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Humiliation, dignity and self-respect

DANIEL STATMAN

ABSTRACT *That an intimate connection exists between the notion of human dignity and the notion of humiliation seems to be a commonplace among philosophers, who tend to assume that humiliation should be explained in terms of (violation of) human dignity. I believe, however, that this assumption leads to an understanding of humiliation that is too “philosophical” and too detached from psychological reality. The purpose of the paper is to modify the above connection and to offer a more “down to earth” account of humiliation that does not depend on metaphysical or axiological questions concerning the unique dignity enjoyed by all human beings qua human beings. The paper argues for a subjective–psychological notion of self-respect in the explication of humiliation, instead of an objective–normative one. To be humiliated means to suffer an actual threat to or fall in one’s self-respect.*

That an intimate connection exists between the notion of human dignity and the notion of humiliation seems to be a commonplace. Humiliation is seen as first and foremost an injury to the dignity of its victims, an injury usually described in figurative language: in humiliation, one “is stripped of one’s dignity” (Gilbert, 1997, p. 133), one is “robbed of” dignity (Dillon, 1997, p. 1), or simply “loses” it (Margalit, 1996, p. 115). This close connection between dignity and humiliation has brought some writers to argue that we face a strictly conceptual connection here. In Avishai Margalit’s words, “if there is no concept of human dignity, then there is no concept of humiliation either” (1996, p. 149).

I believe, however, that rather than making our notion of humiliation clearer, this assumed connection creates difficulties. Tying the concept of humiliation to that of human dignity makes the former too “philosophical,” so to say, and too detached from psychological research and theory. The purpose of this paper is to modify this connection and to offer a more down to earth account of humiliation that does not depend on metaphysical and axiological questions concerning the unique dignity enjoyed by all human beings *qua* human beings.

In Section I, I explore the difficulties in the idea that humiliation should be understood in terms of (violation of) human dignity. I then turn, in Section II, to examine whether these difficulties can be overcome by replacing the notion of dignity by that of self-respect, i.e. by defining humiliation as injury to self-respect.

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Following Massey, I distinguish between an objective–normative and a subjective–psychological notion of self-respect and show how taking the former as a basis for understanding humiliation leads us back into trouble. In Section III, I explain in what sense a distinction between justified and unjustified feelings of humiliation can be retained even in a subjective–psychological account of humiliation. In Section IV, I elaborate on the connection between humiliation and exclusion and on the evolutionary basis for this connection. Section V concludes the argument by clarifying the conceptual and normative implications.

I. Humiliation and dignity

In this section, I point to several reasons against making the concept of humiliation dependent on that of human dignity. I refer, first, to the effect of Darwinism, which has undermined notions of the sanctity of human life, and has blurred the metaphysical and moral boundaries between humans and animals. In his 1990 book, *Created from animals*, James Rachels explains the notion of human dignity as follows:

The idea of human dignity is the moral doctrine which says that humans and other animals are in different moral categories; that the lives and interests of human beings are of supreme moral importance, while the lives of other animals are relatively unimportant. That doctrine rests, traditionally, on two related ideas: that man is made in God's image, and that man is a uniquely rational being. (p. 171)

According to Rachels, Darwinism forces us to give up both of these ideas; hence:

the traditional supports for the idea of human dignity are gone. They have not survived the colossal shift of perspective brought down by Darwin's theory. (p. 171)

Therefore, if Margalit is right in assuming that without a concept of human dignity, there is no concept of humiliation, and if Rachels is right in arguing that the idea of human dignity must be abandoned, then we are left with no concept of humiliation, a result which is unacceptable. One could, of course, suggest a different understanding of dignity than the one suggested by Rachels. However, as Rachels' definition reflects a common understanding, I suspect that other definitions would be somewhat stipulative and would not advance our understanding of humiliation.

Second, even granting the notion that humans are unique in some way, what exactly is meant by the notion human dignity is far from clear. According to Rachels, the basis for this notion has to do either with the idea of man being created in the image of God or with the idea of man being a uniquely rational being. But both these ideas are ambiguous and open to different interpretations. Are all human beings made in the image of God, including, for example, very defective fetuses? By virtue of what properties exactly are they said to be His image? Can human beings be ever said to lose these properties? Regarding the unique rationality enjoyed by human beings, it is again unclear what exactly is referred to. Is it some basic rationality shared by all members of the human species, including babies and the

retarded? Is it a mere capacity for rationality or is it rationality actualized? Indeed the philosophical and the legal literature on dignity is full of disagreements about its nature; thus it seems rather unpromising to turn to this notion in order to clarify what we mean by humiliation.

Third, the imprecision and lack of clarity in the notion is especially troubling when one asks whether dignity is a descriptive or a normative notion. To understand it in a descriptive way is to refer to some given feature that all humans possess and by virtue of which they enjoy privileged status in the world [1]. This feature belongs to all members of the human species, irrespective of their rational or moral capacities, and irrespective of the exercise of these capacities [2]. To understand the expression “human dignity” in a normative way is to refer to obligations incumbent on oneself or on others with regard to oneself. Such a normative use is assumed, for example, by Feinberg, when he argues that:

Respect for persons may simply be respect for their rights, so that there cannot be the one without the other; and what is called “human dignity” may simply be the recognizable capacity to assert claims. To respect a person then, or to think of him as possessed of human dignity simply is to think of him as a potential maker of claims. (Feinberg, 1970, pp. 252–253)

Without going into the details of these two different approaches, I want to raise a problem for both with respect to the relation between dignity and humiliation. As I said earlier, humiliation is thought of as a behavior that strips its victims of their dignity. If we hold a descriptive account of dignity, it is difficult to see how such a loss can occur, especially when we bear in mind that the feature that entitles humans to dignity belongs to all members of the species, irrespective of their individual capacities or behavior. If human beings with limited rational capacities nevertheless possess dignity, then one cannot rob human beings of their dignity by injuring their rational capacities. Similarly, if even the wicked possess human dignity, one cannot rob a human being of his dignity by injuring his moral character or behavior. In short, if mere belonging to the human race is sufficient for having dignity (whatever this term denotes), then, necessarily, no human beings can exist who have lost, or have been stripped of, their human dignity. So, paradoxically, if humiliation is injury to dignity, then precisely because dignity is a fixed feature of all human beings, humiliation is impossible.

