Today, the largest and most familiar part of American Psychology is the popular psychology of self-esteem, now found throughout American society. Self-esteem and the obsession that so many have with it, is familiar to almost all of us these days. Self-esteem programs affect the lives of countless school children, because this idea, really an ideal, has been taken and applied primarily in education.

Historically, the concept of self-esteem has no clear or obvious intellectual origins. No major psychological theorist made it a central concept. Many psychologists, however, have emphasized the self in various ways but the usual focus has been on self-actualization or fulfillment of one's potential. As a result, it is difficult to trace the source of this emphasis on self-esteem. Apparently, this widespread preoccupation is a distillation of the general concern with the self found in so many psychological theories. Self-esteem seems to be the common denominator pervading the writings of such varied theorists as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, ego-strength psychologists, and moral educators especially recently. In any case, the concern with self-esteem hovers everywhere in the US today. It is, however, most reliably found in the world of education — from professors of education, to principals, teachers, school boards, and the television programs that are concerned with education, particularly those programs concerned with preschool education like Sesame Street.

Self worth, a feeling of respect and confidence in one's being has merit as we shall see. But an ego-centered, let me feel good self-esteem, where we can ignore our failures and our need for God is quite another thing. What is wrong with the concept of self-esteem? Lots, and it's fundamental in nature. There have been thousands of psychological studies on self-esteem. Often the term self-esteem is muddled and confused as it becomes a label for such various aspects as self image, as self acceptance, self worth, self love, self trust, etcetera. The bottom line is that no agreed upon definition or measure for self-esteem exists. And whatever self-esteem is, no reliable evidence supports self-esteem scores as meaning much at all.

There is no evidence that high self-esteem reliably causes anything. Indeed, a lot of people with little of it, have achieved a great deal in one kind of activity or the other. For instance, Gloria Steinem, who has written a number of books and been a major leader of the feminist movement, recently revealed in a book long statement that she suffers from low self-esteem. And many people with high self-esteem are happy just being rich, beautiful, or socially connected. Some other people, whose high self-esteem has been noted are successful inner-city drug dealers who generally feel quite good about themselves. After all they have succeeded in making a lot of money in a hostile and competitive environment.

A 1989 study of mathematical skills compared students in eight different countries. American students ranked lowest in mathematical competence and Korean students ranked highest. But the researchers also asked students to rate how good they were at mathematics. The Americans ranked highest in self-judged mathematical ability, while the Koreans ranked lowest. Mathematical self-esteem had an inverse relation to mathematical accomplishment. This is certainly an example of a feel-good psychology keeping students from an accurate perception of reality. The self-esteem theory predicts that only those who feel good about themselves will do well, which is supposedly why all students need it. But in fact, feeling good about yourself may simply make you over confident, narcissistic and unable to work hard. Now, I am not implying that high self-esteem is always negatively related to accomplishment. Rather, the research mentioned above shows that measures of self-esteem have no reliable relationship to behavior, either positive or negative. In part, this is simply because life is too complicated for so simple a notion to be of much use. But for other reasons we should expect this failure in advance.
We all know, and know of, people who are motivated by insecurities and self doubts. These are often both the heroes and the villains of history. The prevalence of certain men of small stature in the history of fanatical military accomplishment is well documented. Julius Cesar, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin were all men determined to prove they were big. Many great athletes and others have had to overcome grave physical disabilities and a lack of self-esteem. One might call this the Demosthenes effect after the ancient Greek with a speech impediment. He practiced speaking with his mouth full of pebbles and later became a famous orator.

Many superior achievements appear to have their origin in what psychologist, Alfred Adler, called an inferiority complex. The point is not that feeling bad about ourselves is good, but rather that only two things can truly change how we feel about ourselves. Real accomplishment and real love.

First, accomplishment in the real world affects our attitudes. A child who learns to read, who can do mathematics, who can play the piano or baseball, will have a genuine sense of accomplishment and an appropriate sense of self-esteem. Schools that fail to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, corrupt the proper understanding of self-esteem. Educators, who say don't grade them, don't label them, you have to make them feel good about themselves, cause these problems. It makes no sense for students to be full of self-esteem if they have learned nothing. Reality will soon puncture their illusions and they will have to face two disturbing facts: that they are ignorant; and that the adults responsible for teaching them have lied to them.

In the real world, praise has to be the reward for something worthwhile. Praise must be connected to reality.

There is an even more fundamental way in which most people come to genuine self-esteem, actually to feelings of self worth or what psychologists call "basic trust." Such feelings come through receiving love.

