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Can We Force Someone to Feel Shame?

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Abstract: For many philosophers, there is a tension inherent to shame as an inward-looking, yet intersubjective, emotion: that between the role of the ashamed self and the part of the shaming Other in pronouncing the judgement of shame. Simply put, the issue is this: either the perspective of the ashamed self takes precedence in autonomously *choosing* to feel shame, and the necessary role of the audience is overlooked, or else the view of the shaming Other prevails in heteronomously *casting* the shame, and the ashamed individual's agency becomes problematically understated. I argue that this debate is fundamentally misguided insofar as it assumes that shame must be exclusively contingent upon either the perspective of the self or that of the Other, when it is in fact dependent upon both at once. This is the "double movement" of shame: an appraisal of the self that is at once social *and* private.

Key words: shame, autonomy, heteronomy, self, Other, relationality, intersubjectivity, audience

Introduction

For many philosophers, there is a tension inherent to the experience of shame as an inward-looking, yet intersubjective, emotion: that between the role of the ashamed self and the part of the shaming Other in pronouncing the judgement which results in shame. Simply put, the issue is this: either the perspective of the ashamed self takes precedence in autonomously *choosing* to feel shame, and the necessary role of the audience is left unaccounted for, or else the view of the shaming Other prevails in heteronomously *casting* the shame, and the ashamed individual's agency becomes problematically understated (Bero 2020: 1283–87; Calhoun 2004: 129, 133, 135; Galligan 2016: 57–58; Maibom 2010: 568; see also Leys 2007: 9; Morrison 1986: 352). One perceived solution to this issue has been to distinguish shame, characterised as a result of transgressing external standards, from guilt, viewed as a product of conflict

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with internal sanctions. From this perspective, shame does not require that its target internalise or "accept" the judgement by which they are ashamed; it is enough that they are pronounced to be shameful by others who they respect or with whom they share a moral world (Aristotle 1984: 1384a25; Calhoun 2004: 133–38; Williams 1993: 82–84).

In this paper, I will suggest that this view is incorrect: that one does, in fact, only experience shame before the judgement of another when one feels that that judgment is to some extent warranted. This collusion explains, on the one hand, the immensely painful nature of shame's condemnatory power and, on the other, the ability of the individual to overcome shame by shifting how they feel about themselves in some fundamental way. However, this is not to say that the feeling of shame is exclusively contingent upon the perspective of the self, either. Rather, it is my contention that both sides of the debate outlined above are mistaken, and that the very distinction between autonomous and heteronomous shame is itself fundamentally misguided. In essence, this is because it is reductive to think that shame must be exclusively contingent upon either the perspective of the self or that of the Other; it is in fact dependent upon both at once. This is the "double movement" (Sedgwick 2003) of shame: it is an appraisal of the self that is at once social *and* private, originating within one's relation with others and subsequently echoed within one's relation with oneself.

Shame as a Double Movement

Most philosophers understand shame as, in essence, referring to the highly unpleasant feeling that one's self is defective or worthless, an experience in which one usually feels exposed before the judgement of others and thereby individuated (Bartky 1990; Locke 2007; Nussbaum 2004; Stearns 2017; Thomason 2018). Unlike guilt, the negative judgement that is involved in shaming is not localised, but rather extends to one's entire self; shame concerns the whole of *who one is*, not just what one has done.[1] We can distinguish between the occurrence of shame as a temporary emotional state ("I felt shame when *x* happened") and as a more established emotional trait or aspect of one's personality ("I have shame about *x*"). The act of shaming, then, can be defined as the deliberate invocation of this feeling in another person or within oneself, whether this occurs as an acute phenomenon or as an activation of underlying mental structures. Yet it is unclear whether shaming necessarily leads to shame—in fact, it is the subject of much debate among philosophers.

