

# Being riveted to oneself: shame and personal identity

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*[Shame] is the representation we form of ourselves as diminished beings with which we are pained to identify. Yet shame's whole intensity... consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend... It is that one seeks to hide from the others, but also from oneself... What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself.*

Emmanuel Lévinas, *On Escape*<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In *Shame and Necessity*, his brilliant book on the ethics of the Ancient Greeks, Bernard Williams performed a detailed and intriguing analysis of an emotion that, up to then, had been given little merit in connection to morality. Arguing with his former professor, E. R. Dodds, and picking up on a distinction between “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures” drawn by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, Williams contended that some features of shame allow us to make sense of our ethical outlook in deeper and more meaningful ways than guilt, which is assumed to be the “superior” moral emotion. Interestingly, in William’s view, this is so because of the special link between ethical judgement and personal identity that underlies shame. This paper will focus on personal identity issues connected to shame. Taking a narrative theory of identity as the starting point, I will explore how in shame the ongoing narrative breaks down and a reassessment of the self takes place. Shame is taken here to be a place where the narrator becomes aware of inconsistencies and of the impossibility to establish one “final, authentic” version of her self. Crucially, this re-evaluation is triggered by a consciousness of the gaze of others upon us, which highlights the importance of social relations both to our sense of self and, of course, to morality. The phenomenology of shame, its intentional objects and the way we interpret them all point toward the notion that

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<sup>1</sup> Lévinas (1935/2003), pp. 63-64.

the self can best be conceived in terms of a work in progress where others have an impact and a say.

### *Some preliminary remarks*

This paper starts with a quotation from Emmanuel Lévinas, a thinker who, in terms of philosophical style, approach and tradition, has very little in common with the philosopher who prompted my own reflections on shame, and whose work is the main focus of this paper, Bernard Williams. The title also comes from the Lévinas quote. Why put my thoughts on Williams under such a heading? The main reason is that, in my opinion, Lévinas' metaphor of "being riveted to oneself" beautifully captures the fundamental tension within the self that I wish to explore here: roughly, the discrepancy between what we are (what can't help being) and what we would like to be. This, in my view, can be a destructive tension, but also a productive one, both in terms of how we conceive identity and how we conceive morality. Williams' account of shame is a detailed exploration of that tension and his views match in many respects Lévinas', so to speak, more poetically expressed intuitions; hence the title. Having said that, in order to explore these questions more deeply, first I would like to take a look at Williams' account of shame, and how it compares to other accounts in recent (and not so recent) literature. I will then draw some conclusions for a narrative model of personal identity and hint at some moral implications.

But before I go into this, I'd like to very briefly say something about the current philosophical debate on emotions. After a few decades of lively discussion, analytic philosophers of emotion have divided, roughly, into three main currents: cognitivists (among them Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum), who think about emotions as judgements, with cognitive content; neo-Jamesian feeling theorists (like Jesse Prinz or Jenefer Robinson), who stress the importance of feeling and non-cognitive elements, which for them are the essential ones; and perceptual theorists (such as Ronald de Sousa and Amélie Rorty), who conceptualise emotions as ways of "seeing as", seeing the world under a certain aspect, or according to a certain pattern of salience that highlights some features rather than others. All positions offer useful insights on emotion and are vulnerable to powerful objections. Probably, for a wider consensus to arise, further scientific input from psychology and neurophysiology will be needed, as the current studies available are still sketchy and inconclusive. Some authors have even defended that "emotion" is not a natural kind, and therefore not a productive category for scientific study (see, for an outstanding example, Griffiths 1997).

I have to admit that my own position on this question of what emotions are is not very well defined, partially because my aim has never been to come up with an account of emotion in general. I am much more interested in the cultural and cognitive aspects of one particular emotion, namely shame, which in my opinion brings to light fundamental features of the

way we think about ourselves. My analysis is driven by an interest in personal identity, subjectivity and agency, in the assumptions that underlie the ways in which we try to make sense of our (in this case, emotional) life. A phenomenological study is therefore crucial and many of my views are sympathetic with those advocated by cognitivists, because many of the aspects they stress are essential to my analysis. However, I wouldn't want to be interpreted as saying, for instance, that emotions are merely special kinds of judgements; rather, their cultural, cognitive and phenomenological dimensions are what, on a first approach, I find more interesting about them.

