

## Stigma, Stereotype, and Self-Presentation

EUAN ALLISON 

**ABSTRACT** *How should we interpret the popular objection that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals? The Eidelson View claims that stigma, because of its connection to stereotypes, violates an instance of the general requirement to respect autonomy. The Self-Presentation View claims that stigma inhibits the functioning of certain morally important capacities, notably the capacity for self-presentation. I argue that even if we are right to think that stigma violates a requirement to respect autonomy, this is insufficient to account for the full weight of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. We need the Self-Presentation View to explain a special threat to agency. I then address the worry that focusing on a concern with being treated as individuals opens the door to the suggestion that treating as superior can be just as morally troubling as stigma. This objection is fatal for the Eidelson View. But the Self-Presentation View has a number of resources for deflating the worry. We should not exclude the possibility of a moral symmetry between some cases of stigma and some cases of treating as superior. Rather, we should provide a nuanced account of the circumstances in which either phenomenon is detrimental for self-presentation.*

### 1. Introduction

And I always feel this with straight people – that whenever they’re being nice to me, pleasant to me, all the time really, underneath they’re only assessing me as a criminal and nothing else.<sup>1</sup>

It is a familiar claim that stigma wrongs us, in part, because stigmatised subjects are not treated *as individuals*. This article aims to clarify that objection.

In philosophical literature, there are at least two complaints raised about stigma that have some claim as interpretations of the popular idea. First, there is the idea that the injunction to treat persons as individuals is an instance of the broader requirement to respect their autonomy.<sup>2</sup> Stigma, because of its connection to stereotypes, violates such a requirement.<sup>3</sup> Our capacity for autonomy confers on us a kind of dignity that commands certain forms of respect. When we stigmatise a person and thus apply stereotypes to her, we fail to demonstrate one such form of respect for her autonomy, and so undermine her dignity in a particular way. I will focus on Eidelson’s construal of the requirement to treat persons as individuals, which has this general form.<sup>4</sup> Call this the *Eidelson View*.

A second idea focuses on *harms* that stigma threatens, in virtue of failures to treat us as individuals. According to this second view, stigma threatens harm by inhibiting the functioning of certain morally important capacities – notably, our capacity to *self-present*.<sup>5</sup> By this is meant our ability to construct a public persona for ourselves. Self-presentation is thus, in one sense, the activity of shaping an identity as an individual. Stigma frustrates our ability

to realise this capacity because it wrests away from us significant amounts of control over the terms in which we are understood by others. Call this the *Self-Presentation View*.

The Eidelson View rests on the idea that our autonomy confers a special moral status on us – our dignity. On this view, the idea that failing to treat someone as an individual disrespects us is not tied to the idea that such treatment threatens harm. Such treatment is simply inappropriate in light of the special value of autonomy – so even harmless cases of failing to treat someone as an individual can instantiate this wrong. By contrast, the Self-Presentation View centres the harms to agential capacities which stigma threatens in its account of how stigmatised subjects are wronged. For this reason, it does not need to assume that our autonomy confers a special moral status on us. It is simply bad for us when people fail to treat us as individuals, because this threatens to undermine our exercise of agential capacities.<sup>6</sup>

I will argue that the Eidelson View is *insufficient* as an interpretation of the wrong that stigma instantiates in virtue of failures to treat us as individuals. I do not reject the idea that part of what is involved in treating persons as individuals is adhering to a requirement to respect their autonomy. I will suggest, rather, that even if we are right to think that stigma violates such a requirement, this will not account for the full weight of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. The particular requirement to respect our autonomy is violated in many situations that do not involve stigma. But stigma distinctively threatens our agency. To explain this, we need the Self-Presentation View.

I will then use this account to address a worry about the complaint that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. The worry is that by making much of this concern, we create space for the suggestion that treating someone as superior can be just as morally troubling as stigma. The concern with being treated as an individual is not tethered to a concern with being recognised in either positively or negatively *valenced* terms. It is simply a concern with being recognised *as an individual*. There is then no reason to assume that treating someone as superior poses less risk to such recognition than treating them as inferior. Yet common-sense balks at this result.<sup>7</sup>

The Eidelson View picks out stereotyping as the morally troubling feature of stigma. Thus, its proponents are committed to a symmetrical assessment of cases of treating as superior that involve stereotyping. They can appeal to consequences that are usually associated with being treated as superior, compared to those associated with stigma, in order to explain why it is in general much worse to be stigmatised. But this comes at the cost of playing down the significance of being treated as an individual in our overall judgement that stigma is morally troubling. So, the objection is fatal for the Eidelson View – its proponents must ‘give up the game’ on the importance of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals, which is the intuitively significant charge it was meant to explain.

