

Being Seen and Being with Others: Shame and Interpersonal Relationships

Abstract: I seek to vindicate heteronomous shame: shame that one experiences in response to a judgment from another that one does not accept. I suggest that such experiences are instances of interpersonal shame. This is shame that involves a sensitivity to interpersonal ideals, whose instantiation depends partly on the attitudes of others. I defend the importance of such shame by showing how vulnerability to others is a constitutive part of rich interpersonal relationships. The account both casts light on and vindicates the heteronomous shame that is pervasive among marginalised and oppressed groups. Such shame is not irrational but involves an accurate apprehension that misrecognition on the part of others has paralysed their ability to act and so degraded an important part of their identity.

Keywords: Shame; Social Shame; Heteronomous Shame; Interpersonal Relationships; Friendship

(7527 words excluding abstract and references)

Shame is painful, pervasive and puzzling. One puzzle about shame concerns the kind of shame that one experiences in response to a judgment from another that one does not accept — let's call this heteronomous shame. Consider, for example, Adrian Piper's (1996) shame when she is called a fraud by an esteemed mentor because she passes as black while being of mixed heritage. She rejects the idea that there is any impropriety in doing so, yet experiences shame when her mentor regards her as a fraud. Such shame is common. Many marginalised or oppressed persons may experience similar shame due to being unjustly perceived by others in society (e.g. Mun 2019; Webster 2021), but this sort of shame is not restricted to them.

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Anyone who has been through a typically brutal adolescence will understand the difficulty of coping with one's changing appearance and the shame that comes from being teased by our peers. At some point, we begin to reject the evaluative standards that others impose on us, but the shame does not so easily go away when unwarranted disapproval or rejection arrives. Ought we steel ourselves against such vulnerability, or is there something important and valuable in these shame experiences?

Let me say more about how I understand heteronomous shame. Two types of cases are relevant here. First, there are cases where an agent accepts that her audience is judging her by a legitimate standard but where she rejects that judgment because the audience either is mistaken about the descriptive facts or adopts an unwarranted interpretation of that standard. Thus, for example, Sharon may be committed to being kind and experiences heteronomous shame when Sally thinks that Sharon is unkind because she has either mistakenly believed that Sharon performed a cruel act or because Sally is holding Sharon to a problematic standard of kindness that is higher than what she would apply to Sharon's male counterparts. Second, there are cases where the agent does not even accept that the audience is judging her by a legitimate standard. Thus, for example, Sharon may reject that chastity is a genuine value but experiences heteronomous shame when Sally judges that her flirting makes her unchaste. There are interesting differences between both sorts of cases, but what unites them and makes them puzzling is the fact that we persist in adopting a negative stance on ourselves through shame even though we have already concluded that the relevant evaluation that the other has made does not stand.¹

¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

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I take as my starting point that we want some vindication of these experiences. There are two aspects to this vindicatory task. The first aspect of this vindicatory task is to give a suitable descriptive analysis of a form of shame such that we can understand why situations that provoke heteronomous shame can be understood as shame-inducing. I suggest that contemporary accounts struggle to do so because they are torn between recognising (1) the importance of our personal evaluative commitments to the experience of shame and (2) the vulnerability of certain aspects of our selves to others in the community. We can accept both insights by recognising what I will call interpersonal shame. Interpersonal shame is the recognition that one has failed to instantiate an interpersonal ideal to which one is committed, and such ideals depend on recognition from others. The second aspect of the vindicatory task is to explain why interpersonal shame is valuable. If possible, we don't just want to say that this sort of shame is irrational but understandable and excusable. For example, one might think that it makes sense to be envious of my richer, more attractive rival, but deny that being subject to such envy has any moral value. I aim to vindicate the value of interpersonal shame by explaining why the instantiation of interpersonal ideals depends on recognition of others and suggesting that being vulnerable to how one is being seen will turn out to be constitutive of being a part of certain interpersonal relationships.

I begin by examining the phenomenon of heteronomous shame as well as two accounts of shame in the literature (section 1). I then embark on the first aspect of the vindicatory task, providing an account of what I call interpersonal shame (section 2). Interpersonal shame involves the recognition that one has failed to instantiate an interpersonal ideal to which one is committed. I then go on to the second aspect of the vindicatory task: defending the importance and value of interpersonal shame. The defence consists of two parts: an explanation of why interpersonal ideals depend on recognition from others (section 3) and an

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explanation of why the vulnerability to shame is constitutive of certain interpersonal relationships (section 4).