This approach presents a challenge, which due to my main references is particularly visible and particularly pressing: complex emotions of self-assessment<sup>2</sup> like shame carry a heavy cultural bias. Bernard Williams analysed shame drawing on Ancient Greek texts, but he himself recognises that the world and our ideas of it and of us as persons and agents have changed immensely since the times of Homer or Sophocles. It is obvious that the concept of shame has varied historically and varies widely from one culture to another, particularly, but not only, regarding its substantive content: namely, the situations and things we deem shameful. *Aidos* in Ancient Greece, an honour culture, was not the same as modern shame. Spanish *vergüenza* has not the exact same definition as English shame<sup>3</sup>, or as the related emotions described by Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 1946/2005) in her study of Japan in the 1940s. Spanish *vergüenza* is not identical now to what it was at the time of Calderón de la Barca. However, translations work somehow, and the fact that, to a great extent, we are able to understand what is being meant seems to indicate there is some common ground.<sup>4</sup> I believe—but this belief is more like a hope based on the abovementioned fact of partial translatability<sup>5</sup>—that this common ground is sufficient to enable a study of shame and the underlying structures of the self that can reflect, at least, some essential facts about most Western societies.

### Bernard Williams' account of (Ancient Greek) shame

Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* is not an ordinary book on the philosophy of emotion: the analysis of shame that it presents isn't motivated by a particular interest in that emotion as such, or in moral emotions in general, for that matter. So when taking it as a starting point for a study of shame, one has to bear in mind a few facts about its aims and its production. *Shame and Necessity* is the result of a series of talks given by Williams at the Department of Classics in Berkeley in the spring of 1989. Being a moral philosopher, a critic

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<sup>2</sup> This term is taken from Gabriele Taylor's famous study: Taylor, G. (1985). *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>3</sup> A crucial difference, whose detailed implications I'm not going to draw here, is that, in Spanish, there is only one word for both *shame* and *embarrassment*.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, see Bernard Williams' (1993) considerations about the relations between *shame* and *aidos*, p. 88. It should be noted here that all my sources are Western authors.

<sup>5</sup> Arguably, translatability is always partial.

of Kantian morality, and in love with Greek classics such as Homer and Sophocles, whose moral world he felt had been grossly misinterpreted by critics, he decided to focus his talks precisely on that world and those critics. The book starts, then, as an attempt to free the Greeks from prejudiced interpretations of them, and consequently finds itself drawn into a detailed discussion of shame as the main moral emotion in their culture.<sup>6</sup>

In this connection, it is also important to bear in mind that Williams is not (only, nor mainly) aiming at a historically accurate reconstruction of the ethical outlook of the Greeks, although the force of many of his arguments comes to a great extent from the fact that he is making a determined effort<sup>7</sup> at approaching the maximum of accuracy in that sense. However, the reason Williams felt an urge to free the Greeks from deforming interpretations was in the first place that he genuinely responded to those texts in and from his own present, not as an exercise of “imaginative time-travel” (Williams, 1993, p. 18). The reason is that he was convinced that we, modern Westerners, are able to genuinely respond to many texts and cultural products of Ancient Greece, in and from our present, and they are still relevant to us because they have a real influence on us now.<sup>8</sup> He quotes and makes his own a remark taken from the final section of the Preface to the second essay of Nietzsche’s *Unmodern Observations*<sup>9</sup>:

*I cannot imagine what would be the meaning of classical philology in our own age, if it is not to be untimely—that is, to act against the age, and by so doing, to have an effect on the age, and, let us hope, to the benefit of a future age.* (Williams, 1993, p. 4)

So Williams’ aim in analysing the ethics of the Ancient Greeks is to make their notions do their untimely work in favour of the present, to help us better understand ourselves, to confront us with forms of existence that are indeed different, but potentially illuminating. Our failure to interpret them correctly entails a parallel error in our self-image. That is why I think it legitimate to bring to bear Williams’ intuitions about Greek shame on our modern conception of it: modern shame is never far away from his concerns, and it plays an important contrastive role in his study. There is something to learn about shame today from Sophocles’ *Ajax*, however strange that may seem.

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that shame was the central moral emotion in Ancient Greece is not Williams’, he takes it from his former professor E. R. Dodds (1951), with whom he argues throughout the book. Dodds himself came upon it by applying to the Greeks some concepts of the anthropological outlook developed by Ruth Benedict (1946/2005), namely the distinction between “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures”, which I briefly summarise below.

