Shame from a Psychological Point of View

Starting point: shame and the architecture of the Self

It should be apparent from our description so far that we see shame as deeply rooted in complex psychological conditions and the concomitant architecture of the self. Shame can be related to intentions, desires, aspirations, and the need for acknowledgment and recognition, as well as frustration, disappointment, exclusion, violence, and a sense of failure – all of which may be caused by others or by one's own responses or assessments. Thus, shame is a relational phenomenon, and as such, it often occurs in, or as the result of, interaction and interpersonal exchange. In this chapter, we will elaborate further on the underpinnings of our initial description, with the help of elements in the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut and other theoretical approaches that supplement the perspectives it offers.[146]

The analyses in this chapter take as their point of departure an understanding of how the self's "architecture" is constituted relationally. It is conditioned by the interaction between the biological and social conditions, and the subjectivity of the (emerging) individual. The structure of the self (the self's architecture) develops through the interaction between two sets of conditions: the biological makeup and the psychological, social, and material conditions in which the self participates. Accordingly, the development of the self is always vulnerable, and the self is

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146 We have chosen self-psychology as the main theoretical approach because of its fundamentally relational understanding of the development of the self, which allows for perspectives that are not present in traditional psychoanalytic theory, and which go beyond understanding shame as a mere affective response.

always potentially exposed, because it is subjected to conditions that can both promote and restrict the possibilities for self-affirmation and self-realization.

Shame is not only a complex emotion, but the different types of shame can be seen as engendered by intentions all of which are guided by aims and desires. When these are impeded, for whatever reason, shame may occur. The ideals and aims that guide and inform our intentional projects and aspirations are constituted in part by what we learn about what matters and what needs to be done when we are in relationships with others from early on. Shame's complicated character is fundamentally related to how it arrives early in human life – usually, before infants have language. And as mentioned, one's proneness to shame may, therefore, also be dependent on how relationships with others make one more susceptible to criticism and shaming, or the opposite: more self-reliant, with more self-esteem and pride in what one does.

Heinz Kohut and the development of the self
Mirroring and idealization

Heinz Kohut's work on the development of the self stands out among the psychologists who have worked with notions of the self that are relevant to our purposes. In the following, we draw on those parts of his theory that may be of relevance for understanding the dynamics that result in shame. Accordingly, we do not develop a comprehensive presentation of all the different elements in his theory of the self.

According to Kohut, the self is initially fragmented, and its experiences are not in any way related to a clear sense or feeling of being a unified self. It is by interacting with others that a unifying feeling or experience of self and world can be developed, and the different experiences become integrated with something that is a sense of self. Hence, interaction with others who can mirror the child and thereby provide it with something that grows into a more or less stable self-experience is crucial. Thus, the self becomes both more cohesive and more enduring than at the previous, fragmented stage.

This self develops in relation to two poles.[147] The first pole finds expression in the infant's need to be emotionally affirmed and encouraged in its authentic being and its own achievements (the *mirroring* pole). This need directs the infant towards the caretaker, who is then also the one upon whom the development of the self becomes dependent. Kohut calls the process of confirmation that takes place "mirroring," and it both affirms and guides the child in discovering who it may be. In the process of being seen for what it truly is, the child may then be able to realize its own potential. Thus, this process "leads the child to a sense of enjoyment of his or her own capabilities, fuels self-esteem and a sense of worth, and forms a basis for developing ambition and a sense of self-pride."[148] Thus, the child's in-born narcissistic grandiosity is here both confirmed and adjusted in the process of mirroring.[149] Part of its experience of its agency is, therefore, dependent on its relation to the other who represents this pole, and the more consistent the response is, the more firm is the basis for the self. Stated in the terms that we have used earlier: The embodied intentional mode of being-in-the-world is recognized, and thereby also contributes to a stable sense of self to the extent that it is validated, affirmed, or recognized.

However, if the mirroring pole (the parent) does not contribute to this type of stable affirmation, the child's chances decrease for developing a more self-reliant attitude to the world and a more stable self. Nevertheless, the need for confirmation remains, and the child becomes more dependent on others for mirroring, due to the insecurity that it experiences because of this lack. Thus, the lack of a stable response from a significant other implies that it becomes more uncertain about the abilities of its agency, and concomitantly, may become more prone to shame. In our previously established terms: insecurity leads to an awareness that its context of agency is not necessarily shared by others and may make

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147 The résumé of Kohut is based on the following texts: Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977); Kenneth Bragan, *Self and Spirit in the Therapeutic Relationship* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

148 *Self and Spirit in the Therapeutic Relationship*, 5.

149 For more on narcissism and shame, see below.

it more susceptible to how others consider it – but not in an approving manner.

Failure to receive an adequate response is crucial in understanding Kohut's interpretation of the origins of narcissistic disturbances in the formation of the self. This point is also of great importance to the understanding of shame. If we relate it to what we have sketched in the previous chapter, it means that the infant's intentions and desires lack a firm basis and may more easily become interrupted by the experienced lack of confirmation by others, no matter if this is expressed openly to, or just assumed by, the insecure self. We will return to the topic of narcissism later.

The infant's need to gain strength from feeling a part of, or being identified with, someone or something which is experienced as strong and reliable, manifests in its search for another pole of identity formation. This pole contributes a fundamental sense of safety and security, which is the basis for developing trusting relationships. Hence, this may also be called the idealizing pole:

> Idealization is the process by which the child at first is comforted and reassured by being held in mother's arms, and later finds strength by identifying with an idealized other or with idealized values and aims. This pole of the self gives life direction and structure, knowledge of right and wrong, and a sense of self-control. Deficits result in feelings of weakness, aimlessness and not being in charge of one's life.[150]

The image of the idealized parent originally constitutes the idealized pole, but later on, other idealized persons or entities may also serve as objects which the self, through a process of identification, can experience as contributing to its own feelings of strength and capability. *Thus, idealization is the other important element in what constitutes the content and coherent direction of intentional agency.* Unclear or blurred ideals may, therefore, make the person more prone to shame because they may more easily run into conflict with each other. The idealization process is

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150   Bragan, *Self and Spirit in the Therapeutic Relationship*, 5. Note how this idealization also plays a role in the development of religion – a point we will return to in Chapter 5.

of crucial importance to the formation of intentions, desires, aims, and projects that the self finds important to pursue, as well as the values on which it bases its assessments of the achievements they result in. Accordingly, we can identify here the origin of the ideals and values that may cause experiences of shame when not lived up to as well. The idealizing pole is thus both internally and externally based – as is shame and its conditions.

We are now in a position where we can define more specifically what makes a person prone to shame from Kohut's point of view: As the above presentation suggests, when the child is not sufficiently cared for and not provided with sufficiently stable relationships that mirror or guide it, a sense of weakness and of not being in charge may be the result. Hence, the child's perception of its agency competence is not solidified and introduces it into a constant quest for recognition – which, in turn, also entails narcissistic traits. Thus, lack of care makes the infant or child more prone to shame because it weakens the child's capacity for agency and self-direction. The blurred boundaries between self and other thus reflect in a proneness to shame. Shame is, therefore, not only the result of failed agency but also the result of not being able to hold a secure position where one can be self-reliant and feel that one is in charge. Accordingly, shame is related to the experience of weakness and vulnerability – a topic we explore further below.

Optimal frustration shapes a solid self

We can now understand how what the child learns through affirmation and mirroring is relevant to how it comes to see its own skills and talents, and thereby, its self and potential for agency. To develop a self is related to a learning process where one is both subject and object. This learning also implies experiences of what Kohut calls optimal frustration. Such frustration is the means by which one can have non-traumatic experiences of whom one may potentially be and not be.[151] It provides opportunities

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151   Heinz Kohut, Arnold Goldberg, and Paul E. Stepansky, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 102–103.

for a more realistic self-understanding and appreciation of capacities and limitations. Consequently, as the result of such optimal frustration, one becomes increasingly able to differentiate oneself from the idealized object, as well as achieving a more nuanced understanding of the limits of one's own grandiosity. The outcome of this process is a mature and integrated self with a solidified psychic structure that can provide itself with a sense of cohesion and continuity, and does not need to look outside itself to achieve this sense. The self which results from a process of optimal frustration and adequate mirroring and mature idealization is, in our view, therefore less prone to shame because its structure, or architecture, has developed into a more solidified self.

The ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality is a crucial condition for successful agency. Therefore, optimal frustration by which the self is neither over-stimulated (if it meets only affirmation, this will foster the continuation of an immature, grandiose self) nor under-stimulated (a process that would force the self into a constant quest for further affirmation, while trying to conform to the demands that may help to achieve it) is a device that can contribute to making the child less prone to shame. A self which is insecure concerning its ideals or capacities may be more prone to shame than one which has developed a realistic sense of its capacities and its accompanying ability to be self-reliant about the judgments and ideals that direct its intentions, projects, and desires. Consequently, such self-reliance contributes to a more coherent agency and to ideals that are in consonance. Furthermore, the individual's agency is then not only oriented towards assurance from others that offers compensatory mirroring but towards internalized aims and objects of a more stable character.

