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## **Ground Zero. The Triangle of Humiliation**

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*“Yes, I agree it is humiliation. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”*

*“Like a dog”*

*“yes, like a dog”*

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 205.

I am neither a political philosopher nor a moral philosopher, so I begin with a few introductory remarks to explain the origins of my interest in humiliation, a subject that is obviously deeply political and moral. A few years ago, I published *Reputation: What it is and Why it Matters* (Princeton UP, 2018), an exploration of the significance of our social ego. By social ego I mean the visceral and powerful feedback loop by which “the self” responds to itself in light of how it sees itself seen by others. My principal claim in the book was that the social ego, controlled by our perception of the perception that others have of us, shapes our emotions and actions and frequently makes us behave contrary to our own interests. An injury to the social ego, a slap in the face in public, can cause a moral pain as excruciating as any physical pain. My basic aim was to explain how our social ego leads a life of its own, independent of and alongside the life of our everyday self. Admittedly, this thesis is not especially original: Rousseau’s distinction between *amour de soi* and *amour propre* emphasizes two different motivational principles: while *amour de soi* pushes us to seek material survival, *amour propre* fuels our quest for symbolic and social survival. I elaborated my understanding of this second, social ego in epistemological terms, as an ego constituted by what I think others think of me, made up of all the representations that circulate in social space about me and my character and my behavior. Our reputation, simply put, *is* our social ego. It accompanies our every gesture and action and, as a consequence, colors all our interactions with others. An additional objective of the book, I should add, was

to explore how we all, in the absence of first-hand knowledge, depend on reliably or unreliably conveyed reputations to gather the information we need about others and the world.

A year after *Reputation* appeared, I published an anthology on “social passions” (*Passions Sociales*, Paris: PUF, 2019), which aimed to survey and anatomize the principal motivations of social action that could not be plausibly reduced to material self-interest. Such passions resonate in social space, explaining why our reactions to the actions of others are not always “rational” and sometimes go far beyond what a cool-headed calculation of costs and benefits would suggest. These “passionate motivations” are not simply hidden, unconscious impulses that are then rationalized by citing values such as justice, equality or freedom. Instead, they are increasingly invoked unapologetically and in public as wholly sufficient justifications for our actions: “I did it out of anger, because I felt humiliated, because I felt despised.” *Passions Sociales* catalogued the social passions in alphabetical order, without any preconceived structure or organizing theme. I made no effort to produce a systematic treatise on the passions, a philosophical genre that has existed since antiquity. Nevertheless, in the course of writing a large number of the entries in this dictionary of the passions, a unifying idea began to emerge. I started to see a structure and a hierarchy in the miscellany of emotions, a basic and overriding function played by the passions in social interaction. I came to think of passions increasingly as “sociometers” – the expression comes from the social psychologist Mark Leary (Leary 2005) – which allow us to quickly ascertain and assess our social status with respect to others.

This reading of passions as barometers of our social status with respect to others (and of the status of others with respect to ourselves) is implicit in many ancient as well as modern studies of the passions. In the second book of his *Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle writes that anger is an unpleasant emotion caused by an undeserved insult (slight) done to us or our friends, accompanied by the emotional pleasure of planning revenge to “repair” the affront (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II, I. 8-II. 2). Bittersweet anger results, we read, when an enraged reaction to a lowering of our status (by a publicly visible insult) is mixed with the satisfaction of anticipating the moment when we exact vengeance on those who insulted us by lowering their social status in turn.

I believe it possible to extend this interpretation of passions as registers of relative social status to almost all the passions. The most obviously social passions—such as empathy, enthusiasm, and solidarity—are accompanied by the pleasant

sensation of finding oneself on the same level as others. Feelings of this sort often arise when social barriers are suddenly swept away by a war, a revolution, a pandemic, or when usual upstairs/downstairs rankings are engulfed by the collective joy experienced at some miraculous turn of events. In a short story by Heinrich von Kleist, *The Earthquake in Chile (Das Erdbeben in Chili)*, an adulterous couple sentenced to death with their child enjoy a moment of empathy and solidarity with their executioners due to the catastrophe that strikes the city of Santiago. Everyone helps and loves each other until the old social hierarchy reasserts itself and the lovers are hanged by those same fellow citizens who, shortly before, had embraced them in the spirit of solidarity fostered by a natural disaster. By contrast, the more antisocial passions—such as anger, contempt, shame, pride, and humiliation—serve to express and underscore social hierarchy and the stark differences of status between individuals.

As a matter of intellectual autobiography, in any case, editing this dictionary and writing many of its entries led me to the hypothesis that relative social status provides the master key to a wide array of human passions. If we canvas the range of passions that can plausibly be described as “sociometric,” moreover, humiliation stands out. No social passion makes us feel the pain of status loss more acutely than humiliation. As the American writer Wayne Kostenbaum, who devoted a good book to the idea, says: “Humiliation, which is a regime in which everything is upside down, implies a reversal: from top to bottom, from above to below, from the noble to the vile, from security to insecurity. This reversal occurs quickly and someone needs to be there to see it and spread the news” (Kostenbaum 2011).

