Circumscribing Shame

Shame comes in many forms. In the aftermath of #MeToo, it washes through political parties and over parliament members when the media exposes their sexist behavior and their harassment of women. But it can also wash over the victims of such behavior. It may also invade the Syrian refugee who managed to get out of Raqqa while many of his family members did not. Shame also comes in a varying degree of severity. There is a vast difference between the rather trivial and short-lived shameful experience of losing your towel when you are putting on your swimming trunks on the beach, to the toxic and invasive shame that can define a whole life.[20] Sometimes it hits with a powerful and shattering force. Other times it sneaks slowly in, but over time takes hold of both body and mind. As such, shame colonizes, often accompanied by, but also pervading other emotions. Shame is like desire: it shapes the way in which we experience our relations to those around us. This formative and binding power of shame is succinctly described by Virginia Burrus:

> Shame is an emotion of which we frequently seem deeply ashamed. Famously the great inhibitor, shame at once suppresses and intensifies other affects with which it binds. Shame can even bind with shame: "Shame, indeed, covers shame itself – it is shameful to express shame."[21]

Thus, shame is in a peculiar way self-pervasive; in its strongest modes, it breaks in and occupies the self, and extends further as more shame is produced because one is ashamed. However, even though shame is strongly pervasive, it is also elusive. It can colonize every dimension of human

---

20 See Mesel, *Vilje Til Frihet. En Manns Fortelling Om Barndom Og Overgrep*, and Kirkengen, *Inscribed Bodies: Health Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse*.

21 Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1.

experience, and still be difficult to describe because our sources of articulation are poor, impeded or restricted.

Evolution: Core positions on the complexities of nature and culture

Why do humans have such a propensity for shame? Where does it come from? Modern research on shame started in the early nineteen-seventies and was clinically focused.[22] Today, the field of shame research is a maze of different perspectives and is conducted on various levels. One approach addresses the origin of shame. Evolutionary biology, sociobiology, neurohistory, and other disciplines have brought their specific perspectives into the discussion. In this chapter, we want to focus on some of the accounts they offer for understanding the (evolutionary) origins of shame.

One topic any evolutionary account of shame needs to grapple with is the relation between biology and culture. How much does any given culture contribute to the shaping of a phylogenic trait, and how much does the phylogenic trait shape the cultural conditions in which it evolves? Our brain controls our body and its functions in any given environment.[23] As cultures shift, the body will adapt and remain integrated within human culture through *coevolutionary processes* and manifest itself through different cultural representations. Thus, the various cultural expressions of shame are the result of these coevolutionary processes that can be traced back to a pan-human (proto-shame) capacity to experience this emotion.[24] However, it is not possible to follow a straight evolutionary line backward towards an obvious origin. Different cultures can both exaggerate, suppress, and shape the display of shame. Therefore, any evolutionary account of shame needs to be based on cross-cultural research. It is only when we realize that the different cultural variations of displayed

22   Helen Block Lewis, "Shame and Guilt in Neurosis," *Psychoanalytic Review* 58, no. 3 (1971); "The Role of Shame in Symptom Formation," in *Emotions and Psychopathology* (Boston: Springer, 1988).

23   Jörg Wettlaufer, "Neurohistorical and Evolutionary Aspects of a History of Shame and Shaming," *RCC Perspectives*, no. 6 (2012).

24   Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches."

shame emerge from the same biological origins as different manifestations in the course of ontogenetic development, that we can start to trace the history of shame and, further, understand its function in human culture and society.[25]

Even though most (if not all) researchers recognize the evolutionary dynamic between culture and shame display and see it as a premise for any evolutionary account of shame, this does not imply that they conceptualize shame along the same lines. Within *a universalist psychological framework*, the evolutionary account of shame builds on the assumption of a species-wide human psychological make-up featuring social emotions, such as shame and guilt.[26] Variations in shame display in different human cultures along the hominid evolutionary timeline are rooted in basic psychological functioning that can be traced through different cultural variations. Of course, culture contributes to variations in the way the psychological function is manifested, for example, through emotional display:

> There are important cross-cultural differences, but these are found in the manifestation of common psychological processes; thus, there can be differences in the readiness at which certain cognitive algorithms are available, in the situations which solicit certain emotions and, in the beliefs, and norms that control patterns of social interaction.[27]

Although cultural manifestation or display may differ, the impact of culture does not create much divergence in the actual function of the core psychological functioning. Instead, there seems to be a *psychic unity of*

25   Heidi Keller, Ype H. Poortinga, and Axel Schölmerich, "Introduction," in *Between Culture and Biology: Perspectives on Ontogenetic Development*, ed. Heidi Keller, Ype H. Poortinga, and Axel Schölmerich, Cambridge Studies in Cognitive Perceptual Development (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). This anthology gives a broad introduction to the field of ontogenetic development.

26   See also Ype H. Poortinga and Karel Soudijn, "Behaviour-Culture Relationships and Ontogenetic Development," in *Between Culture and Biology: Perspectives on Ontogenetic Development* (2002).

27   Keller, Poortinga, and Schölmerich, 4.

mankind, as these mechanisms seem to hold true across the span of cultures as universal psychological functions.[28]

At the opposite end of the spectrum of evolutionary accounts, we find more *relativist* approaches, for example, in the field of cultural psychology. These give stronger emphasis to the formative power of culture. The backdrop of such positions is the claim that both *culture* and *man* are constructs that have developed through complex historical processes. Attempts to understand human psychological functioning need to take these complex cultural constructions as their starting point.[29] Whatever biological backgrounds they may have in common, these have little to offer to the interpretation of what it is to be an actual person, since this person and her shame – as part of a core psychological function – also need to be understood from the point of view of the social and cultural history of man. Psychological processes, such as shame and shaming, are not only embedded *in* a culture, they are part of the constitution and construction of culture in the same way as both a culture and a person is a construct. Thus, the only empirical reference for any description and theory of shame/shame processes is the singular culture in which shame processes are displayed. As such, the study of biological processes, as in hominid evolution, needs to take into consideration both the cultural embeddedness of human ontogenetics as well as the cultural embeddedness of attempts to describe and understand the narrative about the evolution of shame.[30]

---

28 Poortinga and Soudijn. Of course, studies report statistical invariance on dependent variables that can be ascribed to culture. But according to Poortinga and Soudijn, in studies that report such invariance the inter-individual differences tend to be larger than the intercultural differences. See e.g. Ype H. Poortinga and Dianne A. Van Hemert, "Personality and Culture: Demarcating between the Common and the Unique," *Journal of Personality* 69, no. 6 (2001).

29 Michael Cole, "Culture and Development" in *Between Culture and Biology: Perspectives on Ontogenetic Development*, ed. Heidi Keller, Ype H. Poortinga, and Axel Schölmerich, Cambridge Studies in Cognitive Perceptual Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

30 Along the universalist-relativist axis, there is a host of meta-theoretical, philosophical and methodological premises underlying the various positions that make comparisons difficult. As an example, on the one hand, universalist positions tend to focus on causal mechanisms between culture and human behavior in order to establish an evolutionary line. On the other hand, relativists focus on historicity and context in order to understand the interplay between a person and context. Thus, these positions are both epistemologically, ontologically different, and thus, as research objects, release different methodological considerations. However, this falls outside our scope. For an introduction, see Poortinga and Soudijn, "Behaviour-Culture Relationships and Ontogenetic

Between universalists and relativists

Anthropologist Daniel M. T. Fessler strikes a fair balance between the universalist and the relativist positions we have sketched in the previous section. He argues that cultural constructivist accounts of emotional experience emphasize what he calls the "culturally constituted nature of subjective reality".[31] In other words, tracing the evolutionary road back to a *proto-shame* is difficult because, according to Fessler, there are no displays of shame that:

> … provide a direct and complete avenue for the exploration of pan-human emotional architecture – differential cultural exaggerating or ignoring of various features of emotional experience is such that relying on a single society (or set of related societies) limits our ability to discern the full outline of the species-typical trait.[32]

Fessler shows the complexity of tracing the evolutionary origin of shame and shame processes through empirical examples. He argues, for example, that the link between shame and failure seems to have some universal origin, while the relationship between the emotions of shame and guilt, as they are differently expressed in collectivistic versus individualistic cultures, seems to have a cultural background more than being the result of pan-human psychology. Consequently, it is not altogether clear what can be labeled core psychological functioning and what the constructs of culture are. As we understand Fessler, attempts to discern between core biological functioning and mere cultural construct must be based on cross-cultural studies.

Even though there are cultural differences in how and why emotions are triggered, it seems to be some consensus among researchers across the span of different approaches that human emotions have an evolutionary origin, even though there is lacking consensus of what this origin might be. This is not made easier by a lack of consensus of the definition of

---

Development."; Walter J Lonner and John Adamopoulos, "Culture as Antecedent to Behavior," in *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology: Vol. 1: Theory and Method*, ed. Ype H. Poortinga, Janak Pandey, and John W. Berry (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997).; Joan G. Miller, "Theoretical Issues in Cultural Psychology," *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1 (1997); Fons J.R. Van de Vijver and Kwok Leung, *Methods and Data Analysis for Cross-Cultural Research*, Vol. 1 (Sage, 1997).

31   Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches."

32   Ibid., 209.

shame itself. Fessler suggests two criteria that any compelling account of the evolution of shame should meet. First, it would need to give a phylogenic account, i.e., is an evolutionary account of the trait of shame through evolutionary history.[33] Secondly, it would have to include what he calls an ultimate account, that is, it would need to make clear how shame would increase the biological fitness in the environment where it evolved.

A phylogenic account: continuity

Many, including Fessler himself, argue for a phylogenic continuity between human shame and the rank-related emotions of non-human primates.[34] Shame and pride are emotions that motivate behaviors that increase and control status or rank in a group. Shame is an aversive emotion and associated with lower or subordinate positions, while pride is a rewarding emotion associated with domination and the pursuit of high rank. In all social animals, high rank is associated with easier access to resources that increase fitness. Thus, belonging to a tribe with strong and resourceful leaders secures the ability to procreate in a world of scant resources. Displaying shame contributes to securing the social position of subordinates or those of lower-rank in the tribe. These motivational but opposing emotions (shame – pride) have also been tied to specific action tendencies, such as averted gaze (shame) or direct gaze (pride), bent posture (shame) or erect posture (pride), or the already mentioned tendency of the shamed to flee, hide or avoid social contact when shamed and so forth. Thus, as a motivational feeling, shame has increased the biological fitness of lower-ranked individuals in strongly hierarchical societies or tribes and has, thus, remained throughout the hominid evolution. Signals or displays of either dominance or subordination are, of course, not related specifically to the hominid evolution.

Gilbert argues along similar lines and points to an important difference in the way non-human and human primates organize their societies.[35]

---

33   Ibid.
34   Ibid.
35   Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews, "Shame, Status and Social Roles: Psychobiology and Evolution.," in *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture*, edited by Paul Gilbert and

Non-human primates seem to establish rank-positions through their ability to fight. Fighting abilities are attributes that are rewarded with high social status, and thus, contribute to (biological) fitness. However, as primates evolved into human primates, the establishment of social positions and social order became a more complicated process. The hominid hierarchical structure upheld by a social rank-system based on fighting ability probably evolved into small and more flexible hunter-gatherer societies where social positions were determined not by fighting ability but by socially valued personal attributes of material or social character (small acephalous groups).[36] Hence, in a new, more complex and flexible society, biological fitness was secured by the individual's ability to both attract and hold positive social prestige.[37] Accordingly, shame evolved from a social rank-system determined by dominance, to a more complex social rank-system determined by prestige or social recognition.

An ultimate account: the ability to think

The above account of shame as the result of social interaction that recognizes more than physical capacities presupposes that human primates have *a mind,* that is*,* the ability to think of others as having an inner world similar to the one they experience within themselves. It must give an account of the evolution of the necessary cognitive abilities to experience such self-conscious emotions, as well as the ability to reflect over the complexities of what other individuals think is socially desirable or undesirable. Furthermore, to reflect on social attraction, as well as on how holding power is valued by others or oneself, presupposes the evolvement of symbolic self-awareness, self-presentation, as well as metacognition through language. Consequently, human shame is a lot more than an evolved competency signaling that our social status is decreasing in the

---

Bernice Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Paul Gilbert, "Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt," *Social Research* 70, no. 4 (2003). According to Fessler, this is an important point in establishing the phylogenic linkage between non- human and human shame.

36   Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches."

37   This is what Gilbert calls Social Attention Holding Power (SAHP).

eyes of the other. It indicates that our self-evaluation and self-judgment has assessed us as non-desirable.[38]

Consequently, as we see it, shame is a part of an evolved composite cluster of interrelated affective, emotional, and cognitive abilities that makes possible the complexity of human interactions and relationships. Thus, shame is not only an emotional consequence of the evolvement of complex societies. It is rooted deeply in the evolution of the culturally constructed architecture and expression of the human self. In this complex web of relations and interactions, we express ourselves through intentionally directed desires, interests or orientations. Shame may be our response when these are impeded, scorned, devalued or shunned. Shame is thus an evolved culturally constituted response to our complex relational mode of being-in-the-world when we experience the vulnerability of expressing and exposing ourselves.

