

## CHAPTER 15

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**SELF, CONSCIOUSNESS,  
AND SHAME**


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ON many standard readings, shame is an emotion that targets and involves the self in its totality. In shame, the self is affected by a global devaluation: it feels defective, objectionable, condemned. The basic question I wish to raise and discuss is the following: What does the fact that we feel shame tell us about the nature of self? Does shame testify to the presence of a self-concept, a (failed) self-ideal, and a capacity for critical self-assessment, or does it rather, as some have suggested, point to the fact that the self is in part socially constructed (Calhoun 2004: 145)? Should shame primarily be classified as a self-conscious emotion, or is it rather a distinct social emotion?

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**1 SHAME AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**


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Emotion research has spent much time investigating what Ekman called the ‘basic six’: joy, fear, sadness, surprise, anger, and disgust (Ekman 2003). Allegedly, these emotions emerge early in human development, they have a biological basis, a characteristic facial expression, and are culturally universal. It is fairly obvious, however, that these basic or primary emotions do not exhaust the richness of our emotional life. Think merely of more complex emotions such as embarrassment, envy, shame, guilt, pride, jealousy, remorse, or gratitude. According to Michael Lewis, one useful way of classifying the different emotions is by operating with a distinction between self-conscious and non-self-conscious emotions. Whereas primary emotions do not involve self-consciousness, the more complex emotions do (Lewis 2007: 136). Indeed, on Lewis’s account the latter group of emotions involves elaborate cognitive processes, they all come about through self-reflection, and they all involve and require a concept of self. Thus, a developmental requirement for experiencing such emotions is that the child is in possession of a self-concept or a self-representation, which according to Lewis only happens from around 18 months of age.

Lewis goes on to distinguish two groups of self-conscious emotions. Both groups involve self-exposure and objective self-consciousness—that is, self-reflection. But whereas the first involves non-evaluative exposure, the second involves both self-exposure and evaluation. The first group emerges around 18 months and includes emotions such as embarrassment and envy. The second group emerges around 36 months. It includes shame and guilt, and requires the ability to appropriate and internalize standards, rule and goals, and to evaluate and compare one's behaviour *vis-à-vis* such standards (Lewis 2007: 135).

Lewis ends up defining shame as an intense negative emotion that is elicited when one experiences failure relative to a standard, feels responsible for the failure, and believes that the failure reflects a damaged self. Whereas Lewis considers the issue of public failure to be relevant to the emotion of embarrassment, he denies its relevance when it comes to emotions such as shame, guilt, and pride (Lewis 1998: 127).

A very different account of shame can be found in the work of Rom Harré. Briefly put, Harré has argued that whereas shame is occasioned by the realization that others have become aware that what one has been doing has been a moral infraction, embarrassment is occasioned by the realization that others have become aware that what one has been doing has been a breach of convention and the code of manners (Harré 1990: 199).

I find both of these proposals problematic. Although we might readily agree that embarrassment is less shattering and painful than shame, that it is more obviously related to awkward social exposure (due to an open fly button, a loud stomach noise, inappropriate clothing, and so on) than to the violation of important personal values, Harré's definitions and neat distinction are unsatisfactory. Not only does he place too much emphasis on the presence of an actual audience—as if one cannot feel ashamed when being alone, as if one only feels shameful because one has been found out—his sharp distinction between moral infraction and breach of convention is also questionable. Although one can be ashamed of moral infractions, one can certainly also be ashamed of things that have nothing to do with ethics. Indeed, shame does not have to be brought about by something one wilfully does. One can feel ashamed of a physical disability or of one's parentage or skin colour. Thus, rather than linking shame and embarrassment to an infraction of moral values and social conventions respectively (an attempt that also flies in the face of the fact that the same event can be felt as either shameful or embarrassing by different people), I think a more plausible demarcation criterion is one that links shame, but not embarrassment, to a global decrease of self-esteem or self-respect. Embarrassment does not shade into shame until one's discomfort over exposure is joined by a negative self-assessment (see Miller 1985: 39). This would also match well with an observation by Galen Strawson: whereas past embarrassments can easily furnish funny stories to tell about oneself, past shames and humiliations do so rarely if at all (Strawson 1994).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As Strawson has subsequently pointed out, childhood shames might be some of the rare exceptions. Might we not in retrospect find it amusing that various trifles could back then be felt as shameful? I suspect, however, that the ability to feel amusement about such past shames is conditional upon us no longer identifying as strongly with our past self.

As for Lewis's account, I have various problems with his general understanding of consciousness and self-consciousness which in my view relies on a contentious higher-order representational theory of consciousness (Zahavi 2010), but my main concern for now is Lewis's downplaying of the social dimension of shame. Consider ~~again~~ the title of Lewis's book: *Shame: The Exposed Self*. This is how Lewis explains the subtitle:

The subtitle of this book is *The Exposed Self*. What is an exposed self and to whom is it exposed? The self is exposed to itself, that is, we are capable of viewing ourselves. A self capable of self-reflection is unique to humans. (Lewis 1992: 36)

In short, Lewis defines the exposure in question as one of being exposed to oneself. That is, when he talks of the exposed self he is referring to our capacity for self-reflection. Compare by contrast the following remark by Darwin: 'It is not the simple act of reflecting on our own appearance, but the thinking what others think of us, which excites a blush' (Darwin 1872/1965: 325). One problem with a definition of shame like Lewis's that focuses exclusively on an individual's own negative self-assessment is that it becomes difficult to differentiate shame from other negative self-evaluations, such as self-disappointment or self-criticism. Another problem with this highlighting of our visibility to ourselves is that it arguably fails to do justice to those undeniably social forms of shame which are induced by a deflation and devaluation of our public appearance and social self-identity, by the exposure of a discrepancy between who we claim to be and how we are perceived by others. In short, we need an account of shame that can also explain why personal flaws that are recognized and tolerated in privacy as minor shortcomings are felt as shameful the moment they are publicly exposed.