By contrast, the Self-Presentation View can deflate the worry. It does so not by excluding the possibility of a moral symmetry between *some* cases of stigma and *some* cases of treating as superior. Rather, it does so by providing a nuanced account of the circumstances in which either phenomenon is detrimental for self-presentation.

## 2. The Eidelson View

According to the Eidelson View, when we stigmatise a person, we fail to respect her autonomy and thus violate the dignity that this capacity confers on her. The respect which is owed here is in one sense *general* – it is due equally to all in virtue of a capacity that all

persons share. But, given the nature of this capacity, such respect also requires forms of sensitivity to its exercise *by particular individuals*. It thus generates a requirement to treat them as individuals. Stigma violates this requirement because it involves the application of stereotypes to the stigmatised person.

This view requires an account of autonomy from which to construct the relevant principle of treating persons as individuals. The nature of autonomy is contested in philosophy. Fortunately for our purposes we need only appeal to the following two (reasonably uncontroversial) aspects of our nature as autonomous beings: first, we have the ongoing ability to make decisions for ourselves – to change, sustain, or develop the kind of life we lead; second, we exercise this ability in relation to our character – our individual profile of desires, commitments, and interests, the content of which is constructed through exercises of this very capacity. So, when it comes to *respecting* our autonomy, it matters both that our character is a result of past choices of ours *and* that future choices are not fully determined by earlier ones.

Eidelson gives expression to this concern with autonomy by defending the following requirement to treat persons as individuals:

In forming judgments about Y, X treats Y as an individual if and only if:

(Character Condition) X gives reasonable weight to evidence of the ways Y has exercised her autonomy in giving shape to her life, where this evidence is reasonably available and relevant to the determination at hand; and

(Agency Condition) if X's judgments concern Y's choices, these judgments are not made in a way that disparages Y's capacity to make those choices as an autonomous agent.<sup>8</sup>

Eidelson's account specifies requirements that govern our processes of forming judgements about people. In order to make them relevant to the topic of stigma, we need to extend them as follows:

In *expressing* judgments about Y, X treats Y as an individual if and only if the judgements expressed could reasonably be understood to have been formed in ways that satisfy the Character and Agency Conditions.<sup>9</sup>

This extension is necessary because the members of a community in which a person is stigmatised do not, typically, just *hold* beliefs about the stigmatised person that trade on stereotypes. They also give expression to those beliefs – e.g. by shaming them.<sup>10</sup>

Here is an example of how the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals gets unpacked on the Eidelson View. Suppose someone is stigmatised because of her conviction for a crime. She is the target of various acts of shaming by members of her community. These acts express negative evaluations about her on account of her public identity as a convict. Such evaluations trade on stereotypes about convicts – they involve various generalised assumptions about convicts on the basis of group identity. In this way, she is not assessed simply as *someone who has committed a crime* but as someone whose whole nature is *defined* by that activity. Nussbaum writes about the contrast between shaming penalties on the one hand and fines and imprisonment on the other (but the point extends to shaming versus blaming generally): '[they] humiliate, and thus constitute an offense against human dignity ... [whereas fines and imprisonment] are meted out for acts; they do not constitute a humiliation or degradation of the whole person'.<sup>11</sup>

The Eidelson View holds that by expressing these generalised assumptions about convicts through acts of shaming we fail to treat persons as individuals. In the terms offered above, such judgements could not reasonably be understood to have been formed in ways that satisfy the Character and Agency Conditions. Consider the Character Condition. The character of someone who has committed a crime is usually composed of elements beside her offence, and evidence of this is usually discernible from even the most cursory attempt to understand her life. When a person expresses an evaluation of a convict that casts her offence as definitive of her nature, we cannot usually accept (reasonably) that the judgement was formed in a way that satisfies the Character Condition.

Now consider the Agency Condition. The judgement that a person's nature is defined by some offence of hers is disparaging of her ability to continuously shape her character, to put her past behind her, and to transcend any given act of hers. When a person expresses an evaluation of a convict that casts her offence as definitive of her nature, we cannot usually accept (reasonably) that the judgement was formed in a way that satisfies the Agency Condition. On both counts, the expression of this judgement fails to treat the convict as an individual, which on this view is a way of failing to respect her autonomy.

The Eidelson View can then explain, at least in part, why stigmatised subjects would appeal to a concern with being treated as individuals. This is a good result (and, to repeat, not one I will challenge). But is it a *sufficient* account of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals? Contrast the example of the stigmatised convict with the following case:

*Seminar faux pas*: A new graduate student in the philosophy department confuses some technical vocabulary in her contributions during a seminar (*de dicto/de re; explanans/explanandum*; etc.). A senior graduate student at the seminar concludes on this basis that she is philosophically unsophisticated, a belief which he also expresses to the other students behind her back. In fact, the student is highly imaginative and perceptive – a fact which could easily have been gleaned by properly attending to her contributions in the seminar.<sup>12</sup>

The senior graduate student fails in the way he forms his judgement about the new student, and in his expression of that judgement, to treat her as an individual in the way specified by the Eidelson View. This is because the judgement that she is philosophically unsophisticated could not reasonably be understood to have been formed (and is in fact not formed) in a way that satisfies the Character Condition. The senior graduate student had evidence of her imaginativeness and perceptiveness ready to hand, if only he had attended properly to her seminar contributions – her attempts to autonomously shape her identity as a philosopher.