One might respond by saying that dignity does not belong to all members of the human species, but only to most of them. But apart from its departure from our common understanding of dignity, according to which the notion of dignity is needed to protect precisely those who are humanly underprivileged, this response invites the following objection. We humiliate either those who have dignity or those who do not. If the latter are the intended objects of humiliation, then their dignity cannot be violated, simply because they don’t have dignity. Hence—if one assumes a connection between humiliation and dignity—they cannot be humiliated either. If the former are the intended objects of humiliation, i.e. those human beings who are endowed with dignity, then the only way to strip them of their dignity would be to strip them of the relevant feature(s) by virtue of which they have dignity, e.g. their

rationality. But physically incapacitating some person's rationality would not ordinarily be thought of as a case of humiliation. Such incapacitation would turn its object into an entity with no dignity and, thus, into an entity that (conceptually) cannot be humiliated.

These considerations could be put forward in the form of the following paradox. Assuming that it is by virtue of an entity's having a particular quality, q , that it is wrong to humiliate it, then one of two paradoxical conclusions results: either humiliation is impossible, since everyone has q by virtue of being human, or, in a case where q is a quality that not everyone enjoys and that can be lost, humiliating people makes it less wrong to humiliate them, as it strips them of the very condition for being humiliated [3]. To conclude this discussion, then, a descriptive account of humiliation seems to fail in substantiating the tie between humiliation and dignity.

If, instead, we hold a normative account of dignity, emphasizing rights, claims and obligations, it is again hard to see how dignity might be lost. If, as Feinberg puts it, to have human dignity *is* to have rights or to be a potential maker of claims, then nothing we might do to a human being can rob her of these rights or this potential. One can treat another human being *as if* she had no rights, or *as if* she had no dignity. But one cannot make it the case that she loses her rights or her dignity. Thus, in either account of dignity, it is hard to see what it would mean to lose, or cause the loss of, dignity. Therefore, it would be unhelpful to bind the concept of humiliation to such a loss.

II. Humiliation and self-respect

The above difficulties concerning the connection between the notions of humiliation and dignity seem to be avoided if we focus instead on the notion of self-respect, that is, if we define humiliation as an injury to self-respect. This is the definition offered by Avishai Margalit in his book *The decent society* (1996) [4]. Though I disagree with it, the book contains one of the most thorough and insightful analyses of humiliation. Margalit defines humiliation as:

[A]ny sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured. (Margalit, 1996, p. 9)

However, the notion of self-respect is ambiguous too. The ambiguity concerns a fundamental question about self-respect explicated by Stephen Massey (1983), namely: is it a psychological or a moral concept? According to the psychological, or the subjective, concept of self-respect, "a person who respects himself believes that he acts in accord with his conception of worthy behavior and has confidence that he will continue to do so" (Massey, 1983, p. 248). The crucial point about the subjective concept of self-respect is that "the self-respecting person's beliefs about and attitudes toward himself need not have any particular content, nor must his actions meet any independent standards of worthiness or appropriateness" (p. 249). Self-respect is a subjective attitude each individual has toward him or herself, based on standards for worthiness and excellence endorsed by the individual. On this

account, self-respect can characterize slaves and masters, chauvinist men and servile women, moral saints and moral monsters—provided the slaves, servile women and moral monsters believe that their behavior accords with what *they* regard as the true conception of worthy behavior [5].

By contrast, the moral or objective concept of self-respect contends that a self-respecting person's behavior and attitudes must satisfy independent standards of worthiness. Self-respect is not merely valuing oneself, but valuing oneself *properly*, the criteria for propriety being a matter of dispute between different objective accounts. A well-known account of this sort emphasizes the importance of moral equality, arguing we have self-respect only if we treat ourselves as morally equal to all other human beings. On this account, Uncle Tom does not have proper respect for himself, as he fails to take seriously his moral rights [6].

What concept of self-respect, then, is assumed when we define humiliation in its terms? Does humiliation injure one's subjective—psychological self-respect, or one's moral—objective self-respect [7]? Does humiliation undermine the way its victims actually value themselves, or the way they ought to value themselves? To connect humiliation to subjective self-respect would mean that humiliation is any behavior that makes a person think she is unworthy, or less worthy, of respect, according to her own standards. By contrast, to connect humiliation to objective self-respect would mean that humiliation is any behavior that makes a person unworthy, or less worthy of respect, according to independent standards of worthiness, standards not necessarily acknowledged by the object of humiliation. Thomas Hill's famous example of the servile woman (1991) can illustrate this distinction. The servile woman sees it as her duty to serve her husband, take care of his needs and advance his career, and the fulfillment of these tasks brings her great pleasure and satisfaction. On the psychological—subjective concept of self-respect, her husband's behavior and demands do not injure her self-respect; hence they are not humiliating. On the moral—objective concept, however, the husband's behavior is humiliating, as it reflects and fosters improper self-respect by the servile woman [8].

