The Decent Society

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The Paradox of Humiliation

There seems to be a competing notion of humiliation to that of rejection from human society. This is the notion of humiliation as the deliberate infliction of utter loss of freedom and control over one's vital interests. I maintain, however, that the idea of humiliation as rejection contains the idea of humiliation as loss of control. Yet each idea emphasizes a different perspective. Humiliation as rejection stresses the injurer's point of view, whereas humiliation as loss of control underlines the standpoint of the humiliated. But first we must clarify in what sense humiliation involves loss of control.

Sick or old people sometimes lose control over their bodily functions. This gives them a painful sense of loss of dignity. A central component of the sense of pride in oneself is a sense of self-control. Respect for self-control is also an important element of the respect others command in us. The Indian chief in the Western, who speaks in a composed tone of utter self-control, gives us the sense that he has impressive pride in himself. In the exhibition of social honor, as in the representation of personal dignity, gestures of self-control have a place of honor.

Self-control must be distinguished from self-discipline. Self-discipline is manifested in the control one exercises over one's actions in a specific area, with respect to a specific goal. An artisan may be capable of strict discipline in his work even when it involves the hardship of giving up immediate, or not-so-immediate, satisfactions for the sake of achieving professional perfection. The same artisan, however, may show an utter lack of self-control in his nonprofessional life. People who nourish cold revenge manifest self-discipline rather than self-control. Self-control is not tied to a specific goal—it is not confined to the Procrustean bed of some definite act.

Loss of self-respect as loss of self-control is related to the idea of self-respect as autarchy. A self-controlled person seems unaffected by external stimuli. But the distinction between external and internal stimuli is problematic. In one sense Don Quixote was reacting to windmills—an external stimulus—but he reacted to them under the description of knights' horses that came from his feverish brain—an "internal" stimulus. Yet in spite of the difficulty, the general idea is clear: self-control is manifested in delayed reactions, reflective rather than reflexive, to the external environment. It is expressed in overcoming one's "inner drives" by acting on the basis of reasons and not only on the basis of causes and motives. A considerable proportion of the most humiliating gestures are those which show the victims that they lack even the most minuscule degree of control over their fate—that they are helpless and subject to the good will (or rather, the bad will) of their tormentors.

But what is the connection between this and the idea that lack of control touches our central conception of

humiliation as the rejection of human beings as human? Sartre provides us with a useful framework for discussing the connection between humiliation as lack of control—that is, lack of freedom—and humiliation as the rejection of human beings as human.

Seeing human beings in a human aspect, according to Sartre, means seeing them as free to make decisions bearing on their lives. Seeing a human being as a thing, as a "body," is seeing him as unfree. When a person denies his ability to be free (what Sartre calls "having bad faith"), we see him as behaving according to a tag attached to him from the outside. The waiter in Sartre's famous example behaves like a marionette of a waiter.[1] He does not behave under the aspect of humanness, but as if he were playing a role—as if his role had taken the place of his soul. We do not see the owner of a body or the player of a role in a fully human aspect as long as we see him merely in terms of his body or his role—in other words, as long as we do not see him as a free agent capable of making decisions about the conduct of his life.

I have already mentioned Sartre's view that human beings have no nature, but now I must hedge this claim. Humans have no nature in the sense that they have no set of "character" traits or tendencies that uniquely determine the course of their lives. Every human being has the radical possibility of starting life anew at any moment irrespective of his life's previous course. This freedom to shape one's life is, in another sense, the only nature humans have, in contrast to other animals and things. Humans have no character, but they do have a nature in this sense.

Such ambivalence about the meaning of the concept

"nature" is not new. Marx also denies that Man has a nature and insists on Man's always having the capacity to rebel. In other words, it is impossible to eradicate Man's rebellious nature—it can only be temporarily paralyzed. The assertion that humans are free beings is an ontological assertion, like Descartes' characterization of matter as having extension and of the soul as thinking. Treating someone in a way that denies her capacity to be free is rejecting her as a human being. The sadist treats his victim as solely a body, not seeing her under the aspect of freedom—in other words, not seeing her in a human aspect. The masochist, complementarily, is one who presents herself to her tormentor as entirely unfree. The name of the game between the two is humiliation.

Relations between a sadist and a masochist, especially of a sexual kind, involve an inhuman attitude toward the fettered victim as someone who allows her molester to act out his fantasies of omnipotence. As in the master-slave relationship, it turns out that this is a self-defeating attitude. An aspirant to omnipotence needs to have his absolute superiority recognized. Such recognition has value only if it comes from a free agent, that is, a full-fledged person. This being so, much treatment of humans as nonhuman is "as-if." This means that the treatment does not really deny the humanness of the other on an ontological level. It denies the other's freedom on the level of the concrete relations between them. Curtailing the freedom of the other, and making gestures designed to show that the other is severely limited in her control, may constitute a rejection of the other as human. Such is the connection between humiliation as rejection and humiliation as utter lack of control.