The ambiguity of shame: further lines of research on evolution and society

Psychological research has not reached any consensus on either definition, components, mechanisms, or the consequences of shame.[39] However, a core thesis has been that shame is an emotional experience that

38   Even though the submission-thesis seems to be the core evolutionary explanation of shame, there are many variations within the main theory. Peter R. Breggin, "The Biological Evolution of Guilt, Shame and Anxiety: A New Theory of Negative Legacy Emotions," *Medical Hypotheses* 85, no. 1 (2015) suggests that the evolution of shame, guilt and anxiety developed as emotional restraints against aggressive self-assertion within our own group. Thus, the hominid evolutionary advantage of being both aggressive and able to cooperate secured dominion outside the tribe. The evolvement of moral restraints secured the family unit or the tribe, thus optimizing the capacity to procreate within the group and the capacity to dominate outside the group. Matteo Mameli, "Meat Made Us Moral: A Hypothesis on the Nature and Evolution of Moral Judgment," *Biology & Philosophy* 28, no. 6 (2013) gives an account of moral judgment in terms of emotional disposition. His hypothesis is that the ability to make moral judgments evolved as an increasing moralization of social sanctioning. This evolved as bands of hunters started cooperating in large-game hunting, and the need to control and punish bullies and cheats arose. There is a clear resemblance (which he also acknowledges) to Christopher Boehm's theories of the evolution of human conscience and morality. See e.g., Christopher Boehm, "The Moral Consequences of Social Selection," *Behaviour* 151, no. 2–3 (2014); *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

39   Paul Gilbert, "What Is Shame? Some Core Issues and Controversies," in *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture*, ed. Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews (New York: Ox-

occurs when your self-image is temporarily shattered or even damaged in some way. Thus, shame signals an undesirable defect of the self, accompanied by a broken self-image or/and social image. To protect this broken image, the shameful person tries to isolate the damaged self from further negative evaluation.[40] According to Gausel and Leach, there also seems to be a consensus about the harmful effects of shame, whether one focuses on its damage to self-image or social image. They presume that shame manifests damage that needs to be hidden and protected from the negative evaluation of others. This withdrawal or protective hiding has negative effects, psychologically, socially, and ethically.[41]

Evolution revisited

Any general theory of shame needs to take into consideration why shame seems to be such a powerful emotion in human life, even with its cultural differences. Even though there is no clear consensus about the finer points of the evolution of shame, the general theory seems to be reasonably undebatable. If we can trace shame through our phylogenic history as part of a motivational system that evolved during the evolution of our hominid line towards more complex societies and higher cognitive abilities, this is relevant for our understanding of shame's recent functions. If the capacity for shame is part of the evolved architecture of the self, it becomes necessary to establish substantial evidence if we assess shame as solely maladaptive. From an evolutionary standpoint, it would require what Fessler called an "ultimate account".[42] In that case, it would have to explain how the absence of shame would increase the biological fitness in the environment where it evolves. If shame has (mainly) adverse effects, one would expect that it would be selected out over time, whereas

---

ford University Press, 1998); Jessica L. Tracy, Richard W. Robins, and June Price Tangney, *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007).

40   For an explication of the emotion of shame in comparison to the emotion of guilt, se for example June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*. (New York: Guildford, 2002).

41   Nicolay Gausel and Colin Wayne Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2011).

42   Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches."

other attributes with higher significance for fitness would prevail. However, such an account would only be a prediction of future societies, as it would not explain the prevalence of culturally different shame displays in the past.

Martha Nussbaum is among those who actually suggest that in contemporary society, shame is potentially maladaptive from a philosophical and psychological point of view. In *Political Emotions*, she shows how the conscious or deliberate employment of negative emotions like shame, envy, and fear are problematic when one engenders them on a societal level to make divisions between groups. It is also relevant when it comes to employing shame for the purpose of castigating minorities. The above-mentioned emotions inhibit other important human features, like love and compassion, which are crucial for the development of a more humane society.[43] The difference between Nussbaum's approach and that of Fessler is not only conditioned by how Nussbaum operates with a more extensive normative repertoire for the assessment of shame than Fessler. It is also conditioned by how Nussbaum allows for a more sophisticated approach to the ambiguity of shame that addresses its potential harm, despite its contribution to fitness. Thereby, she moves beyond the evolutionary approach and opens up to a more sociological, and not merely a biological, approach to shame.

Fessler, on the other hand, claims that there is a distorting Western bias in the empirical studies of shame. This bias has provided us with an incomplete view of what he calls the "underlying species-typical emotional architecture of man".[44] This incomplete view has made it challenging to explore both the phylogeny and the functions of shame:

> Perhaps more than any other emotion, shame, which makes subordinance, prestige failure, and social rejection aversive, reflects the probable evolution of hominid social systems from highly hierarchical structures to more fluid forms of organization. Though differentially masked or elaborated by the diverse cultures of today, shame carries the hallmarks of a motivational system that

---

43 Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 363ff.

44 Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches."

evolved in bands of hunter-gatherers, groups in which widespread cooperation occurred alongside disparities in power and prestige.[45]

A narrow-minded psychological reading of shame through the lens of Western culture easily loses sight of the important social function of shame in the evolution of human cultures and leaves us with an incomplete and negative reading of its functions. If different cultures constitute different displays of shame, for example, through exaggeration or suppression, any account of shame needs to take both phylogenic history and cultural diversity into account.

Shame and the social matrix

Recently, biologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and others, have all suggested new ways of both differentiating and contextualizing shame, especially in light of cross-cultural research. There seem to be significant cultural variations in how the relations between selfhood, society, and the function of shame are constituted and constructed.[46] In that context, sociologist Thomas Scheff's critique has similarities with Fessler's. However, Scheff's focus is not on the evolution of shame but rather on the sociological function of shame as a bonding emotion. He claims that shame is the primary emotion regulating our daily life. Shame experiences signal threats to our social bonds.[47] Thus, it contributes to maintaining the relational networks in which our lives are embedded. Paradoxically, given the importance of shame, modern society has repressed and confined shame to an individually oriented and psychologically damaging personal experience. Thus, it has become a taboo.

Accordingly, Scheff claims that the exploration of shame within the domain of psychology has lost sight of the social matrix of shame by

---

45 Ibid., 251.

46 Vivian L. Vignoles et al., "Beyond the 'East–West' Dichotomy: Global Variation in Cultural Models of Selfhood," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 145, no. 8 (2016); Daniel Sznycer et al., "Shame Closely Tracks the Threat of Devaluation by Others, Even Across Cultures," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016).

47 Thomas J. Scheff, "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory," *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 1 (2000).

focusing on the individual emotional experience.[48] Even though a narrow focus can shed light on such a personal experience, one loses an essential frame of reference for understanding the sociological function of shame if it is approached from a mere individual perspective. What is especially important to note is that Scheff's own reclaiming of shame reaches far wider than the psychological definition commented upon above:

> I use a sociological definition of shame, rather than the more common psychological one (perception of a discrepancy between ideal and actual self). If one postulates that shame is generated by a threat to the bond, no matter how slight, then a wide range of cognates and variants follow: not only embarrassment, shyness, and modesty, but also feelings of rejection or failure, and heightened self-consciousness of any kind.[49]

Thus, Scheff includes a whole family of experiences in the concept of shame, or the bond effect, as he also calls it. We agree with Scheff that it is obvious that a definition of shame, and an understanding of the components and mechanisms of shame, need to take into consideration its social context. It even seems superfluous to mention that a social emotion needs to be contextualized in order to understand its function, conditions and mechanisms. If shame, as we claim, is an evolved culturally constituted response to our complex relational mode of being-in-the-world when we experience the vulnerability of expressing and exposing ourselves, it is by definition contextual and social, and it is displayed differently in different cultures. Hence, Fessler's argument about the Western bias underscores Scheff's point. Nevertheless, we are not convinced that Scheff's argument about the modern repression of shame is correct. It seems that our history of shame is more complicated. That does not mean that shame is not repressed both in modern and postmodern society. Moreover, it is not always adequately articulated or analyzed.[50] As we have previously mentioned, the poor cultural resources for the articulation of shame in

---

48   Ibid.; "Shame in Self and Society," *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 2 (2003).

49   "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory.", 97.

50   For example, the religious and the psychological focus on guilt (following the focus of the Reformation and Freud, respectively) has led to instances of shame being underdiagnosed or falsely diagnosed as guilt. Shame has also been less focused on in recent psychology on trauma, despite its prevailing presence in victims. See, for an example of this, Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma*

contemporary Western society make coping with shame difficult, as a society, a group, or an individual.[51] That is not necessarily a new phenomenon. What is new, however, in the postmodern, transparent, virtual culture, is the display of shamelessness on the internet and in different social media. Here, we see people display elements of their private lives with hardly any restrictions or shame – although they may sometimes experience shaming as a response to what they present there.

Social psychology and recent attempts at differentiating shame

As we saw above, Scheff expands the definition of shame by cramming a whole family of different experiences into the concept. His aim to clarify shame conceptually is less successful. By the conceptual expansion he makes, it becomes even more difficult to establish formal and material criteria for what shame is. Our suggestion, as mentioned above, is to view shame as part of an evolved composite cluster of interrelated emotional and cognitive abilities that makes possible the complexity of human interactions and relationships. That makes it necessary to conceptualize, for example, both shame and the emotion of guilt as separate and differentiated phenomena for the purpose of identifying the different possible functions these can have as responses to the way we express ourselves in our social matrix. Thus, shame as a response to a perceived defect in our self-image that threatens our social bonds can certainly spur us into repairing action. Hence, shame as an internal phenomenon can prompt us to act in prosocial ways. Furthermore, shame and shaming processes can certainly contribute to both deregulating and fortifying social positions and social bonds. However, when the concept of shame is not sufficiently differentiated from how we conceptualize other socially conditioned feelings, we lose the ability to differentiate between shame that isolates and shame that bonds. We also lose the chance to understand the ambiguous ways shame functions in the architecture of the self.

---

and Recovery (New York, N.Y.: BasicBooks, 1992), which hardly focuses on shame at all, despite mentioning it on the title page.

51   Cf. above, 20f.

We pointed out above how shame in psychological research is appraised as a negative emotional experience, since the broken self-image and/or social image needs protection through, for example, withdrawal from interpersonal arenas. However, a recent position within social psychology has offered a more nuanced understanding of shame that can bring us closer to an ultimate account. This new line of research has focused more on the possible positive outcome of shame.[52] This does not mean that the prevailing understanding of shame as associated with withdrawal and other defensive measures is wholly incorrect.[53] Nevertheless, it contributes to a differentiation in the understanding of shame.

De Hooge et al. have suggested that shame, as a moral emotion, is associated with two motives.[54] These are parallel with two of the movements that shame causes, and which we have suggested earlier. The first is the *protect* motive. The second is the *restore* motive; shame can activate prosocial behavior to restore the damaged self when the experience of shame is relevant for the decision at hand (endogenous), but not when it is not relevant (exogenous). In other words, the choices you have to make in a shameful situation seem to push you towards prosocial actions. However, when removed from the situation, you tend to withdraw. Thus, as a moral emotion, shame can function as a prosocial commitment device to restore the threatened self. However, such prosocial commitment seems to be dependent on the assessment that such restoration of self is possible and not too risky. Accordingly, the restore motive diminishes when the risk and difficulty of restoration are too great, whereas the protect motive

---

52 This new line of research corresponds to a fairly common experience: when you experience shame, for example, because you have not done your job correctly or as good as could be expected, the answer is not always to hide away to protect your self-image. It can also be the opposite: you get right back in the saddle in order to prove that you can do it as well as anyone, and thus restore both the broken self-image and/or social image of who you are.

53 Colin Wayne Leach and Atilla Cidam, "When Is Shame Linked to Constructive Approach Orientation? A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 109, no. 6 (2015).

54 Ilona E. De Hooge, Seger M. Breugelmans, and Marcel Zeelenberg, "Not So Ugly after All: When Shame Acts as a Commitment Device," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 4 (2008) and Ilona E. De Hooge, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Seger M. Breugelmans, "Restore and Protect Motivations Following Shame," *Cognition and Emotion* 24, no. 1 (2010). What we do in the following paragraphs is to thematize some of the relationships between psychology and moral shame. We present a more extensive discussion of the relationship between shame and morality in Chapter 6.

seems to remain unaffected by risk factors. In other words, the balance between these two motives is shifting, and this sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between protective behavior and avoidance behavior.[55]

Even though De Hooge et al. list empirical evidence supporting this understanding, we will later raise the question of whether identifying shame as a moral emotion is too constricting. We will claim that shame is not a moral emotion, but that it sometimes serves a moral *function*. De Hooge et al., however, seem to develop their ideas from a moral definition of shame, instead of seeing it as a psychological phenomenon that can be incorporated into moral frameworks. In other words, our moral sense uses shame for its own purposes, it is not shame that leads us to moral action. This conceptual turn opens up a room for understanding the many times when shame does not serve moral functions, for example, when it expresses itself through anger or even violence.[56]

In a theory-driven meta-analysis of 90 research publications, Leach and Cidam confirm the link between shame, constructive-approach motivation, and behavior.[57] One dominant finding is that the experience of shame related to a reparable moral failure seems to motivate constructive approaches, such as prosocial action or self-improvement. But when the experience of shame is related to a failure that damages the whole self, and where reparable strategies seem futile, or might even enhance the chance of further failure, prosocial action is absent. Spurred by this dual perspective on shame, Gausel and Leach developed a new conceptual model of shame where they differentiated between self-image and social image.[58] Accordingly, there are two basically different ways to appraise our moral failures.[59] We can interpret them as threats to our self-image,

---

55   De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans, "A Functionalist Account of Shame-Induced Behaviour," *Cognition and Emotion* 25, no. 5 (2011).

