



Status, Shame and Dignity

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Perhaps the most famous book on ethics in Japan is *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum*, written by the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict on the basis of research conducted during the Pacific War. Interestingly *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum* has been most popular in Japan itself, where translated editions have sold millions of copies, many more than the original text has sold in the West. One of Benedict's most well-known claims in the book is that Japan is a 'shame society', that is, a society in which the primary moral emotion is shame, whereas the United States, and other Western countries, are 'guilt societies', where this role is played by guilt. Although this claim is much contested amongst anthropologists, it has been extremely influential in shaping wider perceptions of the difference between Western and Japanese ethical practice, so much so that one sometimes hears it referred to as an established fact. I want to look at Benedict's account of shame and at some of the responses it has prompted, and then to suggest that when we understand shame properly, we may find it playing a greater role in Western ethics than might be supposed.

In outlining the distinction between shame and guilt cultures, Benedict writes that:

True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasising to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not. [...] a man may suffer from guilt though no man knows of his misdeed and a man's feeling of guilt may actually be relieved by confessing his sin.¹

¹ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974 [1946]), p. 222

Benedict acknowledges that Japanese people experience some guilt too, and that Westerners can feel shame, especially about non-moral topics. However, she thinks there is a very great difference in emphasis between the two cultures:

Shame has the same place of authority in Japanese ethics that 'a clear conscience,' 'being right with God,' and the avoidance of sin have in Western ethics.²

Although Benedict does not give a precise definition of shame and guilt, she does indicate what she takes to be some of their striking features. Two features of her description that are especially important are that, to feel shame:

1. One must be assessed negatively by others (at least in fantasy), and;
2. One need not internalize the standards according to which one is condemned.

If indeed Japan is a shame society thus characterized, we might well find it a rather sinister place. For shame does not really seem to be a moral emotion at all: although it might happen to be true that one is condemned for having done something one accepts to be wrong, and then feels shame as a result of the condemnation, there is no relationship between one's accepting the action to have been wrong and one's shame, and one could just as well feel shame about an action that one held to be right. A person or a society motivated solely by shame would, it seems, be effectively unmoved by the claims of morality.

Now many anthropologists have contested Benedict's claim that guilt has a very secondary role in Japan, and for what it is worth I think they are quite right to do so. However, although Benedict's suggestion that the sense of guilt is attenuated in Japan is not generally accepted, quite a considerable number of commentators like Sakuta Keiichi, Inoue Tadashi and Takie Sugiyama Lebra, have thought there is some truth to her claim that shame plays a more prominent role there than it does in the West, and indeed some Japanese anthropologists still accept the characterization of Japan as a shame society. It remains urgent for those wishing to understand ethical practice in Japan, then, to examine Benedict's understanding of shame from a philosophical point of view, and to see how accurately she has captured its nature.

It is, I think, clearly evident that Benedict's account of shame is in several important respects defective. Firstly, it is dubious that shame is always a reaction to other people's

² Loc. cit.

criticism. *Prima facie*, it looks as though one can feel shame after being praised by people whom one despises for an act which one regrets; it seems that one can feel shame at one's nakedness before another person, in spite of no negative judgement's being involved; and it seems that one can feel ashamed of oneself on account of some selfishness or brutality, without imagining someone ridiculing or criticizing one for it. It is possible, perhaps, to understand all of these cases as involving one's being criticized by an unconscious imagined audience, but it is unclear why we should do so. On the other hand, it seems that it is sometimes necessary for one to have internalized the standards according to which one is criticized in order for that criticism to prompt shame in one. If an interlocutor's criticism of one is wildly far of the mark, or concerns a weakness about which one is totally indifferent, then it is scarcely likely that one will feel acutely shamed by it. If one is treated as loathsome by one's community on account of actions of which one is actually extremely proud, then although the experience will no doubt be extremely unpleasant, it is unclear that one would feel ashamed, as one certainly would if one accepted the community's judgement.

One of the most compelling accounts of shame that has been offered in response to Benedict is that of Takie Sugiyama Lebra. Lebra suggests that shame involves a consciousness of some feature of oneself or one's situation that is 'incongruous' with some status that one takes oneself to have. Often, the way we become conscious of such features is through noticing the way others judge us, which is why shame does have a close relationship to the judgement of other people. But others' judging one negatively is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition. Lebra's account can also explain why shame sometimes involves believing that one has done something morally wrong. Very many statuses—those of a gentleman, *yamato nadeshiko*, a good Christian, a decent person, and so on—are incongruous with being morally depraved. So the belief that one has done something morally wrong is inherently shameful for someone who identifies with any of these statuses. But of course most statuses involve many features of oneself besides one's moral character, and accordingly one may feel shamed about many other kinds of incongruities, including some which are entirely outside of one's control.

One interesting feature of statuses is that they not only imply certain ways of acting towards others that are in keeping with having that status, but also certain ways in which one must be treated. Accordingly people may feel shamed as a result of having been treated by others in a way that is incongruous with their status: this is, perhaps, the beginning of the explanation of the complex and very disturbing puzzle of the feelings of shame experienced by genocide survivors and rape victims. Furthermore, if one recognizes that another person has a certain status and believes that status to be important, then one will accept that certain ways of

acting towards that person are correspondingly inappropriate. Interestingly, Benedict's analysis of the significance of status in Japanese ethics is very rich and complex: perhaps there is an unacknowledged point of convergence between her and Lebra here.

All this, I suspect, suggests a somewhat more sympathetic picture of shame as a moral emotion than Benedict's characterization implied; to the extent that shame features prominently in Japanese culture, it is also a more attractive picture of that culture than Benedict's. What I want to suggest now is that it is not only a rather attractive picture, but also one that is not so remote to the Western ethical tradition as it first seems. In fact, I think we find the ideas of status and shame playing a very important role, not merely in some remote Homeric ethics or Mediterranean honour culture, but in that supposedly most Western of Western ethicists, Kant.

Perhaps the central claim of Kantian ethics is that we possess an absolute value—a 'dignity'—just in virtue of being persons, that is, on Kant's view, possessors of freedom and rationality. Kant does not think we can cease to be persons, and his considered view is that we cannot lose the dignity that is attendant upon that. However, he certainly thinks that there are ways of acting that are congruous or incongruous with one's dignity as a rational person, and ways of acting towards other rational persons that are congruous or incongruous with their being so: these two facts are, on a plausible interpretation, the foundation of his ethics. In Lebra's terms, I submit, Kant's ethics is an ethics of status, although a status that we have inherently rather than in virtue of society: it is concerned with possessing a certain rank, and acting and being acted towards in a way that is in keeping with that rank. Indeed, one of the things that surprises, alternately pleasing or alarming, many readers of Kant's more applied works on ethics is how often the language of shame, honour, degradation and 'fittingness' occurs, in the course of Kant's discussions of such varied topics as servility, gluttony, sexual objectification, deceit and torture.

To show that these ideas are important for Kant is not, of course, to show that they are important to all Westerners, the immense influence of his ideas on subsequent Western culture, suggests they might not be so very remote from the norm. I conclude with a suggestion, which is that those interested in the ethics of dignity might do very well to learn and think about the ethics of status and shame in other societies. It may be that modern Kantian ethics share much more with these than they do with other modern ethical theories like utilitarianism, and can be correspondingly illuminated by them.