It is my view that we cannot force another person to experience shame when they are not otherwise predisposed to.[2] This view suggests that an element of complicitous self-condemnation is necessary to shame; that the shamed individual is in a sense only extended an invitation to feel shame, which they must then accept

for the shaming to be "successful" (Bartky 1990: 85–86; Buss 1999: 527; Karlsson and Sjöberg 2009: 350; Kekes 1988: 283; Sartre 2003: 302–03; Wurmser 1981: 45; Zahavi 2020: 354). By the same token, it seems likely that someone can provoke the feeling of shame within another without having intentionally shamed them. Individuals frequently feel shame in the absence of explicit shaming from others—indeed, in the absence of other people altogether. As Plato's Socrates says in the *Greater Hippias*, "the man before whom I should be most ashamed" is the man he lives with—Socrates himself (Plato 1925: 298b, 304d). However, this does not mean that self-condemnation *alone* is enough to effect shame in the individual; given that shame is an inherently intersubjective emotion, its occurrence always involves some kind of audience, real or imagined (Bartky 1990: 86; Dolezal 2017: 422; Guenther 2012: 61–62; Sartre 2003: 296).[3] Thus, when shame does occur in the absence of an external shaming Other, it nonetheless occurs before an internalised one—an Other which, as Sandra Bartky suggests, comprises "a composite portrait of other and earlier [perpetrators of] . . . consistent shaming behavior" (1990: 90). The individual who experiences shame engages in a degree of self-shaming, the origin of which is itself able to be traced back to previous experiences of shame occurring within one's relations with others. In this sense, while the shame Socrates feels before his "other" self is shame he might feel when physically alone, it is not truly autonomous in the sense that it cannot be experienced in total disconnection from the judgement of others. Feelings of shame thus constitute a rejection of the self which is perpetrated by both self *and* Other.

This is the "double movement" that is fundamental to shame: that, just as the Other's judgement of me as shameful partly constitutes who I am in a way that I cannot control or fully know, it is I who, in feeling shame, reflect that judgement back through an identificatory act of self-condemnation. As David Velleman puts it: "social censure . . . [is] echoed by self censure on the part of its object" (2001: 29). Or, in the words of psychoanalyst Léon Wurmser, "outer shame reverberates and is massively amplified by inner shame, by the same condemnation [of one's] conscience as that meted out by [one's] accuser. It presupposes the process of introjection: 'I take into myself the judgment and punishment by others'" (1981: 45). It is for this reason I suggest that we should conceive of shame as a self-condemnation that is enacted by both the ashamed self *and* the shaming Other; as a transgression of internally as well as externally meted self-standards.

A primary concern that some scholars hold with the claim that we cannot force another to feel shame is that this view apparently strips shame of its intersubjective dimension. Cheshire Calhoun is one proponent of this line of criticism—she argues that this strategy for reconciling shame with autonomy can only do so by "reducing the other before whom we feel shame to a *mirror of ourselves* . . . drop[ping] from view the fundamentally social nature of shame" (2004: 129, emphasis added). If I must already endorse the standards used to shame me in order to feel shame

then, for Calhoun, the Other before whom I am ashamed is not a "full" Other but a mere reflection of my own, autonomous reactions to myself (2004: 132; see also Maibom 2010: 568; Williams 1993: 84). However, I find this argument to be—ironically—somewhat solipsistic, insofar as it forgets that one's self-conception is *itself* irreducibly social in nature. What are my own reactions to myself if not, in part, reflections of the society in which my sense of self is first constituted?

As contemporary philosophers are increasingly acknowledging, our experiences of shame are not independently, but intersubjectively, formed. This is despite our historical tendency to ignore human relationality; as Benjamin Kilborne reminds us, "the very notion of an identity independent of relationships is a fiction, although a powerful one" (2019: 1). Humans are fundamentally relational beings—from our earliest moments, we experience ourselves in relation to the Other. As such, our own self-image is partly contingent upon how we are seen by other people; this is why even instances of so-called "private" shame, in which no physically external observer is present, still have an audience—albeit an internalised one. This relationality of the self means that, as Krista Thomason writes, "the project of constructing a self-conception [is] . . . shaped or influenced by forces totally outside of us" (2018: 90; see also Zahavi 2014: 225). It also means that sometimes our own feelings, desires, and interests will reflect dominant cultural thinking in ways that surprise or even displease us, such as when we find ourselves partaking in masochistic fantasies that are perpetrated by patriarchal oppression (Bartky 1990: 45–58; Card 1996: 42; Tessman 2005: 23–35; Thomason 2018: 90–91). In this sense, we see that the individual—as self-determining as they might strive to be—is necessarily dependent on various social factors for their self-constitution; some of which, it would seem, lie beyond their control. Bartky expresses this when she makes the Sartrean assertion that, in shame, "what I *am*, that is, what I am made to be . . . is not always up to me to determine: Here, how I am and how I appear to the other converge" (1990: 86; see also Biddle 1997: 227; Zahavi 2014: 353). As Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (2000) have pointed out, the idea that we are shaped by various social determinants is not inherently incompatible with the concept of autonomy. Rather, autonomy is inherently relational: something that figures in the individual's self-conception, that is nonetheless reliant upon their continuous relations with others.