So whilst *Seminar faux pas* is not a case of stigma, stereotyping, or perhaps even shaming, it does involve a failure to treat the graduate student as an individual, as the Eidelson View understands this notion. So, if the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals should be understood in these terms, then the wrong that *Seminar faux pas* instantiates should be of the same kind as the one that is intuitively associated with stigma.

Does it seem this way? Such treatment as we find in *Seminar faux pas* is, bluntly, not very nice. But we would not want to say it involves the same *kind* of wrong as in the case of the stigmatised convict. For one thing, the contexts in which the graduate student confronts such failures to treat her as an individual are pretty localised – they are confined to her interactions with a single colleague. Nobody else cares about her seminar faux pas. One's public identity as a convict, by contrast, is salient across many areas of life. Indeed, this difference is partly responsible for qualifying the latter case, but not the former, as an

example of stigma.<sup>13</sup> I will suggest in the next section that this feature of stigma also has the consequence that when an identity is stigmatised, one's very agency is threatened. That threat does not seem to be present in *Seminar faux pas*.

Yet the Eidelson View *is* committed to saying that the wrong in *Seminar faux pas* is the same kind of wrong faced by the stigmatised convict. This is because it explains the wrong in both cases, arising from failures to treat persons as individuals, by appeal to the same principle: an instance of the requirement to respect autonomy. True, the stigmatised convict is vulnerable to a much more *pervasive* risk of people failing to treat her as an individual. But the comparison here is similar to the comparison between being lied to by one person and being lied to by many more people in addition. The further wrongs that are committed in the latter scenario are just the wrong that appears in the first – repeated over and over. That seems a plausible account of this comparison.<sup>14</sup> But an analogous account of the comparison between *Seminar faux pas* and the stigmatised convict seems inadequate. The latter is *distinctively* wrong in a way that the former is not. As Sangiovanni puts it, 'An insult ... is not correctly seen as an attack that is part of a systematic societal pattern whose effects reverberate throughout one's life and one's dealings with others'.<sup>15</sup>

In general, whilst we might find fault in particular acts of shaming or other isolated failures to treat persons as individuals, these do not generally threaten our capacities as agents. By contrast, stigma *does* pose this threat, as I explain in the next section. Consequently, the wrong that stigma instantiates in virtue of failures to treat us as individuals is morally different in kind from a simple failure to respect autonomy. Because the Eidelson View cannot explain this aspect of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals, it is insufficient as an explanation of it. I will argue in the next section that we need the Self-Presentation View to fill in the wanted explanation.

Let me begin to plot this way forward. Stigma has two features that are significant for our interest in being treated as individuals. First, stigma involves the communication of assessments of the stigmatised person (including those which appeal to stereotypes) that treat a single feature of hers as definitive of her nature. It shares this with many forms of shaming that are not stigmatic.<sup>16</sup> Second, the stigmatised person is vulnerable to acts of this kind *across many areas of her life*. It does *not* share this feature with non-stigmatic acts of shaming or other failures to treat persons as individuals.<sup>17</sup>

The Eidelson View focuses primarily on the first feature. It is in virtue of involving assessments that treat a single feature of a person as definitive of her nature that stigma violates a requirement to respect autonomy. But because stigma shares this feature with many acts of shaming that are not stigmatic, the Eidelson View cannot explain the distinctive threat that stigma poses to our agency. My suggestion, then, is to see whether there are philosophical resources that place some additional importance on the *second* feature of stigma – that the stigmatised person is vulnerable to acts of this kind across many areas of her life. Because this is a feature that stigma does not share with non-stigmatic acts of shaming or other failures to treat persons as individuals, it may enable us to explain why stigma is distinctively threatening to agency. I put forward the Self-Presentation View with this objective in mind.

### 3. The Self-Presentation View

The Self-Presentation View focuses on *harms* that stigma threatens, in virtue of failures to treat us as individuals. Stigma threatens harm by inhibiting the functioning of certain

morally important capacities – notably, our capacity to self-present. Stigma frustrates our ability to realise this capacity because it wrests away from us significant amounts of control over the terms in which we are understood by others.

