



The moral appropriateness of shame

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Abstract

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In this article I explore the much neglected moral emotion of shame and consider the senses in which it may be regarded as morally appropriate. I argue that there is a connection between coming to terms with shame for those who feel ashamed, and judgments concerning its moral appropriateness. The elucidation of normative connections between shame, self-respect and autonomy implies the need to accept certain aspects of shame as regrettable yet, sometimes, as valuable.

Opsomming

Die morele gepastheid van skaamte

In hierdie artikel ondersoek ek die hoogs verwaarloosde morele emosie van skaamte en oorweeg die betekenis waarin dit as moreel aanvaarbaar en gepas beskou kan word. Die verband tussen die aanvaarding van skaamte vir dié wat skaamte ervaar; en oordele aangaande die morele gepastheid daarvan word ook beredeneer. Die verheldering van normatiewe verbintnisse tussen skaamte, self-respek en outonomie impliseer die behoefte om enkele aspekte van

1 In general, I maintain that emotions are sometimes morally *appropriate* – which is to say, very roughly, that each emotion type has instances that respond to genuine value. This is as true of the more attractive cases such as compassion as of several emotions philosophers often reject as vicious, such as shame. These emotions, too, are sometimes responses to genuine values. My arguments will turn partly on some speculative empirical claims, which, however, may ultimately be disproved. But even if my hypothesis is wrong, its defence may prove useful by broaching connections between values and distinctively human concerns.

skaamte as betreuenswaardig, maar soms ook as waardevol te aanvaar.

1. Introduction

Some philosophers are ashamed of shame. According to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1128b),

Shame should not be described as an excellence; for it is more like a passion than a state ... [And this] passion is not becoming to every age, but only to youth... [A]n older person no one would praise for being prone to the sin of disgrace, since we think we should not do anything that need cause this sense.

On the other hand, Plato (*Laws* 2.671c) praises shame as that which will prevent man from doing what is dishonourable. My own stance on shame is closer to the Platonic than to the Aristotelian view. I shall defend the view that the experience of shame may serve as an important warning signal that one's moral values are under threat. This warning signal carries with it the important implication that fostering receptivity to properly felt shame is an important educational goal. That Aristotle should have declined this implication, except for the young, may be considered as one of his infamous empirical mistakes – in this case, the psychological error of failing to accept the fact that no one is wise at all times and we all need to experience shame from time to time in order to identify and correct our inevitable lapses and mistakes. One might question whether we need shame to do this. Does not our sense of *guilt* come into play in this respect? Many philosophers (Rawls, 1971; Deigh, 1983; Taylor, 1985) and some psychologists (Piers & Singer, 1953, 1971; Tangney & Fischer, 1995) have maintained that shame is not a response to moral wrong-doing, but something we feel when we have had a shock to our self-esteem, or when we discover our shortcomings in regard to what we want to be, or when our failure to be or act as befits our station in life is publicly exposed. They have maintained that if shame is a moral emotion, it is more primitive and less useful than guilt – one for which both individuals and cultures would be the better if they could move beyond it.

I begin by providing an overview of various theoretical perspectives on shame and related emotions and concepts with particular reference to their implications for morality. Among such a constellation of concepts, self-respect is singled out for detailed examination. I try to establish connections between shame and self-respect that have been overlooked and have led to misunderstanding concerning their proper relation. I argue that morally

appropriate shame is compatible with autonomous moral judgment by unpacking what is involved in the role of shame in influencing morally sound judgment and morally appropriate conduct. My goal is to recognise the interplay of both autonomous and other-influenced judgments in identifying our shortcomings and seeking to respond critically to them. I want to show that adopting this strategy will lead to appreciation of the moral appropriateness of experiencing and accepting shame.

2. Situating shame

While most psychologists and educators have long recognised the moral importance of guilt, they have had more ambivalent feelings about shame, the "ugly" moral emotion (Tangney, 1991). I want to suggest that both are important moral emotions (although I shall not be much concerned with guilt, which, in my opinion, has been both over-emphasised and over-analysed), since they generally make people conform to rules and uphold the social order. Shame and its close cognate, embarrassment, are probably even more important in daily life, since they are potentially at work in all public interactions and serve to regulate unacceptable and, sometimes, immoral behaviour.² A purely self-interested creature would find reasons to restrain her behaviour in cases where norm violations would lead to punishment, but she would not feel guilt over harms that only she knew about, or experience shame over the discovery of her own moral depravity, or even embarrassment at being caught in a lie. Indeed, the complete lack of shame, embarrassment, and guilt is one of the most salient hallmarks of the psychopath, along with the absence of sympathy (Cleckley, 1955).

