The Harm of Humiliation

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§1. Introduction

In the long first chapter of *The Guermantes Way,* Marcel recounts an episode in which he observed the public humiliation of a young woman at the hands of Rachel, the mistress of his friend:

> A young woman whom Rachel and some of her friends disliked was, with a set of old songs, to make a first appearance on which she had based all her hopes for the future of herself and her family… Rachel had posted among the audience a certain number of friends, male and female, whose business it was by their sarcastic comments to put the novice, who was known to be timid, out of countenance, to make her lose her head so that her turn should prove a complete failure, after which the manager would refuse to give her a contract. At the first notes uttered by the wretched woman, several of the male audience, recruited for that purpose, began pointing to her profile with jocular comments, several of the women, also in on the plot, laughed out loud, each flute-like note from the stage increased the deliberate hilarity, which grew to a public scandal. The unhappy woman, sweating with anguish through her grease-paint, tried for a little longer to hold out, then stopped and looked round the audience with an appealing gaze of misery and anger which succeeded only in increasing the uproar. The instinct to imitate others, the desire to shew their own wit and daring added to the party several pretty actresses who had not been forewarned but now threw at the others glances charged with malicious connivance, and sat convulsed with laughter which rang out in such violent peals that at the end of the

second song, although there were still five more on the programme, the stage manager rang down the curtain. (Proust 2016: 183-4)

The young singer is humiliated, that much, I think, is undeniable. In addition to this point, however, two further thoughts also seem extremely plausible. The first is that her humiliation consists in the way she is made to appear to the audience, and the second is that humiliation, so understood, is bad for her. My aim in this paper is to show that these two thoughts, taken together, raise a question: how exactly is humiliation, so understood, bad for its victim? How could the way Proust's singer figures in the mind of her audience be something that is good or bad for her?

I will begin with an elaboration of these natural ideas and an explanation of the explanatory demand that they motivate (§2). This explanatory demand would not be noteworthy if it admitted of an obvious answer. However, I will argue that the explanations philosophers typically offer in response to this explanatory question are unsatisfying in important ways (§§3-6). I will end by outlining what I take to be a more promising line of explanation, which appeals to our need, as social animals, for interpersonal connection (§7). My aim in doing so will not be to offer the final word on this topic, but rather to indicate a possible direction for future inquiry.

§2. The Explanatory Demand

2.1. Humiliation and Appearances

Proust's singer is the victim of humiliation. It is plausible, moreover, that her humiliation is constitutively connected to the way she is made to appear to her audience. This point might be put more generally as follows: the event of undergoing humiliation consists in the victim's being made to appear to another in a way that is humiliating.[1] This statement, I take it, is highly plausible, but it requires elaboration.

In this episode the singer is humiliated by another; several others in fact. In other episodes, the humiliator and the humiliated are one and the same. We might imagine Rachel insisting on this spin on the episode, claiming, perhaps, that the singer was humiliated by nobody but herself. There are also cases of humiliation which lack a humiliator altogether. Episodes of slipping and falling come to mind as some of the most obvious examples of this sort of case. Even in these cases, however, it is plausible to think that in order to undergo humiliation, there must be someone who observes one slip or fall.

That the claim being made in this section is a claim about what it is to undergo an *event of humiliation*. We can contrast this event with the *state of humiliation*. One can be in a state of humiliation simply by being in a humiliating condition, without actually appearing to another in a way that is

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[1] This common thought is articulated in more specific, and controversial, ways by Taylor (1985) and Miller (1993).

humiliating. Many consider certain mental and physical ailments to be examples of humiliating conditions. Think, for example, of urinary incontinence or the cognitive decline that often comes with old age. There are also humiliating social conditions, such as being forced to live in a cramped, unsanitary environment. It is plausible that the state of humiliation is derivative on the event of humiliation: being in a state of humiliation plausibly consists in one's liability, in virtue of being in this condition, to be the subject of events of humiliation. If this is right, then the state of humiliation is also constitutively connected with the way one appears to others, albeit in a less direct way than the event of humiliation.[2]

In the example we are considering, the young singer *is* humiliated, *feels* humiliated and *thinks* of herself as being humiliated. However, these things can come apart. I can *be* humiliated without being at all *aware* of my humiliation, as when I think that everyone is laughing along *with* me when in fact they're laughing *at* me. I can also *feel* humiliated without *being* humiliated, if everyone is laughing *with* me and I think they're laughing *at* me. And finally, I can even *think* that I'm humiliated without either *being* humiliated (I'm mistaken) or *feeling* humiliated (I'm too depressed to care).[3]

Note that although the claim that humiliation consists in appearing to another in a way that is humiliating is circular, this is not a problem. The aim of this paper is not to give a reductive analysis of humiliation or to

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[2] In any case, the central argument offered in this paper can be extended, with suitable modifications, to the state of humiliation.

[3] See Etinson (2020: 376-378) for a useful discussion of the relations between these things.

delineate what conditions must be met for something to be humiliating. All that is needed, for present purposes, is a formulation of the relationship between humiliation and social appearances that is plausible, and the circular characterisation just offered is sufficient for this end.

