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Shame and Sense

Honors Bachelor of Arts Thesis

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss shame and its connection to sense, the self, and public interaction. I take aim, in particular, at the account of shame put forth by David Velleman in his essay, "The Genesis of Shame." His account is not only conceptually problematic, but it threatens to eclipse the bones and blood of humanity with the anesthesia of ahistorical intellectualism. Shame is a matter of taste and feeling that is concerned with that part of humanity that presents itself through the humanity of others around us. Throughout the paper I balance my critique of Velleman, which I see as symptomatic of modern liberal individualism, with other pictures of man as found in ancient Greek literature. Our sense of shame, in the end, is our sense of humanity.

Introduction

In this paper I discuss shame and its connection to sense, the self, and public interaction. I take aim, in particular, at the account of shame put forth by David Velleman in his essay, “The Genesis of Shame.” His account is not only conceptually problematic, but it threatens to eclipse the bones and blood of humanity with the anesthesia of ahistorical intellectualism. Shame is a matter of taste and feeling that is concerned with that part of humanity that presents itself through the humanity of others around us. Throughout the paper I balance my critique of Velleman, which I see as symptomatic of modern liberal individualism, with other pictures of man as found in ancient Greek literature. Our sense of shame, in the end, is our sense of humanity.

An Old Portrait

For a poem about a war between the Greeks and Trojans, the *Iliad* begins on a curious note: instead of combat and slaughter, it opens with Greek leaders bickering over prizes. It starts when Chryses, a priest of Apollo, approaches the Greeks and offers them “countless ransoms” (τ’ ἀπερείσι’ ἄποινα) in exchange for his daughter, whom they had kidnapped. He asks them, moreover, to accept the ransoms out of reverence for Zeus’ son Apollo (ἄζόμενοι Διὸς υἱὸν ἔκηβόλον Ἀπόλλωνα). All the Panachaeans present respond, “Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!”¹ However, Chryseis, the priest’s daughter, was awarded to Agamemnon. So, rather than hand his τιμή over, he refuses the exchange, sends Chryses off with harsh words, and commands him never to return. On his own Chryses is powerless against Agamemnon. But one

¹ Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 1.23. ἔνθ’ ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἐπευφήμησαν Ἀχαιοὶ αἰδεῖσθαι θ’ ἱερῆα καὶ ἀγλαὰ δέχθαι ἄποινα:

he leaves the camp, he prays to Apollo for retribution, and Zeus' son sends a plague down on the Achaeans.

After ten days of suffering, Achilles assembles the Greeks and suggests that they might want to go back home, or at least figure out why Apollo is angry. The seer Calchas rises before the Greeks and promises to name the cause on the condition that Achilles promises to protect him in return. Achilles agrees, and Calchas discloses the cause, Agamemnon's treatment of Chryses. Now pressed to end the plague, an upset Agamemnon responds,

But I am willing to give her back, even so,
If that is best for all. What I really want
Is to keep my people safe, not see them dying.
But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,
Else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.
That would be a disgrace. You are all witness,
Look – *my* prize is snatched away.²

It is easy to see Agamemnon as something of a spoiled, immature character. After all, faced with the knowledge that he can save the Greeks by simply surrendering Chryseis, he gets testy and demands compensation. Even his initial treatment of Chryses can come across as if he were facing a clear-cut decision and then simply making the wrong one. The situation, though, is much more than a question, answer, and discussion – it is an intricate dance of power performed at the spur of the moment and that has lasting consequences. The scene not only showcases the role that honor, wealth, and shame played for the “Homeric Greeks”, it tells us something about shame in general.

First, it is a struggle to balance power, interest, and right.³ Here, to gain or to lose honor is not simply a matter of esteem or regard, it is also a matter of maintaining the social balance

² Homer, 1.116-120.

³ This point is more or less a reformulation of Donna F. Wilson's argument. Cf. *Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the Iliad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 40-53.

through the material balance of τιμή.⁴ On the one hand, Agamemnon is an elite Greek leader, a member of the house of Atreus, and a king. As a member of the elite, his status is more or less settled in regard to his subjects – neither party would compete with one another for dominance. Their role is to be loyal, and his is to rule well. His relationship to Achilles, however, is not settled – the two contest, beat, and check one another. The aim of these conflicts, according to Wilson, is securing τιμή. In this system, wealth is wrested from others according to each participant's display of skill.

Chryses' status is only partially known when he approaches the ship. It is known that he is a priest, a father, and a victim. As a priest he comes bearing a staff for Apollo. As a father he asks for his dear child (παῖδα φίλην). As a victim he offers countless ransoms. Chryses, at first blush, might not make much of an impact on the Greeks, who know neither the opening word of the epic nor what anything that they do will yield. They, therefore, base their actions on their interpretations of what is known and conjectures about the unknown. For instance, as Wilson points out, the names they call Chryseis reflect their interests and their attempt to influence what she will become.