The moral concept of self-respect is of course tightly connected to the notion of human dignity. It is by virtue of this dignity that human beings are assumed to deserve special respect both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Hence it comes as no surprise that a writer like Margalit, who thinks that “if there is no concept of human dignity, then there is no concept of humiliation either” (Margalit, 1996, p. 149), also utilizes an objective—moral notion of self-respect. In his analysis, self-respect has to do with attitudes such as “insistence on one's basic rights, a mad refusal to compromise one's personal honesty ... or readiness to endanger oneself in a struggle against people who insult or humiliate one, even if they are stronger than oneself” (p. 46). If one is indifferent to one's rights or to personal honesty, then one lacks self-respect and one's dignity is injured, even if on a subjective—psychological level, one has a positive attitude toward the self [9].

We are now in a better position to understand Margalit's definition quoted earlier, according to which humiliation “is any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured.” To determine whether A's behavior toward B is humiliating, we need know nothing

about B's actual feelings as a result of A's behavior or about her subjective standards of self-valuation. All we need know is whether the behavior under question constitutes a "sound reason" for B to feel humiliated, or a sound reason for B to feel that her self-respect has been injured.

This normative understanding of self-respect and of humiliation leads Margalit to think that the notion of humiliation depends on the idea that human beings are worthy of respect. The argument to this conclusion is simple: sound reasons for thinking that one's self-respect is *injured* exist only if sound reasons exist to think that such respect is warranted in the first place. If there is nothing to respect in human beings *qua* human beings, then there is no room for *self*-respect either, and thus no room (i.e. no conceptual room) for injuring it. Hence, to justify the notion of humiliation we must take aboard the most powerful Kantian artillery—concepts like dignity, unconditional value, and (transcendental, or "radical"; Margalit, 1996, p. 70) freedom. This is indeed the project which engages Margalit in the second part of his book (entitled "Grounds for self-respect"), the purpose of which is to find "what aspect of human beings, if any, justifies respecting all human beings just because they are human" (p. 57) [10].

Finding this aspect, however, is not sufficient—on Margalit's view—to establish the rationality of humiliation, which faces a further challenge, one drawn from the Stoic view on autarky and well-being. That other people can hit me, put me in jail and ridicule me publicly is beyond question. But why should such behaviors be taken as constituting a reason for me to respect myself less? How could it ever be rational to consider my *self*-respect injured because of the disrespect *other* people express toward me? These questions, which constitute what I shall call the "Autarky Problem," are logically distinct from the question we just posed about the grounds for respect (hereafter the "Grounds Problem"). If we deserve respect by virtue of our humanity, then, indeed, nothing our tormentors do to us can provide us with a sound reason to think we deserve less respect; hence nothing they do to us can provide us with a sound reason to feel humiliated. But the same holds true if the standards by which we value ourselves are subjective. If a person has a firm sense of her value, a secure conviction that her conception of her good, her plan of life, is worth carrying out—to utilize Rawls's definition of self-respect (1971, p. 440)—then there seems to be no sound reason to think otherwise just because she is beaten or sexually abused by some villain. This assumed irrationality of humiliation is strengthened by the way the tormentor is perceived by his victims as evil and wicked. Precisely because victims of humiliation distance themselves from the values and standards of the tormentor, it is unclear why they should assign any weight in their own eyes to the humiliating behavior and experience any loss in their self-respect.

The distinction between these two problems can easily be confused and it is worthwhile to recapitulate. The Grounds Problem derives from the assumption that humiliation is rational only if a common human trait exists that makes all human beings worthy of respect. If no such trait exists, then, supposedly, it is false that human beings deserve respect solely on the basis of their being human; hence self-respect is ungrounded, hence there can be no sound reason to consider it injured. The Autarky Problem derives from the assumption that self-respect ought

to be independent of the respect of others. Accepting this assumption implies that the disrespectful behavior of others can never constitute a sound reason to consider one's *self-respect* injured; hence, again, a sound reason can never exist for feeling humiliated.

The impression one gets from Margalit is that solving these problems is necessary to establish the possibility of humiliation. But this seems wrong to me. Suppose that human beings do not possess the supreme value often ascribed to them. Maybe the humanistic idea is just a futile attempt to take a religious idea, i.e. that man was created in the image of God, and translate it into secular terms. Or, suppose that we fail to offer a convincing reason for self-respect being injured by the behavior and the attitude of others. What then? Would these suppositions imply that, conceptually speaking, one cannot be humiliated? It is hard to see what such a claim would even amount to. Maybe it would mean that though people often *feel* humiliated, they don't have a sound *reason* for feeling this way; hence humiliation makes sense only as a psychological concept, not as a normative one. But such a result is hard to accept. In fact Margalit himself seems to reject it when, concluding his discussion on the paradoxes of humiliation, he says:

The attempt to find a general justification for this fact is ludicrous. That's the way it is, that's life ... 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? (Margalit, p. 127)

I take it that when Margalit refers to the Nazi behavior as self-evidently humiliating, he is referring not only to the psychological sense of humiliation (who would ever deny that the Jews *felt* humiliated?), but to the normative sense too. He wants to say that the Jews in this dreadful situation had a sound *reason* to feel humiliated, though reasons like this call for no further philosophical justification. And this self-evident fact is immune to both skeptical challenges mentioned above: it does not require an answer to the Stoic paradox, neither does it need justification in terms of a theory of human worth.

Yet this is only a beginning towards an answer and much more needs to be said. Though no general justification is needed to establish the possibility of humiliation, sometimes asking for a justification for feelings of humiliation does make sense. When, then, is humiliation immune to charges of irrationality, and when is humiliation susceptible to rational evaluation? What sort of reasons might prove feelings in general, and humiliation in particular, to be unjustified, and what sort of reasons might prove them to be justified, to be *reasonable*? To answer these questions we need to make some brief claims about emotions and rationality in general, which will be the task of the next section.