• The guilt-shame dichotomy

There is a common distinction, and not a negligible one between shame and guilt. The invocation of a sharp distinction between "shame societies" and "guilt societies" is, for instance, a commonplace in the social sciences. The former ("shame societies") is

2 In a number of recent studies conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, researchers found that "people refer to themselves as experiencing shame when they believe that a real flaw of their self has been revealed [while] they refer to themselves as experiencing embarrassment when they believe that others have reason to think a flaw has been revealed ... The data are inconsistent with the view that embarrassment is tied to violations of conventions, whereas shame is tied to moral failings" (Sabini, Garvey & Hall, 2001:104).

apparently characterised by *heteronomy* – avoidance of wrongful action for fear of being found out and ridiculed by others, the reaction of running or hiding away if caught. On the other hand the latter distinction (“guilt societies”) is characterised by *autonomy* – avoidance caused by one’s own sense of guilt, the reaction of self-loathing and of wanting to compensate one’s victims because of the wrongs done to them.³ The idea seems to be that in shame one’s assessment of failure is merely *external*, whereas in guilt it is purely *internal*, that is, only concerned with the subject’s own norms and evaluations without regard to the verdict of a detached observer or the gaze of an external audience.

It is tempting to consider guilt an independent emotion – one focused on the individual’s own moral failure, which has caused harm and is thought to stand in need of rectification – and it may be possible to imagine people experiencing some sort of shame without experiencing guilt. However, the conceptual allure of the Kantian distinction between autonomy and heteronomy, reflected in the above guilt-shame dichotomy, appears to be waning. Bernard Williams (1993:93) claims that guilt and shame overlap to a significant extent and we will not understand either unless we take both seriously. While there is a distinction to be drawn between these two concepts, conceptualising them as stark opposites overlooks important connections, as I shall argue below.

In addition to conceptual considerations, there are *factual* reasons for rejecting the conflation of shame with “outer” and guilt with “inner”. Williams (1993:81 ff.) points out that in the paradigmatic shame society of ancient Greece, one could experience equally strong shame over unworthy conduct which would have resulted in dishonour had one been seen, as over unworthy conduct which, in fact, was seen. The most common Greek word for shame, *aidos*,⁴ signifies an experience akin to that of being caught in public with one’s trousers down. Shame is the result of being seen by the wrong

3 Piers and Singer (1971:63) write, “The prevailing criterion for distinguishing shame and guilt cultures has been the distinction between external and internal sanctions. If a culture depends primarily on external sanctions, it is considered to be a shame culture.”

4 It is naive to conclude that because the Greeks did not possess two separate words for what we call “shame” and “guilt”, their word *aidos* could not cover the meanings of both. As Williams (1993:90 ff.) amply demonstrates, *aidos* includes elements of inner sanctions, indignation, reparation, and forgiveness – the things nowadays typically associated with guilt rather than shame.

people in the wrong condition. People could also be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the wrong way. For example, the emperor, in Hans Christian Anderson's famous tale, might have felt equal shame if only he, and no one else in the audience, had grasped the meaning of the child's revelation about his "new clothes". Nothing in the nature of so-called "shame societies" thus precludes the possibility of personal moral convictions contradicting that of a "misled" majority.

On the other hand, the judgment of the community frequently becomes internalised so that the gaze of the other accompanies the members of the community even when they happen to be alone. One is ashamed before the gaze of God just as one is ashamed before the gaze of the other. The difference is that one is ashamed before God's gaze when one has in fact infringed the external moral authority, whereas one can be ashamed by the gaze of the other simply because of personal matters such as one's intimate life or family problems that are no proper concern of the other. Consider the example of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden: they feel shame and try to hide themselves before God's all-seeing gaze. They obviously develop a feeling of guilt – otherwise they would not apologise before God with the classic guilt-avoiding rationalisation of attempting to make others responsible for their own wrongdoing.

