

Aischýne (αἰσχύνη) and aidomai (αἰδομαι)

Towards a different interpretation of shame in Plato

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[View of At the origins of evil \(thaumazein.it\)](http://thaumazein.it)

2.4 Towards a different interpretation of shame in Plato

A problem that is closely connected to the emergence of subjectivity is that of shame (αἰσχύνη). As shown above, excessive *philautia* at first determines a form of axiological blindness that results in «making us bad judges of justice (τὰ δίκαια) and goodness (τὰ ἀγαθὰ) and beauty (τὰ καλὰ)» (*Lg.* V 731e-732a; transl. Saunders 1414). This, in turn, makes *àghnoia* degenerate into *amathia* (*Lg.* 732a-b). By preventing the Socratic “awareness of lacking knowledge”, *amathia* precludes the philosophical exercise from which the atopic singularity originates. Life driven by *amathia* is neither erotic nor philosophical nor atopically intermediate: rather, it corresponds to a subjectivity that is unable to adopt a critical attitude towards itself. The subjectivity of the *amathèis* cannot become aware of its own limits through the Delphic *know thyself*. This is why it turns out to be monstrous (cf. above § 2.1). Because of their axiological blindness, the *amathèis* fail to recognize their faults and ugliness: «For what’s especially difficult about being ignorant (ἀμαθία) is that you are content with yourself, even though you’re neither beautiful and good nor intelligent» (*Smp.* 204a; transl. Nehamas & Woodruff, 487; cf. *Lg.* 732a-b). More precisely, *amathia* hinders a very peculiar type of shame, namely the shame that can measure and indicate the level of the obscenity of one’s own subjectivity. This kind of shame orients the care of the soul and, thus, acts not on a psychological but on an anthropogenetic level related to the singularity formation process.

The feeling of shame discussed by Socrates differs from the one considered in the classic distinction between shame culture and guilt culture [Dodds 1951; Williams 1993]. Dodds refers to 9th-century Homeric society and focuses on αἰδομαι understood as fear towards public opinion. What Socrates talks about, instead, is *aischýne* (αἰσχύνη), such as the feeling of shame Alcibiades only has towards Socrates, for which not public opinion but one’s own conscience matters (*Smp.* 216 b-c).¹ Socrates’ standpoint does not coincide at all with the dominant *dòxa*, nor does it intend to undermine Alcibiades’ moral autonomy by inducing his sense of shame. On the contrary, it performs a cathartic function that is essential for the care of the soul, which is an indispensable premise for Alcibiades to learn to govern himself.

Claiming that Plato falls within the canon of shame culture subjected to the vision of the dominant *dòxa* means confusing Plato with those whom Socrates calls “sophists”. Indeed, in Plato’s view, one should not «follow the opinion of the many and fear it», but «that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge [...] and before whom we feel fear

¹ On this aspect and on the *Sophist*’s passage, see Napolitano 2018, 259-269 and 281-291.

and shame (αἰσχύνεσθαι)» (*Cri.* 47d; transl. Grube, 139). Sophists worry about the dominant opinion. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates reveals that sophists feel no authentic shame. They only fear that they might fail to correspond to the fame which they have cleverly built and on which their material fortune also depends. Their fear is something very different from a cathartic shame that applies to the “know thyself” precept. In fact, it inhibits the propulsive drive that originates from realizing that “one knows nothing”. If I feel ashamed when others notice that “I know nothing”, then I will do everything I can in order to hide it, so that I will shamelessly pretend to know. Without the modesty of the claim “I know nothing”, instead of taking care of the soul, I rather conform my image to the canons of the dominant opinion by disguising my true nature with useless burdens and incrustations and thus end up resembling the sea god Glaucus, covered with shells and seaweeds (*R.* X 611c-d).