56   We deal more extensively with this topic in Chapter 6.

57   Leach and Cidam, "When Is Shame Linked to Constructive Approach Orientation? A Meta-Analysis."

58   Gausel and Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame." Further, shame is differentiated in 3 different appraisals and 4 different feelings (see the model, ibid., 475).

59   Nicolay Gausel, "Self-Reform or Self-Defense? Understanding How People Cope with Their Moral Failures by Understanding How They Appraise and Feel About Their Moral Failures," in *Social Issues, Justice and Status*, edited by Mira Moshe and Nicoleta Corbu (New York: Nova, 2013).

that is, we understand them as the result of a defect in ourselves. Such a defect does not need to be global; that is, it does not mean that our whole self-image is lost or broken. We are, for example, able to differentiate between acknowledging our moral defects as husbands, and still recognize that we are good at what we do at work, as well as being passable fathers. And even though it is shameful and unpleasant to admit to such a defect, shame may spur us to both self-reform and reparation of possible bonds that may be broken because of our failures. However, in some instances, appraisal of moral failure may be of such a character that our global self-image is broken and seems irreparable. Then we find no other alternative than protective strategies like withdrawal or hiding from others.

The other option is to interpret moral failure as a threat to our social image through the condemnation of others. In other words, because of our moral failure, we may feel threatened by rejection from others, and thus, the social bonds that hold us together are at stake.[60] When those with whom we share social bonds see our failures and reject us, we lose the necessary bonds that support us through much-needed relationships. An appraisal of lost social image may be real or imagined.[61] Nevertheless, as our actions are often social, so too are our failures. We may lie to ourselves, but more often, we lie to others. When others seeus lying or cheating, or see our betrayal or violence, it is our social image that is at stake.

Why do some people concern themselves with social image, and others with self-image? According to Gausel, it depends on the quality of our social bonds. Some have stronger social bonds, which may be tied to more mature people than others. Such bonds are not so easily cut because of moral failure. When those with whom we share important bonds are able to differentiate between what we do and who we are, the fear of loss of self-image and possible rejection seems to lessen. This is a crucial insight,

---

60 Ibid. Scheff, "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory."; "Shame in Self and Society." The approach offered here can also be related to the one offered in Krista K. Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, no. 1 (2015), who distinguishes between identity and self-conception in her analysis of shame. Shame is the result of their difference. See more on this in Chapter 6 below.

61 Gausel and Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame."

well-documented in both criminological studies and abuse studies.[62] For those who try to deal with their own moral failures, the ability to distinguish between self-image and failure is crucial. When important social ties are cut because of rejection, the loss of social image leaves scant resources for the self to come to grips with this important distinction. It is more likely that the severing of social ties and loss of social image will enhance the overlap between global self-image and moral failure. When all you are left with is what you have done, the resources are inadequate for self-improvement and restoration of social bonds.

However, rejection is a subjective feeling and does not need to actually take place. Possibly, feelings of rejection may correlate with perceived social image. Much is at stake when the loss of social image is a possibility. Our standing and our position in the social order are in play, and, thus, we go to great lengths to hide our moral failures, to prevent the downgrading of our social image.[63]

One core strategy is self-defense, by trying to conceal or cover up failure so that no one will notice. Another strategy can be aggression towards others, by aggressive behavior and shifting blame. In victimological studies, we often see strategies such as victim blaming or scapegoating coming into play. A third strategy is the use of social defense strategies that aim at enhancing social standing, as a counterweight to the weight of moral failures, such as when a political candidate accused of greediness directs full media focus to his alleged philanthropic foundation.

Previously, we asked whether it would be possible to find an approach that could contribute to a more ultimate account of shame. In several ways, what we have now presented does. Even though the suggested route to an ultimate account of shame is not yet fully researched, the above contributes to a more nuanced understanding of shame that takes into account the social function of shame, as well as identifying ethically relevant prosocial functions of shame. If shame, as we have suggested, is an evolved response in human self-architecture that regulates

---

62   Paul Leer-Salvesen, *Tilgivelse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 1998); Mesel, *Vilje Til Frihet. En Manns Fortelling Om Barndom Og Overgrep.*

63   Gausel and Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame."

our self-expression in our vulnerable complex relational mode of being-in-the-world, it makes sense to differentiate between a partial and a full rupture of our self-image. Our self-image reflects our assessment of the social and personal value of our self-expression in this complex network. We can summarize the complexities at hand in the following list:

1. Shame may warn us that the way we express our intentions, desires, interests or orientations, falls short of what we perceive as sufficiently valuable and acceptable in our relational network.

2. If our shortcomings are sufficiently severe, our social image may be severely damaged and beyond repair. Thus, our whole self-image may shatter, and leave us with an all-encompassing and chronic sense of shame and limited options, such as avoidance behavior and other protective strategies.

3. However, in many instances, shame is a reminder to ourselves that our vulnerable position in our relational network is at play, thus spurring us to regulate and improve our self-expression and our self-image through reparative prosocial strategies. We may, for example, be ashamed of our impatient and rude attitude towards a neighbor that regularly pesters us. Our shame is a response to the fact that this attitude does not reflect who we want to be and thus leads us to reparable strategies. Through shame, we are made aware of our moral failure as a neighbor, and it makes us change our attitude in concord with who we want to be.

4. Nevertheless, in severe cases, such as, for example, for victims of abuse, shame can be all-pervasive, leaving the victim in a state of chronic and toxic shame and with a full rupture to their self-image. The mechanisms of such abuse often transport both the experience of moral responsibility and moral guilt from the abuser to the abused. It leaves the victim with a full-blown destructive self-image, a "willing victim of sexual abuse." For many in this situation, there are no strategies for regaining a positive self-image, and the only way left is to hide the ruptured self-image through different protective strategies.

Preliminary circumscription: shame and the question of morality

Shame and guilt as emotions with a potential moral function

We saw above that Scheff included a whole family of concepts and phenomena within the concept of shame. It is not uncommon to associate shame with a wide array of phenomena such as anger, embarrassment, blushing, pride, and so forth. The most prominent neighboring phenomenon, however, is guilt. In the following, we will try to set these two concepts apart in order to understand the difference between shame and guilt as two possibly moral emotions.

Haidt suggests a preliminary definition of moral emotions as "those that are linked to the interest and welfare of either a society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent."[64] Both shame and guilt can be classified as such emotions. The main question we will try to answer in the following is: in what way may we describe and identify shame as a possible moral emotion in relation to guilt? However, we bear in mind our previous remark about how these emotions are not moral in themselves but can serve moral purposes under given circumstances.

The discussion is still ongoing about what constitutes and what is typical of the emotions of shame and guilt. The empirical mapping of these emotions through various instruments has not led to a clear understanding. The discussion is still going strong and hard to oversee but has nevertheless contributed to some insights into the architecture of the moral self. The moral function of shame and guilt, and the role they play as we try to express ourselves in the interrelated mode of being-in-the-world, is essential for understanding both moral/immoral reflection and action. Tangney et al. suggest that the self-conscious emotions, such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride, are crucial elements in our moral

---

64 Jonathan Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, ed. Richard J. Davidson, Klaus R. Scherer, and H. Hill Goldsmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

apparatus. These emotions influence the links between moral standards and moral behavior.[65] They also disclose our relational constitution as humans.

The most prominent line of research views guilt as the prosocial opposite of antisocial shame.[66] In other words, shame and guilt are adversaries in an emotional tug-of-war.[67] The underlying assumption here is that shame focuses on the self, whereas guilt focuses on the actions of the self. Thus, shame is an emotional response indicating that the self is flawed, defective and/or rejected, while guilt is an emotional response indicating that the *actions* of the self are flawed, defective, and/or rejected.[68] Consequently, shame and guilt have different roles and different moral values in our moral apparatus. When you have harmed or violated other people, shame will protect you through isolation and withdrawal. However, as a rule, it will also widen or fortify the moral gap between the offender and the offended. As the gap widens or fortifies, the possibilities for making moral amends for wrongdoing lessen. Consequently, it contributes little to repairing or closing the moral gap. Hence, shame is a response when the interests of the self are threatened but does not promote strategies for repair when harm has been done.

Guilt, on the other hand, focuses on the action or the harm that has been done. It is morally other-oriented. It reminds us of the harm or violation our actions have brought on others, and for which we are morally responsible, and, therefore, need to seek amends for. Because it is not a response signaling a defect of the self, it does not activate

---

65   June Price Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, and Debra J. Mashek, "What's Moral About the Self-Conscious Emotions?" in *The Self-Conscious Emotions*, ed. Jessica L. Tracy, Richard W. Robins, and June Price Tangney (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007).

66   For a review of arguments, see Tangney and Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

67   Tamara J. Ferguson et al., "Shame and Guilt as Morally Warranted Experiences," in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, edited by Richard W. Robins, Jessica L. Tracy, and June Price Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2007). For a historical overview of the research of shame as a self-conscious emotion, see Kurt W. Fischer and June Price Tangney, "Self-Conscious Emotions and the Affect Revolution: Framework and Overview," in *Self-Conscious Emotions*, edited by Kurt W. Fischer and June Price Tangney (New-York (1995): Guilford Press, 1995).

68   Tangney and Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*; Gausel and Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame"; Paula M. Niedenthal, June Price Tangney, and Igor Gavanski, "'If Only I Weren't' Versus 'If Only I Hadn't': Distinguishing Shame and Guilt in Counterfactual Thinking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1994).

avoidance-behavior strategies such as running or hiding. Rather, it is an emotional (and potentially) moral response pushing us towards moral behavior that aims at repairing or closing the moral gap between the offender and the victim. Thus, guilt can be a morally positive emotion by reminding us of our wrongdoing, as well as providing us with the chance to develop a reflective space in which to evaluate both actions and moral repair strategies without threatening the self.[69]

Shame and guilt are categorically different

We argue that, from a moral point of view, there is a categorical difference between guilt and the feeling of guilt, and between shame and guilt. We have earlier suggested that shame is an emotional response deeply rooted in the architecture of the self as a response tied to rejection, demeaning or shunning of our (intentionally guided) self-expression, thus exposing our vulnerability in the world and interrupting our immediate agency. Hence, shame is a response that regulates our relational ties, either by repairing or further severing them. Guilt, however, is basically a moral and subsequently sometimes a legal condition that can elicit morally relevant emotional responses, such as feelings of both guilt and shame.[70] As a moral condition, guilt describes the relation between subjects when harm or violation has occurred. Guilt appears in a specific context and situation that renders someone a victim of the action or attitudes of others. As such, guilt as a moral condition between subjects exists independently of feelings or emotions of guilt. A sexual offender may abuse his victim without anger, remorse or feeling of guilt, but that does not alter the fact that the moral condition between the offender and the victim is one of guilt. Therefore, we need to distinguish clearly between the experience of guilt and the condition of guilt.

---

69   Ferguson et al., "Shame and Guilt as Morally Warranted Experiences"; June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer, *Self-Conscious Emotions: The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995).

70   Jeff Elison, "Shame and Guilt: A Hundred Years of Apples and Oranges," *New Ideas in Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2005).

Elison is among the scholars who make the critical distinction between guilt and feeling of guilt. He proposes the following definition: "Guilt is an objective description or a subjective evaluation which may be made by someone other than the party deemed guilty."[71] The question is whether his definition provides a sufficient way of articulating the distinction. Put briefly, a person can certainly be found guilty of a moral and legal offense in a court of law, through an evaluation of the facts of the case and the testimonies of the offender, the victim, and other witnesses. Nevertheless, guilt is more than a socio-legal condition. It can also be established outside the courtrooms, in everyday situations where we find others or ourselves guilty of actions or attitudes towards others by breaking established moral norms. Thus, guilt is not only a matter of who has the authority to judge someone guilty. It is a matter of the contextual premises on which a moral judgment is based. Accordingly, it is a question of whether it is contextually fair or reasonable to judge someone as guilty of breaking moral norms, and thus violating a victim. The principle of fairness is important, especially if culpable responsibility for wrongdoing is a premise for some forms of shame and/or feelings of guilt.[72]

Marion Smiley questions the assumption that guilt is only applicable when emerging from voluntary acts. She holds that in real life, the criteria of clear intent and a free will through voluntary action does not work. Both intent and will come in degrees, shaped by the contextual possibilities and limitations of the situation in which they are executed. This is the reason why the question of possible culpability needs to be based on the principle of fairness; that is, it needs to take into account the contextual complexity of the situation where the alleged violation occurred. It is important to consider the principle of fairness – not only for delivering just verdicts in a court of law, but also in the complexity of everyday life where the possibility of doing harm is always present, either by intent, negligence, or by accident and sheer bad luck.

On a deeper level, one can also raise the question of whether guilt only exists as a consequence of a moral evaluation that meets the suggested

---

71   Ibid.
72   For further explication of the *principle of fairness*, see Marion Smiley, *Moral Responsibilities and the Boundaries of Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

criteria. A murderer who kills his victim without moral reflection or moral feelings of any kind is still morally guilty of murder, even when there are no witnesses to his act. Thus, it makes sense to understand guilt as something more than the result of moral evaluation only. It is rather an existential ever-present possibility of harm or wrongdoing between ourselves and others due to our vulnerable relational mode of being-in-the-world. As interdependent beings, we expose others to our way of expressing desires, interests, or orientations. Thus, we always leave open the possibility to harm or violate others in the same way as we are exposed ourselves. Thus, guilt takes on an objective character in the case of morality that is not similar to what we can say about shame. The closest we can come to a parallel is when we make assessments like "She did something for which she ought to feel ashamed."