But my criticisms of Lewis and Harré seem to point in opposite directions. I blame Harré for exaggerating the need for an actual audience, and Lewis for downplaying the importance of sociality. How do these criticisms go together? Let us move onwards and consider some alternative views on shame found in phenomenology.

## 2 VARIETIES OF SHAME

In the third part of *L'Être et le néant* Sartre argues that shame, rather than merely being a self-reflective emotion, an emotion involving negative self-evaluation, is an emotion that reveals our relationality, our being-for-others.

According to Sartre, shame is a form of intentional consciousness. It is a shameful apprehension of something, and this something happens to be myself. I am ashamed of what I am, and to that extent shame also exemplifies a self-relation. As Sartre points out, however, shame is not primarily and originally a phenomenon of reflection. I can reflect upon my failings and ~~feel shame as result,~~ just as I might reflect upon my feeling of shame, but I can feel shame prior to engaging in reflection. Shame is, as he puts it, 'an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation' (Sartre 2003: 246). Indeed, and more significantly, in its primary form

shame is not a feeling I can simply elicit on my own through reflection; rather shame is shame of oneself before the other (Sartre 2003: 246, 312). It presupposes the intervention of the other, not merely because the other is the one before whom I feel ashamed, but also and more significantly because the other is the one that constitutes that of which I am ashamed. That is, the self of which I am ashamed, my public persona if you will, did not exist prior to my encounter with the other. It is brought about by this encounter. Thus although shame exemplifies a self-relation, we are on Sartre's account dealing with an essentially mediated form of self-relation—one where the other is the mediator between me and myself.

To feel shame is—if ever so fleetingly—to accept the other's evaluation; it is to identify with the object that the other looks at and judges. In being ashamed I accept and acknowledge the judgement of the other. I *am* the way the other sees me, and I am nothing but that (Sartre 2003: 246, 287). The other's gaze confers a truth upon me that I do not control, and over which I am—in that moment—powerless. Sartre's central claim is consequently that for shame to occur there must be a relationship between self and other where the self cares about the other's evaluation. Moreover, according to Sartre, it makes no difference whether the evaluation of the other is positive or not, since it is the very objectification that is shame-inducing. As he writes:

Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have 'fallen' into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (Sartre 2003: 312)

Although Sartre's analysis of shame is the most well-known phenomenological account, his analysis is neither the first nor the most extensive phenomenological one.<sup>2</sup> In 1933 Erwin Straus published a short but suggestive article entitled 'Die Scham als historiologisches Problem' in the *Schweizer Archiv für Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, and already, twenty years earlier, Max Scheler had written a long essay entitled 'Scham und Schamgefühl'. One reason for looking at Straus and Scheler is that they both add to, as well as challenge, Sartre's analysis. Moreover, in the last few years Scheler's account has received something of a revival, and has been assessed positively in recent books by, for instance, Nussbaum (2006: 174) and Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni (2011: 151).

One commonality between Straus and Scheler is that they both emphasize the need for a differentiation between various types of shame. They both argue against the view that shame is a negative and repressive emotion *per se*, one we should aim to remove from our lives (see Schneider 1987), and they would consequently disagree with Tangney and Dearing's general characterization of shame as an 'extremely painful and ugly feeling that has a negative impact on interpersonal behaviour' (2002: 3). Straus, for his part,

<sup>2</sup> Although there are many insights to be found in Sartre's analysis of intersubjectivity, there is certainly also a good deal to disagree with. This would include Sartre's excessively negative assessment and characterization of our encounter with others (see Zahavi 2002).

distinguishes between a protective form of shame which involves sensitivity to and respect for boundaries of intimacy, and a concealing form of shame which is more concerned with maintaining social prestige. As he points out, although language might not provide us with different terms for the two forms of shame, it does offer us different terms for the privation of the two forms: namely, the terms ‘shamelessness’ (*Schamlosigkeit*) and ‘unabashedness’ (*Unverschämtheit*) (Straus 1933: 341, 343; see Vallelonga 1976: 56, 59). To exemplify what Straus might have in mind when talking of the protective form of shame, consider the situation in which you feel ashamed as a result of having intimate details about your life revealed publicly. You might feel ashamed even if the audience does not react critically, but simply as a result of the exposure itself. Addressing the same phenomenon, Bollnow links shame to the desire to protect the most private and intimate core of ourselves from the violation that public scrutiny might cause (Bollnow 2009: 67, 91).

As for Scheler, he not only thinks the feeling of shame can in some instances be pleasurable, but more importantly, he considers a sensitivity to and capacity for shame ethically valuable and links it to the emergence of conscience: it is, as he points out, no coincidence that *Genesis* explicitly relates shame to knowledge of good and evil (Scheler 1957: 142). Scheler’s first point, regarding the pleasurable quality of shame, is connected to a distinction he makes that matches the one made by Straus. Scheler distinguishes the anticipating and protecting shame of the blushing virgin, which, on his view, is characterized by lovely warmth,<sup>3</sup> from the extremely painful experience of repenting shame (*Schamreue*), a burning shame that is backward-looking and full of piercing sharpness and self-hatred (Scheler 1957: 140). As for the second point, Scheler emphasizes that when we are ashamed of something, the shame reaction must be seen in the light of a normative commitment that existed prior to the situation about which one is ashamed (Scheler 1957: 100). The feeling of shame occurs precisely because of the discrepancy between the values one endorses and the actual situation. Indeed, shame anxiety—the fear of shaming situations—might be considered a guardian of dignity. It puts us on guard against undignified behaviour which would bring us (and others) in shaming situations.<sup>4</sup> As Plato already pointed out in the *Laws*, shame is what will prevent man from doing what is dishonourable (Plato 1961: 647a). Indeed, the very notion of shamelessness suggests that the possession of a sense of shame is a moral virtue. Rather than being inherently debilitating, shame might in short also play a constructive role in moral development.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Scheler argues that the occurrence of shame testifies to the

<sup>3</sup> One wonders whether a more appropriate English term for this would be ‘bashfulness’.

