CHAPTER 6

Shame and Morality

Introductory remarks

When we have talked to people who do not work in a scholarly context about writing on shame, we have had various and somewhat different responses. Sometimes when we said that we were writing about shame, it functioned as a conversation stopper. At other times, people brightened up and said, "Oh, yes! That's interesting." But people rarely pursued a conversation on the topic, and when they did, it was often in a way that indicated that they saw shame as a disciplining or moral phenomenon. We got responses like these:

- People have stopped feeling shame about cheating on their tax returns! They only feel ashamed about the wrong things, like about how they look or what part of their body is not in accordance with the ideals they have. What they should do is feel ashamed for lying, cheating, bullying!
- We live in a shameless society! The moral decline has gone too far!
- I feel ashamed of being English: about how we treat the homeless, and about how we may appear to the rest of Europe!

These three examples show what some people think others ought to feel shame for. Said differently, shame is identified here as something that applies – or should apply – to others, and not to oneself. Even in the last case, it is not really the one uttering the statement that is at the center, but the others who make her feel ashamed for being English.

Shame is, nevertheless, also tacitly present in other cases where people are identified and exposed due to their moral transgressions. We say *tacitly present* because shame as such is not the topic, but the following

instances are cases where shame most likely plays a part, and also, to some extent, is instrumental for the actual agency of some of those involved:

- A newspaper discloses that a prominent and highly profiled CEO has been using inside information to trade stocks for a considerable profit. He loses a vote of confidence. The media attention causes him to flee, and one day later he is found in his car in the woods, dead by suicide.
- The #MeToo movement focuses on women who have been subjected to treatment they have been ashamed to tell others about, and who finally have found the courage to do so as they learn that they are not alone. They overcome shame by sharing their stories. But in the wake of this movement, we also learn about men who have been outed and fired from their jobs with no trial. Some of these men have committed suicide, most likely, partly due to shame.

To be ashamed for a moral failure can have devastating consequences. As these examples show, the ambiguities of shame are apparent in moral contexts. They are taken from conversations and newspaper reports that have appeared during the period in which we have worked on this book.

This chapter articulates a main element in what inspired us to write this book. We are critical to the employment of shame for moral purposes. We are not alone in holding a critical view on how to deal with shame as a moral instrument, although we, like others, also disagree as to the extent of criticism. One can take a look at how philosopher Martha Nussbaum, to whom we have already referred,[485] differs from a scientist like Jennifer Jaquet[486] with regard to different views on the use of shame in the public interest. Furthermore, the chapter is written with a specific purpose in mind: it intends to show how problematic it is to employ shame for moral purposes and consider it a viable tool for moral development, growth, and progress.

To deal with the relationship between morality and shame, we need to distinguish the moral context from other, related contexts. Shame also

485 See especially Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*.
486 Jennifer Jacquet, *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

exists in contexts of socialization (which has to do with how the individual develops an understanding of his or her role and acceptable behavior in society), and of disciplining (punishment or reward for behavior).[487] If we understand morality as something different from socialization and disciplining, it becomes obvious that it is a rather complex phenomenon.

We can understand morality as *the ability to act on shared values and ideals that are recognized as your own, in a specific context and with reference to the relationships at hand*. This definition of morality connects with the widely held understanding of shame as the reaction you have when you realize that you have failed to live up to specific standards that shape your self-conception.[488] Fundamentally, it ties morality to agency as an expression of your own commitments. When we define morality in this way, it has two immediate consequences: First, it allows the agent to consider the contextual elements for agency. Second, it also opens up to other-based considerations that relativize a strict notion of autonomy as based in the individual only: the agent who acts morally may still consider the impact of his or her actions on relationships and contexts. Thus, morality is not only based on principles but on the experience and assessment of contexts and relationships as well.

This understanding of morality ties it closely to the ability to perform agency, that is, the capacity for making decisions based on understanding yourself and your situation, following your own will, and determining your own interests and aims. Thus, morality presupposes a certain amount of cognitive and rational capacity, and empathy. Elements of self-evaluation and consideration of your own capabilities are involved, as well. Morality also requires subjectivity, that is, the ability to think of oneself as the origin of one's actions and act accordingly.[489]

The emphasis here on agency may seem to cloud the idea that morality is not only about what one does, but also about who one is, about what is one's character, and how prior experience or empathy may engender

487 Cf. the presentation of findings in social psychology in Gausel and Leach in Chapter 3, pp. 43–46.

488 This is a fairly common definition, adapted here from John Deigh's reference to Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), in Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," 225.

489 This last point can also be seen in relation to Deigh's distinction between ownership and authorship, as referred to previously (see pp. 123–124).

a specific response. The character can dispose a person to do something based on intuition, almost like a moral reflex, without having to make a deliberate decision. This point is clearly expressed in virtue ethics. However, we argue that also in virtue ethics, the capacity for agency, and therefore actions, are within the horizon of what defines morality. One can never understand someone as courageous if the person never acts in ways that display courage. A righteous person is righteous in virtue of his or her decisions and the aims he or she pursues, and he or she is assessed according to these. What virtue ethics bring to light, though, is how one is not only occasionally morally challenged to feel shameful because of what one does, but one is also prone to shame because of who one is – or is not yet, as a virtuous character. Other moral theories may relate more one-sidedly to the aims or actual consequences of agency, or the norms that guide it. Thus, they address occasions or opportunities for shame in different ways. Nevertheless, we shall see that the focus on character in virtue ethics may shed light on specific features regarding the capacity for feeling shame, and provide reasons for an argument against some types of shamelessness.[490]

Thus, we can analyze the role of shame in morality from different points of view. We can ask: Is it good, from a moral point of view, that people should feel ashamed for their moral failures and shortcomings? Can the feeling of shame provide reliable information about what it is right to do or not to do? Are there good alternatives to shame in this regard? Does shame make the moral agency more or less rational or transparent? Can shame be said to be a moral instance at all, if it is so strongly related to the subject and his or her self-perception? Does shame make people turn away from moral challenges and become too self-occupied instead? Given that shame is almost always backward-looking, and emerges as a result of things past, can shame guide future moral agency? And if it can, can it do it well? We hope to have some well-founded answers to these questions at the end of the present chapter.

490 See below, pp. 328ff.

Brief comments on shame and moral theory

Modern moral theory has not focused much on shame, and shame is hardly ever made a topic in the constructive considerations that moral philosophers make in order to argue their positions. Thus, shame has, to a large extent, become a silent topic in moral theory. What one has focused on is simply something different than shame. In this section, we want to reflect briefly on how shame may be silenced by the ways modern moral theories are set up – and thereby provide a framework for an understanding of why shame is not usually a part of moral theory, although it may still play a tacit role in different types of human agency, among which moral agency may still be one.

As moral agents, humans act on and articulate their values, ideals, and norms. These shape their intentions, desires, actual actions, and the aims they pursue. A moral agency shapes a sense of self and identity, as well. However, in what ways the relation between moral ideals or values and the self is understood varies in moral theories. It is not possible to develop that topic in detail here, but we need to consider in brief how moral theories provide different contexts for the role of shame with regard to moral conduct. Some of these considerations build on what we have presented above.[491]

The *deontological* approach to ethics seems to restrict the role of shame considerably. No moral norm says that "you shall not act in shameful ways" – partly because this statement does not provide any moral insight, and partly because emotions do not in themselves provide us with something that in and by itself qualifies as moral motivation.

Utilitarianism (or more broadly, *consequentialism*) may provide an indirect role for shame. This approach to agency focuses on the best possible outcome of an action in terms of utility, or the principle of avoiding pain and enhancing pleasure. Since shame is among the negative (painful) emotions, utilitarianism can address the avoidance of shame as one of the guiding principles for morality. Thus, shame can have a positive moral function. Furthermore, since utilitarianism mainly focuses on

491 For further elaborations from a sociological point of view on how shame may be related to identity formation, see Jan E. Stets and Michael J. Carter, "A Theory of the Self for the Sociology of Morality," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 1 (2012).

actions and their results, the only place shame can have in this theory, in addition to this, is where the result of an action seems to fail. Then, the agent may feel ashamed for not being able to realize this aim and achieve the desired outcome. However, nothing in the actual construction of morality from a utilitarian point of view suggests that shame should have a role in how the moral subject considers him or herself (as apart from the consequences of his or her actions). Similar considerations apply to other teleological approaches, except for virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics emphasizes the formation of character. Virtuous acts reflect a virtuous person. Someone who fails to perform in a virtuous way is prone to feel shame, not only for what he or she has done but for who he or she is. He or she has failed to display the qualities that are expected by someone who has taken on the task of moral development – and he or she is then a failure, not only in his or her own eyes but also in the eyes of all others that know about the obligations that he or she has taken on concerning this development. In virtue ethics, we are closest to the conventional level of morality. What is considered a virtue may vary from context to context and depend on cultural conditions.[492] Within the frame of virtue ethics, shame may be a strong motivator for how one develops one's moral competence, because the focus is on the moral agent, and not exclusively on the actions and goals one has set for oneself.[493]

Kohlberg's different stages of morality: implications for shame

Development of moral competence

Shame can be analyzed in the context of morality from the point of view of the development of moral competence. In this section, we

492 Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

493 See below. It is also worth noting that virtue ethics emerged in a (Greek) social context where the social bonds were tighter, and the actual social role of the moral agent had a bearing on how he was considered. On shame within different cultural contexts, including more aristocratic ones, and in relation to guilt, see also the analysis in Peter Hacker, "Shame, Embarrassment, and Guilt," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2017).

provide a backdrop for the discussion of shame that follows by looking into some elements in Habermas' adaption of Kohlberg's analysis of this development. Habermas' understanding of the conditions for ethics relies mainly on the stages of moral development Kohlberg identified. Kohlberg's theory about individual moral development provides access to some of the conditions that are in play, and therefore also to the context in which shame can emerge as a problematic issue for morality. However, Kohlberg's position has also been criticized as being gender-biased, and Carol Gilligan has voiced concerns about how his research does not take relational elements fully into consideration because of this bias.[494] Hence, the following approach is only meant to highlight conditions for shame and shaming in the context of different types of morality. It should not be read as a basic approval of all the empirical elements in Kohlberg's analysis. Kohlberg's starting point defies our initial premise: that we are constituted as embodied selves in a tight relational and structural network.

A major concern for Habermas is to develop an ethical theory that can be understood as universal and not only based on contextual conditions. He sees this universality as a prerequisite for people to be able to handle ethical issues in a world where different opinions exist about what should be considered as morally good. Among the advantages that Habermas sees in Kohlberg is that the different stages in his theory allow us to reduce the different forms of ethics to a small number of stages in moral development.[495]

The main features in Kohlberg's identification of the stages of individual moral development are as follows:[496]

---

494 See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

495 Jürgen Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein Und Kommunikatives Handeln*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 128.

496 The following is from Habermas, *ibid.,* 134f., but slightly adjusted in order to integrate the social dimension better, as these are referred to in ibid, 139. Our translation.

Level A: Pre-conventional morality

1. *The Stage of Punishment and Obedience* (egocentric)
   The understanding of what is right is here related to obedience towards rules and authorities, and to the avoidance of hurting others. The motivation for doing right is to avoid punishment.
2. *The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange* (concrete individualism)
   The right thing to do here is to follow the rules that serve one's individual interests and allow others to do the same. Hence, self-interest is the motivation.

Level B: Conventional morality

3. *The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity* (the individual in relation to other individuals)
   At this stage, the individual takes on the role of kindness towards others and is interested in their reactions and feelings. Loyalty and faithfulness towards partners and peers, as well as the willingness to conform to their rules and expectations, are central elements. The motivation for this behavior is to appear as good in the eyes of others and oneself since this is considered that which serves you best in the long term. (cf. The Golden Rule).
4. *The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance* (Interpersonal motives and agreement)
   Central at this stage is to do your duty towards society, maintain the social order and the welfare of the group or the society. The motivation is to maintain self-respect and/or good conscience and to avoid negative consequences for the community or society.[497]

Level C: Post-conventional, principled morality

At this level, the focus is on rights, values, and principles that are, or can be, common to all individuals in a society that is "designed to have fair and beneficial practices." This level has the two following stages:

497 Conscience is a topic we have deliberately left out of this study, due to the complexity it exhibits, and because we do not think it offers much in terms of understanding shame directly. Nevertheless, we would like to note that it should be treated as part of shame's context. For an analysis of shame, guilt and conscience, see John Cottingham, "Conscience, Guilt, and Shame," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. *The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility* (The individual is aware that there are norms and values prior to a given social condition, and defines him or herself in relation to these)
   The move beyond conventional morality at this level becomes apparent in the understanding of the right: the right is constituted by basic rules that express the fundamental rights, values, and the social contract, even when these may be in conflict with the concrete rules or laws of some groups that are members of the society. These "basic rules" are employed to regulate the interests of different groups in society, and recognizes their right to pursue their interests, but not at the expense of others. The motivation for doing the right here is the wish for all to live as well as possible, and the understanding that this right can only be realized when the social contract is maintained and respected.
6. *The Stage of Universal Ethical Principles* (Morality is the rational basis for the development of society, and every person is an end in his or herself, and not only a means for others)
   The underlying assumption is that all of humanity should be guided by universal ethical principles. The rules of a given society are valid to the extent that they are in accordance with these universal principles. The motivation for doing the right is, at this level, that one as a rational person has realized the validity of these principles, and accordingly, is committed to them.

Several important elements in the above scheme can help us to get a better grip on the role of shame in relation to morality. Let us start by looking at some of the insights that appear from the post-conventional and most developed stage of moral development.

Shame under the conditions of the post-conventional stage

The distinction between the right and the good comes to fruition at the post-conventional level. Here, the right is identified by what is in accordance with universal principles, and not constituted by reference to

concrete and historically situated outcomes (of good). Whereas the good is linked to concrete empirical achievements, consequences, or outcomes, the right is conditioned by actions that are in accordance with specific principles, norms, or rules. It means that moral stages that focus on the right also make it possible to separate the agent from his or her actions since the focus is on the action. Thus, the extent to which he or she, in a given case, feels shame, will not be due to who he or she is, but what universal standards he or she has not been able to live up to through his or her agency.

