a terrific person he is. Then, he feels happier, and performs even better."

1. Nowhere do I ever state that we are "worthwhile human beings if we make good choices, act honestly and act with integrity." That way of thinking about self-esteem is totally foreign to my approach. I never write or talk about who is or is not "a worthwhile human being." That is the way Drs. Ellis and Edelstein think about self-esteem, not the way I do. Read "The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem" and judge for yourself.

And "Branden" would never write or say "I coped well with the challenges of life," as, in effect, explaining why I (or whoever) enjoys good self-esteem.

2. Self-esteem is a particular way of experiencing the self. I define self-esteem as the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and as worthy of happiness. I will not attempt here to summarize the entire theory and the reasoning behind it. But to clarify that my concept of self-esteem has very little to do with "rating" oneself in the way Dr. Edelstein suggests, I offer the following observations.

Let us say that you are in poor physical shape and also experience yourself as being in poor physical shape—that is, tire easily, have little stamina, often get short of breath, are physically weak, etc. The problem here, obviously, is not that you "rate" yourself as being in poor physical shape, the problem is that you ARE in poor physical shape. Then, let's say, you join a gym, hire a trainer, and begin to work on improving your condition. You lose weight, become more flexible, grow stronger, develop better stamina, etc. As a consequence, two things happen: you become in better physical shape and you experience yourself as being in better physical shape. Your experience is not the result of mere "rating." Rather, it reflects a direct perception of reality. You are experiencing an objective change in your physical condition.

"Rating" is not the issue. If you are in lousy shape physically, but refuse

to "rate" your condition—will you then experience yourself as physically fit as a person who eats wisely and exercises regularly?

Now apply the same thinking to self-esteem.

Let us say that you spend too much of your life operating semi-consciously; denying and disowning your thoughts, feelings, and actions; avoiding responsibility for your choices and actions; blaming others for all your misfortunes; refusing to be accountable for anything; surrendering to your fear of self-expression or self-assertiveness so you are rarely authentic in your interactions with others; drifting through life without focus, purpose, or goals; and permitting yourself many contradictions between what you know, what you profess, and what you do. As a consequence, you do not feel very competent in the face of life's challenges; you're not proud of your choices and actions; you have little confidence in your mind (since you avoid using it); and you are unable to feel respect for yourself.

Bottom line: you don't have much self-esteem. Does this mean you are "worthless?" Of course not. This notion is the Ellis/Edelstein straw man.

And is the problem of your low self-esteem merely a result of "self-rating?" If you could somehow avoid such "rating," would you feel as happy with yourself as a person who lived consciously, self-acceptingly, self-responsibly, self-assertively, purposefully, and with integrity?

Note I am not saying that you "should" damn yourself as a worthless human being (which is what Ellis/Edelstein suggest is my position). I am saying that over time our choices and actions irresistibly affect how we think and feel about ourselves. Ellis/Edelstein seem to be saying that if only we abstain from "self-rating," our rationality or irrationality need have no effect on our sense of self. (To say it again: Self-esteem is a particular way of experiencing the self.)

No psychotherapist in his right mind would ever suggest that one "should" feel self-damnation. If there is anything therapists agree on, it is that self-acceptance is the necessary foundation of healthy change and growth. In several of my books I have written about the importance of self-acceptance and the counter-productiveness of self-repudiation or self-damnation—see, for example, "How to Raise Your Self-Esteem" and "The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem".

If someone wants to challenge my theory of self-esteem, I will welcome the opportunity to learn. But first, let's be clear on what I've said and not said.