<sup>7</sup> And I dare say succeeding as well; but not being a classical scholar, I can be no authorised judge for that.

<sup>8</sup> For Williams’ ideas on how and why to read the classics see Williams (1993), ch. 1, esp. pp. 18-20.

<sup>9</sup> Williams quotes the *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* from a 1990 edition by William Arrowsmith, who chose this title instead of the more usual translation *Untimely Meditations*. Williams, however, replaces the word “unmodern” with “untimely” in the quotation, for reasons that he explains at Williams (1993), p. 170, n. 6. Here I quote his modified quotation.

His attacks are aimed at those he labels “progressivists”<sup>10</sup> and their Cartesian-Kantian notions of the self and morality. The readings they make are clearly shaped by their prejudices: soul-body dualism, Neokantian views on morality (with their implications of abstract rationality, autonomy, duty, universalism and altruism), and a Hegelian notion of history as progress. The Ancient Greeks didn’t generally entertain such notions, or they did only to a small extent and in a different shape, therefore they were, morally and culturally, a childish and immature people. Williams radically disagrees with those views. For him, any account that takes Achilles, Priam or Odysseus as immature children is obviously incorrect, and he intends to show why and how by bringing to light the main advantages he finds in the ethical outlook of the Greeks. It is at this point where his analysis of shame comes to the fore.

As I remarked earlier, according to a very influential –and disputed– anthropological model, human cultures, and the ethical ideas they entail, can be split into “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures”.<sup>11</sup> Both would therefore be basic attitudes with the power to ethically articulate societies. The first versions of this theory assumed that the structures of guilt were morally superior, better, more mature: shame would be heteronomous and egoistic, while guilt would be autonomous and altruistic. Shame would be egoistic because it refers always mainly to oneself, and heteronomous because the values against which the self measures herself are external; they are always connected to the opinions of others, to appearances. Guilt, however, would be altruistic, because it orients us towards others, towards the reparation of a damage inflicted, and autonomous, because it doesn’t depend on public opinion: transgressions of our moral duty are not affected, or erased or lightened by the circumstance that nobody other than ourselves knows what we did.

But let us turn now to Williams’ account of shame, which is taken to be at the heart of the culture and ethics of the Greeks. The original experience associated with shame is that of being seen in the wrong circumstances by the wrong people, and more precisely, leaving the naked body exposed to the gaze of others. The immediate reaction it triggers is that of covering yourself, hiding or escaping (Williams, 1993, p. 78). This is illustrated by Williams’ examples, such as Odysseus’ shame at the thought of being seen naked by Nausikaa (Williams 1993, p. 78, n. 10).<sup>12</sup> But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in Genesis, shame is also discovered in this way, when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, realise they are naked,

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<sup>10</sup> Prominent among them is Bruno Snell and his *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (1948). While Snell’s most provocative and radical remarks have not always been endorsed, milder versions of his ideas that the Ancient Greeks were not full agents and had no complete concept of the will have influenced many authors and can even be found nowadays (see, for instance, Peter Sloterdijk’s (2006) *Zorn und Zeit*). Dodds’ (1951) views also come under criticism, but of a much more sympathetic kind. William’s basis of agreement with Dodds is much wider.

<sup>11</sup> This distinction was first introduced by Benedict (1946/2005). Upon this distinction is based one of the classical studies of Ancient Greek morality and culture that largely inspired Williams to write his: Dodds, E. R. (1951).

<sup>12</sup> Odysseus naked: *Od.* 6.221-22.

cover themselves with leaves and run to hide.<sup>13</sup> Starting from this paradigm, shame later extends to other situations where we feel ridiculous, diminished in the eyes of another or in an inferior position: tripping clumsily in the street, speaking in public and so on.

While the link with nakedness as a paradigm of vulnerability and the presence of an observer are, according to Williams, key features of the basic experience of shame, if it didn't go further, shame would be no more than a quasi-automatic defensive reaction, it wouldn't be so important for the self and for morality. It would be so anecdotic, intimate and private that it wouldn't be capable of shaping any common ground; there would be no room for even thinking of a "shame culture" (Williams 1993, pp. 219-223). But shame also appears in the absence of observers, although retaining the link to the gaze of others. Such was the case, for instance, for Anna Karenina, alone in the train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, not daring to admit, even to herself, that she had fallen in love with Vronsky; such was Phaedra's case, even before the nurse had told Phaedra's stepson Hippolytus of her passion for him.<sup>14</sup> But, moreover, shame is often felt retrospectively, when we remember situations that, at the time and in the presence of witnesses, may not have seemed particularly discomforting. And even if they did, retrospective shame is never remembered shame<sup>15</sup>, as it might be the case of other emotions; retrospective shame is real shame, felt with full intensity at the moment of remembering it: it's not the reminiscence of an emotion, but the emotion itself.