Furthermore, if one operates based on what is right to do, the motivation for doing the right is linked to one's *insight* into something that is defined as right for everyone to do. It is not linked to my status in the group, my relation to some others that may approve of me or make me feel ashamed. Therefore, a moral action is, in principle, transparent concerning *why* it should be done, and why everyone who finds themselves in the position where this action is an option, should do it. Accordingly, the universal orientation in post-conventional morality excludes the clash between contexts of agency in principle. It also eliminates the possibility of experiencing the double movement of shame, as the agent here is always acting in accordance with principles that make him or her a part of the moral community – and which therefore does not jeopardize his or her membership in it.

The emphasis on insight into the right as the valid moral motivation at the post-conventional level, therefore, excludes shame, or the potential for shame, as a possible motivation for doing the right. There can be no guidance at this level expressed in sentences like "if you do not do this, it is shameful" or "by doing this, you bring shame on us" because such statements do not convey any understanding of why this is wrongful or shame-causing. Accordingly, motivations that appeal to shame cannot be part of what constitutes post-conventional morality. The only option for feeling shame at a post-conventional level is if you do not live up to the moral standards given by the universal principles into which you have gained insight. Thus, if shame is present here, it is not as a motivational factor, but as a backward-looking response to what has taken place in the past. It expresses a self-judgment due to the realization that one has failed

to live up to one's own standards. Furthermore, the role of others in this respect is not to trigger shame, but to instigate in you the insight into why what you did was wrong or should be otherwise – in other words, they may convey a sense of guilt, but not shame.

Consequently, at the post-conventional stage, shame neither seems to have a role in providing moral motivation or guidance, nor in providing moral insight into why something is right or wrong. Furthermore, the focus at this level is on the well-being of society, from which no individual is excluded. We can, therefore, say that post-conventional morality in principle overcomes the potentially egocentric and/or divisive elements that may come to the fore at other stages of moral development, and which are in a profound way expressed in how shame closes in on and centers the individual on him or herself instead of the (generalized) other (to which he or she also belongs in principle). A society based on post-conventional morality places all members at the same level with regard to the opportunities for acquiring moral insight and motivation. Because shame cannot in itself bring insight into why something is morally right or wrong, the communal element is constituted by shared insights and common reasoning.

However, to move from one moral stage to another is the result of learning and increasing competence. It is also a development in which increased autonomy plays a role – a point that is especially important if one considers shame as a socially conditioned emotion. The autonomy we are talking about here is articulated in the moral subject's ability to offer reasons for why something is right to do and make these his or her own.[498] Thus, both Kohlberg (and even more so, Habermas) make a case for morality as rooted in cognitive considerations where the reasons given for an action or a judgment are what constitutes its content. Moral emotivism is ruled out at this stage.[499] So are contextual and relational elements. The universal approach here focuses instead on increased sense for non-partiality, reversibility, and mutuality. Thus, it leads to insights into

498 Cf. again Deigh's distinction between ownership and authorship, which seems relevant here as well: post-conventional morality focuses on actions that can be owned by the person performing them.

499 Cf. Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein Und Kommunikatives Handeln*, 46, 130ff.

the conditions for just ways of acting and for assessing conflicts related to moral questions. One acquires moral competence by being confronted with and challenged by moral questions and the need to handle them.[500]

Accordingly, the motivation for action is no longer to be found in "it is good for me/us," but in a de-centered perspective that shapes how one considers the moral problems at hand and finds guidance for solving them. Instead of viewing moral challenges only based on one's own context, one relates them to principles that transcend the given life-world of those who participate in the discourse, and is thereby more inclusive, and can in no way be accused of being egocentric or group-centered, as in the previous levels of morality. Habermas summarizes the outcome as follows:

> Only at the postconventional stage is the social world uncoupled from the stream of cultural givens. This shift makes the autonomous justification of morality an unavoidable problem. The very perspectives that make consensus possible are now at issue. Independently of contingent commonalities of social background, political affiliation, cultural heritage, traditional forms of life, and so on, competent actors can now take a moral point of view, a point of view distanced from the controversy, only if they cannot avoid accepting that point of view even when their value orientations diverge. With this concept of autonomy, the notion of the capacity for responsible action also changes. Responsibility becomes a special case of accountability, the latter here meaning the orientation of action toward an agreement that is rationally motivated and conceived as universal: to act morally is to act on the basis of insight.[501]

Thus, Habermas develops an understanding of morality that de-situates it from the context that is the foundation for moral judgment. He also decreases the impact that emotions, which are always expressed in specific relations, have on moral formation. The actual social conditions thereby become neutralized, at least to some extent, and do not play a formative role in the deliberative process that shapes moral agency. Consequently, shame is rendered little impact and no role at the level

500 Ibid., 136.

501 Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 162.

of post-conventional morality. One may ask, though, if this is not a relatively ideal conception of moral agency, and one which is not among those that are empirically easiest to detect. At the other levels of morality, that take more into account the actual context in which moral perceptions are shaped and formed, though, shame still may play a considerable role. Perhaps not so much in terms of providing insight into the reasons for acting, as in other modes of motivation for moral agency. Let us consider these in turn:

Shame at the pre-conventional level of morality

At the p*re-conventional leve*l, shame can play the role of making sure that one is obedient to others and complies with their expectations. We are then speaking more about disciplining than about morality in the qualified sense. Here, shame mainly functions as an instrument for disciplining, as one may wish to avoid the painful experiences of feeling shame for something one has done or plans to do. Furthermore, one can feel shame for being punished for showing a lack of obedience. Shame, accordingly, plays the role of a regulator in the close interaction between the agent and his or her peers. However, the agent may not have any insight into why something is right or wrong – only into what is shameful behavior and what is not. Against the backdrop of this insight, he or she may regulate his or her actions to avoid shame. The egocentric and context-bound perspective is hardly transcended. Shame remains either a predominantly backward-looking emotion, as it functions as a reaction to acts already done, or as a deterrent mechanism for future actions. In both cases, the behavior is regulated by relationships with actual others, and no real moral autonomy is possible here.

Shame at the level of conventional morality

At the conventional level, moral motivation is related closely to the individual's ability to meet and conform to or comply with the expectations of the society of which he or she is a part. He or she can adopt the rules of society as his or her own, and therefore also act with a certain amount

of autonomy. However, the risk for shame is great at this level because the individual is always related to the opinions and norms of others in the performance of his or her agency. Hence, the clash of contexts of agency lurks here. He or she may realize that he or she is not facing up to the standards they represent or the normative components that he or she, as a member of the same group, has adopted for him or herself. Shame may occur whenever compliance is not realized, either because one becomes aware of this lack, or because someone else tells you. The interruption that this manifestation of lack represents disturbs the intended coherence of agency as hitherto performed.

Since the interests of the individual as a member of the group are in focus, shame can play an essential role in securing conformity and compliance without any significant development of insight into why something is good or not. Thus, conformity does not necessarily equal morality. The most vivid example of this are the ideals for cooperation and loyalty that we find in a mafia context. Other examples are, for example, how daughters are told to behave in a specific manner in order not to bring shame over the family or clan without learning about why this is so or why compliance is necessary. Thus, shame may impact agency in ways that restrict personal autonomy or obliterate it altogether.

Habermas nevertheless does not reject altogether that contextual considerations can have a role in the development of moral competence. But his understanding of this development implies that it is necessary to make sure that the individual is given access to resources that allow him or her to question legitimately, and eventually also transcend, contextually given norms and expectations, and to do so by means of insights that he or she has had the chance to develop autonomously. Thus, the mechanisms that most strongly engender shame are not among those he considers as beneficial for moral development. One needs to base moral development on a mode of practical reasoning that is rooted in reason, and not in the emotions.

Against this backdrop, Habermas makes a distinction between moral and ethical modes of practical reasoning. Ethical reasoning, he holds, is related to questions about the good life for the individual. In this context, Habermas uses Charles Taylor's notion about strong preferences, which

is not about arbitrary dispositions, but about basic traits in a person's self-understanding, character, and identity.[502] To address questions about the good life, the individual must thematize his or her own identity and make him or herself and not only his or her agency a theme for reflection. This existential self-understanding has a strong evaluative component based on both adopted ideals and on the experiences contained in one's life-history. Thus, it contributes main elements in what we can identify as the components in the individual's context of agency, and also to what constitutes the architecture of the moral self. It can also imply a critical evaluation of the processes and values that have resulted in his or her actual identity:

> Hence, the clarification of one's self-[…] calls for an appropriative form of understanding – the appropriation of one's own life history and the traditions and circumstances of life that have shaped one's process of development. […]. Bringing one's life history and its normative context to awareness in a critical manner does not lead to a value-neutral self-understanding; rather, the hermeneutically generated self-description is logically contingent upon a critical relation to self.[503]

This understanding is notable for its relevance to how we have previously described shame as the result of interruption of intentions and the concomitant invested desire that emerges out of the individual's context of agency when it clashes with a different (perceived, imagined or real) other-based context of agency (which includes different ideals, values, norms, etc.). Habermas seems to presuppose that the thematization of coherence, unity, and integrity of a given life and its accompanying agency should be understood as an ethical question. It entails that the moral self-evaluation that considers one's goals in life, what constitutes a good life, one's achievements, etc., is of crucial importance for the development of a person's self-understanding and the direction and the ordering of his or her desires and aims. The stronger one's moral subjectivity is shaped by

502 Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 4f.

503 Ibid., 5.

the values and aims that have led to one's understanding of what a good life is, the greater is the risk of experiencing shame if these ideals are rejected, and their pursuit is interrupted in a way that feels convincing for the subject. In this case, others may very well be within the context of consideration as well, since these questions are about the aim of one's life.[504] Nevertheless, the questioning of one's own, or the group's form of life, and to what extent it is built on acceptable ideals, requires a mode of reasoning that goes beyond the mere feeling of shame. Shame itself cannot contribute significantly to solving questions about the good life in a viable, lasting, and coherent manner.

Accordingly, ethical questions represent a level of reflection that can be developed into more moral questions when the answers to these are questioned from a more external and universal perspective. The increasing levels of moral considerations and argumentation seem to make shame redundant as a resource in personal moral development. Given the considerations so far, there seem to be strong reasons for being critical of the role that shame plays in a moral context. However, there are recent attempts to rehabilitate shame's role in moral contexts that merit further attention before we can draw any such conclusion. To one of these contributions, we turn now.

Defending shame: Resources

Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni: Shame defended as morally relevant

In their thoroughly argued book *In Defense of Shame*, Deonnai et al. make a strong case for the rehabilitation of shame as morally relevant. The definition that their defense relies on can help us understand further some of the features related to shame in a moral context. Deonna et al. nevertheless acknowledge the ambiguous evaluation of shame in relation to morality: Some see it, they argue, as "a central tool for navigating successfully within our moral environment; at other times, it is taken,

504 Cf. Habermas, *Erläuterungen Zur Diskursethik*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 105.

rather, to be a morally suspicious emotion that we should do our utmost to rid ourselves of."[505] Tacitly, they also point to what we have called the backward-looking character of shame, since it is the negative emotional evaluation of our past traits or actions that may justify a negative evaluation of ourselves as unworthy, as degraded, or as exhibiting an unwanted identity.[506]

Deonna et al. see emotions in general as morally relevant if they can be determined to be morally good or bad, or if the motivations they embody are distinctively moral. This qualification implies that shame cannot be understood as potentially moral apart from the themes or formal objects it relates to, or, in our words, how it is related to our intentions and desires. Shame needs to be related to *moral* objects and our eventual failure in achieving them if it is to work in a moral context. Thus, "it is not necessary to possess an already established conception of the moral good to reflect on the relations between emotions and morality. For, rather than enquiring into whether an emotion is intrinsically or extrinsically morally good or bad, we may wonder whether it qualifies as morally relevant or irrelevant," they hold.[507]

The distinction between morally relevant and irrelevant emotions implies that they can "count as morally relevant when the motivations they embody satisfy constraints we are familiar with from more classic ways of conducting ethical discourse."[508] Thus, shame becomes morally relevant *if the reasons for it can be part of a moral discourse that offers reasons for acting in this or that way.*[509] Accordingly, shame offers moral guidance only when it is made transparent by a cognitive investment that can justify this function. Emotions are sensitive to reasons and, thus, potentially sensitive to moral reasons. Shame as "an emotion is morally relevant when the values in terms of which its evaluation proceeds are moral values."[510] Thus, they suggest that shame can have some cognitive

505 Deonna et al., *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 4.
506 Cf. ibid., 7.
507 Ibid., 14.
508 Ibid.
509 Ibid., 14–15.
510 Ibid., 15.

content – a point that is not without relevance if shame is related to moral agency as defined in the introduction to this chapter.

Against the two dogmas

Deonna et al. devote a considerable amount of space in their book to argue against two dogmas that they think are misleading and which lead to a rejection of shame as a moral phenomenon. The first dogma they call *shame socialism*, which implies that the view of others on oneself fundamentally conditions shame.[511] As such, it implies a moral heteronomy that should be avoided, and accordingly, it cannot be an acceptable basis for morality. The second dogma says that shame is morally bad because it is associated with other feelings that we usually consider as having a negative value. According to this view, shame correlates with a variety of insidious emotional conditions and action tendencies (such as aggression). From this perspective, shame promotes self-destructive attitudes and leads to anti-social behavior. Consequently, it should be avoided.[512]

Deonna et al.'s definition of shame identifies it as "the subject's painful sense of her own incapacity to live up to, even minimally, the demands consubstantial with one or some of the values she is attached to. This verdict of incapacity captures the distinctive sense in which an individual's identity is shaken in shame."[513] The strength of this definition is that it relates shame to identity and the sense of self, or to the overall architecture of the self, and that is, we agree, crucial for moral concerns, as moral agency requires the ability to identify (with) some values on which one can act. It is also in consonance with our initial definition of shame occurring as a response when one's agency is interrupted (be it by one's realization of incapacity or the judgment of others). Furthermore, their definition also uses a metaphor we can relate to: shame is shaking, sometimes it even shatters or dissolves the (sense of) self. They hold that:

511 Note how this "other-based" understanding of shame in a moral context runs counter to the understanding of morality that is based in autonomous acceptance of norms and ideals, as defined in the introduction to this chapter.