Shame: a part of the human capabilities

It follows from the above analysis that the emotions of guilt and shame can both be linked closely to the fundamental moral condition. Thus, emotions such as shame and guilt are both part of the human capabilities that, for example, make us able to recognize and act upon the precarious moral dimension of our mode of being-in-the-world. These capabilities are deeply rooted in the architecture of the self, as part of a cluster of cognitive and emotional capabilities that aid and regulate our self-expression in our interrelated and dependent mode of being-in-the-world. As such, these emotions may serve as moral responses or reminders of conditions of guilt. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that displays of guilt and shame may be emotional responses that are morally irrelevant. Thus, an unqualified categorization of these as moral emotions is somewhat misleading, as we have already suggested. A more adequate description, based on their function as emotional capabilities, is to consider them as part of the human emotional capabilities that under certain conditions can serve a moral function. The question remains, however, whether these conditions can be sufficiently identified.

It is obvious that shame is not always elicited by harmful actions or wrongdoing that constitutes a condition of guilt. Shame may, for

example, be the response to the way our body is displayed in the world when it does not conform to the prevalent cultural ideals.[73] It may also be a victim's confused and emotional response to degrading abuse and traumatization. Hence, shame is complex and ambivalent and does not always serve a moral purpose. According to Aakvaag, shame needs to meet three interrelated criteria to be morally useful.[74] First, there needs to be a fit between shame and the situation in which it occurs. In other words, it must be a reasonable response in the context at hand. As an example, have we acted in violation of our norms and values that put our self-image at risk? When a victim of sexual abuse responds with shame, it is not a moral response to wrongdoing. Rather, it is a consequence of the corrupted moral logic of sexual abuse, where responsibility, guilt, and shame are often transported from the offender to the victim.[75]

We use the notion 'transport' here and in the following to indicate how a violation's corrupted moral logic often transports such feelings from a perpetrator as the one who should, rightly, harbor them, to the victim. Even though the offender may not deliberately attempt to transport these feelings, it may still take place as part of the corrupted logic of the act itself. Hence, there is not a fit between the shame the victim feels and the situation from which the shame originated.

Secondly, the emotional strength in the shame response needs to be calibrated to the situation at hand. If the emotional response is so strong that it overwhelms the agent in a situation where he or she is guilty of only a minor violation, it does not serve a moral purpose because it misleads the moral judgment emotionally. Thus, shame – like the feeling of guilt – needs to be contextually calibrated to serve a moral function.[76] Finally, shame needs to activate appropriate action in the situation at hand. If the emotional response is too strong and uncalibrated, it may activate

---

73　This is a central topic in contemporary shame research, and we will return to it in a later chapter.

74　Helene Flood Aakvaag, *Hei, Skam: En Bok Om Følelsen Skam, Hvorfor Den Oppstår Og Hva Den Gjør Med Oss* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2018).

75　Mesel, *Vilje Til Frihet. En Manns Fortelling Om Barndom Og Overgrep*, 97.

76　For further introduction to the calibration of the emotion of guilt, see Herant A. Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* (Stanford: Stanford General Books, 2010), 21ff. We want to raise the question, though, if one can calibrate feelings of shame in the same way that one does with guilt? The global character of shame seems to make it difficult to think of it as fully parallel. See our previous discussion of shame vs. guilt above, pp. 47–51.

inappropriate behavior such as, for example, avoidance or anger, which will widen and/or fortify the moral gap. However, a morally relevant shame response may remind us that our action(s) has put our self-image and social position at risk, which calls for strategies of repair. But such repair has its moral limitations. It is the nature of shame, as mentioned above, that it is self-oriented, and not other-oriented. Thus, even though shame may be a response to wrongdoing that spurs actions of moral repair, the focus is not primarily on the welfare of the offended but on the welfare of the one committing the offense.

Recent studies within social psychology suggest a differentiation between heavy shame responses that damage the whole self-image, rendering it unrepairable and without other strategies than avoidance behavior, and lesser shame responses that only damage part of the self-image, and, accordingly, present strategies of repair as viable options.[77] Furthermore, the differentiation between the self-image that can open up for repairing strategies, and the social-image that seems to render no strategies except for protective ones will, when read together, contribute to help identify and describe the conditions under which shame may serve a moral function. However, they need to be elaborated further to present a more detailed understanding of the possible moral functions of shame, especially as they relate to the interrelated cluster of cognitive and emotional capabilities. As an example, what role do our cognitive or our relational capabilities have in the necessary calibration of our shame responses if they are to serve a moral function? We will address these questions in a later chapter. Suffice to say at this point that although shame may serve a moral purpose, its moral value is relatively limited compared to the feeling of guilt.

---

77 Gausel, "Self-Reform or Self-Defense? Understanding How People Cope with Their Moral Failures by Understanding How They Appraise and Feel About Their Moral Failures"; Gausel and Leach, "Concern for Self-Image and Social Image in the Management of Moral Failure: Rethinking Shame"; Leach and Cidam, "When Is Shame Linked to Constructive Approach Orientation? A Meta-Analysis"; Ilona E. De Hooge, Seger M. Breugelmans, and Marcel Zeelenberg, "Not So Ugly after All: When Shame Acts as a Commitment Device," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 4 (2008); Ilona E. De Hooge, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Seger M. Breugelmans, "Moral Sentiments and Cooperation: Differential Influences of Shame and Guilt," *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (2007); De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans, "Restore and Protect Motivations Following Shame"; "A Functionalist Account of Shame-Induced Behaviour."

Strategies for transporting or transforming shame

We have suggested above that shame is sometimes transported to the victim from the one who ought to feel ashamed, namely the perpetrator. In this section, we want to mention some of the strategies that shame seems to engender, and which are employed by the shame-feeling individual in order to overcome, transform, and/or avoid shame and restitute his or her agency. Some of these strategies are transporting shame to others, whereas others imply a transformation of shame. These strategies are, nevertheless, all attempts to defend oneself against the experience of shame.

A child who experiences contempt from a parent, given specific, unfavorable conditions, may transform the shame he or she feels in facing the parent's contempt into self-contempt. Whereas shame is an ambivalent experience, because the self still longs for reunion with the self or the significant other, in contempt, "the object, be it self or other, is completely rejected."[78] Kaufman points to how the transformation of shame into contempt in the long run may establish deep and enduring traces in the conditions for interpersonal relationships, because it is a way of putting oneself above others. "In the development of contempt as a characterological defending style, we have the seeds of a judgmental, fault-finding, or condescending attitude in later human relationships. To the degree that others are looked down upon, found lacking, or seen as somehow lesser or inferior beings, a once-wounded self becomes more securely insulated against further shame, but only at the expense of distorted relationships with others."[79]

Rage as a defense mechanism is an emotional response directed against oneself or another, and it precludes from feeling shame because it covers or serves to impede the shame feeling. It serves to keep others away. When directed towards others, it can take different forms, from aggressive outbursts, via hatred, to the scolding of others. The revered minister caught in a shameful scandal may direct, or project, his rage towards others to escape his shameful position. As such, rage helps to avoid shame,

78 Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1992), 84.
79 Ibid., 85.

although fundamentally, it is caused by shame and cannot be understood as totally separated from it.[80] Thus, shame is usually transported to someone more vulnerable than yourself – someone who is subjected to your actions, or below you in the pecking order. It can happen in a deliberate way (by blaming someone), or it can happen as an "unconscious transfer from one person to another without any action being necessary to effect that transfer."[81]

To *strive for power* is another strategy: here, the individual seeks control over those conditions that may cause him or her to feel shame through withdrawal to a context that is easier to control or hold power over, or by adopting a more authoritarian control over the given context. However, the strategy of authoritarian control seems the most likely to fail as it does not prevent other people from seeing what is shameful, even though they do not have the power to voice their critique. Thus, when the shamed CEO withdraws from his position and isolates himself, he is in a better position to control the conditions that cause shame than the CEO that strives for more power in the given context to eliminate the possibility of further critique and shame.

When this strategy is successful, it makes one less vulnerable and, hence, also less prone to shame. The struggle for power to overcome or control shame may be apparent, or it may be invisible at first sight. For some, this struggle may determine their whole way of life. Thus, "power becomes the means to insulate against further shame."[82] It becomes a means for security, but like the previous strategies, when it becomes predominant, it may destroy the conditions for human relationships.

An obvious response to shame is to *strive for perfection*, since to achieve perfection is a way to compensate for an underlying sense of defectiveness, and thereby avoid further chances for experiencing shame. A doctor struggling with shame after being responsible for medical errors may promise himself never to commit such errors of judgment again, and

---

80 For a more extensive analysis of the mechanisms that causes rage, see the section on Shame and narcissistic rage in Chapter 3 below.

81 Cf. Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring*. 82. The following paragraphs are inspired by Kaufman's identification of such strategies, but are only loosely based on his analysis.

82 Ibid., 86.

attempt to compensate by becoming the best doctor he can. Nevertheless, it is a rather futile strategy. Firstly, because errors may be committed by even the best clinician. Secondly, because it aims at the impossible: to eliminate shame once and for all. It can, nevertheless, still have positive effects in terms of accomplishing moral improvement or temporarily overcoming an underlying sense of defectiveness. Kaufman writes:

> The quest for perfection itself is self-limiting and hopelessly doomed both to fail and to plunge the individual back into the very mire of defectiveness from which he so longed to escape. One can never attain that perfection, and awareness of failure to do so reawakens that already-present sense of shame. It is as though one sees the only means of escaping from the prison that is shame is erasing all signs that might point to its presence.[83]

Thus, the struggle for perfection may involve the self in a perpetual game of comparison with others, in which the individual is always at risk of losing. Moreover, it can lead to unhealthy forms of competitiveness, which, in turn, may have devastating consequences for relationships with others. A strategy that is both obvious and known to most is the *transfer of blame*. It can take many forms, from accusing others of being the real cause of one's own failure to more elaborate forms of scapegoating at a societal level. As for the latter, anthropologist Rene Girard[84] has developed a comprehensive theory about how societies can use modes of scapegoating to regain order (or in our notion: conditions for communal and coherent agency) by separating someone as the victim that is to blame. Girard's analysis, in which he is not very explicit about shame, can be applied to at the societal level as well, for example, in the response of Germany to the Versailles Agreement (which initially caused shame, and then, later on, aggression[85]); or the Irish feeling of inferiority in relation to England (which resulted in abhorrent strategies for moral perfection in a

83   Ibid., 87.

84   See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (London: Athlone Press, 1986); René Girard and Patrick Gregory, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

85   Cf. Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring*, 227ff.

close cooperation between the authorities, the Catholic Church, and the smaller, local communities.)[86]

Finally, *internal withdrawal* is also a strategy that can transfer or transform *the subject of shame* from one context to another, in which the latter (the internal world) is one in which he or she is not susceptible to shame to the same extent as in the social dimension. This strategy has similarities with the strive for power. When a child experiences shame as caused by a significant other human in a relationship, it may engage this strategy for coping with the painful experience at hand. "The self withdraws deeper inside itself to escape the agony of exposure or the loss of the possibility of reunion." In the inner world, the child can "engage in internal fantasy and imagery designed by him to restore his good feelings about himself."[87]

All the above strategies imply some form of transportation and/or transformation of shame. They must be seen as defense mechanisms against the painful experience that shame often is. Most of them are outwardly-directed, whereas some may also impact on the architecture of the self, such as when rage, blame, or contempt are directed against the self. No matter who they are directed towards, they can all have a negative impact on the conditions by which the self can develop relationships with others. They also create problems for the development of a coherent agency, because they emerge as interruptions of the normal agency whenever the individual needs to defend herself from the experience of shame, be it consciously or at an unconscious level.

Circumscribing shame as disruption: components of and types of shame

Shame as loss of positive self-experience

To feel shame, you need to have at least a rudimentary sense of yourself as distinguishable, although not necessarily fully separated, from others. This sense of self can be pre-subjective (as in infants) or part of a more

---

86   Cf. Clough, *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, passim.
87   Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring*, 95.

clearly developed sense of subjectivity. In both cases, this sense of self is developed, explored, and articulated through agency. Agency is the capability to act according to chosen objectives, such as specific aims, qualities, or values. As fathers, we may, for example, express our agency by both sharing and adhering to aims, qualities or values for good parenting. This relation between a sense of self and the chosen objectives in question is important. There is a reciprocal dynamic between the content of the self and the chosen objectives.

One the one hand, through agency the self chooses, articulates, and develops these objectives and manifests them through action. We choose values or standards we want to live by as parents, as citizens and as fellow human beings. Ultimately, through a responsible agency we try not only to adhere to these standards but also to act them out, as examples of who and what we are and what we choose to believe in.

On the other hand, the content that the self achieves and manifests implies that the self will experience itself as connected to these qualities, and entitled to recognition or respect for the choice of objectives and values, and, ultimately, to the sense of self these objectives and values mediate. This point is of the utmost importance to the way we will understand the conditions for shame later on: such assumptions of recognition, respect, or affirmation make it possible to experience oneself as part of a world one shares with others, and which can be described as a *common context of agency,* whether it is as a citizen, a colleague or a family member. It is when one realizes that one no longer partakes in such a shared context of agency that shame may occur. As long as there is an uninterrupted relation between the sense of self and the objectives by which it defines itself, there is little room for a sense of shame, and agency can go on in ways that confirm the self's perception of being in a world where it shares the values or intentions of others and is recognized by them. As we shall argue, it is when this shared context of agency is no longer present that the conditions for shame present themselves most strikingly.