III. The rationality of emotions: a multi-layer model

If a wild dog is released and the dog runs in my direction, the effect on me will be a strong feeling of fear. We would say that releasing the dog is the *cause* of my fear,

that the releasing of the dog frightened me. We would also say that in these circumstances I have a good *reason* to feel afraid, that my fear is justified, that it is rational. By contrast, some people get frightened by the sight of mice. For them, the sight of a mouse is the cause of their fear, though in their case they have no sound reason to feel afraid; their feeling is irrational, or inappropriate. What makes the first fear rational and the second irrational? It is the soundness of the beliefs that underlie them. In both cases the emotion under discussion includes the belief that the object of the feeling poses a real threat to the subject. This belief is correct in the case of the dog, while it is false in the case of the mouse. The cognitive aspect of emotions is one obvious source (not the only one) for evaluating the rationality of a given emotion.

Note, however, that these considerations do not apply to the rationality of fear in general, but to the rationality of particular instances of it. Is the very feeling of fear rational? It is not easy to see how to understand this question. Here is one suggestion. Fear of wild beasts, like fear in the battlefield, is first and foremost fear of being killed, fear of one's death. But, as Epicures and other philosophers have argued, fear of one's death is irrational, as death is not a state of the subject. So one might think that in order to justify the feeling of fear, i.e. in order to demonstrate that fear might be based on sound reasons, we must first establish the evil of death, otherwise such fear could never be rational and would be a mere psychological fact. Furthermore, one might argue that we must climb to a higher order of justification and establish the rationality of emotions in general, not only that of particular emotions such as fear or humiliation. The Stoics who raised the most troubling questions about the rationality of humiliation raised similar questions about the rationality of emotions in general. As Martha Nussbaum (1994) explains at length, the Stoics advocated the extirpation of emotions altogether because they believed that emotions attach the person possessing them to externals, which is a denial of the self-sufficiency of virtue. The idea of self-sufficiency which poses a challenge to the rationality of humiliation poses a much wider challenge to the rationality of emotions in general.

Thus, when we talk about reasons for emotions, we must bear in mind that this is a complicated and multi-layered issue. One's fear might be irrational because one's beliefs about a particular danger are false; one's fear might be irrational because, ultimately, there is never a sound reason to be afraid, and one's fear might be irrational because all emotions are irrational and ought to be extirpated. These various levels of rationality or irrationality are logically independent. Even if all emotions are irrational, or even if death is not an evil and hence fear of it is unjustified, a valid distinction between fear of a wild dog and fear of a mouse remains. Furthermore, the fact that human beings, just like other animals, get frightened by the sight of wild beasts running in their direction has clear advantages for survival. These advantages point to another sense of rationality here, rationality in the sense of serving vital interests of the human race, or of other species in the animal world.

How, then, would we define *frightening* behavior? Using a definition analogous to the one suggested by Margalit for humiliation, we would say that frightening

behavior is any sort of behavior that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his life, property or vital interests to be in danger. The crucial point to notice is that the sound reason required here refers to the *first* level of justification, not to the higher levels of justification concerning fear in general, or emotions on an even more general level.

Let us return now to humiliation. Like with fear and other emotions, the rationality (justification, appropriateness) of humiliation is a multi-layered issue. On the first level, just as we respond by fear to events that threaten our vital interests, we respond by humiliation to behaviors that injure or threaten to injure our self-respect. When the behavior of others conveys a message of subordination, rejection or exclusion (see below), we have a perfectly good reason to feel humiliation. We not only *feel* humiliation as a matter of psychological fact, but have a sound *reason* to feel so and our emotional response is rational. Although on higher levels one might challenge the rationality of humiliation, using e.g. the Grounds and Autarky Problems mentioned earlier, these challenges, powerful as they might be, are not strong enough to blur all distinctions regarding first level rationality of humiliation. We do not need to rebut Epicures' skepticism about the evil of death in order to judge some cases of fear (e.g. of a wild dog) more rational than others (fear of a mouse), and similarly we do not need to solve the Grounds and Autarky Problems in order to make helpful distinctions between more and less rational cases of humiliation. Note that I am not arguing that these skeptic challenges cannot be rebutted [11], only that doing so is not necessary for establishing the (first level) distinction between rational and irrational instances of a given emotion.

What might be a case of irrational humiliation? To take a trivial example, if one feels humiliated because one misinterprets a comic comment by one's superiors, then one's humiliation is obviously groundless. In a less trivial manner, there is a direct relation between the justification for humiliation and the humiliating intention of the humiliator. The pure cases of humiliation are those in which the humiliator explicitly seeks by his actions to reject the victim, to humble and degrade him, to exclude him from a specific group or from the family of man altogether. The weaker these evil intentions are, the weaker the justification is for feeling humiliated [12]. When no such intention exists, humiliation is often out of place.

The analogy between humiliation and fear helps to bring to light one further point about the former. With regard to fear, a behavior that constitutes a sound *reason* to feel fear need not necessarily result in that person actually *feeling* fear. A behavior that would make most people extremely frightened might leave others quite indifferent (e.g. when one is a dog-trainer and feels completely safe in the face of a released bull-mastiff). To be more accurate, then, we should say that for A to frighten B, A must engage in behavior that constitutes a sound reason for B to consider her life in danger, and B must actually sense fear (as a result of A's behavior). When we refer to sorts of behavior as frightening without presupposing the "success" of such behaviors, we really refer to behaviors that *tend* to cause fear, i.e. behaviors that result in fear for most people in normal circumstances. So when I say to Jim, "Let's frighten Tom," I really mean to say "Let's *try* to frighten Tom," as we have no way of enforcing this feeling. Though we can provide Tom with a

strong reason to feel fear, he can nevertheless refuse to succumb. Ultimately for the success of frightening behavior, one needs the cooperation of its object.