512 Cf. the connection between shame, low self-esteem, and narcissistic rage, as described in the previous chapter on shame and psychology.

513 Ibid., 98.

> In shame, we take it that we exemplify a specific disvalue that strikes us as an indication of our incapacity to exemplify a self-relevant value even to a minimal degree. This experience of incapacity, although circumscribed to the value undermined in the circumstances, affects the self in a way. Our identity being constituted by the values to which we are attached, it is shaken precisely insofar as we experience our inability to honor even minimally the demands that go with this value.[514]

If we relate this definition to our previously established understanding of shame as resulting from the interruption of the intended projects of the self, as these projects are shaped and guided by values that we are attached to, Deonna et al.'s definition of shame in relation to morality makes sense. Mostly, shame is not a tangential experience, but one that involves the self – be it in a global sense or in a more restricted one. Shame is, therefore, more than an unfavorable construal of ourselves. It is sometimes "a verdict of unworthiness that has an all-or-nothing character."[515] However, occasionally we may also "feel shame in connection with values we hold only peripherally." Then, the all-encompassing negative judgment about ourselves does not apply.[516] Nevertheless, they emphasize that severe evaluation is present in shame. But they also argue that one needs to distinguish between the evaluation component in shame and the object dimension. Sometimes these two components can be separated and sometimes not. For example, they are combined when shame manifests an identity we do not want.[517] Accordingly, for Deonna et al., "a full and ambitious account of shame" […] has to portray this emotion as a negative evaluation of the self that is severe but does not have an all-encompassing character."[518]

Furthermore, Deonna et al.'s definition of shame is pluralist and they can therefore identify how shame presents itself in a wide variety of contexts and different forms. Accordingly, the values that result in shame

514 Ibid., 122.
515 For a critical discussion of the relation between shame and decrease in perceived self-worth, cf. Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique."
516 Deonna et al., *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 98–99.
517 Ibid., 77.
518 Ibid., 99.

can be of different kinds: "Shame can arise as much in connection with the values manifested by an individual's *pudeur* as with those manifested by his dignity, decency, or integrity."[519] Or, as they write later on, "what matters for shame within the present proposal is the attachment we have with respect to each and every value we care personally to exemplify. These might belong to any family of values, among which we can count moral, sexual, aesthetic, political, cultural, and intellectual values, as well as those values having to do with one's public image."[520] Thus, shame can be conditioned by a multitude of factors or elements, among which not all have to be strictly moral in content but all of which contain some value or evaluative component.

There are several preconditions for the experience of moral shame, and Deonna et al. list them in the following sequence:[521]

1. A subject must be complex enough to be attached to values.
2. She must furthermore be attached to self-relevant values – that is, values that she takes as imposing practical demands on her.
3. She must have the following discriminatory ability: she must be sensitive to the fact that she may fare more or less well in regard to the demands these values impose on her.

Given these preconditions, the subject will feel shame if, and only if, these conditions are met:

1. She comes to take a trait or an action of hers to exemplify the polar opposite of a self-relevant value.
2. She apprehends this opposition as indicating a distinctive incapacity with respect to the demands of this particular value.
3. This incapacity is distinctive in the sense that it consists in the incapacity to exemplify, even minimally, the value in question.[522]

519 Ibid., 75.
520 Ibid., 118.
521 Cf. our definition of morality above, p. 271.
522 Deonna et al., *In Defense of Shame*, 102–103. Our italics.

We find it notable that this description of the conditions for shame in a moral context contributes to our underscoring of shame as the result of interrupted agency. On their part, and given this account of shame, Deonna et al. argue in the following way against the two "dogmas" they find prevalent in the recent literature on shame:

Against the socialism position, they hold that the relevant values for the constitution of shame need not have to do with our social standing, or with the invasion of our privacy. It is only some types of shame that are elicited thus, and they should be distinguished from other types of shame. In moral matters, "the role of others […] is most of the time confined to triggering our realization that we are or have behaved in a way that is below the threshold of what we personally deem acceptable."[523] Therefore, shame does not always require the subject to take the perspective of others upon what he or she is or does. Furthermore, they argue that "shame is social when, and only when, it construes the self-relevant values of reputation or privacy as under threat or as out of our control."[524] Far from all shame involves such evaluation, though. Therefore, they suggest distinguishing between social and personal shame: "Shame is social when the self-relevant values concern the way we appear to others; it is personal when the self-relevant value has nothing to do with appearances."[525] In other words, shame in the context of morality is not always a social emotion or one that needs a social context to appear.

The distinction that Deonna et al. establish between social and personal shame sustains their argument "that cases of social shame so defined are not coextensive with cases of public shame – shame occurring in the context of a real or imagined audience – but can also occur in connection with solitary shame – when the emotion is experienced in the absence of any public, real or imagined."[526] Thus, they distinguish between personal and social shame. This distinction makes it possible for them to claim that personal shame often occurs in front of, and because of, others, who then trigger the subject to take a new perspective upon what he or she has

523 Ibid., 138.
524 Ibid.
525 Ibid.
526 Ibid.

done or who he or she is. However, such instances need not have anything to do with the features that usually are seen as connected to social shame, such as threats to reputation or failure to control what should be kept private.[527]

As we have seen, according to Deonna et al., personal shame results from the individual's negative assessment of themselves in the light of the values with which they identify. Shame thus tells them that, in some sense, their identity project and/or the intentions of their agency have failed. Again, we note how this is in accordance with what we have previously sketched about shame. It is notable that shame in this sense is not necessarily the result of heteronomy, nor the result of non-transparent evaluations.[528] It may be caused by some lack of control over the conditions for agency, though.

Turning then to what may be the content of social shame, Deonna et al. identify three main features, among which only one of them (and one that has already been mentioned) seems to make shame problematic from a moral point of view: shame is properly social when the self-relevant values of reputation or privacy are at stake. However, it is hardly the case that all instances are morally relevant in which this is the case. Even though shame is social in such contexts, it is not the same as saying that this shame has moral content or implications.

Furthermore, shame is social because "we learn *in situ* and in contact with others about those circumstances that merit shame."[529] However, shame is not the only emotion that falls into this category. Concerning moral values, this only tells us that values "are singled out in specific

527 Ibid.

528 The point that shame does not compromise moral autonomy is also argued strongly by Fabrice Teroni and Otto Bruun in "Shame, Guilt and Morality," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2011). However, there as well, the understanding of shame as productive and resting on personal moral convictions tends to overlook the complexity of interrelations between selves and others. Dan Zahavi comments on this position, and argues that it "mainly targets highly elaborate, self-directed judgmental forms of shame." Therefore, it is cognitively demanding, and accordingly, it "would rule out not only something like pre-reflective shame, but also anything like infantile shame. Another worry might be that shame is less about one's failure to exemplify a self-relevant value than it is about exemplifying a self-relevant defect; that is, what is shame-inducing is not the distance from an ideal self but the closeness to an undesired self." See Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, 220.

529 Deonna et al., *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, 152.

social and historical settings" and that we "find in shame an especially powerful tool for their inculcation."[530] Thus, Deonna et al. seem to consider shame more relevant for disciplining than for moral teaching, but we would argue that in itself, it does not mean that it is any more morally qualified than, for example, fear.

Shame triggered by the attitudes of others ("public shame") need not have an undisputed moral function. We may also feel shame when no one makes us fear for our reputations or makes salient our lack of control over what we think should be kept private. Deonna et al. hold that others are ancillary to the shame we feel in such cases, and they put forward the strong claim that shame is never heteronomous. Interaction with others is, nevertheless, often required for us to realize the full extent of our moral shortcomings. They can draw our attention to our theoretical or practical blind spots. "Because we take autonomously the insights of some of these others to be authoritative, they may contribute to correcting, refining, or enlightening our moral sensitivity. For this reason, shame may constitute a privileged route to moral progress."[531] This point we aim to discuss further below, not least because it seems to run the risk of oversimplifying cases where we feel ashamed because of the appeal of others, and despite ourselves being convinced that we are acting in a morally justified way.

Despite their strong argument for shame as a potentially moral emotion, Deonna et al. claim that it makes little sense to speak abstractly about shame as morally good or bad. There is "ample reason to conclude that the moral character of shame will be a function of the particular value attachments it manifests and which it is likely to further promote." They continue:

> This shows that shame not only need not be morally ugly but that it can also be morally beautiful. This beauty is admittedly fragile, since it can easily succumb to two great evils: shame is potentially informed by ugly values (e.g., concern with appearances fostering servile conformity) and, when felt chronically and irrationally, potentially destructive for both the individual and those close to him. This, we submit, is the source of the diverging diagnoses about shame.[532]

530 Ibid., 152.
531 Ibid., 152–153.
532 Ibid., 183.

Deonna et al. suggest that shame may compare favorably with guilt because shame is associated with shortcomings that cannot be captured in terms of right or wrong action, and therefore requires a deeper self-awareness. In other words, shame may contribute to ground moral values more profoundly in the moral subject. Because shame is a response to deficiencies concerning the moral virtues, it does not undermine morality, but "serves to place our moral concerns within the broader context of our general interests and values," they argue.[533] Thus, they see shame as playing a potential role in moral formation that is much in consonance with what we briefly described above in relation to virtue ethics. Shame as a phenomenon in the overall architecture of the moral self serves the internalization of virtues. Then the question is, what kind of moral subject does one become when shame is given this role? If the development of virtues employing shame instead of moral insight emerging out of deliberative reasoning takes place, what kind of relationships does that engender between the potentially virtuous moral agent and their peers?

J. C. Manion: The possibility of determining the moral relevance of shame

The arguments

We saw in the chapter on shame and psychology that Martha Nussbaum worked hard in order to identify to what extent it is possible to ascribe a positive function to shame. Her conclusion is that such possibilities exist only to a limited extent. Other philosophers seem to come to much the same conclusion. Jennifer C. Manion's article "The Moral Relevance of Shame" illustrates this point.[534] She argues that shame can "play an important positive role for the ashamed person *despite its negative and potentially debilitating effects*."[535] The italicization of words in the quoted sentence intends to show the ambiguity that she thereby admits that shame has. The quote also signals the challenge present when shame is

533 Ibid., 184.

534 See Jennifer C. Manion, "The Moral Relevance of Shame," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2002).

535 Ibid., 73.

identified as playing an important positive role, despite its debilitating effects.[536] Accordingly, it is crucial to look into her contribution in detail.

Manion's intention in rehabilitating shame's moral relevance centers around two main elements: first, she thinks that negative accounts of shame underestimate and misdescribe its motivating power. Second, shame represents a possibility for self-reflection that can "motivate an agent to seek a (re)considered moral identity and a closer approximation to an improved and improving moral ideal."[537]

Manion holds that not all instances of shame are morally relevant. Shame has a broader scope than that which is relevant for morality. Accordingly, one must account for when it is morally relevant and when it is not. One strategy for identifying the moral relevance of shame would be to say that it must be based on traits, acts, or features in a person that are under their control and which they can, therefore, correct or adjust.[538] This strategy makes shame morally relevant when it is related to the capacity for agency, which, on its part, can be assessed in relation to specific values or norms. Nevertheless, in Manion's view, shame is not only related to acts, but also to who the moral person is.[539] In that regard, shame's moral relevance points us to a notion of morality we find in virtue ethics, insofar as this position in moral philosophy underscores the formation of a person's moral character and abilities, and not only acts or their outcome.

Against this backdrop, Manion defines moral shame as "shame precipitated by some *moral* lapse, failure or omission that results in an agent's disappointment in aspects of her own moral character over which she has some significant control."[540] Thus, it is primarily an experience of failure to meet one's moral ideals. Manion's emphasis on disappointment is interesting to note since she thereby points to how it can be merged with

536 Manion seems quite aware of the challenge she has put before herself: She sees shame as a "significant blow to the self. If shame is therefore to be recommended as beneficial for the person experiencing it, this blow cannot be devastating to a person's moral character or agency. Any good that shame serves must counteract its negative repercussions. Shame must produce a certain good especially well." Ibid., 78.

537 Ibid., 73.

538 Ibid., 75.

539 Ibid., 76.

540 Ibid., 77.

the emotion of shame. We would nevertheless argue that disappointment need not be a consequence of moral shame.

Shame may also work against moral motivation, either because it erodes one's confidence in one's own potential for moral agency, or because it causes outright immoral behavior, be it rage against others or more self-absorption or isolation.[541] On the positive side, though, is its capacity to motivate improvement: we can ease the discomfort of being shamed by trying to prove to ourselves that what we are ashamed of is not an irreparable trait in us. "We can and do seek our own approval and to reaffirm our goodness in our own eyes constitutes one aspect of moral integrity." Thus, it can lead to an improvement in our moral character, Manion claims.[542]

If we read this against the backdrop of our previous analysis of Kohlberg and Habermas, Manion's reasoning at this point presents us with a problem. If we act morally because our motivation to do so is that it eases our discomfort in feeling shame, we find ourselves at the pre-conventional or conventional stage of morality. It is pre-conventional because the motivation is the desire to avoid discomfort and conventional in terms of trying to look good in our own eyes again as measured by the standard of conventional morals. In other words, insofar as the overcoming of shame is not morally motivated, shame also does not seem to motivate actions based on moral insight. Instead, the morally relevant function, which appears as secondary, emerges from one's concerns regarding oneself or oneself in a social context of expectations, conventions, and assessments. Thus, Manion's argument for the moral significance of shame rests on the levels of morality in which communal and relational elements play a significant role, and in which moral insights may not contribute significantly to the development of a mature moral subjectivity. However, that does not imply that such secondary functions cannot contribute morally to society. In a less than perfect world, there will always be people who are morally immature and that may be tempted to pursue their own immoral desires that will put vulnerable others at risk. Thus, even at a pre-conventional level

541 Cf. ibid., 80.
542 Ibid., 81.

shame may serve as a morally protective bulwark against immoral desires and actions.