A still preliminary but fundamental observation is this: rather than being a single passion, humiliation is a passionate configuration that paradigmatically involves a triangular relation between three main actors: the humiliator, the victim and the witnesses of the humiliation. This complex and emotionally rich social ritual, characterized by a clearly patterned social micro-structure (the triangle of perpetrator, victim, and witness) has nevertheless not been the subject of much literature in moral and political philosophy, nor in the philosophy of emotions, although there are some important exceptions such as Avishai Margalit’s book *The Decent Society* (Margalit 1996), the work of the historian and literary critic William Ian Miller (Miller 1993) and the recent book by the historian and sociologist Ute Frevert *The Politics of Humiliation* (Frevert 2020).

In this paper, I will be focusing on the phenomenology of humiliation. What makes humiliation such an important subject is the central role that this painful emotion plays in the disproportionately violent reactions of those who feel humiliated in their social encounters and interactions. My aim is also to explain why understanding the triangular structure of humiliation is requisite to understanding its ethical implications. The claim I want to elaborate and defend is that humiliation, as a wound to our social ego, is present in all societies, decent or indecent, and that even small daily wounds to our social ego can provoke lethally disproportionate reactions.

I began researching this topic by asking friends and acquaintances to tell me about their experiences of humiliation. What surprised me most during this informal inquiry was the extent to which remembering earlier experiences of humiliation was still emotionally “searing.” My friend Pascal told me about a humiliation he suffered as a child at school. At recess, a child from a higher grade approached him to let him know that a group of older children had finally agreed to let him participate in their games and wished to invite him to join them. Full of pride, Pascal approached the group of older boys who then jeered and rebuffed him, as if to say: “What did you think? Was there really any chance we would let a squirt like you play with us? Go back to your toddler friends!” Pascal’s sudden and unexpected rise in rank was abruptly followed by the experience of being cast down even lower than where he started. This distant scrape with schoolyard cruelty is still burned into Pascal’s memory. The emotion is still as “red” as the embarrassed face of the child newly toppled (in his own mind and before others) from his hoped-for new status as one of the “grown-ups.”

Bernard Williams distinguishes between “white” emotions which make you blanch, such as guilt, and red emotions which make you blush, such as shame, anger and humiliation (Williams, 1993). There are, however, different shades of red, and the red of humiliation is a vermilion, sanguine red, which does not fade with time and which cannot be washed away except by vengeance, a rectification, often asymmetrical, whereby the one who pushed us down is pushed in turn from his or her pedestal even lower than where we have fallen.

Let’s now delve deeper into the fundamental characteristics and dynamics of “the humiliation situation” and the emotions associated with it.

## **The humiliation ritual**

“An Officer and a Spy” (*J'accuse*), Polansky's 2019 film on the Dreyfus affair that convulsed French society at the end of the 19th century, opens with an exemplary representation of the humiliation ritual: on January 5, 1895, a captain in the French army Alfred Dreyfus, accused of espionage and treason, is marched to the center of the court of the École Militaire in Paris and publicly dishonored. In a scene lasting about three minutes, the ritual is performed. As it occurs, the audience (soldiers marshaled neatly in the square and some citizen spectators outside the École Militaire), the chief humiliator (a senior officer) and the victim are all brought to acknowledge Dreyfus's humiliation and loss of honorable status. After a drum roll, a raising of the soldiers' swords and the reading aloud of the verdict of high treason, an officer approaches a mortified Dreyfus (who struggles to hold back his tears) and rudely rips off all the signs of rank which also symbolize Dreyfus' now-destroyed self-esteem: the buttons and epaulettes of the jacket, the emblem on the cap, the stripes on the trousers. Finally, in a coup de grace, the ex-Captain's sword is broken in two and cast to the ground. The ritual has been completed. The captain is degraded and disgraced. His status is no longer the same.

What I find exemplary in this scene is that the three perspectives—those of the humiliator, the victim and the witnesses—are all perfectly aligned in staging and experiencing the archetypical humiliating event. In classic cases such as this, humiliation is a public ritual performed by three *dramatis personae*. The crucial element is that the victim feels humiliated and accepts his loss of status even if he may consider it unfair. (In the film Dreyfus shouts: “I am innocent!” but this refusal to admit his guilt does not prevent him from experiencing the terrible burning sensation of the humiliation underway.) If the victim fully internalizes the humiliation, he feels shame; otherwise, his sense that an injustice is being done will also cause resentment. A feeling resembling shame, in any case, is always present: that of being exposed to the public in a ritualized enactment of status loss. The humiliator possesses a form of power that permits him to deprive his victim of their prior and prized social status. In Dreyfus's case, this power to humiliate was vested in the ranking officer by a military hierarchy. Witnesses, for their part, can take sides with either the victim or the humiliator. They can feel enraged at the victim's guilt or indignant at the cruel punishment to which she or he is subjected. But they always know when the ritual has been successfully performed.

