On Shame – in response to Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other*

Shame and pride are the archetypal emotions of self-consciousness. They involve awareness of oneself as an object for other people’s appraisals. Observing this, Sartre (2003) argued that just being an object for others, *whatever* they think, constitutes a failure of self-determination, and is therefore shaming. Such a dramatic claim is clearly overstated. Being an object for others is not degrading in itself since it is the basis of all social interaction; it only becomes degrading in certain circumstances. But the central point remains that shame is a social emotion, being aware of oneself as degraded in the eyes of others.

In the context of his book, *Self and Other*, Dan Zahavi is interested in shame as one of the ways we are aware of ourselves as distinct from others. In his characteristically careful and sensitive style, he considers the case against the social (Sartrian) conception of shame and ultimately rejects it. But he also sees something right about the requirement that the subject in shame must feel the sudden loss of esteem for themselves independently of what the people around them think or might think.

So Zahavi claims that there are two necessary conditions for shame. One is that shame is a response to a ‘global decrease in self-esteem’. The other is that shame is a social emotion. It is “essentially characterized by the way it affects and alters our relationship to and connectedness with others in general.” (Zahavi, 2014, 223) It is a response to real or imagined social exposure of something that is perceived socially to be wrong about oneself, something that is at odds with what one aspires to be. For Zahavi there is a non-social component and a social component in shame.

He supports this social conception of shame with some examples of what he takes to be prototypical of shame – examples that involve a social judgement on the shamed person. These include being discovered as a plagiarist, realizing that your child’s teacher has been watching you when you lose your temper and slap your child, and seeing the look of incredulous horror on your new lover’s face after you reveal your sexual preferences. Now some of these examples might be taken to exemplify embarrassment rather than shame, and indeed some authors have distinguished embarrassment and shame precisely in terms of embarrassment being a response to a social attitude rather than a deeply felt attitude of one’s own. But I do think Zahavi is right to treat these cases, when understood in proper detail, as prototypical of shame. You may be a shameless plagiarist, who is suddenly overwhelmed by shame when discovered. Or you may have some anger management issues as a parent which you can acknowledge to yourself and live with reasonably happily, but after realizing that this has entered the public realm, the shame hits you.

But there are two problems with putting very much weight on these examples. An opponent might argue that the social embarrassment of being discovered in a bad light is what generates your adverse self-evaluation in these cases. So the social element might be an extrinsic –merely causal – element of the shame rather than an intrinsic element. Or the opponent might concede that these are examples of intrinsically social shame but that there are also prototypical examples of non-social shame, which would mean that the social element is not part of our actual concept.

In the absence of further motivation of the social conception, there is a worry about the philosophical explanatoriness of Zahavi’s approach as it stands. And it is reinforced by the way Zahavi includes two independent components in his account of shame – the non-social self esteem component and the social component. This makes shame seem like an artificial concept, dividing up the space of human experience in an *ad hoc* way.

In any case I’m not convinced of the need for the first condition – the non-social self-esteem condition. Zahavi arges against Cheshire Calhoun’s (2004) idea that we can feel shame in a group with which we share a moral practice even though we disagree with its negative evaluation of ourselves. He gives a nice example of a woman living in a community which judges that women should wear the niqab, who herself thinks that women should not have to wear the niqab. Suppose she is discovered not wearing the niqab and encounters the group’s horror. Zahavi argues that if the woman feels shame in this situation it is only because she acknowledges that she has fallen short of her own high standard of not causing offence. If she does not feel this genuine shame at her own shortcomings in this respect then all she can be experiencing is humiliation and not shame. Zahavi argues that a community can humiliate you even when you do not share their values and feel no shame.

But now suppose that the social reaction is not to humiliate the woman, but is more subtle. The people around her suddenly become awkward and reserved. They avoid eye contact; they feel hostile but do not want to express that hostility in any overt way or to humiliate the woman. If she is peculiarly self-reliant, she may cut herself off from her community in order to preserve her self-esteem. But if she needs to be approved of and accepted in this community, and now realizes that she is no longer accepted, what’s she going to feel? She may say: “I feel overwhelming shame at my community seeing me like this and thinking I’m immodest, even though they are completely wrong to think that, and I’ve nothing in fact to be ashamed of.” There is no non-social failure of self-esteem that is contributing to her feeling shame.