Shame is implicit in emphases of the ways in which people monitor their own actions by viewing themselves from the standpoint of others. Telling a lie as a first reflex when being questioned is a well-known technique for avoiding shame. Peter lied about being one of Jesus' disciples, not because he was frightened, but because he was taken by surprise by the representatives of a community whose norms his master had clearly violated. His first reflex was to avoid shame.

3. Shame, self-respect and autonomy

In order to better understand shame, we need to examine its connections with self-respect and self-esteem. In an age characterised by the apparent relativity of values, there seems to prevail a surprising consensus on self-respect being one of the chief ingredients of a life worth living. Nevertheless, there is little agreement in relevant subject-related literature on the necessary and sufficient conditions for self-respect and on its relation to other concepts and

values.⁵ Thus we have various overly narrow analyses in which self-respect is explained without the barest acknowledgement of other related concepts, including its sister-concept – *self-esteem*. We also see a number of overly broad accounts in which the extension of terms such as *self-esteem*, *honour*, *pride*, *dignity*, *integrity* are run together under the rubric of *self-respect*, making the latter concept bloated beyond good sense.

Rawls provides a much-discussed treatment of “self-respect” in *A Theory of Justice* basically focusing upon people's opinions of themselves. Self-respect, according to Rawls (1971:441), “includes a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life is worth carrying out ... [and also] a confidence in one’s own ability, insofar as it is within one’s power, to fulfil one’s intentions”.

Like other critics, I am inclined to think that Rawls has confused self-respect with self-esteem. I concur with the definition of self-esteem suggested by Robin Dillon (1995:134): “Self-esteem is the judgment that one is living congruently with one’s values and thus is or is becoming a kind of person it is worth being.”

Self-esteem is generally taken to be a positive self-evaluation based upon perceived merits, such as talents and achievements, whereas self-respect, in its narrower sense, is often taken as an appropriate recognition of and response to one's status as a person with rights and responsibilities. What is important in self-respect is that it is a complex character trait involving a desire and a disposition “not to behave in a manner unworthy of oneself – that is, to shun behaviour that one views as contemptible, despicable and degrading” (Telfer, 1995:109-110).

This view fits our intuition that self-respect is a guardian of the other virtues and a preserver of moral character. It also raises the often discussed issue of whether shame is related to one’s self-respect or to one’s self-esteem. In favour of the former connection is, for example, the fact that the Greek word *aidos* can be translated both as “shame” and as “self-respect”. Gabriele Taylor (1985:77) claims that there is a case for linking shame with self-respect, while John Kekes (1988:286) claims that “in feeling shame, we feel the loss of self-respect”. David Sachs (1981:356), on the other hand, equates shame with a certain kind of self-disesteem. My analysis of shame,

5 For an overview, see the Introduction in Dillon (1995).

above, helps us to dissolve the dispute by suggesting that shame signals the presence and persistence rather than the loss of self-respect. The link between shame and self-esteem, on the one hand, consists in shame being a specific instance of that kind of negative self-evaluation for which self-disesteem is the global manifestation. Shame if pervasive and frequent enough will, thus, issue in global self-disesteem.

- **Shame as a moral emotion**

The point of the foregoing is to facilitate my discussion of the moral appropriateness of shame. I take “morally appropriate shame” to mean the kind of feeling that a basically good person feels upon realising that she has done something shameful, alternately, it is the kind of feeling that we expect someone who has done something shameful to feel. “She should be ashamed of herself” is not typically said about a person who does have the right feelings. The fact that a person does not feel the appropriate moral emotion is part of what makes her a bad person. As mentioned before, not everything of which one is ashamed can straightforwardly understood be of moral concern; people who are poor tend to be ashamed of this, as do people who are considered ugly. The fact that they feel shame about these matters may appear to have more to do with psychological tendencies and certain societal perceptions than with moral concerns. Accordingly, this has led to a distinction between natural and moral shame (Rawls, 1971:442-444). Whereas “natural shame is aroused by blemishes in our person, or by acts and attributes indicative thereof”, moral shame is revealed by the presence of defects or the lack of those characteristics and traits about which we would be justifiably proud.

