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Shame is Personal, Not Ontological

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Abstract

Ontological accounts of shame claim that the emotion has to do with our basic human vulnerability: on this view, one is ashamed over having had this vulnerability exposed before others. Against this view, I argue that it is not our vulnerable dependency on others itself which causes us to feel ashamed, but our rejection in the face of such vulnerability. Shame is not the result of simply being looked at, then, but being looked at and not being *seen*. In this sense, the shame we do feel over being vulnerable before, and dependent on, others is not a necessary part of human relations, but a sign that something has gone wrong within them; it is personal, not ontological.

Keywords
shame, looking, Sartre, vulnerability, dependency, Martha Nussbaum, recognition, relationality

Introduction

One philosophical explanation for the origins of shame holds that it is a fundamentally ontological emotion. On this account, feelings of shame arise from the revelation that, as a human being, one is fundamentally dependent on the recognition of the Other, and thus vulnerable before their gaze. This way of understanding shame has perhaps most notably been expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre (2003), who famously concluded that shame is “recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other” (p. 312, emphasis removed), and has also been ascribed to by philosophers such as Max Scheler (1987), Emmanuel Levinas (2003), and Giorgio Agamben (1999). Recently, Martha Nussbaum has similarly argued that the most fundamental form of shame, that which we experience in infancy, is ontological. Her view is that this “primitive” form of shame is rooted in our basic physical vulnerability and dependence on others, which we experience from birth (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 177).

On my own view, however, ontological accounts such as these fail to capture the primary structure of shame. Rather, at the core of this emotion lies the reason that being vulnerable and dependent on others can even matter enough to cause us shame in the first place: our need for emotional connection. To feel ashamed, in my view, is thus to suffer a real or imagined loss of connection with another, experienced as a rejection of who one is, and to take one’s own defectiveness or unlovability to be the cause. In this sense, shame originates in a fundamental concern with how loveable one is seen to be by others.[1] Even in cases where one’s shame is clearly elicited by a specific transgression or deficiency of character, as in instances of moral shame, the feeling of shame is itself based on the actual or imagined condemnation of others in the wake of this failure, rather than on the failure itself. When shame results from the approval of others, it is because this approval is something we sense makes us worthy of rejection (to a different audience) and, when we feel shame on behalf of others, we are identifying with the group to which they also belong and thus anticipating that the disapprobation faced by them is due to us as well.

Contrary to that traditionally suggested of the relationship between shame and vision, then, I argue that it is not being looked at which makes us feel ashamed, but being looked at and not being *seen*. In other words, it is not our vulnerability itself that we find inherently shameful, but our (anticipated) rejection in the face of that vulnerability. In this sense, the shame that we experience over our basic vulnerability and dependency on others is not an intrinsic part of human relations, but a sign that something has gone wrong within them; it is personal, not ontological.

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Shame and Exposure

As I have suggested, there is reason to think that the origins of shame lie in emotional disconnection. If this were true—an argument that psychoanalysts have been making for some time now—it would prompt a significant reconceptualization of how philosophers think about shame.[2] In other words, it would require that we see shame as less about simply being exposed before others, and more about being overlooked by them.

Robert Antelme's (1992) story of the blushing boy from Bologna provides an interesting illustration of such a reframing. Classically, it has been thought that the blush depicted in Antelme's climactic passage from *The Human Race*, which tells the story of a young Italian student randomly chosen for execution on the death march to Dachau, is a blush of shame.[3] This is the passage:

> The SS continues. "*Du, komm her!*"
>
> Another Italian steps out of the column, a student from Bologna. I know him. I look at him. His face has turned pink. I look at him closely. I still have that pink before my eyes. He stands there at the side of the road. He doesn't know what to do with his hands either. He seems embarrassed [*Il a l'air confus*]. (p. 231)[4]

Recently, however, some scholars have questioned the wisdom of placing shame at this scene. Ruth Leys (2007), for one, has argued that the story told by Antelme is in fact "at the farthest possible pole" from shame, on the grounds that its emphasis "falls not on the subject's wish to hide from the gaze of others but rather on the need to be *seen*" (p. 178, emphasis added). Reading on from the above excerpt, she points out that Antelme makes another, often overlooked reference to the blushing student from Bologna. It is this passage that reveals to her a different meaning behind the pink of his cheeks:

> We reach [the town] Wernigerode… People are strolling down the sidewalks or heading homeward. Grocery stores. Bakeries. Shops.
>
> Yesterday morning, while the guys were being killed, these people were strolling about like this, on these sidewalks. The butcher was weighing the meat ration. Perhaps a child was sick in bed, and his face was pink, and his worried mother was looking at him. On the road, the Italian's face also turned pink; death slowly entered into his face and he didn't know how to behave, how to appear natural. The mother may be watching us go by now… this mother is looking at us, and sees nothing.
>
> Who sees the pink-faced little child in his bed and yesterday saw the pink-faced Italian on the road? Who sees the two mothers, the child's mother, and the Italian's mother, in Bologna, and who can restore its unity to all that, and explain these enormous distances, and these likenesses? *But does not everyone have eyes?*
>
> … They're going to ignore us; whenever we go through a town, it's a sleep of human beings that passes through a sleep of sleeping persons. That's how it appears. But we know; each group knows about the other, knows everything about it.
>
> It's for those on the sidewalk that we're looking so intently as we go through Wernigerode. We are not asking anything of them; they just have to *see* us, they mustn't miss us. (235–236, emphasis added)

