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## The Puzzle of Humiliation

What, if anything, is philosophically interesting about humiliation?

- To the extent it is written about, it is treated either:
  - As an afterthought in discussions of shame (e.g. Taylor 1985) and mutual recognition (e.g. Honneth 1992)
  - Or, in connection with legal and political issues (e.g. Nussbaum 2004 & Margalit 1996).
- *My aims:*
  - To show that:
    - Reflecting on humiliation in ways that come naturally to us leads to a puzzle concerning the idea that it is a way of being harmed.
    - A number of ready-to-hand solutions which might seem to immediately resolve this puzzle turn out to face important challenges.

### §1. Two Natural Ideas

This puzzle takes off from two natural ideas:

- (i) The first idea is being humiliated consists, in part, in one's appearing (or being made to appear) to another in a way that is humiliating.
- (ii) Being humiliated is a way of being harmed, and its harmfulness isn't reducible to the harmfulness of its further effects.

William James (1890: 294): 'a man's Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates...To wound any of these his images is to wound him.' (see also Honneth 1992, Carlsson 2018).

### §2. The Puzzle of Humiliation

#### 2.1. *An Initial Statement*

If humiliation consists in appearing (or being made to appear) to be some way in the mind of another, how could this constitute a harm I suffer? Is it rational to regard some humiliation I have undergone as harming me?

'Insults...are nothing to the man who sees in the hardships he suffers nothing but the hardships themselves and not the intention behind them, and whose place in his own self-esteem does not depend on the good-will of others' (Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, p. 130).

#### 2.2. *Social Pain*

Sometimes feelings of humiliation are described as 'social pains' along with feelings of grief and rejection. Can we understand the harmfulness of humiliation in terms of the painfulness of experiences of humiliation?

*Three issues:*

- (i) An experience's being 'socially painful' is not sufficient for its being intrinsically bad for one (example: grief).
- (ii) *Being humiliated without feeling humiliated:* We sometimes think that cases of humiliation in which the victim is unaware that they're being humiliated are more deflating, more humiliating and more harmful than comparable cases in which the victim is aware of their humiliation.
- (iii) *Feeling humiliated without being humiliated:* it is plausible to think that feeling humiliated when one has been humiliated is not on a par, in terms of harm, with feeling humiliated when one hasn't actually been humiliated.

### 2.3. *Desire*

Can we understand the harmfulness of humiliation in terms of the frustration of a standing desire to be seen in a way that acknowledges and accords with our sincere self-presentation?

*Explanatory Challenge:* in order to make sense of this desire, I must understand the aspect under which its object appears *desirable* to the agent (Anscombe, *Intention* §37). How can we do this without presupposing the *explanandum* (the idea that being thought of in a way that acknowledges and accords with my practical identity is good for me)?

### 2.4. *Self-Respect and Dignity*

“Humiliation is harmful insofar as it injures an individual's self-respect (or dignity)”

This is often how humiliation is defined:

- *The Oxford English Dictionary:* ‘to humiliate’ — ‘To lower or depress the dignity or self-respect of’
- Margalit (1996: 9): ‘Humiliation is any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured’
- Nussbaum (2004: 204): ‘Humiliation typically makes the statement that the person in question is low, not on a par with others in terms of human dignity’ .

The Conceptual Puzzle: if the normative ground for my self-respect is inalienable, e.g. my nature as a human being (Margalit) or as a self-legislator of the moral law (Kant) then how could I intelligibly regard it as being depressed or injured?

A response: think of the normative basis of self-respect more expansively than one's nature as a human being, but rather in terms of my ‘practical identity’ (see Korsgaard 1996: 101).

It is sometimes suggested that my practical dependent depends on acknowledgement by others.

Honneth (1992: 131-2): ‘the normative self-image of each and every individual human being...is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others...the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse’

This admits of a psychological and an epistemic reading.

- It might be true that, as a matter of psychological fact, my practical identity is dependent on recognition from others. This doesn't tell me whether it *ought* to be, and therefore does not address the question of whether it is rational for me to regard some humiliation
- Epistemic disconfirmation of my practical identity is neither necessary nor sufficient for harmful humiliation.

### References

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