Kekes (1988:286) argues against this distinction by pointing out that the more important a commitment is, the more shameful is its violation. His point is that since all commitments whose violation is shameful are constituents of what we think of as good lives, the occurrence of shame is always significant. Certainly, Rawls’s distinction between natural and moral shame becomes tenuous, given the impact of shame on a person’s conception of a good life. I am inclined to think that, as Taylor (1985:84) puts it, shame is a moral emotion “not because sometimes, or even often it is felt when a person believes himself to have done something morally wrong, but rather because the capacity for feeling shame is so closely related to the possession of self-respect, and thereby to the agent’s own values”.

Taylor argues that attempting to avoid shame is one way of losing self-respect in so far as it sometimes tends to blur the values the person is committed to. She also believes that from this point of view “genuine” shame is always justified. The contrast between genuine shame and false shame is, however, more problematic than her example and brief discussion would suggest, so it is hard to determine what “genuine” shame is and, accordingly, to assess this claim.

- **The notion of conscience**

There are similar problems associated with the notion of conscience. I think there is merit in claiming that when one is justifiably ashamed of one’s conduct and character, the feeling of shame “can bear witness to an uncorrupted conscience” (Isenberg, 1980:374; original emphasis). The ethical sanction of an internal authority forms the pangs of conscience.⁶ We usually feel pangs of conscience if one of our thoughts or intentions does not meet our moral approval. External and internal authorities often collide, and then we are torn apart. On the other hand, we can feel pangs of conscience if we are ashamed of something, while in the judgment of our conscience we did the right thing and so should not be ashamed at all. Involuntariness attaches to both shame and pangs of conscience making both appear somewhat less than rational.

- **Why the suspicions about the value of feeling ashamed?**

Perhaps what has fuelled philosophers’ suspicions about the value of feeling ashamed is the way that shame seems to shift attentions away from what *morality* requires to what *other people* require us to do or be like. In shame we see ourselves in others’ eyes, and measure ourselves through standards that we may not share. The problem with shame, then, could be that a vulnerability to being shamed could be construed as indicating the agent’s failure to sustain her own autonomous judgment about what morality requires. I shall argue against this interpretation. Given the worry that shame

6 Consider that if my child cheats in an exam and is found out, it is not just my child who will be ashamed. One can warn someone not to bring shame and disgrace to one’s country, family, school, or even gender. This is quite rational from the standpoint of external authority, yet entirely irrational from the position of individual conscience. Since conscience is individual and subjective in this sense, I can feel pangs of conscience only when I have transgressed the voice of my conscience. Yet if my wife or my child has done something against their conscience, I cannot feel pangs of conscience unless I am also personally guilty of something, say neglect, cowardice, or spoiling others.

signals a heteronomous and excessive concern with others' opinions, any good defence of morally appropriate shame will have to show that, despite appearances, morally appropriate shame is compatible with autonomous moral judgment. However, it needs always to be borne in mind that morality is something practised with others in a social world. Taking others seriously as co-participants in a moral practice means giving their opinions "weight" – and thus the power to shame.

Like all emotions, shame is about something: it has referents. It may relate to failure to achieve valued appearances, for example in looks or clothing (in this respect one might speak of "aesthetic" shame), failure to carry out some task to an expected standard ("performative" shame?), or – most importantly for my purposes – failure to conduct oneself in ways deemed proper, and to live in ways considered acceptable (moral shame). The complementary feeling of contempt may be unwarranted, if it is unrelated to any shameful or contemptible behaviour for which the despised can reasonably be held responsible. This is the case with class-based contempt, that is very different from what Michelle Mason (2003:234-272) refers to as properly focused contempt. Thus, as with other moral emotions, we can acknowledge the existence of shame without endorsing every instance of it as appropriate. We may even deem some sentiments of shame to be misjudged, for example, the shame of married men of my father's generation whose wives went out to work, which supposedly indicated that they were unable to "keep" them.