Evaluation

Manion is right in arguing that shame may sometimes contribute to our awareness of values and how we function in a social setting. Shame's disruptive character may provide us with new assessments of our expectations and capacities and put "a sudden halt to any unquestioning operations of the self." Thus, it provides the opportunity for self-doubt, and "it is precisely because of this feature [self-doubt] that shame is a potentially valuable moral emotion."[543] Its moral value lies in its ability to question our moral identity or character. As a consequence, we may be able to shape new and better ideals of who we can still be in the future. Manion may be right in arguing this, but we would still like to ask: at what cost? Is not the risk in employing shame as the primary motivator for moral formation that one loses sight of the necessity of building moral character on moral insight about what is right and good to do, and not on the need for overcoming the negative emotion of shame that emerges out of one's former conduct? We can push this critical question even further by addressing the conclusion in Manion's discussion of the positive contributions of shame to morality. She writes, "Because it requires an evaluation of core aspects of the self and not simply one's isolated actions, moral shame is more likely to encourage deep, significant transformations of moral character than are guilt feelings."[544] Given the ambiguities of shame's function in the context of morality, to which Manion herself testifies, one can ask if shame can contribute to profound *moral* transformation. We would argue that shame *in itself* offers no necessary or valid moral insight, although it *may occasionally* mediate it. Thus, shame may continue to hold the moral self captive in unfavorable conditions, instead of contributing to the liberation of its moral potential. Against this backdrop, we acknowledge that it can also motivate the moral subject to move

543 Ibid., 83. In these lines of reasoning, she bases her reflections on the analyses of both J. Rawls and G. Taylor.

544 Ibid., 84.

away from the morally problematic situation. In such cases, it mediates a morally relevant transformation.[545]

Support for morality? Pattison on shame

Arguments

Among the risks of employing shame in the context of morality is that it makes the shame-experiencing individual self-occupied or too self-absorbed to achieve the necessary distance and clarity that can lead to genuine moral insight and assess the moral challenges in ways that are not conditioned by the agent's concerns for him or herself. But as suggested at the end of the previous section, shame may also be a push towards employing other elements in the architecture of the self, which may lead to a transformation of the self's conditions for agency. Furthermore, moral insight at the post-conventional level relies on autonomous considerations and reasoning. In the chapter about psychology and shame, we pointed to how important it is that the self is provided with opportunities to develop emotional self-reliance in its relation to others to avoid being prone to shame. Accordingly, the need for some independence from others is not necessary only to develop genuine moral insight but is also needed to develop a capacity to resist the influence of shaming, especially when it is not, or should not be, morally relevant.

We are not referring here to self-reliance understood as a mode of total independence from others. We find such ideas about independence in modern forms of individualism. Instead, we argue in favor of an independence or self-reliance that can recognize interrelations and dependencies as the flip side of our differentiation from others. Such differentiation implies that one can model the relationship with others along the same lines as a mature relationship between a parent and a child: as a

545 The critical point made here can be developed further in light of the comment made by Rom Harré and W. Gerrod Parrott in *The Emotions: Social, Cultural and Biological Dimensions* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 8: "Shame, to return to a point made by Gabrielle Taylor, limits the shamed person's motives to make things right. The shamed person in effect must accept a debased self as congruent with the wrongful action, and is motivated not so much to compensate for the action as to withdraw from public scorn."

relationship marked by increasing differentiation, and by a growing level of trust in oneself, as well as the recognition of the importance of the other for becoming oneself. Under such conditions, the self can receive the necessary affirmation and recognition to create the fundamental conditions for self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem.

These considerations may also be developed further in light of the difference between guilt, feelings of guilt and shame that we presented earlier. In contrast to feelings of guilt, from which the self can differentiate itself and to which the self can relate in a transparent manner once the distinction between action and agent is learned, shame has a different status. Stephen Pattison speaks about the tendency for shame to take over the self, and underscores the pre-subjective status it sometimes has. One can feel guilty and still maintain a sense of self-esteem, even to the extent that one can admit to being guilty of a particular action without feeling disparaged by the reactions of others. Shame does not make this possible in the same way.[546] It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to be able to differentiate between feelings of guilt and shame and to acknowledge that the two may not operate according to the same kind of logic. However, they may be more intertwined than is often recognized.[547]

Furthermore, Pattison points to an essential element in the relationship between shame and morality that may help us to see problematic and even pathological traits in the way in which shame conditions (or fails to condition) human agency. He asserts that humans suffering from pathological shame (shame that has an enduring negative effect on self-esteem, social interaction, and capacities for agency) are often not part of the moral community or lack the necessary competence to be

546 For further elaborations on this distinction, see Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 43f.

547 Cf. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 361: "In guilt, one typically acknowledges that one has done (or intended) something wrong. In shame, one acknowledges that one is something inferior, falling short of some desired ideal. The natural reflex of guilt is apology and reparation; the natural reflex of shame is hiding. And while guilt typically suggests a constructive future – making reparations, not doing that sort of bad thing again – shame often offers no constructive advice. Sometimes one can resolve to correct a perceived inadequacy, but often what one is asked to blush for is an ineradicable part of what and who one is. Because shame pertains to any ideal, social or personal, it is a mistake to think that it is entirely a public or social emotion."

genuinely moral.[548] We find it is important to underscore that this is not the case for everyone that suffers from such shame. Some may also use morality and moral action to overcome the enduring feeling of shame and to regain their experience of being part of a community. Remaining a moral person despite suffering from pathological shame can be extremely important. It may well be what makes them still able to hold on to some self-esteem and dignity. Thus, what Pattison does not take sufficiently into consideration is that chronic shame does not need to invade all parts of human agency.

However, when shame has the effect that people become "trapped in themselves" in ways that cut them off from genuine relationships with others, morality becomes a challenge. Although they may have a strong sense of other people's opinions and even be supersensitive about the effect of other people's attitudes and actions upon themselves, they are not "other-regarding and moral in the sense of being able to take properly defined and limited responsibility for their own actions and then being able to execute them," writes Pattison, who sees them as being in a pre-social and pre-moral state.[549] We underscore that he says this about people who suffer from pathological shame – and not those who may occasionally experience shame in relations or because of what they do.[550] We nevertheless find that his generic statements about this condition seem to render those who suffer from pathological shame with fewer resources for morality. However, such statements consider neither specific individuals nor the fact that specific contexts may add to the burden on those who are fighting for their decency in a situation of pathological shame. A survivor

548 He is not alone in this – the incapacitation of the self by shame when it comes to social interaction is pointed to throughout much of the literature.

549 Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 123f. Cf. Brené Brown's observation in *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), about how shame is highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, and eating-disorders, whereas guilt is inversely correlated with these.

550 Nevertheless, shame's complexity with regard to its impact on morality in general should not be ignored. Research suggests that people who score high on shame-proneness will be more likely to engage in unethical behaviors. Furthermore, also people with low self-control have difficulty foreseeing the longer term consequences of their actions, which when combined with high shame-proneness, may make unethical actions more likely. See Steven Murphy and Sandra Kiffin-Petersen, "The Exposed Self: A Multilevel Model of Shame and Ethical Behavior," *Journal of Business Ethics* 141, no. 4 (2017), 664.

of child sexual abuse may struggle with such shame. Regaining or holding onto their other-oriented morality by pursuing moral goals may provide a much-needed confirmation that not all is broken. So, even though there is a self-affirming element to this, it does not exclude the true moral value of both deliberation and action. This self-affirming element does not have to differ, at least not in principle, from the self-affirming element present in any moral other-oriented deliberation and action.

Based on his critical assessment of pathological shame-carriers' capacity for moral responsibility, Pattison concludes that shame is not a particularly useful tool for morality. From his point of view, shame produces humans who are under the risk of being unable to act entirely as moral agents.[551] To the extent that shame is used as a mechanism for discipline, its moral potential appears in a new light. Instead of being a useful tool for enforcing moral capacities, shame impedes these capacities, although it may look at first sight to be an effective and useful tool for discipline and control. Using shame for such purposes may, therefore, be counterproductive: it contributes to the dissolution of the moral self that it is intended to edify. This point is overlooked by both Deonna et al. and Manion in their attempts to rehabilitate shame's contribution to morality. Nevertheless, we should not forget that sometimes it may mediate the need for transformation, or for regaining dignity and thereby indirectly serve moral purposes.

Pattison identifies the problematic aspects of the moral uses of shame in how it makes people feel bad about who and what they are. Identity as a sinner or as morally pernicious is "a global judgment about the whole self as fundamentally bad, defective and worthy of rejection." When, for example, religious moral teaching addresses shamed people who think like that about themselves, this teaching may achieve the opposite of what it is aiming at because it "maintains sinners rather than enhancing personal and social responsibility."[552]

The recognition of the humanity of people and their moral standing are closely linked to concepts about humanity. In Pattison's view, shame

551 Cf. Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 126.

552 Ibid., 266. Cf. our thoughts below about the necessity of paying attention to the distinction between the pre-subjective self and the active subject.

implies a potential impediment to the moral self since shame may imply a dehumanization of the self and defines the self in categories that do not involve oneself as a person, but define one in terms of abstract and pejorative characteristics. This concurs with what we saw previously in Cahill's analysis of derivatization, and we will return to other aspects of the same feature below when we look at Thomason's understanding of shame. A society that shames groups or individuals thus does not recognize them as equals. Shaming may imply rejection and contribute to projecting images of others as enemies to be feared. Furthermore, those who are shamed may be "confined to a realm of wordless invisibility." In this way, shame marks the bounds of the human community.[553] This delineation represents in an almost violent manner the clash between contexts of agency, where the shameful is left as an outsider.

Our initial reference to the "shameless Arabian daughters" is one prominent example of what is at stake here: when people act in ways not recognized as acceptable, they may be subjected to shaming that defines them as unclean. If I do this or that, I am unclean. If I have these thoughts or feelings, *my* feelings and thoughts are unclean. Hence, the employment of such notions in relation to shame makes it more challenging to differentiate acts from the self. Processes of differentiation/separation are blocked because the shaming notions are employed by those who have the power to define them.[554]

The immense issues to which this may lead can be discerned by looking at sexual emotions, which are deep and complicated elements of the human self. If such emotions are identified as unclean, part of the self may be perceived as unclean, and the problems related to this uncleanness may seem insurmountable.[555] Furthermore, shame is often used to deliberately exploit the close relationship between identity and sexuality to control the sexuality of others. Since sexuality and sexual emotions, as pre-subjective, cannot be assessed as things that are only related to one's own subjective choices, or considered as objects of one's attitudes toward these emotions, the ability to separate oneself from them, or disown them

553 Ibid., 183.
554 Pattison *Shame,* 182f.
555 Cf. the discussion of Eleanor Stump above, pp. 247ff.

is limited.[556] Accordingly, speaking of desire or thoughts or imaginings as clean or unclean may contribute to the enhancement of (the pathology of) shame, since it directly targets the source of agency in desire.[557]

Violence as a response to shame compromises a moral definition of shame

Violence is among the problematic moral topics that humans face. It also presents us with some specific problems related to morality. Violence contributes to making problematic some of the prevalent definitions of shame, including those presented in this chapter as advocated by Deonna et al. and Manion (above) and Kekes (below). To discuss this problem further, we will take our point of departure in Krista Thomason's critique of the definition of shame as the reaction when we fail to live up to standards, norms, or ideals, which we can call the standard moral definition of shame. Her critique aims to demonstrate that this definition is flawed. The reason for this claim is the empirical observation that agents often respond to shame with violence and aggression. However, to act violently is not an obvious or intelligent response to the painful feeling of failing to live up to an ideal. In other words, the standard moral definition of shame cannot explain why such reactions take place. Thomason, therefore, implicitly argues that we need a definition of shame that is not based exclusively on moral concepts but which nevertheless can allow us to address the morally problematic feature of violence as a reaction to moral failure. Her main claim is that "shame arises out of a tension between our identity and our self-conception: those things about which we feel shame are part of our identities, but they are not part of our self-conception."[558]

---

556 Cf. Manion on moral shame as based on the capacity for agency, and Deigh's differentiation between authorship and ownership.

557 If we link these points to the topic of the former chapter on religion, this is probably also why many homosexuals perceive strict religious positions on their sexuality to contain a double message: on the one hand, they may be told that they are valuable as they are created in the image of God or fully equal with the rest of society whereas, on the other hand, when it comes to their sexual identity they are unclean and unworthy, and should be different. As we are speaking about layers of the self that are predominantly pre-subjective, this may cause a great deal of confusion, frustration, and anger.

558 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," 1.

Let us consider her position in more detail because it also presents us with opportunities for understanding more profoundly what we have spoken of as a clash between contexts of agency.[559]

A philosophical account of moral emotions, among which shame is usually included, faces two challenges. The first challenge is to explain how the emotion has moral value and what role it plays in moral life. We have done some work previously in this chapter to clarify to what extent that is the case with shame. The other challenge is to provide a good conceptual analysis of shame that can account for the way we actually experience it.[560] This second challenge is not only philosophical, but empirical: a definition must make sense of the empirical data we have on shame. This last point is where the moral definition of shame fails, according to Thomason. She articulates the empirical falsification of the moral definition of shame as follows:

> If shame is the painful feeling of not living up to one's values, it does not make sense that agents would respond to that feeling by doing something morally bad. What is more, doing something violent alleviates feelings of shame. If the traditional view is right, this experience is impossible: doing something morally wrong should make agents feel more shame rather than less.[561]

Thomason refers to several literary examples in which people respond to shame by doing something violent to themselves or others. Now, since the moral definition sees shame as a painful response to the failure to embody the values we care about, the standard moral definition is challenged by such examples. According to it, shame should cause us to act with restraint. We have also seen above how Manion argues for shame as instigating self-improvement: the moral definition implies the expectation

559 Another version of this section has previously been published as Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Violence, shame, and moral agency – An exploration of Krista K. Thomason's position" in *De Ethica,* 2020.

560 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality." 2.

