Shame, Selves, and Morality

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Introduction

Krista Thomason's *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life* (2018), develops a novel account of shame—one that advances our understanding of the emotion and its moral significance. On her account, shame is a response to a distinctive tension in one's identity: one feels shame because one feels that one's self-conception—one's own sense of who one is—has been overshadowed by another part of one's identity. So while I might not see my race, appearance, or tendency to be dishonest as central to who I am, I can come to be ashamed of these aspects of my identity if they are made salient by, say, a coworker's comment. So understood, shame (more precisely: the liability to feel shame) is morally valuable because it is indicative of moral maturity. The shame I feel as the result of my coworker's comment about my appearance reveals that I am open to criticism and that I recognize the standing of others—moral sensitivities that shameless individuals lack.

This provocative account of shame and its moral value is combined with an important critical examination of competing views. By focusing on central but underappreciated features of shame, Thomason does much to reorient the philosophical discussion: an account of shame is deficient if it cannot explain (1) why we tend to feel shame when we are seen naked or (2) why shame tends to provoke violence. In addition to these contributions to research on shame, Thomason's book

also adds—impressively—to philosophical work on identity and its role in social life as well as to a range of affiliated issues in moral psychology and emotion theory. For instance, Thomason's "constitutive account" of moral emotions enriches our understanding of the value they have, and her chapter on shaming and stigmatizing offers a nuanced discussion of these practices and their moral costs.

In what follows, we begin with an overview of *Naked*, separating this into a discussion of her challenges to competing proposals (section 1), her alternative account of shame and its moral value (section 2), and her critical assessment of shaming practices (section 3). While we raise some passing worries in this expository discussion, we use the next three sections to develop a larger set of worries that focus on Thomason's explanation of shame's core behavioral tendencies—hiding and violence (section 4), her account of shame's moral value (section 5), and her provocative claim that, unlike other emotions, shame does not have correctness conditions (section 6). We conclude our discussion with some more general observations about the significance of Thomason's proposal for existing debates about the nature of shame and its moral value (section 7).

1. Thomason's Critical Project: Challenging the Traditional and Naturalistic Accounts

1.1. What we want from a theory of shame

According to Thomason, there are two types of paradigmatic shame episodes. First, there are instances of shame that suggest that it is a *moral emotion*. We see this in, for instance, the shame one feels about one's infidelity; here, shame signals that one has failed to live up to one's ideals and the emotion can prompt efforts to become a better person. Second, there is the shame we feel about our gender, our upbringing, or being seen naked. Here shame shows its *dark side*. Not only does shame of this sort seem to have nothing to do with one's moral character, but it also tends to be destructive—prompting avoidance, withdrawal, and even violence.

Given that shame is Janus-faced in this way, Thomason sees a successful philosophical account of shame as needing to meet two requirements (p. 15). First, it must explain how shame has moral value—a task made difficult by shame's tendency to bring destructive behavior (the *moral adequacy constraint*). Second, a viable account must also provide a good conceptual analysis of the emotion; here the challenge is to develop an account that captures the wide range of situations in which we feel shame (the *conceptual adequacy constraint*).

While these are familiar desiderata, Thomason adds a further constraint that enriches our understanding of shame and its value. Following other feminist philosophers (Calhoun (2004) in particular), Thomason argues that we should be hesitant to secure theoretical unity by dismissing cases of shame as "irrational" or "false." After all, to dismiss shame about one's race or sexuality as irrational would be to fault or patronize those with such marginalized identities (p. 37). But the fact that one is more likely to be ashamed of a social identity if that identity is

marginalized should not lead to the conclusion that the marginalized person is less rational, lacking autonomy, or somehow morally immature. So, for Thomason, the task of conceptual analysis requires making sense of *all* shame episodes, including those that other accounts exclude for one reason or another.

1.2. Trouble for the Traditional and Naturalistic Views

In Chapter 1 and the first part of Chapter 2, Thomason critically assesses what she takes the two most prominent accounts of shame to be: the traditional and naturalistic views.[1] Classic versions of the *traditional view* of shame, like those of John Rawls (1971) and Gabriele Taylor (1985), fall along the following lines: shame is a response to one's failure to live up to certain ideals. What exactly these "ideals" are (social, moral, or personal) and what constitutes a "failure" (a loss of self-respect, a particular kind of self-doubt, or something that is perceived by others to be a failure) is a subject of debate. Importantly, though, traditional views see shame as autonomous: there is a strong connection between the elicitor of shame and one's *personal* values or ideals (as opposed to ideals that one does not endorse or believe in).

