

Shame's Guilt Disproved*

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*Learn to feel shame in your own eyes much
more than before others.*
Democritus

I.

To confront shame, says cultural anthropologist Helen Merrell Lynd, “ (...) makes possible the discovery of an integrity that is peculiarly one’s own and of those characteristically human qualities that are at the same time most individualizing and most universal.”ⁱ Some fifty years later, the tide has turned. Psychologist Paul Gilbert formulates mainstream thinking on the nature of shame in the following verdict. “Shame is ultimately about punishment, is self-focused and “wired into” the defense system. Shaming people can lead to various unhelpful defensive emotions, such as anger or debilitating anxiety, concealment or destructive conformity. Moreover, in a shame system people can behave very immorally in order to court favor with their superiors and avoid being rejected for not complying with requests or orders. Prestige seeking and shame avoidance can lead to some very destructive behaviors indeed.”ⁱⁱ If we suppose, as we should, that Lynd and Gilbert are referring to the same emotion, we must wonder how it is possible to reach such radically contrasting diagnoses. The contemporary consensus on shame is pessimistic. Are we to conclude that Plato and Hume, long before Lynd, were severely mistaken when they spoke of *aidos* as a safeguardⁱⁱⁱ and of *Pudor* as “the proper guardian of every kind of virtue”^{iv}? Does commonsense err in castigating the shameless as brazen and in praising those blessed with a sense of shame?

A closer look at the present day consensus about shame reveals various strands which taken together seem to warrant such a negative outlook. They all appear to be connected with the fact that, in shame, you allow yourself to become the victim of external pressures. First, shame is said to be the emotion of social sanction: in shame, you submit to the judgements of others. Second, shame is merely concerned with appearances: in shame, you worry about how you look in the eyes of others. Third and finally, shame as a result motivates at best withdrawal from others, at worse promotes violence towards them. These make up the case for shame's guilt. Before going into more details regarding these claims about shame, note that, taken together and coupled with a certain ideology, they turn this emotion into an easy target for attack. Indeed, painted in this way, shame seems to be tailored for a world that many of us like to think we have left behind. Stratified societies in which rank, honour, decorum and etiquette rule, societies entirely governed by social pressures, are instances of such a world. For so-called individualist societies like ours, which give pride of place to autonomous thinking and freedom of choice, shame comes to look like an ugly remnant of this past. Perhaps, then, we should forget shame, Plato, Hume and commonsense.

II.

But nostalgia for communities is not necessary if we are to restore some of shame's honour. As we shall see, each of the strands making up the rejection of shame contains a grain of truth. But whether taken separately or together they fail to justify shame's bad reputation.

First, then, the claim that, in shame, we submit to the opinions of others: a standard is imposed on the subject and experienced by her as a sanction. Think of the shame you experience when made to feel an outsider. The shame you experience when made to feel inadequate for being a woman or an intellectual. The contempt, sneer or mockery of the other appear to suffice for eliciting shame. The crucial point here is that the victim's shame reaction

is elicited independently of her agreement or disagreement with the standards informing these negative attitudes towards her. The victim need not adhere to the standards in question, she will probably reject them wholeheartedly and yet still feel shame. We can be in the grip of shame without taking an unfavourable view of what makes us an outsider. In Wollheim's colourful words, the standard occasioning shame is "an alien force assaulting the self"^v. This is what we may call with him the "radical heteronomy" of shame, a feature unique to this emotion and, for example, absent in pride or indignation. Your pride in your painting is understandable in the light of the achievement you see in it. My indignation at someone's theft is understandable in the light of the moral transgression I see in it. In both cases, the emotions are made sense of in the light of specific standards to which the subject adheres. And if, as the case might be, pride or indignation is experienced but no adherence to the relevant standard can be ascribed to the subject, we either cannot make sense at all of these emotions, or we simply deem them irrational. But not so with shame! According to the popular view, it is precisely part of the nature of this emotion to be an affective sensitivity to opinions of others which we do not share^{vi}. More to the point, these standards have the power to elicit shame simply because they motivate other peoples' unfavourable opinion of you.