If the gaze of another is essential —and for Williams, it is— and, nevertheless, we can experience shame with full intensity in the absence of witnesses, and even after the events have taken place, we feel shame, then, in front of an internalised observer. That idea may seem strange with just nakedness in mind. But, for Williams, nakedness is only the powerful and vivid paradigm of a more general situation (Williams 1993, p. 220): that of loss of power in the face of another, of finding oneself in a position of inferiority, exposed, vulnerable. But who is this other who looks at us from within ourselves? Any observer would do?

Williams explores different possibilities, and the first obvious fact seems to be that the internalised observer before whom we feel ashamed is not just anyone: *Shame need not be just a matter of being seen, but of being seen by an observer with a certain view* (Williams 1993, p. 82). Praise from certain sources can cause shame. The critical opinions of people we despise or we consider incompetent to issue certain judgements can leave us indifferent, reassure us or perhaps at most cause us some irritation, as Thersites did to the Achaeans<sup>16</sup>,

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 3,7-8. See Velleman's (2006) interesting analysis of this passage.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Karenina: Tolstoy (1877/2000), Part I, ch. 24. Phaedra: Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 373-431.

<sup>15</sup> Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio (2000, p. 30), for example, acknowledges this: *el escozor de la vergüenza podemos volver a sentirlo una y otra vez, incluso incrementado, estando a solas, con sólo recordar imaginariamente la situación social originaria de la vergüenza padecida* ("the sting of shame can be felt time and again, even intensified, when one is alone, merely by evoking in our imagination the original social situation of suffered shame").

<sup>16</sup> See the passage where Thersites encourages Agamemnon to call a defeat in war and allow his men to go back home to Greece, and the contemptuous answer given by Odysseus: *Il.* 2.210 ff.

but not shame. The observer's identity therefore matters, as not everyone has the power to trigger the self-assessment that takes place in shame. Some examples suggest that the relevant observer would be a representative of the community one belongs to. For Penelope, for instance, it's quite clear that the reference group are her countrywomen, when she says:

*lest any  
Achaian woman in this neighbourhood hold it against me  
that a man of many conquests lies with no sheet to wind him.*<sup>17</sup>

But, after quoting this passage, Williams immediately mentions as a counterexample Nausikaa who, worrying about what people will think seeing her with the foreigner, remarks: *And myself I would thin badly of a girl who acted so*<sup>18</sup>. Nausikaa's case is only an example, maybe closer to our modern sensibilities, of something that happens constantly among the warriors in the Homeric battlefield. These cases show what Williams calls the reciprocal structure of shame (Williams 1993, pp. 80-85): we are ashamed before the gaze of those who would also feel shame in the same situation. We don't feel shame before anyone simply because we have broken a norm, we feel shame when we find ourselves in a position of inferiority –owing to whatever reasons, both moral or non-moral– before someone whose judgement we respect and whose opinions we identify with in a certain way; we feel shame of things we would deem ridiculous, humiliating or grotesque in others. But, as Williams remarks, this is not purely a reciprocal structure of indignation, whereby I become angry with you because I know you will be angry with me, these attitudes have content: some actions are admired, rejected or despised, and we internalise the attitudes, not the prospect of hostile reactions (Williams 1993, pp. 83-84). The other is therefore characterised in ethical terms. However, if this is so, the other seems to be reduced to a mere representative of my ethical code, and consequently not to be "other" in any relevant sense, she's just an echo of my own moral voice.

Williams doesn't think so, and he finds his key example in Sophocles' *Ajax* (Williams 1993, p.85), a tragedy where this Homeric hero commits suicide because his sense of *aidos* doesn't leave him any other choice. Offended because the chiefs of the army, who had promised dead Achilles' armour to the best Achaean warrior, decide to give it to Odysseus instead of him, Ajax plans to kill them to avenge his hurt heroic honour. However, when he's about to fulfil his revenge, the goddess Athena blinds him, and he kills some animals from the army's flock instead (as well as two shepherds, to whom Sophocles does not attach much importance, as a matter of fact). When Ajax comes back to his senses and realises what he has done, he can't stand the shame of it and decides to commit suicide. In lines 479 and 480 he explicitly says who is –or who resembles– the other before whom he feels so ashamed: his father Telamon, himself an excellent and much acclaimed warrior in his youth.