- **Shame and self-respect are linked**

Shame is in some ways the opposite of self-respect and pride, but they are also related. To experience shame is to feel inadequate, lacking in worth, and perhaps lacking in dignity and integrity.⁷ Self-respect derives from a feeling that one is living a worthwhile life, and has confidence in one's ability to do what one considers worthwhile. Although deeply private, self-respect is also a profoundly social emotion: It is impossible for us to maintain the conviction that how we live and what we do is worthwhile if there are no others who appreciate our actions (Rawls, 1971:440-441) and, as Adam Smith

7 "If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul" (Tomkins, quoted in Sedgwick & Frank, 1995:133).

and many other writers emphasise, the approval of others is crucial for well-being, albeit, not just any others but those who are regarded as worthy of respect.

Rom Harré suggests that actors continually seek out situations where they risk contempt and hence shame, in order to win respect, implying that unless we take such risks, we shall achieve little respect or self-respect (Harré, 1979). In this way, shame and self-respect are linked. Those who never risk contempt because they never put their beliefs “on the line”, whatever the situation, are likely to be seen as lacking the courage of their convictions, or having no convictions or commitments and hence lacking character. The strategy fails because it, too, invites contempt. One might also feel shame about not having any convictions. Maintaining integrity in the face of pressures to bend is a prime source of respect and self-respect but it is buttressed by the fear of the contempt and shame that failure would bring. Shame painfully brings home to us the brute fact that we have committed ourselves to be a certain way and that we did not live up to that commitment. Since the reason behind the commitment is that being that way is a good way of being, having failed, we feel bad about the way we are. An obvious question which then arises is: *Is the possession of such feelings a necessary condition for change in outlook, conduct, and character?*

It might well be objected that our self-respect could be protected in less painful ways than through the experience of shame. The conceptual and historical connections between shame and guilt notwithstanding, Kekes (1988:282, 291-295) has argued that the same given objective of self-protection can be achieved “in less self-destructive ways” than by experiencing shame, and even guilt – emotions that threaten to deplete our most important resources for self-improvement. For example, he argues, instead of flagellating ourselves with the stick of shame, we should concentrate on the attractions of the carrot, which our conception of a good life represents. Why, if we stray from our purpose, should we not learn to focus more on the appeal of the purpose from which we strayed rather than to wallow in self-condemnation?

• **The nature of human motivation**

Answers to Kekes’s question will necessarily be psychological and will have to do with the nature of human motivation. The first thing to notice is that people do, fortunately, learn from their mistakes. If we sweep all our mistakes and faltered attempts under the carpet to concentrate, instead, on the ultimate prize of all-round excellence,

we fail to utilise important possibilities for moral progress. Secondly, “ultimate prizes” tend to be less tangible in most people’s minds, and yield less easily to instant motivation than the dangers awaiting us along the way. For instance, most people are surely deterred from smoking by the imminent danger of the lung cancer they might incur in mid-life than by their abstract contemplation of a life of mental and physical well-being to which refraining from smoking might (perhaps) contribute.

- **Feelings of shame tied to the others’ imagined or actual contempt**

To return to the (italicised) question posed above. Feelings of shame seem intrinsically tied to the thought of social others’ imagined or actual contempt. As human beings, it is simply a fact that we react to how others view or judge us. Even if we are aware of no inadequacies in our self and walk into a room where everyone turns and expresses contempt, it is incredibly difficult not to feel ashamed. Similarly it is extremely hard not to feel good about ourselves if we walk into a room and everyone looks on at us admiringly. And this good feeling can occur even if we were thinking disparaging thoughts about our self upon entering the room. Indeed human beings can and often do orient their lives to pursue the pleasures of recognition, admiration and honour and to avoid the pain of derision, contempt and dishonour. Our sense of shame can thus come to orient us to avoid contempt or derision *as such* rather than orienting us to avoid the actions that were originally judged to be bad and, perhaps, worthy of derision.