<sup>4</sup> The following example might illustrate this. You are on a train and looking for the restroom. When you find it and enter, you discover that it is already occupied and used by an elderly woman who must have forgotten to lock the door. If you possess a developed sense of shame you will not only retreat immediately, but also search for another restroom in order to spare the woman the experience of re-encountering you when she exits.

<sup>5</sup> But even if shame anxiety can play a role in the process of socialization by promoting social conformity—just think, for instance, of the teenager who carefully selects his clothing in order to avoid being shamed by his peers—it can obviously also be debilitating by killing initiative. If I do not do anything, I do not risk potential shameful exposure. Likewise, it is hard to see anything positive in the so-called ‘toxic shame’ felt by some sexually abused children.

presence of a certain self-respect and self-esteem; it is only because one expects oneself to have worth that this expectation can be disappointed and give rise to shame (Scheler 1957: 141; see Taylor 1985: 80–1, Nussbaum 2006: 184).

Scheler would agree with the idea that shame is an essentially self-involving emotion, but he explicitly rejects the claim that shame is essentially a social emotion—one that by necessity involves others. Rather, he argues that there is a self-directed form of shame which is just as fundamental as the shame one can feel in the presence of others, and he argues that the central feature of shame is that it points to the clash or discrepancy between our higher spiritual values on the one hand and our animal nature and bodily needs on the other (Scheler 1957: 68, 78). This is also why Scheler claims that shame is a distinctly human emotion—one that neither God nor animals could have. It is, in his view, a fundamental human emotion—one characterizing *conditio humana* (Scheler 1957: 67, 91).

More recently, Nussbaum has argued that shame concerns the tension between our aspirations and ideals on the one hand, and our awareness of our finitude and helplessness on the other. Shame is an emotional response to the uncovering and display of our weakness, our defects and imperfections (Nussbaum 2006: 173). As Nussbaum remarks, the Greek term for genitalia, *aidoia*, is related to the term for shame, *aidos* (Nussbaum 2006: 182). One might add that the German term for shame, *Scham*, also refers to the genitals, as does the Danish term for labia, *skamlæber*, which literally means ‘lips of shame’. One reason why nakedness has traditionally been associated with shame, one reason why we seek to cover our sexual organs, is, on Scheler’s view, precisely because they are symbols of animality, mortality, and neediness (Scheler 1957: 75). By comparison, Sartre argued that modesty and the fear of being surprised in a state of nakedness are symbolic manifestations of original shame. The body symbolizes our defenceless state as objects. To put on clothes is to attempt to hide one’s object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen—that is, to be a pure subject (Sartre 2003: 312). It is, in any case, hardly insignificant that shame has frequently been associated with nakedness and that the etymology of the word ‘shame’ can be traced back to the pre-Teutonic term for cover.

Nussbaum has suggested—partly influenced by psychoanalysis—that shame is on the scene before we become aware of what is normal within a particular social value system, and that it is most fundamentally an awareness of inadequacy, finitude, and helplessness that precedes any particular learning of social standards, although societies obviously have room to shape the experience of shame differently, by teaching different views of what is an appropriate occasion for shame (Nussbaum 2006: 173, 185). She also argues that whereas embarrassment is always social and contextual—it typically records unease about one’s social presentation and deals with a feature of one’s social situation which is often short-lived and not closely connected to important personal values—this is not the case for shame, which concerns matters that lie deep, and which can occur regardless of whether or not the world is looking (Nussbaum 2006: 204–5). But although Nussbaum denies that shame in general requires the presence of an audience, she does acknowledge that the earliest forms of shame do require and involve a dyadic relationship between infant and caretaker (Nussbaum 2006: 185, 191).



### 3 OTHERS IN MIND

At this point we need to become more clear about what role others play. To claim that shame only occurs in situations where a discrediting fact about oneself is exposed to others is not convincing. One can certainly feel shame when alone—that is, shame does not require an actual observer or audience. One may also feel ashamed of something even if one can be certain that it will forever remain secret. But does that mean that the reference to others is inessential, and that an account of shame can dispense with the social dimension? Let us not be too hasty. Let us consider some alleged cases of non-social shame.

1. You have a congenital facial disfigurement, and you feel shame when you see yourself in the mirror.
2. You have done something you believe should not be done (or failed to do something, you believe ought to be done). In such a situation you might indeed feel ashamed afterwards. You might feel guilty about the specific deed in question, but you might also feel ashamed of simply being the kind of person who could do (or fail to do) such a thing.<sup>6</sup>
3. You feel ashamed of who you have become when compared to who you were—that is, you feel ashamed of not living up to your capacities, of having betrayed your potential.
4. You have made a firm decision not to touch alcohol again; but in a moment of weakness you indulge your urge and begin a drinking binge that eventually leaves you senseless. When you emerge from your stupor you feel ashamed of your lack of self-control, of your surrender to what you consider base instincts.
5. You are together with a group of peers. They start to discuss a political issue and quickly a racist consensus emerges that you strongly disagree with. However, shame anxiety prevents you from expressing your dissenting opinion in order not to be ridiculed or ostracized. Afterwards, however, when alone, you are deeply ashamed of your cowardly attitude.