1. Shame and Being Seen

1.1 The Self and the Audience in Shame

Let me begin by providing a rough characterisation of shame. When we experience shame, we experience ourselves as being degraded or as inadequate in some way. This point is sometimes made in contrast with the experience of guilt. While in guilt our experience is focused on the action that has harmed or disrespected another, what is salient in the experience of shame is a negative evaluation of our selves (Tangney and Dearing 2002; Lewis 1995).

Another key feature of shame is its sensitivity to some form of an audience. There are two aspects to such a sensitivity. One aspect of this concerns the typical action tendencies of shame. In shame, we usually experience a desire to hide away from others and among the physical marks of shame is gaze aversion and a shrinking of the body to disappear from others (Lewis 2008). As John Deigh (1982) notes, “experiences of shame are expressed by acts of concealment”. Even when the elicitation of shame occurs in private conditions, it still typically involves shrinking and wanting to avoid others.

The second aspect of this sensitivity to an audience consists in the fact that the experience of shame paradigmatically involves the experience of being exposed to the gaze of others. Thus, to use an example of Sartre’s, a voyeur who is peeping through a keyhole feels shame when he realises that someone is behind him looking at him disapprovingly. An actual audience, however, may not always be necessary (Bero 2020). It might be sufficient to imagine being

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seen a certain way or simply to recognise that your actions make you out to look a certain way.

Shame in general may not require an actual audience, but heteronomous shame certainly does. As I've noted above, what I am calling heteronomous shame refers to situations where a subject experiences shame in response to the disapproval of another even though she rejects the basis of that disapproval. The fact that one can reject the basis of another's disapproval and yet experience shame because of that disapproval suggests that the way that shame is sensitive to an audience can sometimes take complex form. Heteronomous shame can be sensitive to an appraisal but not directly to the content of the appraisal. Let me explain.

Piper's shame seems to exemplify this feature. When she experiences shame because she is criticised for being a fraud for passing as black, she explicitly rejects the idea that she is manipulative or deceptive. It is *that she is being appraised a certain way* that she is sensitive to. One might doubt this characterisation and suggest that Piper may be implicitly (and irrationally) giving weight to the claim that she is a fraud, but another example will show that this cannot always be the case. Consider the following example from Gabrielle Taylor (1985):

Nude Model: A nude model poses for an artist. At some point, she begins to realise that the artist is no longer looking at her as if she were a mere model but as an appealing sexual target. This causes her to feel shame.

One interesting aspect of this example is that it suggests that "the view taken by the observer need not itself be critical: people can be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the wrong way" (Williams 1992: 82). This crucially suggests that it would be a mistake to

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describe this as a case where the model gives weight to the content of the artist's appraisal. After all, the attitude of the artist is one that is pleased by the model's sexual appeal — if shame were a straightforward adoption of the *content* of those attitudes, the model would be pleased at herself. This cannot be right. Instead, what seems to elicit shame here is the fact that she is inappropriately being appraised as sexually appealing in a context where she is trying to be professional. In heteronomous shame, we thus feel the sting of another's appraisal of ourselves without necessarily giving weight to the content of another's appraisal.

Let me now turn to examine two extant accounts of shame and see what they say about heteronomous shame. As I will suggest, these accounts get something right, but are incomplete in other respects. By combining some of the insights from both accounts, we can provide an account of shame that vindicates heteronomous shame.

1.2 Personal Ideal Accounts of Shame

One prominent family of accounts of shame are what I will call personal ideal accounts of shame (e.g. Rawls 1971; Mason 2010; Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011). Abstracting from the differences between such accounts, the personal ideal account claims that to feel shame is to take oneself to fail to instantiate some personal ideal that one is committed to. To use one of Deonna, Rodogno and Teroni (DRT)'s examples, a master craftsperson can feel shame over a piece of work that might be impressive by ordinary standards but fall dismally below her high ones.

On DRT's view, shame is always traced to some kind of personal commitment that one has made. In most situations where shame seems to be triggered by an audience, DRT suggest that the gaze of the audience is not essential to the experience of shame. They note two

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possible exceptions to this: shame that is concerned with protecting one's reputation and shame that is provoked when one's privacy is violated. In such cases, because one holds to a reputational ideal or an ideal of modesty, and reputation and modesty can be tarnished by appraisals whether or not the subject agrees with those appraisals, one can experience shame in response to appraisals that one rejects. Could we perhaps vindicate heteronomous shame by understanding it as shame that has to do with protecting one's reputation or privacy?