With that said, it is useful to have *some* characterisation of what it is to be seen in a humiliating light, if only so that this can serve to remind us what it is like to undergo humiliation. Although I doubt that we can give necessary and sufficient conditions of this phenomenon in conceptually antecedent terms, I do think it can be elucidated by appealing to some of its characteristic features. For example, Proust's young singer appears to her audience in a way that is liable to make her feel worthless, incapable, and small. She is seen as laughable and pathetic, and in such a way that might be described as undermining, in some way, her self-esteem, self-respect or dignity (or, at least, their expression). Taylor (1985: 67) suggests that undergoing humiliating involves a fall from a higher to a lower position. It is plausible that the singer does indeed suffer a shift in her social standing which is liable to make her feel that she is not being given the position she takes (or had assumed) to be her due.[4]

Whether or not one appears in a way that is humiliating may also sometimes depend on how one responds to a potentially humiliating situation. As Miller (1993: 121) observes, attempted acts of humiliation are often moves 'in a game of challenge and riposte'. One's response can

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[4] For more thorough analyses of humiliation, see Taylor (1985), Miller (1993), Margalit (1996) and Etinson (2020).

therefore determine how one fares in this game. We might imagine a case in which the initial jibes of Rachel's friends failed to humiliate the singer because she bore them with grace and sang so well as to win over the audience and silence her malefactors. In the circumstances described this would have been hard, but not impossible. In any case this isn't how things play out. By the time the 'pretty actresses' join in on the uproar, it is too late for the singer. The curtains close. She is humiliated.

2.2. Humiliation is Harmful

The second idea is that humiliation is harmful, all else being equal. This too is a natural thought. Humiliations such as those suffered by Proust's singer are the stuff of nightmares. They strike us where we are most vulnerable, making us feel worthless and small. It's no surprise, then, that this thought is commonly acknowledged by philosophers. William James (1890: 294), for example, writes that 'a man's Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates…To wound any one of these images is to wound him.' Etinson (2020: 355) has written of 'the specific (socially oriented) harm of humiliation'. Honneth (1992: Ch. 6), moreover, claims that the disrespect conveyed by an act of physical assault can constitute an injury which is sometimes regarded as worse than the physical injury itself. And finally, Kraut (2007: 248-50), Scarry (1985) and Shklar (1984: 37) all suggest that the harm of torture is not exhausted by physical injuries done to the victim since it also subjects them to the harm of humiliation.

Although Proust describes the episode with the singer in a way that emphasises the further effects of her humiliation, and principally its impact upon her career, it is plausible that her humiliation itself is bad for her. Indeed, it is often the case that the further effect that is most salient to the humiliated person is the prospect of further harmful episodes of humiliation. The humiliated teenager worries about the humiliation of having to show their face at school again the next day, of being bullied and made the object of cruel jokes. They worry about being humiliated, again and again.

The question of whether *all* episodes of humiliation are harmful is not straightforward, just as the question of whether all pains are harmful is not straightforward. Sometimes being humiliated can be for someone's greater good, disavowing them of a delusion and thereby setting their life on track. There are two ways of accommodating cases such as these. The first would be to say that humiliation is, all else being equal, harmful, but that in special circumstances, the harmfulness of humiliation can be cancelled by other factors. The alternative would be to say that humiliation is always *pro tanto* harmful but that this might be outweighed by other benefits. How we decide between these formulations might turn on what we want to say about those, like Dostoyevsky's underground man, who claim to enjoy humiliation, but this issue need not be settled here.

2.3. *The Explanatory Demand*

These two thoughts, taken together, draw attention to a way in which the harmfulness of humiliation calls for explanation.

To see this, consider again the metaphors of humiliation as an 'injury' and a 'wound'. We reach for these metaphors because they aptly express the idea that humiliation is a way of being harmed, no less than physical injury. But they also draw attention to an important difference between these two ways of being harmed. When I am physically injured, there is some tangible harmful change that I undergo. Equally, we can speak of 'mental injuries' which consist in one's undergoing harmful mental changes, for example by suffering painful experiences or the loss of one's mental capacities. The harm of being humiliated, however, doesn't necessarily involve undergoing any particular harmful change. I can be harmfully humiliated without any awareness whatsoever of my humiliation, and this alone is enough to show that I need not, in suffering this harm, undergo any harmful change in my person (I will consider the painfulness of humiliation in §3). This is not to say that a harm which involves no change in the agent is incoherent, but rather to say that these harms invite explanation: if they involve no such change, what *do* they consist in? How can the way I figure in the mind of another be something that is, in itself, good or bad for me?[5]

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[5] Compare Julius (2016: 195).

In the case of some other putative harm, the first of these questions might admit of an answer that is straightforwardly defensible.[6] However, as I will now proceed to argue, this is not the case for humiliation. Each putative explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation currently available in the philosophical literature is unsatisfactory, and, as a result, the second of the two questions in the preceding paragraph acquires the weight of a philosophical problem.

How, then, might we try and explain the harmfulness of humiliation?

§3. Pleasure and Pain

3.1. Humiliation Hurts

It might be complained that the argument of §2.3 downplays the fact that many cases of humiliation do involve harmful changes in the victim insofar as they suffer painful experiences of humiliation. As Margalit (1996: 85) puts it, inflicting humiliation is a way of inflicting *suffering*. O'Brien (2020: 550) likewise remarks that 'it hurts' to be conscious of having 'a lowered social value'. These observations are consonant with the claim, made by a variety of philosophers and psychologists, that our negative emotional

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[6] It might be suggested, for example, that the loss of one's job can, itself, constitute a harm done to one, although it doesn't obviously constitute a change to one's person. I take it that in this case a satisfying explanation can be easily given. Someone might say, for example, that they have been deprived of work they found to be enjoyable and worthwhile. That this suggestion invites explanation, however, is revealed by the fact that if someone were to disavow every candidate explanation (by allowing, for example, that they found the work to be worthless and unpleasant) and yet maintain that the loss of this job itself were bad for them, then we might reasonably want them to say more.

reactions constitute a special class of pains.[7] For example, Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004) define a class of pains they call 'social pains' which consist in 'the distressing experience arising from the perception of actual or potential psychological distance from close others or a social group'. Emotional experiences which are said to involve social pain include the feelings of grief, rejection and humiliation. Can we explain the harmfulness of humiliation in terms of its painfulness?