These examples certainly demonstrate that the feeling of shame does not require the presence of an actual observer. But what about an imagined other? In many cases where the shame-experiencing subject is physically alone and not in the presence of others, he or she will have internalized the perspective of the others, he or she will have others in mind, to use Rochat's phrase (Rochat 2009). The distinctive feeling tone of the shame-experience frequently includes the conviction that others would not have done or been like that. To fail at a task that nobody else is able to succeed at, and that nobody expects you to succeed at, is less likely to result in an experience of shame. The imagined other

<sup>6</sup> To insist that shame and guilt must be distinguished is, of course, not to deny that they can often occur together.

might consequently not only figure as a critical observer, but also as a point of contrast or comparison. Consider, as a case in point, the first example. Although the disfigured person who feels shame when looking in the mirror is alone, I think a natural interpretation would be that the feeling of shame is connected to the fact that the person experiences the disfigurement as a stigma, as something that excludes him or her from normality.

Objections to this line of reasoning, however, can be found in various recent publications by Deonna and Teroni. They insist that we ought to distinguish more carefully between different definitions of what a social emotion amounts to. Is the claim that 1) the object of shame is specifically social—its object being either somebody else or our own social standing—or is the claim 2) that the values involved in shame are acquired through contact with others, or 3) that shame always requires taking an outside perspective on ourselves, or 4) that shame always takes place in a social context? Deonna and Teroni basically reject all these proposals. It is on their view quite implausible to claim that there is always an actual or imagined audience when we feel shame, nor is it on their view correct to claim that shame is always connected to a perceived threat to our social standing or with the management of our social image (Deonna and Teroni 2011; Deonna and Teroni 2009: 39). Although this might indeed be the case when it comes to what they term ‘superficial’ shame, what they call ‘deep’ shame is something we feel as a result of personal failure quite regardless of the evaluation by others—for instance, when reflecting on our own morally repugnant behaviour (Deonna and Teroni 2011: 201). Deonna and Teroni next concede that the values involved in shame might be socially acquired, but they argue that this would hardly be sufficient to warrant the claim that shame is an essential social emotion, since the acquisition of values involved in other non-social emotions is equally social (Deonna and Teroni 2011: 195). Finally, Deonna and Teroni take up the issue of perspective change. It is, as they write, impossible to be ashamed of what one is wholly immersed in. In that sense, shame does involve the critical perspective of an evaluator. But they deny that the evaluator has to be another, or that the shift in perspective has to be motivated by others. Rather, and here they come quite close to Lewis’s view, the shift of perspective is merely a question of a shift from an unreflective doer to a reflective evaluator (Deonna and Teroni 2011: 203).

What is, then, their positive proposal? In their view, shame involves a negative evaluative stance towards oneself. It is motivated by an awareness of a conflict between a value one is committed to, and a (dis)value exemplified by what one is ashamed of (Deonna and Teroni 2011: 206). More specifically, they propose the following definition of shame: ‘Shame is the subject’s awareness that the way he is or acts is so much at odds with the values he cares to exemplify that it appears to disqualify him from his very commitment to the value, that is he perceives himself as unable to exemplify it even at a minimal level’ (Deonna and Teroni 2009: 46).

How should we assess these various objections and non-social definitions? Deonna and Teroni are very concerned with coming up with a definition of shame that covers all possible cases. To some extent this is, of course, a perfectly respectable endeavour, but such a focus also runs the risk of presenting us with a too undifferentiated picture of the emotion. It may offer us a definition that blinds us to important distinctions. I doubt



anybody would deny that shame is a multifaceted phenomenon, but as we have already seen some would go further and insist on the need for a distinction between different irreducible forms of shame, such as disgrace shame and discretion shame, concealing shame and protective shame, moral shame and non-moral shame, or bodily shame (*Leibesscham*) and psychical shame (*Seelenscham*), to mention just a few of the available candidates (see, for instance, Ausubel 1955: 382; Bollnow 2009: 55–7; Smith *et al.* 2002: 157). Furthermore, we should not forget that shame belongs to a family of interrelated emotions. Indeed, the argument has been made that the word ‘shame’ once covered much of the ground now parcelled out between ‘embarrassment’ and ‘humiliation’ (Strawson 1994). It is not difficult to come up with examples where the demarcation gets somewhat fuzzy. The fact that the same event can be felt as humiliating or shameful or embarrassing by different people does not make things easier.

Given this situation I will refrain from the bold but perhaps also overly ambitious task of offering a clear-cut definition of shame—one that specifies its necessary and sufficient features. My goal in the following will be somewhat more modest. Rather than attempting to disprove that there are non-social types of shame, my claim is that there are other, and arguably more prototypical, forms of shame that cannot adequately be understood in non-social terms, and that an attempt to provide a non-social definition of shame is consequently bound to miss something quite significant.<sup>7</sup> Consider for a start—and in the following my main focus will be on disgrace shame—the following five examples:

1. When writing your latest article you make extensive use of passages found in an essay by a little known and recently deceased scholar. After your article has been published you participate in a public meeting where you are suddenly accused of plagiarism. You emphatically deny it, but the accuser—your departmental nemesis—produces incontrovertible proof.
2. You are ridiculed by your peers when you show up at a high-school party in out-of-fashion clothes.
3. You apply for a position and have told your friends that you are sure to get it, but after the job interview, and while in the company of your friends, you are informed by the hiring committee that you simply are not qualified for the job.
4. You have been having a row with your unruly 5-year old daughter, and you finally lose your patience and slap her. Right away you experience guilt, but then you suddenly realize that the principal of the kindergarten has been observing the whole scene.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is obviously also the problem of whether the definition provided by Deonna and Teroni, which mainly targets highly elaborate, self-directed judgemental forms of shame, really hits the mark. On the one hand, it seems to be so cognitively demanding that it would rule out anything like infantile shame. By contrast, Scheler would claim that shame is present in early form from birth onwards (1957: 107), and similar views can be found in many psychoanalytical accounts (see Broucek 1991; Nathanson 1994). On the other hand, the case could be made that shame is less about one’s failure to exemplify a self-relevant value than it is about exemplifying a self-relevant defect—that is, what is shame-inducing is not the distance from ideal self but the closeness to undesired self (Lindsay-Hartz *et al.* 1995, 277; Gilbert 1998, 19).