I don't think so. First, it strikes me that to describe Piper or similar targets of oppression as merely concerned with their reputation or privacy fails to capture the sense in which they find their selves and their identity being degraded by the appraisals that they reject. It appears at least phenomenologically mistaken to describe the depth of the degradation they feel as a mere loss of reputation or privacy. It is thus unclear whether DRT have provided a suitable analysis of what goes on in heteronomous shame. Secondly, even if we grant that this analysis can make sense of cases of heteronomous shame, DRT claim that reputational and privacy-involving shame is the sort of shame that is concerned with only appearances and not with any moral reality. On DRT's view, the kind of shame that is morally valuable are those that are concerned with ideals that depend wholly on us. The appraisals of others can be helpful evidence in showing us that we have fallen short, but if we have concluded that they are mistaken, then there is no value in one's continuing to experience shame. DRT's analysis is therefore not vindicatory of such experiences. The important and valuable experiences of shame are those that are not provoked by the gaze of others. To illustrate this, they cite the following passage from Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*:

We sat opposite each other in silence. ... A hooting sob rose up from my chest. I began to gulp and pant. A deep, useless shame filled me— shame that I had failed my

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wife and my son, shame that I lacked the means to fight on, to tell her that I refused to accept that our marriage had suddenly collapsed ... to tell her to stay, to tell her that I loved her, to tell her I needed her, that I would cut back on work, that I was a family man, a man with no friends and no pastimes, that my life was nothing but her and our boy. ... I felt shame because it was me, not terror, she was fleeing. (Cited in DRT 135-6)

DRT point out that in this passage “The shame felt by the narrator is entirely traceable to values he himself holds and that, he now thinks, he has definitively failed to live up to.” (136) The narrator perhaps takes his wife’s aversion simply as evidence for his failure to live up to a certain personal ideal of a good husband. Now I suspect that more is going on in this brief vignette — certainly DRT are right to point out that part of the ground for the narrator’s shame includes his lack of conviction and cowardice — however, the poignancy of the last line is suggestive of the fact that his wife’s attitude plays a larger role as the ground of his shame. As I will later suggest, it may well be that his wife’s aversion is not merely evidence of some failure to realise an ideal, but in fact partly constitutes the failure of the ideal.

There is nonetheless something right about DRT’s insistence that shame be somehow traceable to values that one personally holds. However, such personal ideal accounts appear unable to capture instances of heteronomous shame. After all, *ex hypothesi* these are instances of shame where the subject rejects the grounds by which the audience appraises them yet feels the sting of the appraisal. If we are restricted to understanding ideals in terms of personal ideals or reputational ideals, then this would suggest that in the relevant situations the subjects are irrational in some way; they are either needlessly concerned with reputation instead of moral reality or are incoherent in foolishly giving weight to the content of

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appraisals that they reject. Mun (2019) has recently suggested that the fact that accounts centred on ideals cannot vindicate heteronomous shame is a reason to reject such accounts. I suggest, however, that we can accept the aspect of shame that revolves around commitment to ideals but still vindicate heteronomous shame by broadening the kinds of ideals that one can be committed to. Let me first turn to a different account of shame.

1.3 Thomason's Overshadowing Account of Shame

Another recent account of shame is Krista Thomason's (2018) overshadowing account.

According to her, in shame we "feel that some feature of our identity eclipses, over-shadows or defines our self-conception." (87) My self-conception is "my own sense of who I am" (93); it is a product of construction by ourselves (though that process may be influenced by culture) whereby we determine which of our characteristics and values we take to guide our lives. Our identities, however, are broader than that, they "are comprised of contingent features of our individual histories as well as the way we come across to others" (93). Others can call attention to such features of ourselves in a way that we feel our self-conception being overshadowed. In shame, then, we recognise that who we are is not wholly determined by how we take ourselves to be but is partially determined by how others regard us.