Selfobjects

From the processes of mirroring and idealization emerge a specific type of experience of elements that are of vital importance to the sense of self in its development. Kohut calls these elements (or objects) *selfobjects*. A selfobject is not a part of the objective world but is a part of the inner world: it belongs to the space of the self. Bragan sums it up thus:

Any person or object experienced as having a self-discovering, self-promoting or self-strengthening function is a selfobject. However, it is the experience of the object that matters, not the external reality, not the actuality, and selfobjects must be clearly distinguished not only from the external objects that are the focus of the experience but also from internal representations of objects and from self-representations. The concept is difficult to grasp because it is purely subjective. Its reality is in the inner world, and it is best to think of it simply as how an object is experienced. Selfobjects are the self-fortifying internal reflection of the outer world, the internal soil in which a cohesive self can grow.[152]

According to this understanding, selfobjects provide the necessary means by which the self is able to experience itself as someone. Furthermore, selfobjects are objects of emotional or libidinal investment. They may also develop in ways that give them compensating functions, for example, due to a lack of care. Since selfobjects are fundamental building blocks of the self, they may exist in rudimentary and undifferentiated forms in the archaic self, or as more mature, differentiated, and symbolic forms in mature versions of the self. Furthermore, they have cognitive as well as emotional aspects. These self-objects that guide action, shape experience, and represent personal investment, intentions, and desires, may condition the individual to experience varying degrees of shame. The more compensatory the selfobjects appear in relation to the lack of ability to build a solid self, the more prone the self may be to shame. The need for compensating strategies when mirroring and idealization has been inadequate testifies to how the self's lack of independence from others makes it prone to shame: it increases the need for immediate recognition by others, and makes the self less reliant on its own sense of self and the internal resources that guide agency. However, the extent to which the self is insecure and reliant on others may vary in different contexts of agency.

Kohut's notion of selfobjects circumscribes the function that other people may have in a person's experience of harmony, strength, firmness, vitality, responsiveness, and creativity. A solid self can be more vital and creative simply because it can direct more energy towards such projects

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152   Bragan, *Self and Spirit,* 6.

instead of using it for compensatory projects aimed at recognition and safety. The weaker the conditions for these experiences are, the more we think the subject is prone to shame. It is due to one's relationships with others that one gains access to the necessary resources for experiencing oneself as a person in control and with a coherent agency. It is worth noting here that real creativity requires that the self is no longer inhibited by the demands that were present in the archaic self and its struggle for success and admiration. As one becomes more self-reliant and less dependent upon others, this may increase the flow of creativity and reduce the proneness to shame.

Shame, vulnerability, and narcissistic rage

The processes described above are the backdrop for understanding Kohut's approach to the connection between narcissism and shame: a natural tendency in infants is to act in ways that seek mirroring. Infants are narcissists by default. Such "natural" narcissism is not the result of a lack of care, but the way in which the infant relates to the world. However, as the child grows, and learns to see the other as independent, and not only as an extension of itself (a process that may also imply frustration), it can become more aware of who it is in relation to the other, and the archaic form of narcissism may recede. Then, it may be transformed into a kind of creativity in which the child matures and become increasingly more reliant on itself instead of on others – partly because it has become liberated from the need to struggle for recognition and acceptance constantly. Thus, a more autonomous mode of acting overcomes narcissism.

It is when the differentiation process between self and other does not run its normal course that the self may develop more problematic narcissistic traits and the insatiable "object hunger" for that which can provide it with some sense of self-worth and safety. Then the self is set on a life-long quest for affirmation and safety. Accordingly, Kohut sees narcissistic distortions as caused by instances when the two poles of the self are not experienced and integrated as an adequate response from a person to whom the self is close. Because such experiences are vital to developing a firm sense of self-confidence and self-worth, the narcissistic

disturbance not only implies lack of self-esteem (although this may be present, but is often hidden or covered up). It also impedes the ability to engage empathetically with other people. Kohut sees defects in empathic engagement as caused by the absence of, or inadequacy of cooperation with, early caretakers. It leads to a mechanic and lifeless understanding of the inner reality of the self and others. The selfobjects in such an immature or arrested self may, therefore, contribute to the petrification of a narcissism that makes the self unable to transcend its captive state. At times, it may imply that it can, when frustrated, develop a narcissistic rage that is directed outwards toward others.[153] This rage is also related to shame. How should we understand this relation?

Narcissistic rage is related to the omnipotent demand for control (power) in the grandiose but immature self. It emerges from feelings of frustration and insecurity that are the result of a lack of such control. It is directed towards the features that threaten and frustrate the narcissistic self. Kohut sees shame as emerging out of the concomitant and denied demand for admiration and affirmation. Usually, by engaging with selfobjects that may help to meet this demand, the self can mobilize its libido so that it is ready to express itself when it receives an affirming and admiring response from the environment. However, when the anticipated answer does not appear, or the intentional object does not appear, the self can no longer unfold itself in the same process.[154] Shame is the result, as rage may also be. Furthermore, rage may cause shame, or shame may cause rage – it can go both ways. Hence, the narcissistic process is back to square one, and the self has to find new ways to affirm itself. In other words: shame and rage may emerge as a result when the intention is impeded or interrupted, so that the self loses control over the intentions and purposes in which it has invested itself and its agency.

Shame and rage are, therefore, according to these perspectives, the results of inadequate attuning in the self-selfobject relation, that is, the relation that the self has to its image of itself (itself as self-object), and

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153   Cf. what we said in the previous chapter about transportation and transformation of shame, pp. 51–57.

154   Sigmund Karterud, *Fra Narsissisme Til Selvpsykologi: En Innføring I Heinz Kohuts Forfatterskap* (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 2009), 93.

which consequently allows it to experience itself. A self-self-object that never allows the self to appear in its own eyes as accepted and valuable may become strongly prone to the development of shame. A self that has never been allowed to overcome its insecurities by forming an alliance with idealized others, or feel affirmed by such selfobjects, may continue its grandiose struggle for control to overcome these insecurities.

According to this analysis, shame-proneness derives from serious defects in the self that prevent a firm sense of cohesiveness and self-esteem.[155] Thus, shame-proneness seems to be correlated with the vulnerability that is enhanced through this process:

> Shame-prone individuals are more vulnerable than most to experiencing even ordinary criticism as devastating. Thus, when either chronic or traumatic injuries occur to the already fragile self, the person becomes shamed in his or her own eyes and may then use strategies such as substance abuse, delinquency, or suicide to escape the pain and thereby prevent further deterioration of the sense of self.[156]

Against this backdrop, it is possible to identify four pathological syndromes of self-development that may be accompanied by debilitating amounts of shame for differing reasons. These are:

a) The *understimulated* self is a condition resulting from chronic, inadequate responsiveness of the individual's selfobjects during childhood.[157]

b) The *fragmenting* self is a condition that results from the inconsistent and capricious responsiveness of selfobjects and their failure to respond to the developing adolescent as a total individual. As a result, the individual never develops a truly cohesive sense of

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155 Cf. Barry W. Shreve and Mark A. Kunkel, "Self-Psychology, Shame, and Adolescent Suicide: Theoretical and Practical Considerations," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 69, no. 4 (1991): 308. The following builds on their summary.

156 Ibid. The point here of numbing one's pain by substituting another will occur also later in the present treatise.

157 Ibid. They describe the outcome of this thus: "An adolescent in the understimulated selfcondition may exhibit behaviors such as compulsive masturbation, recklessness, promiscuity, and drug and alcohol abuse. Such behaviors may be construed as an attempt by the adolescent to defend against unbearable feelings of emptiness and depression."

identity.[158] Although these elements may occasionally be something that most adolescents experience, they are usually "neither overwhelming nor debilitating to any significant degree. But for the vulnerable fragmenting self, lack of internal cohesiveness is powerful and potentially overwhelming and necessitates the activation of additional defensive or compensatory actions."[159]

c) The *overstimulated* self, which results from phase-inappropriate, excessive responses from the adolescent's selfobjects. The individual who ends up in this condition avoids any possibility of becoming the center of attention or avoids contact with potentially admirable selfobjects, or both. This condition has severe consequences for the subject's sense of agency: "feelings of a lack of drive, a sense of having nothing or no one to look up to, and a sense of isolation" is common in this case.[160]

d) The *overburdened* self is the result of prolonged emotional deprivation. When the developing self has not had the opportunity to partake of the quieting, soothing experiences that comes with the subjective merger with the omnipotent selfobject, it results in "an individual who is unable to maintain a sense of inner control over his or her emotional state, one who is unable to maintain emotional equilibrium in a threatening and potentially hostile world."[161]

Shame may be the result when a person is not able to deal with the stress caused by any of these conditions. It may have different causes. It may come from an inner sense of emptiness, from a fear of being overwhelmed, from feelings of inadequacy, or from the risk of public exposure of an individual's lack of cohesiveness. "For each of these forms of

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158   Ibid. The description they offer of this mode is much in consonance with what we have previously suggested by the notion of interruption: "Commonly encountered adolescent expressions of this experience are the feeling of being 'scattered,' the feeling of 'not being in the flow,' and feeling 'like I'm coming apart at the seams.'"

