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Humiliation and the Politics of Identity

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THERE are many different ways of maltreating people and there are several ways of classifying these. Recent moral and political theory has focused on four main types of maltreatment: causing suffering, restricting freedom, violating rights, and perpetrating injustice. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive categories, and, moreover, each is variably inclusive, depending on how it is interpreted. Thus the first can range from the infliction of pain and physical injury through cruelty to the frustration of various kinds of legitimate desires. The second can range from intended interference that prevents agents from realizing their express purposes to unintended limitations on their possibilities of choice. The third can remain confined to the infringement of the libertarian individual rights of voluntary transfer and exchange or expand to embrace the violation or lack of social, economic, and cultural and also group-based rights. The fourth can be limited to the maldistribution of goods or resources or capacities or else include other ways in which people are denied what is their due.

Nor is it obvious that these categories are jointly exhaustive. More recently, moral and political theorists, among others, have sought to formulate a further category that would succeed in identifying a kind of maltreatment that, while it can perhaps be accommodated within all these four, under suitably inclusive interpretations, is nevertheless ever more politically salient in virtually all contemporary societies. In particular, the

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growing impact of cultural diversity and of new, group-based social movements and identity politics has led many to seek new ways of characterizing a type of maltreatment on which the old ways did not focus. The maltreatment is certainly not new but the theoretical focus upon it is. Thus various attempts have been made to achieve this refocusing of concern by reference to a variety of alternative concepts, such as "nonrecognition or misrecognition" (Taylor, 1992, p. 25), "cultural injustice" (Fraser, 1995, p. 71), "faces of oppression" that include "marginalization" and "cultural imperialism" (Young, 1990, pp. 39–65), social exclusion, and the like. All of these attempts are interesting but each has its distinctive difficulties. Among them are problems such as these. Members of hitherto neglected or disadvantaged groups may claim to be "recognized," but how is the comparative strength of such claims to be assessed if not by principles of (distributive) justice? Recognitional or cultural injustice consists in symbolic devaluation, but how can it normally be rectified other than by the redistribution of advantages? Marginalization and exclusion may be acknowledged evils, but these terms are often used as codes for old, familiar ones, and in using them we focus only on bringing outsiders in over the line or readjusting boundaries, while leaving existing patterns of inclusion and exclusion intact (such as the contemporary nation-state).

Now Avishai Margalit (1996) has offered us another, challenging way of focusing the concerns that these attempts exemplify through the concept of *humiliation*. His suggestion is that under this concept one can gather together the whole range of ways of maltreating people that render a society whose institutions practice them less than decent. Is his suggestion convincing?

There are, I think, four instructive difficulties with his account of humiliation that, taken together, have the effect of blurring the focus—assuming, that is, that the object of the discussion is the distinctive way of maltreating people that I have sought to suggest above. In what follows I examine these

difficulties and seek to diagnose their source. I then suggest that it is only by specifying a distinctive kind of humiliation that we can achieve a sharper focus upon the topic under discussion and conclude with some somewhat heretical thoughts about the moral importance of humiliation and decency.

The first of the four difficulties concerns the extension of humiliation as Margalit interprets it. In the course of *The Decent Society* he offers many examples, examples that are clearly intended as intuitively compelling instances of the sorts of humiliation that a decent society would not permit. Among such examples are the following: the story of Uncle Tom, the "toughening" of Israeli army recruits that involved mimicking their vomiting and stammering, the tormenting of Jews in the Diaspora and their degradation in the camps, the rejection of their subjects by colonial regimes, second-class citizenship and systematic discrimination in civil rights, the insulting of a black student in the United States by what was taken to be racist abuse, initiation rites involving degradation, the banning of headscarves in a French school, the media invasion of Katerina Blum's privacy, the Stalinist invasions of privacy, intimacy, and friendship, dehumanizing treatment of prisoners, consigning paupers to poorhouses, the degradations of homelessness and extreme poverty, being subject to a terrorizing, coercive protection racket by the Mafia, the infliction of biblical punishments by King David and Adoni-bezek, and the treatment of hired Arab workers by Israeli kibbutzim and of illegal Mexican immigrants by their U.S employers.