Should we conclude from the fact that shame is often elicited by judgements we happen to disagree with that this emotion is heteronomous? The crucial issue here is whether the existence of a judgement we disagree with is sufficient to explain the occurrence of shame. Clearly it is not. Adverse judgements passed on us and with which we disagree, or demeaning treatment at the hands of others, do not by themselves explain its occurrence, and may easily elicit, rather than shame, anger at those who make these judgements or treat us this way^{vii}. So, what has to be added to explain the occurrence of shame? The best answer is that the missing ingredient is that one perceives one's victimizers' attitude as threatening something one does

value. What is valued of course will vary from person to person, but will likely comprise things like the need to belong, the wish for one's standing in a group or community to be in good order, the need to be able to conform to what is expected of us, or more generally the requirement of being treated as a free and autonomous agent. The above examples of shame make sense only if we suppose that one or the other of these aspirations has been perceived as threatened and this totally independently of one's adherence to the standards informing the stigmatization. It is when judgements or attitudes are perceived as undermining such aspirations, ideals or values, which are truly ours, that shame ensues. The actual content of the judgments is not relevant or is relevant only insofar as they impinge on such aspirations.

The alleged heteronomy of shame is thus a superficial phenomenon. Shame is autonomous, even if its autonomy is obscured by the fact –rightly stressed by advocates of the first strand of the attack on shame- that the values which, when threatened, elicit shame may well be partly or wholly constituted by others' attitudes towards us. That this happens should not prevent us, however, from seeing that, more often than not, others are instrumental in shame by pointing to reasons we totally agree with and where the agreement explains the occurrence of shame. To take a classical example, my being caught red-handed peeping through a door might well elicit shame because I think it shameful. So, one does indeed submit to something in shame, but the fact that you submit to what you deem important to you, rather than to the disapproving look of others, opens up the possibility of speaking, with Lynd, of shame as disclosing “an integrity that is peculiarly one's own.”

III.

But this is precisely where the second strand against shame kicks in. Many will not easily be persuaded by the reading just given of the voyeur example. One might accept that we are often sensitive to the standard informing the judgement that is passed on us, perhaps we even autonomously agree with it,

but insist that it is because we are *seen* to be violating this standard that shame ensues. I was already not particularly happy with myself for peeping through the keyhole, but the degradation that comes with shame depends on the gaze of the intruder. In the words of the author of this example “la honte dans sa structure première est honte *devant quelqu’un*.”^{viii} To insist then on the gaze of the other is to conceive of shame as necessarily involving being caught in a compromising situation. The situation can be compromising as in the case of the voyeur because you are seen doing something that you deem immoral, or because you are caught doing something perfectly respectable but that you prefer to do in private -the satisfaction of bodily needs being an obvious example. In the first case, your standing, say, as a trustworthy and respectable member of the community is threatened, in the second case your privacy is invaded. And from here to an unfavourable attitude towards shame there is only a small step. Shame appears to be superficial because it is either exclusively concerned with what others think of you, i.e. your reputation, or because it centres around needs or activities that end up being problematic only when witnessed. The superficiality of shame, one might further think, is made all the more salient by the fact that shame is necessarily a reaction to the presence of an audience.

At this point, two related considerations are in order. First, were it the case that reputation and privacy were the key to understanding shame, it is not clear that this would make shame superficial. Caring about how we appear is superficial only when it is guided by desperate prestige seeking or craving for applause independently of what grounds the prestige or the applause. Moreover, not all eyes have the same status: since shame is much more likely to occur when we fail in the eyes of specific others, we have yet another reason for rejecting the verdict of superficiality. For it is less than obvious that the shame felt at failing to secure prestige and applause among those we respect and with whom we share fundamental values affects only shallow characters. It might even be a privileged way of ensuring that we do not stray