What is the capacity for self-presentation? For starters, it is closely related to the two aspects of our autonomous nature mentioned above. Recall, we have, first, the ongoing ability to make decisions for ourselves – to change, sustain, or develop the kind of life that we lead. Second, our exercise of this ability is partly informed by our character – a character that we have constructed through exercises of this very capacity.<sup>18</sup> Both views discussed here thus emphasise the importance of our autonomous nature. But the Self-Presentation View differs from the Eidelson View in the following way. The Eidelson View holds that our capacity for autonomy confers a special kind of moral status on us – our dignity. The claim that acting and expressing judgements in ways that violate the Character and Agency Conditions disrespects us is not tied to the idea that doing so threatens harm. It is simply inappropriate in light of the special value of our capacity for autonomy – so even harmless violations of these requirements can wrong us. By contrast, the Self-Presentation View avoids assuming that our capacity for autonomy confers a special moral status on us (though I do not think it needs to deny this either). Instead, it notices that as social creatures we are partly dependent on others for the effective exercise of our agential capacities. This makes us vulnerable to harms imposed by others when they fail to treat us in ways that support such exercise. Stigma wrongs us because it threatens such harms, in virtue of people failing to treat us as individuals.

This way of putting things suggests there is a burden on proponents of the Self-Presentation View to explain the value for a person of enacting a self-presentation (and thus the harm of such enactment being undermined). Proponents of the Self-Presentation View offer various answers.<sup>19</sup> But perhaps the simplest is due to Sangiovanni, who draws our attention to an ‘integral sense of self’ which arises from our awareness of the process by which we make choices in light of, but not fully determined by, a character that we have fashioned through previous exercises of that very capacity for self-presentation. This is a sense of our life as having a kind of *narrative unity*.<sup>20</sup> The value of having an ‘integral sense of self’ is that it is a *constituent* of many of the good things in life.<sup>21</sup> Some (perhaps all) of these can be good for us independently of whether we have an ‘integral sense of self’. Take friendship. It may make friendship easier to pursue and enjoy if our life seems to us to have a kind of unity. But it is plausible that, were we able to attain it anyway, friendship could still be valuable for us without our possessing an ‘integral sense of self’. Still, it also seems plausible that the *full* value of friendship (as well as many other goods), and perhaps the most important aspects of that value, are not accessible to us unless we can see it as appropriately related to core elements of our character – as well as being related intelligibly to other goods in our life that themselves make sense in light of our commitments, desires, interests, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

Supposing we accept this account of the importance of exercising one’s capacity for self-presentation, a natural question to ask next is why *stigma* should be thought to frustrate it. The answer offered by proponents of the Self-Presentation View is that stigma deprives us of significant amounts of control over the terms in which we are understood by others.<sup>23</sup> And as Sangiovanni writes: ‘A gap between the way we see ourselves and the way the world sees us (as we perceive it) will cause dissonance and lead us to adjust or adapt. Our capacity to sustain and develop an integral sense of self cannot survive long a widening gap



between the two'.<sup>24</sup> But what are the mechanisms by which a 'widening gap' produces this 'dissonance'? And how does *stigma* produce this gap?

Begin with the first question. Velleman argues that our drive to be intelligible to ourselves (in the terms offered by Sangiovanni, to sustain and develop an integral sense of self) itself prompts us to aim at intelligibility to others.<sup>25</sup> In order to interact successfully with you – which is partly a matter of such interactions manifesting my self-presentation – I need to understand you.<sup>26</sup> And because you, like me, are moved by the aim of maintaining a coherent narrative account of your life, this means I need to understand you as you understand *yourself*.<sup>27</sup> So, making sense of your responses to me then involves getting *your* conception of *me* into view.<sup>28</sup> This can still be achieved if your conception of me deviates from my self-conception. But a shared understanding, with less 'bookkeeping' of the various conceptions of me in play, is more conducive to understanding how you are acting in response to me and how I should act in response to you.<sup>29</sup> We want to avoid excessive amounts of what Warr aptly calls *narrative labour*.<sup>30</sup> In short, producing actions that are intelligible to others also promotes intelligibility to myself – and this is one important reason why we want to avoid a widening gap between our self-conception and the terms in which we are understood by others.

