

Performative Shaming and the Critique of Shame

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Abstract: Some philosophers argue that we should be suspicious about shame. For example, Martha Nussbaum, in *Hiding from Humanity* (2004), endorses the view that shame is a largely irrational or unreasonable emotion rooted in infantile narcissism. This claim has also been used to support the view that we should largely abandon shaming as a social activity. If we are worried about the emotion of shame, so the thought goes, we should also worry about acts which encourage shame. I argue that this line of reasoning does not license the leap from the critique of shame to the critique of shaming. This is because shaming does not always aim to inflict shame on its targets. Many acts of shaming (which I label ‘performative shaming’) should simply be understood as aiming to serve their characteristic function of shoring up social norms and standards.

Key words: shame, shaming, Nussbaum, social norms, social standards

1. RADICAL CRITIQUES OF SHAME

Many shame experiences are normatively suspect. It is a serious injustice, for example, that we generate vulnerabilities to shame that attach to marginalized racial, gender, or sexual identities.¹ Part of the explanation of its injustice is that such vulnerabilities reflect bad norms—whether racist, sexist, or homophobic. We should not be made to feel shame in light of such norms.

Some philosophers go further in criticizing shame. The problem with shame, they argue, is not merely that many shame experiences are tethered to bad norms. If this were the whole issue, we might conclude that its solution is simply to divert shame to its proper objects—the racism, sexism, and homophobia that is responsible for existing vulnerabilities to shame.² But—so the critique goes—we cannot in general hope to enlist shame in the service of good ends. This is because shame possesses certain essential features that expose it as a largely irrational or unreasonable emotion. We would do better to largely abandon shame (to the extent feasible).

Nussbaum (2004: chap. 4) offers an influential version of this strategy. On her view, shame develops out of infantile narcissism. The infant believes its interests ought to be served perfectly by the world, and the objects which populate it. The most basic shame experiences thus originate in our growing awareness of our vulnerability, dependency, and finitude. This ‘primitive’ shame continues to wield a large (though varying) influence over mature human adults, and many shame experiences are in some way connected to it. Thus, such shame experiences are tainted by the violent and irrational urge for self-sufficiency that lies behind primitive shame. Whilst Nussbaum emphasizes that there are also ‘constructive’ forms of shame which ‘[reinforce] a sense of common human vulnerability, a sense of the inclusion of all human beings in the community, and related ideas of interdependence and mutual responsibility’ (Nussbaum 2004: 213), the distinction is often not transparent in practice. This motivates her general scepticism about the value of shame.

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I will not challenge this radical critique of shame here.³ Rather, I will reject one of its prominent applications. Because she thinks we should be largely suspicious of shame, Nussbaum (2004: chaps. 5–6) concludes that we should largely abandon *shaming*—if we are worried about shame, we should worry about acts which encourage it. Whether or not we should abandon shaming, I do not think a general scepticism about shaming follows from radical critiques of shame. This is because we should not always understand shaming as aiming at inculcating shame in its targets. With this connection between shame and shaming severed, radical critiques of shame fail to transmit in any general way to shaming.

In section 2, I argue for a distinction in kinds of shaming that illustrates this point: between *directed* and *performative* shaming. You are trying to shame someone in the directed sense when you attempt to induce shame in them—and you successfully shame them if you succeed in making them feel ashamed. By contrast, performative shaming does not depend fundamentally upon an intention to induce shame in the target. Such acts should rather be explained by reference to their characteristic social functions—namely, shoring-up social norms and standards. Performative shaming can serve such functions independently of whether it brings about shame in the target. Shaming is thus a heterogenous phenomenon.

In section 3, I summarize how this account blocks the attempt to extract a general scepticism about shaming from radical critiques of shame. I also respond to this objection: opponents of shaming do not need the claim that shaming aims at inculcating shame in its targets; they can extract a general scepticism about shaming from radical critiques of shame so long as they can show that shaming *reliably produces* shame. I argue that even this sort of general connection between shame and shaming fails to produce a general scepticism about shaming. Finally, I gesture at how to criticize shaming consistently with the position defended here.