Thomason's account vindicates the heteronomous nature of shame — it can explain why shame is appropriate when we are appraised by others in ways that we reject. Indeed, the proposal captures the sense, missing from DRT's account, that in cases of heteronomous shame one feels one's identity to be degraded by appraisals that one rejects. However, I think the proposal is somewhat incomplete. To see this, note that for Thomason, overshadowing is supposed to be a notion that is independent of the evaluative commitments of the subject. Our self-conception is overshadowed simply when some aspect of our identity becomes more

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prominent than our self-conception, whether or not this part of our identity threatens some ideal that we care about. She suggests that this is why positive regard from others can cause shame; it may call attention to a feature of ourselves that is not currently part of our self-conception. Thus, in her discussion of the Nude Model example, she claims “the model does not need to feel bad about her sexuality to feel shame” (105) instead “Her shame is due to the fact that the artist’s attraction makes her suddenly aware of herself under a description that differs from the one that she operates with at the moment”. (155)

I suspect that more is going on here. It is not obvious that it is the mere sexuality of the model that is shameful in the scenario as opposed to the thought that she is being objectified. If the model really were okay with being treated as a sexual object in that situation it is not clear whether she would really feel shame. MacKenzie (2019) describes a variant of the nude model case where the model takes herself to be posing just for some extra cash when she realises that the artist thinks that she has come with the intention of being a serious collaborator. She might be embarrassed at the realisation, but shame is hardly obvious. Indeed, it seems further plausible that there are scenarios where we feel our self-conceptions being overshadowed but experience pride instead of shame. Growing up reading *Harry Potter* has always made me dream that a giant would show up at the door and tell me that I am of magical parentage. A more mundane example of such a possibility is simply winning the lottery. If such things were to happen, it would drastically overshadow my current self-conception — but it would be an occasion for pride and not shame!²

² Compare Hobbes’ claim that laughter is the result of suddenly perceiving some superiority in ourselves over others.

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To be fair, Thomason presents overshadowing as a necessary and not a sufficient condition for shame (87), and she does not tell us what the remaining ingredients are supposed to be. I suspect that the gap in the analysis arises from the fact that Thomason understands overshadowing in a value neutral way. At this point, then, we can bring together the insights from personal ideal accounts with Thomason's recognition of the vulnerability of the self in shame. I suggest that we do so by looking for the kind of ideal whose instantiation depends on how others regard us. This would be the kind of ideal that we cannot live up to without the help of others.

2. Interpersonal Shame and Interpersonal Ideals

In this section, I will embark on the first vindicatory task: providing a suitable descriptive analysis of a form of shame that explains why situations that provoke heteronomous shame are recognisable as shame-inducing. First, however, let me clarify how I will formulate the analysis. I assume that shame is an emotion, and it is commonplace in the philosophy of emotion that emotions are intentional states whose content is constitutively connected with some form of evaluative appraisal (e.g. fear is linked to an appraisal that the situation is dangerous). However, philosophers of emotion are torn between accounts that claim that emotions are simply constituted by the relevant appraisal (i.e. my fear just is the appraisal that the situation is dangerous) and accounts that claim that emotions are *responses* to appraisals that are non-emotional (i.e. my fear is not the appraisal but a reaction to an appraisal that the situation is dangerous).³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate this question here, but I aim to give my analysis in a neutral way by claiming that feeling

³ For defenders of the view that emotions are responses to some appraisal, see (Deonna and Teroni 2012; Müller 2019; Mulligan 2010). Defenders of the view that emotions are directly constituted by the appraisal are split on what kind of state that sort of appraisal is, they include those who hold that emotions are judgments (Nussbaum 2001; Solomon 1976), a form of perception (Roberts 2003; Tappolet 2016; Yip 2021; MS), and some sui generis intentional state (Mitchell 2021).

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shame involves ‘taking it’ that the world is a certain way — philosophers of emotion can interpret this phrase according to their favoured theory of emotion.

I will call the relevant kind of shame *interpersonal shame*. Here is my analysis:

Interpersonal Shame: Someone feels interpersonal shame when they take it that they have failed to instantiate some interpersonal ideal to which they are committed, where an ideal is interpersonal when (1) it is an ideal of a role that one assumes in some interpersonal relationship and (2) instantiation of that ideal depends partly on the attitudes of others.

Let me unpack this. First, let me say something about what it means to be *committed* to some ideal. To be committed to some ideal it is not sufficient to simply desire to instantiate it. It is also required that one value or identify with the ideal, but it certainly goes further than mere first-order desire. Thus, an addict can have a strong desire to drink by experience that desire as an alien force on their person as opposed to something that they value. Further, such commitment may be implicit and indeed one may not realise that one values something until that value is threatened. For example, many teenagers do not realise how much they value being around their parents until they have decided to move out of the house (and vice versa). It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full account of valuing, but these remarks should suffice for us to get a grip on the phenomena.⁴

⁴ For various ways of cashing out this notion of commitment, see among others (Frankfurt 1971; Taylor 1985; Helm 2001).