Moreover, all of this takes place as a public event. Agamemnon has been addressed by and is responding to Chryses, then Calchas, then Achilles. Nevertheless, he is still interacting with all of the Greeks present. So when he says “What I really want / is to keep my people safe, not see them dying,” those people, his equals and subordinates, are physically present, surrounding him, watching and hearing him and learning about how he handles pressure.

⁴ The Greek τιμή compasses “honor,” “esteem,” “authority,” “dignity,” “worth,” “value,” “price,” “payment,” “compensation,” “offering,” “penalty” and “estimation”; its verbal form, τιμάω, means both “to honor” and “to pay.”

Even though Agamemnon does not feel shame, he is acting under the threat of it: he is responding to its possibility. Shame as an occurrence is the anguish caused by depreciation. This episode is significant for a study of shame because it displays what it means for shame to be a disposition, i.e., as informing how one lives one's life.

Shame's conditions are necessarily environmental, social, and particular. The proper conditions for shame arise only with certain people and in certain situations: just because some situation is shameful for one person, does not mean it would be for someone else. Additionally, shame requires, as Hume suggests, human transaction.⁵ It requires not just formal conditions but physical content; not just judgments and beliefs, but intuitions and interactions. Shame is both a disposition and a feeling – it is both a sense and an emotion, and its expression attests to one's membership in a community. Shame binds communities together and works to perpetuate the aspects of its order that are most revered.

Shame of the Self-Presenter

David Velleman offers a Kantian account of shame that is interesting but ultimately misguided. His account is in opposition to what he calls the “standard philosophical analysis of shame,” which claims that shame is essentially concerned with “an assessment of the self in terms of ethics, honor, etiquette, or other specific dimensions of personal excellence.”⁶ Instead, he claims, shame is a response to being undermined in one's self-presentation. He defines shame in the following way: “In my view, shame is anxiety that we feel about a threat to our socially recognized status as self-presenting creatures, a status that ultimately rests on the structure of a free will, in virtue of which we qualify as persons”; it is an “anxiety that cannot be allayed by a

⁵ Hume, David, “Of Eloquence,” in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 97.

⁶ Velleman, David, “The Genesis of Shame,” in *Self to Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

sense of personal excellence”; and it is “the anxious sense of being compromised in one’s self presentation in a way that threatens one’s social recognition as a self-presenting person.”⁷

Self-presentation is the process of considering motivations for action, choosing one of these motivations, and then enacting it by virtue of choosing it. To self-present is to act for the sake of being recognizable as autonomous. *Autonomy* is the freedom to determine one’s actions over and against natural inclinations. Velleman’s understanding of autonomy is that it is an individual’s capacity to adjudicate between a number of inclinations for action present at a given time, select one, and then carry it into action by virtue of this selection. In other words, autonomy, for Velleman, is not the capacity to create reasons for action, but rather it is the capacity to turn considerations into reasons for action. Humans self-present whereas other animals do not, because humans are autonomous whereas other animals are not. If a dog has the impulse to do something, it does it. Although a dog may be loyal, it cannot be considerate. This is because being considerate requires being able to disobey impulses, which is to say that it requires the capacity to limit one’s behavior. Considerate actions are performed for reasons that transcend their sensory return. For example, boxers display considerate behavior since they fight according to rules. Dogs, however, do not fight according to rules.

In order to participate in social interaction, for Velleman, one’s behavior must present one “as aiming to be recognized as” social, and it must be recognized as such.⁸ This means that when two people interact with each other socially they are responding to each other as reasons themselves. They treat each other as “considerations that are authoritative in the sense that their

⁷ Velleman, John David, introduction to *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

⁸ “Genesis of Shame,” 54.

practical import is common knowledge among all reasoners.”⁹ In other words, they mutually recognize each other as being creatures that act for the sake of reasons. Mutually recognized parties qualify for social interaction because they can be expected to consider rational expectations and regulate their behavior accordingly. They respect each other as equals.

For Velleman, respect is different from esteem, and it is elemental in the experience of shame. *Respect* is appreciation for what all people have in common, viz. rational autonomy or “bare personhood.”¹⁰ *Esteem* is appreciation for what sets people apart from others, for one’s individuating character traits, social roles, and personal attributes. Velleman posits that respect is more fundamental than esteem. He does this on the grounds that individuating aspects of oneself can only be evaluated if the value of being a person in general is presupposed. Being a person in general must be valued if someone’s type of person is to have value one way or the other.

Self-presentation attests to one’s autonomy and thereby presents oneself as worthy of respect. Self-presentation, since it requires the capacity to consider and disobey impulses, necessarily creates a public self and a separate, private self.¹¹ The private self consists of motivations for action that are not acted upon as well as anything else that one does not or cannot disclose to others. One’s public self consists of all that other people know about oneself, whether one chooses to make it public or not; for instance, the fact that one has parents is part of one’s public persona no matter what, but the fact that one is hungry can be concealed. Privacy evidences autonomy because it manifests the efficaciousness of one’s will – if I can choose to disclose or conceal something about myself, then I must be autonomous to some extent, which

⁹ Velleman, John David, “A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics,” *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43.