2. TWO KINDS OF SHAMING

Consider these examples:

Immoral friend: You are having a private conversation with a friend. She reveals her plan to scam a co-worker. You remonstrate with her. You tell her you think less of her for forming this plan; you invoke how her parents would view the plan; you compare the plan to those of disreputable people; you appeal to ideals you believe she endorses. Your friend is unmoved.

Malcolm X: Malcolm X is appearing on a panel at an American university.⁴ A panellist is criticising Malcolm in front of the live audience for his claim that America is racist. He calls him a ‘divisive demagogue’ and ‘reverse racist.’ Malcolm is unmoved—as the panellist knew he would be.

In both cases, an agent engages in shaming. In both cases, shaming fails to produce shame in its target. But in one case this renders it a failed shaming—in the other it does not.

Consider *Immoral friend*. Let us stipulate that your intention here is to make your friend feel shame. You want her to abandon her plan and you believe that if you get her to feel shame about it then she will do so. Your friend does not feel shame and so your aim is frustrated. Hence, your shaming failed.

Compare *Malcolm X*. The panellist knew he would not get Malcolm to feel shame: Malcolm does not respect the panellist, nor the values he appeals to. He challenges Malcolm anyway. Is he trying to bring about shame in Malcolm—albeit knowing he will fail? If he were, then such shaming would fail in just the way it does in *Immoral friend*. But notice: there is another sense in which the panellist seems to shame Malcolm that does not depend on an intention to make Malcolm feel

shame. Whether that shaming succeeds does not depend on Malcolm experiencing shame—in-
deed, from the perspective of such an act, it might help if he can be portrayed as shameless.

How might we characterize the function of this act? The following story would provide an
intelligible account of why the panellist shames Malcolm whilst knowing he will not get Malcolm
to feel shame. True, Malcolm will not be knocked off the course of advocating for Black Americans.
But there are others who can be dissuaded. So maybe the panellist is not really concerned about
Malcolm's response. He is more interested in the response of the audience. Perhaps he hopes to
convey this message: 'You want to join Malcolm? Fine. But then we, the American establishment,
will scorn you—just like we are doing to Malcolm.'⁵

The upshot here is that we must reject a naïve attempt to explain shaming in terms of shame:
that shaming is just the attempt to bring about shame in a target; and succeeds when such shame in
fact results.⁶ But whilst this is an adequate account of some shaming acts (and, I will argue, of one
dimension of others) it cannot be a full account of shaming.⁷ That is because some shaming, like in
Malcolm X, can succeed without inducing shame in the target. We cannot insulate ourselves from
all successful shaming by being immune to shame.

Here then is the proposed distinction in shaming. First, we have *directed* shaming (as in *Im-
moral friend*). You are trying to shame someone in this sense when you attempt to induce shame in
them—and you successfully shame them if you in fact make them feel ashamed.

Performative shaming, by contrast, does not depend fundamentally upon an intention to
induce shame in the target. Such acts should rather be explained by reference to their characteris-
tic social functions. Suppose that in *Malcolm X* the shaming possesses the function of shoring-up
norms in American society against the politics of Black liberation. More generally, I suggest that
many acts of shaming—namely, performative ones—possess the characteristic function of shoring-
up social norms and standards.⁸ This resonates with common understandings of, e.g., shaming that
enforces gendered hierarchies, online shaming connected to so-called 'cancel culture,' or informal
shaming for breaches of pandemic guidelines.