In this sense, adopting or internalising the perspective of the Other does not extinguish the social dimension in which that perspective was formed. Rather, such an exchange can be thought of as the product of one's reciprocal relations with others. For instance, Stephen L. Darwall has suggested that this emotional reciprocity might be thought of as a kind of "empathic perspective-taking" in which I experience shame toward myself by internalising someone else's contempt for me. Here, shame and contempt constitute a pair of reciprocal attitudes, where the former is the self-directed variant and the latter its Other-directed equivalent

(Darwall 2017: 298–99). The reciprocal relationship invoked by this sort of account fits with the conceptualisation of shame that Sartre advances when he declares that "I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me. . . . Thus, shame is shame *of oneself before the Other*; these two structures are inseparable" (2003: 302–03). To say that shame requires my recognition, and thus my endorsement, of myself as shameful is therefore not necessarily to say that shame is an exclusively internal event. Rather, it is compatible with the idea that the self-condemnation of shame is socially contingent.

Some scholars argue against the notion that we internalise the Other's perspective in shame by pointing out that shame can sometimes result from the approval of others (Fussi 2015: 175–77; Taylor 1985: 59–61; Williams 1993: 82). A now classic example of this circumstance is Max Scheler's story of a nude model who feels shame upon realising that the artist drawing her has come to regard her with sexual desire. At first, we might think that contempt plays no role here—that, if anything, the artist's attitude tends in the opposite direction—and that the notion of the model adopting the artist's perspective cannot therefore explain her resultant experience of shame. However, if we consider the gendered dimension of this interaction between model and artist, we might not be so quick to discount the possibility of contempt. The artist's desiring gaze is not simply one of approval, as if he were admiring the qualities of an equal (or superior); it is a look informed by patriarchal power relations, in which women so often serve as sexual objects for men. If, as is therefore likely, the artist's gaze is an *objectifying* one, then it is plausible to think that contempt or something similarly disdaining could be involved here. In this sense, shame would be an understandable response in the event that the model did internalise such a view of herself, as degraded to the mere status of object. And, as Bartky points out, patriarchy renders it very likely that she would do so, even against her better judgement: "The identificatory recognition of herself in the artist's eye has not been chosen, nor is it welcome, nor does it coincide with the idea of herself she would like him to have of her, but it is recognition nevertheless" (1990: 86).[4]

If, however, we assumed for the sake of argument that the artist's judgement of the model *was* entirely positive—that his desire is perhaps accompanied by great admiration and respect—then it seems plausible that the model's shame could not result from her internalisation of his perspective. Instead, I would suggest that it results from the internalisation of someone *else's* perspective—someone from her past, whose shaming judgement is triggered by her realisation that she is desired by the artist. It is Gabriele Taylor who gives us an account of how this might be possible, despite the fact that she herself considers shame to be autonomous. As she explains:

> The model need not see herself *as* the artist sees her. But as the result of realizing her relation to him she sees herself in a new light. The point can be

> expressed by introducing a second, higher order point of view from which she is seen not as an object of sexual interest, but is seen as *being seen as such an object*. With this point of view she does identify, and this point of view is a critical one . . . it pronounces it wrong for her to be so seen, at least at this time and by this audience. (1985: 61, emphasis added)

If the artist's judgement of the model is a wholly positive one and yet the model feels shame upon realising that the artist sees her that way, then I think Taylor is right to think that a higher order perspective is introduced. However, while Taylor would argue that this perspective belongs to the model alone, I want to suggest here that it originally comes from outside and so cannot be considered wholly autonomous. Perhaps the notion that it is wrong for her to be looked upon positively by the artist while naked is one which she inherited from childhood, for instance, or from social norms prohibiting the sexual expression of women. Whatever its origin, her shame in this instance is not that of one person alone but instead emerges from the interplay of both participants; it belongs to, in the words of Donna Orange, "the relational system" (2008: 90).