One might ask how this idea of humiliation as taking away human freedom—that is, preventing people from making decisions concerning vital interests of theirs—fits in with the picture presented earlier, of humans as making every effort to avoid decisions. The answer is that there is no logical or practical contradiction between the picture of humans as acting in their everyday life on the basis of habits and standard procedures requiring no decisions, and the picture of a human being as free to make decisions if and when she chooses to do so, in spite of the existence of these habits and routines.

Back to our main concern. The basic claim of this section is that humiliation as a severe diminution of human freedom and control is subsumed under the idea of humiliation as the rejection of human beings as human. This is true under the assumption that rejecting human beings as human means rejecting them as beings capable of freedom, since it is freedom that makes them humans rather than mere things.

I have discussed the connection between two concepts of humiliation—humiliation as rejection from the human commonwealth and humiliation as extreme injury to the other's control over herself. But whichever of these concepts is adopted, the notion of humiliation leads to a paradox. I discuss this paradox in the next section.

The Insult and Humiliation Paradoxes

The words "insult" and "humiliation" are on a continuum. Humiliation is an extreme case of insult, while both of them denote injury to one's honor. This book, however, makes a qualitative distinction between the two. "Insult"

denotes injury to one's social honor; "humiliation" denotes injury to one's self-respect. Insults may injure the offended person's self-esteem. Humiliation injures one's sense of intrinsic value.

The paradox of humiliation may be expressed graphically as follows: if the mark of Cain is stamped on Cain's forehead then there is nothing wicked about it, because Cain deserves it. And if the mark of Cain is stamped on Abel's forehead by mistake, Abel ought not to take it too hard, since he knows very well that he has not shed blood. He should not think badly of himself just because the mark of Cain was mistakenly stamped on his forehead.

Insult is a social evil because of the ill it causes to the offended one in the eyes of others. But if humiliation, in contrast, involves supplying victims with a sound reason for viewing their self-respect as having been injured, it seems to lack any raison d'être. For if, as mentioned, the humiliation is merely justified criticism, then it should change the way people evaluate themselves without damaging their self-respect. And if it is unjustified, then it should not even diminish their self-esteem, let alone damage their self-respect. The humiliation paradox returns us in essence to the Stoic critique that it is never rational to feel humiliated. That is, people may be humiliated in a psychological sense, but not in a normative sense.

Bernard Williams distinguishes between "red" and "white" emotions—that is, emotions that make us blush and emotions that make us pale. Shame is a red emotion; guilt is a white emotion. A red emotion is an emotion in which one sees herself through the eyes of the other, and therefore blushes. In a white emotion the person sees

herself with the "inner eyes" of her conscience, which may make her pale. One's point of view in the two types of emotions is different. The paradox of humiliation is that on the one hand the person sees herself through the eyes of others—the bullies—yet on the other hand the normative sense of humiliation is that she is to respond from her own point of view. Humiliation is a red emotion, yet the victim assumes a response which fits a white emotion. A person's face cannot be red all over and white all over at the same time.

Insult, by definition, depends on the attitude of the other, since it involves an injury to the person's social honor. If the insult is based on a false charge, yet the insulted one has reason to believe that, false or not, he will have to pay with his social honor, then he has good reason to be insulted. But in the case of an unjustified act of humiliation—and any attempt to humiliate a person is unjustified—the question is whether the victim has a sound reason for considering himself humiliated, that is, for considering his self-respect to have been diminished in his own eyes.

Let us sharpen the question. Humiliation is the rejection of human beings as human, that is, treating people as if they were not human beings but merely things, tools, animals, subhumans, or inferior humans. It is easy to see why such "as if" treatment is liable to be insulting and shaming—that is, excessively damaging to people's social honor. But why should such treatment provide the victims with a reason for considering themselves devalued in their worth as human beings? Why should they adopt the point of view that the humiliating bully is trying to get them to

adopt? That victims tend to identify with their tormentors is regarded as a psychological fact, but our question is normative, not psychological.