In a famous 1956 article, sociologist Harold Garfinkel describes in great detail rituals of public degradation, a practice, he argues, that exists in all societies that have

a moral structure (Garfinkel 1956). According to Garfinkel, the ceremony is successful when everyone, including the victim, recognizes that the status of the person in question has been degraded, turning him or her into a being of another and inferior “human type.” A criminal trial can serve as a just this kind of ritual of public degradation. One status is taken away from the accused in order to give him or her another and inferior status in front of witnesses. (In the case of acquittal, obviously, the defendant’s previous status is reestablished once the charges are publicly refuted or dropped.)

All societies organize rituals of public degradation, just as they organize rituals of public elevation whereby someone’s relative social status is upgraded. It could be argued that strict compliance with formal rules of degradation is one way of “containing” the emotion of humiliation, of making this public destruction of the social ego into a controlled procedure. The emotions accompanying humiliation, in fact, if left to smolder without being channeled into a “cold” ritual, can explode uncontrollably. They can destroy individuals or drive them into an escalating tit-for-tat spiral of humiliations (Saurette, 2006) whereby the humiliated party, enflamed by resentment, is impelled to humiliate others in turn. Naturally, there are also “hot” rituals aimed at making sure that the emotions accompanying an abasement of the social ego are felt with maximum intensity, and I will address these later. For the moment, it suffices to observe that many public ceremonies in all societies are devoted to degrading the social ego. Such rituals enact and display the ignominy of status loss.

The protagonists of a successful humiliation ritual are, to repeat, three: the humiliator, the humiliated and the witnesses. In the ideal-typical situation that I illustrated with Dreyfus’s degradation ceremony, the perceptions of the three actors track each other perfectly. All three realize that the victim has been dishonored and disgraced. Still, the emotions felt by the three parties are obviously very different. The emotion of humiliation experienced by the humiliated has very specific features. As mentioned, it is a “red” emotion, like shame or embarrassment. But more than shame and embarrassment, humiliation makes the victim feel the weight of a thud on the ground. *Humilis* in Latin comes from *humus* which means earth. Instead of a judgment on what we have done, as is usual in the case of shame, we experience humiliation as an attack on who we are, on our deepest being, on our respect for ourselves, on our honor, on our dignity. It is a difficult burden to carry, precisely because humiliation rituals have witnesses: we see ourselves publicly cast down from the imaginary

pedestal on which our self-esteem has generously placed us. The measure of ourselves is no longer in our hands, but in the hands of others, specifically in the hands of the humiliator who demeans us and of the witnesses who watch us falling into the abyss. In current dictionaries, humiliation is defined as “an injury to the pride and dignity of a person.” The typical examples of humiliation cited are of the type: “You humiliated me in front of everyone!” Such definitions confirm the central and constitutive role played by public observers in producing or enacting the experience of humiliation. It is our social ego that is exposed. What is disfigured, violated, and belittled is the image we have of ourselves and that we think that others, too, ought to share. Respect for ourselves, our dignity, the most intimate part of our sense of ourselves is actually the most social aspect of our nature. It is constituted by what we believe others think of us. It is how we see ourselves seen. Once we realize that this social image is degraded, our whole status as a person is called into question. I will return to this theme below, when I examine the most profound reaches of our being - dignity, self-respect, honor, agency – that are threatened by the act of humiliation. At this point, all I want to emphasize is that “the intimate realm” violated by a humiliation ritual is actually the *social* part of our ego.

### **Action and emotions: humiliator, victim, public**

The humiliator feels a range of emotions: the gratification of exerting domination over an ego that believed itself to be better than it actually is; the satisfaction of wreaking vengeance against an ego that plumed itself superior to the humiliator’s ego; a sense of justice restored when cutting down to size and “putting in his place” someone unjustifiably swollen with pride. The humiliator can feel pleasure, and even be amused, while watching his victim lose their prized social status. Many humiliations, in fact, are accompanied by a comic effect. In a 1967 film, *The Magic Christian*, Peter Sellers plays a wealthy gentleman who enjoys watching the extent to which people are willing to humiliate themselves for money. In the closing scene, Sellers places a tub full of excrement in the middle of London. After throwing money into the tub, he encourages passers-by to recover it. After some hesitation, passers-by eagerly dive neck-deep into the muck in order to get their hands on the bills.