In emphasizing the 'shoring-up' function of performative shaming, I do not deny that such
shaming can also be used as a tool for social *change*. Suppose some vegan activists stand outside a
butcher shop and shout 'Shame! Shame!' at anyone who enters or exits. We might assess the success
of this act not solely (or not all) by reference to whether it induces shame in the targets, but also
with respect to whether it helps widen support for the norms of the activist sub-group.⁹ So, this act
could have the function not only of shoring-up norms within the sub-group (it might, for example,
reinforce the activists' pride in their moral outlook) but also of broadening the contingent that
shares these norms.¹⁰ It is possible to explain this latter role in terms of the function of 'shoring-up'
itself. We might say that the vegan activists simply begin acting in ways (e.g., censuring others) that
would make sense if the norms *were* shared by a larger contingent. They do this with the aim of
inspiring an awareness that leads to the adoption of the norms more widely. If shaming succeeds
in doing this, then it could retrospectively be understood as 'shoring-up' these norms. But if it fails
to bring about such change, we can say it failed here in respect of the characteristic functions of
shaming (though it may serve them successfully with respect to the sub-group that already shares
the norms).¹¹

The key point here (illustrated by *Malcolm X*) is that the characteristic functions of perfor-
mative shaming can be successfully enacted by shaming independently of whether it brings about
shame in the target. And even when such shaming does not bring about shame in the target, it may
be perfectly successful *as shaming*. Performative and directed shaming are conceptually distinct
activities.

There are several points to make in filling out the core distinction in shaming. First, both di-
rected and performative shaming involve 'the communication of a negative evaluation of a person'

(McDonald 2021: 139).¹² When we shame someone, we express that we disapprove of some feature of theirs or something they have done.¹³

I can communicate a negative evaluation of my friend's immoral plan without shaming. I could just tell her I think the plan is wrong—communicating only that it would be appropriate for her to feel guilty about it. To shame her, I must communicate that *shame* would be apt.¹⁴ The evaluation must communicate (as Williams says about the emotion of shame) that it would be appropriate for her to feel that her 'whole being' is 'diminished or lessened' (1993: 89).¹⁵ This applies to both directed and performative shaming. Thus, all shaming bears some conceptual connection to shame. These resources help distinguish between shaming and neighbouring forms of criticism.

What else distinguishes shaming from other acts that communicate negative evaluations of people? This depends on the kind of shaming at issue. Fixing on directed shaming, this involves an intention to make the target feel shame. We can accidentally make someone feel shame too—and there are practically no limits to what might lead to this. But that is not directed shaming.¹⁶ This could be another reason why expressing a negative evaluation of my friend's immoral plan may not count as shaming: I may not intend to make her feel shame.

The fact I do not intend to make the target feel shame does not mean I cannot be engaged in any kind of shaming. I may still be engaged in performative shaming. It is a notable feature of such shaming that whilst it depends for its success on the enactment of certain characteristic functions, it need not involve an intention on the part of the shamer that the shaming enact these functions.¹⁷ True, in *Malcolm X* we can imagine that the panellist has the intention of dissuading other Americans from sympathizing with Malcolm's cause. But the intuition that he shames Malcolm does not depend on that. We could imagine that he does not care whether his act serves this purpose. He might only care about doing what his university sponsors expect of him. Still, he may shame Malcolm.

Thus, performative shaming is partly constituted by its characteristic function of shoring-up social norms and standards—and it succeeds by virtue of serving these functions. How, in this context, should we understand the idea that an act possesses a function independently of whether the actor intends it to have that function? A plausible suggestion is that an act can be said to possess this function when it constitutes a kind of act that *generally* or *usually* or *on the whole* shores-up social norms or standards. Though we are good at making these judgements in practice, providing a deeper explanation is more elusive.

Further distinguishing features of performative shaming follow from its characteristic functions. Whilst all shaming involves the communication of a negative evaluation of a person, there is a more specific content to the negative evaluations we express in performative shaming—the target is cast as having fallen foul of social (as opposed to personal) norms or standards. This is because such shaming serves its function (at least partly) by communicating such evaluations to the target or others. This distinguishes performative shaming not only from many other acts that communicate negative evaluations of people, but also from (some) directed shaming—occasions for shame are often idiosyncratic, so I can seek to induce shame in you via evaluations that are highly bespoke (i.e., not tethered to social norms or standards).