By contrast, the *naturalistic view* explains shame in terms of the submissive behaviors that humans have evolved to demonstrate in response to actions that are (in some way) inconsistent with certain social norms and expectations (e.g., Maibom 2010, Keltner 1995, Gibbard 1990). Here, appeals to evolutionary psychology are

[1] In Chapter 4, Thomason discusses a third, less prominent, family of *pessimistic views*—accounts of shame that maintain the emotion has little moral value.

used to explain shame's elicitors and behaviors, and the norms that one fails to live up to are specified as those of one's social group. As such, naturalistic views do not propose that there is a strong connection between shame and autonomy.

At first pass, traditional accounts seem well positioned to capture shame's moral dimension (in virtue of shame's connection to autonomy), while naturalistic accounts are better positioned to explain the wide range of situations that can elicit shame (in virtue of the lack of this connection). A central move in Thomason's critical project is to use this observation to argue that neither the traditionalist nor the naturalist has the resources to *both* explain shame's moral dimension and deliver a satisfactory conceptual analysis. While there is much richness in the criticisms Thomason develops on this front, they are bolstered by an intriguing set of arguments suggesting that the traditional and naturalistic views face further difficulties. Specifically, she argues that neither proposal can explain two paradigmatic types of shame: cases involving nudity and exposure, and cases where shame brings violence. Though others have noted shame's connection to nudity and violence (e.g., Mason 2009, Maibom 2010, Deonna, Rodogno & Teroni 2012), Thomason argues that these cases merit greater attention given the significant role that they play in our understanding of what shame is (p. 11, 25).

First, consider exposure. These cases are difficult for advocates of the traditional and naturalistic views to make sense of because it is not clear what is wrong—morally or socially—with being walked in on while, say, going to the bathroom or having sex. Traditionalists typically try to make sense of exposure-

driven shame by maintaining either that the cases don't really involve shame, but rather embarrassment (Kekes 1988), or that these are instances of "natural," not moral, shame (Rawls 1971). But as Thomason points out, the move to reclassify shame as embarrassment fits poorly with our own experiences as well as autobiographical accounts of shame resulting from exposure (p. 27). Further, the suggestion that these are instances of some other type of shame seems ad hoc—especially since "moral psychology does not have an example of any other emotion that admits of two fundamentally different types" (p. 28).[2] Other traditionalists seek to explain the shame of exposure as concerning (personal or moral) ideals regarding modesty (e.g., Deonna, Rodogno & Teroni 2012). However, Thomason argues that this move is in tension with the traditionalists' emphasis on shame as a morally valuable emotion. After all, one can feel shame even when the exposure that caused it wasn't one's fault. But if one can experience shame in situations for which one bears no responsibility, then it's hard to see how it could be a morally beneficial emotion (p. 34-5).[3]

[2] While we agree with Thomason's charge that the traditionalist's splitting move is ad hoc, we are skeptical of her further claim that no emotions have sub-types. As we see it, the philosophical and psychological literature on emotions like disgust (e.g., Giner-Sorolla et al. 2019; Kumar 2018) and anxiety (e.g., Öhman 2008; Kurth 2016, 2018) makes a plausible case that some emotions admit of fundamentally different types. In light of this, we think Thomason's argument works because it successfully shifts the burden to the traditionalist: they must now provide a principled, empirically supported case for thinking there are different types of shame.

[3] We suspect the case here isn't closed. Consider Williams' (1976) discussion of the lorry driver who feels guilty about running over a child despite there being nothing he could have done to prevent it. That example suggests an emotion can be morally valuable—the lorry driver's guilt reflects well on him—even when it misfires (i.e., the guilt is misplaced since the driver has done nothing wrong).

The naturalistic account (at least, Thomason's characterization of it) fairs no better. As Thomason notes, the challenge here is to explain what social norm is violated when, for example, a teenage boy gets caught masturbating by his mother. While it is clear that there are norms against performing sexual acts in public, it's not clear how the boy flouts those norms—after all, his privacy was *violated* by his mother. But if no norm was flouted, then naturalistic accounts cannot explain cases of shame due to exposure like these (p. 44-5).

Turning to cases of violence in response to shame, Thomason looks at the psychological literature on violent reactions to shame as well as literary examples like Sophocles' *Ajax*, Perry from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and Bigger from Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Shame's connection to violence is important both because—as Thomason's examples make plain—it is part of how we experience shame and because it complicates our understanding of shame's moral relevance.

In this regard, Thomason argues that, like exposure, violence in response to shame is difficult for existing accounts to explain. How does violence aid in, or make up for, failing to meet one's moral or personal standards, as the traditional account maintains? In what sense can violence be an expression of submission, or help move an individual towards societal acceptance in the ways suggested by naturalistic proposals? Granted, some have replied that the shame-induced violence of, say, Ajax makes sense within the context of an honor culture (e.g., Taylor 1985). However, even if we grant that (but see Thomason's retort p. 53-4), it does little to

explain the violence shame provokes in Perry and Bigger who are not members of honor based societies.

Taken together, then, Thomason's detailed examination of exposure and violence not only reveals unappreciated challenges to existing accounts of shame, but also advances our understanding of shame's complexity.