3.2. Objections

I think there are at least three reasons to think we can't.

First, there is good reason to doubt that we can generally infer from the painfulness of an emotional experience to the conclusion that the experience in question is bad for us. Consider the 'socially painful' experience of grief. Losing a loved one is, no doubt, bad for us. However, it would be a distortion of the facts as we know them to infer from this that the experience of grief, in such circumstances, is bad for us. In fact, it is highly plausible that, all else being equal, it is *not* bad for us to experience grief when we have lost a loved one. A similar point holds for other negatively valenced emotional experiences: it is plausible that it is not bad for us, all else being equal, to *feel* shame if we are, in some way, shameful (even if *being* shameful is bad for us); it is not bad for us, all else being equal, to *feel* guilt, when we are guilty of something (even if *being* guilty is bad for

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[7] e.g. Korsgaard (1996: 148), Goldie (2000: 57), Klein (2007: 531) and MacDonald & Leary (2005).

us); and it is not bad for us to *feel* regret, all else being equal, when we have done something regrettable (even if *doing* regrettable things is bad for us). These examples suggest the following, extremely plausible, general principle: if an emotional experience is apt and proportional to one's situation, then, all else being equal, it is not bad for one to have it. If this is true, then a mere appeal to the social painfulness of humiliation will not be sufficient to explain the harmfulness of humiliation.[8]

Second, this strategy provides an unsatisfactory account of the harmfulness of unfelt humiliations. Compare, for example, the case of (a) a man who thinks everyone is laughing along *with* him when in fact they are actually laughing *at* him with (b) a man like (a) in all respects other than that he is aware that he has been humiliated. Both men are humiliated but only the latter *feels* humiliated. Moreover, in addition to it seeming wrong to say that only (b) is harmed, the present approach seems to render unintelligible the idea, which we sometimes find attractive, that the harm of (a) might actually be greater than that of (b), all else being equal, if (a)'s humiliation is greater. Some who are inclined to think that 'what you don't know can't hurt you' might object to this, but this is implausible. As Nagel (1970: 76) observes, it entails that 'even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face,

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[8] In fact, I am inclined to find a slightly stronger thesis plausible. This thesis has it that *if* we lose a loved one or are subjected to humiliation, then, all else being equal, it is good for us to feel humiliation and grief respectively, provided that these experiences are appropriate and proportional. These, after all, are emotionally healthy responses to distressing situations (compare Kraut 2007: 153-158). This does not entail that the emotional response is good for us in a way that negates or outweighs the harm in question.

none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result.'

Third and finally, this strategy seems committed to the claim that (c) a man who mistakenly takes someone to have been laughing *at* him and, on this basis, merely feels humiliated, suffers a harm of the same kind as someone who, like (b), is actually humiliated, and therefore a greater harm than someone who, like (a), feels no humiliation whatsoever. But even if we are occasionally inclined to think that an experience of inappropriate humiliation *is* harmful, it is implausible to say that this is a harm of the same *kind* and *degree* as the harm of a genuine case of humiliation, and also implausible to say that they people of this kind generally suffer the harm specific to humiliation more than those who undergo genuine humiliation without being aware of it.

§4. Desire

4.1. *The Desire for Approbation*

To avoid these difficulties, we might seek to explain the harmfulness of humiliation on the basis of our desire, as social animals, to be positively appraised by others. I will follow Lovejoy (1961) in referring to this class of positive attitude as forms of 'approbation'. According to this view, it is good for us to be held in approbation because this satisfies our desire for

approbation, and it is bad for us to be humiliated because it frustrates this desire.

There are two ways to understand this proposal, depending on whether the desire in question admits of what Anscombe (2000, §37) calls a 'desirability-characterisation'. That is, depending on whether the object of the desire is apprehended as being, in some sense, desirable.

4.2. The Desirability of Approbation

On the face of it, when we desire approbation we apprehend it as being desirable. Equally, when we are averse to humiliation, we apprehend it as being *undesirable*. If this is right, then we should be able to say what it is about approbation that the subject takes to be desirable when they desire it. That is, we should be able to give a 'desirability-characterisation' of approbation.

The challenge facing this approach is to provide a desirability-characterisation that can explain why approbation is good for us and humiliation bad for us without begging the question. After all, the most straightforward way of characterising its desirability would be to appeal to the fact that it is good for us, but this is the very thing that we are trying to explain.

The problem, however, is that it is unclear what the alternative desirability-characterisation could be. For example, we can rationally regard approbation as being desirable insofar as it has certain further effects, such

as the acquisition of food and protection. However this would only justify the thought that approbation is good for us insofar as it has certain good or bad further effects.

We might suggest that being the object of approbation is desirable either (i) because it is liable to cause pleasant experiences of oneself as the object of another's approbation or (ii) because it is conducive to some further good, such as one's self-respect, dignity, or personal relationships. However, neither of these strategies places any explanatory weight on the notion of desire. (i) involves a regression to the hedonistic approach rejected in §3, whereas (ii) seeks to explain the harmfulness of humiliation in terms of things that are good for us in a way that is plausibly independent of any given individual's desire for them. These approaches will be considered in §§5-6, but before I do so it is worth being explicit about why I do not think that it will help to claim that the desire for approbation is a more basic form of desire which lacks a desirability-characterisation

4.3. Brute Desires

It might be suggested that this construal of desire is too sophisticated. Perhaps we can understand someone as in some sense having a 'brute', perhaps hardwired, desire for approbation which does not involve apprehending approbation as being in any sense desirable.