159   Ibid.

160   Ibid.

161   Ibid. "Understandably, defense mechanisms tend to be more active and externally directed for this type of person. When reacting to perceived threats, such an individual will tend to lash out first rather than trust either in the other or in his or her own inner ability to deal with the emotions that may be aroused."

self-pathology, shame is a possible result of the failure of defensive or compensatory maneuvers." Shreve and Kunkel conclude:

> The failure of the maneuvers for the vulnerable self may result in the activation of powerful, archaic fears. The understimulated self fears exposure of his or her essential emptiness, the fragmenting self fears the exposure of his or her lack of cohesion, the overstimulated self fears the exposure of his or her need to be distant from others, and the overburdened self fears the exposure of his or her inability to maintain internal emotional equilibrium. One by-product of these fears is the development of the feeling of shame.[162]

The advantage of this approach to shame thereby becomes fully observable: shame is not merely a result of failure to perform a specific form of intended agency, but is also the result of the relational conditions that shape the individual who is a potential agent. Thus, shame is the result of the interaction between the individual and her peers and how the self has been psychologically shaped (what we have called the architecture of the self) by parents and other significant others from early on. This analysis points to a more nuanced role for the social environment of the one who feels shame:

> The adolescent who feels threatened and vulnerable as a result of not experiencing empathy will naturally turn for support to those selfobjects that have been most recently supportive. In adolescence, the turning is most frequently to the alter ego selfobjects as represented by the peer group. A failure of this support at this crucial time is frequently cause for an increased sense of futility, vulnerability, and shame. The shamed, vulnerable adolescent becomes a distant and elusive figure, severing what relationships he or she may have left that could possibly serve as future supports. This pattern of behavior increases as the adolescent becomes more sensitive to and expectant of negative evaluations from others. As the adolescent becomes more isolated, old relationships atrophy and new ones are avoided, and it is precisely this severing of significant self-selfobject relations that often results in the profound sense of shame, despair, and withdrawal preceding many adolescent suicides.[163]

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162   Ibid.
163   Ibid.

Thus, we find a much deeper understanding of shame here than we do when we simply see it as the result of moral failure or as instances of embarrassment. In the last sentences of the quote just cited, we also see how shame and the rage that can result from it may be directed in fundamentally destructive ways towards the shame-bearing self. Hence, we have developed an argument for rejecting shame as a positive factor in the building-up of the self, apart from what it supplies in terms of frustration that is necessary for biological/neurological development.[164]

Martha Nussbaum: Psychological considerations within a philosophical framework

In her philosophical approach to shame in *Hiding from Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum makes several important observations that can help us to understand the ambiguities of shame further. Her analysis combines psychological insights with normative elements, and thus, she is able to show how shame is not a neutral phenomenon, but points towards and even implies normative considerations and assessments. Therefore, her contribution may serve as a bridge between what we present as the psychological background of shame, on the one hand, and how we understand the role that shame may and may not play in relation to ethics, on the other hand. Ethics will be a topic in one of the subsequent chapters.

Primitive shame

Although she carefully underscores how shame can take on a positive role "in development and social life, in connection with valuable ideals and aspirations," Nussbaum nevertheless makes it clear that not all the roles that shame plays in life are positive. Its ambiguity appears from early on, as is visible in the version of shame she calls "primitive," on which she bases much of her deliberations. Primitive shame is "closely connected to an infantile demand for omnipotence and the unwillingness to accept

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164   Cf. p. 23, on how the frontal cortex depends on shame experiences for its development.

neediness."[165] It emerges out of the primary narcissism of a typical human infant, and it "gives rise to a particularly primitive and pervasive type of shame, as the infant encounters inevitable narcissistic defeats."[166] In other words: such defeat causes shame. The infant that realizes it is dependent on others, "and is by this time aware of itself as a definite being who is and ought to be the center of the world" feels primitive shame due to the "realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one's deficiency, to cover it." Thus, "all infant omnipotence is coupled with helplessness."[167] Against the backdrop of our previous attempt to describe shame, this makes perfect sense: the realization of lack, vulnerability or deficiency makes it apparent that the intentions which one immediately enters the world with, cannot be fulfilled or realized. This realization might lead to shame, but it need not do. To what extent it does depends on a wide variety of variables, not least how one is guided in tackling such interruptive realizations.

The normative implication of the understanding of shame sketched so far is that on these premises, it is an irrational emotion.[168] Why is that? Because the wish to be omnipotent and without need is to wish for something that cannot be. Moreover, shame is therefore also an unreliable emotion: as we have already pointed to earlier, it does not inform us properly or adequately about how others are and why they react as they do. Shame is, namely, often bound up with narcissism and "an unwillingness to recognize the rights and needs of others."[169] When shame is combined with this lack of empathy, it is possible to see it as related to the narcissism that is a consequence of being subjected to a lack of care – a point that we saw that also Kohut emphasizes. It follows from this point that people

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165   Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 15.

166   Ibid., 184. The features that Nussbaum elaborates on here have been analyzed in more detail in the section above on Kohut's self-psychology.

167   Ibid., 183. We find reasons here to note also how this withdrawal severs the bonds to others. The intentional and immediate desire for realization of oneself in the eyes of others (desire of recognition) is frustrated or impeded.

168   To what extent shame is irrational is a topic we will return to repeatedly in different contexts.

169   Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 15.

who feel shame may be impeded in their capacity to relate with empathy towards others – a point that is not without relevance for moral agency.

Shame, self-perception and agency

Nussbaum argues against Silvan Tomkins' understanding of shame as an affect. He understands shame as "a painful affect resulting from any interruption of pleasure and expectation, as when the infant expects a pleasurable feeding, and that does not take place"[170] and situates it in a comprehensive-affects theory.[171] Accordingly, Tomkins does not presuppose any cognitive content as necessary for feeling shame, whereas Nussbaum, who develops her notion of shame from a more object-relational point of view, thinks that some rudimentary cognitive content is a necessary requirement for shame – at least in humans.[172] Nevertheless, they both seem to be open to the idea that shame implies some kind of interruption of intentional agency. From Nussbaum's point of view, though, she argues for this agency as dependent on, or at least possible to articulate as conditioned by, some cognitive content, and a rudimentary sense of self:

> Emotions, of course, may involve thoughts that are primitive or archaic. One may have a kind of rudimentary fear, for example, even before being securely aware of the distinctness of one's own body from the caretaker's body, and I have suggested that young infants do have such rudimentary emotions. Nonetheless, shame does require at least an incipient sense of one's own being, and an incipient sense of the distinctness of the helpless being that one is from the sources of comfort and nourishment.[173]

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170 Ibid., 183.

171 Tomkins also writes, aptly, how "shame may be evoked by a *complete rejection of* any affect, including shame." See Silvan S. Tomkins and E. Virginia Demos, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins What* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 405.

172 "At least in humans" is added here because there seem to be some elements that are shame-like also in dogs that have done things that are forbidden, or in other species that have experienced defeat in their competition for a mate (moose). Such examples suggest that even animals may have some experience of interruption of their agency – what we in humans describe as shame. It is hard to know, however, if these responses are similar to human responses, and to what extent they manifest (rudimentary) self-consciousness.

173 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 183–84.

Here, Nussbaum makes two crucial points concerning the conditions for shame: first, shame seems to presuppose some ability to differentiate (at least partly) from the mother. Thus, shame means that the symbiosis is dissolved, or in the process of dissolving. However, in Nussbaum's view, this symbiosis should not be taken to indicate that everything is blissful and unproblematic until the differentiation process starts. She holds that "the world was never really blissful at any time after birth: infants experience an alternating absence and presence of good things as soon as they have experience, and gradually develop awareness of their powerlessness to control those good things."[174] This view entails that we can see shame as something that "emerges gradually over the course of the first year of life, perhaps becoming the full-fledged emotion only after a sense of one's own separateness is achieved."[175]

To see shame as the result of being able to differentiate between oneself and others seems obvious, but it is nevertheless an important presupposition for all experiences of shame – not only for what Nussbaum calls primitive shame. Against the backdrop of our phenomenological description of shame, we can understand the role of this differentiation more precisely: *We can now see shame as a specific emotional manifestation of the relational character of being, in which the separation between self and other appears as painful and problematic and contributes to the experience that the intended goodness is impeded and the chances for its realization interrupted*. The separation is, in turn, a precondition for how we see shame as the result of clashing contexts of agency that leads to disruption and lack of agency coherence.

Before we proceed with our analysis of Nussbaum's position here, we can benefit from Helen B. Lewis' analysis of shame and agency from a more emotional point of view. Her classic analysis underscores our point about shame as the result of a clash between contexts of agency. She sees it as the result of a conflict – a conflict that, to a large extent, mirrors the phenomenological description we developed in the introduction, although she works from a psychological angle. However, whereas

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174   Ibid., 184.
175   Ibid., 184.

Zahavi's analysis of shame pointed to the mediated experience of the self via the other, Lewis develops the conflict and the components in this "clash" further. She points to how "the divided functioning of the self in relation to the 'other' – its being in two places at once – and the 'split' between cognition and affect, together with the global nature of the whole self as the target of hostility from the field, make shame a difficult experience to rectify."[176] Thus, shame might imply a separation between cognition and affect. Furthermore, her focus on the latter also opens up for a broader understanding of shame than one that focuses on moral transgressions. She describes what we have metaphorically termed as a "clash" as a "failure by comparison with an internalized ego ideal"[177] which may comprise of other components than those circumscribed by moral standards and norms. This clash implies what we are addressing when we say that shame implies a double perspective on the self: the immediate, and the other-mediated.