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<sup>17</sup> *Od.* 19.146 = 24.136.

<sup>18</sup> *Od.* 6.285-86.

Ajax's raging fury has placed him in a world where the people he respects (embodied in his father's figure) can no longer respect him; therefore, he can't respect himself, he can't respect the self he has become through his actions, and he chooses the only option that, in his view, is consistent with the only identity he is willing to make his own: to commit suicide, to literally disappear from the world. The other who looks at us is therefore not just an echo of our ethical code. As Williams puts it:

*The internalised other is indeed abstracted and generalised and idealised, but he is potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me.*  
(Williams 1993, p. 84)

Williams therefore believes that shame is an essentially relational emotion, which forces us to assess ourselves in reference to a social environment that is "other" in relation to ourselves, but it is not alien. Shame inseparably links the identity we embrace with the world where we deploy it and its expectations. *Shame*, Williams writes, *looks to what I am*, and exploring it can help us better understand *how a certain action or thought stands to ourselves, to what we are and to what realistically we can want ourselves to be* (Williams 1993, p. 93). Something similar to this has been suggested by sociologist Helen M. Lynd (1967), who believes that the questioning of the self that takes place in shame entails a parallel questioning of the world where that self lives (see Lynd 1967, ch. 1): one is shaken out of the place one occupied.

Having analysed shame thus, Williams moves on to a detailed comparison between shame and guilt. I am not going to present it here fully, because, for the purposes of this paper, I'm leaving aside the more explicitly ethical aspects of shame. However, from this comparison Williams draws important conclusions, which are essential to his approach and deepen the theme of personal identity. Williams contends that, if one emotion is apt to help us make sense of our ethical ideas and our practical deliberation, that emotion is shame, not guilt. Guilt can be abstracted as the censorship of an inner judge –a sort of Freudian super-ego– for having broken a norm or failed to fulfil a duty. Properly, it should attach only to the voluntary. However, there are many cases where we recognise that victims have a right to be compensated for involuntary damage, and we think it's the person who involuntarily caused the damage who must respond. There are cases when we feel terribly guilty for involuntary actions. There are cases, such as Oedipus', where our very identity and sense of self depend on our coming to terms with what we did involuntarily. Guilt as schematically described above can't help us make sense of these cases, but shame, by connecting self and world as we have seen, can. Shame's structure allows us to understand that our position in the world and the interactions between that world and the self are subject to many circumstances that lie outside of our control, but that we have to factor in as part of our identity narrations.



### Shame in the literature

Let us now turn to what other authors have to say about shame. In the past few decades, this emotion has attracted some attention as a topic of study for psychology, philosophy, cultural studies and so on. Most accounts agree that shame is a distressing and disturbing emotion, triggered by a negative self-assessment that the subject performs upon him or herself due to the exposure of some defect, fault or inadequacy to some ideal or norm.<sup>19</sup> It can be due both to actions and to characteristics of the agent, which for any reason make her feel inferior. It can also be due not to things that we do, but to things that happen to us.<sup>20</sup> While these core elements are shared by most descriptions of shame, two basic sorts of accounts can be distinguished: those that stress the social dimension and those that stress the individual or personal dimension of shame. It seems obvious that, phenomenologically, in shame the subject performs a self-evaluation and finds himself diminished. But it is not so obvious whether the standards according to which this assessment is carried out are social norms or some kind of ideal of personal excellence. Most accounts of shame include the following features (some times with the aim of refuting them): shame as directed towards the self rather than others; shame as directed to the whole self rather than to a certain action or feature; shame as a social emotion, often with an explicit reference to the gaze of others, of an audience; shame as linked with an inability to live up to certain personal ideals, values or standards.