2. Thomason's positive view: Shame and identity

2.1. Identities, self-conception, and overshadowing

Thomason uses the challenge of violence developed in Chapter 2 as a jumping-off point for the positive account of shame that she presents in Chapter 3. During a shame episode, we experience a loss of control. Thomason argues that we respond to shame with violence in an effort to regain the control that we feel we have lost. But what exactly is lost and regained here? Thomason proposes that when shame leads us to be violent, it is a response to our loss of control over a part of our *identity*. Violence, then, is our attempt to reclaim control over who we are. Much of the novelty in Thomason's proposal comes in the account of identity that she develops both to explain shame's connection to violence and to ground her larger account of the emotion.

On Thomason's account, the self has multiple, potentially conflicting dimensions. First, we have our voluntary self-conceptions: the person we take ourselves to be, how we try to present ourselves to others, and the features of

ourselves that we take to define who we are and that guide our decision-making. But we also have a social, public self that is, in a real sense, non-voluntary: the person that others take us to be. Crucially, these aspects of our selves can diverge. During an episode of shame, Thomason argues, some non-voluntary part of our identity *overshadows* our self-conception, creating a perceived tension between our social/public and private selves.[4] In shame, the way the subject conceives of herself is overshadowed by a feature of her self that she wishes to hide, or at least that she wishes would not be as salient a part of her identity as it is on that occasion. So, for instance, even if I don't see my ethnicity or socioeconomic status as important to my sense of self, I can become ashamed of them if, say, they are things that my father-in-law focuses on in a conversation. Not only can Thomason's proposal capture standard occasions of shame like this, but it can also explain cases that give traditional and naturalistic views trouble.

First consider cases where shame brings violence. Having one's self-conception overshadowed by a non-voluntary part of one's identity can bring the feeling that one has lost control over one's identity: the person one takes oneself to be is not the person others see one as being. Violence then becomes a way for one to reassert one's agency (more specifically, one's *public* image as an agent) in the face of its diminishment by the shame-eliciting experience. It is an "act of self-assertion" that allows one to "again feel defined by [one's] self-conception" (p. 118).

[4] Thomason is clear that this is a necessary, not sufficient, condition for shame. It seems to be the case that an experience of such a tension can lead to other emotions (particularly anger or frustration) or no affective experience at all.

Turning to cases where exposure or nudity bring shame, per Thomason's account, these too are cases where one's self-conception is overshadowed. In sexual activities (a couple having intercourse, the teenager masturbating), I "lose myself in my body." So when I am caught in the act, I am "wrenched away from identifying with [my] body" in a way that leaves me feeling exposed: my self-conception (my identification of myself with my sexual body) is overshadowed my sudden realization of what I look like to others during sex (p. 114). This, in turn, explains why, when exposed, we try to hide ourselves or what we were caught doing.

Thomason's account also gives answers to some of the more vexing questions in debates about shame. For instance, much of the literature on shame focuses on the relationship between the subject of shame and her audience: what role does the 'other' play in an episode of shame? In contrast to the prominent contention that an (actual or imagined) audience is *necessary* for shame, Thomason argues an audience merely plays an *instrumental* role: while an audience can make certain features of one's non-voluntary identity salient, it's the dynamics within oneself, between parts of one's identity, that are ultimately what is necessary for eliciting shame.

Similarly, Thomason's proposal can also capture other cases that competing views have trouble explaining—like when a flattering remark brings shame. Consider Max Scheler's (1987) example of the shame felt by a nude model when she is complimented by the artist who is painting her. On Thomason's account, the model feels shame as the result of the tension she experiences between her self-conception

as a professional doing her job and her non-voluntary identity as a sexually attractive model (p. 154-5).

However, while Thomason's move to understand shame as a consequence of having one's self-conception overshadowed has explanatory advantages over the traditional and naturalistic accounts, her proposal also seems underequipped to explain cases where part of one's self-conception—not one's non-voluntary self—is the source of one's shame. Consider, for instance, a case where my self-conception includes the belief that I lack self-discipline. Suppose further that I am ashamed of this perceived deficit. Since lacking self-discipline *is part of my self-conception*, there is no overshadowing of who I take myself to be. This suggests there's an important set of cases Thomason's account cannot accommodate.

In response, Thomason might argue that the tension lies between my non-voluntary identity as a person lacking self-discipline (which is *also* a part of my self-conception) and, say, another part of my self-conception—my view of myself as a decent student or as a person who can achieve her academic goals. Thomason could then say that my conception of myself as a capable student is overshadowed by my non-voluntary identity as someone lacking self-discipline.