5. You have started a new romantic relationship. After a while, in a moment of intimacy, you reveal your sexual preferences. Your disclosure is met by your partner's incredulous stare.

If we consider these five examples—and to avoid any misunderstandings I should emphasize that they are not autobiographical—how plausible is it to claim that others are quite accidental to the emotion in question and that the very same experience of shame could have occurred in a private setting?<sup>8</sup> I do not find such a suggestion plausible at all. Again, I am not denying that we can sit in judgement on ourselves and as a result come to feel shame, but I think that this kind of repenting, self-reflective shame, with its accompanying feeling of self-disappointment, self-misery or even self-loathing has a somewhat different phenomenology than the intense feeling of shame which one can experience in the presence of others.<sup>9</sup> In the latter case there is a heightened feeling of exposure and vulnerability, and an accompanying wish to hide and disappear, to become invisible, to sink into the ground. There is also a characteristic narrowing of focus. You cannot carefully attend to details in the environment while being subjected to that kind of shame. Rather, the world recedes and the self stands revealed. The behavioural manifestation of shame—slumped posture, downward head movement, and gaze-avoidance—also emphasizes the centripetality of the emotion. The experience of shame is an experience of self, but it is one that is thrust upon us. We are in the spotlight whether we want it or not. It is one that overwhelms us and which is initially almost impossible to avoid, escape, or control. As Nietzsche puts it in *Daybreak*:

<sup>8</sup> The same obviously holds true for something like vicarious shame. Consider the following example. You are walking on the street with a friend of yours, who is black. You encounter your father, who hails your friend with a racial slur. You might experience shame as a result, and it might take different forms. You might feel shame *with* your friend, or feel shame *for* your father (see Scheler 1957: 81). That is, you might sympathize with and share your friend's feeling of shame, or you might simply feel ashamed of your father (who ought to be ashamed). These rather different cases of vicarious shame raise complicated questions regarding the role of identification and its involvement in, for instance, honour killings, which I cannot pursue further here. It is, in any case, noteworthy that the *Oxford English Dictionary* in defining shame specifically includes a reference to those situations where shame arises from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in the conduct of those others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own.

<sup>9</sup> In an intriguing study, participants were asked to read hypothetical accounts of an event that could have happened to a person like themselves. They were told to try to imagine what the central person in the account would be thinking and feeling. Then, after reading the accounts, participants were asked to complete a set of items designed to measure their sense of this person's experience. In one test, the different accounts involved a protagonist who committed a moral transgression, and the story then varied according to three conditions (privacy, implicit and explicit public exposure). In the first condition the transgression took place in privacy. In the second condition the transgressor either saw or was reminded of someone who would have disapproved of the transgression, and in the final condition the transgression was actually witnessed by another. The findings showed unequivocally that explicit public exposure intensified the experience of shame when compared to the privacy condition. If the transgression involved a violation of personal standards, the feeling of shame was also significantly higher in the implicit exposure condition when compared to the privacy condition (Smith *et al.* 2002).

The feeling ‘I am the mid-point of the world!’ arises very strongly if one is suddenly overcome with shame; one then stands there as though confused in the midst of a surging sea and feels dazzled as though by a great eye which gazes upon us and through us from all sides. (Nietzsche 1997: 166)

This kind of shame also disrupts the normal temporal flow. Whereas repenting, self-reflective shame is backward-looking and past-oriented, and whereas shame anxiety—which in any case might be more of a disposition than an occurrent feeling—is by and large anticipatory and future-oriented, the acute experience of shame on which I am currently focusing might best be characterized in terms of a ‘frozen now’ (see Karlsson and Sjöberg 2009: 353). The future is lost, and the subject is fixed on the present moment. As Sartre writes, in shame, I experience myself as trapped in facticity, as being irremediably what I am (rather than as someone with future possibilities), as defencelessly illuminated by an absolute light (with no protective privacy) (Sartre 2003: 286, 312). In his analysis of the different ontological dimensions of the body, Sartre further argues that the gaze of the other disrupts my control of the situation (Sartre 2003: 289). Rather than simply existing bodily, rather than simply being absorbed in my various projects, and interacting confidently with the environment, I become painfully aware of my body’s facticity and being-there. I become aware that my body is something on which others’ points of view bear. This is why Sartre speaks of my body as something that escapes me on all sides and as a perpetual ‘outside’ of my most intimate ‘inside’ (Sartre 2003: 375). Whereas guilt is primarily focused on the negative effects on others and includes a wish to undo the deed and might motivate reparative actions, the acute feeling of shame does not leave room for the exploration of future possibilities of redemption.

Taylor has at one point argued that shame (in contrast to embarrassment) involves an absolute sense of degradation, and not just one that is relative to a specific observer or audience. Whereas one might feel embarrassed *vis-à-vis* specific others—that is, whereas embarrassment might be relative to specific others, and whereas one might seek comfort for this embarrassment and even joke about it with friends and confederates—the experience of shame is different. Not only is shame difficult to communicate,<sup>10</sup> but we lack the inclination to let others in on it (in order to obtain their sympathy and consolation). Moreover, although shame might be induced by our encounter with a specific other, we are not merely shamed *vis-à-vis* him or her. Our relationship to everybody is affected. Shame is to that extent a far more alienating and isolating experience than embarrassment. But instead of seeing this as evidence for the fact that others play no significant role—which would be Taylor’s interpretation—I find it more plausible to claim that shame, rather than simply involving a global decrease of self-esteem and self-confidence, also affects and alters our interaction and connection with others.