The same holds true for humiliation. To humiliate a person is not only to provide her with a reason to feel humiliated but actually to produce this painful feeling [13]. In this respect, the structure of humiliation is different from that of betrayal. As a well-known anti-hedonistic argument shows [14], the evil of betrayal is independent of its painful discovery by the betrayed person. You can betray a person behind her back, thereby wronging her. By contrast, you cannot humiliate a person without her knowing it and, furthermore, without her accepting it, i.e. experiencing a loss in her self-respect and acknowledging you as its source [15].

One can see how this understanding of humiliation presupposes a subjective–psychological notion of self-respect rather than an objective–moral one (see Section II above). If humiliation must end up in the victim actually *feeling* humiliation, then the reasons to consider one’s self-respect injured that produce this feeling must be of a sort with which the victim identifies, otherwise she would be untouched. The servile woman whose (subjective) self-respect depends on her success in serving her husband and on watching his achievements wouldn’t feel humiliated by behaviors of her husband that would definitely be regarded as providing sound reasons to consider her self-respect injured on an objective–moral notion of self-respect.

In closing this section, I wish to clarify the significance of the claims made here to morality. No doubt a valid distinction obtains between the very feeling of an emotion and the appropriateness or rationality of this feeling. But at least from a moral point of view, placing too high constraints on rationality here would lead to unreasonable results. The moral rules governing the relations between humans must refer to human beings as they actually are, not to human beings as they ideally ought to be, according to some philosophical theory of rationality. And as human beings are emotional creatures, as they tend to suffer painful feelings due to other people’s actions, our moral and political rules should be drawn accordingly. Hence, in the moral–political context, questions regarding the rationality of emotions are relevant only on the first level of justification mentioned above, i.e. that concerning the rationality of particular instances of a given emotion. If a particular instance of fear or of humiliation is irrational, or unreasonable, it would not suffice to establish a normative demand to others (or will establish only a weak one). If it is rational, or reasonable, then it would establish such a demand, even if on some higher level of justification this type of emotion, or the emotions in general, can be shown to be irrational. In the next section, I try to connect this rationality to our strong need for inclusion in a social group.

IV. Humiliation and fear of exclusion

I mentioned earlier that one way to understand the notion of rationality with regard to the emotions is to refer to their advantages in serving vital interests, in other words to their evolutionary benefits. Fear is definitely rational in this sense. Is humiliation too? I believe the answer is in the affirmative, and exploring it will enable us to advance our general understanding of humiliation. The point is that the

chances of survival are much higher when one is part of a group; hence one has a strong interest in becoming part of a group and a sound reason to fear being excluded. But to be accepted as a member of a group one needs to conform to the standards of worthiness set by the group, and the best strategy to achieve that goal is to internalize those standards as one's own. At times the standards of worthiness are relative to a particular group, while at other times they apply to membership in any human community. If an individual is made totally powerless, if he is forced to depend on others for the most mundane aspects of life, if he is left with no private area, then he might feel that he has lost the most basic social skills and is therefore in danger of being excluded from the human family altogether [16].

The tight connection between subjective–psychological self-respect, or self-esteem (to use the common psychological term [17]), and feelings of social inclusion is established by Leary and Downs (1995). In their view, a motive as pervasive and potent as self-esteem must serve a very important function, yet this function has been rather neglected in the psychological literature. According to Leary and Downs, the function that self-esteem serves is the need to belong. Human beings are unlikely to survive in isolation; hence they have a powerful interest to be included in a group. But as such inclusion is never guaranteed unconditionally, and as it is, at any rate, a matter of degree, human beings need a ready way to (1) monitor the social environment for cues indicating rejection or exclusion, and (2) be alerted to them via affective reactions when such cues are detected (Leary & Downs, 1995, pp. 128–129). Empirical studies indeed reveal that the events that enhance self-esteem typically also enhance feelings of social inclusion and vice versa, while events that diminish self-esteem also lead to perceived social exclusion. To illustrate this point, let me mention one of these studies, conducted by Tambor and Leary (1993). In this laboratory experiment, subjects were assigned to work as part of a group (i.e. to be included) or to do work alone (i.e. to be excluded) and were told that this assignment was based either on the preferences of the other participants or on a random procedure. Subjects then rated themselves on a self-esteem scale: the results indicated that inclusion or exclusion greatly affected subjects' feeling about themselves, but only when the inclusion or exclusion was due to perceived acceptance or rejection by the group. Leary and Downs contend that the need to belong is understood from an evolutionary perspective, as no other motive is so essential for survival and reproduction.

The need to belong is so strong that its protective monitor, that is, self-esteem, alerts one to perceived threats of exclusion in an automatic manner which does not depend on rational reflection, though such reflection might sometimes be able to turn off the alarm, so to say, if found to be ungrounded. Some diminishing of our self-esteem occurs automatically even when an insult comes from people who pose no real threat to our social status (Leary & Downs, 1995, pp. 134–135).

An evolutionary framework for the understanding of shame and humiliation is also developed by Paul Gilbert (1997), who suggests that social attractiveness, rather than fighting, has become the most salient strategy for humans to gain status and to develop useful relationships in groups [18]. That is why the experience of being

degraded, devalued, unattractive, “not worth bothering with,” is so threatening for humans, an experience common to both shame and humiliation.