We see two problems with this reply. First, it does not fully address the concern being raised. Perhaps I don't see myself as a decent student or a person who can achieve her academic goals. In those cases, we're again left without a story about what gets overshadowed. Second, and more generally, Thomason's proposal fits poorly with the phenomenology of shame in response to this kind of personal

failure. Intuitively, it is not that my undisciplined actions reveal a tension in my self-conception (as Thomason's proposal suggests), but rather I am ashamed of a part of my self-conception because it fails to match up with certain social or personal ideals that I endorse. If this is right, not only does it deepen the problem that Thomason has explaining these cases of shame, but it also reveals that cases such as these are easy for her traditionalist and naturalistic opponents to explain.

Switching gears a bit, while it's clear how Thomason's account differs from the traditionalist and naturalist proposals, the difference between her proposal and David Velleman's (2001) view is more subtle. Velleman describes shame as a failure of "self-presentation," a failure to present oneself as a competent agent. Like Thomason, Velleman emphasizes the differences between our private and public selves and the control we have over each. Both philosophers also see shame as a kind of failure to control how one comes off to others. Velleman, however, takes self-presentation to be more than just control over one's public image. Self-presentational successes are necessary for one to be a functioning social agent: "others cannot engage you in social interaction unless they find your behavior predictable and intelligible" (Velleman, 2001, p. 53). Failures of self-presentation are thus failures to present yourself as "an eligible target for interaction" (p. 54).

These affinities aside, Thomason argues that her account of shame is better on several fronts. First, Velleman's account makes too much of the failures that bring shame. On his account, self-presentation is a matter of having a coherent self-conception—it is "a sense-making activity where we try to construct a persona for

both ourselves and for others" (Thomason p. 86, footnote 3, emphasis added). But, pace Velleman, Thomason maintains that shame needn't involve such a dramatic failure: we can be ashamed of things that in no way challenge our ability to successfully engage in social interaction. Second, given Velleman's understanding of shame in terms of self-presentational success, he cannot explain shame that results from privacy violations—that is, exposures that are not the fault of the subject. Consider: if being caught having sex is truly a self-presentational failure, then this failure occurred before the violation of privacy. So, Velleman's account delivers the implausible result that one should experience shame *before* one's privacy is violated.

Stepping back, Thomason's account of shame is significant in a number of ways. Not only does she give an explanation for instances of shame that other views have trouble with, but she does so without appealing to the idea of "false" or "irrational" shame. She also captures the wide range of paradigmatic instances of shame, and responses to feeling shame. Central to all of this is Thomason's move to, in a real sense, intellectualize the emotion. To see this, notice how Thomason's account of shame's connection to violence contrasts with what we get from the naturalistic proposal. On the naturalistic account, violent responses are understood as the (unfortunate) rearing up of some residual, hardwired proto-shame response (e.g., Maibom 2010). For Thomason, they are more strategic: violent responses are attempts to reassert control over one's public identity. This intellectualizing of shame is also central to Thomason's account of the shame of sex and exposure. As we have seen, her account explains shame by pointing to the tension between our

thoughts about how we look to others when having sex and our own identification of ourselves with our sexual bodies. However, as we argue below (section 4), we worry that this intellectualizing of shame comes at the expense of a plausible explanation of its phenomenology.

2.2. The moral value of shame

In Chapter 4, Thomason offers a novel account of shame's moral value. Rather than maintaining that every shame episode is morally valuable, she argues for a "constitutive" account of the morality of shame. On this proposal, one's capacity to feel shame is indicative of a kind of moral maturity. More specifically, someone with a liability to feel shame is someone who is sensitive to the way her self is socially defined: she is open to moral criticism and recognizes the moral standing of others (p. 12). This sensitivity contrasts with what we find in a shameless person. Such an individual takes her self-conception to be the final authority on who she is. Her shamelessness is morally problematic because it reveals her "failure to recognize the limitations of her own self-conception," and so her failure to recognize her moral peers as such (p. 149).

To illustrate this, Thomason discusses a shameless self-promotor. A person who constantly speaks highly of herself and who is closed-minded in the face of others' criticism is someone who lacks the liability to feel shame. To the shameless self-promotor, no one else's conception of her identity matters; no other person has a say in who she is. In lacking this open-mindedness to others' points of view and

conceptions of her, the shameless self-promoter fails to recognize others as people whose opinions matter (pp. 150-151).

While this proposal surely captures part of what's wrong with shamelessness, it also seems to miss something important. Consider the shameless adulterer. On Thomason's account, the problem with his lack of shame is that—in dismissing the points of view of his wife and others—he takes himself to be the sole arbiter of his self-conception. But the problem here seems to concern more than just the issue of whose opinions matter for the construction of one's identity. Rather, the adulterer's shamelessness reveals that he does not recognize the damage his behavior has done to *his* (moral) standing as a self-respecting agent. Thomason might respond that were the shameless adulterer to recognize his wife's point of view, he would see the harm that he has done to himself. But this reply underappreciates the moral power of shame—shame can be a *direct* signal of damage to one's moral standing, as opposed to one that must be mediated by the perspectives of others. If this is right, then Thomason's proposal fails to fully capture the moral value of shame.

