

Reply To Stephen Whittaker

David W. Black

I am grateful for Professor Whittaker's careful and insightful comments. He raises three excellent questions; and I would like to address each briefly, fielding them in reverse order. First, many of the shameless souls of our contemporary world do indeed shelter under the auspices of social media, i.e., the *technological* manifestation of the crowd. I would add only the following to Whittaker's observation. Plato would have considered this electronically contrived crowd to be an addiction more dangerous than the traditional asylum simply because a "virtual" crowd surrenders its status as a flesh and blood assemblage and becomes a digitized simulacrum. If armed properly with a cellphone, one can summon the crowd instantaneously and from almost any location. This provides on-demand access to gratuitous distraction. Beyond this, the phenomenon of a *remote* crowd impacts the sincerity of participation; it allows one to keep others at arm's length. Hence escape from conscience has never been easier.

Second, I do believe that many of the themes addressed in the *Symposium* arise in other Platonic dialogues. For instance, the distinction between two types of poets in the *Republic*, which in Whittaker's words "comes down to the distinction between superficial mimesis and the edifying metaphysical

depth of demiurgic creation,” would seem to be a more discursive expression of what Plato presents illustratively in the *Symposium*.

Finally, Professor Whittaker asks: why is shame not a virtue? I would offer a quasi-Aristotelian answer. Shame is not a virtue for Aristotle because it is not an “excellence.” In other words, it does not appear in every instance as a mean disposition. Aristotle suggests that *modesty* connotes the appropriate degree of shame, that is, a degree that is neither excessive nor deficient. Modesty would therefore seem to be a candidate for virtue, but Aristotle does not go so far as to grant it that status, even though he respects the modest individual. I agree that shame functions differently than mature virtue, but it may nevertheless be a proto virtue. This is because shame produces a broad intuition of authoritative otherness. It directs one’s gaze upward from one’s earthly agenda and resets consciousness in a larger context; that is, it transforms *instrumental* survival into *conscientious* deference. To carry a sense of shame, then, is to be properly dressed for moral engagement.

Shame may be a primeval disposition, but it nevertheless binds emotions into a focal concern. It opens a rich domain of feeling that provides a platform for conscience. It supplies the context of attention within which virtues and vices can germinate and later assume authority. Consequently, virtue may be available only to those who have been propaedeutically softened by shame. Because it delineates viscerally the distinction between transcendent and immanent, shame becomes the catalyst of *domestication*. I will thus take the bait offered by Whittaker’s reference to Mnemosyne and the muses. Shame could indeed be the *mother of the virtues*.