¹⁰ Intro., 9.

¹¹ “Genesis of Shame,” 53-55.

means I should be treated as such, i.e., respected. Self-presentation is compromised when the split between one's private self and one's public self is stripped of its practical reality.

Velleman cites frontal male nudity as being naturally more shameful than frontal female nudity and explains this inequality in terms of self-presentation. He writes, "Male nudity is more shameful because it is more explicit ... in the sense that a man's outside is liable to reveal his feeling in a particularly explicit way, whether he likes it or not."¹² The claim is that erections are overt barometers of covert sexual feelings that express their measurement whether or not their expression is willed; women's anatomy lack such overt barometers. An erection is like a sneeze in that it is heteronomous, but it is unlike a sneeze in that it expresses feelings whose expression must be limited or restrained in order for social interaction to occur. The repression of sexual feelings is required for social interaction. Failure to abide by this requirement is evidence, supposedly, of a failure to respond to reasons, of a failure to behave autonomously, and so it is evidence against one's eligibility as a respectable member of a community: failures to respect the personhood of others are failures to respect one's own personhood, and without respect for personhood a rational community of persons is impossible. "The naked man," Velleman writes, "is unable to choose which of his impulses are to be public; and so he is only partly an embodied will and partly also the embodiment of untrammelled instincts."¹³ The shamefulness of male nakedness is deemed by Velleman to be naturally shameful because, unlike a clothed male or a female clothed or otherwise, a naked male's ability to conceal his feelings is compromised simply because of his anatomy.

¹² Ibid., 56.

¹³ Ibid., 56-57.

Velleman's also accounts for what he calls *inchoate shame*, which is a moment of shame in which one is not ashamed of anything in particular.¹⁴ Some contingent causes of inchoate shame include racist remarks, being put in a pillory, and forced public performances.¹⁵ In situations such as these, a subject may reasonably be shame because he or she is treated by others as less than autonomous. In the first instance, to be the victim of a racist remark is to be treated as determined by one's race instead of oneself. In the second instance, pillories constrain one's physical capacity to self-present, which compromises one's status as such a creature. In the third instance, being forced to perform in front of others can be perceived as a threat to one's standing as a self-presenter because such a performance presents a public persona that contradicts one's will.

Another way of expressing Velleman's account of shame is to say that it is a response to feeling objectified, rightly or wrongly, by others and anticipating continued objectification by them. To be treated as an object is to be handled, managed, or used – it is to be stripped of one's dignity. An exposed erection is naturally suited for shame in this account because the objectivity of one's body as a biologically determined system overshadows one's subjectivity. A failure of self-presentation is an uncontrolled fusion between one's private and public selves. At the end of his article, Velleman suggests that we should cultivate our sense of what should be private if we want to regain our sense of shame.

Letting Deigh Reply

Velleman includes John Deigh's account of shame, as it is presented in "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," with the philosophical accounts of shame he finds problematic. However,

¹⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63-66.

Velleman's account does not address Deigh's position directly. It is curious that he ignores the particulars of Deigh's stance, because Deigh's position contains an implicit challenge to Velleman's account in reference to assumptions about personal worth and the kind of worth that shame invokes.

"Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique" critiques what he presents as the "Rawlsian" stance on shame: that shame is a reaction to the loss of self-esteem. *Self-esteem* in this account is "the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions," it accrues to directed actions, and it requires a constellation of values that structures one's life.¹⁶ So, in this view, whether or not my goals or actions are in concert with these values determines my self-esteem. Moreover, in order to act with or against one's values, one must first of all be able to conceive of oneself as giving direction to one's life. This is because if one is going to esteem oneself for, say, writing a good book, then one must be able to trace the book's quality and existence back to oneself as being responsible for it.

This kind of self-esteem based account relies on the presupposition of an "auteur theory of worth."¹⁷ The auteur theory of worth locates the source of one's worth in the split between authorship and ownership, which is analogous to the division between autonomous and heteronomous actions.¹⁸ *Ownership* is one's inseparability from one's actions or behavior, whereas *authorship* is a special relationship to actions or behavior where one is able to identify oneself as its source. So, one has ownership of both autonomous and heteronomous actions, but one only has authorship in relation to autonomous actions. Authorship can be claimed or disclaimed, and it is often disclaimed for actions where passions guided one's actions – this is

¹⁶ Deigh, John, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," *Ethics* (1983), 227-28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

reflected in excuses like “The devil made me do it” or “He wasn’t feeling himself.”¹⁹

Disclaiming authorship is a way of distancing one’s present self from one’s past actions that often works, e.g., we judge ‘crimes of passion’ less severely than ‘cold-blooded’ crimes.