Relatedly, since the characteristic function of performative shaming is to shore-up norms and standards that have a *social* character, acts which serve this function well are often done in public, appealing to an audience besides the person(s) explicitly and expressly called out.¹⁸ By contrast, there is no special pressure to carry out acts of directed shaming in public since the norms or standards appealed to might be personal ones.

Consistently with the heterogeneity of shaming, one and the same act is often both directed and performative shaming. Indeed, directed shaming could be a route by which an act serves the characteristic functions of performative shaming. For example, one way to shore-up social norms

is by making salient the costs of deviating from them. And one way of doing this is to put on display a putative norm-violator who has been made to feel shame.¹⁹

Finally, ‘shaming’ is a *thick* act-description.²⁰ To describe something as ‘shaming’ is to indicate that it has certain rich social meanings. There are many thinner descriptions that pick out the same acts that constitute something as shaming—we might focus on certain bodily motions or the production of certain noises (e.g., rolling of eyes, snorting). But though these acts thinly described are what constitute a shaming on a particular occasion, none of them are essential to its constitution as *shaming*. Different bodily motions and noises may do just as well (e.g., spitting, tutting). So too, the same bodily motions and noises need not always constitute an act as a shaming—in different contexts, they may be part of a game we are playing where the bodily motions and noises in question are assigned a non-shaming function (e.g., to indicate that a task has been completed within the game). Shaming is *polymorphous*.

Here are some more formal definitions of directed and performative shaming:

Directed Shaming

A shames B in the directed sense iff:

- (1) A communicates a negative evaluation of B;
- (2) A intends that B experiences shame *in the right way* as a result of this communicative act.²¹

Performative Shaming

A shames B in the performative sense iff:

- (1) A communicates a negative evaluation of B involving the idea that B has violated social norms or standards;
- (2) This act possesses the characteristic function of shoring-up social norms and standards.

3. BEING ANTI-SHAME DOES NOT MEAN BEING ANTI-SHAMING

Some philosophers argue that if we should be generally suspicious of shame, we should largely abandon shaming. Whilst Nussbaum offers some independent arguments against shaming, she writes ‘that each of them receives a deeper rationale by being connected to [my] account of shame. . . . [T]he account gives more power and flesh to the arguments, and thus gives us new reasons to accept them’ (2004: 229–230). In making the case that shaming violates dignity, Nussbaum goes on:

For on that account [of shame], people who inflict shame are very often not expressing virtuous motives or high ideals, but rather shrinking from their own human weakness and a rage against the very limits of human life. . . . Thus we can show that it will not be easy, if indeed it even is possible, to remove from even the most morally tethered shame penalties the quality of insult and humiliation to which the proponents of the dignity argument rightly object. (Nussbaum 2004: 232–233)²²

Thus, on Nussbaum’s account, our general normative concerns about shame (set out earlier in this paper) should make us worry about acts that encourage it. So, a radical critique of shame is supposed to underwrite a general scepticism about shaming—which (putatively) *inflicts* shame.

The account of shaming developed in Section 2 undermines this last assumption. Shaming should not always be understood as the infliction of shame. Whilst some shaming (directed shaming) is like this, there is also shaming (performative shaming) which should be explained by reference to its characteristic function of shoring-up social norms and standards. Whilst this function is sometimes served by, or at the same time as, the infliction of shame, this is not an essential feature of successful shaming. So, we should not follow Nussbaum in leaping from radical critiques

of shame to a general scepticism about shaming. If we should be worried about shame, we should be worried about acts that aim to inflict it. But since shaming should not always be understood in this way, it does not follow that we should largely abandon shaming.