This analysis does not imply that shame is absent when an uninterrupted coherence between the self and its projects, as the sum of its chosen objectives, is the case. Even when one is absolutely convinced of the choice of one's values, and experiences the acting out and the receiving

of both self-assurance and self-worth as a reciprocal consequence, shame may occur. One can picture a shameful situation where others, who do not share either our objectives or conditions for agency, ridicule or mock them despite our conviction about doing the right thing. A convinced anti-abortion protester standing outside a hospital may feel shame when passing men and women, patients and staff, laugh and ridicule his views and his one-man protest. Accordingly, there is always a social dimension to the experience of the self, where loss of recognition can be experienced as shameful. That does not diminish the strong tie between sense of self, its objectives and its agency. Ultimately, it is this self-experience that is interrupted by shame.

However, shame seems to be connected to a varying degree of loss in this continuous, positive self-experience. As humans, we continuously need to develop and maintain a sense of self, and appear to ourselves and others as worthy of recognition. Such sense of self is the result of our long-term attempts to achieve coherent agency, in which we pursue a sense of self through the goals we have set before us. Shame can interrupt these intended struggles to achieve or maintain this sense of self. Thus, with shame the grip and self-control can be diminished or put under pressure. In severe shame, there is not only an interruption in coherent agency, that is, stable intentions, actions and chosen values, interests, and so forth, but its actual outcome implies a rupture, a realization of the total discrepancy between actual intentions/values and those of a shared context of agency, values, and recognizable intentions.

Hutchinson's analysis of Hatzfeld's book *A Time for Machetes*, about the Rwandan conflict,[88] describes an interview conducted in prison with a perpetrator called Léopard. He had participated in the atrocities. Hutchinson describes how Léopard's shame emerges as he starts to acknowledge his crime and the gradual realization of how he, through his actions, violated the core values of both himself and humanity:

---

88   See Phil Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy* (New York: New Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 141ff.; Jean Hatzfeld, *A Time for Machetes: The Rwandan Genocide: The Killers Speak: A Report* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005), 154.

However, he had turned away from, had denied, that which would force him to acknowledge his moral crime; he had denied, turned-away-from, that which would allow him to acknowledge the true meaning of his actions. Léopard denied that in carrying out those actions he had not merely violated a code to which he was bound by an external authority, but that he had done violence to the very fabric of human existence (and, therefore, his own).[89]

When Léopard finally acknowledges this rupture between his actions and his own humanity, he realizes that the values he shared with his peers were not commonly accepted. Thus, he also needs to acknowledge another meaning of being human, and consequently, shame washes over him. The aims or qualities of being human are something he has not lived up to, and so to speak, by his own actions, he has denounced them.

Another example of this interruption or rupture can be found in the nursing profession. Nursing research has shown that nurses who experience a gap between their nursing standards and ideals, and the standards they can manage to uphold in their daily practice, over time will accumulate moral distress.[90] Such distress can manifest itself through emotions of both shame and guilt, as he or she has to administer suboptimal care due to limitations that he or she does not control, such as lack of resources.

In other words, the feeling of shame also entails an experience of exposure to something outside one's desires and control, such as when our objectives are put under pressure and/or downgraded. The more dependent the self is on others for recognition, and the weaker its independently established self-esteem accordingly is, the more it is prone to the interruptions or rupture of shame.[91] On the other hand, the less it is dependent

---

89   Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy*, 142.

90   Sofia Kalvemark et al., "Living with Conflicts – Ethical Dilemmas and Moral Distress in the Health Care System," *Social Science & Medicine* 58, no. 6 (2004); Sture Eriksson, Ann-Louise Glasberg, and Astrid Norberg, "Burnout and 'Stress of Conscience' among Healthcare Personnel," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 57, no. 4 (2007); Ann-Louise Glasberg, *Stress of Conscience and Burnout in Healthcare: The Danger of Deadening One's Conscience* (Umeå: Umeå University, 2007).

91   To what extent such recognition is lacking is due to how well the child has been met, confirmed and guided safely in its earlier years – also in ways that imply a certain frustration of its inborn tendency towards grandiosity. This links shame to what we, in the present context, call the narcissistic complex. More on this below.

on others for continuous recognition of sense of self-worth, the less the self is prone to shame, and the more he or she is resilient to shaming. Still, shame can hit the self in both cases, and with disastrous effects. Thus, one tenet in a preliminary definition of shame can be described as:

> a negative and emotionally charged interruption of the positive sense of self that one needs to have in order to experience oneself as good and one's actions and intentions as meaningful and worthy of recognition by others, as when (actual or imagined) ridicule or rejection by (actual or imagined) peers take place.

This experience of emotional interruption or rupture means that the evaluation of oneself or of others suddenly changes and downgrades a previously existing, positive sense of self, no matter how weak or strong this sense may be. This point also suggests that shame, for the most part, is a retrospective response. It also implies a double movement: one withdraws from others while, simultaneously, also wanting to recover one's position among those to whom one feels shamed. Thus, shame describes the emotional and existential dilemma of a double movement, in which the first step is movement away from the other when the movement towards others is somewhat thwarted and our vulnerability is exposed. The second movement is relational and social – a moving towards the other to become part of the community again – which is one of the reasons why shame is so effective in social disciplining.

However, the desire to return to the community or group may not always be present; another tenet in the understanding of shame comes into play when it is not the boundary of the emotional self that is disturbed, shattered or violated, but one's physical integrity, as in violence or sexual abuse. Then, the need to retract from those or that which causes shame may be permanent, and there may be no need for reconciliation with the one who caused shame. Accordingly, shame may manifest a situation in which the relationship to others is severed permanently – and for a good reason. However, such severing of bonds may not necessarily alleviate the experience of shame, although it may contribute to its weakening.

Thus, simplified: shame is what happens when the positive sense of self is interrupted in a way that makes the self realize that it is not living up to

or achieving the intended goals or values that others and/or the self determine it by. This interruption is caused by an experience of dissonance. It means that the initially positive disposition to feel good about oneself, manifested in one's intentional being, is no longer present and becomes disturbed and confused. The interruption can happen in different ways: through words that interrupt, through ways of relating to it that makes it feel excluded and not recognized, through a realization that one is cut from the same cloth as one's tormentor, or, as mentioned, through physical threats or actual violence, as well as overstepping the boundaries that secure one's sexual integrity. In all of these instances, the self is exposed in ways that makes it feel bad about itself and having lost a grip on what was hitherto the basis for its coherent intentional agency in the world.

Shame is not only related to actual occurrences of interaction with others or tied to cultural expectations (see below). Shame is also something that the self may be made prone to experience in contexts and situations that would not instigate such experiences in others.[92] Self-acceptance and self-insecurity are two crucial factors. Thus, in order to understand the mechanisms that may engender shame, we need to develop a psychological account of its conditions. This will be developed in one of the following chapters.

Gilbert's circumscription: five components

In the circumscription above, shame emerges as a powerful, dynamic and elusive experience that at the same time is difficult to identify and articulate. These many faces of shame have spurred research from a host of perspectives and disciplines. Paul Gilbert describes the many approaches to shame:

---

92 We will not go into the discussion of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, or the balancing of, on the one hand, a person's proneness and on the other hand, the contextual elements that together generate shame reactions. For further reading on the topic, see June Price Tangney, Patricia Wagner, and Richard Gramzow, "Proneness to Shame, Proneness to Guilt, and Psychopathology," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 101, no. 3 (1992); Tangney and Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

Not only are there different schools and theoretical approaches to shame, but it can also be conceptualized and studied in terms of its components and mechanisms (Tangney, 1996). It can be examined in terms of emotion (e.g., as a primary affect in its own right, as an auxiliary emotion, or as a composite of other emotions such as fear, anger, or self-disgust); cognitions and beliefs about the self (e.g., that one is and/or is seen by others to be inferior, flawed, inadequate, etc.); behaviors and actions (e.g., such as running away, hiding and concealing, or attacking others to cover one's shame); evolved mechanisms (e.g., the expression of shame seems to use similar biobehavioral systems to those of animals expressing submissive behavior); and interpersonal dynamic interrelationships (shamed and shamer; Fossum & Mason, 1986; Harper & Hoopes, 1990). Shame can also be used to describe phenomena at many different levels, including internal self-experiences, relational episodes, and cultural practices for maintaining honor and prestige.[93]

This long quote does not offer a taxonomy of shame. Rather, it presents a set of interweaving perspectives that express shame, and, thus, can be examined as such.[94] It includes emotions, cognitions and beliefs, behaviors and actions, evolved mechanisms, and, lastly, interpersonal dynamic interrelationships. Put into our terminology, components and mechanisms of shame manifest themselves in different dimensions of experience, such as emotion (primary, auxiliary or composite), or cognition in the inner dimension of experience, or evolved mechanism in the natural dimension, or as behavior or action, or as interpersonal relationships in the social dimension.

Gilbert also describes the different conceptualizations and debates on what constitutes a shameful experience.[95] He describes shame basically as a complex set of feelings, cognitions and actions, although its

93   Gilbert, "What Is Shame? Some Core Issues and Controversies," 3–4.

94   Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy*, 138–39.

95   Paul Gilbert, "Body Shame: A Biopsychosocial Conceptualisation and Overview with Treatment Implications," in *Body Shame: Conceptualisation, Research and Treatment*, eds. Paul Gilbert and Jeremy Miles (Routledge, 2002), 2–3. For further reading on the conceptual issues regarding shame, and also shame versus guilt, see for example, June Price Tangney, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Assessment of Shame and Guilt," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 34, no. 9 (1996); Linda McFall, "Shame: Concept Analysis," *Journal of Theory Construction & Testing* 13, no. 2 (2009); Alon Blum, "Shame and Guilt, Misconceptions and Controversies: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Traumatology* 14, no. 3 (2008).

manifestations can vary considerably. He underscores an important point regarding the relation between shame and morality (which we will return to later): Shame "is an experience that is self-focused however, dependent on the competencies to construct self as a social agent."[96] Although shame is self-oriented, in contrast to the feeling of guilt that is often other-oriented (as described above), both are dependent on the signs and symbols of the social dimension in order for someone to construct themselves as shameful or feeling guilty.[97] As we pointed out above, our capacity to identify, articulate and understand shame depends on the semiotic resources we have learned from others. Gilbert elaborates these features further by differentiating between five aspects and components of shame.[98]

The first component, a social or external cognitive component of shame, manifests itself through automatic negative evaluative thoughts about others who see the self as inferior, bad, inadequate and/or flawed. It is worth noting the automatic component here: shame is not the result of pondering or reflection, but the immediate experience that "others are looking down on the self with a condemning or contemptuous view."[99] Such shame can also be linked to various forms of stigma, self-consciousness caused by illness, the disfigurement of the body, etc. In other words, shame links the social and the inner dimensions of experience. Furthermore, the self-conscious element of shame adds a complexity that is also present in the way it is made manifest in the world. The cognitive

---

96   Gilbert, "Body Shame: A Biopsychosocial Conceptualisation and Overview with Treatment Implications," 6. Cf. also the description by G. Kaufman: "Shame itself is an *entrance* to the self. It is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, of inferiority, and of alienation. No other affect is closer to the experienced self." Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring*, xix.

97   We briefly discussed above the relationship between shame and its neighboring concepts, such as guilt/feelings of guilt. The distinctions in real life are somewhat blurrier than what is put forth here. See also June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, and Debra J. Mashek, "Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2007).

98   Gilbert, "Body Shame: A Biopsychosocial Conceptualisation and Overview with Treatment Implications," 5–6.

99   Paul Gilbert and Jeremy Miles, *Body Shame: Conceptualisation, Research and Treatment* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 5.

component allows for a more deliberate processing and also a more frequent use of language when we communicate and handle shame.[100]

The second component is that shame is internally self-evaluative. This has been the focus of much research and specifies the nature of the cognitive component above.[101] Thus, shame is a negative evaluation of the global self. As such, it differs from the feeling of guilt, which, as shown above, normally does not include the global self, but is merely a negative evaluation of a specific action. Shame as a global negative self-evaluation, for example, when experiencing oneself "as bad, inadequate and flawed", is not only an expression of negative automatic thoughts about the self. It implies an active expression of self-critique and self-attack. Such self-devaluations and internally shaming thoughts mean that the presence of actual others is not always necessary in order to feel shame.[102] In a specific situation, it is not necessarily the presence, or even the imagined presence, of an audience that activates shame. The revered minister giving in to his desires in ways he struggles to avoid may certainly feel shame for his weakness even when others do not see him. Thus, shame becomes internalized.

The third component is that shame often manifests itself as emotion. As such, shame can be an affect associated with the interruption and sudden loss of positive affect, such as pride or honor.[103] Shame invades and activates other emotions as well: anxiety, anger, disgust in the self,

---

100   Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robins, "The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions. A Cognitive Appraisal Approach," in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, eds. Jessica L. Tracy, Richard W. Robins, and June Price Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 7.

101   See Gilbert, "Body Shame: A Biopsychosocial Conceptualisation and Overview with Treatment Implications."

102   This discussion of the presence of an audience in order to experience shame reaches far. Empirical studies in victimology, especially Holocaust studies, have documented that survivors of atrocities can feel both shame and guilt when they realize the atrocities that were inflicted upon them, and that they are alive when so many others perished. See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Metropolitan, 1996); Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (New York: Vintage International, 1989); Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy*. Hutchinson describes the same when he analyzes Jean Hatzfeld's book on the Rwandan genocide. The shame of the perpetrator emerges as acknowledgment of the crime sinks in, even though there is no audience.