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The key part of my proposal is that in shame we take ourselves to fail to instantiate some *interpersonal* ideal. There are two crucial features of interpersonal ideals. First, interpersonal ideals are ideals of a role that one assumes in some interpersonal relationship. For example, in a familial relationship one can adopt the role of a parent or a child, in a friendship one can adopt the role of a friend, in a political community one can adopt the role of a citizen or a ruler and so on. These roles are normative in the sense that one who occupies such a role is held up to some standard. We thus have the ideal of a good parent or good friend or good citizen.

The second crucial feature of these interpersonal ideals is that whether one instantiates them depends partly on the attitudes of others. In other words, the instantiation of the interpersonal ideal is subject to a recognition condition. The sort of reputational ideal that DRT discuss is but one example of this: whether one instantiates the ideal of being a reputable member of the community is wholly constituted by the regard that other members have towards you.

Interpersonal ideals have a similar structure. To be a good friend or a good parent it is usually necessary that one's friend or one's child have some sort of positive regard toward you. If my child has his mind poisoned against me by someone else, it may not be my fault that we become estranged, but this would still compromise my standing as a parent. Of course, the ideal of a good parent is only partially constituted by the attitudes of my child — it can also be compromised by failures wholly on my part. One may wonder at this point why instantiating interpersonal ideals depends partly on others' attitudes. I will defend this claim shortly (section 3). Let me first show that this account of interpersonal shame allows us to make sense of heteronomous shame.

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Recall that shame's sensitivity to an audience has two aspects: (1) it leads to hiding before others and (2) is sensitive to their appraisals. This account of interpersonal shame makes sense of both features. First, hiding is an intelligible response to failures to instantiate interpersonal ideals because these ideals are ideals of roles that we play in relationship with others and such failure implies some fracture in our relationship. Given that the failure is partly constituted by the appraisal of others, hiding is also intelligible as a form of aversion to that which has diminished us.

Furthermore, this account of interpersonal shame can account for the complex way we respond to the appraisals of others in the case of heteronomous shame. Recall that in heteronomous shame we are sensitive to the fact that we are being appraised in a certain way without giving weight to the content of that appraisal. The account captures this because in interpersonal shame, while we are not directly committed to the grounds by which we are appraised, we are committed to an interpersonal ideal whose instantiation is partly constituted by those very appraisals. Furthermore, depending on how the ideal is conceived, certain sorts of positive regard may compromise it. Thus, in the Nude Model case, positive sexual interest from another can be objectifying and degrading to one's standing as a professional and as a member of the moral community.

This analysis of interpersonal shame therefore makes sense of why experiences involving heteronomous shame are intelligibly shame-inducing. I will now turn in the next two sections (sections 3 and 4) to attempting the second aspect of the vindicatory task: to defend the value of interpersonal shame. Before that, however, a preliminary remark is in order. I believe that key instances of heteronomous shame constitute valuable aspects of our ethical lives, but this

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is not to say that all instances of shame are valuable.⁵ As Webster and Bero (2020) note, shame can easily be taken captive by perverse or oppressive ideologies and social practices and has a somewhat contingent connection with the domain of the ethical. As I will later note, there may be instances of interpersonal shame that we have good reason to discard because they keep us in relationships that we ought to abandon.

My defence of interpersonal shame consists in showing that key instances of heteronomous shame are in fact constitutive of interpersonal relationships that are both valuable and so the vulnerability to shame serves as the ground for our interpersonal relationships. To establish this, there are two questions we need to answer:

- (1) Why is it that the instantiation of interpersonal ideals depends partly on the attitudes of others? (section 3)
- (2) Why should we be committed to such ideals? (section 4)

I address these in turn.

3. Interpersonal Ideals and Interpersonal Vulnerability

First, why should interpersonal ideals depend on the attitudes of others? To answer this question, it would be helpful to examine some remarks that David Velleman (2001) makes about shame and self-presentation. Velleman points out that if we wish to engage in sustained social interactions with others, we need to be able to present ourselves as “predictable and intelligible as manifesting a stable and coherent set of motives.” (36) This ability to

⁵ DRT (Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011) also point out that a defence of shame must attend to the specific ideals that the relevant instance of shame is sensitive to and explain why those ideals are morally or normatively significant.