This connection between humiliation and social exclusion helps us realize how such exclusion might entail humiliation irrespective of other moral aspects of the situation at hand. First, humiliation is independent of the overall moral justification of the humiliating behavior. For many years it was believed that retributive justice permits, maybe even requires, the humiliation of wicked criminals [19]. Some still hold this view nowadays [20]. They regard the humiliation of criminals as a way of meting out to criminals the punishment they deserve, of doing justice. But, obviously, even if humiliating sanctions—exposing criminals publicly, beating them up in front of a watching crowd, etc.—are just, they are nevertheless humiliating due to their message of rejection and exclusion [21].

Second, the possibility of humiliation is not contingent on the moral views held by the perpetrators or the victims of humiliation, in particular their views about the equal or unequal worth of all human beings. The victims of humiliation need not believe (implicitly or explicitly) in the equal value of all human beings in order to feel humiliated. All they need assume is that *they* are worthy of respect, while the “they” can refer to numerous groups: nations, religions, even SS officers [22]. An SS officer might be humiliated by his commander and comrades for not being cruel enough in a murder mission. His assumed misbehavior might be announced publicly on the parade grounds, followed by the officer being declared unworthy to serve in the SS. To judge this situation as humiliating for this SS officer seems to me rather obvious, and this judgment need not make any assumptions about the equal respect due to all human beings, nor of course about the beliefs of the humiliators or the victim in such equal respect.

The fear of being rejected is so strong [23] that it cannot be evaded even when the signals of rejection are sent by people with whom the victim strongly disassociates herself, which is typical to many cases of humiliation [24]. Though the victim of humiliation often does not value the standards of worthiness and of social success assumed by the humiliator, the humiliator manages to shatter the victim’s self-respect, to make her feel unworthy, diminished in stature, devalued. This involves presenting the victim’s claim for status as a pretense [25], often by making her appearance or behavior seem contrary to the requirements of this status. Such appearance or behavior makes it hard for the victim to retain the desired status even in her own eyes.

Our understanding of the inescapable damage to self-respect in humiliation is advanced by Robin Dillon’s recent distinction between what she coins “basal self-respect” and other, more superficial modes of self-respect. On Dillon’s view, basal self-respect concerns our primordial interpretation of self and self-worth, “the invisible lens through which everything connected to the self is viewed and presumed to be disclosed ... The heart of basal self-respect is our most profound valuing of ourselves” [26]. Basal self-respect is a nonpropositional attitude to oneself and it is not just a matter of fitting some subjective criteria of worthiness. Often, and this is the case with women in sexist societies, though the individual believes she is doing fine according to such criteria, she still suffers from a damaged basal self-respect, as

result of systematic oppression and devaluation in the social, political and cultural reality [27]. One cannot then avoid damage to basal self-respect by critically reflecting on the reasons for such damage, because the damage affects the very lens through which one assesses reality and weighs reasons [28].

Despite the Stoics, the Epicureans and a long philosophical tradition, our self-respect—and our well-being in general—is fragile and vulnerable to many types of contingencies, some produced by Mother Nature and others by our fellow humans [29]. People with whom we might strongly disassociate ourselves have the power to injure our selves, at times to the point that we regard our lives as not worth living. To the cold philosophical mind this might not make sense, but it is a sad and unfortunate fact of life. Very few people, if any, are immune to humiliation, especially when it is severe and systematic [30]. The trauma caused in such circumstances is unavoidable, as argued by Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and recovery*; no one is immune to post-traumatic damage if the traumatic exposure is severe enough (1992, Ch. 3). With all respect to the philosophical reflections and personal merits of people like Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Diogenes, I suspect that even they would fail to remain indifferent to the systematic humiliation in a place like Auschwitz [31]. *Pace* Aurelius (*Meditationes*, 8th bk, 48, III), there is no inner citadel inside of which human beings are totally safe from the effects of humiliation [32]. People might indeed hope to recover from such experiences, and one therapeutic method is to bring them to refuse to succumb to the degradation, i.e. to maintain a personal conviction of their innocence and the undeservedness of their demotion. The Stoic approach, which is rather limited in its power to give immunity to humiliation, might turn out as more efficient in the *post*-trauma recovery process [33].

Let me conclude this section by trying to clarify how the foregoing arguments help respond to the charge that humiliation is irrational. First, as a result of a long evolutionary process, our self-respect depends crucially on the respect or disrespect shown to us by others. In other words, it is a given fact about human nature that self-respect is vulnerable to injury by others, i.e. to humiliation. Second, this is not just an unfortunate fact about human nature, but one that has clear evolutionary advantages. We have a strong interest in belonging to society and a strong interest in not being excluded. Humiliation reflects this fundamental interest and also alerts us to possible threats of exclusion coming both from our limited social circles as well as from the family of man altogether.

V. Summary and conclusions

It is a plain fact about human beings that their sense of personal worth is shaped to a large extent by what other human beings think about them and the treatment they receive. That individuals are sufficient to bestow self-respect on themselves is an illusion. Humiliation takes advantage of this fact and seeks to injure self-respect by sending painful messages of subordination, rejection and exclusion. No normal human being is immune to the devastating effects of these messages. It is this injury to (subjective) self-respect that explains the moral wrongness of humiliation.

This vulnerability to humiliation is the flip side of the human urge for social inclusion and recognition. Since this urge—and the vulnerability to humiliation that comes with it—has obvious evolutionary advantages, it is not irrational. Nor is further philosophical justification required to render humiliation rational. In particular, the concept of humiliation does not presuppose a Kantian notion of human dignity, the idea that human beings are all equally worthy of respect. Neither our theory of humiliation, nor the actual victims of humiliation, need presuppose these ideas.