Lewis also relates experiences of self to the experience of one's own agency in a way that underscores why self and shame are so closely related. Self as registration of identity is mediated by agency. "The self is, first of all, the experiential registration of the person's activities as his own. This registration of activities may, and most often does proceed silently and automatically, i.e., without the person's awareness of his registration mechanism." Here, we claim, she describes what we have defined as the immediate character of agency before the interruption of the shaming "other." She continues, in a way that also supports our initial analysis further, by pointing to how "instances of the failure of automatic registration, such as depersonalization and estrangement, make clear by contrast how much of the registration of activity as one's own is taken for granted."[178] Shame suspends this "taken-for-grantedness" in one's experience, and thereby, it suspends agency's immediacy. The mediation of shame by the presence of the other is, in her view, not only a cognitive effect but relies on the "emotional relationship between the person and the "other"

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176   Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 40.
177   Ibid.
178   Ibid., 30.

such that the person cares what the other thinks or feels about the self. In this affective tie, the self does not feel autonomous or independent, but dependent and vulnerable to rejection." Lewis can, therefore, also say that "shame is a vicarious experience of the significant other's scorn."[179] Consequently, the actual presence of the other is not necessary to experience shame.

Shame and imperfection

Nussbaum makes a further point that underscores shame's ambiguous character: The painful experience that shame contributes to implies more than a simple diminishing of self-regard. Shame emerges only against the backdrop of some kind of already existing self-regard. "It is only because one expects oneself to have worth or even perfection in some respect that one will shrink from or cover the evidence of one's non-worth or imperfection."[180] Expectations like these do not appear out of thin air but are themselves the result of interactions with others – an insight that, in turn, underscores the relational conditions of selfhood in general, and the conditions for shame more specifically. Against the backdrop of our suggestion for seeing shame as the interruption of intentional personal investment, this feature makes sense, since that which is interrupted can be identified as the positive and immediately present regard of oneself in its concrete manifestation of agency. We can elaborate this point with an example:

> Consider the case of a boy who thinks that he is good at skiing, because he has never had the chance to think otherwise. Then there is a ski-contest at his school and, like the other pupils, he signs up. He has no idea of how good he is or not, but he thinks that he is just as good as the others in his class, at least. He participates in the competition like his peers and feels good about himself for doing so. However, when the results are announced, he sees that he is at the end of the list – significantly behind all the others. For him, this is a shameful experience. He feels bad about himself and wants to hide.

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179   Ibid., 42.
180   Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 184.

Children's need to perform and to feel good about themselves for performing well may often end with this type of frustration – which we may call the frustration of the desire for recognition by achievement – a recognition that is crucial for the development of positive self-esteem. The case above illustrates both of Nussbaum's points: How the child can differentiate between himself and the others, and how it is that he has an initial positive feeling about his performance – perhaps assisted by parents who have given him no opportunity for a reality check that could help him make an adequate assessment of his skiing skills.

In the example given, shame is a "painful emotion responding to a sense of failure to attain some ideal state."[181] It affects the whole experience of self, and not only the specific act. The boy did not only feel bad about his skiing skills – his whole self-perception as an excellent skier was crushed. "In shame, one feels inadequate, lacking some desired type of completeness or perfection. But of course one must then have already judged that this is a type of completeness or perfection that one rightly ought to have."[182] The other side of this point is that shame can be diminished if one can operate with more realistic ideals of who one can and should be; be it in the eyes of oneself or the eyes of others.[183] However, this way of handling potential shame does not exclude the possibility for a continuous influence of the primitive type of shame later on in life: shame may follow whenever the subject suffers a narcissistic defeat and realizes that he or she is not uniquely special in some way. Therefore, Nussbaum concludes that "the primitive shame that is connected to infantile omnipotence and (inevitable) narcissistic failure lurks around in our lives, only partially overcome by the later development of the child's own separateness and autonomy."[184]

It is worth noting here that shame seems to stand in a certain opposition to, and may even at times compromise, autonomy – a point that will be discussed in Chapter 6 on shame and morality. But this point is not

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181   Ibid., 184.
182   Ibid., 184.
183   We want to stress here that this strategy for diminishing the potential for shame is conditioned on developing a more *realistic* basis for self-esteem, and not on the strive for perfection, which can never help one overcome what caused shame in the first place.
184   Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 184–85. Quote 185.

only relevant for ethics. From a psychological point of view as well, autonomy is at risk. Even when one has developed a sense of self and the psychological maturity that results in self-reliance, shame may appear. What Nussbaum calls the "narcissistic defeat" is, therefore, not necessarily the result of a negative or immature attitude: it can happen when the investment of desire, creativity, or struggle for recognition that all humans articulate, in some way or another becomes frustrated or impeded. Such investment need not be a manifestation of unrealistic grandiosity: it might just as well be the result of the natural struggle for recognition and self-articulation that every human being exhibits.

Shame as a social and relational phenomenon

As indicated, the need for being recognized as unique, and the feeling of grandiosity that one may feel the need for in comparison with others, testifies to the profoundly relational character of being human. These narcissistic traits, with their potential risk of failure and concomitant effect in the experience of shame, need not necessarily mean that shame is a social feeling in any qualitative sense of the word. Instead, we may say that it is an emotion that separates one from others and contributes to a feeling of being set apart or isolated from them, when one is, in the default position, related to them. Thus, an experience of shame would not have been possible *unless there was already some form of relational self-understanding present*. We argue, therefore, that shame is among those emotions that make it necessary to establish a distinction between a *relational* and a *social* character. To speak of an emotion as social implies that the one who harbors it feels a (deep and positive) connection with others, whereas the one who feels shame has an experience of this connection as severed, as lacking, or as manifested only negatively. Accordingly, shame as an emotion separates one from the community with others and dissolves the experience of social belonging. (This is probably also the reason why shame is so often used for punishing others or for disciplining them). Hence, it entails a movement away from others, as well as away from one's previous and immediate experience of oneself.

Accordingly, we can see shame as the possible (but not a necessary) result of an interruption or even a breakdown in self-relation via relation to others that is usually expressed in forms of self-esteem and the experience of belonging to a community of peers. Thus, shame articulates "an awareness of inadequacy that precedes any particular learning of social norms" – a point that is important to note since it makes shame far more about self-relation than relation to others. Thus, it can exist before any capacity for subjectivity and self-reflection is fully developed. Nussbaum nevertheless holds that this (to our notion, *pre-subjective*) experience of shame does not rule out "that in later life it will become inflected with social learning."[185]

Furthermore, when Nussbaum sees the primitive form of shame as a breakdown in self-relation as self-esteem, it does not require that the one who is ashamed experiences the presence of a more general audience.[186] The qualitative state of shame comes to expression in shame as the experience of being disconnected from that which one holds to be the source of good, and this need not be a general audience or a specific group, but only that or those in which one's self-esteem is grounded (or, in our mode of expressing it: *that towards which one's agency is intentionally directed*), be it one's own self-conception or the relation to the admiration and recognition of the other/others. Nussbaum refers to Piers' analysis of shame as "connected to a fear of abandonment by the source of good; its pain is felt primarily in relation to an ideal state that one fantasizes oneself, not, at least in primitive shame, in relation to the group as such."[187] This fear of abandonment by the good is, accordingly, part of what can interrupt the intentional agency and cause shame. The relation to the good is also among the elements that we see as relevant for identifying shame as an embodied phenomenon that originates out of frustration of desire (since desire is always, at some level, the desire for the presumed good).

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185 Ibid., 185.

186 Here, she comments indirectly on a topic that we shall discuss further in the Chapter 6 on shame and morality, namely what Dionna, Rodrigo & Teroni call the "socialist dogma" for understanding shame. See below, pp. 286–292.

187 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. 185. Note here how her analysis underscores the initial and immediate experience of social relation that is a presupposition for agency that seeks recognition in the eyes of others or oneself.

We should also note here how the above analysis testifies to the composite character of shame and the various dynamics in which it can manifest itself. Because shame is rooted in the disruption of positive self-esteem, it is, as indicated, of crucial importance to consider what constitutes the sources of this self-esteem. The variety of ways in which shame functions in the social arena, therefore, makes it a rather dynamic emotion. Nussbaum points to how, in our minds rightly, "societies have a good deal of room to shape the experience [of shame] differently, both by teaching different views of what is an appropriate occasion for shame and by linking shame differently with other emotions."[188] Hence, what counts as shameful to "the shameless Arabian daughters" may be totally different to what is shameful for a young woman who posts pictures of herself on *Instagram.*

Nussbaum holds that primitive shame can be transcended. However, as we have seen, she is also well aware that this does not always happen. She holds that "all human beings very likely carry a good deal of primitive shame around with them, even after they in some ways transcend it."[189] We would argue that the universal potential of primitive shame to reappear and be present makes it difficult to see it as something that can be reliable in public life as a device for normative guidance. Nussbaum holds that, to the extent that there is any cognitive content in "primitive shame," it has a negative content for the self and is not likely to serve any apparent positive purpose in society. However, she is realistic in thinking that it would be hard to eliminate shame from human life since primitive shame is so deeply rooted in the structure of life itself. Thus, her normative assessment is that shame neither can, nor even should, be eliminated from human life. Shame is one of the ways "in which we negotiate deep tensions involved in the very fact of being human, with the high aspirations and harsh limits that such a life involves."[190]

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188   Ibid., 185.
189   Ibid., 15.
190   Ibid., 70.