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demonstrate that we have control over our self-presentation is crucial because “others cannot engage you in social interaction unless they find your behaviour predictable and intelligible” (36).

While our ability to control our self-presentation depends on us to a certain degree, our success in crafting a stable persona that enables interaction with others depends partly on how others regard us. He notes the Gricean point that successful communication requires not just the right kinds of intention on the part of the agent, but also recognition from the audience of our intentions. This point generalises to other forms of social interaction:

“only when your movements are recognised as aiming to be recognised as helpful do they count as fully successful contributions to cooperation: and even a competition or a conflict is not full-blown until the parties are recognised by one another as trying to be recognised as opponents.” (36)

Thus, victims of malicious stereotyping can be compromised in crafting their public personas because they are regarded as “less than the master of [their] self-definition and therefore less than a socially qualified agent.” (45) Webster (2021) has recently pointed out that this is true not only of malicious stereotyping but also for more positive stereotypes (think e.g. about stereotypes about Asians or some other model minority). When being in the grip of a stereotype, even a positive one, one is unable to avoid making salient some aspect of their stigmatised identity. Such agents are subject to controlling images that others impose on them and this compromises their presentation of a stable persona.

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The ability to properly self-present is only one sort of crucial ability that depends on the recognition of others. The phenomenon of illocutionary disablement that feminists have called attention to is another domain where the ability of subjects to perform certain actions depends on the attitude of others. Illocutionary disablement occurs when the performance of certain speech acts depends on the right kinds of uptake from the audience. For example, an actor who screams “fire!” while acting in a play, though he may be uttering the right words, will fail to perform the act of warning the audience.

Such disablement occurs more systematically and nefariously to women and oppressed groups because of the way they are being regarded by others in society. Thus, Rae Langton (1993) famously claims that the prevalence of pornography has altered the perception of women among many men in a way that generates structural constraints on women’s speech. Their ability to perform the speech act of refusal is silenced because they are unable to secure the right kinds of uptake. Saying ‘no’ has perversely been taken to be a way that women coyly invite men to come on to them and so fails to be an instance of refusal. Langton’s specific way of understanding illocutionary disablement in this case is of course controversial, and it is out of the scope of this paper to defend her analysis.⁶ However, the idea that failure of uptake systematically silences oppressed groups is widely accepted. Dotson (2011), for example, points out that oppressed groups are often unable to perform successful acts of testimony because their audience refuses to take them seriously, thus inflicting on them a form of epistemic violence.

⁶ See (Tanesini 2019) for a discussion of more contemporary approaches to how silencing occurs as a result of failure of uptake.

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The failure to control one's self-presentation and to perform such speech acts will compromise one's standing as a social participant. One who values one's standing in this way can thus be vulnerable to interpersonal shame when their standing is eroded by appraisals from others even if they reject the ground of those appraisals. Furthermore, dependence on the recognition of others is a feature of the ideals that embody more specific interpersonal relationships.

For example, I suggest that satisfying the ideal of being a good friend is going to be partially dependent on how you are seen by them. It is a crucial part of friendship that friends undertake shared projects together. Shared projects involve shared intentions,⁷ and these require common knowledge of our intentions among the involved parties (Bratman 1993). If so, then shared intentions themselves are subject to a recognition requirement: we can form a shared intention only insofar as we mutually recognise each other as trying to form such an intention. If one friend systematically distrusts the other this would erode the possibility of forming the shared intentions which form part of the friendship. The ideal embodied in friendship is therefore one that can be eroded by systematic mistrust.

Consider also the relationship between a teacher and her student. For a teacher to mentor and teach a student, it is not necessary for the student to think the teacher is a nice or friendly person. Presumably, however, some form of respect is necessary for the teacher to teach effectively. Furthermore, insofar as the teacher needs to convey knowledge to her student, she needs to be regarded by them as trustworthy.⁸ More generally, the nature of the regard that upholds or compromises the relevant ideal depends on the way the role is conceived. The

⁷ It will require *at least* shared intentions, though Helm (2010) suggests that more may be necessary to characterise these shared projects.

⁸ For an overview of the relationship between trust and testimony see (McMyler and Ogungbure 2018).

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ability to perform the kinds of actions that are a part of the ideals embodied in rich interpersonal relationships are ones that will depend on the right sort of uptake from others.