The public that witnesses a humiliation ritual also has a standard set of emotional responses. They may feel indignation towards the humiliated because of the crimes he or she committed and that have now brought them down. Alternatively, they might feel indignant toward a humiliator who inflicts excessively harsh penalties on

the humiliated. They may also experience a slightly sadistic frisson of pleasure when witnessing the punishment. They may feel uplifted by a sense of superiority every time the humiliated is degraded, precisely because *they* are not suffering the same indignity. Or they can feel empathy towards the humiliated because they empathize with his suffering.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the martyrdom of Damians – sentenced to death on March 2, 1757, but first tortured, humiliated, and drawn-and-quartered to the point of transforming his corpse into a ridiculous puppet with no identity – as one of France’s last publicly performed corporal punishments. It took place shortly before such penal rites were relocated inside prison walls to prevent the suffering of the condemned from provoking the public’s empathy instead of awe. The forms of humiliation tolerated by the public depend on extremely delicate historical-cultural variables, which vary over time and differ from society to society. The most striking example is certainly torture, one of the most chilling rituals of humiliation that humankind has ever developed, and for which different eras and cultures display very different thresholds of tolerance.

Obviously, these three perspectives on the humiliation ritual are not always aligned. In such circumstances the parties to the canonical triangle don’t perceive events in the same way. One or two may be unaware that the ritual is taking place. A humiliation may not be felt as such by the “victim,” for example, either because she refuses to accept the lowering of her status, or because she does not recognize the authority of the tribunal that casts her down. Hester Prynne, the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, is condemned by the Puritan society around her to wear a scarlet letter “A,” a sign of her adultery, sewn onto all her clothes. But this public stigmatization has no effect on the proud Hester, who continues to conduct an outwardly respectable life with her daughter. Refusing to reveal the name of her daughter’s father, the Reverend Dimmesdale, she proudly bears the burden of social ostracism for both of them. In one scene, Hester arrives well-dressed in church, with her letter stitched on clothes that are more elegant and more gracefully worn than those of the other women of the village, sparking the indignation of those wives who wished to see her mortified by the stigma they had imposed.

As this example shows, there are situations in which humiliation takes place in the eyes of the humiliator and the public but is not experienced as such by the ostensibly humiliated party. Typically, such situations play out more on the register of comedy than of tragedy. One makes fun of someone in public, thereby diminishing

her perceived social status without the victim herself realizing it. In a French film by Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri (*The Taste of Others* or *Le Goût des autres*, 2000), Castella is a wealthy provincial businessman who falls in love with Clara, an actress who teaches him English. One evening at a bar with Clara's actor friends, Castella lets himself be turned into a laughingstock without realizing it, coming across as a total ignoramus among actors who mischievously mention and mischaracterize literary texts he has never heard of.

At other times, moreover, only the public is aware of the humiliation. A cruel example cited by William Ian Miller is that of a smartly dressed lady who goes to mass only to have those sitting behind her in church observe a louse crawl out of her well-groomed hair and slither towards her hat. The poor woman's pretensions to a reputable social status are ruined. Humiliation has occurred because her desire to appear better than she is (richer, more respectable) has been thwarted. But the status loss only takes place in the public eye (in this case there is not even a humiliator). The witnesses watch the humiliation take place in real time. They can identify with the victim and feel embarrassment or indignation (depending on the severity of the humiliation). They can empathize by identifying with the humiliated woman even though *she* is totally oblivious and is not experiencing any of these emotions. Later, they might alert the humiliated party that the humiliation occurred, that everyone had laughed at her, for example, thereby triggering a time-delayed experience of shame.

Finally, there are situations in which we feel humiliated without the humiliator intending to humiliate us. Miller gives an autobiographical illustration of this pattern: after a pleasant discussion one evening with an academic colleague, Miller encountered the same individual on the street a few days later. But this time the colleague did not recognize him. Although the slight was unintentional, Miller felt humiliated. He had fallen from a status of "friend/acquaintance" to that of "unknown/stranger." I can venture an autobiographical example of my own. As an Italian who has lived in France for many years and speaks French with a strong Italian accent, I am often asked: "Where are you from?" I don't know exactly why, but this question, usually posed without any malice but after so many years in France, humiliates me, as if I was unworthy of being accepted as an equal and was constantly being sent back to my "origins," demoted to the status of "emigrant" rather than "citizen."

The varieties of humiliation inflicted without the humiliator realizing it, when the person who inflicts the humiliation does so accidentally and is not driven by any *libido*

*dominandi*, are obviously many and far more serious than the rather frivolous cases I have just recounted. The failure to recognize or respect identity groups to which individuals belong, for example, can at times be wholly unintentional, yet nevertheless be experienced by the members of that group as extremely hurtful to their own personal identity (Honneth 1996). Awkward relations between different cultural groups can produce feelings of humiliation, even when there is no conscious intention to humiliate.