3. Thompson On Shaming Practices

If a liability to feel shame is a sign of moral maturity, and if some episodes of shame can promote moral growth (e.g., the paradigmatic cases of shame in response to a moral failing), are we ever justified in making other people feel shame? Answering this question is the project of Chapter 5. Thomason's discussion here is nuanced as

she identifies—and assess the moral merits of—various ways we might make another feel ashamed.

First, there's *inviting shame*. Someone is inviting shame when she tries to make another person see himself the way others see him by calling attention to how his behavior or attitudes are being viewed. The goal is to elicit a kind of self-awareness that the person in question is lacking—namely, his awareness of his self's social dimension (p. 179).

By contrast, *shaming practices*, as Thomason characterizes them, involve publicizing attitudes or behavior in another that one sees as morally problematic. While there is overlap between inviting shame and shaming, shaming practices are specifically aimed at publicly highlighting the negative trait(s) of their target. It is shaming, not inviting shame, that tends to be a prominent practice on social media platforms. Thomason says that while shaming can also have the goal of promoting a kind of self-awareness, it's typically used to censure its targets or try to change their behavior (p. 181).

Lastly, there's *stigmatizing*, a kind of shaming that focuses on the particular social identity of a group. The primary difference between stigmatizing and shaming is that stigmatizing "involves the manipulation of someone's social status" as a result of what is being shamed; by contrast, the experience of shame is not a necessary part of stigmatizing (pp. 183-184).

Thomason's conclusions about the moral status of these various practices are supported by the details of her account of shame and identity. She argues that public shaming is impermissible because those performing the shaming are trying to define their target by highlighting certain (negative) features. So while shamelessness is problematic because the shameless person fails to recognize the perspectives of her peers, the proper correction isn't public shaming—for responding to shamelessness in that way would fail to respect the target's self-conception. Even in cases where the target of shaming is a powerful corporation or a vehement racist, Thomason argues that there are more effective, and more morally acceptable, ways to reject certain ideologies than shaming.

For similar reasons, inviting shame to motivate some kind of self-improvement in the target is also impermissible: we are not in the position to decide when another person needs the kind of feedback that inviting shame is trying to offer, and so to offer this unsolicited feedback is to display a kind of moral arrogance (p. 186). Thomason says that inviting shame to motivate self-improvement implies that we are in the position to "morally educate," not just to judge, and being in the position to morally educate implies that we have achieved some higher moral status and are immune to the kind of flaws we are pointing out (p. 187).

Thomason's answer to the question of the permissibility of stigmatizing involves a rich discussion of shaming in legal punishment. Stigmatizing by the state is an immoral practice per Thomason because the state should not manipulate one's ability to construct one's identity, especially for the purpose of lowering one's social

status (p. 213). Regarding extra-legal stigmatizing, Thomason raises concerns similar to those she raises against public shaming: while stigmatizing smokers, for example, might reduce smoking, it also lowers the social status of a group of people in a way that cannot be justified despite good intentions (p. 215).

The only time that some form of shaming is morally permissible, according to Thomason, is when one is inviting shame in "moral self-defense" (p. 187). She uses the example of inviting an arrogant person to feel shame to illustrate this idea. An arrogant person sees those around her as lesser in some way, and expects them to see themselves as lesser as well. Because of this sense of superiority, inviting her to feel shame would be a morally permissible way to bring her down a notch. This case of moral self-defense is different from inviting shame for self-improvement because it does not imply that the shame-inviter is morally superior to the arrogant person (p. 188). "When other people refuse to take us seriously [in the case of shamelessness] or when they think of themselves as more important than we are [due to arrogance, racism, etc.], invitations to shame protect our self-respect" (p. 190).

With our overview complete, we turn to raise three worries before concluding with some general remarks about what Thomason's proposal tells us about the nature of shame.

4. A First Worry: The Explanation of Shame Responses

Thomason maintains that her account better explains the two dominant response tendencies associated with shame—hiding and violence. We are less sure.

First consider Thomason's account of the connection between shame and hiding. As she sees it, "once we feel defined or overshadowed by some aspect of ourselves, we often fear it will be permanent" (p. 104). By hiding, "we can remove ourselves from sight or if we can hide the thing that causes our shame, we can regain a sense of power or control" (p. 118). But this rendering of the connection between shame and hiding is puzzling. For one, hiding is surely inadequate as a strategy for regaining a sense of power over one's identity—much less addressing a deficiency that one fears will become permanent. Moreover, the example of Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter* reveals that shame can prompt strategies that are genuinely effective. As Thomason explains, Prynne's acts of kindness allowed her to regain "a feeling of control by asserting her self-conception as an agent rather than as the passive recipient of contempt from the townspeople" (p. 120). But given that there are better strategies, and given that Thomason's account takes shame to be a cognitively complex, intellectual emotion, why does hiding turn out to be the most common response to feeling shame (p. 118)?