561 Ibid., 2. A precondition for this analysis should be noted: this analysis fits insofar as shame stands alone. However, shame, guilt, aggression, and striving for dignity may all be part of the emotional turmoil of chronic shame. Thus, studying shame as an empirical phenomenon also needs to take into consideration the fact that cause and effect, reasons and actions, are complex. This complexity adds to the turmoil and is hard to make sense of. It is a complex relational social system where we can observe correlations without being able to separate one or the other empirically to test them against clear-cut definitions.

that one attempts to overcome shame by living up to one's ideals and values in the future. However, in the cases that Thomason describes, shame inspires the opposite of self-improvement. The standard moral definition of shame cannot explain this fact. Moreover, it also fails to address the fact that immoral acts can make those who experience shame feel better. In other words: immorality sometimes alleviates shame.[562]

Thomason presents several possible strategies that one can adopt to explain instances of alleviating shame by acts of immorality without having to give up the moral definition. First, one can claim that shame is sometimes irrational, and accordingly, in exceptional cases, irrationality serves as an explanation. Second, one can also argue that in some cases, shame is not adequately focused. It is properly focused when "(1) we hold ourselves responsible for our failure and (2) when the norm to which we respond is a legitimate one."[563] Third, irrational shame, defined as shame that leads to incomprehensible acts, can also be explained by Gabriele Taylor's notion of "false shame," which occurs when we have standards or norms imposed upon us for a brief period, and these are contrary to genuine shame, which is the moral kind that occurs when we fail to live up to our ideals.[564] Finally, one can classify cases of reactive and immoral shame as those performed by shame-prone individuals with a maladaptive self-image, because "shame-prone individuals are more apt to respond with aggression than those who are not, but this is an issue with shame-proneness and not with shame."[565]

Thomason nevertheless finds no reason for comprehending violent responses to feelings of shame as irrational.[566] That some shame-prone individuals respond to shame with aggression does not mean that anyone

562 Ibid., 6. Cf. how the elements we described above on the transportation and transformation of shame (e.g. by blaming others, scapegoating, etc.) contribute to such immorality.

563 Ibid., 7.

564 Ibid., 7. The reference she uses here is to G. Taylor, "Shame, integrity, and self-respect." In *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, edited by Robin S. Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995).

565 Thomason, ibid., 7.

566 Cf. ibid., 7–8. She also points to how these approaches can in fact contribute further to shame, and to people feeling shame about feeling shame: These explanatory approaches "encourage us to find fault with ashamed people. Because the traditional way of understanding shame is about failing to live up to values, we are forced to claim that agents who experience shame about their faces have misguided values and false beliefs. A different account of shame could explain them in a way that does not require attributing mistaken values to agents who feel this way." Ibid., 12.

who responds to shame with aggression is shame-prone. No empirical data suggests this to be the case, she claims.[567] Thus, she rejects all the attempts to explain the link between shame and violent response within the frames of the moral definition. Accounts of shame based on this definition cannot explain why agents are tempted to respond to shame by doing something wrong.[568] Her alternative account for the relationship between shame and violence widens the scope beyond shame caused by failure to achieve ideals and values. In our context, it is notable since it points to the broader conditions for agency, and to how shame may be a response to its interruption.

According to Thomason, shame arises when we feel that some aspect of our identities defines us.[569] She does not address in detail what causes this feeling, but according to the examples she offers, it is likely to think that they are the result of interpersonal exchange, and not only an intra-personal experience. It is the globalization of one aspect of us that comes to dominate our inner realm of experience. To make this definition work, she has to make a distinction between identity and self-conception: "those things about which we feel shame are part of our identities, but they are not part of our self-conception." Thus, she contributes to nuancing the role of shame in what we have called the architecture of the self. The following example is an illustration:

> An agent feels shame when some aspect of her identity becomes prominent or revealed in the shameful moment and that she feels that this thing defines her as a whole. That is, in episodes of shame she feels defined by, reduced to, or totalized by some feature of herself. I take this defining feature of shame to be necessary rather than sufficient. In other words, someone may find herself in these circumstances and feel something other than shame. My contention is that when an agent reports feeling shame, this feature will be present in the experience. Similarly, if an agent does not yet feel shame, but fears it, it is because she fears that some aspect of herself will define her.[570]

567 Ibid., 8.
568 Ibid., 10.
569 Ibid., 2.
570 Ibid., 11.

Accordingly, shame is the experience of feeling defined, reduced to, or totalized by some feature of ourselves.[571] As mentioned, this view corresponds to Cahill's understanding of derivatization.[572] Thus, experiences of shame involve a tension between our identity and our self-conception. A self-conception is our "self-image," that is, "how we represent to ourselves the person we take ourselves to be." On the other hand, "our identities extend beyond what we represent to ourselves. An agent's identity is who she is in a broader sense and can include things that fall outside of her self-conception."[573]

In this analysis, two elements are worth highlighting. First, the distinction between identity and self-conception sheds light on how shame results from what happens when two different contexts of agency clash, that is, when they do not complement each other but are in conflict. This conflict causes what we have called a disturbance of interruption of agency. Second, Thomason sheds light on Deigh's distinction between authorship and ownership, because shame makes it impossible to disown the feature in question: Shame as "the result of our inability to disavow that aspect of ourselves by which we feel defined explains why shame makes us feel so powerless. The thing that causes me shame both overshadows me and yet is me."[574] The combination of these two aspects helps us to understand the complexity of shame. But she also provides us with additional insights into these complexities:

The metaphor "overshadow" that Thomason uses can also be linked to our previously established notion of interruption, because Thomason uses it in the characterization of shame as experiencing one's lack of agential control over the feature that causes shame. "Shame arises in response to those aspects of ourselves over which we have very limited

571 Ibid., 12.

572 Cf. above, pp. 188ff.

573 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality." 12. Here, Thomason seems to build on G. Taylor when she speaks of the agent experiencing shame as "becoming aware of the discrepancy between her own assumption about her state or action and a possible detached observer-description of this state or action, and of her further being aware that she ought not to be in a position where she could be so seen, where such a description at least appears to fit." See Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, 66.

574 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," 13.

control."[575] It can be features related to our bodies, our intelligence, our grace (or lack thereof), our families, and our socioeconomic status, all of which are things over which we have little influence: "The shame that we feel about these aspects of our identities does not stem from the fact that we falsely believe we are responsible for them and thus failing to live up to ideals. It stems from the fact that they compete with our self-conception in comprising who we are."[576]

Another important element in Thomason's understanding of shame is that it also provides the means for understanding how it correlates to issues like race and gender, which in a similar way are beyond one's ability to control.[577] Such shame is not due to the feeling of failure because of sex or skin color but caused by how others have identified these traits in ways that overshadow what else they may feel about themselves. "Women and people of color are often thought of as a group rather than as individuals and others attribute thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to them in light of their sex or their skin color. Feeling as though one's identity can be 'read off' of one's skin color or sex understandably makes one feel totalized by one's skin color or sex."[578] Hence, this phenomenology of shame can account for feelings of being made small. "The feeling of smallness is the feeling of our self-conception being dwarfed by the aspect of our identities that inspires our shame."[579] When that which causes shame thus overshadows us, or, as we would say, interrupts us and our self-conception, it impacts how we can articulate ourselves in agency.

Thomason argues that her understanding makes it unnecessary to divide shame into kinds: all shame results from the lack of coherence between self-conception and identity.[580] Thus, she can explain cases of moral shame without reference to a failure to live up to ideals. Shame emerges because someone, despite how she represented her moral character

575 Ibid., 14
576 Ibid.
577 Cf. ibid., 14f. This also goes for features of embodiment, as we have pointed to previously.
578 Ibid., 15.
579 Ibid.
580 Cf. ibid., 16. Or, as we would state it, all shame is the result of clashes between different perceived or experienced contexts of agency and their conditions.

to herself, clearly was capable of doing something she thought she would never do. Shame thus interrupts or disturbs one's self-conception.[581]

How can this account of shame explain the relationship between shame and violence better than the moral definition can?[582] Thomason argues that "we respond to shame with violence because it allows us to once again feel defined by our self-conception rather than those aspects of ourselves that fall outside of it." Violent acts should be seen as a protest reaction that tries to manifest that I am more than my face, my arms, my failure. It is, in her view, not the destructive element in the violent act that is its main aim, but the attempt to regain control. "Violence is the attempt to regain control, which shame itself has caused one to feel that is lost."[583] She elaborates:

> Our bodies, our sexuality, and our socioeconomic statuses are all rich targets for shame that are a part of our identity even though we do not choose them. Shame makes us feel that we are not in control of who we are: parts of my identity define me independently of how I want to define myself. One of the ways of alleviating shame is to do something that regains a sense of control. We try to hide, cover ourselves, or get away from the situation, and these actions can help us regain feelings of control because we remove from sight the thing we experience as shameful. Violence, anger, and aggression can accomplish the same goal. At first this looks puzzling because it seems that we might be equally reduced to or totalized by our acts of violence or aggression as much as our faces or bodies.[584]

Although she sees the violence in question primarily as an act of self-assertion, it is reasonable to ask why one cannot regain control and assert oneself in other and less destructive ways. Thomason seems to downplay the severe content of acts of shame-induced violence.[585] At least, one

581 Ibid., 16.

582 For the sake of the argument, we follow Thomason's line of reasoning here, in which violence is a liberating action. But also the opposite, striving for dignity, may be a liberating action as a response to shame. What contextual factors or parts of our architecture that play together with a search for dignity or violence are nevertheless not clear. For example, the shameless Arabian daughters reacted to objectivization by striving for dignity and not by acting violently.

583 Cf. Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," 17.

584 Ibid., 17.

585 Cf. Breivik, see below.

would think that violence was performed against the one who made one feel ashamed. But that is not always the case.

Against this backdrop, shame that results in violence becomes possible to understand as rational to the extent that it restores a sense of agency:

> My sense of myself as an agent is closely connected to my self-conception. That is, one of the primary ways I think of myself is as an agent: one who chooses, acts, and makes decisions. Since my sense of my own agency is a large part of my self-conception, when I am seen as an agent, I feel as though my self-conception (not the parts of my identity that fall outside of it) is determining who I am.[586]

Thus, shame's violence is also a protest against becoming "reduced to some feature of our identity that we experience as fixed." The act of violence constitutes the one who performs it as something else and more than what he is in his shame. That is the rationale for performing the act. The response from others – even a negative one, implies that the person to whom they are responding is more than the possessor of some shameful feature.[587] Moreover,

> becoming the object of resentment by doing something violent helps us to regain the feeling of control we lose in shame because we once again feel that our self-conception determines who we are. Others surely respond negatively to me as the violent agent, but they are no longer seeing me as an object of amusement or fascination. What we seek in shame is not approval, but recognition […]: Violence gains us that recognition because in asserting our agency, we assert our self-conception.[588]

There are several elements to point to and discuss in Thomason's alternative understanding of shame. First of all, we need to ask, why does violence stand forth as the most obvious reasonable way of assuring one's agency? Violence is not only destructive, but it is also almost guaranteed to diminish the status of the agent in the eyes of others, and thereby, it may cause even more shame. One could easily think of other less destructive ways of responding to shame: protest, laughing, or simply by doing

586 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," 18.
587 Ibid., 18.
588 Ibid., 19.

something that shows that you do not accept being defined exclusively by this or that trait – as in running for public office if you are a woman or black. Furthermore, since not everyone responds to shame by acting violently, the variation in responses may also suggest that some do not consider it a good solution at all. Hence, one should distinguish between what makes acts of violence possible to understand, and what makes them the most reasonable choice, that is, founded in good reasons or warrants. We do not find this distinction in Thomason.

A related, second comment follows. According to Thomason, it is possible to see a moral interest in the struggle for recognition that the violent act implies. But the negative recognition that is provoked by a violent act (which is usually morally condemned) is most likely going to end up in a new rejection and more shame, due to how the violent act defines the agent. The most obvious example of this is the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, whose acts can be understood as the result of narcissistic shame and rage. After his deeds, however, hardly anyone can relate to him without thinking of the shameful acts he performed. The extensive discussion about his sanity and to what extent he could be considered responsible for his actions (cf. the discussion of authorship vs. ownership previously) suggests that it is not logical to consider violence a rational response to shame – simply because it can engender more shame. Nevertheless, this criticism does not exclude the possibility that shame can catalyze different strategies that articulate struggles for recognition.[589]

Thirdly, in the description referred to of self-asserting violence, Thomason seems to emphasize the response of others to these acts as crucial for the experience of overcoming the shame-defining features in the agent. This explanation may be relevant to some instances of violence, but does it also explain self-inflicted violence, like suicide? Is it not more likely to see violence as one painful act performed to numb an experience of another pain, without ascribing too much rationality to it?

Thomason's conception of shame does not lead her to argue for the elimination of shame altogether, though. She sees shamelessness (which

589 Cf. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

for her is the alternative) as something that "reveals an agent's failure to recognize the limitations of her own self-conception."[590] She also sees shame as valuable because it can open us up to the perspectives of others – "it means that we do not take our own points of view as the only important ones." Shame allows us to overcome the limitations of our self-conceptions, by disturbing them: "The more authoritative I think my self-conception is, the more prone I am to overlook things that do not fit with it."[591] She continues:

> A liability to shame prevents us from taking the way we see ourselves to be the primary authority in our self-estimation. Feelings of shame arise when we feel defined by some aspect of our identity that is not part of how we see ourselves. Even though that part of our identity is not part of our self-conception, we feel shame because we still acknowledge it as ours.[592]

We can rephrase Thomason's intention here more negatively: we need shame when we become too conceited. Our all-too-prevalent tendency to evaluate ourselves positively is the reason why we need shame to prevent self-inflation, "not because it is morally good to judge ourselves lowly or poorly, but because a liability to it requires that we recognize that we are not always the people we take ourselves to be."[593] Accordingly, she takes issue with conceptions of shame that see it as an emotion of self-protection, although she does so without offering any discussion of the positions that argue thus. In other words, shame can contribute to moral progress. This topic is discussed further by John Kekes.

John Kekes: Shame and moral progress

John Kekes' article "Shame and moral progress"[594] takes as its point of departure the ambiguous evaluation of shame in the scholarly literature: at the one extreme, shame is always justified, but at the other, shame is

590 Thomason, "Shame, Violence, and Morality," 20.
591 Ibid., 21.
592 Ibid., 21.
593 Ibid., 21–22. One could, of course, ask if these aims are not better reached by means of other and more transparent strategies that allow for deliberation and weighing of shortcomings.
594 John Kekes, "Shame and Moral Progress," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (1988), 282f.

seen as inflicting a wound in the self. He places great emphasis on shame's contribution to moral agency, and it is therefore of vital interest for us to discuss his contribution critically. His argument that "whatever value there is in shame can be achieved in less self-destructive ways" than those manifested in shame experiences is what interests us the most.[595]

Kekes discusses how we should assess shame in relation to possible moral progress. From a moral point of view, shame is caused by the realization that we have fallen short of some standard we regard as important. Hence, he argues for a moral understanding of shame, which is what Thomason wants to move beyond. However, against the backdrop of the previous section, this understanding of shame in the moral realm can be integrated within the broader understanding of shame as the tension between self-conception and identity for which Thomason argues. In both cases, we may become aware that there is a dissonance between our standards and what we are.