The pink of which Antelme talks, then, is not just that of the prisoners, of the young Italian student who blushes as he is chosen for death; it is also that of the townspeople, of the flushed German child sick in his bed. For Leys—and, following her, Claudia Welz (2011) and Lisa Guenther (2012)—what the student's blush signifies is therefore not the desubjectifying nature of shame, but the inescapable fact of human relationality. The likeness that is drawn here between the blushing Italian student and the pink-faced child serves as a reminder of our shared humanity; our unity, as Antelme puts it, which persists even across the most enormous distances. This parallel, decides Leys, "is a rebuke to anyone who tries to link the color pink to a particular affect [ie shame]. All we are entitled to say is that in these pages pink appears to be an expression of a threatened aliveness or vitality." (p. 178, emphasis removed).

Yet Antelme's story is not merely about the fact of human relationality, or even the moral responsibility to others that this might entail; rather, it is about when such things are *overlooked*—when unity fails, and those meant to recognize your humanity treat you as if you were inhuman. The townspeople know about the prisoners marching through Wernigerode, yet they pretend not to see them. In failing to bear witness to the suffering of the prisoners, the people of Wernigerode also fail to bear witness to what they have in common with them: that they too have faces that can turn pink and mothers who worry about them, that they too are human.

The desperation of the prisoners to make themselves known to the townspeople can thus be thought of as a desperation to be recognized as human—a desire which, at its most fundamental level, seems to me to resemble a desire to be loved. We could think of the type of recognition being desired here as something more like respect or esteem, but I have chosen to connect it to love, since this is the first—and arguably most crucial—form of recognition that we experience. It also contains an important affective element: to love someone is to not only intellectually recognize their humanity, but to *feel* it. In this sense, love encompasses not merely recognition, but the sense of interpersonal connectedness that may arise out of recognition. I suspect that, even as adults, this is the sense in which we most crave to be seen; we desire recognition which is, as Kelly Oliver (2015) puts it, "an affair of the heart and not just of the mind" (p. 481). I will be suggesting that it is this fundamental wish to be loved which, when unmet, also lies at the heart of shame.

Both Leys (2007, p. 178) and Michael Hearn (2021, p. 6) identify an important, yet slightly mysterious, interplay in Antelme's portrayal of the prisoners: that between their wanting to hide, in the sense of avoiding the threatening gaze of those who would execute them, and their wanting to be seen, in the sense of wishing for acknowledgment or recognition from others. For Antelme (1992), the crucial distinction here seems to be that between, on the one hand, being "looked at" in a literal sense and, on the other, actually being "seen" for *who one is*; this is why it is not a contradiction for him to say that "this mother is looking at us, and sees nothing" (p. 236). For Leys, the emphasis on bearing witness in this passage precludes the presence of shame. After all, she reasons, our standard notion of shame is quite clearly to do with *not* wanting to be looked at. The question here is thus whether the desire to be seen and the feeling of shame should be viewed as mutually exclusive.

It seems that shame might bear a more complex relation to seeing, and being seen, than has traditionally been thought. The standard version of shame's relationship to "the look" is essentially that which we have already witnessed in Leys' account, and which is famously typified by Sartre (2003) in his description of the voyeur looking through the keyhole. Specifically, this is the idea that shame results from one's objectification before the gaze of the Other. Such a view of shame fits well with traditional philosophical ideas about vision as an alienating force, a distrust of the visual register that appears to have originated largely in the works of twentieth-century French thinkers—most notably G.W.F. Hegel and, following him, Sartre and Jacques Lacan. Reacting against the Cartesian perspectivist tradition, which posited the rationality of vision as a register governed by laws of geometry, this intellectual trend cast some doubts on the epistemic reliability of vision, often emphasizing it as a field of illusion and misrecognition (Jay, 1994; Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 63).

Alongside such misgivings, or perhaps underlying them, emerged a dominant framing of vision as hostile, in which human relations are characterized primarily by the struggle for dominion over alien Others, and looking is thus reduced to "a vehicle for narcissistic, fetishistic or voyeuristic pleasures" (Wollen, 2007, p. 95). This is most clearly illustrated in the emphasis on conflict and mastery that we find in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, especially as it is taken to be reenacted in the early work of Sartre. Hegel's (1977) framing of self-recognition as contingent upon human desire, which he saw as necessarily involving competition with the desires of others, seems to have partly provided the basis for the rather agonistic account of human relations that is thought to be discernible in *Being and Nothingness*.[5] This is Sartre's most famous (though not his only) characterization of vision, as an objectifying force grounded in conflict. Here, in Peter Woollen's (2007) words, "all we can hope to do is… to meet one gaze with another in a kind of battle of looks, until one or other of us is subjugated" (p. 96). Feminist theorists in particular have identified the key problematic assumption underlying such a conceptualization of the look; namely that, as Oliver (2001) writes, it "is premised on the claim that even in concrete relations each person is attempting to enslave the other" (pp. 57–58; Irigaray, 1996, pp. 103–106). In other words, framing the gaze of the Other as inherently alienating rests on the idea that conflict is an inevitable and defining aspect of human relations.