Humiliation involves an existential threat. It is based on the fact that the perpetrator—especially the institutional humiliator—has power over the victim he assails. It crucially involves the sense of utter helplessness that the bully gives the victim. This sense of defenselessness manifests itself in the victim's fear of impotence in protecting vital interests of hers. Even if the humiliated person attempts to turn the tables and see her tormentor—in the nonliteral sense of seeing—as a beast, this should not mitigate her feeling of humiliation. Humiliation coming from a human monster, such as Mengele, is indeed humiliation. The victim perceives the existential threat in the humiliating acts and is aware of her own helplessness in the face of this threat. Even if she succeeds in convincing herself that the "handsome devil" on the platform, as Mengele appeared to his victims, is really a devil and not a human being, she has not rid herself of the justified awareness of the humiliation in her situation. The humiliation exists, and it is justified, since the victim cannot help seeing Mengele as human. The tactic of seeing Mengele as a wild beast and thus not seeing his actions as a reason for humiliation is just that—a tactic. My claim is that even if the tactic worked, the humiliating situation would remain. Humiliation, as the rejection of human beings as human, even if it is performed ritually or symbolically without any physical cruelty, serves as a signal of existential rejection that is not symbolic at all. There is a constant threat of living a life unworthy of a human being.

During their long history of survival in the Diaspora,

Jews often assumed an attitude toward Gentiles that considered the latter to be "barking dogs." No one need be insulted or humiliated by them; after all, no one is insulted or humiliated by a barking dog. The dog may be frightening, never humiliating. This attempt by victims of humiliation to dehumanize their tormentors, understandable as it is, is not entirely unlike the bullies' attempt to dehumanize their victims.

Another device used by Jews throughout the centuries is the "Good Soldier Schweik" technique, the adoption of an attitude of mock innocence toward the potential tormentor—an attitude that avoids taking the bully seriously by making him a ridiculous figure. Yet it would seem that this option is always available, and so the question is why humiliation should ever be taken seriously. The existential threat implicit in the humiliation must be taken seriously, but not the humiliation itself. The victim has no reason to see any flaw in his human value, but only a danger to his existence, or to his basic human condition.

But all these defensive tricks of the weak in humiliating situations—the "barking dog" tactic, the "Good Soldier Schweik" technique, turning a badge of shame into a badge of honor, as in "Black is beautiful," or the denial tactic of "He's not spitting on me, it's only raining"—cannot uproot the humiliating situation. At most they may mitigate it somewhat.

But, again, why is this so? Why is it rational to consider yourself humiliated? Society is a prerequisite for social honor, but only you are needed to bestow self-respect upon yourself. If this is the case, then how can strangers, whether individuals or a group, determine whether and how you should respect yourself? Moreover, self-respect

is the respect you confer upon yourself as a human being. It is not based on any evaluation of yourself for any sort of achievement. Being human is a feature, not a relation. Being human is not dependent in any way on what anyone thinks about you, or how anyone treats you, just as your having bushy hair is not a feature dependent on anyone's attitude or on what anyone thinks about your hair. Even if other people laugh at your hair, saying it is thinning, this ridicule does not give you a sound reason for feeling or believing that you are losing your hair, if in fact it is still bushy.

One answer to this query is: although self-respect is an attitude you may have toward yourself, it depends on the attitude of others toward you. This dependence is not merely causal—it does not consist only of the fact that what people think of you, and the way they treat you, affect your own attitude toward yourself psychologically. The dependence is conceptual as well.

The skeptical justification for respecting human beings is rooted in the fact that we all recognize one another as part of humanity and for this reason and this reason alone we deserve respect. As mentioned, the skeptical justification is based from the outset on an attitude rather than a trait. Any traits that might be used to justify respect are parasitic on our attitude toward human beings as human. Thus any attempt to reject a person from the human commonwealth erodes the base on which respect is founded. Even if the humiliated person has no doubt that she has incurred an appalling injustice, whereas she is just as human as anyone else, she cannot ignore how others treat her in shaping the way she regards herself. This is because the attitude of others, however base they may be,

is required for determining what defines the commonwealth of mankind—a commonwealth that there is value in belonging to. The attitude of others is built into the very concept of the value of humans which the bearer of self-respect is supposed to adopt with regard to herself. All in all, someone with self-respect is not exempt from taking into account the attitude of other people toward her.

There are important issues in philosophy where structural problems crop up in which cases that on the surface do not appear to require reference to things outside themselves turn out under analysis to require such reference after all. Thus, for example, Hume's analysis of causality is based on the idea that one event is the cause of another only if events of the first type are always accompanied by events of the second type. But why do we need these other events of the same type? If there were only one windowpane in the world, and only one stone, wouldn't the throwing of this stone at that windowpane be the cause of the window's breaking even if there were no other cases of stone-throwing or broken windows in the world? According to the analysis given by Hume, who believes that causality is in the way we view things and not in the "world," other events are necessary in order for us to be able to create the concept of causality. This concept is a psychological product of conditioning, and in Hume's view there is no conditioning on the basis of one stimulus. This is true of all general terms, such as "red." "Red" may be defined, say, as whatever is the same color as my spilled blood. But isn't it possible that my spilled blood might be the only red thing in the universe? Here too the concept of red could not be formed if there were only one red

thing in the world. The same sort of argument suggests that my language would also be impossible if I did not know that others share it. Indeed, there is a whole battery of philosophical arguments in which it seems at first that there is a concept that could be applied to only one thing in the world, without anything else having to exist, yet under scrutiny it turns out that the formation of such a concept calls for the existence of other things. Likewise, self-respect, although based on one's human worth in one's own eyes, implicitly assumes the need for other respectful human beings.