Just stating this view, however, is enough to motivate the thought that this use of the term 'desire' is a piece of philosophical jargon and that we

should therefore not grant too quickly that whatever count as desires in this sense count as desires in the ordinary sense of the term (I will therefore call these so-called desires that lack desirability characterisations 'brute desires').[9] After all, ordinary desires generally do involve apprehension of their object as being desirable in some way. And although it is tempting to compare these brute desires with whims, to do so would be to do a disservice to whims. As Quinn (1993: 249) points out, most of the things we do on a whim are things 'whose value (or apparent value) can either be discerned or made the object of intelligent speculation.' I might have a haircut, eat a buttery, or fly out to Iceland, on a whim. But these are all things which I can recognise as being desirable, at most only the timings are a matter of chance. These brute desires therefore seem much closer to compulsions than ordinary desires or whims. They are conative states which dispose us to pursue approbation but which do not involve apprehending approbation as desirable in any way at all.

In this regard, these brute desires are like the compulsions of the man, described by Quinn (1993: 236), who is disposed to switch on all of the radios in his vicinity: not because he regards this state of affairs as being, in any way desirable, not even because he wants to hear anything at all. Is it really so obvious that the 'frustration' of these compulsions is good for him?

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[9] I take it, moreover, that this is Anscombe's point.

The present line of explanation therefore faces the following challenge. They must not only explain why the 'frustration' of these compulsions is, indeed, good for him, but must also do so in a way that would explain why humiliation is the particularly egregious harm that we typically take it to be, and why approbation is the particularly important good that we take it to be. It is far from clear, however, that this challenge can be met by the account currently under consideration.

§5. Self-Respect, Dignity and Identity

5.1. *An Attack on Dignity*

The idea that humiliation undermines or injures a person's dignity or self-respect is sometimes thought to be true as a matter of definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'to humiliate' as 'to lower or depress someone's dignity or self-respect', and a number of philosophers have echoed this thought. Margalit (1996: 9), for example, understands the state of being humiliated as one's being in a condition or suffering a form of treatment which 'constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured'. And Nussbaum (2004: 204), perhaps more cautiously, writes that 'humiliation typically makes the statement that the person in question is low, not on a part with others in terms of human dignity'. Can we understand the harmfulness of humiliation on the grounds that it undermines the victim's self-respect or dignity?

5.2. 'The Paradox of Humiliation'

It is a common thought that humiliation constitutes an attack on self-respect and human dignity, but one that calls for explanation. After all, the notions of self-respect and dignity are among the most contested notions in moral philosophy. According to Margalit (1996: 24) self-respect is to be understood as the 'honor persons bestow upon themselves by virtue of their own humanity'—that is, the honour which is based exclusively on their nature as human beings. Similarly, to speak of 'human dignity' as Nussbaum does is to refer to the basic value one has as a human being which makes such self-respect appropriate. Finally, we might speak of a person acting in a way that is dignified insofar as their behaviour is expressive of their self-respect.

However, if we view the normative grounds of self-respect in terms of our fundamental dignity or value as human beings, we will face a puzzle in explaining how we could intelligibly regard it as being injured, attacked or stripped away from us. As Darwall (2013: 16) suggests, 'failing to recognize someone's dignity…may injure her in some way or other, but it cannot injure her dignity, at least not directly'. Margalit (1996: 121-6) calls this 'the paradox of humiliation.'

Margalit's paradox can be avoided if we reject his claim that the normative grounds of self-respect lie exclusively in one's inalienable value as

a human being.[10] In response to Margalit's paradox, then, we might seek to make sense of the idea that one's self-respect can be injured by thinking of the normative grounds of self-respect more expansively so that it includes properties of oneself that one might intelligibly regard oneself as lacking or losing.

One way of doing this would be to appeal to Korsgaard's (1996: 101) concept of a 'practical identity'. This has two features, corresponding to the two aspects of self-respect articulated by Rawls (1999: 386). First, one understands oneself to be a certain kind of person with a certain kind of value, as living a life that is worth living and as being engaged in activities that are worth undertaking. Second, one thinks of oneself as being in some sense able to live this kind of life and to fulfil the goals and intentions that go along with it. It comprises one's sense of one's value as a specific, socially and historically determinate, kind of person.

For example, one might think of oneself as a student, teacher, socialist, feminist, christian, as someone's, friend, parent or child, or, like the young woman from *The Guermantes Way,* as a singer. At a more basic level, one's practical identity might include a conception of oneself as an autonomous agent, as someone in control of their body in all of the typical ways and able to determine their own identity. As Korsgaard (1996) herself emphasises, this may include one's moral identity as a human being, but it is

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[10] Margalit takes this to be axiomatic. However, he also admits that he is using humiliation in a way that is narrower than our ordinary use of the term (see, for example, Margalit 1996: 288-289).

not exhausted by it. The attitude of self-respect could then be understood, on this basis, as one's recognition of, and proper responsiveness to, one's value, so understood.