Anthropologist Marshal Sahlins argues that the modernization of traditional cultures accelerated by globalization stimulates feelings of humiliation, inferiority and self-contempt, including despair at the uselessness of one's traditional artifacts compared to the objects of modernity (Sahlins 2005).

Today, humiliation is also a pivotal notion in the study of international relations (Saurette 2006; Badie 2014; Euben 2015). French international-relations expert Bertrand Badie distinguishes four types of humiliation that affect relations between states: (1) humiliation by inflicting a very severe punishment on a defeated nation in order to reduce its status as well as power and to deliver an emotional shock to public opinion; (2) humiliation by denial of equality, whereby the "other" nation is classified as inferior and unworthy of a relationship between peers who interact on an equal footing with equal rights; (3) humiliation by exclusion, when the inclusion and integration of a state into a community of equals is denied; (4) humiliation by stigmatization, was when a state is stamped with a mark of infamy (example: "the axis of evil"). Even when a state's loss of status in the international realm does not derive from an intentional act of humiliation, it will often be perceived as humiliating by those who suffer it and is therefore likely to create vindictive and lethally disproportionate reactions in nations that feel collectively disrespected and defamed.

Obviously, understanding which humiliations are intentional and which are not is a sensitive matter that goes to the heart of endless debates and often hinges on incommensurable cultural sensitivities. What I want to emphasize for the moment is merely that there are situations in which humiliation can occur without there being any intention to humiliate.

In the ideal-typical case of humiliation (Dreyfus), the three sides of the triangle are aligned, that is to say, the humiliator, the victim and the witness all perceive the humiliation ritual in the same way. The social contours and consequences of humiliation will be very different, as a consequence, when the perceptions of the three

parties are not in sync. Here is a tentative catalogue of the principal variations on the classic case:

1. The victim does not feel humiliated by the humiliator's intentional act.
2. The victim feels humiliated in the absence of an intentional act of the humiliator.
3. The victim does not realize that he has been the subject of an intentional act of humiliation.
4. The humiliator intends to humiliate and feels contempt for the victim.
5. The humiliator has no intention of humiliating and does not feel contempt for the victim.
6. The humiliator is absent and the victim does not notice the humiliation which is perceived only by the public.
7. The public takes sides with the victim and feels empathy for the victim and indignation towards the humiliator.
8. The public takes sides with the humiliator and feels indignation for the victim and pleasure in seeing the victim humiliated.
9. The victim is a group.
10. The audience is absent.

In the remainder of this article, I will try to understand how we can talk about a single phenomenon, "humiliation," in the face of such a variety of situations. We should also ask if the moral connotations of humiliation remain the same across all the situations just canvassed. To begin this inquiry we need first to understand what exactly is being humiliated when someone suffers humiliation.

### **Fifty shades of ego: what is the subject of humiliation?**

The many definitions of humiliation all agree that humiliation involves a put-down, an indignity, an injury to some aspect of the self. But which self or which aspect of the self? Avishai Margalit defines humiliation as: "any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider her *self-respect* injured" (Margalit 1996, 9, my italics). Psychologist Evelyn Lindner defines humiliation as "the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor, or dignity." Self-respect, pride, honor, self-esteem, dignity, intimacy, agency: what precisely is taken away from us when our status is lowered in an act of humiliation? And what is it (beyond a perceived status

loss) that renders so emotionally intolerable the humiliation present in acts of punishment?

In the Christian Middle Ages, humility was considered a virtue of the good Christian. Humility before God and in front of one's fellow men was a positive good, a strategy of voluntarily "abasing oneself" in front of others to abjure the sin of pride as well as to avoid provoking in others, envious of our superior status, any desire to humiliate us. Christianity is a religion of humility built on a foundational scene, the passion of Christ, which is, in fact, a ritual of humiliation (Zink, 2017). It could even be argued (although this is disputable) that the Christian ethics of humility had the function, in societies traditionally based on codes of social honor, of interrupting violent cycles of mutual humiliation fueled by the pride of wounded honor and the compulsion to repay humiliation with humiliation.

A fundamental distinction between ancient and modern societies involves the role of honor in social relations. In pre-modern societies, honor is socially assigned. It is a recognized social status, and the loss of this status is experienced as a humiliation. In modern societies, the concept of social honor is slowly replaced by that of individual dignity and humiliation is felt to be a loss of this individual dignity. From this perspective, Margalit distinguishes between self-esteem and self-respect (Margalit 1996, 44). Self-esteem is a social metric that locates us in a value hierarchy established by society. It represents an internalization of the social honor that a society distributes unequally among its members according to their social success.