The problem this list poses is its sheer heterogeneity. Is there really an underlying concept that captures what all these instances of maltreatment share and that thereby reveals just what comprises the single wrong they do their various victims? In trying to answer this question, Margalit raises the second difficulty that (like the third and fourth) concerns the intension of his proposed concept of humiliation.

His answer is that there are

> three elements that constitute humiliation, or, if you will, three senses of the term 'humiliation': (1) treating human beings as if they were not human—as beasts, machines, or subhumans; (2) performing actions that manifest or lead to loss of basic control; and (3) rejecting a human being from the "Family of Man" (1996, p. 144).

These are not, he claims, "three separate meanings but merely three different senses with close links to one another" (p. 146). Margalit's argument for this last claim is twofold. First, that (3) "contains" (2), with (3) stressing the injurer's point of view and (2) underlining "the standpoint of the humiliated." And second, that there are "close links" between (3) and (1). I do not find these claims or these arguments convincing. For it seems obvious that rejection (that is, "an extreme case of insult") may or may not involve "the deliberate infliction of utter loss of freedom and control over one's vital interests" while to say that the latter entails the former is only to assert that such an infliction is an injury to human dignity. And, likewise, (1) may or may not constitute the ways in which people's "humanity" is rejected, and, moreover, as Margalit acknowledges, there are certainly contexts in which treating people as animals or machines (or as numbers)—as in operating theaters or sports competitions—is both appropriate and desirable. Furthermore, neither (1) nor (2) helps to make clearer what Margalit claims to be the focus of his book, namely "the humiliation of encompassing groups by the institutions of the society" (p. 277).

This leads me directly to the third difficulty, which consists in an attempt by Margalit to narrow down his notion of humiliation (and thus the decent society) by restricting its application to institutional practices, as opposed to "relationships between individuals" (which, if they are not humiliating, imply a "civilized" rather than a decent society). He comments that this is the distinction between a macro- and a microethical concept, suggesting that his concern is with "the setup of the society as a whole" (p. 2). At first sight, this distinction and

conceptual choice seem reasonable enough, even if, as he himself admits, there are "borderline cases where it is not clear whether speakers should be considered to be speaking in their own name or in the name of the institution" (p. 171), as when university professors speak as teachers. But, behind this admission and debatable example there lies a deeper issue. For conflicts where humiliation is at work often involve conflicting interpretations of just how individuals' speech and actions *are* to be considered. Doubtless Jews in prewar Austria or Poland were relatively unimpressed by the thought that the widely various forms of antisemitism then prevalent were just so many individual opinions. From the perspective of those subject to it, humiliation can look distinctly unified. Of course such unity can be exaggerated and even invented. I am certainly not suggesting that every interpretation is as good as every other and that there is nothing like a truth of the matter to be attained here. On the other hand, it cannot be confined to a "concrete description of institutions" (p. 1) and must also embrace the culturally patterned if variously interpretable speech and behavior of individuals. Institutions are not the only, and often not the major, factor that generates macro-effects out of microbehavior, shaping "the set-up of society as a whole." Consider, for example, George Orwell's rich description of colonial humiliation in his *Burmese Days* (1934) in which the varieties of racism among the Europeans and of corruption among the Burmese are both more significant than, and explanatory of, the Europeans' Club's exclusion of nonwhites.

The fourth difficulty has already arisen in our discussion of the third. From which point of view are we to identify humiliation? What counts as decisive evidence that we are facing a case of humiliation? Not, it appears, the intentions of the putative perpetrators. For, as Margalit writes,

> since we are concerned with institutional humiliation—whose agents are clerks, police, soldiers, prison wardens, teachers,

> social workers, judges, and all the other agents of authority—we can ignore the subjective intentions of the humiliators in examining whether their actions are degrading (p. 128).