Thinking of the normative basis for one's self-respect in this way might open up space for the idea that one can rationally regard one's self-respect as being injured, attacked or even lost. This strategy might be developed by appealing to the common thought that our practical identities are in some sense dependent on the recognition of others. Honneth (1992: 131-2) for example, claims that 'the normative self-image of each and every individual human being…is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others' and, that, as a result, 'the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse.'[11]

This suggestion admits of at least three readings: a psychological reading, an epistemological reading, and a conceptual reading. I will argue that each of these readings fails to deliver an adequate explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation.

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[11] See also Darwall (2006: 144-5)

5.3. The Psychological Reading

According to the psychological reading, it is simply a matter of psychological fact that the practical identities of human beings are sensitive to the attitudes that others have of them, and therefore only sustainable when they are 'continually backed up' by the recognition of others.

This reading, by focusing on the humiliated subject from an impersonal theoretical point of view fails to provide a personal-level, rationalising, explanation of our susceptibility to humiliation, since it provides no explanation of why it is rational to respond to the opinions of others in this way. Just as to take an exclusively predictive attitude to my future actions, asking what *will* I do as opposed to what *should* I do, reveals an alienated relation to myself, so too would thinking of oneself as being harmed by being humiliated insofar as others' responses to one *cause* one to lose confidence in one's self-conception, regardless of whether these responses yield reasons which render this loss of confidence rational, or even intelligible.[12]

5.4. The Epistemological Reading

This issue might lead us to consider an epistemological reading of the claim that our practical identities are dependent on recognition.

Brennan and Pettit (2005: 26) observe that we have 'an evidentiary reason of prudence' to concern ourselves with the opinions and attitudes

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[12] This point is broadly inspired by Moran (2001).

that others have of us, since enjoying their esteem or recognition provides us with evidence that we are the people that we take ourselves to be. On this conception, then, our practical identities must be 'continually backed up' by recognition in order to be epistemologically justified.

There are two good reasons to doubt that this reading can provide an explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation.[13]

First, the mere fact that one's self-conception has been undermined, rationally or psychologically, is not sufficient for explaining why it's rational to regard humiliation as being bad for one. After all, this surely depends on whether or not the other is right. Moreover, as Brennan and Pettit (2005: 26) note, insofar as one takes the other's conception of one to be accurate, to provide one with genuine evidence, whether it be for or against one's practical identity, one ought to take it as being *good for one* insofar as it enables one to acquire knowledge as to how one is.

Second, having one's practical identity epistemologically undermined is not a necessary feature of harmful humiliation. Someone might be harmfully humiliated when treated by another in a way that reveals that the other sees them through the lens of racist, sexist or classist stereotypes. In such a situation, one might recognise that the other's conception has no rational import for one's own self-conception on the grounds that it is deeply mired in prejudice. An example of this sort is provided by Big Eagle, a chief of the Santa Sioux, who recalled that:

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[13] Versions of these objections also apply to the psychological reading.

> Many of the whites always seemed to say by their manner when they
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> saw an Indian, 'I am better than you,' and the Indians did not like
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> this…the Dakotas did not believe there were better men in the world
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> than they. (Big Eagle, in Brown 1970: 38-39)

We can intelligibly regard these young Dakotas as being humiliated by the way they were treated by the settlers whilst remaining neutral on whether their epistemic self-conception was undermined in any way. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that they themselves would repudiate this suggestion. This point is acknowledged by Taylor (1985: 67-8), who observes that one can be humiliated in response to the way one is seen by another 'whether or not [one] shares their view'.

5.5. The Conceptual Reading

Finally, it might be suggested that some aspects of our practical identity depend, as a conceptual matter, on recognition. This might be said to follow from the fact that social statuses constitute an important part of most peoples' practical identities, and that one's possession of a social status is dependent in some way on one's being recognised as having it by others. Etinson offers an explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation in these terms:

Attitudes can degrade because they are fundamental constituents of social relationships, and of social status in general. To fully inhabit a social position (friend, colleague, ruler, citizen, celebrity, etc.) others must reliably *take* one to have it — that is, one must be "seen" as having it. Chloé and Lesley are not really friends, they do not really enjoy "friendship," unless they both regard each other as friends (itself a socially constructed category). When others fail to adopt relevant attitudes towards us, then, this can threaten, undermine, and even obliterate our social position, humiliating or degrading us. (Etinson 2020: 366)[14]

It is crucial for the defensibility of this thesis that occupation of a social status requires 'reliable' recognition. After all, it is not plausible that one-off cases of 'misrecognition' are generally sufficient to undermine one's social status. If there is a sense of being a singer which is a social status, either because as it requires that one is thought of by others as such, or because it requires that one be able to actually produce a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure in others through one's singing, one will not cease to occupy this status by virtue of a one off case of misrecognition. Cases of misrecognition must be more widespread than this to preclude you from occupying the status in question.

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[14] Margalit (1996: 124-5) makes a similar claim about one's self-conception as a 'member of the commonwealth of mankind'. I focus on Etinson's account because I take it to be the more promising version of the strategy, but versions of the objections I offer also apply to Margalit.

I suspect that this is the reason why Etinson formulates the requirement in terms of *reliable* recognition. On this view, only the lack of reliable recognition (or the presence of reliable misrecognition) could preclude one from occupying the status in question. This way of stating the conceptual dependence thesis, however, poses a challenge to its employment as an explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation. One-off cases of humiliation can, after all, harm one, even if they don't conceptually preclude one from occupying the status in question. They do not, therefore, undermine this aspect of one's practical identity.