103   See above. Cf. for example, Chapter 5 where this interruption is visible in relation to the wish for celebration.

self-contempt and inner deflation or dejection. In their analysis of the self-conscious emotions, such as shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment, Tracy and Robins identify five major features that distinguish them from non-self-conscious emotions:[104]

- self-conscious emotions require self-awareness and self-representations
- these emotions emerge later in childhood than basic emotions
- they facilitate the attainment of complex social goals
- they do not have discrete and universally recognized facial expressions
- they are cognitively complex

Even though these are features of a whole set of self-conscious emotions and therefore lack the specificities of a single description, we recognize these as features of shame. Hence, we agree that shame both critically involves the self and is complex, as we have mentioned above. However, there is a difference between claiming that shame is (only) a self-conscious emotion (Tracy and Robins), and that shame displays or manifests itself as a self-conscious emotion (Gilbert). As it will be shown later in this work, this is an important distinction. In order to describe both the function and the many faces of shame, we need a theoretical model that opens a larger space in the architecture of the self for shame as more than only an emotion. Whereas the emotional character of shame is certainly a necessary and very prominent feature in any definition of shame, we will argue that shame is a complex phenomenon both through its manifestations and its functions in human life. On the one hand, displays of shame can be analyzed as consequences of the specific interconnectedness between the natural, social and inner dimensions of the experience of a specific situation, such as if we blush with shame when being caught in a compromising situation. On the other hand, shame is more than an emotional consequence of such instances – it has consequences for agency.

---

104   Tracy and Robins, "The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions. A Cognitive Appraisal Approach," 5–7. For further discussion, see Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robins, "Putting the Self into Self-Conscious Emotions: A Theoretical Model", *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (2004).

The point about consequences for agency is also demonstrated in Gilbert's fourth component, where he shows that shame has a behavioral component. Shame, or more precisely, the handling of shame, often includes retractions or other defensive action to remove the threat of exposure.[105] When one is ashamed, one avoids looking others in the eye, and one can feel behaviorally inhibited or engage in submissive-defensive behaviors. Furthermore, one can behave in ways that mean acting out in anger, based on "the desire to retaliate or gain revenge against the one who is 'exposing' the self (as inferior, weak or bad)."[106] Thus, the need for deliberate defensive and/or evasive actions, such as moving away from the scene where shaming took place underscores the interdependency between the above-mentioned inner and social dimensions of the shame experience. However, not all action is deliberate. As mentioned, automatic actions, such as eye aversion, sudden anger, or the reflex to quickly evade shameful situations, also seem to be a behavioral feature of shame.

The fifth component is physiological. Shameful experiences can activate stress responses in the body, by heightening the parasympathetic activity to a varying degree. One obvious example is how a sudden experience of shame can manifest itself through blushing, a heightened pulse, or a lump in the throat. Another and more severe form of physiological manifestation can take place when toxic shame over time forms and shapes both body posture and body movement.

In sum, Gilbert's distinction between the five components shows the complexity of the phenomenon of shame, and the concomitant need for attempting an interdisciplinary description. In the subsequent chapters, we attempt to integrate and unravel these different components or perspectives through our analysis of how shame's different dimensions are articulated in different arenas of social life.

---

105   Gilbert, "Body Shame: A Biopsychosocial Conceptualisation and Overview with Treatment Implications," 10–16.

106   Gilbert and Miles, *Body Shame: Conceptualisation, Research and Treatment*, 6.

Types of shame: contextual demarcations

In the following, we will attempt to sort out the most important forms of and perspectives on shame in order to demarcate their role in human experience. These demarcations are essential for the later analysis, especially in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6.[107]

Discretionary shame

Given that shame may not only be related to what we do, but often to who we *are*, shame can be difficult to manage, because it cannot be controlled by adapting to others by means of what one does and does not do. We have seen that shame manifests itself as an experience of the self, and as such, it manifests a sense of self that is not desired, and which signifies that "I am not what I should be." The experience of shame may then generate two opposing impulses: on the one hand, the desire to flee from those who are your peers, and on the other hand, the desire to regain community with them by overcoming the causes of your shame.

In the literature on shame, there is a decisive and important distinction between two forms of shame that may help us to access some relevant nuances related to later development as well. There is what we suggest calling *discretionary shame*; and there is what we suggest calling, *disgrace shame*. This important distinction was described as early as 1977 by Schneider in his book *Shame, Exposure and Privacy*.[108] Schneider describes man as "the creature that blushes." Discretionary shame protects our vulnerability to violation.[109] Thus, discretionary shame may

---

107 There are other ways of classifying shame, and also forms of shame, than those we point to here. However, the forms we develop in the following occupy our focus as they all testify to a pluralist approach to shame with regard to conditions, causes, functions and consequences, and in a way that also includes the often-neglected topic of shame in a Western religious context. For a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of different forms of shame with a clear therapeutic scope, see Marie Farstad, *Skammens Spor: Eksistens, Relasjon, Profesjon* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk 2016).

108 Carl D. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1977).

109 Ibid. Cf. Francis J. Broucek, *Shame and the Self* (New York: Guilford, 1991), 5ff; Thomas J. Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, "Shame as the Master Emotion of Everyday Life," *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 1, no. 3 (2000).

also be part of a sound self-perception, as it does not necessarily jeopardize the basic trustful relationship that a self may have towards the self and the world. This kind of shame may, on the contrary, even contribute to the self-other relationship: it may provide a relationship with a protective discretion, tact and sensitivity. When you accidently barge in on a compromising situation that puts the vulnerability of others at risk, you may feel discretionary shame. Such shame may therefore also imply that one has internalized respect for others and their values.

As we saw above, Scheff and Retzinger criticize any attempt to individualize shame by pulling it out of the social matrix. Shame is more than a reaction to personal failure to live up to one's ideal:

> Shame arises in an elemental situation in which there is a real or imagined threat to our bonds; it signals trouble in a relationship. Since an infant's life is completely dependent on the bond with the caregivers, this emotion is as primitive and intense as fear. The point that shame is a response to bond threat cannot be emphasized too strongly, since in psychology and psychoanalysis there is a tendency to individualize shame, taking it out of its social matrix. Typically, in these disciplines, shame is defined as a product of the individual's failure to live up to her own ideals. But one's ideals, for the most part, are usually a reflection of the ideals of one's society. Mead's idea of the generalized other captures this notion perfectly. If one feels that her behavior has been inadequate or deviant, not only an internal gap has been created between behavior and ideals, but also a gap between group ideals and one's self, a threat to the bond. The sociological definition of the source of shame subsumes the psychological one, pointing to the source in shared ideals.[110]

Thus, discretionary shame may strengthen the bond between the individual and the community to which he or she belongs.[111] James Fowler describes this as a type of shame that protects the elements that provide the basis for a person's worth in the eyes of others, and for his or her positive sense of self-worth and pride.[112] It is not difficult to see this type of

---

110   Scheff and Retzinger, "Shame as the Master Emotion of Everyday Life," 5.
111   James W. Fowler: *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon 1996), 104.
112   Ibid., 105.

shame as developing out of a nuanced and balanced interaction between the self and its primary caretakers, who are able to mirror the child sufficiently to develop his or her basic self-trust, while also being able to provide the necessary frustration for relating more realistically to the challenges and demands of others. In this way, shame may even be seen as the result of the monitoring and regulating of some of the important boundaries between self and other.

Shamelessness and possible consequences

Shamelessness is the opposite of discretionary shame. The shameless comes close enough to see both the vulnerability and the compromised situation of the other but does not have the moral sensibility or the moral standards to act accordingly, for example, by retreating in order to protect. The shameless have no regard for the boundaries of the other, and/or the moral sensibility that is activated when the boundary is broken. Rather, the shameless seeks fulfillment of her own needs and desires without reflecting on the other. As such, both shame and shamelessness are opposing features of the self that are closely tied to varying degrees of positive mirroring and self-experience in early childhood, and later manifested through differences in way of interacting with others. Thus, they are phenomena with strong relevance for morality – and we discuss them further in Chapter 6.

Shamelessness is especially recognizable in acts of violence. That is not surprising. As suggested, the shameless possess neither the ability to see nor respect the boundaries of the other. We saw earlier how the Rwandian citizen Léopard experienced shame when he saw that his own actions denied others the rights and recognition of being simply human. To be able to recognize one's shameful and violent acts presupposes an ability to both identify and respect the boundaries of the other. It takes a moral person to retreat in shame when faced with his own immoral actions. The more room a person can establish between themselves and the victim, the easier acts of violence become. As the face and the boundaries of the other becomes blurred, readiness for violence may increase. Thus, violence correlates with the social, geographical space between victim and offender. It is far easier to push the button and open the trapdoor

to the bomb bay than to kill face-to-face. It is also far easier to kill the ones we have dehumanized through language and ideology.[113] There is far less shame in wreaking havoc in villages of Rwandian "cockroaches" and faceless families of Vietnamese "gooks", than to faces where we recognize our own humanity. The strategies for evading responsibility, guilt and/ or shame are plentiful, as soon as the moral person has established some form of distance. But it is far more complicated to escape the shame of one's actions when we come within the reach of empathy.

However, it is not only in violence that shamelessness can be found. In recent times, the emergence of social media has led to a prevalence of both verbal abuse and attempted shaming of others from behind the curtain of anonymity. It is far more difficult to remain shameless when one is confronted with one's actions by having to face others. In the Scandinavian countries, journalists have confronted people who have "trolled" others online, and the result has mostly been a reaction of shame and remorse. This is an indication of the validity of the point above: shamelessness is easier to maintain when you are not confronted with the face of another, who represents other values and who questions your belonging to a community of shared values and qualities.

Nevertheless, as we mentioned above, not all perpetrators retreat in shame even though the vulnerability of the other is all too clear. The Norwegian philosopher A. J. Vetlesen comments: "What we need to recognize is that, in certain circumstances, evildoing thrives in proximity. Evildoing, be it modern or postmodern, be it ideologized along racial, nationalist, religious, or ethnic lines, does not depend on distance, invisibility or anonymity."[114]

---

113 For an introduction to this discussion, see, for example, Erwin Staub, *The Roots of Evil. The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust, (Cambridge; Maldon: Polity Press, 2007); Arthur G. Miller, *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide.*2000 ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

114 Arne Johan Vetlesen, "Det Er Ofrene Som Skammer Seg," in *Skam: Perspektiver På Skam, Ære Og Skamløshet I Det Moderne*, ed. Trygve Wyller (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2001), 31ff.; See also his *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing.*

Many victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) describe the particular shame tied to the shamelessness of the abusive close other.[115] A child naturally expects to be safe, to experience trust and recognition in the closeness of the other. A safe and nurturing relationship is the place where its vulnerability is both allowed, recognized, and met with empathy. But in instances of CSA, many children are met instead with the opposite: with violence and degradation. It happens without any sign that the offender recognizes the obvious vulnerability of the child and reacts to it with at least a hint of compassion that slows down or holds back the abuse, or a sign of the offender feeling remorse, guilt or shame over his shameful actions. The shame of the abuse is not picked up by the offender, but is left with the abused child, generated by the shameless exploitation of trust. It is a shame over being reduced to a sexual thing to be exploited, over the total lack of recognition of the self in the eyes of the other.[116] It is the shame of not being recognized as a vulnerable person even within the reach of empathy.

In his book *Facing the Extreme*, the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov analyzes the shame in Holocaust survivors, especially Jean Améry:

> The shame of the camp survivor has several components, the first being the shame of remembering. In the camps, the individual prisoner is deprived of his will. He is made to perform acts that he not only disapproves of but also finds abject, that he does either because he is ordered to or because he has to so as to survive. Améry compares this feeling to that of a victim of rape; logically, it is the rapist who ought to feel shame, but in reality, it is the victim who does, for she cannot forget that she was reduced to powerlessness, to a total dissociation from her will.[117]

Violence is the severing of any positive intentions in the victim. Violence within the boundaries of empathy thus negates the very essence of human constitution; the vulnerability and interdependence of the self. Therefore, shameless violation leaves the victim with the deepest sense of shame: shame over not being recognized as a vulnerable and

---

115   Mesel, *Vilje Til Frihet. En Manns Fortelling Om Barndom Og Overgrep*, 117ff.
116   Vetlesen, "Det Er Ofrene Som Skammer Seg," 124.
117   Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, 263.

interdependent person recognized and affirmed in her own being and intentional agency.

To sum up, the shameless carries no discretionary and protective shame but may leave the offended or the victim with a deep and toxic *shame that signals the dangers inherent in losing the self* when facing the shameless other. The shameless acts without recognition of the subjectivity of the other. Instead, the other is made into an object with no independent existence. Another interpretation of the shameless is that he acts only as an object by having failed in developing a proper sense of selfhood. In that sense, an emerging presence or recognition of shame may provide possibilities for proper individuation, for developing autonomy and selfhood, and for mutual subject-object relations.[118]

Disgrace shame

The above description of discretionary shame provides us with a sufficient basis for understanding so-called disgrace shame. Disgrace shame manifests itself in varying degrees, from strong but passing instances of shame that interrupts what we have called coherent agency, to the paralyzing, toxic and pathological shame that creates a permanent rupture in coherent agency and leaves the subject outside the boundaries of the community. Disgrace shame entails the loss of respect, honor or recognition by others from whom this was considered important, relevant and desirable. The examples may be many, from being rejected by a former friend or a lover, to the toxic shame of abuse, which we shall elaborate on below.