- **Primary fears attached to shame**

According to Piers and Singer (1953), the primary fears attached to shame are fears of being ridiculed, made the subject of gossip, subject to demeaning treatment, and of being ostracised or abandoned. Thus shame is strongly connected with the desire to conceal failings from others’ view, with the fear of exposure, and with anxiety for “how it will be for one’s life with others” if one acts shamefully (Williams, 1993:102). Shaming moral failures are paradigmatically ones that might, if exposed, reduce one’s social standing in an actual group and might degrade the quality of one’s social interactions. Williams seems to leave open the possibility that others may shame us with their criticisms even where we disagree with their evaluation of us. Autonomous agents care about how they appear in the eyes of respected others. They care because they have a general respect for the other’s evaluative commitments, skill at moral reasoning and perceptiveness. That general respect

grounds the power to shame, and thus people may be shamed by particular criticisms that do not match their own particular self-criticism. Alternatively, they may fail to maintain their own critical perspective in the face of others' shaming contempt. In view of such considerations, Williams emphasises how the evaluative gaze of others, fears of exposure, anxiety about others' contempt, that is, the social dimensions of shame, play a central role independently of our own self-assessments. At the same time, morally appropriate shame is ultimately tethered to the agent's own evaluative standards, since she must choose whose evaluative judgments merit her respect. So while it is true that shame is always shame in the face of real social others who will interact with me differently if my moral failing is exposed, vulnerability to shame does not indicate abdication of individual judgment. On the contrary, individual judgment is central to morally appropriate shame.

- **Shame and the recognition of moral shortcomings**

Williams raises important issues about the role of shame in influencing morally sound judgment and morally appropriate conduct. However, ultimately he fails to account for both the distinctively social character of shame *and* for the power of others' eyes to shame because he is unable to explain how being exposed to another who may view one with contempt and who may then interact with one differently can lead to a reconsideration of one's contemptible behaviour and problematic character traits. The power of the judgment of the other to exert influence upon our own opinions so that we come to see as failings what we had not previously identified as such is not recognised in his (or of anyone else's) account of shame. The fact is that the viewing other does not always share our own good opinion of ourselves. Being self-absorbed to the point of narcissism, we may need to experience shame in order to help us to recognise our own limitations. So, I want to argue that the kind of shame identified as morally appropriate specifically includes shame over which the ashamed person has come to see the error of her ways through recognition of moral shortcomings. Such shortcomings must first be exposed to public view before they can become the source of shame; or, at least, the contempt that others would show us were our shortcoming to be exposed, must be clearly imaginable.

- **We narrow our lives in order to escape and avoid shame**

I am inclined to think that each of us, in our own characteristic ways, narrows our life in order to escape and avoid shame. Ashamed of shame, we learn to live with it but keep it out of awareness. In the

process, however, we choke off natural human emotions and desires. Unwilling to face shame, we settle instead for alienation. Conditioned by a deep fear of shame, we become alienated from ourselves, from other people, and from full participation in life. We never get away from shame – we just bury it. So it may be only in cases where shame is part of neurotic adaptation that we could, with any real prospect of success, seek to transcend it. For the rest, mere acceptance of it will do!

4. The ability to confront shame tendencies within ourselves

Recognising its prevalence within the individual as well as within society may facilitate the acceptance of shame. People who obsessively strive after perfection are as likely as not to be seeking to avoid persecution from inner feelings of shame. Their yearnings for uniqueness provoke feelings of shame and humiliation over such yearnings, and the vulnerability that they engender (due to the danger of resistance or denial of fulfilment or a response of rejection or contempt from the object of desire) define an essential element in what is essentially a narcissistic experience. According to Kohut (1971:154), shame arises when the exhibitionistic demands of “the narcissistic self” cannot be met. In almost all clinically significant instances of a recurrent propensity to remain mired in shame, the shame sufferer is characterised by a defective idealisation and by concentration on the narcissistic self. (Being “narcissistic” may be understood as a description of extreme self-absorption.) The ambitious, success-driven individual with a poorly integrated self-concept and intense exhibitionistic narcissistic tensions may be most prone to experience shame. On the other hand, those who usually are condemnatory towards others, are as likely as those who habitually are self-deprecatory to be seeking to avoid deeper shame suffering through deflection of painful feelings from themselves onto others. If the goal is reduction of shame to manageable levels, those who are prone to shame need to find ways to confront the shame tendencies within themselves in order to attempt to lay foundations for a less damaging social and interpersonal environment.