It might be suggested that these individual cases *threaten* one's social status since, if they become sufficiently widespread, one will cease to occupy the social status in question. However, this would at most suggest that these individual cases are *conditional harms* in the sense that if they become widespread, then one will be harmed by losing one's social status. But even if some cases of harmful humiliation are conditional harms, this explanation will not apply to all cases of harmful humiliation. There are, after all, one-off cases of harmful humiliation. And it is also plausible that those cases of humiliation that are conditionally harmful in this sense are also *non-conditionally harmful* in a sense that remains to be explained.

A second problem with this approach is that it is restricted to a specific class of cases: specifically, those cases of humiliation that are connected with one's social status. However, one can be viewed in a way that is

inconsistent with some aspect of one's practical identity that doesn't concern any social status and yet which is nevertheless humiliating.[15]

For example, even if there is a sense of being a singer which is a social status, there is also a sense of being a singer which isn't. The latter way of understanding oneself as a singer only requires that one has (to some extent) the requisite skills, capacities, and abilities, and finds value in engaging in the activity. Suppose you think of yourself as a singer in this sense. If some people make fun of your singing, this might harmfully humiliate you even if it doesn't conceptually preclude you from thinking of yourself as a singer. Indeed, you might continue to think of yourself as a *good* singer, as being well before your time. You might even be right about this, and yet be under no illusion about the fact you *aren't* a singer, never mind a good one, in the previously discussed 'social status' sense of the term. After all, your singing doesn't actually produce the relevant sort of pleasure in others. However, it might be that everyone in your community is tone deaf, lacks a taste for non-instrumental music, or thinks singing is a false gift sent by Satan to corrupt the pure of heart.[16]

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[15] Is it really so obvious that any amount of humiliation could be sufficient, in itself, to obliterate the social statuses Etinson refers to? Consider the status of being someone's colleague. Even if one must receive a kind of recognition by a hiring committee, once the contract is signed and the paperwork is in order, is it obvious that any amount of humiliation, in itself, could preclude one from occupying this status?

[16] These possibilities suggest that the activity of singing isn't conceptually dependent on one's *actually* bringing about a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure through one's singing. If there is a constitutive interdependence here it will be of a more complicated sort. Compare McDowell's (2009: 169) instructive discussion of the relationship between recognition and the capacity to speak English.

If the foregoing is compelling then the thought that social status is conceptually dependent on reliable recognition does not provide a readymade explanation of the harmfulness of humiliation. As with the other approaches considered so far, this style of account is in need of further development if it is to constitute a satisfying response to the explanatory demand we are considering.

§6. Personal Relationships

6.1. *The Need for Relationships*

An alternative explanation is suggested by Etinson's (2020: 366) claim that attitudes 'can degrade because they are fundamental constituents of social relationships'. It is plausible both that certain kinds of relationship are an important, perhaps essential, component of human wellbeing and that these relationships are constituted, at least in part, by the attitudes that those involved have towards one another. Etinson suggests that this requires that each person thinks of the other as their friend and themselves as the other's friend. But even if we think this is too strong, perhaps because we think people can be friends even if they lack the concept of friendship, it is nevertheless plausible that being someone's friend requires having some amount of esteem for their merits, particularly their character traits, and a desire that they fare well for their own sake.[17] If this is right, then the quality

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[17] See, for example, Aristotle's remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book VIII.

of one's relationship with another, and perhaps even the relationship itself, will be dependent on the attitudes the other has towards one.[18] Does the harmfulness of humiliation consist in the damage it can do to our personal relationships?

6.2. The Challenge

The challenge facing this approach is to provide an elaboration of the relationship which I need to stand in which would have the power to explain the harmfulness of humiliation without begging the question. It is clear, for example, that we can be harmfully humiliated before people who aren't our friends or romantic partners.

Moreover, it is far from clear that this gap could be plugged by appealing to the idea that although these people are not currently our friends, it would be good for us if they were, and therefore bad for us to have this possibility precluded. After all, it is not clear that it would be good for me to be friends with each individual that I might be harmfully humiliated before. Maybe, but maybe not. Doesn't it depend, in part, on whether I want to be friends with them, or, as Quinn (1993: 251-2) suggests, on the place that they could occupy in my life? In any case, since there are limits to the number of people I can be intimate with, it isn't it obviously not the case that it would be desirable for me to be friends with *everyone?*

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[18] A point emphasised in recent social epistemology. See Stroud (2006), Keller (2018: 20), Paul and Morton (2018: 85) and Schroeder (2018: 121).

One way of responding to this challenge would be to appeal to the Strawsonian claim that we have a deep and abiding concern to stand in relations of mutual-regard with others.[19] It is much more plausible, I think, to suggest that standing in this kind of relation with any given person we encounter would be good for us. So perhaps humiliation can harm us insofar as it undermines a relationship of mutual-regard.

As we will see in §7, I think this brings us close to the truth. However, if we understand what it is for two individuals to stand in a relationship of mutual-regard simply in terms of each subject having an attitude of regard which takes the other as its object, this strategy would be question-begging in the present context. This is because the harm in question will be understood in terms of the fact that the other person (in this case the person before whom one is humiliated) ceases to have the relevant attitude of regard towards one. But this is an instance of the very thing we are trying to explain: how is the way I figure in the mind of another something that is good or bad for me?

With suitable modifications, this charge also applies to the appeal to friendship and romantic relations *if* these accounts seek to articulate the relationship, and the damage done to the relationship, exclusively in terms of an alteration of the other's attitude towards the humiliated person. But, again, how could the other's attitude, itself, constitute something that is non-instrumentally good or bad for the victim?