The independence of the concept of humiliation from a theory of human dignity leaves open the possibility that certain higher level primates can also be humiliated [34]. The only way to block this possibility is to point to some human feature relevant to humiliation that these animals lack. But most probably this feature would be absent in some human beings too, with the unwanted implication that they too would conceptually disqualify as objects of humiliation.

Particular feelings of humiliation can have sound or unsound reasons of various types. A strong reason for feeling humiliated exists when the humiliating behavior is explicitly intended to degrade its victim. When there is no intent to humiliate, or when one simply misunderstands the message of the assumed humiliator, the reason for feeling humiliated is much weaker, or does not exist.

This last conclusion accords well with the conclusions of a separate study I published recently [35] on the nature and the normative strength of claims about hurt feelings. I argued that the normative power of hurt feelings to enforce limitations on behavior or expression exists mainly when the hurt is intentional. When the hurt is incidental, it usually cannot ground a demand for such limitations. The same is true of humiliation; claims about humiliation are typically weighty claims from a moral point of view, as humiliation is one of the worst evils. However, this negative status applies mainly to cases of intentional humiliation. The weaker the intention to humiliate and to hurt feelings, the weaker the normative demand on behalf of the hurt person to limit the behavior of others.

I argued that the ambiguity of the notion of human dignity makes this notion rather unhelpful in explicating the notion of humiliation. It might, however, be helpful to explore the argument the other way round, namely, to use the notion of humiliation to interpret the notion of dignity. The down to earth understanding of humiliation suggested here might provide us with a more down to earth understanding of dignity too. This result might be especially useful for legal discourse, in which, on the one hand, dignity is assigned supreme importance, but, on the other, it has no clear reference. Defining violations of dignity as behaviors that humiliate—in the sense alluded to here—might help to give our constitutional concept of dignity a clearer and more practical meaning. This suggestion has significant normative implications, but developing them lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

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Notes

- [1] Some philosophers, such as Kant, contend that dignity is not restricted to the human race but extends to all rational beings (whatever their nature might be). Yet hardly anybody claims that dignity is enjoined by sub-human beings such as animals. For an exception, see Sapontzis (1981, 1982), and the criticism by Nelson (1982).
- [2] For such understanding, see, for example, Tremper (1988, p. 1321). In Tremper's view, the idea that one has human dignity merely by virtue of belonging to the species is required, if we want to use this language with respect to minors.
- [3] I am grateful to an anonymous reader for *Philosophical Psychology* for suggesting to me this way of formulating the paradox.
- [4] See also Honneth (1995), who regards humiliation as a form of disrespect which leads to injury to self-respect.
- [5] The concept of self-respect is hardly to be found in the psychological literature which subsumes the phenomenon of psychological self-respect under the heading of self-esteem. Cf. Dillon (1997, p. 235, note 20): "Many of the psychological studies define 'self-esteem' in ways that overlap with self-respect."
- [6] A distinction similar to that between psychological and normative self-respect is made by Keshen (1996, Ch. 6) between, respectively, self-esteem and self-respect.
- [7] Logically speaking, these notions are not mutually exclusive and one might adopt both to the effect that for a person to have self-respect he or she needs both subjective self-respect and objective self-respect. I find it hard, however, to see the basis for such a view, particularly as the grounds for subjective self-respect might be different and even contradictory to those for objective self-respect.
- [8] Arguments against sexual behavior which is regarded improper are often based on its damage to the practitioners' self-respect. See, for example, Kupfer's argument in this vein against prostitutes (1995).
- [9] It is not entirely clear to me whether Honneth is assuming a psychological-subjective or a moral-objective notion of self-respect. On the one hand, he quotes Feinberg's argument mentioned above (Section I), to the effect that having self-respect is thinking of oneself as a holder of rights (Honneth, p. 120) and all his discussion is very much Kantian in its spirit. On the other hand, he repeatedly emphasizes the psychological effects of self-respect or disrespect (see especially Ch. 6), which seems to deny the possibility mentioned above of having psychological self-respect without moral self-respect.
- [10] I will not discuss here the project itself, only its connection to the notion of humiliation. But the reader might have noticed some skepticism on my part about the prospects of this project and its relation to questions of self-respect. From a psychological point of view, I am particularly in doubt about the motivational power of the mere recognition that one is human. As Keshen (1996, p. 124) puts it: "I'm human too' does not seem to go deep enough as a justification or as a source of motivation." Cf. Nozick (1974, p. 243), who argues that the basis for self-esteem is not common human features such as the ability to speak one language, or having an opposable thumb, but rather differentiating characteristics. See also Statman (1993b), who concludes from Nozick's argument that pointing to such common human features cannot serve as a basis for enhancing pupils' self-esteem.
- [11] With respect to the Epicurean view about death, see Nagel (1979). As for the Stoic challenge, see Nussbaum (1994) and Harris (1997).
- [12] Here I again find myself in disagreement with Margalit, who contends that the humiliators need not have any humiliating intent (1996, p. 10). This contention seems to me inconsistent with Margalit's claim that only humans can produce humiliation (p. 9). It seems to me that the only

basis for this last claim is the human capacity to form humiliating intentions; otherwise I see no justification to assume that only humans can humiliate.