Feeling against Thinking

Another concern often expressed by philosophers in relation to this debate is that requiring individuals to "agree" with the Other's judgement in order to feel shame will, at times, result in the attribution of irrational, masochistic, or morally immature beliefs to the ashamed individual. This is an understandable concern, especially when it comes to those in oppressed social groups (Calhoun 2004: 135–37; Maibom 2010: 572; Thomason 2018: 122–23).[5] In these circumstances, it is not uncommon for the oppressed individual to deny that their membership to such groups is a shameful thing, and to nonetheless simultaneously experience it as shameful. To explain away such instances of shame as examples of moral agents who lack the capacity for mature or rational thinking, or who are simply pathological, is clearly problematic. Cecilea Mun expresses this nicely when she observes that such an "attribution of irrationality . . . can subject epistemic agents to credibility deficits, which work to incapacitate or debilitate individuals as knowers within their epistemic communities" (2019: 299). This in turn discounts "rational experiences of shame . . . [that] ought to be understood as occasions of the righteous shame of the marginalized" (Mun 2019: 302, emphasis removed). As Thomason points out, it also obscures the fact that shaming oneself for something one knows is not shameful can be an intelligible act; for instance, often targets of sexual assault blame themselves for what happened in an unconscious effort to gain control over the event (2018: 122–23; see also Brison 2002: 74; Zahavi 2020: 227). If there is some kind of conceptual discrepancy involved in shame, then, it cannot only be due to some mental shortcoming on

the part of the ashamed person. So how is it that a mature moral agent can be said to endorse the Other's perspective that they are shameful, when that person rationally knows that they have nothing to be ashamed of?

I believe the answer lies in an observation made by Sandra Bartky, that often our experience of shame does not occur at the level of propositional belief, but is instead disclosive of one's *feelings*. She describes the latter as being tied to a person's affective attunement to the world, their "situation not in ideology but in the social formation as it is actually constituted" (Bartky 1990: 95; see also D'Arms and Jacobson 2003: 127–45; Maibom 2010: 57). While we may not rationally, discursively believe that we agree with the content of the shaming Other's judgement, the shame that we so painfully experience before its pronouncement is evidence that we do, at least on some emotional level, find it to be warranted. Thus, in shame a person can *sense* "something inferior about themselves without *believing* themselves to be generally inferior at all" (Bartky 1990: 93). Otherwise, if they simply found the Other's judgment to be entirely unwarranted, Sartre points out that shame would not be the result:

> [In shame,] it is as an object that I appear to the Other. Yet this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image, in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other and so could not 'touch' me. I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature *recognition*. (2003: 302)

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have pointed out (1995: 22), only that which engages our interest is capable of making us blush.

In objecting to the notion that we to some extent "agree" to be shamed, Calhoun reproduces a story told by Adrian Piper, who recounts her experience with what she calls her "groundless shame" (Piper 1996: 234–35). In Piper's retelling, she feels ashamed upon being accused by her professor of having listed herself as black on her graduate school application when she was, in his (mistaken) eyes, in fact white. According to Calhoun, Piper has a "firm belief in her own worth and in the unacceptability of racism" and thus cannot be said to share—on either a rational or an emotional level—her professor's view that she has been manipulative or deceitful (2004: 137). "Rather than signalling a failure to sustain [her] own positive view of [herself]," argues Calhoun, what Piper's shame instead indicates is merely her "capacity to take seriously fellow participants in [her] social world." (Calhoun 2004: 138). And yet, upon closer inspection, Piper's account does contain hints that, against her own rational judgment, she did feel the professor's judgment to be in some sense warranted. She writes:

> [T]he *truth* in my professors' accusations is that I had, in fact, resisted my parents' suggestion that . . . I decline to identify my racial classification on the graduate admissions application, so that it could be said with certainty that I'd been admitted on the basis of merit alone. (Piper 1996: 240, emphasis added)