(On the other hand, and contradicting this, he writes of the "humiliating motive of pity . . . which motivates the charity society" [p. 235]). Nor is the matter to be decided by the feelings of the putatively humiliated: "the psychological sense of humiliation does not entail that the person who feels humiliated has a sound reason for this feeling" (p. 9). So, for example, the "question is not whether poor people feel humiliated, but whether they have a sound reason for feeling that way" (p. 226). After all, people may be paranoid or strategic in claiming to be humiliated; and, conversely, they may, like Jews in the Diaspora, have subtle ways of avoiding such feelings.

How, then, are we to identify such "sound reasons"? How are we to know "whether the victim has a sound reason for considering himself humiliated, that is, for considering his self-respect to have been diminished in his own eyes" (p. 121)? Margalit's answer is that his sense of humiliation is normative, not psychological, and to point to the elements or senses of "humiliation" indicated above as constituting the appropriate criteria; treatment as non- or subhuman, extreme deprivation of freedom, and rejection from the human family. But this is only to push the question one step further back. It is, of course, easy to adduce examples, such as most of those cited above, whose humiliating nature is not subject to serious doubt. But in this matter it is the easy cases that make bad law. The hard question is: How do we decide cases where it is not widely obvious that there are sound reasons for diminished self-respect, where the question of how to interpret harsh treatment or restricted freedoms or social exclusion is in dispute?

This question only becomes more acute when we attend to a further, important aspect of Margalit's concept of humiliation, namely its symbolic character. He observes that humiliation as

loss of control has "the symbolic element which expresses the victim's subordination" (p. 147), that groups can be excluded from "symbolic citizenship" when symbols are "directed against a minority," rendering that minority "liable . . . to feel actively rejected by the society" (pp. 158, 169), and that religious rituals are very important to a decent society (in contrast to the basic institutions of a Rawlsian just society) because of their symbolic power to define who are and who are not full members of the community. But symbolism (above all, religious symbolism) is paradigmatically subject to diverse and contending interpretations. And so our question is posed once more: When this is so, how are we to decide which is the correct or "sound" interpretation? How are we to determine when it is true to claim that a society's practices symbolize humiliating subordination, rejection, or exclusion?

All these four difficulties stem from the assumptions that "humiliation" names what is common to all those autonomy-reducing and exclusionary practices that diminish self-respect, that they can be identified from a bird's-eye view of such practices across societies in time and space, and that only if these various practices diminish self-respect in the same or related ways can we distinguish the human from the sub- and nonhuman in a normatively significant way. I am not convinced that this is a fruitful set of assumptions. What underlies them is Margalit's "humanism" that, in a revealing footnote (p. 295), he defends against Roland Barthes's presumed charge of "humanistic sentimentality" by asserting that he uses the phrase "Family of Man" to endow the human species with moral significance. Thus he distinguishes the ranking involved in self-esteem and social honor from the egalitarian notions or self-respect and human dignity, the "honour that everyone deserves in equal measure" (p. 43). Humiliation is "injury to human dignity" (p. 262). Now I suggest that the better way to evade the charge of sentimentality here is to address less abstract questions than "What is humiliation?" and from a standpoint closer to live contempo-

rary conflicts about which practices and institutions are humiliating and why. This is not to argue against the need to articulate abstract principles, but rather to suggest that they may best emerge from the clash of interpretations and arguments around less abstract questions.