Turning to Thomason's account of violence, as we've seen (section 2.1), shame brings violence because it's a way for me to "again feel defined by [my] self-conception" (p. 118). Since this violence is an "act of self-assertion," it is a manifestation of my agency, and "when I am seen as an agent, I feel as though my self-conception (not the parts of my identity that fall outside of it) is determining who I am" (p. 119). By

"becoming the object of resentment by doing something violent," I can thus regain the feeling of control that I lost in my feelings of shame—through violence, I "once again feel that [my] self-conception determines who [I am]" (p. 120).

But this explanation seems over-intellectualized insofar as it takes us to want to re-assert our agency *in order to shore our self-conception and thereby regain control*. While this might be true in some cases (Ajax, perhaps), it seems implausible as an account of all instances of shame. Consider one of Thomason's central examples: Perry from Capote's *In Cold Blood*. When Perry slits Mr. Clutter's throat, is he best understood as doing that in order to restore his self-conception after feeling ashamed about looking for the coin? Or is it better seen as an unthinking, impulsive response that lacks any larger purpose? Perry's statement that "*I didn't realize what I'd done* until I heard the sound" (quoted by Thomason, p. 54, emphasis added) suggests the latter. We get more support for this less intellectualized explanation from Thomason's discussion of Susan Miller's (1985) empirical work on shame and violence. There she quotes Miller's observation of individuals "*reflexively attacking* anyone who stimulates an incipient shame" (Thomason, p. 55, emphasis added).

Our reading of these examples suggests Thomason's account of shame over-complicates the connection between shame and violence. Moreover, if violence in response to shame is as sophisticated as Thomason takes it to be, here too it seems that the person responding to shame would be able to realize that there are better ways to take control of her identity than violence (again, Hester Pryne's response is an example).

We also find it hard to understand why, on Thomason's account, shame would lead someone to attack a stranger or innocent bystander. Granted, such violence would allow you to reassert your agency in some sense. But that reassertion of agency wouldn't be directed at (or necessarily noticed by) the person for whom it seems to matter—namely, the individual whose comments about you were what brought the shame about. As Thomason herself notes, "acts of violence are especially tempting responses to shame because the lack of control we experience in shame makes us feel powerless… I can make *the same people* who were just laughing at me quake and cower with my violent acts" (p. 120-1, emphasis added).

These concerns with Thomason's account of shame's connection to violence are particularly pressing given that less intellectualized, naturalistic accounts seem to avoid them. On a sophisticated naturalistic account, shame is an emotion that is related to a more primitive proto-shame response—one that evolved to facilitate social interaction within the dominance hierarchies of our hominid ancestors. Importantly, proto-shame isn't merely an emotion that developed to signal submission. It's also one that motivates efforts—including violence—that have the potential to help one secure higher rank. As the evolutionary anthropologist Daniel Fessler explains, the capacity to experience proto-shame was "selected for because [it led] individuals to strive for dominance, a behavior which, in the long run, increases reproductive success" (1999, p. 90; also, Maibom 2010). However, since vestiges of proto-shame remain part of our psychological makeup, they can affect our behavior in shame-eliciting situations (often, in unfortunate ways). With this sophisticated

account of shame's origins in hand, an advocate of the naturalistic account can then explain why Perry's shame leads him to kill Mr. Clutter and why shame-provoked violence can be levied against strangers—in both cases, it's an unfortunate manifestation of (proto-) shame's driving an effort to assert dominance.

5. A Second Worry: The Moral Value of Shame

On Thomason's account, shame—or, more precisely, a liability to feel shame—is a mark of moral maturity because it reveals that one does not take one's own self-conception to be the final authority on who one is. To be liable to shame means that others' opinions can get one to rethink one's own self-conception. We are concerned that this rendering of shame's value is too liberal with respect to whose opinions should matter.

As we read Thomason, her proposal entails that you should give "practical weight" to *anyone's* assessments of your self-conception (pp. 98-101). But this strikes us as too extreme—surely some judgments about us are so out of bounds that they should be dismissed as irrelevant for one's self-conception (and thus for feelings of shame). Why, for instance, should Nancy give weight to Donald's insinuation that the fact that she's a woman undermines her ability to be an effective leader (something that she takes herself to be)?

Thomason's concern here seems to be that if we don't adopt a catholic approach and give weight to everyone's opinions, we are no different than Bernard Williams'

crank—someone who, in the face of dissent, just assumes his assessment of the matter is correct (p. 94). But while it seems true that determining whether someone's opinion should be given weight admits of vagueness, it also seems true that cases like Donald's remarks about Nancy should be given no weight at all. Furthermore, the issue here is not one that Thomason can easily address. To follow our suggestion and take only some opinions to have weight in our assessments of ourselves would suggest that only some sources of shame are appropriate—a conclusion that, as we've seen (section 1), Thomason clearly rejects. Perhaps this is why she suggests (implausibly, to our mind) that someone like Nancy should seek to "negotiate" with Donald about how much weight his judgments should have in her assessments of her leadership abilities (p. 100).