First of all, our mother's love, normally. But this foundational experience of love and self confidence cannot be faked. When teachers attempt to create this deep and motivating emotion by pretending they love all their students for one hour or less a day, and by praising them indiscriminately, they misunderstand the nature of this kind of love. Parental love simply cannot be manufactured by a teacher in a few minutes of interaction a day. The child not only knows that such love is fake, but that real teachers are supposed to teach, and that this involves not just support, but discipline, demands, and reprimands, in short tough love.

Good teachers show their love by caring enough to use discipline. Thus the best and most admired teachers in most American high schools today, are the athletic coaches. They still teach, but they expect performance and they rarely worry about self-esteem. One of the best things that can happen for a budding football player who isn't any good is to be cut from the team, because then he can begin looking for what he is good at. Instead of struggling at football where he would be wasting crucial years of his life being a third-rate player, he might become a first-rate golfer, or math student or artist. A lot of things in life we discover by the process of elimination and we have to have enough faith in our teachers that they'll eliminate us from some of the subjects we don't belong in so that we can find where we do belong.

Similar problems arise for those who try to build their own lagging self-esteem by speaking lovingly to their own inner child or other insecure inner self. Such attempts are doomed to failure for two reasons: first, if we are insecure about our self worth, how can we believe our own praise? Think about it. If you don't think you're really very worthwhile, how can you tell yourself you are and believe it? Reality has to come in — other people's love or the actual accomplishment of something. Then you know, "Hey, it's grounded." Otherwise it's kind of your own little psychological narcotic. And second, like the child, we know the need for self discipline and accomplishment. In short, self-esteem should be understood as a response, not a cause. It is primarily an emotional response to what we and what others have done to us. Though it is a desirable feeling or internal state, like happiness, it does not
cause much. Also, like happiness and like love, self-esteem is almost impossible to get by trying to get it. Try to get self-esteem and you're likely to fail, but do good to others and accomplish something for yourself and you will have all you need.

The subject is vital for Christians partly because so many are so concerned about it, and partly because the recovery of self-esteem has been emphasized very explicitly, particularly in Protestant Christianity. We must note, however, that self-esteem is a deeply secular concept, not one with which Christians should be particularly involved. Nor need they be. Christians should have a tremendous sense of self worth. God made us in His image, He loves us, He sent His Son to save each of us, our destiny is to be with God forever. Each of us is of such value that the angels rejoice over every repentant sinner.

But on the other hand, we have nothing on our own to be proud of. We were given life along with all of our talents, and we are all poor sinners. There is certainly no theological reason to believe that the rich or the successful or the high in self-esteem are more favored by God and are more likely to reach heaven. Indeed, blessed are the humble, blessed are the meek.

In addition, self-esteem is based on the very American notion that each of us is responsible for our own happiness. Thus, within a Christian framework, self-esteem has a subtle and negative effect; we may take the pursuit of happiness as a far more intense personal goal than the pursuit of holiness.

Today, self-esteem has become very important because it is thought to be essential to happiness. Unless you love yourself you will not be happy. But to assume that we must love ourselves that God will not love us as much as we need to be loved is a form of practical atheism. We say we believe in God but we don't trust Him. Instead, many Christians live by the very unbiblical: "God loves those who love themselves."

Another problem is that Christians have begun to excuse evil or destructive behavior on the grounds of low self-esteem. But self-esteem, whether high or low, does not determine our actions. We are accountable for them and we are responsible for trying to do good and to avoid evil. Low self-esteem does not make someone an alcoholic, nor does it make a person finally able to admit his or her addiction and do something about it. Both of these decisions are up to each of us regardless of our level of self-esteem.

Finally, the whole focus on ourselves feeds unrealistic self love. What psychologists often call narcissism. One would have thought America had enough trouble with narcissism in the 70s which was the Me Generation and in the 80s with the yuppies. Today, the search for self-esteem is just the newest expression of America's old egomania.

In giving school children happy faces for all their homework just because it was handed in or giving them trophies for just being on the team is flattery of the kind found for decades in our commercial slogans — "You deserve a break today," "You are the boss," "Have it your way." Such self love is an extreme expression of an individualistic psychology long supported by our consumer world. Now, it is reinforced by educators who gratify the vanity of even our youngest children with repetitive mantras like "You are the most important person in the whole world."

This narcissistic emphasis in American society and especially in education and to some extent in religion is a disguised form of self worship. If accepted, America would have 250 million "most important persons in the whole world." Two hundred and fifty million golden selves. If such idolatry were not socially so dangerous, it would be embarrassing, even pathetic. Let's hope common sense makes something of a come back.

Talk given to priests in New Westminster, British Columbia on September 29, 1995.
See http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0001.html