Shame and individuation: overcoming narcissism

We need to add a further point, that builds on the previous ones, to the above analysis. It concerns how psychological conditions contribute to developing what is required for a mature and moral relation to others and the world. Thus, we need to repeat some of the points in the previous analysis with regard to their significance for moral maturation and moral relationships. This section is, therefore, also relevant as a backdrop to the forthcoming chapter on morality and shame.

When the infant's narcissistic grandiosity engages it in the world in modes that lead to (optimal) frustration, the subsequent result is individuation. As already seen, it is when the child is sufficiently affirmed, and its feelings and achievements recognized that it slowly develops the ability to exist as separate from the caretaker and gain a sense of self with a distinct self-experience and world-experience. Then it also becomes increasingly more able to see the caretaker as a person with distinct needs and activities. Furthermore, "the parents' (or other caregivers') ability to meet the child's omnipotence with suitably responsive and stable care creates a framework within which trust and interdependence may thus gradually grow: the child will gradually relax its omnipotence, its demand to be attended to constantly, once it understands that others can be relied on and it will not be left in a state of utter helplessness."[191] Due to this process of individuation, the child also becomes better able to deal with the composite character of its feelings and regulate them better: it can see that the relationship to (m)other is ambiguous, meaning that it comprises both negative and positive elements: Nussbaum refers to Fairbairn's account of how the child develops a moral defense that makes it possible to relate to its own feelings without being crushed by them:

> The idea is that the child who recognizes that it wishes to destroy the parent whom it loves feels threatened with a sense of limitless blackness in itself. It sees that it has badness in itself, and feels that perhaps it is all bad. But by now the child is capable, in a rudimentary way, of understanding the distinction between the self and its deeds. It can seek atonement for bad acts without feeling

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191   Nussbaum, 187.

altogether lost. Morality comes to the rescue, in the sense that it is able (with help from others) to understand that doing bad, and even wanting bad, are not the same as being bad through and through.[192]

When the child gradually becomes able to renounce its demands for complete control over the caretaker, by seeing these demands as inappropriate, it is experienced as a loss. However, Nussbaum underscores, with Melanie Klein, that "it will also be attended by creativity, as the child learns that it can atone for bad wishes and deeds with good wishes and good deeds." She goes on, writing:

> It now sets about doing things for others, showing that it recognizes that other people too have a right to live and have their own plans. In general, the child learns to live in a world of individuals, in which others have legitimate claims and separate purposes, and in which respect for those claims limits the inordinate demands of the self. Love is increasingly understood in terms of interchange and reciprocity, rather than in terms of narcissistic fusion and the rage for control; the self is increasingly understood, and accepted, as human, incomplete, and partial, rather than as grandiose and demanding completeness.[193]

As we have seen, when the child's emotions are not affirmed and/or contained by the (m)other, it remains dependent on others for a sense of self that allows for self-esteem and safety. Moreover, the child finds itself captured in a tension between having the need for the other, whereas this other for which it has the need is never going to give it access to the resources it needs for becoming self-reliant. The parent who attends insufficiently to the child keeps it in a continuous craving for response and thus contributes to maintaining its narcissistic orientation towards the world.

The precondition for developing a mature self is therefore to provide care that can overcome such narcissistic delusions and establish a more adequate self-perception. This can only happen if consistently affirmed and offered ideals that enable the development of other-oriented empathic interpersonal interaction. A fundamental outcome of this development is

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192   Ibid., 187–188.
193   Ibid., 188.

the *basic trust* with which the child can meet the world.[194] This trust, is, as we shall develop in the final chapter of this book, among the prerequisites for avoiding or overcoming shame. Trusting and empathic interaction not only allows oneself to function better, but it makes it possible to overcome some of the causes of shame. Hence, we argue, shame is rooted in conditions that one should try to work against or overcome by improving the conditions for emotional and cognitive interaction in the social dimension of existence. This is most vividly apparent in how shame can be avoided by having more adequate expectations about one's achievements and limitations. In reality, we are not omnipotent, and since we are dependent on others, primitive shame represents a significant emotional response to the disruption of this self-delusion. It does, in a significant manner, represent the emotional response to the disruption of this self-delusion. Thus, to overcome shame, one needs to come to terms with one's vulnerability.

Emerging features in the philosophical discussion of shame

Shame and vulnerability

We have suggested that shame is linked to the vulnerable state of being human. Shame is the result of the experienced exposure to others of our vulnerability, which can lead to exposure to others in (deeply) emotionally charged situations and relations. Shame may thus also be seen as one of the ways in which we respond to our vulnerability, in movements of withdrawal, reclusion or isolation. All of these responsive movements suggest that we try to shield ourselves from further exposure. Thus, the way we deal with vulnerability can explain how there is a connection between shame and hiding, shielding oneself from the gaze of others, or looking away oneself. This withdrawal can be understood as the result of recognizing that one's intentions or projects imply a failure or are scorned

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194   For the psychological basis of such trust, see Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Revised edition. (London: Triad/Paladin, 1977).

by others, and accordingly, expose oneself to the vulnerability of one's intentions and agency.

In the above analysis of the relationship between shame and narcissism, we have seen that narcissism comes in both healthy and pathological variants. Positive and "natural" narcissism is conceived of as "any mental activity which serves to 'maintain the structural cohesiveness, temporal stability, and positive affective coloring of the self-representation.'"[195] Thus, we see narcissism "as a continuum phenomenon, from healthy and adaptive at one end of the spectrum, to pathological and severely maladaptive at the other."[196] Kealy and Rasmussen describe the problematic sides of narcissism as not originating out of grandiosity as such, but as a result of "the veiled and vulnerable counterpart to grandiose display." Accordingly, "[t]he self-regulatory deficit of pathological narcissism is not the grandiosity itself, but a secret fragile core that must be warded off from conscious awareness and prevented from discovery by others – and indeed from the self."[197] Given our previous understanding of the self which experiences shame as dependent on others and lacking the self-esteem or self-reliance that can supply autonomy and independence from the gaze of others, this approach seems to underscore further the role shame plays in the psychological complexities that come to the fore in narcissistic individuals. Shame can then be seen as an immediate response to instances when the self suddenly experiences itself as vulnerable and exposed – experiences that are more than likely to occur in a narcissist that is not assessing its capacities, abilities, and concomitant projects in an adequate manner.

The "vulnerable theme" that occurs in narcissism "refers to feelings of helplessness, suffering, and anxiety regarding threats to the self, and reflecting inner feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, and shame. These phenomena we have already touched upon in both Nussbaum and Kohut above. Narcissistic vulnerability involves "hypervigilance to insult, and

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195   David Kealy and Brian Rasmussen, "Veiled and Vulnerable: The Other Side of Grandiose Narcissism," *Clinical Social Work Journal* 40, no. 3 (2012), 357, with reference to Robert Stolorow, "Toward a Functional Definition of Narcissism," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 56 (1975).

196   Kealy and Rasmussen, "Veiled and Vulnerable: The Other Side of Grandiose Narcissism", 357.

197   Ibid., 358.

excessive shyness or interpersonal avoidance in order to retreat from perceived threats to self-esteem."[198] We have already indicated that the vulnerable condition may be either overtly or covertly expressed. We see this as one of the possible psychological reasons for why people may feel ashamed for being ashamed: the display of shame implies an admission of vulnerability that only makes one even more vulnerable.[199] It allows us to see grandiosity as an attempt to defend and compensate for the experiences of chronic shame and vulnerability.[200]

If we, furthermore, consider the origin of shame from the point of view of attachment theory, children whose parents are narcissistically preoccupied may suffer from a lack of affirming responses to their unfolding self because the parents are too self-occupied. This lack of adequate response "has a traumatic effect, generating chronic feelings of shame and emptiness, from which an escape is sought via grandiose fantasies and self-enhancing behavior."[201] In other words: narcissism begets narcissism. Attachment theory identifies this as a condition in which the child lacks a 'secure base.' Accordingly, it develops "an insecure internal working model of the self, propelling maladaptive searching for security and validation."[202]

If we look at this analysis from some distance, we see then that shame belongs to the emotions and psychological conditions in which the self