It should be acknowledged here that, as Ellie Anderson has recently argued, the sense in which Sartre and other phenomenologists speak of "objectification" is not always as a form of subjugation.[6] To be objectified by someone is, in technical phenomenological terms, simply to become the object of their experience. Not only does objectification in this sense not (necessarily) entail being treated as an actual inanimate object, and thus degraded in status; it is also not mutually exclusive with one's being a subject (Anderson, 2022, p. 152). For this reason, Anderson seems correct in defending Sartre as having a less pessimistic view of human relations than has typically been attributed to him—if he emphasizes that we are objectified before the gaze of the Other, this should not be taken to mean that we are always being dominated or degraded by them. And yet, Sartre (2003) does make the claim that such objectification, even understood in nonconflictual terms, is necessarily an occasion for shame (p. 312). In this sense, he seems to retain some pessimism about our basic interactions with one another: the vulnerability and loss of omnipotence involved in being looked at, and not having complete control over how I am seen, are assumed to be things that one would naturally be ashamed of. This is an assumption that I claim only makes sense from an individualist worldview.

Expanding upon feminist critiques of the primacy of vision in Western patriarchy, Oliver (2001) argues that it is not our cultural emphasis on vision that is morally problematic per se, but how such vision is framed as that which alienates us from our surroundings, and thereby encourages our desire for mastery over them (p. 57). Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka philosopher Mary Graham (1999) argues that this philosophy of alienation stems from the false assumption of Western individualism that humans are metaphysically separate entities. Under such a framework, the wholly individuated self-constitutes a discrete being, separate from the "external" world. The individual is in this sense "completely free," however it is precisely because of such freedom that "a sense of deepest spiritual loneliness and alienation envelopes [sic] the individual. The result is then that whatever form the environment or landscape takes, it becomes and remains a hostile place" (p. 110). Freedom, in this sense of complete separation from others, is unachievable; nevertheless, we seem to crave it.

The process of alienation outlined by Graham is reflected in Lacan's (1953, 2006) work on vision, which emphasizes how the look estranges the subject by divesting them of the illusory ideals of autonomy and mastery so esteemed by modernity. It is through the pursuit of such ideals that we have been led to repudiate our dependence on others: as Joanna Kellond (2019) writes, "though the mother and her care give the lie to the idea of an autonomous subject, this care has been disavowed in modernity, as the Cartesian subject establishes itself as independent of the world around it." (p. 28). The fact that we need others for our survival might be most radically evident in the case of children, yet there is an argument to be made that it remains true throughout our lives—if not physically, then certainly emotionally. Most independent adults continue to need others psychologically and, in fact, will once again need them physically as they grow old. Much of the work in disability studies, often following Martha Fineman (2004), seeks to correct the fantasy of individualism by emphasizing just this point: that, if the human subject ever does reach a state of true independence from others, it is certainly not permanent (or natural) enough to be a defining feature of their existence.

And yet, Simone Drichel points out that such observations about the fact of human interdependence, or relationality, have done little to dissuade us from individualist modes of thinking. She writes:

> [It] is intriguing… [that] 'relationality scholarship' seems to have made very little impact on the popular imagination, which continues to be dominated by idealisations (and illusions) of freedom, independence, and autonomy, especially in our anxious neoliberal times. Fearful of being unduly influenced by or, worse, dependent upon others, we pursue some kind of glorified 'isolate' existence… Given how powerfully persuasive, even irrefutable, the primacy of relationality is—at least with regard to subject constitution—the ways in which we nonetheless try to refute this primacy and assert ourselves as independent and autonomous beings, that is, as beings free from the tangles of relationality, is, indeed, striking. (Drichel, 2019, p. 2)

This denial of (inter)dependence, which is what drives the philosophy of separation, appears to underlie prevailing suspicions over the visual register, since it is only by neglecting our fundamental relationality that we are able to conceptualize looking as primarily a tool of control and domination. If we are to imagine an alternative way of thinking about vision, therefore, I claim that we need to begin with the recognition that we are fundamentally dependent on others.

The Loving Eye

To understand how this kind of worldview could take shape, we might look to an instance of Indigenous ways of thinking and being in the world. trawlwulwuy scholar Lauren Tynan (2021) tells us that Aboriginal relationality is based in a notion of likeness, or kinship, which extends beyond classificatory practices to consider the relationships that things hold to one another. To illustrate, she explains that relationality answers the question "How are a river and a mountain similar?" not with a categorization—"They are both part of nature"—but rather with a relational observation: "The river flows down from the mountain." (p. 600). She contrasts this way of thinking with the impulse of colonial epistemologies to classify, compare, and define:

> Rather than asking 'What's your name? What sort of work do you do?', Aboriginal people often ask 'Who are you? Where are you from?' The former question relies on classificatory practices that value individuality and the labour market, whilst the latter creates a relational network where people can establish kinship relationships; strengthening sameness across difference. The question 'Who are you?' is actually asking, 'who are you related to? How are you related to me?', which decentres the individual and gives primacy to a collective and relational reality between Peoples. The second question, 'Where are you from?' decentres the human and looks for relational ties based on Country (ancestral or lived) and more-than-human kin. (pp. 600–601)

Tynan emphasizes that in such a relational framework, Othering—and, therefore, objectification in its hostile form—is impossible. "When all things exist in relatedness," writes Tynan, "it is inconceivable that an entity, idea or person could exist *outside* of this network, or be conceived as 'Other' to this system of relationality" (p. 601).[7] In this absence of Othering, vision can be disentangled from the need for mastery and control, allowing for the possibility that looking might occur in nonconflictual ways.