- [13] The same holds true for shaming, i.e. you cannot shame a person without him feeling shame or feeling ashamed. This explains one of the problems with shame sanctions (see note 20), as noted by Stephen Garvey (1998, p. 749): if a criminal is “shameless,” then subjecting him to a shaming penalty will have little retributive bite.
- [14] See, for instance, Nagel (1979, p. 5).
- [15] That humiliation requires the cooperation of the victim creates a Hegelian master–slave dialectic, as argued by Margalit and Motzkin (1996) in their discussion of the unique role of humiliation in the Holocaust. The humiliator seeks to dehumanize the victims, but his dependence on the victims’ acceptance of the humiliation forces him to re-acknowledge their humanity.
- [16] On the importance of powerlessness in humiliation, see especially Silver *et al.* (1986).
- [17] See note 5 above.
- [18] For minor differences between the Leary and Downs’ model and Gilbert’s model, see Gilbert (1997, p. 130).
- [19] For a brief survey and references, see Whitman (1998, pp. 1055–1056, and accompanying notes).
- [20] For the revival of shame sanctions in the United States, see Wooler (1997), Whitman (1998, p. 1056), and Garvey (1998, pp. 734–737). The desirability of such sanctions is under dispute. See Kahan (1996), who endorses them and Massaro (1991) and Whitman (1998), who oppose them.
- [21] Humiliation might be viewed positively not only in the context of punishment and not only by masochists. Many anthropologists contend that humiliation is part of all rites of passage, in particular the liminal stage of the rite. As participation in such rites is often desirable from the point of view of the participants, especially in initiation rites, they accept them with no resistance. Levy *et al.* (1986) explain in this way the relatively weak resistance of patients in closed psychiatric wards to the humiliation they undergo. Such humiliation indicates to the patients that some change is in process, and hence that there is a possible end to their suffering.
- [22] That one might feel rejected from many groups is expressed in an analysis of the degradation reported by many clients in psychotherapy. Bergner (1987, p. 25) characterizes this degradation as being “subjected to treatment by others which has given them reason to conclude that they were not fully entitled, coequal members of their communities.” The identity of the communities varies from one individual to another.
- [23] It is stronger than the wish to *improve* one’s social status. Empirical studies show that people are more concerned about avoiding exclusion, with its lowered self-esteem, than about facilitating inclusion, with its higher self-esteem. See Leary and Downs (1995, p. 133). Cf. Miller (1993, p. 204): “Most of our disposition with regard to honor is defensive rather than offensive, preserving rather than acquisitive.”
- [24] The fact that in some cases the victims come to adopt the point of view of their tormentors and to identify with it is no objection to this thesis. Such identification is not the victims’ state at the time of the humiliation but one of its unfortunate results.
- [25] Cf. Miller (1993, p. 145): “Humiliation is the consequence of trying to live up to what we have no right to,” and also Taylor (1985, pp. 67–68), who says that the humiliated person “will think of herself as being thought presumptuous in having allotted to herself such a high position ... It is this thought, that she is regarded as presumptuous, which is essential to humiliation.”
- [26] As Dillon notes (1997, pp. 241–242, note 29), the notion of basal self-respect is congruent with a number of analyses in psychology. In addition to the sources she quotes, see also the distinction made by Deci and Ryan (1995) between contingent self-esteem and true self-esteem. The former refers to one’s achievements according to some specific criteria of excellence, while the latter reflects “a solid sense of self,” to a large extent independent of one’s failure or success in any specific task.
- [27] These brief remarks about the low basal self-respect of women in sexist societies suggest a need to modify the use I made earlier of Hill’s example (1991) of the servile woman (see Section II). I argued that the servile woman is satisfied and enjoys a rise in her (subjective) self-respect when

she realizes what good care she takes of her husband and how helpful she is in advancing his career. Now, however, we can see that this rise in self-respect might be rather superficial, while deep inside this woman might have a basal low self-respect. The notion of self-respect is thus multi-leveled, even within the subjective-psychological notion.

- [28] Failure to appreciate the importance of basal self-respect is at the root of the illusion that by acquiring various techniques one can improve one's self-esteem and, consequently, solve all of one's problems. Self-esteem, as Brown and Dutton put it, has become "the panacea of modern life ... no matter what ails you today, self-esteem is the cure" (1995, p. 712). This is an illusion because there is no easy way to transform one's basic view of oneself by "learning how to be assertive," or practicing "taking no notice of what others think." Dillon shows that as basal self-respect is structured by society, the only way to prevent damage to it is to transform society so that all individuals can grow up valuing themselves unconditionally. The prospects for such transformation are not high and, hence, from the point of view of the individual, there is room for pessimism (Dillon, 1997, pp. 248–249).
- [29] The question of whether, and to what extent, our well-being might be immune to luck has been discussed in the last two decades as part of the moral luck problem. See Statman (1993a). For a recent argument against the possibility and the desirability of such immunity, see Harris (1997).
- [30] Even antisocial personalities are vulnerable to humiliation. As Millon and Everly argue, one cause for their aggressive pattern of behavior is their fear of being humiliated (1985, p. 263). I do not, however, wish to rule out the possibility that some severe personality disorders result in total apathy to humiliation.
- [31] For a philosophical exploration of the essential role of humiliation in the Holocaust, see Margalit and Motzkin (1996).
- [32] On how even "lifeless stones" are vulnerable to day-to-day humiliation, see Miller (1993, p. 148).
- [33] See Bergner (1987), who illustrates the use of this therapeutic method with victims of sexual abuse.
- [34] A few years ago, the Supreme Court of Israel prohibited an entertainment show which included a fight between a man and an alligator, on the basis, *inter alia*, of the claim that the show humiliated the alligator. See Justice Heshin's opinion in CA 1684/96 *The "Let Animals Live" Association v. Entertainment Projects Hamat-Gader Ltd*, section 41. For a recent discussion on personality dimensions in nonhuman animals, see Gosling and John (1999).
- [35] Statman (1998). An English version is forthcoming in *Democratic culture*.

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