At least two questions can be raised about a subject’s response to their construing themselves to be in a shameful position. Firstly we can ask what sort of response shame is. What is going on in the person who is feeling shame? How are they behaving? What are they expressing? And second, we can ask where this response fits into a social practice of shame. Assuming that shame is a socially embedded emotion, there should be some social practices with certain norms into which the shame response fits and which make that response appropriate. What are these practices?

Unless we have answers to these questions it is just mysterious why the sort of situation that shame is supposed to be a response to should be emotionally salient. It will just seem arbitrary whether shame is a response to the perception of a social attitude towards one or a response to one’s own attitude about oneself or both. So I think what is needed in order to understand shame and locate it properly is an investigation into the normativity of shame. And this is not something that Zahavi attempts in this chapter. Admittedly from the perspective of a certain conception of phenomenology, working out shame narratives to describe shame practices may seem like just so much sociology: windy speculation and Just-So stories. But I think we need them to get a grip on the concept. So my question now is what, if anything, makes shame responses appropriate.

In the normal course of events we acquire social statuses that are determined by how we are perceived by the people around us. These statuses give us various social entitlements – to respect, attention, consideration, kindness, love, offerings, and so on. Sometimes we may reveal to others that we are not the sort of people they thought us to be – that by their lights we do not deserve these statuses. For example, Zahavi’s niqab refuser has been taken to conform to certain social values of modesty and is conferred some status of community membership as a result. She accidentally reveals that she does not share this conception of modesty and does not even respect it when seen not wearing the niqab.

What happens next is a fall from grace. And it can mean the loss of friendship, love and respect. The community is only willing to confer these statuses on someone if they fulfill certain commitments and thereby merit the accompanying entitlements. Normative structures have to be held in place forcibly. So the fall from grace can mean that one becomes a non-person in the community where one’s only right to personhood was located. It can mean exile – spiritual or actual. Of course it is terrifying. And terror and shame are closely linked.

If you try to maintain your entitlements in the community and do not hide the fact that you do not have the nature that the community regards as a precondition of this entitlement then the community must shun you, or worse. It must reject your claim to these entitlements, and this may feel quite violent. The entitlements will be torn from you as in the lovely scene in the film of Mary Poppins where Mr. Banks is publically shamed by having his banker’s jacket sleeves literally torn off and his umbrella ritualistically broken.

How can you resolve the situation? One way is to withdraw. You might simply shoot yourself or leave altogether and try to start again in a different community, or perhaps remain in the community with lower status – an exile in your own homeland. Alternatively, you might abase yourself to try to get your status back. You cover yourself in sackcloth and ashes. You hide in clear view. In acknowledging your shame you communicate that people can ignore you and that you are not insisting on visibility, acceptance or respect. You are begging only tolerance of your very existence in their world. This is part of the social practice where shame becomes appropriate.

It may just be a stage on the way towards re-acceptance. If the community judges that you have fully acknowledged the unacceptability of the way you revealed yourself to be and that you are genuinely committed to being better, then you may re-enter. Your tail has been between your legs, and now you can wag it again.

Of course, it is not usually this dramatic. You do something a bit shameful. The person you are with looks briefly aghast. You are covered in shame and express that in your facial gestures, blushing, head in hands, linguistic expressions: “Oh God, that’s terrible of me!” Your companion responds positively to this: “Don’t worry, we’re all capable of that.” They laugh in a friendly way. You laugh. The shame is resolved. But if you had not acknowledged through shame the unacceptability of being the sort of person who would find that behaviour reasonable, you would have lost something with your friend. They could not have brought you back into the natural warmth of their attention in quite the same way.

Your acknowledgement of shamefulness in your words, deeds and bodily expression is an offering of appeasement to your community – a sort of sacrifice of yourself. It may fail of course. For example, the offering may not be or be perceived to be wholehearted. The niqab refuser who is ashamed without acknowledging that there is anything to be ashamed of is sending out mixed signals. Her shame will not do its job to get her back. What is right about Zahavi’s insistence that shame involves a global loss of self-esteem as well as a realization of the loss of social esteem is that this is so for *successful* shame. It is only when your sense of yourself is sensitive to the social sense of who you are that your expression of shame can function as a genuine self-abasement leading eventually to re-acceptance.

References

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