Some fit between these conceptions is achieved through reliance on a shared pool of roles and scripts for interacting with others.<sup>31</sup> Social roles, including hierarchically ordered ones, are often enablers for mutual understanding rather than barriers to it. They provide us with ready access to information about where we stand in a given interaction, clueing us in to expectations that will be placed upon us within it. But any given social role is only likely to comprise part of one's character – so we should not make or act upon judgements about people that are not licensed by the need to occupy certain social roles for the purposes of mutual understanding. That does not mean we need to *endorse* the self that others present to us – but it does require that we recognise it *as* an attempt at self-presentation rather than as issuing from some unalterable nature (e.g. the circumstances of one's birth).<sup>32</sup> For example, I should not assume that my waiter is performing that job because they are not smart enough to get a different one. To do so is to fail to make a distinction between the roles that a person may contingently occupy and the person herself. It casts such roles as definitive of her nature. At the same time, by assuming more about a person than I am licensed to by the particular self-presentation she is enacting, I intrude inappropriately upon her freedom to conceal and reveal aspects of character as she sees fit. A concern with privacy is thus a core feature of the Self-Presentation View.<sup>33,34</sup> By denying possibilities for individual expression in these ways, I run a serious risk of a widening gap between the terms in which I understand her and the terms in which she understands herself.

The complaint here is similar to the one raised earlier against stereotypes, which play a large role in stigma. Stereotypes are rigid – and crowd out the particularity of the stereotyped person.<sup>35</sup> We worried earlier, however, about whether modelling these failures in terms of violating a requirement to respect autonomy is sufficient to account for the weight of the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. There is an analogous worry: whilst any given failure to achieve mutual understanding in our interactions with others may manifest faults of various kinds, these may not be sufficient to threaten our capacity to sustain and develop an integral sense of self.<sup>36</sup> As Velleman documents, a common strategy for dealing with relationships in which they occur is simply to exit them and find others that hold out better prospects for manifesting a shared conception of oneself.<sup>37</sup>

We need to specify why the gap between self-conception and how we are understood by others that is threatened by *stigma* is distinctively troubling for our capacity to sustain and develop an integral sense of self.

We can take our lead from the observation that whilst we may exit particular relationships in which failures of mutual understanding occur, we are also dependent on others to satisfy our goal of sustaining and developing an integral sense of self. We forge a public persona through interactions with others. So, as Velleman notes, there is no option to 'strike out entirely on our own' – and there is always the risk of becoming 'a kind of social outlaw ... where others would have to take unorthodox measures to deal with you, leaving you with no intelligible avenues of response'.<sup>38</sup> This is one lens through which to understand Velleman's remarks about people with 'low social status': it may be, amongst other things, their comparative lack of opportunity to find relationships in which their self-conception will be reciprocated that might lead them to '[internalise] the conception that other people have of [them], adopting it, and acting so as to confirm it'.<sup>39</sup>

This observation has an important upshot for how we think about the charge that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. Recall that stigma has two features that are significant for our interest in being treated as individuals. First, stigmatised subjects are vulnerable to evaluations, often drawing on stereotypes, that cast a single trait as definitive of their nature. Second, they are vulnerable to such evaluations across many areas of their life. The first vulnerability is shared not only by stigmatised subjects, but also by targets of many other acts of shaming and so on. But the second vulnerability is distinctive. And whilst the first vulnerability certainly frustrates mutual understanding in particular interactions, it is only when coupled with the second vulnerability that one's very capacity to self-present is threatened. This is a moral concern of a different kind.<sup>40</sup> In short, the stigmatised person's lack of control over the terms in which she is understood by others is not merely a feature of particular interactions of hers, but of her life as a whole. This is because stigma is present throughout her social world – so there is a pattern therein, owing to the application of stereotypes and so on, of interactions that hold out little opportunity for self-presentation.

An objection that might be raised here is whether the Self-Presentation View really avoids the challenge put to the Eidelson View. Have I really identified a feature of stigma that introduces a moral difference in *kind* between stigma and other shaming practices or failures to treat persons as individuals? Might it not be the case that stigma is simply worse than other shaming practices or failures to treat persons as individuals because a stigmatised person is exposed to *more* breakdowns in mutual understanding (prompted by acts of shaming, applications of stereotypes, and so on) and thus has *less* opportunity to meaningfully enact a self-presentation?

This objection misinterprets our interest in enacting a self-presentation. Breakdowns in mutual understanding are not in themselves of any serious moral import. They are an ordinary part of life. We have no morally relevant interest in ever greater amounts of opportunity to shape our public persona unhindered by social roles and the expectations that other people attach to these. But we do have a fundamental interest in maintaining a *basic level* of control over the terms in which we are understood by others. Without this basic level, the self-understanding that is necessary in order to function as an agent is liable to fracture. And when we generate this liability by stigmatising others, *that* is a moral failure of a different kind.



#### 4. Treating as Superior

We have tried to make sense of the frequently cited objection that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. I argued that the Eidelson View is insufficient for this. If we appeal only to the idea that stigma violates a requirement to respect autonomy, we will be unable to discriminate morally between stigma and other cases of shaming, for example. The Eidelson View thus misses the full weight of the appeal to our interest in being treated as individuals in the complaint against stigma. In order to make sense of this, we need the Self-Presentation View. Stigma undermines the capacity of stigmatised subjects to self-present. This is not true for other cases of shaming and failures to treat persons as individuals. This is explained not only by the fact that stigmatised individuals are vulnerable to evaluations, often drawing on stereotypes, that cast a single trait as definitive of their nature – but by their being distinctively vulnerable to such evaluations across many areas of their lives.