Unlike conceptions of vision which stem from an individualist framework, a relationalist ethos emphasizes how looking can be something that sustains, rather than repudiates, our fundamental relationality. Kaja Silverman (1996) gestures at this possibility when she points out that being looked at need not always be an (exclusively) objectifying experience, but can equally be thought of as a subjectifying one. For Silverman, Lacan offers an important addition to Sartre's early account in this regard. As she writes:

> Lacan insists that the gaze by which the voyeur is 'surprised' not only constitutes him as a spectacle, and divests his look of its illusory mastery, but reveals to him that he is a 'subject sustaining himself in a function of desire'. Lacan thus imputes a self-conscious *subjectivity* rather than a self-conscious *objectivity* to the voyeur at the moment at which he is made aware of himself, and severs the connection between subjectivity and transcendence. (p. 168; see Lacan, 1978, p. 85)

In other words, it is not through subjugating others that I truly recognize myself as a subject, but rather through the identificatory gaze of the Other. If we can conceive of the look as mutually subjectifying in this sense, it poses a credible challenge to what Silverman terms "the logic of that by-now familiar 'either you or me' binarism" (p. 166). Donald W. Winnicott's (1971) account of mirroring, which offers an alternative to the modern tendency toward alienation identified by Lacan, also stresses the importance of relationality when it comes to looking. For Winnicott, alienation is not intrinsic to human relationships, but rather signals that *something has gone wrong within them* (Kellond, 2019, p. 33). The infant who feels alienated under the gaze of others is one whose caregiver has failed, for whatever reason, to properly reflect the infant back to themselves, while the ideal infant–caregiver relation is that captured by Winnicott's image of the mother's face as a mirror. This mirroring relation can be thought of as evoking a loving eye or, as in psychoanalytic thought, a view of love as attention.

Thinking about looking in a relational way opens up the possibility for vision to become *loving*, rather than alienating. “If the subject is not using vision to grasp or fix alien objects that it seeks to control,” explains Oliver (2001), “but to connect and touch others upon whom it depends for its agency, then *connection* rather than alienation becomes primary” (p. 76). Looking as an expression of love recalls the work of Iris Murdoch (1970), who offers us a vivid description of loving as the ongoing practice of paying attention to another or, as she puts it, an exercise in “*really looking*” (p. 91, emphasis added). For Murdoch, love consists in redirecting our attention out from ourselves, in order to properly appraise the other in their uniqueness and peculiarity; in this sense, it involves putting aside one’s ego in light of “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (p. 215). The memoir of Jessie Cole (2018), who grew up in an isolated valley on Bundjalung Country, Australia, and whose family fell apart after two of its members took their own lives, illustrates the importance of being, and feeling, seen:

> When I walked the streets of my hometown [after my father’s suicide], people crossed the road to avoid a conversation. I imagined them thinking, *Fuck, I’m not up for that today*. Each one of them not knowing that almost nobody is, on any given day.
>
> … There was something terribly alarming about me, something no one could face. I was becoming invisible. A shadow walker. The wounded part of me wanted to cry out, *Why are you ashamed for me? What have I done? … Look at me*, I longed to beg. *Stretch yourself to look at me*. But I limped on, quietly. Slipping further into the shadows. (p. 152)

Like the desperation of Antelme and his fellow camp prisoners to be seen by the townspeople they are marching past, Jessie’s pain is magnified by her apparent lack of visibility. Without being truly seen by others, she cannot be appreciated in her peculiarity and uniqueness: that is to say, she cannot be recognized for who she is, any more than her pain can be witnessed. Looking with love, then, is not limited to the romantic or intimate, but is foremost about recognition: it is being seen in the psychological sense of really being paid attention to.

In his work on Murdoch, Christopher Cordner emphasizes how the loving eye is not an exclusively visual phenomenon, but is primarily also to do with how we use seeing as a way to *attend* to one another. Thus, looking with love also includes “gentleness and tenderness [in] a kind of attending as presence-to, waiting-on, and acknowledging of another, that escapes description in terms of vision” (Cordner, 2016, p. 212). When Jessie eventually finds solace in two new relationships, that with her therapist, Varda, and her partner, Sam, it is because neither is afraid to really pay attention to her: “what I liked about Sam, right from the outset, was the way he didn’t look away from me. It made me visible, where I had felt myself not to be… In his unwavering gaze I came into the light” (Cole, 2018, p. 210). The loving eye evoked in accounts such as these not only challenges traditional philosophical assumptions about vision as inherently alienating but, as we will see, also casts doubt on its presumed relation to shame as an objectifying force.

Given this connection between looking and loving, I suggest that we consider how shame might be viewed as compatible with a desire to be seen, rather than a wish for concealment. Contrary to traditional accounts of shame, I propose that it is not merely being looked at which makes us feel ashamed, but being looked at and not being “seen” or recognized for who we really are. The connection between shame, love, and being seen that I wish to draw here is largely unexplored within the philosophical literature, although it has recently been touched on by Dan Zahavi (2020), who has observed that “shame can be triggered not only by the look of others but also by their wilful *overlooking*” (p. 353, emphasis added). Though brief, his thoughts here are worth quoting at some length, for they are remarkably in the direction of what I too want to suggest. He continues:

> The fact that we can feel ashamed because we are overlooked and ignored by others is revealing. In psychoanalytic theorizing, it has been proposed that shame is an emotional reaction to the absence of approval. If this were correct, it would situate shame right at the core of our interpersonal life. In its most fundamental form, it would not be connected to a breach of specific cultural norms or standards, but rather concern our fundamental need for recognition. When the latter is being withheld, we might feel shame. If so, this would also suggest a possible remedy for more enduring forms of shame, namely *love*. (pp. 353–354, emphasis added)

On this account, shame can be conceptualized as originating in an absence or failure of emotional connection, experienced by the ashamed individual as a rejection or abandonment of their whole self due to their perceived defectiveness. In order to better understand how shame might be thought of as resulting from an absence of love, I suggest that we first look to our earliest experiences of shame: those which occur in preverbal infancy.