Divine Honor and Human Dignity

It may be helpful to compare the concept of human dignity with the notion of divine honor in the monotheistic religions. God, in these religions, is jealous of His honor. God demands to be honored even by people who have proved by their actions—the worship of other gods—that they are not worthy of honoring Him. God's zeal for His honor is odd since the other gods are considered worthless and insubstantial, yet it is precisely these nonentities that the foolish idolaters choose to worship. What is the point of requiring the followers of these "broken cisterns" to worship the source of the "living waters"? Why demand the honor of the One and Only God from a community of fools and evildoers? Can God and His "self-respect" be dependent on such people?

The conclusion to be drawn from this argument is the blunt statement that if the Great and Terrible God requires the affirmation of human beings, then other human beings require it all the more. The biblical God

requires even those who are least worthy of worshiping and honoring Him to preserve His honor. Out of *imitatio Dei* we can say that the psychological fact that we find ourselves humiliated—perhaps degraded is a better word in this case—even by the lowest of the low is a fundamental fact of our lives. The attempt to find a general justification for this fact is ludicrous. That's the way it is, that's life. Of course, in certain instances we may ask someone to justify why he considers himself humiliated by something that no one else considers humiliating—for example, if it really is raining and he believes someone is spitting on him. But to ask why the Jews in the Viennese square considered themselves degraded when their Nazi tormentors forced them to scrub the pavement is absurd. If that is not humiliation, then what is?

But there is another way of understanding God's need to be honored even by those who are not worthy of honoring Him. This is an interpretation of the need for honor through a paradox complementary to the humiliation paradox—namely, the paradox of love. The lover, in sharp contrast to the humiliator, sees the object of his or her love as human. Treating the beloved as human means accepting the other as having freedom of choice. On the one hand the lover wants to appropriate the beloved exclusively for himself, but on the other hand he wants her to choose him freely. Even if she does choose him, however, he remains full of anxiety that she may one day stop loving him. Thus he finds himself in a state of sharp tension between the desire for absolute control over the beloved in order to keep her exclusively his and the opposite desire that the other, the beloved, should remain free to choose, even though this endangers the lover's

exclusivity. (This, for example, is how Sartre interprets Proust's Albertine.) God wants to be loved and honored exclusively, but this love and worship have value only if they come from beings with the power to choose, including making exceedingly mistaken choices, even the choice of worshiping nonentities.

These paradoxes attest that there is a self-defeating element in the enterprises of love and humiliation. This is not a logical contradiction which would make it impossible to love or to humiliate anyone. It is rather a conceptual tension that raises the question of whether love and humiliation are emotions that can be justified, and not merely caused. I have been arguing that one may justifiably feel hurt when rejected in love in favor of a good-for-nothing, and one may justifiably feel humiliated by someone worthless.

Humiliation is a clearer case than love, since humiliation can be felt even in the absence of a humiliating agent. It is possible to be humiliated by one's life conditions, provided they are man-made. This has no parallel in love. Humiliation does not require a humiliator, and so it is less important to find out who the humiliators are than to ascertain whether there is a justification for feeling humiliated. In our case, since we are concerned with institutional humiliation—whose agents are clerks, police, soldiers, prison wardens, teachers, social workers, judges, and all the other agents of authority—we can ignore the subjective intentions of the humiliators in examining whether their actions are degrading. This is especially justified when we are discussing systematic humiliation that is not the whim of a particular individual in authority. It is easy to see systematic institutional humiliation as a

degrading situation, while disregarding the question of whether the humiliators as individuals are significant enough to justify one's feeling humiliated.

Shifting the discussion from humiliating agents to a humiliating situation is not intended to absolve those actually doing the humiliating on behalf of the institutions from their individual moral responsibility for their deeds. It is meant rather to remove the obstacle in understanding why it is rational for victims of humiliation to consider themselves degraded. The shift from a humiliating agent to a humiliating situation is important because institutional humiliation is independent of the peculiarities of the humiliating agent, depending only on the nature of the humiliation. It thus contrasts with the sort of humiliation that takes place in personal relations. You do not have to value the official humiliating you in order to value the institution she is serving. Moreover, you do not even have to value the institution in order to recognize its power to create degrading conditions. Love, unlike humiliation, cannot be shifted from an individual to an institution. Institutions do not love.