too far away from what we deem important^{ix}. Next, with regard to the connection of shame with privacy, this should motivate at most the claim that this emotion has very little to do with, to quote Lynd again, “an integrity that is peculiarly one’s own”, but certainly not the pessimism peculiar to the contemporary consensus on shame. Much more significant is the obvious fact that, even though bodily shame may be developmentally prior, many instances of shame centre around exclusively human preoccupations. It is for instance not uncommon for teenagers to feel shame at being seen by their peers with their parents, or, say, to feel shame at a dinner party simply because your happy marriage becomes the topic of discussion. And it would be preposterous to gloss these cases in the same terms as those introduced for cases connected with bodily functions^x. What is exposed in these cases and the reason for which its exposure occasions shame is certainly not basely superficial and points in a rather different direction than that of the dim view characteristic of contemporary thinking about shame^{xi}.

A second and related consideration concerns the emphasis that is put on the alleged fact that audiences are required in shame. Note first that the claim is plausible only on a very broad understanding of what these audiences amount to. The audience need not of course be present in flesh and blood, but, according to the canonical articulation of the idea, may be merely imagined to be present. Shame is “a reaction to other people’s criticisms” which “requires an audience or at least a man’s fantasy of an audience.”^{xii} The audience one fantasizes may be a real one, or it may just be a figment of the imagination. Note, second, that the idea that, in shame, audiences have to come in real or at least in imagined form is less innocuous than may first appear. For the claim taken literally would mean that shame felt privately involves picturing in one’s mind such an audience. Since it is reasonable to suppose that what is pictured must be accessible to introspection, the appeal to imagination, to be phenomenologically adequate, should always put one in a position to answer the question ‘Who is expressing the unwelcome opinion

about me?'. Now, is it obvious that each time we feel shame privately we are able to answer this question? If I realize that I have been walking around all day with a rather large smear from my daughter's nappy on my shirt, the shame I am likely to feel might involve more or less articulated thoughts about others, but certainly not necessarily the picturing of any one person or audience in particular. While the often-heard claims about a phenomenology of 'the look', 'the eyes' or 'the gaze' are occasionally illuminating and may be part of paradigmatic shame eliciting situations, they cannot be taken at face value as part of the analysis of all cases of shame. And this insistence on the audience becomes all the more dubious when shame arises from doing something that we deem unworthy or plainly immoral knowing that nobody else would be shocked by it or even that everybody would praise one for it. Solitary shame without imagining an audience is certainly common, and even documented^{xiii}. The ophthalmic metaphors fail strikingly to illuminate the shame felt at your ungenerous attitude towards a friend, or that felt at not spending more time with your children.

What is left, then, of the second strand of the attack on shame once the need for an audience is questioned? The force of the metaphors of the look and hence the grain of truth behind the audience claim seem to have their source in the facts that, first, the quality of shame is made all the more painful by the presence of an audience^{xiv} and, second, that in prospective shame, imagining audiences might very well be a powerful heuristic device for the happy handling of many a delicate situation in which important decisions have to be made. Nothing in this, however, justifies succumbing to the temptation to claim that shame is exclusively concerned with our standing and privacy. That these two values are indeed dear to many of us and perhaps especially prevalent in some social settings explains why shame often ensues when they are threatened. But that this is a fact should not make us forget that shame also occurs when we fail to live up to values that have nothing to do with reputation or privacy. More often than not shame results from perceiving

ourselves as failing with regard to moral, intellectual or aesthetic values we deem essential and self-defining. In this sense, it is possible to speak with Lynd of shame as having an “individualizing” character. If we seriously undermine those values that we take to be self-defining, we risk not being able to recognize ourselves.

IV.