Shame as a Loss of Connection

The baby looks into her caregiver’s eyes, which gaze lovingly down upon her. There is a kind of soft tenderness, an emotional warmth between them, that is evident on both their faces: the caregiver smiles, a genuine affection lighting up their eyes, and the baby responds with her own cheeky grin, squealing with delight as her feet are tickled. Suddenly, the caregiver looks away. When they look back, their face has gone completely blank, a shadow cast over their expression. The baby is confused—what has happened? She smiles, asking for a smile in return; she points across the room, asking the caregiver to look; she reaches her arms out, asking to be touched. The caregiver's face remains expressionless, their eyes blank and unseeing, their body limp and unmoving. Quickly, the baby begins to unravel. Visibly distressed, she begins to cry and lose postural control, her efforts to reengage the caregiver rapidly diminishing. Finally, she appears to give up on reestablishing connection and instead attempts to deal with her distress independently—looking away, looking down, and biting her hand.

The behaviors displayed by infants in such studies on face-to-face interaction, known as the still face experiment, are considered by many to be consistent with the experience of shame (Broucek, 1991, p. 31; Dolezal, 2017, p. 434; Zahavi, 2014, p. 233). As Colwyn Trevarthen and Kenneth Aitken (2001) argue, the infant's avoidance of eye contact, hanging of the head, and slumped posture "assumes the configuration and interpersonal timing of an expression of sad avoidance, an expression which, in an older person, we would not hesitate to call distressed embarrassment or shame" (p. 9). Although it was previously thought that the onset of shame could not occur in children until they were much older than the infants in such experiments, psychologists have suggested for some time now that children of a much younger age can experience shame (e.g., Cartwright, 2017, pp. 6–7; Nathanson, 1987, p. 7). Alongside widespread observation of shame-related behaviors in infants as young as 2 to 3 months, this shift in thinking coincides with an increasingly widespread rejection of the notion that we are born as blank slates, without any sense of attachment to others.

The idea that very young children might experience shame challenges the traditional constructivist picture of the infant as lacking the cognitive abilities considered necessary to experience themselves as separate from others. Simply put, this is because shame seems to presuppose an awareness of at least some distinction between self and other, insofar as it involves a negative evaluation of the self in relation to the other. For constructivist shame theorists, such as Michael Lewis, experiencing this "self-conscious" aspect of shame is only possible if the individual possesses a *concept* of self and other (as distinct), and can thereby evaluate the self against certain external standards or expectations—a cognitive capacity not observed in children until at least 15 months of age (Lewis, 1992, p. 88; see also Zinck & Newen, 2008, p. 3). However, this seems to contradict contemporary empirical findings in which babies demonstrate an experiential awareness of themselves as distinct from others from the moment they are born (Reddy, 2008, p. 92). From birth, infants recognize and respond to changes in the behaviors of those around them, such as alterations in tone of voice or facial expression; they even display the ability to initiate and terminate social interactions, such as mutual gazing with caregivers (Banella & Tronick, 2019, p. 36; Devouche & Gratier, 2019, p. 23).

The real question, then, is how such self-other awareness is possible in newborns, given that they cannot plausibly possess the cognitive structures required to conjure up mental representations. As Zahavi (2014) suggests, however, it is not inconceivable that one might have an experience of something before one is capable of having a reflective or conceptual understanding of that thing. Citing a similar argument made by John Barresi and Chris Moore, he argues it is therefore plausible that infants might "have an experience of sharing before they understand what it is to share experiences, just as they might have an experience of the other's attention… before they begin to understand the concept of attention" (pp. 233–234; see Barresi & Moore, 1993, p. 513). It is my view that this is also the case for our earliest experiences of shame, which is not conceptually grasped as such by the infant, but is nonetheless *felt.*

The observation that shame can be experienced prior to an ability to understand cultural norms or form self-ideals tells us something important about where shame comes from. Namely, it seems to suggest that the emotion has to do with something much deeper and more fundamental than adherence to social standards. Shame, as Nussbaum (2004) puts it, "cuts beneath any specific social orientation to norms… [serving] as a highly volatile way in which human beings negotiate some tensions inherent in their humanness" (pp. 173–174). In other words, if shame can be experienced even in preverbal infancy, it means that its origins must inhere in some deeper psychological mechanics available to us at that age, which only *later* become understood with reference to the different cultural standards used to evaluate the self. In this sense, writes Andrew Morrison (1996), shame simply becomes "a more complex emotion as we develop the capacity for abstraction and symbolization necessary to form ideals and as we experience our failure to live up to them" (p. 70; see also Nussbaum, 2004, p. 185; Zahavi, 2014, p. 353). Of course, if shame in its most fundamental form does not originate in external standards or norms, then its origins must lie elsewhere.