As Deigh writes, “[the auteur theory of worth] is based on a conception of us as the authors of our actions.”²⁰ The problem with this theory, though, is that it ignores or underplays other significant sources of worth. Deigh expresses these other sources in the following way:

...we might say that a person’s worth is determined by his status in the context of some social hierarchy. The salient feature here is that one’s status, and so one’s worth, is *fixed independently of one’s conduct*. To be sure, one can change classes through marriage or cultures through immigration, but short of this the general conduct of one’s life, that is, however well or badly one conducts it, does not increase or decrease the worth that is attributed to one *because* of one’s status. And pretty much the same holds of worth that is attributed to human beings because of their species or to persons because of the kind of beings they are conceived to be: rational ones, say, spiritual ones, or autonomous ones. That is, *worth attributed to one because of one’s essential nature is, like worth attributed to one because of one’s status, fixed independently of how one conducts one’s life.*²¹

This passage gives voice to the essential underpinning of Velleman’s account while simultaneously undermining it. This is the claim that matters of character qualities, personal excellence, and honor cannot, on their own, ground a shame response. This is because the value of these character attributes, e.g. whether being greedy or lusty is cause for shame or not, is only intelligible in the light of the more constant and fixed value of personhood. Being seen as greedy, for Velleman, is not shameful because it signifies a failure in one’s pursuit of excellence, but rather it is shameful because it compromises one’s very social standing as a self-presenting creature. To the extent that the category of the shameful is possible only in reference to a constant, fixed value source, Velleman and Deigh are on the same page. And, moreover, they

¹⁹ This is the same point that P. F. Strawson makes in his influential essay “Free and Resentment.”

²⁰ Ibid., 240.

²¹ Ibid., 241. Italics mine.

also agree to the extent that they both describe shame as a response to a threat instead of a loss or failure that causes self-disesteem.²²

In regards to the source of one's fixed worth, though, Velleman and Deigh part ways. Deigh's account acknowledges the mutability of sources of worth instead of positing a single source – he acknowledges that the source of one's worth is integrally embedded in one's socio-historical pretext. Everyone is, to some degree, the 'author' of her life. However, the text that she produces is only meaningful within a broader pretext and context over which she has little control. Experiencing shame, anticipating shame, and regulating one's life so as to avoid shame all betray, to use Deigh's phrase, "an acute sense of who [one] is," which requires reference to one's socio-historical context.²³

This is captured by Alexis de Tocqueville. He illuminates the significance of pretext for identity and worth when he writes,

Amongst aristocratic nations, it often happens that the condition of domestic service does not degrade the character of those who enter upon it, because they neither know nor imagine any other; and the amazing inequality which is manifest between them and their master appears to be the necessary and unavoidable consequence of some hidden law of Providence.²⁴

In an historically aristocratic society, where class is determined by ancestry and the aristocratic order is understood as required, there is no need to predicate one's worth on bare personhood. Such a social system, like all social orders, presupposes one's personhood as a necessary condition of occupying a position in society in the first place. How one is actually related to others becomes the source of persons, and since these relations are largely out of one's control

²² Ibid., 242. He suggests that "we should conceive of shame, not as a reaction to a loss, but as a reaction to a threat, specifically, the threat of demeaning treatment one would invite in giving the appearance of someone of lesser worth."

²³ Ibid., 235.

²⁴ De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (Cambridge, MA: Stever and Francis, 1863), 225

they are fixed and necessary as far as oneself is concerned. Each person is an embodiment of his class, and each class has traditional obligations, values, opinions, and beliefs that define it and regulate its members conduct within and between classes. So, although it might be shameful for a member of the nobility to become a slave, it would not be shameful for a slave to be a slave. And, moreover, enslavement would not be shameful for a member of the aristocracy because she feels that it compromises her self-presentation, but rather it would be shameful because it just *is* shameful for someone like her to act and be treated like a slave. Part of what it means to be a member of the nobility is to be honored as such and another part is being ashamed of being slavish.

This model of identity and worth hinges on a relationship between who one is and how one is seen. Who one is, moreover, is understood in terms of one's socio-historical position. As Deigh expresses it, this model posits "a sense of worth that comes from knowing one's status or essential nature [that] reflects congruency between one's conduct or appearance and one's real worth."²⁵ It is important, here, to understand the intimacy of the relationship between appearance and reality. Appearances are not contingent representations of some deeper, more obscure, or hidden self or self-system; instead, they are presentations of how one really is who one really is. Appearances are also public and vary in meaning depending on who sees them, just as the significance of who one really is varies depending on the members of an interaction.

Velleman, as stated earlier, locates the fixed source of value in one's "bare personhood." By citing this as the source, Velleman's account ostensibly supplies a deep, timeless, and necessary source of personal value in light of which one's particular social standing becomes valuable. In effect, this results in a slightly more sophisticated version of Rawlsian shame.

²⁵ Deigh, 242.