We now face an objection to the very charge we have sought to interpret – that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. The concern with being treated as an individual is not tethered to a concern with being recognised in either positively or negatively valenced terms. It is simply a concern with being recognised as an individual. There is then no reason to assume that treating someone as superior poses less risk to such recognition than treating them as inferior. This opens the door to an implausible result: treating someone as superior can be morally on a par with stigmatising them.

To see this, consider an example from Valentini:

*Messiah.* Al is a good man. He leads a fulfilling life. Those around him appreciate him and treat him with respect. Shortly before his death, he makes an unsettling discovery. Unbeknownst to him, those in his community believe he is the Messiah: someone chosen by God, with innate virtue, and deserving of unconditional respect. As it happens, Al really is a good man, worthy of respect. But if, counterfactually, his behaviour and personality were disagreeable, those around him would continue to be positively disposed towards him. They all interpret Al's behaviour through the lens of the 'Messiah-script', without seeing him for who he really is.<sup>41</sup>

We should take two things from this example. First, it is possible to fail to treat someone as an individual not only when we apply negatively tainted stereotypes to them, for example, but also when we treat them as superior. We can, if we wish, cash this out in terms of the Character and Agency Conditions. The members of Al's community do not give reasonable weight to evidence of the ways that Al has exercised his autonomy in giving shape to his life. That evidence is reasonably available – in the way he chooses to conduct himself agreeably in his interactions with them – but they ignore it completely, responding to him only through the lens of the 'Messiah-script'. And the members of Al's community disparage his capacity to make choices as an autonomous agent, since they respond to him on the assumption that his choices are not subject to the hazards of ordinary autonomous choice but are rather the direct consequence of innate God-given virtue.

The second point is that some people who are treated as superior are, like those stigmatised, vulnerable to evaluations that cast a single feature of theirs as definitive of their nature *across many areas of their lives*. Al is vulnerable not only to experiencing failures to treat him as an individual in particular interactions – such failures are a pervasive feature

of his social world. These points together suggest that some cases of treating as superior should be just as troubling as stigma to proponents of either the Eidelson View or the Self-Presentation View.

Is that such a counterintuitive result? I do not think so. I am convinced that examples like *Messiah* – which is certainly troubling – should lead us to conclude that some people who are treated as superior are just as trapped as those who are stigmatised. Or, to take a real-world example, it is not *so* obvious that the treatment of some tabloid celebrities – who may be esteemed by others – is not morally on a par, in some respects, with stigma.<sup>42</sup>

Still, we can also point to examples of treating someone as superior but failing to treat them as an individual that do not seem morally troubling. Perhaps the workers at a company think the boss can do no wrong. They do not pay attention to his individual qualities – they only interpret his behaviour through the lens of the ‘infallible-boss-script’ and would continue to treat him as superior even if he started to fail as a boss. But what is so bad (at least *for the boss*) about that?

This objection is fatal for the Eidelson View. Its proponents are forced to concede that, as far as a concern with being treated as an individual goes, the boss example *is* morally on a par with stigma. In both cases, there is the same kind of failure to respect autonomy. This does not mean, of course, that the cases are morally equivalent *all things considered*. There are many contingent perks that go along with being treated as superior, even if people fail to treat you as an individual.<sup>43</sup> And there are further contingent disadvantages that accrue to you when you are stigmatised. This perhaps motivates the sense not only that it is worse overall to be stigmatised, but that failing to treat someone in that position as an individual amounts to ‘kicking them whilst they are down’.<sup>44</sup>

This move taken on its own, however, comes at great theoretical cost. We started with what appeared to be a morally salient feature of stigma – that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. But now we are forced to say that it is really the contingent disadvantages associated with being stigmatised that account for most of our sense that it is morally troubling. This is because the example of the boss involves the same kind of failure to respect autonomy as do cases of stigma. And yet the former seems hardly troubling at all. In the end, failing to treat a person as an individual turns out not to matter so much for proponents of the Eidelson View.

Can the Self-Presentation View do better? I think it can. This is because being treated as superior not only involves certain contingent benefits but is (in general) less likely to undermine your ability to self-present than if you were stigmatised. So, there is one sense in which, *from the point of view of our interest in being treated as individuals*, being treated as superior is less troubling than stigma.