• Risks in the process of achieving respect and self-respect

To show how ways to confront shame tendencies in themselves can be done, I need to return to Harré’s point about risk-taking, i.e., that unless we take risks, we shall achieve little respect from others or self-respect. It is important to recognise that events that seemingly call our selves into question – think of the dangers posed by whistle

blowing – really pose only *challenges* to be faced, for good or for ill. It is in the honest facing of those tests of self that we most especially find out of what stuff we are made. For it is *how* we face those inevitable defeats, those necessary failures, those painful rejections – not whether they were deserved – that matters most. An individual may emerge from such crises, such confrontations with self as shame hands us, either more solid and secure in her personhood, or more uncertain, self-doubting, and confirmed in defectiveness. Always there remains the possibility, if not the potential, for growth if one but takes the risk. And growth is at best a risky prospect. No one can ever claim, with anything even approaching certainty to know what the outcome might be. Thus the uncertainties of life provide us with the possibilities for restoring ourselves and for growth.

Yet just as likely are the possibilities for the solidification of shame further within the emerging identity of an individual. One's very identity may be based on shame. In such an event, defeats, failures, and rejections may no longer be actual but merely perceived as such. Simple awareness of a limitation may be sufficient to count as a mortal wounding of the self, a new confirmation of inherent defectiveness. Mistakes, which ought to be expected in the course of daily functioning, become occasions of agonising self-torture.

- **Focus on the enduring character traits**

If the deleterious effects of shame are to be overcome, we need to focus on character traits, i.e., those enduring qualities of persons thought to speak to their worth as persons and which are plausibly regarded as within their domain of responsibility. There is moral philosophical precedent for holding people responsible for their characters – ordinary folk wisdom, typically, does the same. Now people who wish to overcome character traits of which they are ashamed may have recourse to various strategies. Like alcoholics who wish to reform, they may avoid circumstances that may lead them to backslide on their resolutions. Self-awareness and vigilance combined with the support of trusted and knowledgeable significant others may serve as pillars upon which to lean in their endeavours to replace character weakness of which they are ashamed so as to become better persons.

- **Deliberate what kind of person you want to be**

To be a person is, roughly, to be a creature with a capacity to care not merely about things or ends in the world but also about yourself and the motives for action that are truly your own. To care about

yourself in this way is to put yourself at stake in your engagement with particular things, projects, ends, etcetera – things that you thereby value. This is, in effect, to define the kind of life it is worth your living and so your identity as this particular person. Yet to be a person is not merely to have a capacity to evaluate yourself in this way – it is also to have the capacity to be responsible for these evaluations – and so for your identity – in virtue of the inter-connected capacities to deliberate about what kind of person you want to be and to exercise a form of control over your cares and values so as actually to acquire this identity.⁸ As Ben Ze'ev (2000:514) remarks, “More than other emotions, shame expresses our deepest values and commitments; freeing ourselves from shame implies unloading these values and commitments.”

- **Conflicting values and one's identity as a person**

Being irresolute in the face of conflicting obligations can leave one feeling ashamed. The way to overcome such feelings would appear to require that one recognise that in some interpersonal contexts certain traits of character are appropriately viewed as more salient and treated as more important in assessing the degree to which one embodies the moral ideal that one's obligations presuppose. Assume that I value both being a good father and being a good academic. In particular cases, these two values might conflict. Thus, when my daughter breaks her leg and needs to be taken to the hospital just as my office hours are about to begin, I decide that, although attending office hours is a part of being a good academic, in this case I should take care of my daughter. Should I then feel ashamed for failing to uphold my value of being a good academic? Of course not – taking care of my daughter in these circumstances just *is* living as I ought – just *is* upholding my identity as this person, who has multiple and sometimes conflicting values. Consequently, whether or not any particular action (or omission) amounts to success or failure at upholding particular values depends in part on the place it has within a broader rational structure of values constitutive of one's identity. It is in this sense that particular values are each parts of one's identity as this person.

- **An inter-connectedness among one's values**

A particular value is not intelligible as my value unless it already has a place within this broader rational structure constitutive of my

8 This is a structural feature of Frankfurtian accounts of values now in vogue. See, for example, Frankfurt (1988; 1999). For an alternative see Helm (2001).

identity. We cannot understand the inter-connections among one's values – one's "priorities", as we might call them – to be an optional extra slapped on top of one's values after the fact. Rather, the commitments one undertakes to particular values must already understand them to be a part of one's identity as this particular person, and these commitments therefore presuppose a broader commitment to the import of the person as such. Indeed, in being susceptible to these commitments, one must be responsive to the overall structure of one's values constitutive of one's identity, lest one feel unwarranted shame at such things as failing to hold office hours when one's daughter is in need. As Kekes (1988:286) points out: "Shame ... is proportionate to the centrality of the unfulfilled commitment to our conception of a good life."