Velleman's account is based on a variation on the auteur theory of worth that divorces author from content and text from pre-text. To be a self-presenter is to be an author; to be recognized as a self-presenter is to be attributed authorship with only contingent regard given to what is written, i.e., how one acts. In the end, this account, with all of its concern for timelessness, autonomy, and universal value, is timely and political – it is an example of modern liberalism. On this point, Deigh's description of Rawls's account applies to Velleman's as well.²⁶

[It is] an attractive characterization of the shame felt by persons who are relatively free of constraints on their choice of life pursuits owing to class, race, ethnic origins, and the like. For such persons tend to regard their aims and ideals as constituting their identity and their ancestry, race, class, and so forth as extrinsic facts about themselves.²⁷

This correlates to the division Velleman draws between one's individuating self-conception and the concept of bare personhood. One's personhood, as he would have, stands over and against the contingent facts about oneself that one represents in thinking about who one is in particular. This personhood, too, is posited as applying equally to all people at all times insofar as they exhibit rational behavior – the worth that it accords is likewise equal and unchanging.

The ideal and selfsame worth of personhood conceived of in terms of autonomy is a historically and culturally contingent fiction. Here again Tocqueville's writing on American democracy is illuminating:

When the greater part of the community have long attained a condition nearly alike, and when equality is an old and acknowledged fact, the public mind, which is never affected by exceptions, assigns certain general limits to the value of man, above or below which no man can long remain placed. It is in vain that wealth and poverty, authority and obedience, accidentally interpose great distances between two men; public opinion, founded upon the usual order of things, draws them to a common level, and creates a species of imaginary equality between them, in spite of the real inequality of their conditions. This all-powerful opinion penetrates at length even into the hearts of those whose interest might arm them to resist it; it affects their judgment, whilst it subdues their will.

²⁶ Deigh's description applies to Rawls for different reasons than it does to Velleman.

²⁷ Tocqueville, 235.

Granting bare personhood the ultimate worth that Velleman claims it has requires turning a blind eye to the original, material, socio-political inequality between people – or, if it doesn't ignore it, it grossly underplays its significance. It is also in the ruling classes interest to maintain fundamental equality between persons. It alleviates the conscience of the privileged by assuring oneself that, in the end, all men are equal and have immutable worth as humans, that rational action stands over and above material conditions, that every man is his own authority, and that all men have equal rights. These assumptions, however, also present man to himself as a fundamentally isolated creature. His value is hardly indebted to his patrimony, and his ideal self – the person of bare personhood – is the negation of everything about him that makes him rare. According to Velleman, so long as he acts coherently he is worthy of respect. The rich and the poor, the high and the low, in this system, are equals, requiring no more and no less from each other than their peers. Its primal dictum is to live dispassionately and to act according to the concept of personhood. It does not recognize the contingency of the contents of the concept of personhood, that what it means to be a person changes over time and between people.

At the end of the day, the problem with an account of shame like Velleman's is that it creates an illusory equality between men. It depicts people as first and foremost discrete entities whose belonging, whose very humanity, is not guaranteed. Shame, as he paints it, is concerned with a threat regarding something that cannot be lost, one's necessary identity as a person. Social disqualification on the grounds of a failure to self-present is an impossibility. This is because humans raised in, by, and with other humans simply cannot fail to self-present. Any single moment judged to be a failure of self-presentation presupposes a prior and continuous success at self-presentation. Additionally, Velleman's account of shame cannot explain instances where one is surprised by one's lack of shame.

Social disqualification is a fiction that preys on the assumption of one's isolation from others, from one's ancestors, one's contemporaries, one's future, and one's progeny. For social disqualification to be a legitimate threat it would take more than just being ignored, overly praised, maltreated, or inadvertently exposed. In any instance where such things as these may happen, one can only be seen by a finite audience in an equally finite situation, and no such audience has the power to revoke one's social membership. At most, one can be rejected from or discredited in this or that part of the social sphere to varying degrees. And to be discredited or rejected in some way is itself a form of social interaction – to feel shame, to express it, in these kinds of situations, moreover, testifies to one's sociality because it displays one's humanity.

Velleman's Self

Strictly speaking, Velleman does not believe that there is a single self. Instead, he claims that there are three “reflexive guises” under which different selves are represented: “the self-concept, the guise of past or future self, and the guise of the self as cause of autonomous action.”²⁸ The first and third types of guise are of importance for understanding Velleman's position on shame. The first guise, the self-concept, are the object of self-esteem, and an individual's self-concept consists of “representing those features of himself which he values as differentiating him from others.”²⁹ In other words, it is a representation of one's particularized identity as comprised of facts and character qualities. Velleman emphasizes the representational and objective quality of one's self-conception when he describes it in the following way: “It is like a photograph in the subject's mental album, showing just another person but bearing on the

²⁸ Introduction, 8-9.

²⁹ Intro., 9.

reverse side ‘This is me.’”³⁰ This snapshot, as it were, is fictitious, and yet it can serve as a basis for the determination of behavior.³¹

The third guise, the self as cause of autonomous action, is the self that gets credited with electing and thereby causing one’s behavior.³² The ascription of autonomy involves but is ultimately independent from the particular actions or modes of behavior that comprise one’s self-conception. The ascription of autonomy is the epistemic principle of coherence, and specifically, of “agential coherence.”³³ The idea here is that in order to reflect on any action as performed by oneself, one must identify oneself with the cause of the action by virtue of merely willing it to be done. This process of reflexive identification with the cause of an action simultaneously posits one’s own will as a coherent, singular cause whose power lies in turning possible motivations for action into reasons for action.

