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Goffman's Revisions

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SUMMARY

Erving Goffman's reputation as a cynic stems from his text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which portrays the self as a manipulative confidence trickster. However, matters are more complicated than they first appear. There are two versions of the text, one published in 1956, the other in 1959, and Goffman's revisions to the latter quietly challenge the cynicism of the former. Focussing on these revisions makes the text look rather different. Goffman has two voices in *The Presentation of Self* and the aim of this paper is to allow each to be heard.

INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman's reputation as a cynic stems from the implications of his text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which analyses individuals as shadowy figures hidden behind an array of performance masks. The implication of this early 'dramaturgical' perspective is that a person possesses *two selves*—a manipulative self and a performing self. However, identifying Goffman's view is more complicated than has been thought. Complications arise because there is not one but two versions of *The Presentation of Self*, the first published in 1956, the second in 1959. The two editions are substantially the same but they are not identical. Of particular significance are the sections which Goffman appended to the first chapter and to the conclusion, as these quietly undermine the *two selves* thesis. These alterations are slight and easily missed; nevertheless, by focussing on them it is possible to identify and overcome the now well publicised limitations of dramaturgical interpretations of the everyday world.

MANIPULATION AND MASK

Both editions of *The Presentation of Self* outline six theatrical principles which can be used to interpret everyday behaviour. By an elaborate series of sub-classifications and examples Goffman conveys an image of the person as a cynical manipulator of social encounters. The picture here is of an individual hiding behind a performance. Underpinning this account are the metaphors of the theatre and the confidence trick, which Goffman skillfully interweaves in a masterful literary display.

These metaphors can be seen at work in his first dramaturgical principle: the 'performance'. This is subdivided into seven distinct branches, the seventh of which is 'mystification'. This refers to the ways in which people ('actors') accentuate some aspects of their performance whilst concealing others (1959, p. 68). Goffman suggests that people do this to keep their audiences at a distance, the assumption being that distance will make them appear enticing and mysterious. Here he cites the advice given to the King of Norway: avoid

familiarity with 'the people' in case they are disappointed (1959, p. 68). The only mystery, it seems, is that there is no mystery, the dramaturgical problem being to prevent one's audience from discovering this.

In this example the practice of mystification is merely a device used by the King of Norway: it is an appendage to him. By thinking of the self in this way dramaturgical analysis reduces the person to a manipulator behind changeable masks and facades. Earlier Goffman expresses exactly his thought, when in discussing the ways in which professionals present themselves, he comments that their apparent cynicism is 'a means of insulating their *inner selves* (1959, p. 20, emphasis added). This expression reveals his explicit or implicit willingness to distinguish *two selves*.

Habermas' discussion of Goffman in his *Theory of Communicative Action* draws attention to the inadequacy of this formulation. Habermas puts it thus: 'it seems correct . . . to classify *dramaturgical action* as a concept that presupposes two worlds' (1984, p. 93). I take Goffman's revisions to be battling against this presupposition.

MULTIPLE SELVES

In 1959 *The Presentation of Self* was re-issued by both Penguin and Anchor Press. Republication provided Goffman with an opportunity to reconsider his earlier account of the self. For the most part he limited his revisions to stylistic changes and the amplification of the general theme. However, at two key points he appended sections which challenge the *two selves* thesis. In a very curious way these sections are neither introduced nor distinguished from the prior body of text. Instead a second Goffman voice intrudes in a quietly disruptive fashion. The first intervention I want to consider occurs on pages 70-76 of the Anchor edition. This appended section is called 'Reality and Contrivance' and it is entirely new. The first sentence of this section mentions our common sense acceptance of a model of human behaviour based on the confidence trick. The ensuing pages then question this assumption, leading up to an example which profoundly disturbs the account of self on which both editions are built. In almost anecdotal fashion Goffman notes:

And when we observe a young American middle-class girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boyfriend, we are ready to point to items of guile in her behaviour. But like herself and her boyfriend, we accept as an unperformed fact that the performer *is* a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance. [1959, pp. 74-75.]

It is immensely significant that this example is *not* in the earlier edition, and it is likely that his suggestion that 'we' have neglected the greater part of the girl's performance signals his recognition that he had done so. Inserting this example discredits the *two selves* thesis by exposing the erstwhile manipulator to public view. Goffman's claim that the greater part of the girl's performance is not her guile and contrivance but her enactment of a young American middle-class girl opens up a much more complex analysis of the person, for which a dramaturgical analysis is unsatisfactory.

The two examples of the King of Norway and the young girl clarify the reasons for the suspicion that dramaturgical analysis is of limited use: for whilst it is reasonable to classify the King's efforts to keep a distance from 'the people' as a performance, it is unreasonable to classify the girl's actions in the same way. This is because the King can both *stop* his performance and *separate* himself from it; the girl's 'performance' of young American middle-class girl cannot be so readily distinguished from her sense of personhood. Implicit here is the

thought that the girl displays a multiplicity of selves which are neither appendages nor masks. This invites a picture of the person as a composite of multiple selves, each of which projects a set of claims. Goffman's later work is very much concerned with this. This change of direction reneges on the image of the hidden manipulator.

SCAFFOLDS AND THE SELF

The 1956 edition of *The Presentation of Self* ends with a suitably cynical conclusion:

... the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialised character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage. [1956, p. 162.]

Exactly the same sentence appears towards the end of the second edition (1959, p. 251). In the first edition it is the culmination of the study: the text ends with the thought that moral character is just a staged achievement. The second edition downplays this cynicism by concluding with a new section entitled 'Staging and the Self' (1959, pp. 252-55). The first two pages of this section attempt to reformulate the self by distinguishing self-as-performer from self-as-character. The distinction is couched in hesitation, moving uneasily between the self as a being with 'fantasies and dreams' and the self as a 'peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time' (1959, p. 253). This appended section, and with it the second edition, end with words of caution about the dramaturgical vocabulary. In the face of his growing dissatisfaction, Goffman informs us that '... the language and mask of the stage will be dropped' (1959, p. 254).

CONCLUSION

There are two different characterizations of the person in *The Presentation of Self*. The more prevalent of these suggests that the person is a manipulator behind a variety of public masks. A second account can be discerned, however, in which the person is portrayed as a composite of multiple selves. The cynical reading of the text is compatible only with the first of these characterizations. Goffman's revisions question both the image of the hidden manipulator and the usefulness of dramaturgical interpretations of the social world.

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