The first two claims, about the object of shame, are hardly controversial. Shame is generally taken to have two objects, a direct one (the self ashamed) and an indirect one (the occasion of shame). So when, in Virginia Woolf's story *The New Dress*, Mabel Waring felt ashamed of her clothes at Mrs. Dalloway's party, she was ashamed of herself because she was improperly dressed; and when Ajax felt ashamed of having killed animals instead of men, he was ashamed of himself because he had ridiculously mistaken the cattle for the chiefs of the army.<sup>21</sup> Some times we can feel shame for another person, but then we do it because the other is not "other" in the relevant sense, because we identify or associate with her in some significant way (family, close friends, members of identity-relevant groups, etc.). Stanley Cavell, for instance, notes:

*Shame is felt not only towards one's own actions and one's own being, but towards the actions and the being of those with whom one is identified —fathers, daughters, wives..., the beings whose self-revelations reveal oneself. Families, any objects of one's love and*

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<sup>19</sup> This definition, which is relatively tentative and does not aspire to be exhaustive, as well as the choice of the main four features of shame are based on the definitions and the literature reviews provided in two papers: Maibom (2010) and Teroni and Deonna (2008a).

<sup>20</sup> Which is one of the reasons why the defenders of guilt as the superior moral emotion have argued that shame is less moral than guilt.

<sup>21</sup> See, respectively, Virginia Woolf's story *The New Dress* and Sophocles' *Ajax*, which I commented in my account of Williams.

*commitment, ought to be the places where shame is overcome (hence happy families are all alike); but they are also the places of its deepest manufacture.* (Cavell 1969, pp. 267-353)

Some cases, like teenagers feeling ashamed of their parents, are very clear in this sense, but in other cases the level of identification is not so high. The expression “I’m ashamed of you” seems to carry much more a sense of moral censure than a real sense of shame on the part of the person uttering it. However, to the extent to which we may be able to feel real shame for another person, I believe there is always interplay of identification and disidentification: we don’t empathically feel *her* shame, we feel ashamed to be associated with a shameless person (to be in her company, to belong to the same group, etc.).

The idea that shame implies an assessment of the whole self isn’t controversial either. Generally, even if shame comes as a result of a certain action, we do not feel ashamed of the action itself, but of being the sort of person who can perform such an action<sup>22</sup> (“how can I possibly be so clumsy, or so absent-minded, or so selfish, or so vain, or something else, to behave like this?”) (see Maibom 2010, p. 568). Shame, as already stressed when discussing Williams, uncovers a dissonance between the self and the world, a flaw, an inadequacy. And this dissonance, even if it’s caused by a particular action or feature, affects the self as a whole, uncovers it entirely. My initial quote of Lévinas’ emphasises precisely this aspect, this sense of complete, inescapable exposure, as the essential feature of shame.

If we think again of nakedness as the original experience of shame<sup>23</sup>, that clearly illustrates a sense in which a certain action or feature can leave the whole self exposed. Helen Lynd (1967), who in her book highlights the private dimension of shame, thinks that it is an essential element of a self-conscious subjectivity, of the ability —the need— to self-interpret that persons have, that even *an outwardly trivial incident can become invested with profound human emotion and be transformed into an event of tremendous import* (Lynd 1967, p. 41). This tremendous import arises precisely from the fact that such an event reveals the self as a whole —a revelation that in Lynd’s account, as in Lévinas’, is always first and foremost an exposure of oneself to oneself (Lynd 1967, p. 30)— and throws into question the self and the world where he lives.

Markedly social accounts of shame also agree with and emphasise this aspect. Sánchez Ferlosio (2000), for example, interprets shame as the mechanism through which we learn and appropriate social rules of belonging. Heidi Maibom (2010) gives an evolutionary account of shame, taking a look at behaviour patterns in non-human animals, and defends that some features of the emotion we call shame can best be understood as a product of appeasement mechanisms in hierarchical social structures. Mechanisms of belonging and hierarchies are precisely the sort of structures where the status of an individual, i.e., her

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<sup>22</sup> When shame is unequivocally moral, this is taken to be the crucial phenomenological difference between shame and guilt: guilt attaches to the action, shame attaches to the self.

<sup>23</sup> This association is stressed not only by Williams, but also by other authors such as Scheler (1913/1987), Lévinas (1935/2003) or Velleman (2006).

identity, can be affected by a single action or feature, so these accounts also provide a good model for understanding how a single feature or action can affect the self as a whole.

Let us turn now to the point where disagreement arises. Is shame, then, a private or a social emotion? My initial quote of Lévinas stresses the intimate character of shame, the primacy of exposure of oneself to oneself. On the other hand, Williams' whole account turns around the idea of the gaze of another and finds the main "virtue" of shame precisely in its social character.