Clearly, though, the scope and power of shame makes its transcendence by the individual a problematic if not quite not insuperable matter. According to Sally Planalp (1999:177), "[Shame] is the ultimate moral weapon before which we all cringe because it is the most strongly evaluative, the most painful, and probably the most powerful emotion of them all."

In less severe shame experiences, for instance, the shame sufferer may try to repair the harm: the individual who is insulted may demand an apology; the person who behaves shamefully tries to behave in more socially approved fashion; the shame sufferer seeks an opportunity to redeem herself.

- **We are our own harshest judges**

According to the well-known researcher into shame, Léon Wurmser (1981:84), the "aim" of shame "at its most differentiated" is "changing one's character". Motivation for such change is not simply a function of the severity of the painfulness of shame – although this should not be underestimated. As we saw earlier, experiencing shame need not be about relinquishing our autonomous judgment – indeed, it seldom is.⁹ But how *should* the shame sufferer respond to the characteristic self-reproach that is shame? A good starting-point is to recognise that in many instances of shame, the criticism and disapproval of others reflect primarily the projection of our shortcomings *onto* others. In other words, we experience our shame

9 I agree with Carl Schneider (1977:138) who writes, "The point is not to throw out shame and enthrone autonomy; but to recover an appropriate sense of shame and of the mutuality that is its foundation."

through the eyes of another assuming that her verdict of us will be the same as our own verdict and that she views us with contempt. But others, no matter how significant, just are not as interested in our deficiencies as we are; they have their own concerns and preoccupations. It might thus come as a revelation to us that no one could judge us as harshly as we judge ourselves. Such recognition may then lead us to the realisation that much of the painfulness of shame can be alleviated by the awareness that shame largely is a product of our own doing. But that does not mean that shame should be treated as a disease to be eradicated. To do so is to endanger our sense of place in the greater structure of life and of society.

- **“Shame has the seeds of betterment in it ...”**

To conclude: insofar as shame promotes social responsibility, moral conformity and cohesion, it may be deemed a positive and creative force (which is not to accept that other forms of coercion, such as contempt, with which social norms are enforced are always justified). Shame can be an inhibitory emotion preventing one from saying anything that another may deem inappropriate or shameful. In so far as it diminishes estimations of self-esteem and self-respect, it can be seen as destructive. Because of its particular dynamics, shame has a singular capacity to reveal the self to itself. The process of revelation that occurs in shame is not necessarily a narrow or static one. Through the experience of shame, identity may not only be confirmed, but also shaped, enlarged and put into perspective. Initial harsh judgment, in due course, may be replaced by more sober assessment. The immediate pain in shame is often the sting of self-negation – a more sustained look may reveal an underlying core of positive belief and self-evaluation. If all respect for the self is lost, the knowledge that the self has betrayed a friend will not arouse shame. This ambivalence is typical of shame. A person may experience self-contempt or numbness, but shame implies that a person cares. These considerations lead to a more hopeful conclusion – “Shame has the seeds of betterment in it ... It is future-directed and lives from hope” (Pruyser, 1968:323).

5. Conclusion

In this article I explored shame as an attitude and emotion that exerts wide-ranging impact upon moral matters. It does so mostly by influencing people's self-assessments as well as the assessments that others make of their actions and characters. The distortions of judgment which are so often characteristic of shame should not obscure the fact that there exists also morally appropriate shame

which may lead shame sufferers to seek ways of altering aspects of their character. This does not imply that shame is in any sense a virtue, or that it can be avoided for any length of time. But, at least for a time, “[w]here shame has been, self-acceptance, tolerance, competence, and pride can stand” (Morrison, 1996:194).

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Key concepts:

guilt
identity
self-esteem
self-respect
shame

Kernbegrippe:

identiteit
selfagting
selfrespek
skaamte
skuld