<sup>10</sup> Based on her clinical experience, Miller recounts how the speech of a person who attempts to talk about shame might at first be fragmented as a struggle takes place between the impulse to disclose and the impulse to conceal (Miller 1985: 36).

## 4 STANDARDS AND EVALUATIONS

As Aristotle pointed out in the *Rhetoric*, the people we feel shame before are those whose opinion of us matters to us (Aristotle 1984: 1384a25). Indeed, it is rarely the case that the identity of the audience is irrelevant. Not only might it make a difference whether the witness is a close family member, somebody who is part of your social network, or a total stranger (especially if the person in question does not know who you are either), but hierarchy and social status can also play a role. A sub-par performance in public will be experienced as more shameful if noticed by somebody with more rather than less social status than you. Compare, for instance, the situation where a pianist makes mistakes when practising a piece alone, with the situation where he makes mistakes at a public recital with the composer in attendance. However, as Landweer has observed, not only might the status and authority of the witness make a difference to the intensity of the experience of shame. If the witness expects and values your competence, and if she is sufficiently qualified to be able to notice your failure, her presence can also change the character and intensity of the shame, even if she might be less competent and have a lower social status than yourself (Landweer 1999: 94).

As already mentioned, Sartre argued that shame in the first instance is shame of oneself before the other, and that this involves an acceptance of the other's evaluation (Sartre 2003: 246, 287). This highlighting of the entailed acceptance matches well with an observation made by Karlsson and Sjöberg: namely, that that which is revealed in shame, although highly undesirable, is nevertheless experienced as familiar, as something that discloses the truth about oneself (2009: 350). Such claims have, however, been disputed by various authors, who by contrast have stressed the *heteronomous* character of shame. Deigh, for instance, has argued that we must 'admit cases of shame felt in response to another's criticism or ridicule in which the subjects do not accept the other person's judgement of them and so do not make the same judgement of themselves' (Deigh 1983: 233; see Wollheim 1999: 152). Calhoun has even argued that it is a mark of moral maturity to feel ashamed before those with whom one shares a moral practice, even when one disagrees with their moral criticisms (Calhoun 2004: 129). By arguing in this manner, Calhoun criticizes those who claim that 'mature agents only feel shame in *their own eyes*, and only for falling short of their own, autonomously set standards' (Calhoun 2004: 129).

I am not sure such use of the terms 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' is really clarifying. When siding with Sartre, and when arguing that one only feels shame if one accepts the involved evaluation, I am obviously not suggesting that one only feels shame when falling short of one's own autonomously set standards. The relevant question is not whether the standards are set autonomously in the sense of being set completely independently of others—to quote Walsh, 'it is naive to suppose that human beings act in total isolation from their fellows, or to think that they bring virgin minds to their actions, minds which in no sense bear the impress of their associations with other men' (Walsh 1970: 8)—but whether the feeling of shame entails an endorsement of those standards,

regardless of their origin. To put it differently, the point of disagreement is not over whether others might impose certain external standards on the subject—this is hardly disputed by anyone—but whether the subject needs to endorse the evaluation in order to feel shame. Now, Calhoun further argues that any strategy that roots ‘the power to shame in the agent’s endorsement of the shamer’s evaluations will have trouble capturing shame’s distinctively social character’ (2004: 135), since it ultimately reduces ‘the other before whom we feel shame to a mirror of ourselves’ (2004: 129). But why should we accept this reasoning? Might an internalization of the other’s evaluation not involve the acceptance of new standards? If so, it is hardly a question of making the other a mirror of oneself, but rather of oneself responding to the other.

We need, however, to distinguish more carefully between the other’s evaluation and the underlying value. Consider the following example. When giving mouth-to-mouth respiration to a girl after you have saved her from drowning, you are accused by passers-by of taking advantage of the girl. Since you have a clear conscience, you do not accept the evaluation, but you do share the underlying value: that it is wrong to sexually exploit a defenceless girl. According to Castelfranchi and Poggi you will in this case feel ashamed in the eyes of others, without feeling ashamed before yourself (1990: 238). Is this suggestion convincing? Does it really make sense to speak of cases of shame where one is ashamed in the eyes of others, but not in one’s own? It is obviously possible that others can think one ought to be ashamed when one is not, but that is not what Castelfranchi and Poggi have in mind. Rather, and to repeat, they think that one might feel shame without feeling it in one’s own eyes. I am somewhat sceptical about this proposal. I think it would be more correct to interpret the case in question as a case involving embarrassment rather than shame. Why? Because I think shame in contrast to embarrassment is linked to a global decrease of self-esteem, and I do not think the situation in question—where one does not share the other’s evaluation and know it to be false—would occasion such a decrease. Perhaps some might object to this assessment and insist that the situation described by Castelfranchi and Poggi could be shame-inducing. I agree that under some circumstances it could indeed, but even then it would not support their interpretation, since the feeling of shame would still be conditional upon the acceptance of the others’ evaluation. How could that possibly be the case? Well, what if you were struck by the girls’ beauty during your attempt to resuscitate her, and felt attracted by her, and even had the fleeting thought that her lips were voluptuous. Had that been the case, I think one might possibly feel ashamed by the accusation of the passers-by. It would sow a doubt in one’s own mind: was there perhaps, after all, an illicit element of arousal involved? To make the case for this interpretation, consider a slight variation of the story. In order to save the woman, you had to risk your own life, since you are a very poor swimmer. After struggling to bring her in safety, and after commencing the attempt to resuscitate her, passers-by accuse you of attempting to exploit the situation in order to steal her valuables. In this case, the accusation is so far-fetched that it is very unlikely to be accepted by the accused, and as a result I find it quite implausible to claim that it would be shame-inducing. If anything, a more likely reaction would be strong indignation.