Nussbaum's (2004) view is that the "primitive" experience of shame is rooted in humans' basic physical vulnerability and dependence on others, which we experience from birth. Her argument is that the infant, who is born into a prolonged state of helplessness, inevitably experiences shame as they develop an awareness that they are unable to meet their own needs and are instead forced to rely on others to do so for them. On this account, the experience of shame is tied to feelings of deficiency and weakness; it therefore "has its origins in a primitive desire to be complete and completely in control" (p. 177). This conceptualization, which posits that shame is ontological since there is no way to escape the embodied vulnerability which underlies it, can also be found in more classic accounts of shame, such as those provided by Sartre and Scheler. Famously, Sartre (2003) concluded that shame comes from "recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other" (p. 312, emphasis removed); in a similar vein, Scheler (1987) argues that "It is only because the human essence is tied up with a 'lived body' that we can get into a position where we must feel shame" (p. 5, emphasis removed). Recently, Luna Dolezal has argued that the idea we experience shame over our physical reliance on others fits with observations of early shame made by developmental psychologists. In her view, shame "originates from our embodied vulnerability" because it serves the biological function of keeping us alert to the importance of our bonds with others, which are necessary to physical survival, at least in childhood (Dolezal, 2017, pp. 433–434; see also Scheff, 2003, p. 247). On this view, the infant only experiences concern over the emotional withdrawal of their caregiver insofar as it threatens the likelihood that their physical needs will be met. In this sense, then, shame is at its core an embodied concern which subsequently becomes transmuted into a normative one.

I take issue with this particular ontological account of shame for two reasons. The first is that it does not position the emotional needs of the child as intrinsically important, but instead frames them as merely instrumental to having one's physical needs met. If, as Dolezal (2017) writes, shame is originally "an embodied anxiety regarding the threat of losing the physical bonds of caregivers, [which subsequently] transforms into social shame," then, for the infant, emotional connection with others is only valuable insofar as it increases the likelihood they will be physically taken care of, and would not be considered an end in itself (p. 434). The problem with this way of framing things is that it is unable to explain why emotional distress occurs in infants whose physical needs *are* being met.

This is, after all, precisely what occurs in the still face experiment: since the mother remains physically present throughout, it is her emotional—not physical—withdrawal which causes great distress in the child. As Banella and Tronick (2019) explain, the infant experiences this event as emotionally distressing because it constitutes a "mismatch" or rupture in the state of reciprocity which previously existed between infant and caregiver. Under ideal conditions, both members of this dyad will mutually regulate their interactions in order to achieve this state of attunement and synchrony; however ruptures often occur when one or the other participant falls out of step (misreads the other's signal, changes their mind, and mistimes an action). Since it is impossible to avoid ruptures entirely, Banella and Tronick argue, it is successful reparations, rather than constant reciprocity, which is necessary to infant wellbeing (pp. 37–38). The quicker and more frequently repairs between caregiver and infant can occur following a break in reciprocity, the more likely the infant will be to develop a positive conceptualization of self—as efficacious—and Other—as trustworthy—and to thus be inclined toward positive affectivity more generally. Repeated failure to repair results in the reverse outcomes (p. 38). Thus the child in the still face experiment does not only express needs that relate to physical comfort or survival; they also express a wish for love and connection which is, at its core, a fundamentally emotional desire.

Of course, one might argue that such ruptures in connection are only experienced as distressing to the child because they signal that the child's physical needs may subsequently go unnoticed and therefore unfulfilled. However, this seems unlikely. We know that infants who have consistent access to adequate food, water, shelter, and medical care, and yet are deprived of any kind of emotional caretaking—such as facial attunement, affection, or skin-to-skin contact—often die (Spitz, 1949, p. 147). We also know, through Harry Harlow's (1958) unethical animal experimentation, that baby rhesus monkeys will attach to a "mother" made of soft cloth over one made of wire, despite the fact that the wire mother produces the milk they need to survive and the cloth mother does not.[8] Not only will the monkeys run to the cloth over the wire mother when they perceive danger, they will actually scream with distress and "abject terror" when the cloth (but not the wire) mother is removed from them (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959, p. 423). Such findings appear to disprove the notion that emotional needs are a mere outgrowth of our physical dependency on others; rather, our desire for emotional attachment is present from birth, independent of physical fulfillment. It is not enough, then, for the infant to *be* safe and cared for; they also need —and want—to *feel* that they are safe and cared for.

The second issue with the ontological account of shame I have described here is the notion that shame is rooted in an awareness of our basic human vulnerability. In essence, this is problematic because it takes for granted that relying on others for one's needs to be met *is* inherently shameful, when it is far from clear that this is the case. On my view, viewing human vulnerability as shameful only makes sense if our dominant experiences of being vulnerable before others are those in which we are rejected or overlooked. In fact, this exact psychological process has been observed in emotionally neglected children. Over time, research tells us, infants will learn to repudiate their desire for emotional connection with others if such connection has historically not been available to them. As Banella and Tronick (2019) explain, the repeated failure to repair a ruptured connection between infant and caregiver over time disrupts the dyad's capacity for mutual regulation, which then leads the infant to develop an increasingly *self*-directed style of emotional regulation. This excessive self-focus means that the child loses out on connection with others. "[When] self-regulation becomes the predominant goal," Banella and Tronick write, "[it is] at the expense of interactive regulation. A self-directed style of regulatory behavior aims to control negative affects and hampers the infant's engagement in interactions with the world of people, things, and themselves" (p. 38). It is through this process that the child learns to renounce their need for others—there is no point in asking for help, if help usually does not come.

