

---

## COMMENTARY - BEYOND THE LANGUAGE OF CONSUMPTION.

---

# ESTEEM: A SCARCE AND VALUABLE GOOD

---

By Luigino Bruni

Published in *Avvenire* on July 14, 2013



Esteem is an increasingly scarce good in our society, and therefore is all the more valuable. Though “demand” for esteem is on the rise, the “supply” is insufficient because we are all so busy looking for it that we lack the time and resources to supply it to those who also seek it, desire it and even crave it. The need for esteem is much greater than our capacity to supply it, as the economist Geoffrey Brennan and the philosopher Philip Pettit remind us in their book *The Economy of Esteem*. The present shortage of esteem is symptomatic of a typical failing of our market based society. Such a society is characterized by the expansion of the dominion of markets, which results in the extreme scarcity of any goods that cannot be priced, the kind of goods that are often essential to leading a good private and social life. In short, we suffer from a widespread shortage of non-market, free goods, and esteem is among them.

True esteem is not a commodifiable good. However, the capitalist market is aware of the unquenched hunger for esteem in the world and strives to provide goods as a substitute for it. These goods are mainly “positional goods”, i.e., goods we purchase in order to meet our need for attention, recognition, distinction and ultimately esteem from others.

The pursuit of positional goods has existed in all societies. However, these goods are now invading our individualistic, solitary society, and we rely on such goods, through the language of conspicuous consumption, to convey to others who we are, lacking a more articulate way to communicate this. Our enormous fascination with these goods hinges on the fact that we establish a “dialogue” with the things we own (and even the ones we do not). The more inarticulate we feel in other forms of communication, the more proficient we become in this language, only to discover - if and when we do so - that the things we manage to describe with it are too few and meager, never the things that are significant to our happiness. The language of consumption is likely to become the new Esperanto of lonely people misguidedly looking for esteem and happiness in all the wrong places.

Esteem is not easily identified because it is often mixed with other human feelings, such as recognition, awe, respect, attraction and, above all, admiration. Esteem, however, has its own distinctive features and characteristics.

First of all, esteem involves graciousness because it can only be donated freely and sincerely, not bought or sold. Sincerity too is essential; if the recipient of one’s esteem believes it was conveyed only to make him or her happy or, even worse, out of a sense of pity, the joy of true esteem will be transformed into the opposite. Our duty to truthfulness prevails over the need for esteem. This is a fact that educators and teachers are well aware of. In fact, if a student believes that an appreciative remark from a teacher is insincere, that “esteem” will result in discouragement and diminished self-esteem. False esteem is also called flattery (which the powerful, always in desperate need of esteem, receive vast amounts of), and it can also result from taking shortcuts that avoid dedicating the time necessary to discovering the reasons for true esteem.

Thus, esteem requires spoken words without mediation. Esteem must be verbally expressed, spoken. It is not a “like” button. This is why esteem, unlike admiration, can only arise between individuals with a personal relationship. One may admire a great athlete or a writer, but one must begin a personal relationship with somebody to turn admiration into esteem; it is imperative to speak.

Esteem, unlike the fascination with or attraction to aesthetic appearance or particular gifts (such as physical beauty or intelligence), arises only from moral reasons. We do not hold someone in high esteem on account of his or her green eyes, but for the virtues he or she possesses. We may be attracted to or fascinated by a specific trait that a person possesses (e.g., a particular talent), but esteem is always a comprehensive assessment of the person as a whole (which is why it is so intensely sought-after). It is due to its comprehensive nature that gaining one's esteem is a process, a rough and fragile journey. Esteem always originates when we are struck on our first encounter by a particular trait someone possesses (such as honesty, goodness or righteousness). However, as we get to know and become familiar with that person, other dimensions of his or her character may become evident, which may eventually lead us to arrive at the unfortunate and all-too-common conclusion that we "no longer hold that person in high esteem". This is a sad and often disastrous realization, especially when expressed to spouses after years of marriage, mutual esteem and "love and honor". It is at this point, if we want it and have the moral and spiritual resources for it, that the asceticism of esteem begins. It is a long and painful process, but it is also a sublime way to find new reasons to once again hold someone in high esteem and gain the other's respect. Because esteem is a relational good, it is deeply intertwined with reciprocity ("outdo one another in showing honor"), which complicates and enriches the whole process; the esteem of those we do not esteem does not bring us any joy. For this reason, true esteem always involves giving and forgiving.

In conclusion, the short supply of esteem in the world depends on, perhaps above all else, the lack of people who are able to find reasons to hold others in high esteem. Many people who seem unworthy of our admiration likely display at least one honest, good and beautiful quality that could make them deserving of our esteem, if only they were looked upon with sympathetic eyes. But these "eyes" that can look deeply into the soul of another are exceedingly rare in our society. We know, or at least intuitively believe, that there is something worthy of esteem in each of us. Despite this, we consider ourselves the victims of genuine injustice when others do not perceive the beauty in us and do not recognize that we are beautiful. That feeling of being underestimated, not truly known and recognized, is among the most intense, painful and long-lasting in human existence. I have had the good fortune to have some friends who held certain things about me in high esteem, even before I myself became aware of their presence; their admiration and respect made these qualities within flourish and mature. This profound esteem is capable of transforming things that are "not yet" into something that is "already". Charisms throughout history have been able to endow people with vision that allows them to find the best in those who do not respect or admire themselves and are therefore incapable of holding others or even life in high esteem. People possess countless dimensions of beauty, honesty and goodness that will wither and die simply because there are no eyes will or able to see them, love them, and help them develop.

*Translated by Tomás Olcese*