I anticipate this reply: to extract a general scepticism about shaming from radical critiques of shame, we do not need the claim that shaming always aims to inculcate shame in its targets. All we need is the claim that shaming *reliably produces* shame in its targets (or others). We can agree that this does not always happen and is not always necessary for successful shaming (as in *Malcolm X*). But such cases do not upset the idea that we are, in general, vulnerable to experiencing shame when others communicate that shame would be apt for us (or perhaps for people 'like us'). Since shaming reliably produces shame, we can maintain that because we should be largely suspicious of shame, we should largely abandon shaming.

In response: what can be said for shaming here can also be said for *blaming*. We are quite vulnerable to experiencing shame when others communicate *any kind of* negative assessment of us. I assume proponents of abandoning shaming do not also want to abandon blame.²³ If much is to be made of this version of the claim that we should be troubled by the connection between shaming and shame, it must rest on the idea that there are *special* reasons why shaming will serve its function via the production of shame (even if there are deviant cases such as *Malcolm X*).

But this idea is false. There are multiple contingent mechanisms by which performative shaming shores-up social norms and standards.²⁴ Sanctioning us, 'with the weight of the shamer's own reproach . . . and the reproach of the masses' (McDonald 2021: 151)—often resulting in shame—is simply one possibility. Shaming can successfully enforce social norms merely by emphasizing how transgression will harm our reputation. And as Billingham and Parr write:

[P]ublic criticism can increase our common knowledge of (a) what the norm is; (b) what it demands in particular situations; and (c) when it has been violated. In these ways, public criticism enables us collectively to reaffirm our endorsement of the norm, and of the values it promotes or respects. (Billingham and Parr 2020: 1000)

So, shaming can shore-up social norms and standards by inducing a range of cognitive and affective changes.²⁵ This can include inducing shame in the people explicitly and expressly called out, or others.²⁶ But this does not re-establish the link to shame in a way which licenses a general abandonment of shaming. This is because all that is needed to block this move is to show that shaming need not proceed in this fashion and, supposing it did not, that this would not necessarily make it a deficient form of shaming. The shaming in *Malcolm X*, for example, could simply communicate what the norms are and what the likely sanctions will be for deviating from them, without inspiring shame in anyone. If it does this, it could still successfully shore-up social norms by increasing knowledge of their content and bringing about fear of reputation loss, for example. Since the production of shame does not hold a privileged place amongst the mechanisms by which shaming serves the function of shoring-up social norms and standards, we do not have any more reason to worry that shaming reliably produces shame than to worry that blaming does. So, it is unattractive to endorse a general abandonment of shaming on the basis of concerns about shame.

4. CRITICIZING SHAMING

My argument is not inconsistent with the view that shaming is often (or nearly always) morally troubling. But how can we establish such scepticism without falling into the pitfalls of the strategy criticized here? We could seek other ways to establish our suspicions about shaming in general terms.²⁷ But it may be more fruitful to offer a *fine-grained* critique. Of some act or type of shaming we can ask: Does shaming shore-up bad norms or standards? Is shaming an effective way of securing good ends? Is shaming a proportionate response to the offense which occasioned it? Are there viable alternative courses of action? If radical critiques of shame are sound, we can also ask what

relation the shaming bears to the production of shame in the target or others. We cannot be sure in advance how much shaming will be vulnerable to this fine-grained critique. But I suspect it captures most everyday objections to shaming. Our inability to extract a general rejection of shaming from radical critiques of shame is not an obstacle to a sensible morality of shaming.