Among such questions are the following: How should a nonhumiliating society treat groups and collectivities to which its members belong? Which groups should such a society recognize as legitimate and in what ways? Which should it reject and in what ways? Is it possible to be human without the stamp of at least one encompassing group? In fact, all these questions are raised, and the last one explicitly posed (p. 142), in *The Decent Society,* whose focus (to repeat) is meant, according its author, to be "on the humiliation of encompassing groups by the institutions of the society." The answers offered are, however, disappointingly meager since they engage insufficiently with the alternatives that are currently on offer in contemporary political and academic debates about such pressing questions, though there is much in the book that can help us to reflect further about them. To the first question Margalit's answer is cultural tolerance, with "a presumption . . . in favour of the interpretation given by vulnerable minorities as to the humiliating nature of the gestures directed at them" (p. 183). To the second question his broad answer is what he calls "encompassing groups"—anonymous groups that have a common character or culture encompassing many aspects of life, acquired by its members and marking their lifestyles, membership of which is partly a matter of mutual recognition, is important for its members' self-identification to others, and is a matter of belonging rather than achievement (pp. 138–40). His (Herderian) view is that "different encompassing groups reflect different ways of being human" (p. 143), but he offers no principle for deciding which such groups (and which ways of being human) should be recognized as legitimate, nor does he indicate what practical measures (special resource allocations, group-based rights, special forms of political representa-

tion, and so on) would constitute appropriate recognition. Nor, conversely, does he indicate how to judge which groups should be regarded as "valueless" other than by examples (the Nazis, the criminal underworld) or whether or how they should be dealt with. As for the last question, his answer is to concede that, "just as there are eclectic artists, there are cosmopolitan people who do not belong to any encompassing group" (p. 143), but they are allotted only one sole sentence in his 299 pages.

Perhaps a helpful way of approaching these questions is through the concept of *ascriptive humiliation.* By this I intend a kind of maltreatment that consists in domination that results in distinctive kinds of injustice. By "domination" I mean to refer to the systematic use of power in a social context of unequal power relations. In such a context ascriptive humiliation consists in mistreating people by means of ascription, in the classical sociological sense of the term: that is, by reference to statuses that are assigned to individuals, identifying what individuals are, not what they do, such as "attributes of sex, age, intelligence, physical characteristics, status in relational systems, e.g., collectivity memberships" (Parsons, 1951, p. 64).

The more overt form of this is *discrimination,* which consists in the denial of socially valued advantages through practices that rely on marking out specific ascriptive categories of persons for unfair treatment. These practices can consist in positive actions or omissions and they may be deliberate or unconsidered and routine. Examples are specific acts of a racist or sexist or otherwise discriminatory sort, as when a woman or a black person is denied a job or a promotion or an apartment because of prejudice, or a state disfavors an ethnic community in its distribution of funds, or (once more) the Europeans' Club in Orwell's novel continues not to elect nonwhites. Any of these might be claimed to be idiosyncratic or systematic (and, as suggested above, deciding between these can be a deep interpretive issue), and if systematic we may speak of structural discrimination. A distinct form of structural

discrimination occurs when organizations use intrinsically bias-free selection procedures (say, for entry to medical school) that in fact have a disproportionately adverse effect on ascriptively identified groups. Standardized testing, hiring through personal connections, and retirement based on seniority often have such an adverse impact. Each of these forms of discrimination reinforces the other: past acts of discrimination make bias-free procedures less effective, while institutional discrimination makes acting on prejudice more respectable.

Discrimination can be seen as the withholding of recognition: the refusal to accept as "normal" persons who, as the result of some ascribed attribute, are thereby marginalized and unjustly excluded from social advantages to which they would otherwise be entitled. On the other hand, in hierarchically differentiated societies, governed by hierarchical principles of justice, those discriminated against, such as untouchables, are treated as "normal," bottom-of-the-heap people. The specific harm done to those discriminated against is in addition to the denial of advantages resulting from discrimination (such as the job, or promotion, or apartment, or funding, or admission to the Europeans' Club or to medical school), since the reason for the denial is demeaning to those discriminated against. They suffer the additional injustice (which may not be officially recognized as such in a hierarchically differentiated society) of rejection from the dominant culture of mutual recognition. Moreover, the material disadvantage that discrimination creates symbolizes the ascriptive humiliation that brings it about.