Consequently, disgrace shame also leads to the experience of being placed outside a community in ways that distort self-development by compromising the unavoidable and constitutional vulnerability of the self. It may emerge when one experiences oneself as someone other than the ideal, due to the perception of how (one believes that) others experience oneself. As related to others, we are vulnerable and not immune to others' perceptions of us. Such shame may be culturally conditioned,

---

118   Stephen Pattison, *Shame: theory, therapy, theology* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79f.

for example, by how one (and others) perceives oneself as ill, disabled, imprisoned or unemployed.[119] This shame may accordingly emerge out of the self's inability to live up to socially and culturally mediated ideals. It may also arise from warranted or unwarranted disappointment in oneself or others, in ways that make the discrepancies in self-perceptions between the ideal and reality more salient, and that may have an impact on social relations.[120] Sometimes one has to live with such shame, while at other times, one needs to develop a different self-perception in order to free oneself from this emotion. It is in this context that the ability to develop relations to others that can provide alternative self-perceptions becomes important.

Pathological shame

Not everyone who experiences variations of what we have described as disgrace shame finds themselves in a toxic and pathological condition. This severe mode of shame, which we will unfold in the following, is one that temporarily or even permanently seriously jeopardizes relationships with others and with the community.

Toxic or pathological shame has at least two forms. The first form of pathological shame has its origin in long-term dysfunctional relations between the self and (proximate) others, and we will unfold this form of shame in the following. The second form of shame can be found, for example, in the effects of traumatic violence and abuse. Especially sexual violence can sometimes generate a deep and toxic disgrace shame that can lead to a full rupture between the needed positive sense of self, in order to experience oneself and one's actions as good and worthy of recognition, and a destroyed and shattered self-image, with the concomitant impeded intentions and aims, and sometimes also destroyed social image. This type of shame holds the power to negatively shatter and reconstitute the architecture of self in ways that permanently damage social functioning.

---

119   Accordingly, sometimes the standards that condition such shame may be generally approved, i.e., regarding greed, while on other occasions, one may question the standards (i.e., not being slim enough, or not wearing the right clothes in the schoolyard).

120   In the words of Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis, 1993), 89: "The idealizing self experiences shame when it is rejected or disconfirmed."

The pathological condition of shame is characterized by how it affects the self's ability to be part of, relate to, and find fulfillment in a community with others. Such shame impedes the potential for a fulfillment that is shaped by a sense of self-worth and a genuine concern for others. It therefore differs from discretion (concern for others) or an awareness of a serious mistake or problem in one's own life (which is also constituted by a different role of others in the self). Instead, pathological shame is serious and destructive because it builds on a fundamental experience of being placed outside of the community of one's peers, of lacking self-esteem, of being assigned a lower value than others, or even a non-existing value. Thus, a primary mark of such pathological shame is the self's inability and lack of potential to maintain self-respect and a sense of self-worth when faced with (imagined) others. The presence of (perceived) others in the self instigates this experience, and hence, every instance in which others are present may appear as problematic and may throw the self back onto herself. Pathological shame manifests itself in the perception that there is absolutely no basis for self-appreciation or self-worth.

Accordingly, this type of shame does not contribute positively to the self-other relationship. Thus, it stands in contrast to what discretionary forms of shame may do, as these may even serve to uphold positive relations with others.[121] Pathological shame may make relations appear *toxic*, simply because they feed the feeling of a lack of self-worth even more when the individual remains in such relations than when he or she or has withdrawn from them. Accordingly, it is not the result of individual dispositions but emerges from specific forms of interpersonal relations that have severely affected the architecture of the self, more specifically the self-other constitution. This is of the utmost importance for the self's identity, because it means that the self's potential to experience itself in a positive manner is severely constricted. Thus, we can define pathological shame as an expression of destroyed and dysfunctional relations between the self and its (symbolic) others.

---

121 Cf. James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville, 1996), 107.

The most important implication of this definition from a theoretical point of view is that pathological shame affects the architecture of the self, that is, how the fundamental features of one's experience of self and agency are constituted. This shame does not have to emerge out of the self's ability to thematize itself by means of symbols or language, nor does it have to be a product of how the self has conducted itself as an agent in the world. Its origin can be placed within the dimension of self that must be described as pre-subjective, and thus affected by the early development of the child. Accordingly, in a crucial sense, this shame conditions the self's capabilities to be in the world, to experience and thereby to be, or to regain, a self at all.[122]

Pathological disgrace shame and the pre-subjective

Some kinds of shame may result from narcissistic deprivation or narcissistic wounds, a topic we will go deeper into later.[123] Thus, shame is the result of interruption of interests or desires. These occur when the infant is deprived of his or her opportunity to develop in an emotionally healthy direction, because caretakers mainly relate to the child on the basis of their own emotional needs and concerns. Because lack of care disturbs the child's need for affirmation and mirroring, the intentions that search for such recognition are impeded and may cause shame. Hence, we can speak here of shame as a pre-subjective element that contributes to the shape and content of the emerging subject's self-experience. Shame is, in the pre-subjective context, the result of the child not being given a sufficient opportunity to be affirmed and recognized as valuable and lovable in his or her own capacity. Instead, the child's self-worth becomes

---

122 We use the notion of pre-subjectivity here because it identifies the conditions for self-perception even before one becomes capable of articulating oneself as a subject by means of thought and language. There are some *given* pre-subjective conditions that are part of psychology as well as personality: desire, body, relations with others, vulnerability, and dependence are all such conditions that exist prior to and partly also outside of the subject's ability to control them. At the same time, they are elements that the subject may have to appropriate in a specific manner in order to become a more qualified subject.

123 Cf. Fowler, *Faithful Change*. For a similar approach, see also J. Patton, referenced by Pattison, *Shame,* 199, pointing to how shame is basically a response to a narcissistic wound, including the responses of rage and power, self-righteousness etc., which cuts off the self from re-establishing relations with others.

permanently dependent on who he or she is in the eyes of the parent.[124] He or she is referred to the insecure state manifested by and within relationships with other subjects who are not able to take care of him or her sufficiently. Lack of self-confidence may then substitute the trusting self-relation the child needs and increase the child's vulnerability, anxiety, and lack of self-worth – as well as his or her dependency on others for affirmation.[125]

Instances of such shame imply that a dysfunctional relation is expressed not only in the child's inability to experience himself or herself as appreciated and affirmed, but also in the fact that the presence of such shame emotions deprive the child of the possibility to differentiate himself or herself emotionally from the parent in a healthy manner. Accordingly, the child is thrown into a process in which he or she must constantly consider his or her own identity in relation to others, and how the implications of what he or she does impacts *their* emotional status. Thereby, the other is integrated into the self in a way that does not allow for a sufficiently differentiated self. The lack of differentiation may keep the child permanently aware of its inability to live up to the expectations of his or her (m)other, and thereby contribute to a constant condition of shamefulness.

Winnicott's understanding of the false self may shed some light on shame as emerging out of a similar kind of relationship: when faced with a parent who is not good enough, some infants become compliant and do everything to please them without considering their own needs, feelings or desires in a sufficient manner, or rendering them as unhelpful for the relation. The unacceptable feelings and energies that constitute the "true self" are thereby denied and regarded as unwanted. As a result, the child may lose its sense of individuality and be deprived of a properly separate existence.[126]

Shame that originates as a pre-subjective phenomenon therefore determines the self-relation in ways that profoundly affect relations

---

124 Fowler, *Faithful Change,* 108.
125 Ibid.
126 Pattison, *Shame*, 101, referring to Phil Mollon, *The Fragile Self* (London, 1993), 45f.

to others as well. Such shame is constituted by passivity, that is, the present architecture of the self is the result of others' actions or lack of action towards her. The result is not due to what he or she has done or not done, but due to what others have made him or her. This pre-subjective character of pathological shame implies that it can be experienced as uncontrollable. Thus, it is much more than an emotion that we can strive to control, it is a component in the way the self is organized and works – what we have called the architecture of the self. Healing from such shame can only take place if one engages in a therapeutic process that interiorizes a different self-other system than the one that has been instigated by the primary caretakers. This new system or architecture must provide the ability to differentiate both emotionally and cognitively between the self and others. Only in this way will the self be able to experience shame as something that the self has not caused. However, the reinstatement of such a new self-other system may be a long process.

Shame: attempting a comprehensive phenomenological description

Towards a preliminary comprehensive definition

Shame is rooted in the specific relational mode of being-in-the-world where humans exist as intentional beings. Shame is a composite phenomenon that involves an inner, a social and an embodied experience of self. We therefore recommend that one sees shame as more than an emotional reaction to one clearly delineated set of conditions. Shame is the result of a diversity of types of interplay between different experiential dimensions in which an agent participates.

In this section, we aim at providing an overarching description of what shame entails and implies when it comes to self-experience, and do so in a way that builds on, summarizes, and develops further some of the observations already presented. The section intends to highlight some of the diverse elements that shame entails to show that it is more than an emotional response. We shall provide examples in the end in order to contextualize our description.

Shame and intentional investment or engagement

Let us try to elaborate the aforementioned complexity from a phenomenological point of view. Because human beings are *intentional*, they are directed towards others, towards the world, and are involved in different kinds of projects. These projects are related to their self-image and their social image, and reflect these images to a lesser or greater extent – although the self-image and the social image behind intentional projects need not correspond. The notion "projects" is important here, since it captures the intentional and projective character of the self as one who always engages in the world and with different objects or aims that it wants to achieve or accomplish, which have some kind of value or attraction for it. Intentionality is expressed as orientation towards something. Concomitantly, it has to do with how the self manifests an interest that is directed by and shaped by the relation to this something.[127] The intentional and projective character of being (which Heidegger calls *Da-sein*, or "being-towards") is not based exclusively on intellectual deliberations. It may also be rooted in instinctual elements (as in the infant seeking the breast for food) or in desires that emerge as the result of interactions with others (as in Girard's mimetic desire, which implies, for example, that an infant wants to have what another has, simply because the other has it).[128]

---

127 Another way to express this intentionality is by means of the notion "interest". In her book on shame, Probyn comes close to the description we develop here, especially with regard to relationality and interruption: "Interest constitutes lines of connection between people and ideas. It describes a kind of affective investment we have in others. When, for different reasons, that investment is questioned, and interest interrupted, we feel deprived. Crucially, that's when we feel shame. That little moment of disappointment – 'oh, but I was interested' – is amplified into shame or a deep disappointment in ourselves. Shame marks the break in connection. We have to care about something or someone to feel ashamed when that care and connection – our interest – is not reciprocated." Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 13.

128 When Merleau-Ponty understands consciousness as a kind of bodily understanding, it can be related to the idea of intentionality's relation to shame that we sketch here. He argues that our exploratory and goal-directed movement constitutes a way of being conscious of things, and is a form of understanding what is perceived that is not derived from activities of conceptual categorization and inference (which belong properly to the intellect). Thus, the organization and adjustment of movements involved in bodily understanding, though norm-guided and experienced, must not be regarded as always chosen – our moves are objects of personal choice only when specifically endorsed for reasons. Cf. Charles Siewert, "Consciousness and Intentionality," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017).

Intentionally-based agency is simply the human mode of being-in-the-world, and is therefore the contextual frame of any modality of shame.

These projects entail personal investment, and we hold that this investment is also a part of the contextual framework of shame. Therefore, we hold that the instinctual and/or desire-based intentions are not only an expression of the embodied self, but that the embodied mode of intentionality and "directed-towards" that is articulated in the self's projects and projections are of crucial importance for understanding shame. How?

The intentional projective mode of being implies that the self always understands itself in relation to something that is of importance or value to it to a varying degree, something it wants to achieve to a varying degree. What it seeks to achieve is not simply external to it or of merely instrumental value but is linked to its sense of self and the way that self expresses itself in the world through agency. Thus, it invest itself in these projects and the projects become expressions of its intentions: it may want to be fed, sexually satisfied, recognized as the bearer of a specific status, admired, considered as skilled, worthy of recognition, etc. All of these elements also imply some (albeit sometimes tacit) participation in a world with others. Often, such projects turn out to be successful, or at least partly successful, as different contextual elements make possible and delimit its way of expressing itself through agency. Some projects may be of great importance and demand a large personal investment. But some projects may also be of lesser importance and, accordingly, require a smaller personal investment. Although the importance of the intentionally based projects may differ, as well as the amount of personal investment in them, the human relational mode of being is never non-intentional and without some sort of invested interest expressed through some sort of action. *Shame manifests the unwelcome interruption of these intentional projects both cognitively, emotionally, socially, and bodily.*

Shame as disruption, rupture, or impediment of coherent agency

Shame may occur when there is some sort of disturbance in, disruption of, or full-blown rupture between, intentions, desires and the projects they

engender *and* the possibility of expressing these in the world through agency. Thus, shame can manifest itself in the lack of the personal ability to fulfill the intended project or achieve the desired aim. It can also manifest itself through contextual restraints, such as when the social structures or the internalized normativities within which an agent conducts agency impede or block the possibility of expressing certain personal projects in a coherent manner, because they are deemed undesirable in the context.[129] Similar suggestions can be found in the understanding of shame as "an awareness of a distinctive inability to discharge a commitment that goes with holding self-relevant values."[130]

Interruption also occurs when a person realizes that their context of agency is not shared by others, and that the others' context of agency and conditions are not in consonance with their own. Then we can speak about shame as emerging from the clash between contexts of agency. This is often expressed as becoming aware of the other's (disapproving) gaze at you or your actions (be it imagined or real). The expansion of the context of agency from the immediate and personal towards a broader context where others are involved causes an interruption and the potential impediment of the original intentional orientation. This impediment throws the self back at itself in a way that makes it aware of itself from another perspective than the one manifested in the original intentional

---

129 Silvan Tomkins describes shame on the basis of affect theory, as "inevitable for any human being insofar as desire outruns fulfillment sufficiently to attenuate interest without destroying it. The most general sources of shame are the varieties of barriers to the varieties of objects of excitement or enjoyment, which reduce positive affect sufficiently to activate shame, but not so completely that the original object is renounced: "I want, but –" is one essential condition for the activation of shame. Clearly not all barriers suspend the individual between longing and despair. Many barriers either completely reduce interest so that the object is renounced or heighten interest so that the barrier is removed or overcome. Indeed, shame itself may eventually also prompt either renunciation or counteraction inasmuch as successful renunciation or counteraction will reduce the feeling of shame. We are saying only that whatever the eventual outcome of the arousal of shame may be, shame is activated by the incomplete reduction of interest – excitement or enjoyment – joy, rather than by the heightening of interest or joy or by the complete reduction of interest or joy." See Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness.: The Complete Edition*, electronic resource, Ebook Central (New York: Springer Publishing, 2008). Book 2, Vol. 1, 388.