The idea that shame is social has been recently challenged by Deonna, Rodogno and Teroni<sup>24</sup>, for instance. Their approach draws a certain measure of inspiration from (Scheler, 1913/1987) and Lynd (1967), although it deviates from both in important ways, it's much more elaborate than any of those accounts, and all in all constitutes a highly original proposal. But let us look at Scheler and Lynd first.

In his phenomenological analysis of shame, Scheler (1913/1987) defines it as an emotion of self-protection, associated with the perception of a threat to a cherished value, which the subject wants to safeguard. For Scheler, shame appears in a transitional space between being recognised as a subject and being observed as an object, and vice versa. The self-assessing dimension doesn't appear clearly in his account; for him the essential feature of shame is the consciousness of a spiritual value that must be preserved against external attacks and against the individual's animal drives, which may undermine it.

Helen Lynd thinks that the exposure to the eyes of others is less important than the exposure of oneself to oneself, the sudden discovery that one is not the kind of person one wanted to be:

*I think that this public exposure of even a very private part of one's physical or mental character could not in itself have brought about shame unless one had already felt within oneself, not only dislike, but shame for these traits... it is the exposure of oneself to oneself that is crucial. (Lynd 1967, pp. 29-30).*

Lynd, like Lévinas in the quotation that heads this paper, stresses here that the essential element is this self-discovery, this self-consciousness. Lynd (1967, pp. 43-49) adds surprise to it: we move in a world of everyday expectations, with a more or less spontaneous or unreflective security about what we are. Suddenly, something happens, important or unimportant, big or small, with or without moral connotations, and this something undresses me, unsettles my answers to the questions about who I am and what is my place in the world, the basic assumptions upon which my identity rests, the ongoing narration

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<sup>24</sup> Their book *In Defence of Shame* (2011) has recently come out, but unfortunately I haven't been able to study it well enough yet. My remarks on their views are drawn from a series of articles on shame by Deonna and Teroni, which are listed among the references and quoted where appropriate.

through which I constitute myself<sup>25</sup>. And the key is my own sharpened consciousness of this discrepancy. That factor is crucial, for example, to the perpetual shame of Josef K at Kafka's *The Trial*.

Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni (2008a, 2008b and 2009) also think, like Lynd, that shame is mainly connected to this presence of oneself to oneself. They link it, like Scheler, to the subject's inner values and the ideal representation he makes of himself. In their view, the often referred-to phenomenology of the gaze of another, of the internalised audience that observes us, does not appear clearly in many cases, and in their view it represents rather a metaphor through which we think retrospectively about shame. Their analysis of shame is based on a concept of the self and of identity that bears some important relations to Harry Frankfurt's (1988 and 1999). According to him, the core self is constituted by "what we care about", by the profound values and ideals that actually shape our will and guide our actions, and which we moreover make our own, appropriate as part of ourselves. Frankfurt thinks we shape our identities by selecting among the materials of our psychical life, and appropriating some of them rather than others through action; so, in his view, self, identity and agency are indissolubly tied.

Deonna and Teroni also think about identity in terms of values we care about, but they don't tie it so closely to action: it is possible to hold, often as an essential part of our identity, values that are not active at all, such as those connected to physical appearance, family, ethnic group or nationality. They stress the fact that, for these values to be part of one's identity, it's not enough to deem them positive or important in general, one has to want to exemplify and reflect them in one's life. One can value good art, for example, and think it important for society that there are good artists in the world, without wanting to be an artist oneself. The identity-relevant value here would be having discernment for good art (recognising a good piece when seeing it), whereas artistic creativity would be valued positively, without being identity-relevant. The distinction is crucial, because for Deonna and Teroni (2008b, p. 40) shame arises from the perception that one isn't able to exemplify, even minimally<sup>26</sup>, a value one identifies with and cares to reflect in one's life. For Deonna and Teroni, the frequent interpretation of shame as social comes from the crucial importance that we, as social beings, attach in our lives to others and to our relations with them.

Bernard Williams, for whom the social side of shame is essential, would of course disagree with this interpretation, as we have seen, and so would many other authors.<sup>27</sup> Sánchez Ferlosio (2001) emphasises the fact that shame is tied to our social nature, to our need to

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<sup>25</sup> I'll pay more attention to issues connected to narration in the final section of this paper. On this topic, see Schechtman (1996).

<sup>26</sup> They recognise degrees of exemplification (with a minimal threshold of non-exemplification, below which shame appears) and hierarchies of value importance. This allows them to account for instances where a faulty exemplification of a value doesn't cause shame, and for differences in intensity of shame episodes.