Acts of self-presentation present not just fodder for one’s self-conception, but they also present oneself as a self that acts for reasons. In doing so, self-presentation presupposes both the agential unity of one’s will as well as the disclosure of this unity in one’s behavior as a testament to one’s coherence as a rational agent. Hence, failures of self-presentation imply the illegibility of one’s autonomy and thereby threaten the intelligibility of one’s behavior.

Significantly, for Velleman, there is no such thing as a single, persisting self. Instead, there are different selves created by the act of reflection itself. In his account, “self” is synonymous with “perspective,” and it is as prone to variations as perspectives are to changing.

³⁰ Intro., 3.

³¹ Intro., 6. Velleman offers a robust account of a self-conception’s imaginary nature and this nature’s efficaciousness in “The Self as Narrator.”

³² See “From Self Psychology to Moral Philosophy” and “Motivation by Ideal.”

³³ “The Self as Narrator,” 223.

This reduction of self to perspective and personhood to the formal capacity for rationality creates a chasm between self and world, effectively uprooting the personal from the interpersonal.

Shame and Sense

In his essay “Recognition,” Axel Honneth postulates that the origin of the feeling of dignity and respect for others’ dignity begins when an infant sees a caregiver’s smile. This smile is taken as standing in “symbolic abbreviation” for goodwill, i.e., that he or she will care for us, that he or she loves us and will protect us.³⁴ In this story, the root of dignity is deeply visual; in fact, dignity *is* something “visible” in a nuanced, social sense of the word. The same holds for Velleman’s take on the dignity implicated or compromised in shame. I feel shame, according to Velleman, either when I see someone see me as less than socially visible or when I see myself as unable to be seen as a social participant. While how we are seen by others is certainly implicated in shame, any account that rests in a crucial way on the sense of vision tends to become highly cerebral and aflutter with jargon-saturated explanations and definitions. A more intuitive understanding of the source of personal dignity, how this source becomes necessarily embedded in a social context, and the content of shame is begins with equilibrioception and proprioception.

A common assumption regarding the senses is that there are five: sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. This is problematic for (1) its superficiality and (2) its tendency to reify senses. This list of five leaves out at least two other primary senses of ours: equilibrioception and proprioception.³⁵ Equilibrioception is our sense of balance, which we share with at least all other ambulatory animals and which we may share analogically with all motile organisms.

³⁴ Honneth, Axel and Avishai Margalit, “Recognition,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Issues* (2001), 118, 124-126.

³⁵ Other senses might include the sense implicated by the feeling of a rumbling voice box, the feeling of one’s own heart’s beating, the internal pressure of gas, the overwhelming sensation caused by the vibrations of loud music, the feeling of pupils dilating, and so on.

Proprioception is our sense of self-awareness, of where we are in relation to ourselves.³⁶ It is our sense of embodiment, which we share on some level with anything that responds to stimuli.

Equilibrioception stands out from the standard five senses in that it obscures the difference between inside and outside, internal and external, subject and object. The ‘object’ of our sense of balance is the sophisticated and ongoing relationship between ourselves and our terrain. This relationship is sophisticated for the same reason that I put object in scare quotes: from the perspective of balance, my body and my surroundings form an intimate, inseparable unity, a gestalt. Vision, hearing, taste, touch, and feeling afford causal description.³⁷ I can easily talk about what I see or taste in subject-object terms, where the cause of my experience is mainly due to something that I posit as external to myself. The senses themselves can be treated as foreign to oneself – it becomes vision’s fault that I see an illusion, not my own.

Balancing whilst standing or sitting is something that we are always already doing – this is what the drunkard ‘loses.’ Nevertheless, the sense of balance doesn’t become an issue until it breaks down; there is no positive, physical sensation that accompanies keeping one’s balance, but there is one when it is upset. Yet equilibrioception is always there, even if only in the background or just offstage.³⁸ We can lose our balance at any given time. It can also be taken

³⁶ Proprioception includes but need not be limited to kinesthesia, the awareness of our motion, weight, momentum, etc.

³⁷ Here, I am using causal with emphasis on its Latin root, *causa*, which means “origin,” “source,” or “thing.”

³⁸ It is, really, falling that always looms just off stage – falling, that is, horribly and finally for a reason beyond one’s control. To be aware of this is to have a ‘sense for the tragic.’ Cf. Karen Armstrong on Thesmophoria:

[T]he cult had made the Greeks confront the unspeakable. They had watched their society collapse during the dark age, through they seem to have repressed the memory of this calamity. But some buried recollection of that time made them aware that whatever they achieved could vanish in a trice, and the death, dissolution, and hostility were perpetual, lurking menaces. (59)

from us. The issue that equilibrioception establishes *in concreto* is maintaining the delicate balance between oneself and one's environment.