There are at least two features of being treated as superior that account for this. Recall that according to the Self-Presentation View the significance of stigma for our interest in being treated as individuals is that it wrests away from us significant amounts of control over the terms in which we are understood by others. This control is removed from us because stigma generates vulnerabilities that are present throughout our social world – there is a pattern therein, owing to the application of stereotypes and so on, of interactions that hold out little opportunity for genuine self-presentation. The inability to ‘strike out on our own’ means that, when confronted with such a predicament, we may simply be forced to accede to the identities that are imposed on us by others.

The point about people who are treated as superior – and this is the first factor that accounts for the moral difference compared to stigma – is that one of the perks of

occupying such a position may be precisely that one is able to insulate oneself from circumstances in which one's self-conception diverges from the terms in which one is understood by others.<sup>45</sup> Notice that this feature of treating as superior is closely related to one's access to important social goods – the same goods which the Eidelson View appeals to as mitigating our concern with treating as superior. Consider the boss again. The boss may be able, for most purposes at least, to avoid her workers who understand her in terms that fail to treat her as an individual. She can seek out other contexts in which her self-conception is reciprocated – and secure in this knowledge she can (as Velleman suggests) 'act so as to win others over to [her] conception of [herself]'.<sup>46</sup> This point is significant for the question of whether one's capacity for self-presentation is undermined by others' failures to treat one as an individual. Or to put the point another way, it may lead us to question whether being treated as superior does, in general, generate vulnerabilities that are present throughout one's social world in the same way that stigmas do.

There is a second reason why it might be better, from the point of view of our interest in being treated as individuals, to be treated as superior. *An individual is more likely to welcome positive representations as part of her public persona than negative ones.* Esteemed individuals often do not have any trouble working such high regard into a coherent narrative account of their life – many *expect* to be well received.<sup>47</sup> The boss example may be like this (esteemed professors come to mind as another example). And this is important for the question of whether her capacity for self-presentation is undermined, even if the valence of the evaluations that she incorporates into her public persona are not *directly* relevant to her interest in being treated as an individual.

A worry: does this open the door to a morally troubling result – that stigma is rendered less evil so long as the stigmatised person has fully internalised the negative evaluations of her that circulate in the community? I do not think so. Though I cannot do justice to the thought here, it seems that such internalisation is rarely an example of genuine self-presentation but rather of acquiescence in an identity imposed from outside oneself. Still, I *do* think there is something correct in the idea that when a stigmatised person fully 'owns' a stigmatising conception of herself, she does something to deflect from the harm that would otherwise have been done to her. I cannot offer an account of 'owning' here – but I do suggest that the Self-Presentation View lends itself to an account of the value of 'owning' that appeals to the ways in which it facilitates a stigmatised person's self-presentation in an environment that is otherwise hostile to it.

Let us summarise how the Self-Presentation View avoids the worry about grounding a complaint against stigma in a concern with being treated as individuals. First, we concede there is no principled reason why some cases of treating as superior cannot be as morally troubling as stigma. Intuitively, there are such cases. Second, we follow the Eidelson View in noticing the contingent perks that go along with being treated as superior and the contingent disadvantages that accrue to you when you are stigmatised. This has *some* role in explaining our judgement that it is, in general, worse all things considered to be stigmatised than to be treated as superior. But we cannot stop here without downplaying the salience of our concern with being treated as individuals in complaints against stigma. So, we must appeal to the Self-Presentation View to explain why there is one sense in which, *from the point of view of our interest in being treated as individuals*, being treated as superior is less troubling than stigma. This involves offering a nuanced account of the circumstances in which either phenomenon is detrimental to self-presentation.

## 5. Conclusion

I have not rejected the idea that part of what is involved in treating persons as individuals is adhering to a requirement to respect their autonomy. I have instead argued that even if we accept such a requirement, pointing to a violation of it will be insufficient to explain the weight of the common accusation that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals. The Self-Presentation View is superior in this regard since it allows us to treat stigmas as morally different in kind from other shaming practices and failures to treat persons as individuals. This is because the former, but not the latter, generate vulnerabilities that are present throughout our social worlds – and it is this feature that accounts for the threat stigma poses to our capacity for self-presentation. I have also argued that the Self-Presentation View is an improvement upon the Eidelson View in its ability to explain when and why there are moral symmetries between treating as superior and stigma. When it comes to the complaint that stigmatised subjects are not treated as individuals, self-presentation is the place to start.