130 Julien A. Deonna and Fabrice Teroni, "The Self of Shame," in *Emotions, Ethics, and Authenticity*, eds. Mikko Salmela and Verena E. Mayer, (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 33, cf. 34.

project. Thus, the ability to act in coherence with the original intentions is compromised.

Here coherence means that there is a certain consonance between intentions and desires, actions, values, and the expressed results of these. Thus, shame is specifically linked to projects where lack of consonance, especially for moral reasons, reflects negatively on the self. This approach implies that shame does not occur when projects do not reflect negatively on who we are and on our sense of self. The significance of lacking coherence correlates both with the degree of perceived importance for the agentitself, and its investment in the project, as well as with its ability to cope with such a lack. Thus, the (mode of) reciprocal dynamics between the sense of self and the possibility of coherent agency mirrors the solidity of the self. Its ability to handle both external and internal pressure without reverting to shame is dependent on the extent to which it can maintain a coherent agency when it comes to fulfilling its intentional projects.

The problematizing interruption of the intentional project and the investment therein is, as mentioned above, not necessarily mediated by the intervention of others; it may be that the person in question realizes that he or she is not competent to fulfill the intentions or may come to see that the project implies a way of appearing that is not desirable after all. This realization may be based on his or her self-image or social image. But it may also be that others react to the project in ways that engender shame, as when the infant is rejected in its intention to be fed, or when one realizes that the project one is investing in is considered by others to be morally repugnant (such as stealing or committing adultery).

The interruption of the intentional project that engenders shame is, therefore, more than an experience of failure to achieve the desired good, no matter how much or how little it is cognitively articulated. It may also comprise an experience of failure or the lack of ability to act in ways that can lead to the desired result, or it may entail an experience of the desire or intention itself as failed, impeded, or considered by others as objectionable. The frustration of the desire that leads to the intention is among the elements that allow us to see shame as an embodied phenomenon: shame could not occur unless an agent, which had intentions fueled by a desire for an assumed good, had been denied.

Shame as a mediator of self-experience

We can develop and substantiate our phenomenological account of shame further by addressing elements in Dan Zahavi's work. He takes issue with other important analyses of shame, including those that exaggerate the need for an actual audience in order for shame to occur, and those that downplay the importance of sociality for the same reason. Building on Sartre's analysis of shame, Zahavi first points to how shame is a form of intentional consciousness.[131] Shame implies an apprehension of self and, therefore, it exhibits a certain mode of self-relation. However, shame is not primarily and initially a phenomenon of reflection.[132]

Moreover, Zahavi's analysis underscores our previous point about shame as linked to interruption. It appears as "an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation."[133] It is the result of one's experience of oneself in relation to someone else who interrupts one: "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 that of which I am ashamed is only constituted in and through my encounter with the other."[134] Accordingly, Zahavi maintains "that shame contains a significant component of *alterity*."[135] This point corresponds to what we wrote above about the sudden expansion of the context of agency, which we can now see as constituted by the (imagined) presence of the other.

Zahavi's account of shame offers a profound explanation of why we can see shame as an experience of the self, and not only of a situation, an act, or something else; shame is a mediated mode of self-relation. The other serves as a mediator of this experience of self, and this mode of being. Thus, shame "reveals our relationality, our being-for-others."

---

131   Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212.

132   Ibid., 213. "I can reflect upon my failings and feel shame as a result, just as I might reflect upon my feeling of shame, but I can feel shame prior to engaging in reflection."

133   Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by Zahavi, ibid.

134   Ibid., 213.

135   Ibid., 239. Italicized by us.

Accordingly, as we have already pointed out, shame is both a self-conscious emotion and a social emotion.[136]

Above, we suggested that shame is the result of a clash between two different contexts of agency and evaluation. This description fits well with how Zahavi points to how "shame makes me aware of not being in control and of having my foundation outside myself."[137] It presents one with an immediate experience of powerlessness when one is faced with the context that clashes with one's immediate intentionality in agency, and the previous immediacy is substituted with a sense of becoming an object for one's own consciousness. This objectification may itself be shame-inducing, and it is also part of the interruptive character of shame, in which the subject changes position, or realizes that his or her agency clashes with that which others can or will recognize. However, "although the feeling of shame reveals to me that I exist for and am visible to others, although it reveals to me that I am (partly) constituted by the other, and that a dimension of my being is one that the other provides me with, it is […] a dimension of myself that I cannot know or intuit in the same way as others can."[138] Consequently, this situation also involves an aspect of alienation from the immediate self which is articulating itself through intentional agency.

Accordingly, Zahavi sees it as insufficient to analyze shame only "by focusing on the fact that the shamed subject is thrown back upon itself." Instead, he subscribes to the idea that the subject, when shamed, is both "entirely self-present" and "beside itself."[139] Thus, shame involves an existential alienation:

> In some cases, the alienating power is a different subject […]. 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

136 Ibid., 213.
137 This point can also be substantiated by Gabriele Taylor's analysis, according to which "shame is crucially related to a shift in the agent's perspective on himself or herself – a shift that specifically occasions the realization of an adverse discrepancy between the agent's assumptions about himself until now and the perspective offered by a more detached observer." See Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 66.
138 Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, 213–14.
139 Ibid., 238.

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.[140]

Zahavi further nuances the other-based experience of shame by claiming 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 […] the core 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."[141] Thus, shame becomes a specific reaction in the human sphere because humans can always consider or contemplate different ways of being than those present. As such, shame belongs to the human condition, a point that also has been developed in Martha Nussbaum's analysis of the phenomenon. She sees it as an emotional response to the uncovering and display of our weakness, our defects, and our imperfections.[142] We shall see how this point is elaborated in a later chapter.

Shame as the result of lack of recognition or humiliation

Zahavi develops his final point, on how interruption mediated by the other may occur, via Axel Honneth's understanding of the role of recognition in the development of a child's perception of its own agency. "Honneth points to infancy research that suggests that there is a range of adult facial expressions such as the loving smile, the extended hand, the benevolent nod, that will let the child know that he is the recipient of attention and devotion, and then argues that the child, by being the recipient of such pre-linguistic expressions, becomes socially visible."[143] These elements, we

---

140 Ibid., 238–39.
141 Ibid., 215–16. Here, he builds on Max Scheler.
142 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 173, 85. See for example Nussbaum's account in Chapter 3.
143 Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, 224.

would argue, support the child's immediate performance of its agency. It does so in ways that affirm it and allow it to go on without interruption. However, when the child is intentionally ignored and becomes aware of this, or is humiliated, it causes a negative mode of disruption of agency that not only concerns the child in his or her early years. It can also cause the adult to stop up and consider his or her actions. To make any person socially invisible is to deny him or her opportunities for recognition and to place him or her outside the human community – a feature that we also see as important for the experience of shame.[144] This experience is, therefore, also one of interruption, and one that may cause shame. There is a significant relation between shame and the need for and perceived absence of recognition, a point that we will develop further in Chapter 3. The absence of approving reciprocity may engender shame and make one more prone to it.

A few illustrations of the above position

Finally, let us briefly consider some examples that can illustrate the understanding of shame we presented above:

A special case here concerns the victims of violence or sexual abuse. For them, shame is the result of the experience of not being worth anything – and being totally under the control of someone else's agency. Such violence and abuse takes away the necessary sense of being at the center of one's own actions, as an agent that is in control. The deprivation of agency here, as well as the impediment of one's perception of what should be the desired qualities of one's life, results in shame. Victims of rape or other types of violence may, therefore, experience shame because of their intentions of achieving something good in the world. Their ability to be embodied agents in control of themselves has been impeded by the attack to which they were subjected. They lose (at least for some time) their ability to be in control of their actions and realize their own goals. Their

---

144   Axel Honneth and Avishai Margalit, "Recognition," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 75 (2001). Cf. Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, 224.

sense of self (including the embodied self) becomes so shattered that it is hard to experience any kind of trust that can sustain the confidence in further positive projects that are guided by intentions to realize valuable aims. Shame is then not only the reaction to not being recognized as worthy of respect in the eyes of the offender, but also the emotional strategy of withdrawal, in order to protect oneself, into a state with a restricted will to perform agency. Since such offenses imply a transgression of the boundaries of the self, it also means that the structure of desire in the victim has been violated. His or her further intentions do not remain as reliable as earlier, and he or she cannot be confident that he or she has the respect of others any longer. Here shame is not due to how he or she is perceived by his or her actual peers, but the result of the offender's inscription of himself/herself in his or her sense of self in a way that makes him or her perceive himself or herself as unworthy. Concomitant to this mental intrusion of the violator may be the lack of control of oneself and one's projects.

Another example: The new boy at school wants to be recognized and included by his peers and accordingly, he invests in that project. When they ridicule him for his clothing or his dialect, he experiences the failure of his project and the frustration of his intentions. His desire for recognition is not fulfilled. His retraction from the others is a response aimed at shielding or defending himself further from the exposure that perpetuates this experience of failure. This retraction will often have a physical component, such as turning away, walking away, looking down, etc. It is likely that people who feel shame due to illness or physical disabilities or psychological challenges may have similar desires for the value of inclusion that are frustrated. Intentions for agency are changed, and the experience of shame also creates a sense of being placed outside the community of shared values, intentions, and qualities. Shame need not be the result of violence or immoral behavior, though.

Moreover, we have had students from other parts of the world who were unable to realize their expectations of getting an "A", and who therefore felt shame on returning to their home country with a less honorable grade. Their desire to bring honor to themselves and their families turned out to be impossible to fulfill. This form of shame is one that has to do

with the shared understanding within a certain group or community about what is considered honorable – and one is excluded from the group due to lack of sharing the traits required for that. Here, shame is also the result of failed intentional projects, but the interruption of the project is because of a personal lack of capacity rather than the result of a rebuke or the rejection of others.

Shame as an individual experience: why does it differ?

People are prone to shame to different degrees.[145] Some, who have developed a solid sense of self and concomitant independence and self-reliance, may be less prone to shame than those who have learned that it is how you appear in the eyes of others that matters. We will come back to this point in the next chapter on the psychology of shame. Here we only want to point to how the different variables that actually cause shame work in tandem with the extent to which the person is prone to shame, and that this proneness may vary considerably in different individuals. Furthermore, this point makes it important for us to not only underscore the ambiguities of shame, and the fact that shame comes in many different forms. It also points to the reason why shame may be experienced to different degrees, as strong and debilitating, or as a reaction that passes away more or less quickly. The variations in the experiences of shame may thus not only rely on the degree of personal investment, or on proneness to shame, but also on the access one has to the resources for overcoming it.

In the following chapter, we shall address in more detail how shame as a pre-subjective state manifests itself in how the lack of trust in oneself is the result of a lack of integration of a sense of self that can put trust in one's own agency. The result of early relational distortions contributes to the infant being prone to shame, lacking trust in itself and pride in what it is doing. Agency becomes fragmented, and there are less chances for

---

145   For an introduction to the discussion of shame-proneness, see Tracy, Robins, and Tangney, *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*; Tangney, Wagner, and Gramzow, "Proneness to Shame, Proneness to Guilt, and Psychopathology"; and Tangney and Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

coherent and self-directed agency. Here, we only want to draw attention to the fact that these conditions are related to shame-proneness.

Related to this is shame as the result of actual or imagined rejection because of one's actions or features. This goes for anything from exposure of handicaps or disease, ridicule because of being naked, or when one is exposed as vulnerable in a sexually-charged situation. Discretionary shame works here in a similar manner to other types of shame – as an interruption that leads to withdrawal and protective actions. Again, projections or intentions are interrupted by something occurring in the situation as the cause of shame. Such experiences of shame need not be instigated by actual others but can just as well be a manifestation of an internalized inferiority feeling. Hence, shame is often, but not always, a manifestation of actual social relationships, but it can be the result of not being able to achieve one's own goals or aspirations – even when no one else knows, sees, or cares.