According to Kekes, "those who are incapable of this emotion cannot be seriously committed to any standard, so they are apt to lack moral restraint."[596] This strong and generic claim requires empirical underpinning, which he does not offer. It can also be questioned from a moral point of view since it sounds somewhat arrogant or stigmatizing. One can, for example, easily think of someone with a strong sense of justice and moral insight into why something is right, who nevertheless feels guilt and not shame when he is found to lack in some act the standards to which he is committed. Although one can say with Kekes that, "Shame is a sign that we have made a serious commitment," shame is not the only sign of such commitment. It is also not necessarily the only condition under which it may appear (think of gendered shame, impairment shame, class shame, race shame, etc.). Furthermore, when he sees shame as an impetus for honoring our commitments, he argues that this is so based on a motivation that belongs to other levels of morality than the one we find in post-conventional morality: shame motivates honoring the commitment, "since violating the commitment painfully lowers our

595 Ibid., 282.
596 Ibid.

opinion of ourselves."[597] This fact in itself can cause one to have some doubts about shame's positive contributions, in ways similar to those we have addressed in previous sections.

Thus, shame implies a self-denigrating aspect. It "does not merely alert us to our shortcomings, it makes us feel deficient on account of them."[598] Feeling shame is likely to be self-destructive because it can "undermine our confidence, verve, and courage to navigate life's treacherous waters." This makes shame problematic from the point of view of moral progress, since it diminishes the resources needed for the only agency capable of it, namely our own.[599]

Fundamental to shame is its self-directed orientation: the subject who has it and the object towards which it is directed are the same. We have previously described this as the double position that shame instigates. Human beings "are not merely the subjects and objects of it [that is, shame], we are also aware of ourselves as objects when we feel ashamed."[600] The experience of shame involves a sense of failure. However, to "recognize a failure in ourselves requires the comparison between some aspect of our present selves and the standard which a better self would have more closely approximated than we have done."[601] Again, we see shame as occurring as a result of the clash between different (normative) contexts.

This point becomes even more obvious in what Kekes writes next: For shame to have cognitive value, one has to make a comparison with a certain amount of detachment. This detachment allows for another perspective than the one we initially and immediately had. Then we can consider our characteristic or action as others would see it.[602] Thus, Kekes argues, "What is essential to shame is to detach ourselves from what we are, have, or do to the extent that we can view it as falling short of some standard,"

597 Ibid.
598 Ibid.
599 Ibid.
600 Ibid.
601 Ibid.
602 Ibid.

be it private or public.[603] Or, in other words, the potential contribution of shame lies in its capacity to help us objectify ourselves and our agency.

However, contrary to other self-insights that can be established by progress in reflection, shame's way of disrupting our previously established intentions takes place in other ways. For example, it does so by shocking and interrupting us "either because we have not engaged in self-conscious examination or because the result of the examination has been to subsume the relevant characteristic or action under a neutral or complimentary description."[604] The realization "that, in fact, we have been cowardly, or cruel, or dishonest" causes the shock as "we suddenly see some aspect of ourselves in a new and unfavorable light."[605] The cognitive contribution of shame is therefore related to the fact that:

> We see what has been there, but we see it for the first time or we see it differently from the way we used to. Shame involves interpretation, which is often reinterpretation, and what produces it is some episode, some criticism, some comparison which we encounter and whose significance forces itself on us, such as Adam and Eve discovering that they were naked.[606]

We cannot consider shame's moral aspect unless we have first developed an understanding of the cognitive aspect thus described. However, Kekes makes a central claim in his assessment of shame as a moral feeling: he argues that there is no difference between moral shame and other types of shame. The distinction between moral shame and "natural shame" or other types of shame "rests on the assumption that morality and the domain of choice coincide."[607] Kekes' argument against this distinction is therefore interesting, as it related to an understanding of shame that relates it to conditions of agency, among which choice is a crucial one. His argument goes as follows: "Since the objects of natural shame are not chosen, natural shame is placed outside of morality. However, the domain of morality is wider than the sphere of choice. Morality is concerned with

603 Ibid., 284.
604 Ibid., 285.
605 Ibid.
606 Ibid.
607 Ibid.

living good lives and there are many constituents of good lives about which we often have no choice."[608] Shame is, therefore, not only the result of choices we have made, but also due to failures and defects for which we have not made any choice, but which nevertheless mean that we are not up to our own standards of excellence.[609]

> It is essential to living a good life that we should, at the very least, not feel bad about ourselves. Our self-respect depends on the sense that we are living up to our standards. Shame may occur when we realize that we have fallen short of these standards. Thus shame is an experience of failure, but it may or may not be culpable failure.[610]

At this point it is necessary to stop and ask if this is a sufficient argument for leaving the distinction between moral and natural shame behind and if it rests on an adequate understanding of shame. Take as an example a person who feels ashamed for a natural trait for which they did not make a choice, like skin color or red hair. There is absolutely no failure involved in these features. Nevertheless, people may feel ashamed of them, just as they may feel ashamed of belonging to a group or a family that is considered by the majority of members of society as outcasts, without having done anything morally reprehensible. This example suggests that shame is caused by the interruption of the desire to belong – also when belonging is not defined by moral standards or standing. Kekes does not discuss this point.

The only way Kekes' refutation of the distinction between natural and moral shame can make sense is if it is restricted to the standards we have accepted as valid for ourselves. It would make sense of his claim that "whether we feel ashamed depends on our standards and not on whether the failure to live up to them was due to innate or acquired, voluntary or involuntary, or cultivated causes."[611] Furthermore, "Shame painfully brings home to us the brute fact that we have committed ourselves to be a certain way and we did not live up to the commitment. Since the reason

608 Ibid.
609 Ibid.
610 Ibid., 285f.
611 Ibid., 286.

behind the commitment was that being that way was a good way of being, having failed, we feel bad about the way we are."[612] He concludes this line of reasoning with the claim that "shame is a moral feeling, *because the fact in its case is that we find some aspect of our lives bad*."[613] But this final statement, italicized by us, can only make sense when the aspect of our lives that we find bad is determined as being thus by a standard that we accept. When I feel bad because someone thinks my red hair is ugly, this is not a moral feeling, even though I may feel ashamed by it. Kekes seems to be on the wrong track here when he sees shame exclusively as the result of how we evaluate our commitments.

However, despite these critical remarks, Kekes identifies an essential element in what causes shame when he links it to our commitments. He argues that from a moral point of view, shame is "proportionate to the centrality of the unfulfilled commitment to our conception of a good life." It is this connection to our agency as based on a conception of a good life and the commitment it engenders that makes the occurrence of shame significant for considering it in relation to moral progress.[614] He sums up the considerations of shame and moral progress in three interrelated claims.

The first claim is concerned with how individuals can move from experiencing one type of shame to other types. He underscores that it is first and foremost a development in terms of how individuals change their attitudes towards norms and standards: going from a superficial attitude towards a deeper one in regard to moral standards. The movement of individuals from liability to propriety-shame, to honor-shame, and to worth-shame is one kind of moral progress. In propriety-shame, we care about appearances. It appears when standards set by appearances count against us. In honor-shame we care about appearing as we are, and this shame is dependent on our failure to conform to standards of appearance definitive to our honor that we have developed. Finally, worth-shame is the result of how we care about being in a certain way. It is independent of appearances and emerges out of the failure to live up to our own

612 Ibid.
613 Ibid.
614 Ibid.

standards. Thus, "The progress is from caring about how we seem, to caring about how we are."[615]

The second remark concerning shame and moral progress is linked to development in a similar way to that identified by Kohlberg and Habermas, and builds on the previous comment: it is progress towards more self-direction. "People whose chief moral concern is with appearances are at the mercy of public opinion and depend on it for their choices and judgments; people moved primarily by honor subordinate their choices and judgments to public opinion, but they have made it their own opinion; while people whose moral standards include both public and private ones can criticize and correct their choices and judgments in both social and personal morality."[616] The advantage of this is that the development of increased self-direction thereby provides "greater scope for moral criticism, and consequently, a better chance of moral improvement."[617]

The third comment is especially relevant for us since it concerns the conditions for agency and the potential to develop some resilience concerning shame: Kekes argues that "the more we concentrate our moral resources and attention on what is in our control, the less scope we leave to chance." Furthermore, he argues that the described development is towards one in which there is increasing emphasis on the moral resources in the moral subject herself, and in her private world, since "our control over the private sphere is always greater than our control over the public

615 Ibid., 290.

616 Ibid.

617 Ibid., 290f. There are more favorable approaches to shame in the formation of the moral self than Kekes. Johannes van der Ven argues against Kekes' rejection of the teaching of shame and says that it is only acceptable for so-called inauthentic shame, "in which the person fears for his/her reputation in the eyes of others. This kind of shame, in my interpretation, is based on other-directed self-esteem. Moral progress, however, cannot and must not lead us away from what I call authentic shame, which is shame engendered by a failure to meet my own longing for honesty and integrity, which are based on inner-directed self-esteem. The education of shame means to advance the child's transition from the stage of inauthentic to authentic shame. The transition from inauthentic to authentic shame cannot be made by the child without educational assistance. It requires educational conversation or even educational counseling, which must include a certain mix of nondirective and directive approaches. Nondirective interventions are, for example, mirroring, supporting, cognitive understanding, and emotional understanding of the child's utterances. Directive interventions are questioning, interpreting, exposing, or advising." J. A. van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 334. Van der Ven does not seem to consider the full ramifications of Kekes' argument.

one." Therefore, "a moral attitude which concentrates on the private is more likely to lead to a good life than others."[618] Thus, the progress here can also be estimated with regard to the improvement of the chances to live a good life.[619] Progress is correlated with "greater depth, self-direction, and control" and thus, to fundamental conditions for coherent agency. These regard the individual (depth) and moral traditions (self-direction). In the latter case, we can see a moral tradition improving when it fosters the moral progress of its members.[620]

Kekes also argues that this progress should imply moving away from all forms of shame toward other responses to moral failure. This recommendation has implications for individuals as well as moral traditions.[621] He expresses his reason for this recommendation in the following claim: shame "weakens moral agents, and it leaves a residue which adds a burden to the deficiency with which the agents already struggle."[622] Furthermore,

> Shame is a bad feeling. It is not just painful, but the pain it makes us feel is on account of our own deficiencies. It diminishes our self-respect, and it does so in important ways, because the deficiencies which occasion it are obstacles in the way of living what we regard as good lives. Thus shame is a kind of moral double jeopardy. Not only are we saddled with deficiencies, but we have shame to pillory us for them.[623]

Against those who argue that shame is painful but necessary, Kekes replies that there are more constructive reactions to violations of moral commitments: "Anger at ourselves, resolution to improve, the desire to make amends, a quest for understanding why we did what we regarded as wrong are some others."[624] All of these reactions contribute to maintaining our self-respect, a point that is important to counter the claim that one cannot have self-respect if one cannot feel shame.

---

618 Kekes, "Shame and Moral Progress," 291.
619 Ibid.
620 Ibid.
621 Ibid.
622 Ibid.
623 Ibid.
624 Cf. ibid., 292.

Furthermore, Kekes argues that shame cannot serve to protect against the corruption of the moral self. It cannot protect us from doing wrong in the future because if the wrong is in the future, there is nothing to be ashamed about yet. Hence, it is not shame, but the fear of shame that supplies the function that guides future action here. What Kekes ignores here, however, is how I may be ashamed of some of my inclinations, and therefore keep myself in check concerning future actions. In such cases, shame may prevent me from specific actions in the future and serve a moral function.

On the positive side, the wish to maintain self-respect may be a better candidate for supplying this function. But also pride, honor, vanity, kindness, etc. can do that. Negative modes of motivation can be fear of punishment, fear of loss of love, of respect, or of status. These may serve just as well as fear of shame, according to Kekes. With regard to past actions, shame is likewise not able to supply any protecting function, because the wrong has already been done. Shame is not the only response that can contribute to the removal of our sense of self-corruption in such cases. Recognition of failures "may produce many morally acceptable reactions of which shame, at best, is only one."[625]

Accordingly, Kekes comes fairly close to arguing that the case for shame as a contributor to the development of a moral self is not a strong one. Instead, it seems to decrease some of the competencies needed for moral progress on both the individual and the collective level:

> If moral life is to go well, there must be a robust self capable of engaging in it. It must be able to make more or less detached choices and judgments, it must be able to withstand adversity, it must have strength, confidence, and integrity. Shame undermines all this, weakens the self, and that is why moral progress consists not merely in developing from propriety-shame, through honor-shame, to worth-shame, and thereby growing in independence and self-direction, but also in developing from worth-shame to less destructive forms of moral response to the recognition of our moral failures.[626]

625 Cf. ibid., 292.
626 Ibid., 293.

Kekes claims that "This is not seen by many writers on shame", and we agree. Much of the material we have reviewed for this book overlooks these problems of shame's effect on the development of a mature moral self. Shame taps energy from the self and its projects, undermines self-confidence, and makes us less capable of developing the moral creativity we may need to instigate progress and thereby become more morally mature. Or to put it negatively, in the words of Kekes: "shame undermines self-direction, reduces the chances of moral reform, and weakens our selves. Correspondingly, a moral tradition which makes available moral possibilities other than shame is better than one which does not."[627]

Can we then find alternative means for moral progress if shame apparently is a feeling over which we have no control? Kekes argues that although we cannot have direct control over shame, we can control it indirectly. What he means is that "once we have it, we can decide to cultivate or to minimize it, to strengthen or to weaken it, to attribute greater or lesser importance to it. What makes this possible is that in addition to the emotive aspect of shame, which is beyond our direct control, shame also has a cognitive and a moral aspect, and these we can control."[628] In short, "The cognitive aspect of shame involves a self-conscious detached comparison between the deficiency responsible for our failure and the standard of which we have fallen short. The moral aspect of shame is the identification of the standard as an essential component of our conception of a good life and the acceptance of the standard for the evaluation of our own character and conduct."[629]

Accordingly, Kekes suggests that we cultivate our capacity for directing our attention in a way that enables us to minimize the influence of shame, and instead direct our attention toward our conception of a good life. This conception "is bound to have sufficient force to counteract shame, for the intensity of our shame depends on how much we mind having fallen short of the conception."[630] This proposal is not only

627 Ibid.
628 Ibid.
629 Ibid.
630 Ibid. "Thus, the stronger our shame is, the more attractive we must find the goal of which we are ashamed to have fallen short. And if the goal is not very attractive, then we could not mind all

interesting in itself, but it is also one which we can relate to Thomason's idea about violence as the immediate response to shame: the more one is able to detach oneself, and consider alternative reactions to shame, the more constructive those alternatives have the potential to become.