But are there not, some might insist, situations where one might feel ashamed even if one rejects the relevant standards and disagree with the evaluation? Consider the relation between shame and humiliation. Humiliation (or shaming) usually involves a temporary alteration of status—one is put in a lowered or degraded position—rather than a more enduring change of identity. Moreover, it usually comes about not because you yourself are doing anything, but because somebody else is doing something to you. In that sense it usually requires a foreign agent, one with power over you. To humiliate someone is to assert and exert a particular insidious form of control over the person in question, since one seeks to manipulate the person's self-esteem and self-assessment. In fact—and this is the central point—the person who feels humiliated might often have difficulties keeping his identity uncontaminated by the humiliated status. He might feel soiled and burdened with an unwanted identity, and might even begin to blame himself and feel responsible for the status. In such cases, shame will also follow (Miller 1985: 44). This, I think, might be part of the reason why people who have been sexually abused might feel shame, though they are obviously the victims and not the perpetrators. In some cases, however, humiliation and shame can come apart. In some cultures it might be humiliating to be treated as an equal by a person of lower status, but although you might feel humiliated by this, it does not entail that you accept the evaluation. It does not lead to the global decrease of self-esteem which I take to be a necessary feature of shame. Whereas people believe (in some cases quite wrongly, of course) that their shame is deserved and justified, they do not necessarily believe they deserve their humiliation. This is also why humiliation frequently involves a focus on the harmful and unfair other, and why it might be accompanied by a desire for revenge (Gilbert 1998).

I have repeatedly emphasized the link between shame and a decrease of self-esteem. But that link has also been questioned and challenged. It has been argued that the two can be dissociated and that it is possible to have a decrease of self-esteem without feeling ashamed (but perhaps merely mildly self-disappointed), just as it is possible to feel shame without experiencing any loss of self-esteem (Deigh 1983).

In voicing this objection, Deigh is primarily objecting to Rawls' characterization of shame as an emotion that one feels upon the loss of self-esteem (Deigh 1983: 225). How does Rawls analyse this loss of self-esteem? According to Deigh, he characterizes it as a question of failing to achieve a goal or an ideal that is integral to one's self-conception. More specifically, on this approach one experiences self-esteem if one regards one's aims and ideals as worthy and believes that one is well suited to pursue them. One loses self-esteem if one's favourable self-assessment is overturned and supplanted by an unfavourable one (Deigh 1983: 226, 229). But as Deigh then proceeds to point out, not only might some simply feel self-disappointment under such circumstances, but developmental evidence also suggests that children can feel shame before they have a well-defined self-conception that is centred around the pursuit of certain stable aims and before they are able to measure themselves against standards of what is necessary to achieve such aims (Deigh 1983: 232–4). And if this is so, a decrease of self-esteem cannot be essential to shame. Deigh continues by criticizing Rawls for failing to consider the possibility that the opinion of others might be internally related to shame, and suggests that shame is



more often ‘a response to the evident deprecatory opinion others have of one than an emotion aroused upon judgement that one’s aims are shoddy or that one is deficient in talent or ability necessary to achieve them’ (Deigh 1983: 233, 238).<sup>11</sup>

The reason Deigh objects to the proposed link between shame and a decrease of self-esteem is consequently because, on his view, it fails to consider the interpersonal dimension of the emotion. His proposal is instead to link shame to a threat to one’s self-worth, since there are aspects central to one’s identity which contribute to one’s sense of worth independently of one’s own achievements (Deigh 1983: 241).

As I see it, the main issue here is one of terminology. Deigh introduces a distinction between one’s sense of worth and one’s self-esteem, and follows Rawls in defining the latter in terms of achievements. But if one abandons such a narrow definition and basically uses ‘sense of worth’ and ‘self-esteem’ synonymously, while at the same time giving up the idea that a decrease in self-esteem is *sufficient* for shame, the objection seems to lose its force.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by returning to the questions with which I began. What does the fact that we feel shame tell us about the nature of self? What kind of self is affected in shame?

In a number of previous publications I have sought to articulate and defend the notion of an experiential core self, and have argued that such a notion can already be found in phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, and Henry (see Zahavi 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2011). More specifically, I have proposed that one can link a basic sense of self to the first-personal character of experiential life. When I taste a strawberry, remember the birth of my oldest son, or think about climate change, all of these experiences present me with different intentional objects. These objects are there *for me* in different experiential modes of givenness (as tasted, recollected, contemplated, and so on). This *for-me-ness* or *mineness*, which seems inescapably required by the experiential presence of intentional objects, and which is the feature that really makes it appropriate to speak of the subjectivity of experience, is obviously not a quality like green, sweet, or hard. It does not refer to a specific experiential content—that is, to a specific *what*. Rather, it refers to the distinct manner or *how* of experience—to the first-personal character of experience—and in the past I have argued that this constitutes a primitive form of selfhood. An important feature of this notion of self is that the self, rather than being conceived as an ineffable transcendental precondition that stands beyond the stream of experiences, or as a social construct that evolves through time, is seen as an integral but pre-social dimension of our experiential life.

<sup>11</sup> It is not entirely clear to me whether Deigh’s interpretation does justice to Rawls’ theory. Not only does Rawls operate with a distinction between natural shame and moral shame (Rawls 1972: 444), but he also explicitly writes that the latter involves our relation to others (Rawls 1972: 446).