It is also less painful that way, since fewer interactions with others also means fewer chances of rejection. "The lesson learnt by the child," writes Eero Rechardt (2019), "is easy to understand: do not leave yourself vulnerable to the painful loss of integration by seeking reciprocity, do not seek an understanding gaze, do not expect anyone to understand you when your self has collapsed" (p. 227). This coping mechanism of avoidance, known in attachment theory as an avoidant or dismissive attachment style (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), is one that children carry with them into adulthood. The greater the need for this coping mechanism or adaptation, "the more the adult avoidant appears to the outside world as a person who does not need others and who functions autonomously. In fact, the undefended avoidant feels desperately alone, isolated, and unable to depend fully on [anyone]" (Tatkin, 2009, p. 11). It would not be a stretch, I think, to presume that shame would have a place here. If we primarily associate our dependence on others with failure or rejection, then it makes sense that we would view our basic needs as indicating weakness, incompleteness, and deficiency, as so many philosophers seem to do—that we would frame being human as fundamentally shameful.

The shame being discussed here is in this sense not ontological—to do with human vulnerability—but (inter)personal—to do with a loss of connection. Ontological accounts of shame, such as those put forward by Nussbaum, Sartre, and Scheler, intend, as Lisa Guenther (2011) observes, to speak to "the structure of intersubjective being rather than to a particular configuration of historical social relations" (p. 24–25). And yet, my charge is that this is precisely what the account fails to do. The shame that we often feel over our fundamental dependence on others is not a given but, I argue, a historically contingent feature of our social world—one structured around the ideology of competitive individualism, which devalues human vulnerability and neediness. To be vulnerable and in need of others is, under these conditions, to be deficient in the prized qualities of self-sufficiency and independence, and to therefore be subject to shame. It is only then that the desire for recognition, as a desire to be loved for who or what one really is—a fundamentally relational, needy being—becomes something to be ashamed of and subsequently repressed. No one, as Donna Orange (2008) puts it, is born ashamed (p. 85).

While the idea that vulnerability is inherently shameful might fit nicely with an individualist framework, my contention is that it makes a lot less sense from a relationalist one. This is because when our reach for others whom we depend on is met with reciprocity and warmth, like the infant whose smile is mirrored in the face of her caregiver, we do not experience the need which drove this connection as shameful. Rather, we experience it as a fact of human relationality; perhaps even a positive or joyful one. If it were true that, as Axel Honneth (1995) interprets Winnicott, the infant only becomes aware of their need for the Other—that is, of their own "deficiency"—when that need goes unfulfilled, then perhaps this awareness would be a necessary occasion for shame (p. 100; see Winnicott, 1965, pp. 87–88). However, as Johanna Meehan (2011) emphasizes, "The experience of being attuned to another person does not arise only in the face of failed responsiveness; it is an evolutionarily developed ability to experience other people as people, one that develops over time, but is already present at birth" (pp. 92–93; see Reddy, 2008). And, as Rowland Stout (2015) points out, it is unlikely that we would experience being vulnerable before others as inherently degrading if such vulnerability is a requirement for basic social interaction (pp. 634–635).

If we can expand our idea of what it is to experience vulnerability to include those moments when such vulnerability results in connection, rather than rejection, then our reliance on others becomes characterized not by deficiency, but by fulfillment. This way of thinking is captured perfectly by Meehan (2011) when she writes:

> Only if the experience of the self and of others can be pleasurable and not just negative, can recognition and our desire to achieve it be grounded in the positive account of desire, as a desire to be with the other and not just a desire for 'the desire of the other', a view that holds that relationships are motivated merely by the experience of lacking something. Selves always exist in relation to other selves. This is not because of some internal deficiency or the result of a loss; it is because to be a human self is to not just need others, but to want them. (p. 95)

Since the desire to be with others can, and should, be an occasion for joy, then it is implausible that we would feel shame purely in virtue of recognizing that we have that desire. Instead, what I want to suggest here is that shame occurs when this desire has *failed to be met*, and we experience this as being due to our own defectiveness. Interestingly, Hegel observed as much in the nineteenth century, writing:

> Shame does not mean to be ashamed of loving, say on account of exposing or surrendering the body… but to be ashamed that *love is not complete*, that… there still be something inimical in oneself which keeps love from reaching completion and perfection. (in Piers & Singer, 1953, p. 16, emphasis added)

When the infant experiences shame, then, it is not simply due to the idea that they have desires but, as Pentti Ikonen and Eero Rechardt (2010) argue, the "idea of a *conflict* or possibility of a conflict between [their] own desire and the attitudes of others towards this desire" (p. 122). This makes sense—if the response is positive and affirming, then simply allowing oneself to be vulnerable to the judgment of others may not be an occasion for shame. After all, writes Felipe León (2012), "it is clear that one can be exposed to others without feeling shame at all. In love, friendship and everyday interactions one is open to the gaze of others without feeling [ashamed]" (p. 207). As

Levinas (2003, p. 64) reminds us, "Being naked is not a matter of [not] wearing clothes"—rather, as Claudia Welz (2011, pp. 70–71) puts it, it is when "we cannot hide what we should like to hide." If the origins of shame lie not in the act of exposure itself, but our (anticipated) rejection in the face of such exposure, then this also has implications for the relation between shame and looking. That is, it opens up the possibility that shame might be seen as compatible with not only a desire to hide, but a desire to be *seen*.