The shame that Piper feels before the accusation of her professor is not shame for being black—just as the professor is not shaming her specifically *for* being black—it is her shame that, as someone who could have passed for white, she had forgone the opportunity to prove the certainty of her merit by not relying on her blackness to be accepted. It is understandable, I think, that this feeling of shame was then triggered by the professor's accusation that she had classified herself as black when she "looked" white—despite Piper knowing, rationally, that she had not been deceitful and so had nothing to be ashamed of. This incongruence between knowing and feeling is the same one that is illustrated by Piper when she writes, "[t]here is a part of me that still can't trust [my white relatives'] acceptance of me. But that is a part of me I want neither to trust nor to accept" (Piper 1996: 248). It is precisely this kind of disparity that Bartky refers to when she asserts that a person can deny their shame at the discursive level of belief, yet simultaneously accept that shame at the nondiscursive level of feeling.

On my view, the claim that a person can experience as warranted a feeling of shame which they "know" to be misdirected does not entail that such a person is morally inconsistent or irrational. Rather, it fits with what we know about the irreducible relationality of the self, attesting to the fact that we do not always choose what we internalise from the world around us. Furthermore, it is consistent with Thomason's observation that sometimes we have intelligible reasons for feeling that which we do not believe to be propositionally true. Lastly, the assertion that shaming is an invitation which one must accept in order to feel shame can also explain how a person is able to *overcome* or resist shame by shifting how they feel about themselves on some deep, emotional level. As Robert Stolorow reminds us, bringing the otherwise pre-reflective realm of emotional experience into conscious awareness is the very aim of the psychoanalytic relationship, since it is on this level that substantial therapeutic change can be effected. "[The] intersubjectively derived, pre-reflective organizing principles" which underlie our emotional worlds "are the basic building blocks of personality development, and their totality constitutes one's character" (2018: 896). Effecting a shift on this deep level of affective attunement is often what is required in therapeutic treatment of deep-seated shame, in which one may intellectually know one is not inherently shameful or worthless but nonetheless feel oneself to be. This reminds me of an astute observation often repeated in psychology: it is not enough to simply be told that we are loved, or that we are worthy of love; we have to feel it in our hearts.

Conclusion

The debate over whether shame is best characterised as autonomous or heteronomous is longstanding. In conceptualising shame as requiring a level of complicitous self-condemnation, I have argued against the possibility that shame is exclusively heteronomously determined. Given the painful nature of shame, I am persuaded that it entails an identificatory recognition; that it cannot occur in an individual unless they accept the shaming judgement as warranted on some (discursive or nondiscursive) level. As I have suggested, however, shame cannot be considered an exclusively autonomous event either. Indeed, I argue that the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous shame is fundamentally misguided in thinking that shame must be exclusively contingent upon either the perspective of the self or that of the Other. This misconception fails to capture the "double movement" that is fundamental to shame: that, just as the Other's judgement of me as shameful partly constitutes who I am in a way that I cannot control, it is I who, in feeling shame, reflect that judgement back through an identificatory act of self-condemnation. We are fundamentally relational creatures and, when we experience shame, we experience it not because of the dominance of either the self or the Other, but because of how both come together at once.

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Notes

1. This distinction between shame and guilt has reached near-consensus in both the psychological and philosophical literature. See for example Bartky 1990: 87; Dolezal 2017: 424; La Caze 2013: 89; Lewis 1971: 424–25; Locke 2007: 149; Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski 1994: 585–95; Williams 1993: 89–90.
2. Here, I am referring to grown adults rather than children.
3. In rare instances, scholars have objected to viewing shame as intersubjective—see for example Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011: 125–53. For a critique of this objection, see Zahavi 2014: 218–21.
4. For further commentary on Scheler's nude model example, see Fussi 2015: 173–75; Thomason 2018: 37, 43–46, 105, 155; Williams 1993: 220–21.
5. Although she too agrees with this argument, Cecilea Mun points out that, when such shame is unwarranted, we might equally want to say that shame is *not* a rational response for oppressed individuals (2019: 290, 292, 298–99).

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