Self-respect, by contrast, is something more fundamental: it is our sense of personal dignity. It is a claim to that minimum of respect that is due to us as human beings. In contemporary societies, according to Margalit, humiliation as a normative concept has to do with any action affecting others that entails the loss of their self-respect and therefore of their dignity. In fact, the concept of dignity surfaces in many normative definitions of humiliation. The word "dignity" comes from the Latin *dignitas* which means rank, or social honor, but which has been "democratized" over the centuries (Moyn, 2019) to the point of becoming a value attributed inherently to everyone, regardless of their social rank. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, dignity (*Würde*) becomes the center of the value of the human being, an innate value that can neither be lost nor acquired, as opposed to a person's "social value" or "price" (as in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, where "dignity" is defined as "the public value of a man") which is contingent. Dignity makes humankind superior to other animal species because humans possess the rational autonomy to behave morally following the

universal imperatives of morality, those laws that all humans can discover in themselves as rational agents. In 1945, dignity was “canonized,” to borrow an expression from Samuel Moyn (Moyn 2019, 177), in the United Nations Charter and then in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a value inherent in all human beings as human beings, regardless of rank, ethnicity, or gender. A notion on which philosophy has spilled rivers of ink, dignity as an inviolable characteristic of all human beings is a concept that remains ambiguous, oscillating between Kantian autonomy and Hegelian recognition. Because it is linked to our agency, to our autonomy as rational agents, dignity, too, depends on the recognition of others, which is evident, for example, in Margalit’s definition of self-respect. Respect for oneself as a feeling of personal dignity involves an awareness of what is due to us from others in all circumstances whatsoever.

A fundamental ambiguity pervades this battery of concepts of “the self” that is potentially the subject of humiliation: whether the self can be defined as something intrinsic to the human being or whether its definition depends on the social world around us. Does humiliation comport a downgrading of our evaluation of our intimate self or of social self? The Enlightenment concept of dignity does not resolve this ambiguity because, as we have seen, dignity (in its modern meaning) also involves social notions such as respect and recognition. The sociologist W.E.B. Dubois wrote at the beginning of the last century about the humiliation suffered by the African-American population in the United States: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1903). When internalizing a humiliation, it seems to me, there is *always* this double awareness of looking at oneself as seen by others. And it is from and in this double consciousness that the moral outrage and agony of humiliation is born.

### **How I see myself seen: the mirroring self**

In a famous passage of *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre imagines a voyeur peering through a keyhole. At first he is self-oblivious, totally absorbed in his own illicit peeping. But at a certain point he imagines that someone is observing *him*, and the mere thought of being caught in the act by another onlooker triggers a feeling of shame as if he became suddenly aware of himself, but only through the imaginary gaze of the “other.” In Sartre’s words: “La honte est honte devant quelqu’un ... Autrui est le médiateur indispensable entre moi et moi-même: j’ai honte de moi tel que j’apparais

à autrui”<sup>1</sup> (Sartre, 1943). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley spoke of the looking-glass self (seeing oneself as seen by others) as a fundamental stage in the development of the self. According to Cooley, our self develops by internalizing the judgments and evaluations of the social world around us, and it is the harmony between our perception of ourselves and how we think others perceive us that lends an element of stability to our existence. Psychologist Philippe Rochat recently demonstrated in a series of experiments how shame appears as a feeling in children when they see themselves seen by others in situations that they cannot completely control. By re-conducting the famous experiments on “the mirror stage” studied by psychologists and psychoanalysts (Lacan, Zazzo, Dolto), that is, the stage of development in which children recognize their own image in the mirror, Rochat showed how shame first emerges in the course of human development from childhood to adulthood. His experimental design was very simple: a little mark is made on the baby’s forehead without his knowledge. It is therefore a sign that the child cannot see except in a mirror. If the child, looking into the mirror, tries to remove the mark, it means that he has recognized that that image he sees is his own. Rochat shows that this experience of recognizing one’s image in a mirror goes together with a sense of shame rather than of jubilation as Lacan thought. That is because it involves discovering something about ourselves that is not under our control. What is humiliating or shameful is that someone has acted upon us without our knowledge (Rochat 2013).

Our self is not socially constructed, but it *is* conditioned by our experience of the other. It is a mirroring self that integrates the gaze of the social world around us into our lived experience. We are born armed with the powerful capacity of the self to shape and reshape itself and to stabilize our perception of who we are by internalizing perceptions of ourselves that we extract from social world. We recognize our image only in a mirror or in the eyes of others: if our mirroring self is aligned with our social self, then the image seems to disappear, dissolving without a trace in our daily actions. It is so fluid and adaptive that we take it for granted. If our mirroring self is not aligned with our social self, however, we suffer a more or less serious injury to our identity. Something is screeching: we have to fix something, adjust either ourselves or the world, because our voice is out of tune, filtered through the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> “Shame is shame in someone else’s presence ... the other is the indispensable mediator between me and myself. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to another.”