Aside from exceptional cases, people do not constantly check in with their sense of balance as they, say, hold a conversation, watch a painting, or check the time. The sense of balance is always in play. It is in play while we see, while we smell, while we eat, feel, and listen. And, moreover, we necessarily use other senses in conjunction with equilibrioception. Arguably, one of vision's most fundamental, practical roles is its service to our sense of balance. We survey our surroundings in order to gauge our comportment. When we see slippery stairs, we brace ourselves, grab a railing, or proceed with caution and pay attention to the details of our movement and the distribution of our weight. Here, too, our proprioception becomes more sensitive. We are more aware of our center of gravity, how we are shifting our weight, where our feet and hands are. Being human means being embodied, which means being *as* embodied.

Equilibrioception is integrally related to proprioception: they are needed to qualify one another. This relationship of mutual qualification is itself a sense that is different from either. This is our sense of stability. On the one hand, this 'hybrid' sense is our concrete awareness of how we are embodied, e.g., as upright, as stable on two feet, etc. On the other hand, it is of what is balancing, e.g., that I am my body and that, as such, I can fall down. Moreover, our other senses are in a constant state coalescence with each other, including our sense of stability and balance, such that we always already have a complex sense, an 'interpretation,' of our experience before we reflect on any sense in particular.

Sensation is somehow identical with interpretation. We speak of senses in this way, e.g., a sense of responsibility, a sense of self-doubt, a sense of danger, a sense of shame, a sense of cleanliness, a sense of self-worth, a sense of direction, a sense of belonging, a sense of

impending doom, a sense of obligation, a sense of guilt, a sense of honor, a sense of propriety, a sense of reverence, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of identity, a sense of urgency, a sense of safety, a sense of satisfaction, etc. All of these forms of sense include a hermeneutic element that makes them non-mechanical. So long as sense and perception are conceived of in mechanical terms as media or the like, the consciousness of human sensuousness will seem foreign.

Divorcing sense and judgment, which is a natural union, establishes nonsense as the mark of judgments and unintelligibility as the nature of sensuousness. So long as sense and judgment are recognized as either half of the same arch, the self remains in tact as portal that they open.

However, when they are treated as separate functions and the arch is dismantled, the self's very existence and unity is called into question. Hence, personhood may cease being treated as achieving definition and distinction throughout her lifelong relationship with the world. Instead, *via* the divorce of sense and judgment, the person may be treated as affording definition through deduction; in addition, it may be treated like a universal force like gravity. The identification of human beings with autonomy and rationality are forms of the later – the person is an author, a self-presenter.

Return to Troy

In the Chryseis scene, we watch the Greeks as they perform a balancing act. Each character is attempting to maintain the balance of something greater than he while at the same time caring for his own interests. But the players are humans and as such they are prone to their own natures and ignorance. None of the characters that we hear of have our view of their situation. They do not know the ins and outs of their context, nor do they know how they appear to each other or what to make of how things appear to them.

Agamemnon in particular finds himself in a complicated situation. It is unclear who has more of a right to Chryseis, her father or her captor. It is clear, though, that Agamemnon as victor and leader has the right to refuse Chryses' ἄποινα. However, it is only his right as long as he has the upper hand. He miscalculates the terrain, though, and thinks that his position is more stable than it turns out to be. When his hold on the situation begins to slip, he is forced to regain his balance. Then, as Donna F. Wilson puts it, "Agamemnon must find a way to give what he cannot keep, namely, Chryseis, so as to keep what he will not and cannot afford to surrender, namely, belief in the legitimacy of his privileged position in the fixed system [of the social order]." ³⁹

So, we are right in seeing Agamemnon as ignorant or foolish. He is ignorant of what will happen when he acts like a ruler and refuses Chryses' offer. He is foolish because he opposes the expressed wishes of his audience, whose allegiance constitute his power, without winning them over. But then again, it would be foolish of a ruler not to exercise his power as a ruler when he feels compelled to do so. But then again again, it would be foolish of us to think that Agamemnon's behavior is foolish in general. There are times when it is best to accept ransoms, and times to refuse them; there are times when it is best to act like a parent, and times to act like a peer; there are times when it is best to obey rules, and times to break them. Unfortunately, what a given situation calls for may be hard to hear. In addition, we are all hard of hearing.

We might feel like dismissing Agamemnon, like he did Chryses, when we watch him act as he does. When we do, we feel like condemning him, because we feel as if he deserves our response. This is foolishness on our part – we play the part of the fool. Or at least we are set up to play the fool's role. This is because Agamemnon deserves to be treated in such a way as much

³⁹ Wilson, 50.

as Chryses deserves his treatment. Thinking that Agamemnon is immature, then, is an expression of one's own immaturity.