Moreover, Thomason's emphasis on the need to give weight to everyone's opinions also seems to be in tension with her discussion of cases of inviting shame in another person as a legitimate mechanism of "moral self-defense" (pp. 187-190; also section 3 above). Thomason argues that attempting to elicit shame in another person is a morally permissible kind of self-defense when the target thinks lesser of you or does not take your perspective seriously. However, this suggests that developing a kind of shamelessness in the face of people who (like Donald) are dismissive of your moral standing can also be a form of moral self-defense. After all, to say that it's morally permissible to invite shame in order to get someone to take seriously a perspective they dismiss entails that those dismissive attitudes should be rejected.

And if dismissive attitudes should be rejected, then—pace Thomason—a certain type of shamelessness in the face of those attitudes is morally valuable.

6. A Final Worry: No Appropriateness Conditions for Shame

Perhaps the most striking feature of Thomason's account is her conclusion that shame has no appropriateness or fittingness conditions. For an emotion to be fitting in this technical sense is for the situation to be as the emotion presents it to be. The idea here is that emotions have evaluative content—e.g., fear is about danger, pride is about achievements—and so our emotions present our situations in a particular, evaluatively-loaded way. To say that my fear of the rabid dog is *fitting* is just to say that the dog *really is* dangerous. Understood in this way, assessments of fittingness are normative appraisals that presume that emotions can misfire—it's unfitting to fear the harmless toy poodle.

While Thomason thinks emotions like fear can be (un)fitting, she denies this is so for shame: "on my view, unlike fear or resentment, there is no independent standard for determining what counts as 'properly' shameful" (p. 170). Unlike fear, shame is a *self-conscious* emotion and, as such, the content it presents is about oneself—namely, that one's self-conception is being overshadowed. Per Thomason, since shame is dependent on one's perspective in this way, it is not something one can be mistaken about; its content is not something we can get a handle on independently

of the way we experience it (p. 171). While we find Thomason's proposal provocative, we have three concerns.

First, we find the arguments for thinking shame lacks appropriateness conditions unconvincing. For instance, Thomason points to the difficulty we have in specifying standards for what counts as an (in)appropriate instance of shame: given how disparate the range of things that prompt shame is, there's little reason to think a standard of the appropriately shameful could be specified (pp. 169-70). But from the fact that it's difficult to specify such a standard, we cannot conclude that no standard exists. Moreover, while we should allow that some (many?) claims about (in)appropriate shame might be contestable—and perhaps essentially so (e.g, D'Arms & Jacobson 2003)—we also have clear cases of inappropriate shame: shame about, for instance, one's physical appearance, sexual orientation, or humble background.

To bolster this first argument, Thomason suggests there are notable contrasts between shame, on the one hand, and other emotions like fear and resentment on the other. For fear and resentment—but not shame—it's "easy" to give examples of what the proper targets of the emotion are. Similarly, for fear and resentment—but not shame—the range of proper targets is fairly narrow (p. 170). We are skeptical that these purported asymmetries are real. For one, the above discussion, as well as the philosophical literature on shame, casts doubt on the difficulty of specifying examples of shame's proper domain. We also doubt whether emotions like fear are more likely than shame to admit of the narrow formal object characterizations (danger) as Thomason presumes (see, e.g., D'Arms & Jacobson 2017). Furthermore, even if we

grant that the range of proper sources of shame is diverse, it is unclear why this tells against the possibility of shame having correctness conditions. After all, emotions like disgust and anxiety are legion for their range of elicitors, but they are also emotions that appear to have correctness conditions (Kumar 2017, Kurth 2018).

Second, Thomason's conclusion seems to violate her own requirement that a viable account of shame must "provide a good conceptual analysis" of shame—one that matches the ways that we experience the emotion (p. 15). After all, not only do we say things like, "you shouldn't be ashamed of your parents," but we use such talk to mark out occasions where the shame one experiences is inappropriate (e.g. one's father, though from a humble background, shouldn't be a source of shame). In fact, we do not just raise questions about the appropriateness of shame felt by others, we also critically reflect on the appropriateness of our own feelings of shame: witness self-help publications like "When is it Appropriate to Feel Shame?" (Burgo 2013), "The Gift of Shame: A Positive Look on a Negative Emotion" (Pollock 2018), and "Is There a Place for Shame in your Parenting Toolbox?" (Hamaker 2018). Similarly, Thomason's suggestion that talk of inappropriate shame needs to be reinterpreted—that it is better understood as admonishments not to beat oneself up (p. 172)—fits poorly with the concerns that she has (following Calhoun 2004) about making blanket claims about errors in people's talk about their experiences of shame (e.g., p. 38).