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NOTES

1. See Bartky 1990, Fanon 1986: chap. 5, and Webster 2021.
2. See Jacquet 2016 and Lebron 2013.
3. See Flanagan 2021: chap. 5 for criticism.
4. This is adapted from Malcom X (X and Haley 2001: 391–392).
5. The panellist could also be pandering to the audience—if they are already well-disposed to his challenge.
6. My rejection of this view is echoed by Billingham and Parr (2020: 99), McDonald (2021: 135), and Thomason (2018: 179–181). Nussbaum (2004: 203–204) appears to endorse the naïve view. This is significant since Nussbaum seeks to extract a general scepticism about shaming from the radical critique of shame. The naïve view would license this move.
7. This owes something to the broadness of contemporary usage of 'shaming'—at least in the culture I am familiar with, it can be used to describe nearly any public criticism. Still, we should not be too focused on drawing distinctions in the use of words—but rather in making sense of the phenomena to which such words might be referring. So, whilst my account does concede something to the broadness of contemporary use of 'shaming', it also defines shaming as a distinctive form of criticism.
8. See Allison 2023: 6–8. For the view that at least some shaming enforces social norms, see Billingham and Parr 2020, Manne 2019, and McDonald 2021: 151–154. See McDonald (ibid.) on the relationship between shaming and social standards.
9. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point and the example.
10. If the norm were presented merely as a candidate social norm or as a personal norm only—as opposed to a social norm that is already operative within some sub-group—I am not sure the act would properly be characterized as shaming (unless we wanted to understand it simply as a form of, perhaps unsuccessful, directed shaming). Think of a similar protest to the vegan activists but carried out by a lone moral pioneer.
11. This suggestion parallels Williams's (1995) account of the 'proleptic' functions of blame—whereby the blamer gives the blamed a reason and does so by treating them as if they already have one. Blame can then retrospectively be made intelligible in relation to the reason the blamed now possesses.
12. See also Billingham and Parr 2020: 1000, Kahan 1996, and Thomason 2018: 181. Shaming will not necessarily be verbal, or its expressive content communicated intentionally. Its social meaning will often owe much to context. See Anderson and Pildes 2000. Notice that because shaming has a communicative aspect a neurosurgeon who manipulates your brain chemicals to make you feel shame does not thereby shame you.
13. Such disapproval need not, however, be sincere.
14. I will remain neutral between competing accounts of shame. For the view that one experiences shame only if one forms certain negative evaluations of oneself, see Rawls 1999: 388–391 and Taylor 1985: chap. 3. Others

deny that shame involves negative self-evaluations but claim that shame instead involves the perception of being negatively evaluated by others (see Calhoun 2004 and O'Brien 2020). Others deny that shame essentially incorporates evaluations at all (see Velleman 2001).

15. See also Nussbaum 2004: 184, 230. For criticism, see Flanagan 2021: 139–140. When shaming is occasioned by a putatively wrongful act, the shamer may also communicate that the target should feel guilty.
16. See Thomason 2018: 179.
17. Thomason agrees that aspects of some shaming are unintentional (2018: 182–184).
18. The publicity of (at least some) shaming is emphasized by Billingham and Parr (2020), McDonald (2021), and Thomason (2018: 181)
19. Making someone feel shame can in any case serve the aim of enforcing social norms by causing that person herself to shrink and flee the public space in shame.
20. It is not the thickest possible description. Consider roasting—which seems to be shaming that bears the right sort of connection to humour. See Anderson 2020.
See O'Brien 2022: 261–263 and Sibley 1971.
21. I have included 'in the right way' to exclude so-called deviant causal chains. Directed shaming succeeds when the shamed person experiences shame which is caused (and intended to be caused) in the right way by the shaming. Cf. Davidson 2001.
22. Nussbaum's remarks are focused on formal shaming penalties. But she is also wary of informal shaming. The dignity argument carries over to such shaming.
23. See Nussbaum 2004.
24. See Bell 2013: 267–269 for an account of blame according to which it has multiple aims, some of which overlap with my account of the multiple ways in which shaming serves its characteristic functions.
25. See Allison 2023: 7.
26. The audience in Malcolm X could be vulnerable to shame in response to the shaming, even if Malcom is not. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.
27. E.g., Nussbaum's claim that shaming violates dignity (2004: 230–233).

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