2.5. Philosophy as *kàtharsis* through *èlenchos* and the function of shame

In the *Philebus*, *amathia* is considered harmful because it goes in the opposite direction compared to the famous Delphic inscription and pushes towards not-knowing oneself (*Phlb.* 48c). In this light, we can understand Socrates’ mission, which primarily consists in questioning his fellow citizens in order to purify them from *amathia*. He aims at healing them of *amathia* because it hinders them from becoming aware that the care of the soul is more important than the concerns about satisfying the lust for pleasure and wealth as well as about one’s name and reputation (*Ap.* 28d-30b).

Authentic shame is not subject to the dominant *dòxa*, as the “shame culture” theory holds. Its function is not moralistic but anthropogenetic. It allows us to distance ourselves from the monstrous and obscene aspects in us. It thus shapes the physiognomy of singularity and guides its formation process. *Amathia* is something more than simple non-knowledge. It is the driving force of a false *cura sui* that goes in the direction opposite to a true *epimèleia heautoû*. In other words, it is a form of excessive complacency towards oneself that fuels the egotistic Self. Like a cancer, it kills the soul from the inside and makes it a deformity similar to adipose tissue developing without restraint: if *amathia* blinds the soul, there can be no spontaneous shame – the only reaction able to contain and cure this disease. Indeed, the *amathèis* can never feel shame because they are prisoners of an *egocentric bias*. Nevertheless, occasionally, when they are openly refuted from the outside, they may manage to overcome the self-deception resulting from *amathia*. Only in this case can they recognize how obscene they are and thus experience the healing pang of shame.²

Plato’s concept of *kàtharsis* (purification) has thus far been underestimated and overlooked compared to that used by Aristotle.³ For Plato, *kàtharsis* is not limited to the purification from the body as described in the *Phaedo*. In the *Sophist*, in fact, the cathartic process already appears to be re-thought and re-modelled over and above the fear of the body still evident in the *Phaedo*. While the body can be purified through gymnastics (which purifies from ugliness or deformity) and medicine (purification from illness) (*Sph.* 229a), the soul can be purified through justice (purification from wickedness, understood

² On the cathartic function of shame in Plato for the formation of personal identity, see Cusinato 2012, 269-270; de Luise 2021b.

³ On the significance of Plato’s notion of *kàtharsis* and its influence on the 20th-century issue of phenomenological reduction, cf. Cusinato 1999.

as an illness of the soul) and through shame (purification from *amathia*, understood as ugliness or deformity of the soul) (*Sph.* 230b-d).

Without the healing pang of shame, it is not possible to heal the soul because «the soul [...] won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone, by refuting it, reduces it to an attitude of modesty (εις αἰσχύνην καταστήσας) and, by removing the opinions that interfere with learning, *manifests it as* cleansed (καθαρὸν ἀποφήνη)» (*Sph.* 230c-d; transl. White, 550, modified). Here, we are no longer dealing with a merely intellectual process. The *kàtharsis* described in the *Sophist* does not consist in the simple *logical recognition* of one's own errors and contradictions. Instead, it is a purification from one's own false opinions that takes place through the feeling of shame. Therefore, *kàtharsis* becomes the basis for the practice of transforming one's way of living.

A philosophical *kàtharsis* based on refutation (*èlenchos*) thereby takes shape. It brings us to distance ourselves both from a counterproductive overestimation of ourselves, or literally, our «inflated and rigid beliefs» about ourselves (*Sph.* 230c; White, 550), and from other false opinions. This *kàtharsis* goes on until it induces the interlocutor to feel ashamed and thus makes their soul ready for transformation. In this way, *kàtharsis* takes on the character of an erotic *paidèia*. The *kàtharsis* through *èlenchos*, which is «the principal and most important kind of cleansing (καθάρσεων)» (*Sph.* 230d; transl. White, 550), shapes the image of singularity by distancing itself from the obscene images of the Self. Therefore, this type of *kàtharsis* orients our attempts of «giving birth in beauty» (*Smp.* 206b; transl. Nehamas & Woodruff, 1014). Such *kàtharsis* does not occur through prescription, but dissuasion.