malfunctioning audio equipment that disconcerts concert singers when they begin to hear their own echo. Our dignity, our respect for ourselves, our agency are all called into question when the mirror is broken, and the image that the world sends us back no longer resembles the positive one we expected to receive. This fine line between being and being seen creates normative expectations: I weave the canvas of my existence with a pattern that I believe should be perceived in a certain way. And I expect others to reflect back to me more or less the same image I have conveyed to them. Sociologist Erwin Goffman, in his 1957 masterpiece, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, argues that our projection of own image, however fabricated, creates moral expectations. Others have a duty to help us keep it up at least during our face-to-face encounters. Embarrassment, which often accompanies situations marked by the risk of humiliation, is a “generous” social feeling. Others feel embarrassed when faced with the chance that our social ego, or the social presentation of ourselves, will suddenly crater. I introduce myself into polite company well-dressed and nicely coiffed, prepared to convey a positive impression of myself. But, unbeknownst to me, a louse is crawling on my head. Observers have a choice. They can passively suffer the embarrassment of the scene and act as if nothing has happened. Or they can alert me to my shame and let my nicely crafted self-image fall to the ground. They can laugh at me or run away in horror at the disgusting little parasite. If I notice the louse, I too can pretend that nothing has happened or I can completely unravel and even faint or I can explicitly share the embarrassment with others. Embarrassment is always a state of “being uncomfortable together,” and in this sense is a profoundly social feeling.

Contrary to Goffman, in any case, I believe that the relationship between the self and its image is less strategic than constitutive. According to Goffman, we strategically fabricate an image, a social mask that hides our true self and that allows us to perform as actors in the social theater. It seems to me, instead, that the relationship between these two dimensions of the ego is more substantial and less instrumental. Our social self is more like the shell which a hermit crab grows, without intending to do so, than like an actor’s chosen mask. If it is a mask, it is a mask that we cannot remove because our innermost, deepest self is interwoven with those social threads that have allowed us to manufacture it. It is our most intimate essence, what we have slowly woven to become who we are.

Humiliation touches this deep dimension of our beings, profoundly shaking who we are. It touches the frontier between us and others, and it is precisely along that

frontier where our sense of ourselves, our respect for ourselves and our dignity meet and coalesce.

We are humiliated when we see ourselves seen by others in a way that transforms our image in the mirror into a (more or less hideous) monstrosity. We are humiliated when we are told that we are not only other than we thought we were, but that we are considerably less worthy or even worthless.

This characterization of the self as straddling a fine line between who we are and how we see ourselves seen allows us to better understand the continuity between cases of daily humiliation (the colleague who fails to recognize us in the street, the louse crawling on one's head, the slap given to the child, a colleague's hand thrust under one's skirt) and cases of grand humiliation, as Miller defines them, with a capital H. Humiliation always involves a rupture between how we see ourselves seen and how others really see us. It occurs when the gaze of others destroys our positive self-image and compels us to play a part that we cannot willingly accept. Even in those extreme cases involving bodily violence, such as rape or torture, humiliation means being forced to see oneself as something that one is not, as a body bereft of agency, whereas our usual perception how we see ourselves seen always implies our capacity for agency by default.

The aim of the humiliator is to break the mirror. Humiliated, we are no longer seen as we wish to see ourselves seen and our identity is shattered. Often the humiliator aims to inflict humiliation on those who preen themselves to be something better than they are. He happily deflates those who, he believes, have an unjustifiably inflated ego. That makes sense because humiliation is a way of "putting back in their rightful place" or "humbling" those who dare to perceive themselves as "better" than the humiliator and better than the humiliator thinks they are. As in the example of my friend Pascal, humiliated by older kids for daring to believe that he, too, could be one of them, the typical scathing phrase tossed at the humiliated is: "Who do you think you are?" This is why Miller says that little everyday humiliations usually savor more of the comic than the tragic. The humiliator laughs at the laughingstock made to suffer a blistering humiliation. And admittedly the carnival atmosphere that surrounds such minor humiliation rituals often serves to emphasize this comic aspect of the poor victim's downfall.

### **Can groups be humiliated?**

In the foregoing pages I have frequently jumped from examples involving individuals to examples involving groups. But can groups, classes and collectivities be humiliated when humiliation is defined as a ritual degradation of social status and a devaluation of the self? What would it mean for a group to be humiliated? Can we apply concepts such self-respect, dignity and self-esteem to groups, to a nation for example, or to women as a class? Christian Neuhäuser (2011) argues that there are three ways of humiliating a collective: (1) the direct humiliation of an entire group by humiliating all its members (for example, setting up special check points at airports for Muslim passengers because they are suspected, simply as Muslims, of being potential terrorists; (2) the symbolic humiliation of a group by deliberately defiling or desecrating a well-known symbol of the group, as in the January 6, 2021 attack on Capitol Hill in Washington; (3) humiliation of the group as a whole by humiliating one or more of its members as a “lesson” or message to the others (for example, when the rape of one or more women is meant to humiliate the entire female gender). Although Neuhäuser’s three cases support the suggestion that groups can be humiliated, it remains true that the diffuse feeling of group humiliation, like the equally diffuse feeling of group pride, is difficult to define with any clarity.