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[19] See Strawson (2008). This is emphasised in different contexts by Hieronymi (2004) and Marušić and White (2018).

I will now outline what I take to be a promising answer to this question.

§7. Interpersonal Connection

7.1. *A Way Forward*

Appearing to another in a way that is humiliating can be bad for me. This is a truism that calls for explanation. It is worth noting that each of the potential explanations considered so far seek to explain the harmfulness of humiliation, reductively, exclusively in terms of the individualistic states of the victim of humiliation and the person before whom they are humiliated. The appeal to personal relationships in §6 came closest to questioning this, but sought to explain the alteration humiliation causes to the quality of a relationship in terms of the attitudes of one or more of the parties to the relationship. As such, it is compatible with the assumption that we can explain what is harmful about the relation one person stands in to another when they are humiliated before that person, reductively, in terms of the attitudes of each individual involved. This assumption should be questioned. It might be that we cannot understand the harmfulness of humiliation without making reference to an interpersonal relation which is good for us in a way that is irreducibly relational.[20]

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[20] In an excellent recent article Crowther claims that what it is to 'share a life' with another is inherently relational in this way (see Crowther 2020: especially footnote 8). One attraction of the account I will now offer is that it can provide an explanation of why this is so.

To note this possibility, however, is to explain little. In order to provide a more informative account, we must identify and describe the relational good implicated in humiliation. I will now outline what I take to be a promising way of developing this strategy which appeals to the idea that we have a need, as social animals, for 'interpersonal connection'. According to the view I will ultimately defend, the harm of humiliation consists in one's loss of the standing to connect with another in a way that involves the successful enactment and recognition of one's practical identity.

7.2. Interpersonal Connection

From infancy onwards, human beings seek to engage in episodes of communicative interaction not merely, as Grice (1989: 28) seems to suggest, for 'the maximally effective exchange of information' or for 'such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others.' It is sometimes said that we do so in order to *connect* with others (e.g. Eilan Manuscript; Tronick 2005)

When we speak of 'connecting' in these contexts, we generally have in mind a specific kind of harmonious emotional relation in which each person *affects* the other and is *being affected* by the other. This happens in such a way, moreover, that each individual's emotional comportment towards the other is dependent upon, and determined by, the other's emotional comportment towards them. Finally, talk of connection implies a kind of openness: it is out in the open, or mutually manifest, to each individual that

they are affecting-the-other-and-being-affected-by-the-other in this way.[21] This emotional relation might obtain through a variety of forms of interaction, whether it be conversations between adults, protoconversational games of 'peekaboo' between an infant and caregiver, episodes of mutual touch, or other activities, such as dancing or playing music together.[22]

According to a non-reductive account of interpersonal connection, when two individuals connect they stand together in an interpersonal relation that cannot be reduced to any of their individual acts or mental states. This is not to deny that when two people connect, they are in a specific mental state, but only to insist that this mental state cannot be understood independently of the relation which holds between them (compare Campbell 2005: 228).

One way of further specifying the metaphysical structure of this interpersonal relation would be to claim that it consists in a specific kind of *transaction*, as that notion is presented by Ford (2014). According to Ford, the relationship between what *x is doing to y* and what *y is undergoing at the hands of x* is one of identity. They are 'two aspects of a single material reality, a transaction between the agent and the patient' (Ford 2014: 25). I *am chopping* the log and this is identical to the log's *being chopped* by me: I *do* what

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[21] For a more developed elaboration of the relevant sense of openness, see Eilan (Manuscript) and Laing (2021). As these authors note, this openness isn't present in cases of reciprocal covert attention: I might be aware that you are aware that I am spying on you, and you might be aware that I am aware of this, without this being 'out in the open' between us.

[22] Due to space constraints, I here rely on an unanalysed notion of 'harmony'. This suffices for the purposes of an outline. After all, we are generally in a position to recognise which forms of interaction are harmonious and which are not. However, we might reasonably expect a fully developed theory of interpersonal connection to include a more thorough elucidation of this notion.

the log *suffers*. So too when we connect: I'm *affecting you*, you're *affecting me*, I'm *being affected by you*, and you're *being affected by me*. These are all aspects of a single, two-way, transaction. As Aristotle says, this 'acting-and-being-acted-upon' is 'one activity' (*On the Soul*, 3.2).

It is plausible both that interpersonal connection is good for us, all else being equal, and that the relation of connection does not admit of a reductive analysis. If these claims are true, then interpersonal connection will be an irreducibly relational good. When I connect with another I undergo a change which is, all else being equal, good for me. This change, however, cannot be reductively analysed in terms of the ontologically antecedent states of each individual or the ontologically antecedent events that each individual is undergoing. It can only be understood in terms of the irreducible relation that I come to stand in with another.

It is plausible that it is good for us, all else being equal, to connect not merely with our friends, family and romantic partners, but also with anyone that we happen to interact with. Our interactions with other people, after all, are generally emotion-laden, evoking feelings of friendliness or awkwardness. As Cavell (1969: 264) observes, even coldness to another person does not usually take the form of an 'emotional blank'. The friendly, mutually respectful, episodes of connection between strangers may be more superficial than the kind of connection which occurs between friends who are having a deep personal conversation but this does not stop them from counting as episodes of interpersonal connection.