Cheshire Calhoun: Moral shame as the result of relational practices

The primacy of human practices

Instead of addressing shame in a moral context as something that only has to do with not conforming to moral standards, one can also see shame as deeply rooted in human practices. These practices have also, of course, moral components, as they rely on the expectations that participants in these practices have to each other. Cheshire Calhoun has provided an interesting analysis in which she provides an apology for moral shame that offers an alternative to shame as analyzed by B. Williams, J. Kekes, J.P. Tangney, and others.[631] To a large extent, her analysis provides us with a description of shame's function in a morally charged context – and it is less directed towards making a strong normative case for shame's unavoidable role in moral matters.

Calhoun points to how philosophers see shame as problematic because it is often more concerned with how one appears in the eyes of others than with what was done. Thus, it profoundly compromises the agent's autonomous judgment about what morality requires. The relevant recommendation to deal with this challenge would be for agents to develop the capacity to be more insensitive "to the shaming gaze of others and attentive only to the demands of their own practical reason."[632]

Calhoun nevertheless argues in favor of the importance of being able to feel morally ashamed. Shame over moral failings is "essential to a mature ethical agent's psychology. More controversially, I think that vulnerability

---

that much the failure to achieve it. So we can't always derive from shame the clue to a better, less destructive response."

631 See Cheshire Calhoun, "An Apology for Moral Shame," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2004).

632 Ibid.

to feeling ashamed before those with whom one shares a moral practice, even when one disagrees with their moral criticisms, is often a mark of moral maturity."[633] To sustain this position, she must argue against positions like Kekes' above, and also against that of B. Williams, who argued that the only relevant shame we have to feel is when we look bad in the eyes of those whom we respect and agree with concerning values. She claims that both scholars "make shame suitable for an autonomous agent only by reducing the other before whom we feel shame to a mirror of ourselves. Both drop from view the fundamentally social nature of shame."[634] Thus, she identifies two crucial features: the perspective of the other is essential to understand shame, and, correspondingly, shame is a social phenomenon. The relational element in shame especially comes to the fore in what she calls "the primary fears attached to shame." These "are fears of being ridiculed, made the subject of gossip, subjected to demeaning treatment, and of being ostracized or abandoned."[635] Such fear can also help explain the desire to conceal one's failings from others' view. And this is what attempts to reconcile shame with autonomy, as Kekes tries to do, cannot explain. Addressing such attempts, Calhoun writes that,

> it severs the connection between shame and concern for one's standing in a social world. It does so because it mistakenly takes the object of shame to be what the agent alone believes is a moral failing. The real objects of shame, however, are failures to meet moral standards that are also held by other people. Shaming moral failures are paradigmatically ones that might, if exposed, reduce one's social standing in some actual group and might degrade the quality of one's social interactions.[636]

Thus, Calhoun identifies as central to the experience of shame the concerns about how one appears in others' eyes, as well as the fear of having socially exposed discrediting facts and the anxiety about others' contempt and about having one's social relations impaired.[637] In other words,

633 Ibid., 129.
634 Ibid.
635 Ibid., 131.
636 Ibid.
637 Ibid., 132.

shame engenders the experience that the other's perspective towards me is not coherent with that which determines my agency, and this lack of coherence makes me aware of the clash of perspectives that may imply discrediting, negative exposure and contempt.

The position that accepts that one should feel shame in the eyes of respected others (Bernhard Williams) also acknowledges that there is a social dimension in shame.[638] It nevertheless does not solve the main problem, since Williams, like Kekes, "traces the power to shame to the shamer's mirroring to a large extent the agent's own evaluative perspective."[639] However, this position does not make it understandable "why moral criticisms with which one disagrees would have any power to shame at all." Accordingly, it is "hard to see why particular moral criticisms shame an agent who does not endorse them."[640] The attempt to reconcile shame with autonomy in this way cannot capture shame's distinctively social character, Calhoun holds.[641]

A final problem with these suggestions is that they must render some specific experiences of shame as irrational. Otherwise, we cannot explain the fact that people feel moral shame when their behavior is exposed publicly is problematic, even when they do not see it as problematic themselves.[642] The views Calhoun criticizes cannot explain why someone suffers from shame in cases when he is otherwise considered "a mature, well-formed ethical agent" who would presumably "only feel shamed by moral criticisms that mirror his own, or that at least invoke ethical standards he respects. More worrisome, we must discount as irrational or immature much of the shame suffered by socially disesteemed populations – racial minorities, women, the poor, lesbians and gay men."[643] Pervasive shame often coexists with a denial that there is

638 Cf. how this differs from Deonna et al.'s understanding of shame, above.
639 Calhoun, "An Apology for Moral Shame," 135.
640 Ibid.
641 Ibid.
642 Many of the men who have been exposed in the #Metoo campaign probably did not see any problems in their own behavior prior to being exposed in the media. But as a consequence of being outed, shame was the result.
643 Calhoun, "An Apology for Moral Shame," 135.

anything to be ashamed of. Such cases remain unexplained in the views that Calhoun criticizes.

In sum, we have instances in which we feel shame without good reason, and instances in which we feel shame when we differ from the values of those who make us feel ashamed. The question is how we can make a morally relevant case for shame that can explain these experiences and give us a better grasp of what is at stake. Calhoun suggests that we approach this problem from a wider perspective and see shame as an expression of the fact that we have the capacity to take fellow participants in the social world seriously.[644] Moreover, she argues that taking other participants seriously is not the same as giving in to others' views, which would be the main argument for arguing against moral shame to protect moral autonomy. Her suggestion fits well with how we see shame as the result of the interaction between different evaluative contexts of agency, and helps us to specify our position further.

Shame as an element in social practices

Calhoun uses the metaphor "weight" when she analyzes shame in the broader social context. She says that it is a question about allowing the judgments of others to have some weight. However, she rejects the assumption that "weight" is an epistemic notion: that would mean that they can be weighed in our reasoning process if we have accepted their truth. Moral agents are nevertheless not just knowers, but participants in various social practices of morality. This fact enables Calhoun to suggest that "the 'weight' central to shame is not an epistemic notion." Instead, the "weight" of others' opinions is related to their relationship with us as fellow participants in social practices. If we approach shame from this angle, it becomes understandable why another's view of us can have practical weight, even when we deny the truth of their view.[645] She sums it up thus:

> Moral criticism that shames has what I will call "practical weight." Moral criticism has practical weight when we see it as issuing from those who are to be

644 Ibid., 138.
645 Ibid., 139.

> taken seriously because they are co-participants with us in some shared social practice of morality.[646]

In other words, Calhoun's understanding of shame situates shame within a broader context of social practices. These emerge because people want to do something together. Such practices are not only those which we identify as professionals, although these are also included. Many of them are also related to what takes place in institutional contexts, although Calhoun does not address the institutional dimension in her description of these:

> A social practice of morality comes about because there is something else that we want to do together – work in a profession, engage in religious worship, play sports, live together in a neighborhood, have a marriage. These various activities are sites of particular moral problems that produce the need to generate shared moral norms. The practice of education, for example, produces a need for norms governing student–teacher relations, including sexual relations. The practice of medicine generates a need for norms governing the response to terminal illness. Those moral norms then get hammered out among people who already share a social world.[647]

Everyday life consists of a plurality of moral practices, each with its shared understandings about how "we" do things. The contexts of these practices, accordingly, allow co-participants "to engage in a shared enterprise of evaluating each other's behavior and character, determining who has lived up to and who has fallen short of shared moral ideals, and calling each other to moral account for transgressions."[648] At this point, the notion of expectations becomes essential, since shaming within the context of such practices means "impressing upon the person that she has disappointed not just one individual's expectations but what some "we" expected of her."[649] Moreover, "The power to shame is a function of our

646 Ibid., 139.
647 Ibid., 140.
648 Ibid.
649 Ibid.

sharing a moral practice" and is articulated as a representative viewpoint within the practice. It is why shaming criticisms have practical weight.[650]

The expectations towards participants in social and moral practices are, therefore, the backdrop against which one can see shame. However, there is one more element in Calhoun's analysis here that is important, namely that the moral criticisms that lead to shame must have a representative character. Thus, it is understandable why one can feel shame in light of some appraisals and not in light of others: if the critique is not representative of the standards of the moral practice, then it does not lead to shame in the same way as when it is. Thus "vulnerability to shame has more to do with our sharing a moral practice with others than it does with accepting another's criticism."[651]

> To share a social practice means that one finds its moral understandings intelligible, even if not endorsable. One understands how people could come to think this way about moral matters. One understands what counts for others as acting responsibly, being truthful, being honorable, giving good moral advice, and so on.[652]

Such emphasis on how evaluation is representative means that Calhoun can shift the focus from how the shamed person endorses the shamer's perspective to the representativeness of the shamer's viewpoint. "What inspires shame is recognition of who we are for those with whom we share a moral practice."[653] It is the representative viewpoint that constitutes the power to shame. This interpretation can also explain why one may feel shame even when one has nothing to be ashamed of. The unfortunate consequence is that "the power to shame is likely to be concentrated in the hands of those whose interpretations are socially authoritative."[654] This point may not only be valid for moral shame in the strict sense, but may also apply to, for example, shaming practices in other social settings, such as sports clubs or religious groups.

---

650 Cf. ibid., 141.
651 Cf. ibid., 141–142.
652 Ibid., 143.
653 Ibid.
654 Ibid.

The emphasis on representativeness constitutes a problem because the power to shame may be unequally distributed, and therefore be to the disadvantage of minority groups. How can Calhoun then develop an argument in favor of moral shame? Given that "the burden of shame seems unfairly distributed in inegalitarian societies, serving only to further burden those who are already unfairly burdened […], what apology could be made for moral shame"?[655]

The moral relevance of shame in the context of practice

Calhoun defends moral shame by pointing to its social function. She describes morality in a way that nevertheless could (almost) be done by a cognitive ethicist like Habermas: "Morality is, in part, a critical, normative enterprise conducted by individuals who use their own best judgment to arrive at moral standards and practical conclusions, who seek the rationally best justifications for their judgments, and who critically assess the standards and practical conclusions of both particular others and of social practices of morality."[656] We have italicized 'individuals' in the quotation here not only to suggest where Habermas and others may disagree but also to point out how Calhoun sees shame as the element that opens up to the social dimension of morality: she admits that shame does not serve the normative and critical dimension of the moral enterprise. Nevertheless, "moral criticisms that we judge to be rationally indefensible may provoke shame." But this does not mean that shame seconds "the critical normative judgments that we reach as autonomous, reflective individuals."[657] It serves another function than the reflective, normative one. Shame's contribution to morality is related to its role as a fundamentally social enterprise. It serves as a means to regulate interactions between social actors. Calhoun elaborates this point:

> Morality regulates interactions between real social actors. Even if particular social practices of morality seem flawed from the individual's critical, normative perspective, the social practice of morality is the only moral game in town. It is

655 Ibid., 144.
656 Ibid.
657 Ibid.

> only in real social worlds that I have a moral identity. Who I am, morally, is who I am interpretable and identifiable by others as being. That I fancy myself (even with what I take to be the best reasons) to be one kind of person rather than another does not give me an identity as that kind of person. Instead, the set of one's possible moral identities is delimited by the available moral interpretations within an ongoing moral practice.[658]

The way Calhoun situates the moral self in the context of practices is crucial to her explanation of why we can be vulnerable to being shamed before others with whom we disagree. Participation in moral practices provides us with inescapable moral identities "because one's own self-conception does not decisively determine who one is."[659] Thereby, she tacitly utilizes a distinction between identity and self-conception, similar to Thomason. Moreover, "the identities that we have within particular moral practices are inescapable because we typically do not choose moral practices." Instead, we choose social practices, and as a consequence, "we then find ourselves located for better or worse in particular ongoing moral practices." Accordingly, she sees shame not as "the emotion of a critical, normatively reflective, autonomous agent. Shame is the emotion of the practitioner of morality."[660]

Is Calhoun's argument for shame really an argument for moral shame? We think it is. To situate shame in the context of practices makes sense. She is nevertheless clear that shame can be abused for disciplining and for oppression, and that it does not convey any guidance that is automatically possible to justify as moral content in itself. Shame can make us aware that there are certain standards that we do not live up to, which we should have. But it is not clear that shame is an obvious, or even a good, tool for moral formation of regulation of interpersonal relationships and the content of social practices. Thus, the main contribution of Calhoun lies in how she points out limitations in the positions that try to combine a certain sense of shame with moral autonomy, and how shame may make us more open to the judgments of others who are more experienced moral

658 Ibid., 145.
659 Ibid.
660 Ibid.

practitioners than we are ourselves. So far, we can thus conclude that she offers a clear, albeit not very strong, defense against the promotion of shamelessness. We now turn, therefore, to another philosopher who has analyzed reasons for being shameless or not.

Michelle Mason: Are there good reasons for not being shameless?

Shame as a behavioral regulator

Calhoun's description of how shame works in social practices is not a strong argument in favor of shame. It is more explanatory than apologetic. However, as has become increasingly more apparent throughout this chapter, we are developing a relatively critical assessment of shame's moral contribution. This assessment can be seen as a normatively aimed argument for shamelessness. Against that backdrop, perhaps the strongest objection to the trajectory of the argument in this chapter so far is the claim that shamelessness is a moral fault. Intuitively, though, to make the generic claim that this is the case seems to be a somewhat hasty conclusion. Therefore, we have to consider in more detail under what conditions we should regard shamelessness favorably, and when we may assess it critically.