Even if we are on the right track, the ugliness of shame might not stem from what motivates it, but from its consequences. This is the focus of the third and final strand making up shame’s bad reputation and perhaps the focus of the contemporary consensus formulated by Paul Gilbert in the opening quotation. There is no need to dig very deep into the abundant empirical literature on the topic^{xv} to notice that shame is often part of the following picture: shame, frequently contrasted with guilt in this respect, is said to lead to a turning away from responsibilities, to self-oriented distress, to anger at others and aggressive behaviour, and to psychological symptoms such as depression. These claims seem to some to be supported by the idea that all these maladaptive features of shame are vestiges of traits that were once advantageous during the emergence of shame^{xvi}. The benefits of self-oriented distress in order to show submission to the dominant or of anger and aggression to dispose of this same dominant are indeed easily imagined.

Three mistakes seem to us to characterize the bulk of the studies on which these claims are based. First, it is striking that no difference between *shame* and *shaming* or what we would call humiliation is, if drawn at all, ever seriously taken into account. While this assimilation is perhaps not surprising within the framework of a conception of shame as dependent on the disapproving eye of others, it is very problematic. To take an obvious example, while reacting with anger and aggression are consubstantial with being humiliated, it is not obvious that shame, as we have described it, has such consequences. Secondly, a large part of the empirical results emanates

from studies of individuals in whose lives shame takes centre stage and has damaging effects. These are, in the very term ordinarily used to describe them, “shame-prone individuals.” But perhaps there is no easy inference to be made about the ugly consequences of shame *episodes* on the basis of data regarding the ugly consequences of shame *dispositions*. This is because shame-proneness is by definition a pathological disposition: it involves individuals who are likely to feel recurrent and irrational shame in more circumstances than the average. Finally, whereas there is little doubt that self-oriented distress and avoidance behaviour are often connected with shame -and this may well be the grain of truth in the third strand-, self-reform and self-enhancement might also count among its consequences. The former, which are short-term manifestations of the emotion, should be balanced against the latter, which are among the positive long-term action-tendencies connected with shame.

What aiming at self-reform or self-enhancement will consist in will of course vary as a function of the threatened value. Shame is the painful tribute we pay for being made aware of the need to pursue this aim and thus continue to recognize ourselves. With a bit of experience, however, the tribute can be paid only in imagination, through prospective shame or, with more experience, we may come to instinctively avoid paying it at all. This is how shame and related phenomena such as *aidos*, reverence, respect and *pudor* take on the protective and prospective roles of a guardian to which so many philosophers from Democritus and Plato to Hume and Joubert – discretely – allude, roles which sadly fail to inform much of contemporary psychology and philosophy.

ENDNOTES

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ⁱ Helen M. Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1958), 257.

ⁱⁱ Paul Gilbert, 'Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt', *Social Research* 70:4 (2003), 1225.

ⁱⁱⁱ Plato, *Republic*, V. 465.

^{iv} David Hume, *An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals*, chap. 8, sect. 8, 213.

^v Richard Wollheim, *On the Emotions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Lecture 3.

^{vi} Cheshire Callhoun, 'An Apology for Moral Shame', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12:2 (2004).

^{vii} Wollheim, *On the Emotions*, Lecture 3.

^{viii} Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 265-266.

^{ix} Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chap. 4.

^x This suggests that we should draw a distinction of the kind Rawls' famously did between natural and moral shame. Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), 290.

^{xi} This is not to say that there is no important continuity between bodily shame and other forms of shame. But, according to Velleman, who does stress this continuity, this emotion is everything but superficial: in shame, the person fails to manifest her agency in her eyes or those of others, i.e. appears as less than a person. David J. Velleman, 'The Genesis of Shame', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30:1 (2001).

^{xii} Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), 222-223.

^{xiii} R. H. Smith, J. M. Webster, G. W. Parrott & H. L. Eyre 'The Role of Public Exposure in Moral and Nonmoral Shame and Guilt', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83:1 (2002), 138-159.

^{xiv} Smith & al., 'The Role of Public Exposure'.

^{xv} For a thorough review of the relevant empirical literature, see June P. Tangney & Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002).

^{xvi} See e.g. Gilbert, 'Evolution, Social Roles' and Daniel Fessler, 'Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 4:2 (2004), 207-262.