Before moving on it is worth noting that since this account treats interpersonal connection as an irreducible relation, it entails that I am connecting with you if and only if you are connecting with me. It is therefore like relational theories of perception and joint attention in being committed to a form of disjunctivism. If you are mimicking an emotional expression in such a way that you aren't actually affected by me in the way you appear to me to be, then we will not be connecting with one another. At best I will be undergoing an experience of 'merely apparent interpersonal connection'.[23]

7.3. The Relationship Between Recognition, Humiliation and Interpersonal Connection

An attractive feature of this account of humiliation is that it can provide a plausible explanation of the way in which recognition can be good for me and humiliation bad for me.

This explanation begins with the thought that it is plausible that we have a need, not just for connection with others, but for specific kinds of connection. For example, isn't it plausible that we have a need to connect with others in a way that involves the successful enactment and recognition of our practical identities, where the success of this enactment is determined by its being recognised by the others with whom we're interacting? We do, after all, generally, find it important to interact in a way that is 'dignified'. That is, in a way that is expressive of our conception of

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[23] See Campbell (2005: 289) on joint attention and, for a general overview of disjunctivism, Soteriou (2016).

ourselves as a certain kind of person with a certain kind of value (in the sense delineated in §5.2), and to be treated as such by others. We find it important to be treated in these ways, moreover, insofar as they are expressions of the other's recognition of our value.

How much of one's practical identity one will need to successfully enact and have recognised will plausibly vary with the context and one's interlocutors. I might only need my identity as a philosopher to be recognised by my friends or colleagues, but in most of my interactions I presumably need others to recognise my basic value as a human being, as someone deserving of respect, and as a socially competent interlocutor.

If this is right and we have a need to connect with others in a way that involves the successful enactment and expression of our practical identities, then we can explain how another's attitude of recognition of us is good for us as follows. When another recognises one's practical identity, they are in a dispositional state that is actualised by certain kinds of attitude and behaviour.[24] It is plausible that this disposition will be partly constituted by a disposition, all else being equal, to connect with one in a way that involves the recognition of one's practical identity, and which thereby enables one to successfully enact one's practical identity.[25] If this is correct, then the other's recognition of one's practical identity will not be fully specifiable independently of the concept of interpersonal connection. Attitudes of

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[24] For an instructive discussion, see Stout (2022).

[25] The *ceteris paribus* clause is crucial (see Stout 2022: 161). This disposition might be counteracted by other dispositions (for example, the disposition to avoid me that is perhaps partly constitutive of your fear of me).

recognition are states of potential-connection of the relevant sort. And when two people connect in a way that involves each individual's enactment of their practical identity and the other's recognition of that practical identity, then this episode of connection will be the actualisation of their respective recognitional dispositions.[26]

When the other recognises my practical identity, then, I possess a certain kind of *standing* in relation to them: I am able to engage with them in forms of interpersonal connection which involve the successful enactment and recognition of my practical identity. If it is plausible that it is good for me to connect with the other in this way, then it will also be good for me to have this standing. This good, therefore, cannot be understood without making reference to an irreducibly relational good: the good of interpersonal connection.

So much for the good of recognition. It is plausible that the distinctive harm of suffered by the victim of humiliation consists in the *loss* of this standing. When one appears to another in a way that is humiliating, one is unable to successfully enact one's practical identity in a way that will make the other recognise one. As I mentioned in §2, if I find myself in a potentially humiliating situation, for example if a senior colleague has insulted me and my family, whether I am ultimately humiliated may depend on my response. If I am able to maintain this standing with a suitably devastating or dignified riposte I may avoid humiliation. When I *am*

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[26] This is intended to be analogous to Aristotle's claim that 'the activity of the sensible object and that of the sense is one and the same activity' (*On the Soul*, 3.2.)

humiliated, however, I lose the standing to connect those before whom I'm humiliated in a way that involves the successful enactment and recognition of my practical identity. This loss of standing might not be permanent: the relevant standing could be recovered by making the other recognise the relevant aspect of my practical identity.[27]

Unlike the desire-satisfaction account of §4, this account can provide a straightforward characterisation of the desirability of recognition: recognition is desirable insofar as it grounds one's standing to connect with others in a way that involves the enactment and recognition of one's practical identity. Possession of this standing is good for us because the relevant kind of interpersonal connection is good for us. And this can be understood as being good for us in a way that is closely analogous to the more straightforward physical and mental goods alluded to in §2. By coming to stand in a relation of interpersonal connection with someone I undergo a beneficial change, albeit one which cannot be characterised independently of the relation which holds between us.

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[27] If this is right then we can acknowledge a truth to the claim, considered in §5, that being humiliated consists in having one's practical identity (or dignity) undermined. The truth behind this suggestion is *not* that one's practical identity as such is damaged, injured or lost by one's humiliation. This may or may not be the case. However, it will be the case that one's standing to connect with another in a way that involves the successful enactment and recognition of one's practical identity is undermined. According to the account developed in this section, then, we must understand our need for recognition in terms of a more basic need for interpersonal connection.

§8. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to show that the harmfulness of humiliation calls for explanation and that the ways in which philosophers typically try to meet this explanatory demand are unconvincing.

Although I have outlined what I take to be a promising account of the harmfulness of humiliation, my aim in doing so has not been to conclusively meet the explanatory demand, but rather to indicate how I think we should try and do so. In this regard, the account of §7 is programmatic: it suggests that the task of explaining the harmfulness of humiliation can be subsumed within the broader project of providing a theory of interpersonal connection and its relationship to human wellbeing. This is a big project, and in order to successfully carry it out one would need to say much more than I have been able to do here in elaboration and defence of the claim that we have a need for connection, and specifically for forms of connection which involve the successful enactment and recognition of our practical identities. For better or worse, this is work for another day.[28]

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