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198 Ibid.
199 Cf. also David Kealy and Johns Ogrodniczuk, "Pathological Narcissism: A Front-Line Guide," *Practice* 24, no. 3 (2012), 164: "Narcissistic vulnerability refers to feelings of helplessness, suffering and anxiety regarding threats to the self, reflecting inner feelings of inadequacy, emptiness and shame. Interpersonally, narcissistic vulnerability involves hypervigilance to insult, and excessive shyness or inter-personal avoidance in order to retreat from perceived threats to self-esteem. As useful as sub-typing may be for heuristic purposes, grandiosity and vulnerability likely do not exist in pure form. Instead, some degree of fluctuation between grandiose and vulnerable elements is likely to occur for most clients with narcissistic problems. Indeed, these themes may simply be two sides of the same coin, with grandiose features serving to mask underlying self-esteem deficits."
200 Ibid., 164.
201 Ibid., 165. Cf. C. A. Gross and N. E. Hansen, "Clarifying the Experience of Shame: The Role of Attachment Style, Gender, and Investment in Relatedness," *Personality and Individual Differences* 28, no. 5 (2000), who also find that secure attachment is negatively associated with shame while preoccupied and fearful attachment are positively correlated. In a similar vein also are the results in Alessia Passanisi et al., "Attachment, Self-Esteem and Shame in Emerging Adulthood," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 191 (2015).
202 Kealy and Ogrodniczuk, "Pathological Narcissism: A Front-Line Guide." 165.

is mainly preoccupied withitself. This self-occupation also means, as we have briefly touched upon earlier, that one becomes less able to respond empathically to the state of others. The reasons for this lack of attunement to others can be found in the attachment trauma just mentioned: such trauma inhibits the development of mentalization, which is "the capacity to reflect on mental processes in oneself and others."[203] This point is of relevance to the present treatise because it points further to the unreliable relationship that shame and processes leading to shame display, when it comes to how one relates to the world and to oneself. The traumatic attachment provides the self with fewer chances for self-transparency, and offers less understanding of what the real responses, attitudes, and minds of others are:

Mentalization is fostered within secure attachment relationships in which the child experiences his or her mind being reflected and represented by attachment figures. This process essentially affords the individual a theory of mind in which behaviors and emotions can be thought about beyond their face value. Impaired mentalization involves a lack of flexibility in interpreting mental experiences: the individual's interpretation is the interpretation. For example, when confronted with situations that trigger shame and insecurity, the client with narcissistic problems may have great difficulty in taking a step back to consider potential alternative perspectives or responses.[204] To summarize the above in straightforward terms: severe shame seems to be among the modes of being in which the individual manifests how it is captured in the prison of its own self, or, at least, how shame impedes its chances for developing into a free, creative, spontaneous and self-reliant individual.[205]

Shame: self-esteem and self-respect

We now need to take a closer look at the relation between self-esteem, self-respect and shame, because shame seems to impact these ways of

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203 Ibid., 165.
204 Ibid., 165.
205 The notion of captivity we have chosen here is not arbitrary: the withdrawal to the inner self as a prison can also provide a shelter for the shamed self.

relating to oneself. We do this in two steps: first, by discussing some elements of the understanding of shame in Deonna *et al.*,[206] and then by looking into a thorough discussion that points towards elements in moral theory as well, by John Deigh.[207]

Deonna et al. make a distinction between self-respect and self-esteem. It serves to address the conditions for shame in the identity of the person in question more specifically. Deonna et al. hold that the identity that is relevant for shame must be internally specified "in terms of the subject's failures with respect to values to which he has a particular attachment."[208] Hence, they see shame as related to values, and we argue that values are always, in some sense or another, among the basic conditions for agency, even when they are not recognized or cognitively acknowledged.

Deonna et al. problematize the Rawlsian idea that shame is a blow to self-esteem, and they support this position by referring to Gabriele Taylor, who holds that the Rawlsian view of shame misconceives the relation of the subject to its values. Taylor, on her part, offers an account in which shame is correlated to self-respect rather than self-esteem.[209] This approach allows us to see what is at stake in terms of expressions of identity in the type of projects and agency that may cause shame when they are interrupted.

According to Taylor, self-esteem means that one takes a favorable view of oneself, whereas lack of self-esteem means that one takes an unfavorable view of oneself. However, Taylor holds that one can maintain self-respect even when one does not take a favorable view of oneself in concrete situations where one loses one's self-esteem. Furthermore, this point implies that self-respect is a precondition for an uninterrupted and trustful engagement with the world, since there is no disturbance to one's intentions and accompanying expectations. "To respect oneself is to have a sense of one's worth that goes together with having certain expectations."

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206 Julien A. Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

207 John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," *Ethics* 93, no. 2 (1983).

208 Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 94.

209 Not all authors who work on shame follow suit here. There are several authors that we present in the following who see shame as related to self-esteem.

It is when these expectations are not met that shame kicks in: shame is the emotional reaction to "injuries, lack or loss of self-respect."[210]

> In shame, then, we assess situations in terms of their impinging upon our self-respect, where self-respect has nothing to do with having a favorable opinion of ourselves. Self-respect, we may add, cannot, unlike self-esteem, be fruitfully viewed as varying along a continuum; it has, rather, an all-or-nothing character: you either have self-respect or you have lost it. Providing a positive characterization of self-respect will, thus, allow us to see what is distinctive about shame.[211]

Here, Taylor links shame to a disturbance to that which constitutes the subject's central commitments, as these are in some way or another crucial to the life that he or she envisages him or herself as leading, and thereby to his or her identity. When these commitments are successfully realized, they not only result in self-respect. They may also be seen as manifestations of it. In other words, shame is the result of shortcomings regarding our central and self-defining commitments. "In shame, we evaluate ourselves as going against our central commitments" and experience our integrity as threatened.[212]

Deonna et al. recognize important elements in Taylor's approach that are in accordance with our previously presented understanding of shame. By connecting shame with self-respect understood as an all-or-nothing affair, we see how shame implies a severe evaluation, and not only a shifting or variable mood. Furthermore, Taylor's approach opens up to the culturally and socially relative conditions of shame, as it sees it as connected to the different values to which individuals may be attached. Thus, "Taylor's account is agreeably pluralist, in the sense that it acknowledges and accommodates the fact that different people, at different times and places, have different values that might all become relevant for shame."[213] What she does not seem to be able to take into account with this approach

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210 Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 95. With reference to Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, 131.

211 Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 95.

212 Ibid.

213 Ibid., 96.

is that shame may not only occur when central commitments are jeopardized. One can also feel shame for scolding one's neighbor for not mowing his lawn often enough, or one's daughter for not doing the dishes as fast as one would like.

Deonna et al. also see similar problems as we do with relating self-respect (and its eventual failure as manifested in shame) exclusively to central self-commitments. They argue that Taylor's model fails to shed light on many episodic appearances of shame, especially the less dramatic ones. We may also feel shame concerning commitments that are not self-defining. Accordingly, they argue for understanding shame along a spectrum in which not all occasions for shame are constituted by a failure to live up to one's central commitments.

At this point, our suggestion for understanding shame may prove helpful. Instead of seeing shame exclusively as the result of one's central commitments, we can see such commitments as a subcategory of what we have called the intentional projects in which the person invests themselves to a greater or lesser degree. Some of these projects may be of greater importance than others to the individual's overall commitments. However, the failure of "smaller" or more limited projects may also cause shame, simply because one at a given time invested some of one's own desires, expectations, aspirations, or creativity in them with the hope of success or fulfillment. Then they were obstructed in some way. Thus, although Taylor has identified important relations between shame and self-respect, we still find reasons to maintain that shame needs to be seen as related to conditions of both self-respect and self-esteem, since there may be instances in which our self-esteem is affected by shame without it affecting our fundamental self-respect.

Deigh on conditions for agency and shame: shame is not necessarily the loss of self-esteem

John Deigh has also criticized the Rawlsian understanding of shame as the result of the loss of self-esteem in ways that are somewhat parallel to those of Deonna et al. Rawls "explains self-esteem in terms of the goals and ideals one incorporates into one's life plans." Although Rawls focuses

on the conditions of the moral personality, he identifies shame in general as the result of failure to achieve a goal or an ideal that is integral to one's self-conception. Shame thus involves a sense of personal failure, he holds. We would add: it is also caused by our perception of the vulnerability that affects and restricts our agency. This failure is conditioned by the personal investment which has been carried out and correlated with the strength or power of this investment.[214] According to Rawls, shame is felt over shortcomings, whereas guilt is felt over wrong-doings.[215]

Deigh expands and adds to the Rawlsian account in different ways. First, he claims that shame involves a certain amount *of loss of self-control,* a point that underscores the character of rupture and interruption of agency associated with shame. This loss implies an "experience of discomfiture, a sudden shock that short-circuits one's composure and self-possession."[216]

Moreover, Rawls seems to hold that shame affects one's sense of worth: In shame, the positive self-image is replaced by a negative one that implies a loss of self-esteem. Self-esteem is then correlated with the evaluation of one's achievements and with one's sense of success: high self-esteem is the result of a positive judgment of success, whereas low self-esteem is the result of one's sense of failure.[217] However, Deigh finds this approach unsatisfactory. He questions the central idea that shame signifies loss of self-esteem.[218] This Rawlsian understanding of self-esteem links it primarily to one's own mood and the given activity that one has undertaken within a given period, and which is then the basis for one's self-assessment. Furthermore, the relevant activities must be qualified as expressing a direction in order to be conditions for positive self-esteem. "They must be channeled into pursuits or projects and reflect one's goals and ideals," Deigh writes, thus underscoring the personal investment we have made part of our understanding of the conditions for shame.[219] This investment and its

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214 Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," 225. This correlation may not always be the case, though; sometimes one can feel severely ashamed without having made any investment at all!