Euan Allison, University College London, London, UK. [uctyera@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:uctyera@ucl.ac.uk)

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## NOTES

- 1 Testimony cited in Goffman, *Stigma*, 25.
- 2 For a survey of interpretations of the requirement to treat persons as individuals, see Beeghly, "Failing."
- 3 For a view of stigma that focuses on stereotypes, see Goffman, *Stigma*.
- 4 Eidelson, *Discrimination and Disrespect*.
- 5 For sociological work on self-presentation, see Goffman, *Presentation of Self*.
- 6 This framing mirrors Sangiovanni's (*Humanity without Dignity*) opposition between 'dignitarian' accounts (which he rejects) and the 'negative conception' (which he favours) – though Sangiovanni goes further than me in *denying* that individuals have dignity in the sense described here.
- 7 Sangiovanni (*Humanity without Dignity*, 103) accepts the 'common-sense' view that it is (usually) worse to be stigmatised than to be treated as superior, at least with respect to cases of *inappropriately* stigmatising and treating as superior.
- 8 Eidelson, *Discrimination and Disrespect*, 144.
- 9 I say 'could reasonably be understood to have been formed' rather than 'were formed' to allow for the possibility that X does not endorse the judgements she expresses about Y.
- 10 Eidelson's account is not vulnerable to the worry that treating persons as individuals will require us to refrain from ever making judgements about people on the basis of generalisations. Eidelson (*Discrimination and Disrespect*, 145–6) notes: 'What the character condition requires is simply that one also consider information that does manifest a person's self-authorship'.

- 11 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 230.
- 12 This example may be complicated by the role of class, gender, race, and so on in the failure to attend properly to her contributions. So let us assume, artificially, that her confusion of the technical vocabulary is the only salient factor.
- 13 This point finds resonance in Viehoff's ("Power and Equality," 12) remarks about 'social status hierarchies' as 'a feature of society as a whole, rather than of a particular relationship'.
- 14 I am bracketing the possibility that in the latter case, when more people lie to a person, they are *also* committing some further distinctive wrong, such as collectively 'gaslighting' them.
- 15 Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, 96.
- 16 See for example Thomason, *Naked*, 205.
- 17 For discussion of a kind of non-stigmatic shaming ('reintegrative shaming'), see Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration*.
- 18 For this account of the feedback mechanisms involved in self-presentation, see Velleman, "Self as Narrator."
- 19 For example, see Velleman, "Genesis," 35–7.
- 20 Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 81–2.
- 22 Rozeboom ("Review," 508) questions whether we need to appeal to our 'dignity as free, rational agents' in order to explain why this kind of relationship to character is valuable. If so, the Self-Presentation View needs to incorporate some insights from the Eidelson View. I do not think I need to resolve this issue here because my main argument goes through either way. Even if part of the value of self-presentation is explained by appeal to the dignity that autonomy confers on us, a simple affront to such dignity is not a sufficient explanation of the objection that stigma fails to treat us as individuals. We must appeal to the ways in which stigma undermines agential capacities – as the Self-Presentation View does and the Eidelson View does not.
- 23 For example, Velleman ("Genesis," 45) writes: 'The target of racist remarks is displayed ... as one who has been captured in a socially defined image that leaves no room for self-presentation'.
- 24 Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, 82.
- 25 Velleman, *How We Get Along*.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 30 Warr, "'Always Gotta Be Two Mans'."
- 31 Velleman, *How We Get Along*, 70.
- 32 The respect which, according to the Self-Presentation View, is owed to persons is not then a form of 'appraisal' respect. Rather, it is a form of 'recognition' respect – which, in this case, requires that we refrain from violating rights that are grounded in the harms that stigma, for example, threatens. See Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect." See also Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, 86–7.
- 33 See for example Velleman, "Genesis."
- 34 This passage is indebted to Sangiovanni's (*Humanity without Dignity*, 91–4) discussion of 'inegalitarian Fellows' who treat 'Scouts' as *bound to serve*.
- 35 On the rigidity of stereotypes, see Blum, "Stereotypes and Stereotyping," 261–5.
- 36 Sangiovanni (*Humanity without Dignity*, 95) makes a similar point by contrasting being rude to one's lawyer with the example of the 'inegalitarian Fellows' mentioned in an earlier endnote.
- 37 Velleman, *How We Get Along*, 66–8.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 87, 78.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 67–8, fn. 8.
- 40 This moral difference in kind is compatible with differences in the *degree* to which stigma inhibits self-presentation. The above argument suggests that the degree to which stigma threatens this capacity will vary according to how pervasive the stigma is in one's social world. It strikes me as intuitive that the most morally salient stigmas are often the ones that are, in this sense, most all-encompassing.
- 41 Valentini, "Disempowerment," 462.
- 42 For discussion of this example, see Velleman, "Genesis," 49. Velleman endorses the view that we can sometimes experience 'praise itself as a kind of pillory'.
- 43 This is not generally true for targets of so-called 'positive stereotyping', who are often marginalised.
- 44 For a similar strategy, see Fabre, "Doxastic Wrongs."
- 45 This is not universally true. The example of tabloid celebrities is relevant – as is *Messiah*.

46 Velleman, *How We Get Along*, 68, fn. 8.

47 See Velleman, "Genesis," 47, fn. 24, for a different take. See also Velleman, *How We Get Along*, 66–7.

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