An example of type (3) group humiliation is the case of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who lit himself on fire at the age of 26 on December 17, 2010 in the city of Sidi Bouzid after repeatedly having his merchandise confiscated by local police. According to his family, Bouazizi could no longer bear the humiliations he suffered daily at the hands of the police. The straw that broke the camel’s back was being slapped by a female policewoman. Bouazizi’s self-immolation gave rise to a storm of protest and rebellion across the country, leading to the resignation, on January 14, 2011, of Tunisia’s President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, after 23 years in power. Bouazizi was humiliated not only personally but also “as a” long-suffering Tunisian citizen. He represented the collective humiliation of the Tunisian people subjected to the same intolerable abuses and a dispiriting lack of respect by public officials. His drastic gesture was read by the population as a cry of revolt against the collective humiliations which the Tunisian state had been inflicting on its citizens for many years (Frevert, 2017). But how did Bouazizi’s personal feeling of humiliation spread to the entire oppressed population? How can humiliation be shared? By posing this question I do not mean to ask how an emotion can be collective, an ancient and complex psychological, sociological and philosophical question to which a large recent literature has been devoted (Kaufmann, Quéré 2020). Although I have treated this

topic elsewhere (Origgi 2019), I am not going to address it here. Instead, I wish to examine only how a group can feel disparaged and dispossessed by a humiliation inflicted on one of its members. How can an entire group identify itself with the injured social ego of one of its members and thereby be collectively humiliated?

Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz (1990) define an encompassing group as a group that shares a culture, a way of life, a style that encompasses various customs, habits, attitudes and evaluations. If an encompassing group is a nation, we can expect it to possess a common language, a distinctive style of architecture, a literary tradition, a local cuisine, and so forth. The members of an encompassing group do not know each other personally as do those a small group of neighbors; but they can form an imagined community in the sense of Benedict Anderson (1983). Membership in an encompassing group is not normally obtained by merit but is instead acquired by birth, by tradition or by mutual recognition. An encompassing group is a culture and each member of that culture shares a number of conceptions of the culture itself. They all see themselves (and see themselves seen) as Italian or Tunisian or American. An act of humiliation inflicted on a member of that group causes the group to react against the newly degraded image of one of their compatriots. The image of one humiliated member of the group conflicts with the way the group sees itself and wishes to see itself. We might say that the social ego of a group results from the combination of its self-image (shared among its members) and the way it is seen by other groups. When the two images coincide, this combination produces the group's proud narrative of itself, also known as its reputation (Origgi 2018). So long as these images are aligned, moreover, the group coexists peacefully with other groups. If one group begins to be seen in disparaging terms by other groups, then the two images clash and the members of the disparaged group will seek to re-establish the favorable public reputation they believe they deserve. Mohamed Bouazizi, Tunisian, is humiliated and the entire Tunisian nation reacted to repair the personal/group humiliation. A feeling of empathy with a representative victim plucked from one's own group makes other members feel victimized too, and a surge of indignation at how the victim was mistreated excites a strong desire to overthrow the humiliators in turn. This example suggests that collectivities too have a kind of social ego, a mirroring self, a "how they see themselves seen by others," which can become first the object of humiliation and then a spur to revenge.

Normative theories of humiliation, such as Margalit's theory of a decent society as a society that does not humiliate its citizens, i.e., that does not give them reasons to

believe that their self-respect has been injured, are theories that focus on great humiliations, humiliations with a capital H. According to Margalit, humiliating in a normative sense means treating others as sub-humans, like animals or machines. It means treating them in a way that makes them lose control of themselves and excludes them from the human community (Margalit 1996, 144). Such theories demand that extreme poverty, hunger, torture, mutilation and the denial of fundamental rights are excluded from a decent society. But, while proscribing great humiliations from decent societies, they fail to explain why “small” humiliations (for instance, the slap that a Tunisian policewoman gave Bouazizi) can provoke disproportionate reactions.

The lesser humiliations that obliterate our social ego, that poison the way we see ourselves seen, that make us discover an external gaze on ourselves that deeply wounds our identity—these micro-humiliations may be less serious, but they can nevertheless have grave consequences. Being seen in a way that we don’t recognize, becoming victims of a look that strips away our most cherished attributes and assign us others that we consider infamous in situations that degrade our social status—all this is humiliating because it deletes and discards the most intimate part of ourselves, our mirroring self, and prevents us, even apart from being recognized by others, from recognizing ourselves.

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