One can, of course, conceive of an ideal of friendship along the lines of the way an effective altruist conceives of their relationship with nameless beneficiaries. And one can conceive of the teacher-student relationship along the lines of the way the author of a Wikipedia page conceives of their relationship to those reading the page. Perhaps one can live up to these ideals regardless of how others take them (though this is not even clear in the case of the Wikipedia editor). I take it, however, that something crucial would be lost if we understood friendship and teaching in this way. There is thus good reason to conceive of the ideals along the lines that I have sketched. Interpersonal shame is thus our sensitivity to the ideals present in the rich interpersonal relationships we have with others. Even if we reject the grounds of a certain appraisal, as in the case of heteronomous shame, we are still vulnerable to shame because that appraisal interferes with our instantiating an interpersonal ideal that we are committed to.

4. Commitment and Interpersonal Relationships

Grant that the relevant ideals are of the form that I have just sketched, one might still ask: why should we be committed to these ideals? We can sharpen this objection by thinking again about the pain that is involved in feeling heteronomous shame. If it is so painful to interact with those who appraise us mistakenly, why can't we just continue to interact with them while ignoring the relevant ideal? Of course, it is not possible to voluntarily alter our commitments, however painful they may be. Still, should we perhaps try to gradually change them via some form of therapy? There will be good reasons to do so in certain cases that I discuss below, but I want to suggest that there will be many ideals where our commitment

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remains deeply valuable because those commitments are constitutive⁹ of the relevant interpersonal relationships.

To see this, we need to think harder about the nature of interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal relationships, I suggest, are practices where some of the norms do not just regulate the practice but constitute them (See e.g. Rawls 1955; Searle 2010). Constitutive norms are norms that define what it means to make a move in the practice and do not merely guide pre-existing action. Chess is a familiar example of this. One cannot describe one's action as checkmating or castling apart from the rules of chess itself. The rules are not mere guides to action but make certain actions possible. Furthermore, it seems that to count as playing chess one needs to adopt a constitutive aim: trying to win the game in accordance with the rules. One is therefore not properly described as playing chess unless one has the right kind of motivational set; one must be trying to win. To see this, imagine playing chess with someone who is moving the pieces lawfully but utterly aimlessly. In such a case, it is hard to describe them even as chess players; they are simply not playing chess! There are thus certain kinds of practices where one is a proper participant only insofar as one is committed to some subset of the norms embodied in the practice.

Cheshire Calhoun (2004) makes a kindred point here. According to her, the vulnerability to shame is a result of sharing a moral practice with another. On her view, to be a part of a practice involves recognising the authority of others who are representative of that practice.

Our shame even when we do not accept what grounds another's appraisal simply manifests

⁹ An alternative defence of shame would focus on how shame is instrumental in motivating us to achieve certain valuable ideals. While I think that shame is indeed instrumental in this way, there will be situations where it is in fact counter-productive (see (Snoek et al. 2021) for a nuanced discussion of the instrumental value of shame). Showing that shame is constitutively related to important goods allows us to provide a more robust defence of the emotion. Thomason (2018) also opts for a constitutive defence of the value of shame.

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our acceptance of that authority.¹⁰ I am hesitant to link shame directly to acceptance of authority — as I have suggested there are other ways of being sensitive to the appraisals of others without seeing ourselves as subject to their authority. Furthermore, the sorts of interpersonal relations that I think we can be rightly committed to are broader than that of sharing a moral practice with others. Nonetheless, her insight that the vulnerability to shame is a necessary part of sharing certain practices with others is right. This is because the vulnerability to shame is part of being a genuine participant in rich interpersonal relationships.¹¹

To illustrate this, consider friendship again. Someone who does not care at all about being a friend can hardly be described as even a good or bad friend — they are simply not playing the role of a friend. This means that to be a friend, one needs to try to be a good friend and so be sensitive to failures at instantiating this ideal. If so, being a good friend involves being vulnerable to the various ways in which you can fail to be a good friend, including how your friend sees you. One is therefore only a part of certain interpersonal relationships insofar as one is committed to the ideals that those relationships embody. Again, consider what happens when a child grows up and begins to identify in some way that is deeply contrary to the values of their parents. Perhaps they become religious, or they come out. Initially, their parents' deep disapproval of them causes them frequent shame, even if they are certain they are making the right decision. Imagine, however, that at some point the child no longer feels anything at their parent's disapproval and refuses to feel shame. Something crucial then seems to have changed in their relationship — they no longer see themselves as a family the way that they used to be.

¹⁰ See also (Buss 1999; Thomason 2018) for attempts to link shame to acceptance of authority.