Finally, suppose we follow Thomason in thinking that what matters for shame is just our experience of being overshadowed. Here too, we think there is trouble. To see this, first recall that, for Thomason, "the way that we come across to others is part

of our identity" (p. 97). Now notice: when a part of ourselves involved in this overshadowing is a product of how others see us, it seems we can be wrong about some part of this overshadowing. More specifically, while we cannot be wrong about how we *experience* the relationship between the parts of ourselves (our self-conception and our social self), we can be wrong about the *content* of our social self. After all, it is constituted (in part) by others' views of us, and we can be mistaken about what those views are.

The upshot, then, is that shame can be unfitting even on Thomason's account. Shame will be unfitting when the overshadowing we experience does not reflect how others see us. So, for instance, my shame is unfitting when my non-voluntary identity of having crooked teeth is not, in reality, overshadowing my self-conception (because, say, my peers never notice this feature of me). It might *feel* like it is overshadowed, which is why I am feeling ashamed, and this is still a very real intra-self tension. However, there is a way in which I am *nonetheless wrong* about the relationship between my self-conception and my social self.

7. Taking Stock

Though we have just raised a set of worries about Thomason's account, one of the central virtues of her book is the way it enriches our understanding of shame and its value. So let us return to where we began. An adequate account of shame needs to

meet two conditions: it must (1) explain shame's moral value and (2) provide a conceptual analysis that captures the range of situations in which we feel shame.

The above critical observations suggest that Thomason's account does not have an obvious advantage when it comes to explaining either shame's moral value (sections 2.2, 5) or its tendency to bring hiding and violent behaviors (section 4). This, in turn, suggests that deciding whether her proposal beats out the competition—the traditional and naturalistic accounts—will turn less on questions about the moral adequacy of these proposals, and more on their conceptual adequacy. If that's right, then making progress will require looking closely not only at the range of cases we feel shame, but also—since no account is likely to be able to accommodate all of them—how central those cases are. Yet we suspect that this latter assessment will be heavily influenced by one's background methodological commitments.

On this front, it's worth noting both Thomason's preference for examples from literature (p. 24), and her wariness of empirical work (p. 10). After all, this staring place not only gives shape to what she takes the "canonical" cases of shame to be, but also colors her understanding of what meeting the conceptual adequacy constraint involves. In light of this, we conclude with three observations.

(1) Though direct comparisons are a bit difficult, the kinds of cases that Thomason focuses on do not match up well with empirical work investigating the types of situations that bring shame. On Thomason's rendering, paradigmatic occasions of shame include situations where one feels the emotion as the result of (i) looking like a madman (Ajax), (ii) being seen naked or similarly exposed, (iii) having

someone of, say, a different race be nice to you (Bigger), and (iv) having attention drawn to one's physical deformities or blemishes (Grealy).

By contrast, according to empirical studies, the most common situations where individuals report feeling shame are (i) occasions involving a personal failure (e.g., academic, sports, work), (ii) situations where one has hurt another person emotionally, and (iii) times when one has failed to meet the expectations of others (Keltner & Buswell 1996; Tangney 1992). In fact, situations of the sort that Thomason focuses on are *not* mentioned very frequently in these studies.[5]

(2) Given the cognitively rich way that shame manifests itself in the cases that Thomason focuses on (e.g., Ajax's violence, being seen having sex), it's unsurprising that her proposal takes shame to be an intellectually deep and conceptually complex emotion—one that is focused on how your conception of yourself fares in light of others' perceptions of who you are. By contrast, a focus on what the empirical work identifies as the most common elicitors of shame seems (at least at first pass) to be a better fit with traditional and naturalistic accounts of shame.

(3) Appreciating the disparity in the sources of shame noted in (1) raises questions about how we should understand one of Thomason's central dialectical moves—namely, the charge that competing views should be rejected because they aren't able to capture the "canonical instances" of shame (see, e.g., pp. 24, 25, 38-9, 40, 48, 50). If the empirical work is correct, it suggests that "canonical instances"

[5] Some have even argued that, in recent years, we have seen a decline in the shame caused by exposure and privacy that Thomason focuses on (e.g., Gurstein 1996).

should be understood normatively: the cases that Thomason focus on are the most important cases of shame, even if they are not the ones we experience most frequently. This thought, we suspect, is grounded in the fact that cases like these "abound in film and literature" (p. 24). But someone of a more naturalistic persuasion will be suspicious: these case are found in film and literature, not because they are the most important, but rather because they are the ones most ripe for dramatic development.

Hence our prediction: assessments about the conceptual adequacy of a theory of shame will be heavily influenced by one's methodological commitments.

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