If we look back at the positions we have identified as important concerning the problematic features of moral shame, we can, with Michelle Mason, identify them either as positions in which shame has no moral content or as positions in which shame is considered as expressing a primitive mode of morality.[661] We can also, alternatively and in light of the analysis of Calhoun, see shame as a morally relevant emotion that may, on occasions, contribute to the regulation of behavior for participants in practices that have moral content, but without shame itself having a necessary moral function or providing moral guidance.

661 See Michelle Mason, "On Shamelessness," *Philosophical Papers* 39, no. 3 (2010). For examples, think of our initial description of the shameless Arabian daughters.

Shamelessness as a moral problem

However, it is not only shame that presents problems for morality. Mason's contribution addresses the problematic absence of shame. She argues that it is necessary to consider shamelessness as a moral challenge. Her precise scope is based on the claim that shamelessness, understood as an evasion of moral self-censure, can be morally pernicious. Against this backdrop, we need to assess its problematic moral stance.[662]

Mason argues against what she calls "the common assumption," that is, that "to call a person or action shameless often purports to mark a moral fault in that person or action."[663] There are notable exceptions to this common assumption about shamelessness. Aristotle, for example, points to the fact that we consider the morally virtuous person shameless – simply because she does not have anything of which to be ashamed. This seems to be a case of actual shamelessness, and not a case in which the agent does not have any capacity for shame, or evades moral self-assessment.[664] Other positive cases of shamelessness are when someone distances themselves from others' wrongful attempts to shame them. In such cases, the absence of shame manifests autonomy or independence from the pressure to internalize another's evaluation, even when someone else would be likely to feel ashamed for the same act.[665] In these cases, lack of shame does not necessarily signalize a moral lack, and they run contrary to the common assumption. All these are cases that Mason calls "autonomous shame." This autonomy impedes shame and results in shamelessness. It can be considered as positive because one is then not subject (or, as she says, "a slave") to another's evaluation and the shaming effect of it. However, she also sees this autonomy as a condition in which one is precluded from another type of "slavishness": the one that is "constituted by the evasion of any evaluative ideal of the person or by the total subjugation of one's evaluative scheme to another person or unworthy end."[666] It is this evasion, or

662 Ibid., 403.
663 Ibid.
664 Ibid., 404.
665 Ibid., 405.
666 Ibid., 408.

the tendency to evade evaluations that may cause justified shame, that she sees as a potential moral problem concerning shamelessness.

This problem can be highlighted if we address it in relation to the aforementioned two positions that are skeptical towards shame as a moral device: the one that sees shame as having no essential moral content, and the one that sees it as an instance of primitive moral thinking.[667] Considered from the point of view of both positions, heteronomous shame should be abolished and shamelessness appears as a recommendable alternative to such shame. This approach entails that shamelessness is "a moral fault only in cases where shame registers something within the agent's control and morally assessable as wrong."[668] Furthermore, "The philosophical account of shamelessness this version of the Moral Primitive critique of shame suggests is one where shamelessness consists in a willing disregard of moral values others would impose on one in favor of those one has autonomously endorsed oneself. It is easy to see how, on such a view of shame, shamelessness might emerge as a virtue of authenticity or integrity rather than a vice."[669]

The critique of shame as morally primitive contains one important element: it points to how the experience of shame may involve the perspective of another and the other's evaluative expectations.[670] Sometimes it makes sense to think of this perspective of the other as one from which one should rightly distance oneself. Yet, sometimes, it does not – and then, shamelessness is not a moral virtue and a sign of the mature, autonomous agent, but his or her vice. One way to get around this is to make a distinction between shamelessness and the lack of shame, in which

667 Ibid., 410. In the first case, "shame is not a properly moral attitude at all, understanding 'moral' here to function descriptively in delineating an area of practice characterized essentially by a concern with obligation and individual responsibility." Mason describes shame's problematic standing here, interestingly, also from the point of view of *practice* (cf. Calhoun above): "On this first view, any practice lacking essential conceptual ties to notions of obligations and individual responsibility is not properly regarded as a practice of morality." Accordingly, she names it the "No Essential Moral Content critique of shame." In the latter case shame is "not a properly modern moral attitude but instead a psychological remnant that finds its conceptual home in forms of moral thinking, albeit primitive forms of moral thinking." She calls this the "Moral Primitive critique of shame."

668 Cf. ibid., 414.

669 Ibid., 415.

670 Cf. ibid., 416.

the latter means that you do not feel shame, and have no reason to, even though you have the capacity for it. What, then, makes shamelessness, as Mason defines it, more specifically a moral fault in her opinion?

As already suggested, Mason sees shamelessness as a form of moral evasion. To be shameless is to regard oneself as "beyond the reach of any ideals of character appraisal." The notion of character is essential here.[671] A shameless person sees moral appraisal from a narrow perspective: it concerns one's actions but leaves one's character untouched. "Because those moral standards to which the shameless do subscribe are narrow in this sense, behavior for which one might hold oneself accountable in a way that bears on the esteem one regards as one's due is, for the shameless, at most an occasion for guilt or regret."[672] In other words, shamelessness excludes one's character from appraisal. To have shame, though, would include an appraisal of character. Accordingly, Mason suggests the following definition of the experience of shame as morally relevant:

> To experience shame is to experience oneself (shame's object) as diminished in merited esteem (the property that renders the emotion fitting its object) on the ground that one has violated some legitimate ideal of character.[673]

Thus, Mason comes close to the earlier mentioned understanding of moral shame as defined by Rawls and others: it is the reaction to not being able to live up to one's ideals and standards. It needs to be pointed out, because the moral context then, in her view, seems to presuppose that shame is related to cognitively accessible content, and accordingly, that it needs guidance to have an adequate focus.

Shame with a proper focus

Mason lists the following conditions as necessary if shame is to have a proper focus, that is, to be morally relevant, and therefore convey some bearing on the character assessment of the person in question:

---

671 Cf. how we discussed this notion and its relevance to shame briefly in relation to virtue ethics above.

672 Mason, "On Shamelessness," 417.

673 Ibid., 417f.

> 1. It is directed at oneself as a response to one's violation of an ideal of the person, 2. The violation is one for which one appropriately holds oneself responsible, for example, a) one was not on the initiating occasion acting with nonculpable ignorance, compelled, or forced, b) one is not psychologically abnormal or morally undeveloped, and 3. There is a legitimate expectation or demand that one approximates the personal ideal.[674]

There are several important features in Mason's approach that are worth highlighting: First of all, this allows for considering shame as an emotion of self-assessment.[675] Against this backdrop, lack of shame is a testimony to one's indifference to ideals of character and to the evaluation of one's esteem-worthiness that such ideals support. Concomitantly, "a healthy sense of (properly focused) shame signals a susceptibility to more comprehensive moral appraisal of oneself in light of certain character ideals."[676]

Thus, Mason's contribution builds on the distinction between doing and being that we have identified as relevant in a previous chapter.[677] Actions may provoke shame: "just in case I fear or worry that what I have done […] reflects back on myself in a way that threatens to challenge the esteem that I or others reasonably can maintain for myself in the light of some ideal of character I myself endorse."[678] Shame establishes a focus on who I have revealed myself to be. Thus, she sees shame as a response to what one fails to be. Unlike guilt for specific actions, "shame is an emotion that constitutes a wide esteem evaluation of self."[679] Furthermore,

> by an esteem evaluation of self, I have in mind the features of shame as involving a deeper assessment of the merit of one's character in light of an ideal of such and as possessing an essentially reformative motivational force, one that

674 Ibid., 418.
675 Ibid., 418.
676 Ibid., 419. This definition seems to be especially relevant to the analysis of why people can commit crimes or atrocities that subject others to suffering and pain: they are able to ignore such ideals or substitute them for others. Cf. the case of the guards in the concentration camps during WWII: they had ideals about character formation that excluded compassion for the prisoners.
677 See above, p. 217.
678 Mason, "On Shamelessness," 420.
679 Ibid., 420.

> looks inward toward reforming those aspects of one's character that fall short of the ideal in question.[680]

In contrast, shamelessness emerges from this view in the following way: "Shamelessness consists in a failure to value any character ideals recognizable as worthy of a well-lived human life."[681] Accordingly, such shamelessness can be seen in the manifestation of a lack of interest in being a faithful lover or a true friend – such ideals are simply considered as not relevant. Against this backdrop, in the cases here discussed, to be shameless is to lack any constraint on what one will allow oneself to be.[682] This approach does not exclude that one still has to ask if the shame one may hold is morally justified or if shamelessness shows a lack of willingness to subject one's character to moral standards. That can only be determined by considering moral reasons for certain behavior that involves character assessment.[683]

A final consequence of Mason's position is that those who lack shame because they do not consider their character ideals in light of their actions, may, in fact, lead shameful lives. The ideals that help us measure the conditions for a good life appear to be outside their horizon. When one is shameless because of this lack of ideals, one is also blind to significant moral goods, Mason argues, and goes on: "In denying shame its place in the moral domain, a shame-less moral theory likewise obscures an important form of moral failure.[684]

Thus, Mason seems to argue that shame has a precise contribution in the context of morality: it does not convey moral insight, but it helps us to be aware of flaws in our character in a way that a guilt approach cannot do. Shame makes us attentive. Her position does not, nevertheless, exclude that one should try to overcome the conditions and instances in which shame would be relevant, adequate, or necessary. Thus, her argument for the adequacy of shame and against certain types of shamelessness is an argument for increased moral sensitivity and for developing

680 Ibid., 420.
681 Ibid., 423.
682 Cf. ibid., 422.
683 Cf. ibid., 421.
684 Ibid., 425.

moral characters that would not need to feel shame because they acted in accordance with moral ideals into which they had a rational insight.

Concluding remarks

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us return to its Introduction and ask if we have answered the questions there. There were several questions listed, and we will present the answers to them briefly, not by repeating the detailed analyses in the different sections, but by indicating in what way and to what extent the material we have presented provides us with resources for answering and arguing their outcome.

The first question we asked was, is it good from a moral point of view that people should feel ashamed for their moral failures? To this question, we will answer yes – and no. Yes, to the extent that shame is a natural reaction to specific self-perceptions of failure. Because we are fallible as humans, it is good that we react to our failures, as such reactions can make us more prone to altering our behavior. As Manion rightly points out, shame may occasionally also function positively as a motivating factor to establish deep-going and necessary change. Furthermore, as Mason argues, sometimes shamelessness is morally pernicious. Then, shame may contribute to initializing transformations in our characters or provide more comprehensive perspectives on character formation. However, it is better that people feel guilt rather than shame, as guilt makes it possible to differentiate between agents and act in a way that allows the agent to see and experience him or herself as more than the one who performed the despicable act that caused the reaction. Moral competencies are better enabled by guilt than by shame. Therefore, the question should also be answered with a "no," since moral failure should not be identified with personal failure, and moral insight is better enabled by reactions of guilt to specific actions than by shame that also makes the agent shameful.

Furthermore, and concomitant to the rather limited credit we are willing to give shame as a moral resource, we will argue that the answer to the question, "Can the feeling of shame provide reliable information about what to do or not to do?" must be negative. Shame does not in itself provide us with genuine moral insight – at best, it can provide us with

knowledge about how we have not met our own or others' expectations and ideals. Thus, shame is a negative resource. Moreover, it can lead us astray since the expectations and ideals that clash with our shame-causing agency need justification by other instances than our emotional reactions if they are to count as justified from a moral point of view.

Therefore, the question, "Are there good alternatives to shame in this regard?" must be answered in the affirmative, by pointing to how continuous moral discourse, where all voices are heard and all perspectives are taken into consideration, is systematically pursued in order to establish a shared understanding of what shall count as justified, rational and good behavior. Moral discourse can, as Habermas argues, contribute to the formation of will and desire in ways that display moral insight and an agency that does not engender shame. This moral discourse cannot be conclusive but needs to remain open and probing, subjecting every action to repeated scrutiny and critique. It needs to be so not only to ensure that it is justified in the eyes of everyone involved, but to allow this discourse itself to contribute to the moral formation of subjects who learn to take a moral stand, in an autonomous and self-reliant but not individualist or subjective manner. Furthermore, the discussion on shamelessness above suggests that shamelessness is not a good alternative to shame – but rather, in problematic cases, an indication of the morally problematic stance of a person lacking the capacity for assessing one's character.

Accordingly, we hold that shame does not make moral agency more rational or transparent in itself. It complicates moral judgment, and when it overlaps with moral judgment established by discourse and rational insight, this is a contingent result of shame, and not a result that shame alone can carry the burden of justifying.

Can shame be said to be a moral instance at all, if it is so totally related to the subject and his or her self-perception? We acknowledge that shame can perform a rudimentary moral function but, when and if it does, it is a contingent fact and not a function that is based on shame's inherent moral character.

Does shame make people turn away from moral challenges and instead make them too self-preoccupied? We have suggested that this may be the case sometimes, and thus, the answer to this question contributes further

to the problematization of its moral character, as indicated in response to the previous question.

Given that shame is almost always backward-looking, and emerges as a result of things past, can shame guide future moral agency? And if it can, can it do it well? Again, its contribution to these functions is uncertain and not helpful unless complemented by other means. Shame can show us that something is wrong, but not necessarily what is wrong or why, and not what is right either.

Finally, how do we assess – from a moral point of view – that people do or do not feel ashamed for their moral shortcomings and failures? That people feel shame is the result of conditions in problematic human situations and relations, which one should try to overcome, abolish, and leave behind. As said before, shame is a signal that something, until further analysis undetermined, is wrong. A genuinely human society that aims at the respect of others fosters moral guilt instead, based on rational discourse instead of feelings of opaque (moral) shame. To protect people from moral shame and to make them better moral subjects can be done by teaching them to employ the distinction between doing and being. We cannot abolish shame, including moral shame. Still, we can try to build societies, social practices, and relations in which shame has minimal space and does not necessarily occur – for the sake of both morality and humanity.