Rectifying these kinds of discrimination can take either of three forms. First, it can be personally oriented, giving the victims what was wrongfully denied them, though this will not apply to institutional discrimination, where there are normally no identifiable victims. Or second, it can be group-oriented, as in the form of affirmative action, which has the effect of focusing on and thereby helping to reinforce and perpetuate

the salience of the victims' ascribed status. Or third, it can aim to be "transformative," seeking to deconstruct or deemphasize the role of the discrimination-engendering ascriptions in the society's culture and institutions.

The less overt form of ascriptive humiliation is sometimes referred to as *colonization,* sometimes as *cultural imperialism* (it used to be called *hegemony* in Antonio Gramsci's sense). This consists in "the universalization of a dominant group's or nation's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm," rendering invisible the perspective of the oppressed while simultaneously stereotyping them as "other" (Young, 1990, p. 59). In genuinely colonial contexts, it employs the full panoply of power mechanisms, as the black poet Aimé Césaire observed when he wrote, "I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement." These words are quoted by Frantz Fanon at the very beginning of his *Peau noir, masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks;* 1970, p. 7). In this and other works Fanon explored the psychological, political, and social dimensions of this form of humiliation and the intimate relations between language, personality, sexuality, and political experience, in the context of the struggle for independence and the postcolonial experience in Algeria and elsewhere in Africa.

Colonization however can be given a more general meaning and in that sense can be seen in societies where dominant groups, in control of the means of interpretation and communication, project their own experience as representative of humanity as such. The culturally dominated are thus paradoxically both marked out by stereotypes and rendered invisible. They are defined by the dominant culture, which they both internalize and reject and they thus experience a kind of "double consciousness" (as Gramsci noted) that the black American political thinker W. E. B. Du Bois described as "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" (quoted in Young,

1990, p. 60). This double consciousness appears when such internalized ways of interpreting the world that devalue and stereotype the members of a group are, however inarticulately, put in question by them. And once such questioning becomes overt and generalized, we have the basis for alternative cultures of recognition.

The injustice of this kind of ascriptive humiliation is, so to speak, the usurpation of its victims' point of view by the dominant culture. It has been well described by Iris Marion Young as consisting in the fact "that the oppressed group's own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while the same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life" (1990, p. 90). Rectifying it can only involve enabling its objects to become subjects, doubtless involving ascriptively based cultural self-assertion and identity politics.

Turning to the questions raised above, in the light of this analysis of ascriptive humiliation, various answers suggest themselves. A nonhumiliating society will avoid discrimination, both culturally patterned and institutional, directed against the groups and collectivities to which its members belong. How it will seek to remedy such discrimination where it exists is, of course, politically controversial. In particular, as Nancy Fraser has argued (1995), there is a tension between ascription-fostering and ascription-transcending policies. A nonhumiliating society will also aim at reducing the scope of colonization. The cultural and political self-assertion of the hitherto colonized or partly colonized will, of course, foster the role of ascriptive values. So far as state polices are concerned, here too there is a political choice between policies that encourage the flourishing of ascriptive differences and individualist and meritocratic policies that seek to reduce their scope.

As for the question of which groups a nonhumiliating society will recognize as legitimate and in what ways, the appropriate

answer is both wider and narrower than Margalit's. Wider since we refer to all ascriptive groups, not just "encompassing" ones: all those groups to which individuals ascribe themselves as belonging. But also narrower, since it will not recognize as legitimate groups to which people are assigned by dominant groups but to which they do not themselves subscribe; nor will it view favorably groups that themselves ascriptively humiliate by practicing discrimination or hegemony over others. As for the ways in which recognition may be granted, this is, once more, in political contention, some arguing for selective group-favoring policies and even entrenched rights (as for national minorities, for instance; see Kymlicka, 1995), while others argue that constitutions, laws, and even state policies should be, so far as possible, ascription-blind.