Many philosophers have commented on the apparently paradoxical nature of the blush in moments of shame. Most behaviors associated with the feeling of shame act to reduce communication with others, which is consistent with the classic picture of shame as being tied to a desire to hide. The blush, however, seems almost to invite communication. As much as shame wants us to hide, observes Jennifer Biddle (1997), the blush appears to want to confess: "Fire hydrant red, the surface of the skin blushes and betrays the desire for self-effacement… Even at its most dejected, or perhaps precisely then, the self beckons to the other" (p. 228). It is this apparent contradiction that led Silvan Tomkins to conclude that the shame response is deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence, he argued, is rooted in two simultaneous, contradictory desires: to hide and to be seen. "In shame," Tomkins (1963) writes, "I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, and I also do not wish to do so" (p. 361).

This might not sound altogether too clarifying, until we recall that it was this precise combination of desires which Robert Antelme and his fellow prisoners experienced on their march to Wernigerode. At the same time as they desperately wished to avoid the hostile gaze of the SS, which likely heralded their impending execution, they longed for a look of recognition from the townspeople, one which would have seen the prisoners for what they really were: fellow human beings. They were, in the words of Benjamin Kilborne (2019), "caught between a longing for recognition and a terror of being seen" (p. 2). In my view, there is actually nothing contradictory about experiencing both of these feelings at once, if we understand that the person experiencing them is not ashamed of being exposed *per se*, but of being rejected in the face of that exposure. They both wish *not* to be looked at, because it opens up the possibility that they will be judged or objectified, and they wish *to* be looked at, since this is the only way that they might be truly seen, or recognized, for who they really are. This sentiment is captured nowhere more beautifully than in the words of Winnicott (1965): "It is a joy to be hidden but [a] disaster not to be found" (p. 187). At the heart of both desires of shame, then, the desire to hide and the desire to be seen, it could be said that there lies a singular one: the desire to be loved.

Conclusion

In considering where shame comes from and how this might relate to vision, in the sense of seeing and being seen, philosophers have often concluded that shame is the emotion that results from one's objectification before the gaze of the Other. On this view, shame precipitates a desire to conceal oneself from the Other's gaze, so that one might no longer be vulnerable to such objectification. In the broader context of its Western individualist framework, which tends to characterize human relations in hostile terms, an uncritical emphasis on vision as a tool for mastery over others has led many philosophers to argue that shame is ontological. This is because they view domination and subjugation as a defining feature of human relations, and therefore see vulnerability before others as something that we would necessarily want to avoid—that is, something inherently shameful. In this sense, the ashamed person's desire for concealment is understood as a desire to not be vulnerable or dependent on others.

However, if we consider vision and vulnerability from a more relational point of view, such as that which we find in Aboriginal ways of thinking and being in the world, we see that relationships between people do not need to be characterized by the struggle for dominion over hostile Others. In fact, such dominion requires that we employ a kind of philosophy of false separation, one which denies that our existence necessarily *is* dependent on others and that we are all connected as relational beings. Recognizing that human relationality is not only inescapable, but that it can be beautiful, opens us up to the possibility that vision can be used to connect with others and not just to degrade them. In this sense, experiencing alienation before the gaze of the Other is not a necessary part of human relations, but a sign that something has gone wrong within them.

If looking can be an act of love, one which confers the gift of subjecthood and recognition upon us, then this explains how shame could result from the feeling of being overlooked. This disrupts the classic picture of the individual hiding in shame, since it suggests that the emotion might better be described as less to do with a desire to hide, and more about a wish to be seen—not merely to be looked at, as if one were an inanimate object or an alien Other, but to be recognized—and accepted—for the unique and peculiar individual that one is. At its core, then, shame is not about normality, morality, or vulnerability to others; it is about connection, or its absence. At the heart of shame lies the reason that being perceived as "good enough" would even matter to us in the first place: our need to be understood and accepted by others—that is, our desire to be loved.

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Notes

1 The notion that shame is connected to an absence of love has historically only been briefly touched upon by philosophers (e.g., Mann, 2014, pp. 113–117; Dolezal, 2017, pp. 435–436; Zahavi, 2020, pp. 353–354). Recently, however, it has begun to receive more attention in the field: Laing (2022) has argued that shame manifests our desire for interpersonal connection, Westerlund (2019) that shame is rooted in a wish for social affirmation, and Rukgaber (2018) that shame is caused by an interpersonal rupture.

2 See Lewis (1971), Kaufman (1992), Wurmser (1981). Some recent examples include DeYoung (2015), Erskine (2015), Ikonen and Rechardt (2010), and Karlsson and Sjöberg (2009).

3 This is the interpretation made by Agamben (1999, pp. 103–104), and it has subsequently appeared in numerous works (e.g., Simmons, 2007, pp. 28–30; Lechte & Newman, 2013, pp. 83–84).

4 The French word *confus* can also be translated as confused, muddled, or crestfallen.

5 Some scholars have recently argued that Hegel himself did not always frame recognition as exclusively contingent upon domination or struggle, although it seems fair to say that his work certainly emphasises such themes (e.g., Monahan, 2006; Yar, 2002).

6 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

7 A similar point is made by Orange (2019, p. 25) in her interpretation of Levinas' concept of proximity.

8 On the controversy surrounding the ethics of Harlow's work, see Gluck (1997: 149–161).

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