¹¹ There is thus also some affinity between my account and Maibom's (2010) claim that part of the evolutionary function of shame is to indicate and manifest our compliance in social practices.

Let me engage with an objection here: there have been many oppressed persons who have felt that the way to resist certain forms of injustices or prejudices is to refuse to feel shame when they are being disregarded by their family. Can I make sense of this thought on my account? I think so. Firstly, this last section could be seen as giving an account of why shame might be fitting, but the fittingness of an emotion does not entail that one has overriding reason to have the emotion.¹² There may be other features of the situation such as the pain that such shame would cause the subject or the importance of rejecting such shame in order to better stand up to injustice that make it such that one ought all-things-considered to get oneself to refuse to feel shame.

However, in many cases, we not only misdescribe the normative situation by confusing all-things-considered ought with what is fitting, we also fail to see that there is a genuine normative cost involved on the part of the oppressed and marginalised when they alter themselves to avoid feeling shame especially in close interpersonal relationships. Oppressed and marginalised persons face what Amia Srinivasan (2018) calls an affective injustice: they face circumstances where it is systematically frustrating for them to have fitting emotion. Srinivasan's discussion focuses on how, even though minorities and oppressed groups often have occasion to be fittingly angry, unjust social arrangements make it such that anger is constantly counterproductive to their political goals. This is because their anger tends to alienate allies and aggravate conflict by promoting negative stereotypes (think e.g. of the image of the angry black woman used to dismiss important political concerns). In a similar way, we may detect an affective injustice in the domain of shame. Shame expresses the

¹² The relationship between reasons and fittingness is complex. That some emotion is fitting may not necessarily mean that we have normative reason to have that emotion. For example, Berker (Berker 2023) makes the observation that we do not have reasons to love every lovable cat. For a promising account of the relationship between fittingness and reasons, see (Cullity 2023).

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commitment for many of the oppressed to being a part of interpersonal relationships with others, but prejudice and negative controlling images make it such that they are regularly subjected to painful and sometimes crushing shame experiences as a result.

Secondly, we may go further and say that there will be occasions when it is not even fitting to feel shame because there are certain relationships that it is not appropriate to be committed to (e.g. deeply toxic relationships). In such cases, the refusal of shame may itself be fitting either because it is within one's prerogative to exit the relationship or simply because it is not even fitting to be committed to such relationships. One may choose to fittingly abandon some intimate interpersonal relationships for this reason. However, I suggest that something important to one's well-being would be lost if one abandons most of one's interpersonal relationships in this way. There is thus only so far that one can downgrade one's interpersonal relationships to save oneself from shame.

Insofar, then, as we want to be a genuine participant in interpersonal relationships with others, we must be committed to the ideals they embody and so feel shame when others regard us in ways that threatens that ideal. When someone like Adrian Piper or a person from a marginalised group feels shame because of criticism that they know is mistaken and that they reject, they are not being irrational or mistaken in feeling shame. Instead, it reflects their commitment to the ideal of the practice and manifests their participation in that interpersonal relationship.

To say this is not to encourage them to beat themselves up but is to vindicate them in their experience of heteronomous shame. They are not being irrational in feeling some way but have instead apprehended the situation rightly; their being treated or seen a certain way was

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indeed degrading or damaging to a crucial part of their identity. My hope is that by calling attention to why such shame can be fitting though painful, we can also relieve subjects of a kind of psychic burden. This is the burden of being faced with the choice of either brutally rejecting our experiences of shame or to painfully think that shame represents something wrong with themselves. Instead, we can learn to sit with our shame and recognise that while it represents a genuine loss on our part, the fault need not lie with us but with the misrecognition of others.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to vindicate heteronomous shame. First, I have done so by providing an analysis of the form of shame that one often experiences in such situations: interpersonal shame. Interpersonal shame involves a sensitivity to interpersonal ideals, whose instantiation depends partly on the attitudes of others. This explains why instances of heteronomous shame are intelligible as shame-inducing. Second, I have defended the importance of interpersonal shame by showing how the vulnerability to shame is a necessary part of rich interpersonal relationships. The account both casts light on and vindicates the heteronomous shame that is pervasive especially among marginalised and oppressed groups. Such shame is not irrational but involves an accurate apprehension that misrecognition on the part of others has paralysed their ability to act and so degraded an important part of their identity. To seek to escape from interpersonal shame is to seek to escape from the interpersonal relationships which form a key part of who we are.

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