An alternative response to Agamemnon's conduct in this scene, especially given our foreknowledge of the fate that awaits him, is a sense of the fragility of human life. Odysseus reacts in this way when he beholds Ajax in the throes of madness and says,

I pity his misfortune under that yoke
of catastrophic madness. It makes me think
not just of his fate but my own as well.
I see that in our lives we are no more
than phantoms, insubstantial shadows.⁴⁰

Odysseus' reaction gives expression to the origin source of human worth and dignity: love for human as is. The inverse, the source of human worthlessness is, according to a doctor as told by Zosima, "I love mankind," he said, "but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons."⁴¹

Jack's First Invention

Suppose there was a Jack who was friends with an Indiana. Suppose Indiana bought a ring from a pawn shop, that the ring was Gyges', and that he lost sight of himself as quickly as the ring got stuck between his knuckles. Suppose that Gyges' ring silenced Indiana's voice, and crippled his body such that he could walk but had neither strength nor dexterity. Indiana becomes confused and scared, but his confused terror lightens greatly when he sees Jack coming his way with an old oil can. Indiana then finds that Jack can't see him or any trace of him even though he's looking right at him. Indiana begins bumping into Jack and knocking him around and off

⁴⁰ Sophocles, *Ajax*, trans., Ian Johnston, 121-126.

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 57.

balance. At first Jack just loses his balance – “That was weird.” – then again and again, and the more it happens the less it surprises him.

Under the influence of a recent Sci-fi movie binge, Jack interprets his sloppy walking absurdly: he imagines a large, highly camouflaged alien puppy nudging him to play. Taken by the vividness of the scene, without really thinking about it, he starts dashing oil out in the air around him. And, out of nowhere, much to Jack’s own confusion and terror, an oil coated Indiana appeared before his eyes. After he and the oil helped liberate Indiana, Jack went home and made his first invention. He called it “Concealer-Revealer” which consisted of oil in a can and which could be used to make visible what could be felt but not seen. The function, more or less, was to make *more* sense out of one’s experience. This is the primary role of many works of art as well as superfluous items of clothing – it protects and gives content to our feelings of dignity or worth. In removing someone’s clothing or in being seen naked, for example, nothing leaves, no spirits flutter out of Pandora’s box, but something *is* lost. This something, though, may really be a nothing that exists insofar as we make it exist, i.e., as long as we treat the world like it is present.

Conclusion

There is something lacking in the examples of shame that Velleman provides in “The Genesis of Shame” as well as in his understanding of the self: the richness, complexity, and ambiguity of reality. For the most part, he uses arbitrary, stock characters whose involvement in other situations and names we never learn. They are ahistorical and cultureless, and the scenarios they are involved in are more like green screens than actual environments.

Velleman presents the self as a series of discrete representations of oneself. He approaches it from a private perspective with the result that he attempts to explain what it means

to be a self in isolation from the contributions of public, social interactions. Hence, he is led to the conclusion that there is no single self – the self, though, is a public creation, and so it cannot be created by the individual. We see this in the *Iliad*: neither Chryseis nor Agamemnon is the author of the self for which they are responsible and with which they identify. The private theory of the self that Velleman perpetuates is the common standard of American individualism as well as some brands of Christian morality. However, such notions of the self, when they are assumed to be the way things “really are,” create a mendacious illusion that can sicken the spirit. The problem is that they present the self as something private for which the community at large is not responsible and something that is not responsible for the actions and lives of others in the community. This view, however, is but one of many voiced in the public contest regarding the interpretation of the self. We must tell each other that we are private individuals and treat each other as such in order for us to become them – in this respect, we are not unlike Agamemnon and Chryseis whose identities are up in the air and must be nailed down by each other for each other in order for them to become a reality. The self is a public building that is always under construction.

The consequence of Velleman’s view of the self, which is insulated in its conception both from public engagement as well as separate from death (he never mentions the possibility of the self’s death), is that he treats shame as a private phenomenon occasioned by internal powers of judgment. However, the private is itself a public formation, and so if his account of shame is accepted, it will only make our relationship with the shameful even more abstract. It also leads him to relate shame to cognitive judgment as effect and cause respectively. However, shame and judgment are properly united within the human sense complex and, in particular, in our sense of balance in reference to interpersonal engagement. Shame is a matter of what is noble, not what is

correct. We do not know how to act correctly – we are forever children in this regard – however, we do know what looks noble and what looks base. This knowledge is not discursive; it is a knowledge of sense, and so it requires the development of taste and common sense rather than reason alone.

We feel shame when we wittingly act against the human good and desecrate the noble bits of human nature. The worst thing for human good, the human project, is assuming that one already knows what is good – we ought to trust our feelings and passions and not keep them to ourselves. There is nothing so shameful as keeping honest passion to oneself for fear of offending reason – we owe it to each other to let the flames of our spirit burn bright and reveal what is most human, i.e., what this particular human is in these particular times. I'm with Sappho when she writes, "enough smoothness."⁴² It may be time to oppose the phlegmatic passion that has crept in to so many of our hearts, since the lust for reason may just be the passion for the death of passion, a contradiction that suffocates instead of titillates our boney, bloody, fleshy selves.

"I want to say something, but shame prevents me."

*"But if your desire were for the noble and good
and if your tongue were not brewing evil,
shame would not turn your eyes glossy
and you would speak out for what is right."⁴³*

⁴² Sappho, 53, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.