The analysis of shame can illustrate the limitations of the just outlined notion of self. Shame testifies to our exposure, vulnerability, and visibility, and is importantly linked to such issues as concealment and disclosure, sociality and alienation, separation and interdependence, difference and connectedness. The shamed self is not the experiential core self. Or to put it differently, a self that can be shamed is a more complex (and complicated) self than the minimalist experiential self.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps a reference to Mead might clarify matters. Mead is usually categorized as a defender of a social constructivist approach to the self. On his view, we are selves not by individual right but in virtue of our relation to one another. However, in *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead concedes that one could talk of a single self if one identified the self with a certain feeling-consciousness, and that previous thinkers such as James had sought to find the basis of self in reflexive affective experiences—that is, in experiences involving self-feeling. Mead even writes that there is a certain element of truth in this, but then denies that it is the whole story (Mead 1962: 164, 169, 173). For Mead, the problem of selfhood is fundamentally the problem of how an individual can get experientially outside himself in such a way as to become an object to himself. Thus, for Mead, to be a self is ultimately more a question of becoming an object than of being a subject. In his view, one can only become an object to oneself in an indirect manner: namely, by adopting the attitudes of others on oneself, and this is something that can only happen within a social environment (Mead 1962: 138).

If one compares Mead and Sartre there are, of course, some marked differences between the two. Whereas Mead distinguishes sharply between consciousness and self-consciousness, and even claims that we prior to the rise of self-consciousness experience our own feelings and sensations as parts of our environment rather than as our own (Mead 1962: 171), Sartre argues that our experiential life is characterized by a primitive form of self-consciousness from the very start. Despite this important difference, however, both of them highlight the extent to which certain forms of self-experience are constitutively dependent upon others.

Contrary to those who claim that ‘what is distinctive of shame is the presence of a specific kind of *intrapersonal* evaluation, an evaluative perspective the subject takes upon himself’ (Deonna, Rodogno, Teroni 2011: 135), I do not think one can capture the acute experience of shame simply by focusing on the fact that the shamed subject is thrown back upon itself. As Seidler points out—and I think this constitutes an essential insight—

<sup>12</sup> According to Deonna and Teroni, we need to operate with a distinction between superficial and deep shame (2011, 201), and only the former concerns our social identity. Their very choice of terms suggests that the core of our being, our real identity, is pre-social or asocial, whereas the social dimension of our identity is only skin-deep, a mere matter of appearance. In arguing like this they are getting very close to a view espoused by Kierkegaard in the following passage: ‘Everyone who when before himself is not more ashamed than he is before all others will, if he is placed in a difficult position and is sorely tried in life, end up becoming a slave of people in one way or another. What is it to be more ashamed before others than before oneself but to be more ashamed of seeming than of being?’ (Kierkegaard 1993: 53). Although I would agree that there is a core dimension of our selfhood that is pre-social (Zahavi 2009), I do not think that dimension, which on my terms is what should be called the experiential self, is or could be the subject of deep shame.

‘Das Schamsubjekt ist “*ganz bei sich*” und gleichzeitig “*außer sich*”’ (Seidler 2001: 25–6). This, I think, is also Sartre’s basic idea. More generally speaking, Sartre takes shame to involve an existential alienation. I would agree with this—at least if one understands it as amounting to a decisive change of perspective on self. In some cases the alienating power is a different subject, and Sartre’s description of our pre-reflective feeling of shame when confronted with the evaluating gaze of the other is an example of this. In other cases, the feeling of shame occurs when we sit in judgement on ourselves. But in this case as well, there is a form of exposure and self-alienation, a kind of self-observation and self-distancing. To put it differently, in the company of others the experience of shame can occur pre-reflectively, since the alien perspective is co-present. When alone, the experience of shame will take a more reflective form, since the alien perspective has to be provided through a form of reflective self-distancing.

I would consequently maintain that shame contains a significant and irreducible element of ‘alterity’. This is obvious in those cases where the experience of shame arises as a reaction to the evaluation of others, but even past-oriented self-reflective shame and future-oriented shame anxiety contain this aspect—although both lack some of the characteristic phenomenology of the acute form of shame. This is so not only because of the self-distancing and doubling of perspectives involved, but also because others influence the development and formation of our own standards. To that extent, the evaluating perspectives of others may play a role in the structure of the emotion even if they are not factually present or explicitly imagined (Landweer 1999: 57, 67). Moreover, even if one could argue that the kind of shame you might feel when failing to meet your own standards is not socially mediated in any direct fashion (it is not as if you only feel shameful because you are losing face or that other people’s evaluations are always part of what shame us) there is still the question concerning the relation between *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* shame. I have rejected the claim that the latter can be reduced to or explained on the basis of the former. In fact, although I cannot substantiate the claim in any detail in this chapter, I find it far more plausible to claim that intrapersonal shame is subsequent to (and conditioned by) interpersonal shame. Is it not by first being attentive to and sensitive to the attention and evaluation—that is, perspective of the other—that we gain the ability to internalize that perspective? Is it not by adopting the perspective of the other that we can gain sufficient self-distance to permit a critical self-evaluation? This would be the view not only of a number of developmental psychologists, but also of, say, philosophers such as Mead and Sartre. As the latter writes, ‘although certain complex forms derived from shame can appear on the reflective plane, shame is not originally a phenomenon of reflection. In fact, no matter what results one can obtain in solitude by the religious *practice* of shame, it is in its primary structure shame *before somebody*’ (Sartre 2003: 245).

There is much more to be said about shame. A more adequate understanding of this complex phenomenon would also require extensive analysis of, for instance, its developmental trajectory (how early does it emerge, how much does infantile shame—if it exists—resemble adult shame, what role does it play in adolescence, and so on), and cultural specificity (to what extent do the shame-inducing situations, the very experience

of shame and the available coping strategies vary from culture to culture). But these are not topics I can pursue further on this occasion. In conclusion, let me just state that I think the preceding discussion has shown that it is questionable whether the self-relation we find in shame is as self-contained and inward-directed as Lewis and Deonna and Teroni claim. I think that prototypical forms of shame provide vivid examples of other-mediated forms of self-experience. More specifically, I think shame—and other forms of ‘self-other-conscious emotions’, to use Reddy’s insightful term (Reddy 2008: 145)—can teach us something important about how our experience of and adaptation of the other’s attitude towards ourselves contribute to the development and constitution of self.<sup>13</sup>

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