Which kinds of group are illegitimate? The answer is: those that are only the constructs of official or dominant labeling and those that themselves ascriptively humiliate; but also those that act in other ways unjustly, by restricting the civil and political liberties of their own members or of others. What measures should be taken against them is, once more, politically contentious and will also vary depending upon the grounds for declaring them illegitimate. Thus, for example, as Kymlicka has argued (1995), some groups might need to be restrained by the state from enforcing internal restrictions on their members while qualifying for some form of external protection from other groups or the wider society.

Finally, what about the question of cosmopolitanism? Must human beings belong to at least one encompassing group, such as a nation? Must they have a deep bond to a language and a cultural community in order to flourish? The contrary assumption—that human progress required the gradual extinction of national communities—was a commonplace among Enlightenment cosmopolitans, such as Condorcet and Voltaire, and subsequently among most liberals and Marxists and other socialists until relatively recently. Their common animus against the national principle was directed against its particu-

larist focus on ascriptive group identity. Liberals have often seen this as incompatible with the promotion of individual choice and the value of individual autonomy. On the other hand, liberals have often tended in practice to be nationalists, and most recently several writers, among whom Professor Margalit is prominent, have made the case for liberal nationalism, arguing that a national context is not only compatible with but even a precondition for individual freedom.

This view has been challenged by Jeremy Waldron, who argues for "the cosmopolitan alternative," maintaining that in the contemporary world, "people live in a kaleidoscope of culture" and that

> It can no longer be said that all people need their rootedness in the particular culture in which they and their ancestors were reared in the way that they need food, clothing and shelter. . . . Such immersion may be something that particular people like and enjoy. But they can no longer claim that it is something that they need. . . . The collapse of the Herderian argument based on distinctively human *need* seriously undercuts any claim that minority cultures might have to special support or assistance or to extraordinary provision or forbearance. At best, it leaves the right to culture roughly on the same footing as the right to religious freedom (1995, pp. 99, 100).

Cultures, Waldron maintains, are, in any case, not distinct wholes: in our globalizing world of incessant cultural exchange, one cannot say where one begins and another ends, so that they could only be preserved artificially and inauthentically, by defining them in terms of a common ethnic source and cutting them off from cultural enrichment and diversification (1995, p. 107). To this Kymlicka responds by denying that national cultures must have such a basis and claiming that they can be pluralistic and open to new ideas and practices, and arguing for protecting and affirming such cultures as the best context for Enlightenment values of freedom and democracy (forthcoming).

I shall not here discuss this important and ramifying debate other than by observing that what I have called ascriptive humiliation can have another interpretation that is worth drawing attention to in the context of the growing preoccupation with identity politics. For any given ascriptive grouping will consist in a variety of different types of person. There will be identifiers, but there will also be quasi-identifiers, semi-identifiers, non-identifiers, ex-identifiers, trans-identifiers and anti-identifiers. Adherents of identity politics speak only for and to the first, and, unless ascriptive groups do remain thoroughly pluralistic and open, they can represent a considerable danger to the rest of us.

I conclude with some remarks about the dangers of taking humiliation and decency too seriously. Professor Margalit claims, reasonably, that "pluralistic societies, which encourage competing forms of life, are most likely to be in a constant state of tension between criticism and rejection" (1996, p. 181). He also claims, in my view less reasonably, that "there must be a presumption in a decent society in favour of the interpretation given by vulnerable minorities as to the humiliating nature of the gestures directed at them" (p. 183). Once more, we face the question of who is to decide a tricky interpretive problem. I am not sure that I trust the vulnerable always, or even usually, to get it right. For what makes them vulnerable? Once more, it is easy to list examples of victims of racism or other kinds of persecution whose claims to such a presumption are indubitable. But what about those who are especially vulnerable to insult and offense because of their dogmatic beliefs or their passionate temperaments or the opportunities for mobilization such vulnerability may afford them?

Many forms of criticism risk giving offense. Satirical humor cannot avoid it. Is a decent society to do without them, or keep them under strict control? Or should a decent society make space for indecency (and thus for Dean Swift and Lenny Bruce) and for encouraging the unfashionable virtue of robust self-confidence in the face of alternative ways of life?

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