215 Ibid.

216 Ibid.

217 Ibid., 226–227.

218 Cf. ibid., 226.

219 Ibid., 227.

relation to central goals and ideals is also highly relevant for understanding the conditions for what we have called coherent agency:

> Self-esteem is had by persons whose lives have a fairly definite direction and some fairly well-defined shape, which is to say that self-esteem requires that one have values and organize one's life around them. One's values translate into one's aims and ideals, and a settled constellation of these is necessary for self-esteem. […] Arguably, someone who has no aims or ideals in life, whose life lacked the direction and coherence that such aims and ideals would bring, would be neither an appropriate object of our esteem nor of our disesteem.[220]

Deigh introduces an essential distinction in order to understand the causes for lack of coherence and for the concomitant problems related to lack of self-esteem and shame for what one has done. His distinction between *ownership* and *authorship* makes it possible to interpret a situation in which one acts in conflict with one's aims and ideals. The agent may explain this lack of coherence with one's basic values for agency as the result of having been overpowered by some contingent desire. Thus, one's agency would be attributed to powers of which one is the origin (ownership), but one can distance oneself from these by rejecting these as something one would own as a basis for further agency (authorship). An example of this would be the case mentioned in Chapter 2, where nurses act against their best conscience due to a lack of resources.

Deigh employs this distinction to show how agency can generate subjective conditions for self-esteem in a way that allows for different types of self-relation. "When one has a settled constellation of aims and ideals, then one distinguishes between the acts of which one is the author and those in which one serves as an instrument of alien forces. Without any such constellation, one is never the author of one's actions, though many times the instrument of alien forces that act on one, triggered by external events."[221] Accordingly, authorship means having a settled constellation of aims and ideals as a precondition of self-esteem. It comes from "a good opinion of oneself as the author of one's actions, more generally, one's

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220   Ibid., 228.
221   Ibid., 228.

life."[222] Thus, authorship may be conditioned by a positive development of the self in relation to stable and orienting values and ideals.[223] Or, to state it in accordance with G. Taylor: It is the distinction between authorship and ownership that allows for having self-respect even when one can occasionally have low self-esteem.

According to this analysis, self-esteem depends on two related factors, which both condition the agency that leads to the positive outcome it represents: it implies "a favorable regard for one's aims and ideals in life and a favorable assessment of one's suitability for pursuing them."[224] When self-esteem is not present, it is either because the aims and ideals on which one acts are considered base, or because of lack of "talent, ability, or other attributes necessary for achieving them. Either would mean that one lacked the good opinion of oneself that makes for self-esteem, and either would explain the dispirited condition that goes with one's lacking self-esteem."[225]

Hence, the conditions for what we have called coherent agency, of which shame is the manifestation of its impediment or interruption, require, first, that "one regards one's aims and ideals as worthy and, second, one believes that one is well-suited to pursue them."[226] The first of these conditions is a prerequisite for a sense of life as having a meaning, whereas the second relates to the "confidence one has in the excellence of one's person."[227] Together, these conditions can shape the direction and orientations of the projects in which we invest in a coherent manner. Referring back to the earlier discussions in this chapter, we would add that the extent to which one can develop such a positive orientation and direction is usually dependent on one's initial interaction with significant others.

These conditions are significant for the occurrence of shame insofar as they suggest that loss of self-esteem is caused by "a change in either one's regard for the worthiness of one's aims and ideals or one's belief in one's

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222   Ibid., 229.
223   Cf. p. 121 above.
224   Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique", 229.
225   Ibid.
226   Ibid.
227   Ibid.

ability to achieve them." "The loss here is the loss of a certain view of one-self," Deigh writes.[228] Thus, here idealization and mirroring, as described by Kohut, seem to work in the negative. So far, we have characterized this loss by means of notions such as rupture or interruption. The previously held self-esteem and the good opinion one had of oneself become exchanged for an unfavorable judgment that destroys this view. Lack of positive self-esteem is the result. In the Rawlsian account,

> … shame is the emotion one feels when such loss occurs. Moreover, shame is to be understood as signifying such loss. Shame on this characterization is the shock to our sense of worth that comes either from realizing that our values are shoddy or from discovering that we are deficient in a way that had added to the confidence we had in our excellence.[229]

However, Deigh finds this view insufficient. He points to several examples that the Rawlsian account seems to have trouble covering in order to make his position clear in detail: "First, there are cases in which one can experience lack of self-esteem, but not shame, such as when one becomes aware of the limitations of one's capacities or skills. Then, we simply establish a more adequate assessment of our competences."[230] Thus, it is possible, for example, to have a low sense of esteem regarding one's skiing ability without feeling shame.

The second example is when shame is felt over something one did not believe affected one's excellence, because one does not regard it as a fault in oneself. Examples here cover everything from when one feels shame for one's accent or dialect or hair color when others ridicule it, to more severe cases where ethnic origin becomes a case for discrimination. From our point of view (not Deigh's) this may be a case in which the intentions one has for relating to and engaging with others are interrupted by their response. Thus, the response hampers one's intentions for full and equal participation with one's peers. In this sense, other people always matter to one because they are the ones in whose faces and in whose actions one can read one's own value as subjects.

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228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.
230 Cf. ibid., 230ff.

Deigh, nevertheless, makes some important comments regarding such cases, which point to the conditions for shame in the social and cultural realms of experience. He points to how self-esteem depends to some extent on the esteem others accord oneself. Furthermore, the impact of their assessment is correlated with the dependency that the person in question feels towards them: "The greater that dependency, the more readily one will feel shame in response to any deprecatory judgments they express."[231] In other words, there are cases in which social action constitutes shame and in which it is not one's abilities or ideals that are the cause, but the interruption by others of one's agency and unproblematic self-assessment. Deigh considers this case as problematic from a Rawlsian point of view because sometimes one may feel shame due to another's criticism or ridicule, even when one does not accept the other person's judgment of oneself. Such cases show that shame is often more of "a response to the evident deprecatory opinion others have of one than an emotion aroused upon judgement that one's aims are shoddy or that one is deficient in talent or ability necessary to achieve them."[232]

Young children who feel shame represent another problem for the Rawlsian account. Children at the age of four or five usually do not have a well-defined self-conception, nor do they organize their life "around the pursuit of certain discrete and relatively stable aims and ideals" by which they measure themselves by the "standards of what is necessary to achieve them."[233] Accordingly, children at this age do not relate to the conditions that Rawls considers necessary for self-esteem – and we nevertheless consider them as subjects of shame. In other words, a child at this age, though capable of feeling shame, does not have self-esteem. The shame they experience must be attributed to other factors than the loss of self-esteem that Rawls talks about.[234]

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231   Ibid., 233.
232   Ibid.
233   Ibid., 234.
234   Ibid., 234. At this point, Kohut's and others' descriptions of the child's need for recognition in mirroring may be a more adequate way to describe what happens: it is the project of acquiring self-esteem through the mirroring of one's achievements that is rejected here, not an already existing self-esteem.

The final case that Deigh refers to as a problem for the Rawlsian account of shame is related to a distinction between an achievement ethic and an aristocratic ethic. Thus, his remarks on this topic are relevant for the forthcoming chapter on ethics and morality as well. Rawls' position is based on the former, which emphasizes making something of oneself and achieving success. However, Deigh holds that "some experiences of shame reflect an aristocratic ethic; one feels shame over conduct unbecoming a person of one's rank or station." Shame that is a response to an achievement ethic is caused by the realization that one has not lived up to one's aims and ideals, or the standards of excellence one holds for oneself. However, in shame that occurs on the basis of an aristocratic ethic, "the subject's concern is with maintaining the deportment of his class and not necessarily with achieving aims and ideals that define success in life. He is concerned with conforming to the norms of propriety distinctive of his class and not necessarily with achieving aims and ideals that define success in life."[235]

Nevertheless, we need to ask: would not also the latter, that is, failed and unsuccessful conduct that falls short of given aims and ideals, be possible to interpret as causing shame? One way to get around the problem would be to say shame here occurs because one fails to conform to ideals instead of realizing them. However, Deigh argues that something gets lost in this re-description: there is a shift in focus here from the one who one is (identity) to the way one conducts one's life (agency) that is of importance. The Rawlsian account does not register this shift adequately: his view allows the person's membership of a certain group or class to recede into the background as a determinative factor. But it is not insignificant as such, which is the reason why we treat this case in the context of psychology and not ethics. Although membership or belonging is the source of the ideals, the Rawlsian account does not ascribe any further significance to it. But it has significance because it is this membership that is the cause

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235   Ibid., 234. As the observant reader will see, the connections we make between shame and agency here place our treatment close to the topic of ethics, which is treated more extensively in the next chapter. Here, we just want to observe that Deigh's understanding of aristocratic ethics seems to have parallels with what Kohlberg calls the conventional stage. Thus, it need not only be based on a class-stratified society.

of shame, and since the person will have a sense of shame, or of having disgraced him or herself, due to his or her relationship with others. Rawls does not distinguish between questions of identity and questions of life pursuits.[236]

Accordingly, Deigh identifies nuances in the origins of shame that are related to more than the failure to realize one's commitments. Social and cultural features may be more involved in engendering shame than what the Rawlsian approach can account for. That account works mostly for people who answer questions about who they are by reporting about the aims or ideals that guide them:

> This makes it an attractive characterization of the shame felt by persons who are relatively free of constraints on their choice of life pursuits owing to class, race, ethnic origins, and the like. For such persons tend more to regard their aims and ideals as constituting their identity and their ancestry, race, class, and so forth as extrinsic facts about themselves. So the characterization explains the shame they feel as including an acute sense of who they are.[237]

Deigh's critique of Rawls' thus rests on how the latter ignores the psychological, as well as the social and cultural, conditions for shame. It is not only one's failure in the struggle to achieve one's aims and ideals through agency that condition shame. Rawls seems to focus too much on the active, modern person who is relatively free from the conditions set by their context, culture, and the history to which they belong. Deigh sees the limitations of this position as one that "restricts a person's identity to his aims and ideals in life," and therefore, "it fails to explain as including this sense the shame someone, living in a rigidly stratified society, feels when he does not act as befits a member of his class or the shame someone, living in a multiethnic society, feels when he acts beneath the dignity of his people." However, even when a person recognizes that he or she is not up to the cultural standards that he or she is expected to follow, these ideals do not constitute his or her identity. "Hence, we fail to account for

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236   Ibid., 235.
237   Ibid., 235f.

such shame if we describe it as being felt over one's having fallen short of ideals that regulate one's life."[238]

Deigh's conclusion about the requirements for a definition of shame can, accordingly, be summarized thus:

- It must take into account the role that the concern for the assessment of others has for experiencing shame.[239] However, this concern is part of the conditions that cause shame and not part of the definition itself.[240]

- In Rawls, one's sense of worth has two sources. One is the person's conviction that he or she has a meaningful life, and the other is the assessment of his or her own excellence. This approach comes close to self-respect as defined by Taylor above. Against this backdrop, shame is, from his point of view, "felt either upon a judgment that one's aims or ideals are shoddy or upon a judgment that one is deficient in a way that makes one ill suited to pursue them."[241] This experience represents a shock to one's immediate sense of worth. Deigh nevertheless claims that the account of what causes this shock is insufficient. It omits important sources for our sense of worth, as is evidenced, for example, in the case of the child seeking recognition without having a clear set of aims and ideals for life guidance, or the aristocrat who feels shame over behaving like a plebeian. In these cases, the source is neither a conviction about the worthiness of ends, nor a belief about suitability to pursue them. Thus, aspects of our identity that contribute to our sense of worth independently of the aims and ideals around which we organize our lives are insufficiently taken into account.[242]

- Concomitant to the previous point, a sense of worth (or, to use G. Taylor's terms, self-respect) as well as shame may therefore have its origin in structurally different contexts: either the results

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238   Ibid., 235.
239   Cf. ibid., 238.
240   Ibid., 239.
241   Ibid., 240.
242   Ibid., 240.

of agency, or in the status, belonging and position that one holds in relation to others. One can, however, have different assessments of how one's conduct is, without it impacting on one's self-esteem, depending on to what extent one sees oneself as the author of one's actions or not.[243]

The author theory about shame relates the sense of worth to one's conduct, and sees agency as providing grounds for attributing that worth. On the other hand, a sense of worth that comes from status/nature reflects a concern with the congruency between one's conduct or appearance and one's real worth. In the latter case, it is the relation between appearance and reality that is important: behavior that is congruent with one's worth is an occasion for pride, and behavior that gives the appearance of lesser worth is an occasion for shame.[244] This approach also makes it easier to understand people's sensibility to shame, because it can explain why one "restrains oneself when one verges on the shameful and […] covers up the shameful when it comes into the open. […] Having shame, that is, having a sensibility to shame, can be understood here as self-control that works to restrain one from giving the appearance of lesser worth and self-respect that works to cover up shameful things that, having come to light, give one such an appearance."[245]

Accordingly, Deigh sees shame "as a reaction to a threat, specifically, the threat of demeaning treatment one would invite in giving the appearance of someone of lesser worth," and not as a reaction to a loss. Thus, it is a protective movement: "Shame serves to protect one against and save one from unwanted exposure,"[246] and accordingly, it is also self-protective "in that it moves one to protect one's worth."[247] Thus, he offers an additional element to the relationship between vulnerability, hiding, and shame to which we have already pointed. Furthermore,

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243   Ibid., 241f.
244   Ibid., 242.
245   Ibid., 242.
246   Ibid., 242.
247   Ibid., 243.

> Shame inhibits one from doing things that would tarnish one's worth, and it moves one to cover up that which through continued exposure would tarnish one's worth. Less figuratively, we might say that the doing or exposure of something that makes one appear to have less worth than one has leaves one open to treatment appropriate only to persons or things that lack the worth one has, and shame in inhibiting one from doing such things and in moving one to cover them up thus protects one from appearing to be an unworthy creature and so from the degrading treatment such appearance would invite.[248]

To understand shame as a self-protective emotion explains two important features: first, the liability to shame regulates conduct, since shame inhibits one from doing certain things. Second, shame manifests itself in acts of concealment.[249] The Rawlsian approach to shame cannot explain the latter. Therefore, Deigh argues, it should be given up.[250]

Deigh makes a convincing case that shame need not be connected to self-esteem, and that a conception of shame that only defines it from that perspective is inadequate. However, it does not necessarily exclude the fact that shame as a phenomenon can affect both self-esteem and self-respect. But it is not only due to the loss of these. To the extent that self-respect and self-esteem are emotional phenomena, they are both affected by experiences of shame.

If we consider Deigh's proposal against the backdrop of our understanding of shame as a reaction to interruption of personally invested projects, shame is the response of a self which finds itself and its conditions for agency vulnerable in a situation where such interruption occurs. One way to react to this experience of vulnerability is to hide. Another can be to invest in a new, self-assertive project to regain control of one's agency and re-establish coherent agency (and concomitant self-esteem). The latter would concur with Deigh's proposal to the extent that it implies a regulation and adjustment of conduct.

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248 Ibid., 243.
249 Ibid., 243.
250 Ibid., 244–245.

Preliminary concluding reflections

The analyses in this chapter take as their point of departure how the self's architecture is constituted relationally and conditioned by the interaction between the infant and the significant others in early childhood. We recognize that the development of the self takes place on vulnerable terms, to which the self is always potentially exposed. This recognition is an essential precondition for understanding the conditions for experiences of shame. As the social and material conditions for the self are themselves not stable or fixed, this fact exposes the self to various resources that have implications for its agency. Then intentions and projects through which it develops, articulates and affirms itself, are therefore also always marked by risk and vulnerability.

It is against this backdrop that we can see the mechanisms behind shame as evolved. Shame is an evolutionary product just as much as a psychological one. Shame's evolutionary process continues in the individual when he or she grows up and becomes an adult. The process (be it sound or bad) is itself exposed and vulnerable because our genetic makeup is always filtered through the individual's social and material conditions. Hence, social interaction and the various conditions for self-development and realization play a large part in the conditions for shame and for the extent to which the individual becomes prone to shame or not. It cannot be determined based on social or genetic elements only but is the result of the interaction between different variables. Similar things can be said about the self's capacities for trust, empathy, love, altruism, etc.

We can now, therefore, unfold the complexity of shame through a threefold optic. The mechanisms of shame, that is, the biologically and intra-psychological workings of shame, such as the biologically evolved sense of shame, and also the epi-genetical structuring of our mind that allows for genes to be activated or not, are developed under a set of defining conditions. On a scale, these range from oppressive to liberating, such as relational interdependency (for example, discretionary shame), societal structuring (for example, religious or ideological norms) and material conditions (for example, access to housing, food, cf. the shame of the poor, the hobos in American culture, beggars, etc.). Shame manifests itself phenomenologically in contextually dependent patterns. These patterns

allow for a retroductive argument that suggests how shame emerges out of the mild causality of the self's architecture in context.

Some examples may illuminate the above theoretical description:

- A woman is part of a cult where her freedom is taken away (ideological and material conditions). She is also frequently sexually abused by the leader/self-appointed prophet as part of the religious ideology (material conditions = rape, ideological conditions = religious ideology defending rape). Under such conditions, shame – as a biological and psychological mechanism regulating our mode of relating to others, may cause a permanent alteration in self-image and identity (through the shame of being nothing more than a sexual object).
- A child that grows up under social conditions in a nurturing (social) environment that fulfills the basic (psychological and material) needs may develop a sense of discretionary shame (mechanism of shame) that (as a consequence) both protects the fragile relations to others as well as fortifying the self through coherent agency.
- When a psychiatrist gives in to his or her sexual desires and turns the therapy into a sexual encounter, his or her professional integrity and ethical standards will, most certainly, be questioned by many of his or her colleagues and probably also by him or herself. Shame reactions, such as professional isolation, anger, or cover-up strategies may occur to offer protection from shaming by others.[251]

To approach shame within this multi-layered context is what makes it possible to see its profound implications for the individual's self-perception, projects, intentions, and social life. Moreover, it also means that we need to see shame within a context where the self's ability to make choices and to learn and unlearn ways of coping with shame provides a complex and dynamic understanding of how it expresses itself in human life.

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251 See, for example, Terje Mesel, *Når Noe Går Galt. Skam, Skyld Og Ansvar I Helsetjenesten.* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2014).