<sup>27</sup> Among them, for instance: Taylor (1985), Velleman (2006) and Sánchez Ferlosio (2000).

belong to a group (initially the family) and be accepted as a member of it. Shame for him appears with the realisation that we don't fit in and that our status as members of the group is threatened.

Heidi Maibom (2010) makes a related argument, although more nuanced and convincing in its approach. She tries to come up with a model that can account for paradigmatic episodes of shame, but also with such paradoxical and pressing cases as the shame experienced by victims of brutal abuses, such as rape or genocide. She's also puzzled about the immense power to cause shame that high-ranking individuals or institutions have, as opposed to lower-ranking ones. In order to elucidate these questions, she looks back at the past of our species from an evolutionary point of view. She argues that shame descends from a primary emotion associated to submission and appeasement behaviour, which is an essential conflict-solving mechanism for social animals. This basic mechanism, which can avoid the use of violence in conflict situations and can also prevent such situations from even arising, gives rise to much more complicated dynamics in complex societies, such as our human ones, where cooperation is essential and the opinions of peers gain importance. Shame takes its basic traits from this model, which helps to explain its connection to hierarchy and the mechanism through which victims of abuse feel ashamed.

Shame for Maibom is essentially social and essentially heteronomous, which has a positive side, as we saw with Williams, but also a negative, deeply violent one. What she proposes, but does not develop yet in her paper, is closely in line with Williams' aim: a change in our way of thinking about morality. I quote her:

*Shame is a response to shortcomings when it comes to public expectations. Shame is essentially about our lives with others, about our identity in a group, and our standing within it... as social creatures we are embedded in a life with others where we acknowledge the desirability of acting in certain ways and the consequences of not doing so... [This] does not amount to accepting all the individual norms and standards that are part of the public realm... we can feel shame... merely because others disapprove of us. This is, as Calhoun aptly points out, part of the communal character of the moral life or, as I prefer to think of it, our life together, since not all shame-inducing failing involves specifically moral considerations. (Maibom 2010, p. 576).*

My own position is more sympathetic to these "social" theorists. The fact that shame can be felt as the most private of experiences<sup>28</sup> or that the phenomenology of the gaze of another is not always recognisable doesn't mean that shame can be made intelligible without a reference to another. How could we learn to judge ourselves from the outside, how could we know that there are other viewpoints to look at ourselves from, if there were no others to show us? Let us go back to Lévinas' definition of shame:

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<sup>28</sup> Although I dare say that this could probably be argued of the phenomenology of most emotions.

*It is the representation we form of ourselves as diminished beings with which we are pained to identify. Yet shame's whole intensity... consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend (Lévinas 1935/2003, p. 63).*

How does this perspective arise, this possibility to look at myself as a “foreign being”? Surely we learn about this variety of perspectives in our interactions with others; we only learn that we are selves when we realise that there are others, as developmental psychology shows. In the same movement, the other teaches me of her existence and shows me the limits of my own self. And it is not that I need another to feel shame, in the same way I need him to feel love. Actually, I do not need him in the same sense at all. In love, he has to be really outside, there, in front of me. My gaze goes out, toward him. In shame I have to go outside myself and take his position, put myself where he was standing and look at me. Why would I do that if I did not care about how the world looks from there? Why would I care about this if I did not care about my appearance before the world and the way it can affect my relations with it? In shame, I see that I am being seen.<sup>29</sup> Shame essentially involves caring about my position in the social world. It involves reciprocity, as Williams defended, and reciprocity can't exist if one of the poles is absent. Love can be conceived in a unilateral way, where activity lies exclusively on the side of the lover (one can love an inanimate object, an idea, etc.). For shame to make the slightest bit of sense there has to be an active, understanding, judging other looking at me. As Williams argued, the fact that it is internalised and often, but not always, even closely identified with some of my values doesn't mean it isn't “other”. In my view, this otherness is essential to understand shame and to understand ourselves.

### Shame and the narrative self

A short paper on shame like this one is no place for a detailed argument on the virtues and weaknesses of a narrative understanding of the self. The idea that the self is a narrative or has a narrative structure has been widely advocated and criticised by continental and analytic philosophers alike<sup>30</sup>, and I can't now go into detail about such controversies. Suffice it to say here that I take our personal narratives to be the fundamental means through which we engage with our past and our future, and thereby achieve a sense of identity through time, much in the way put forward by Peter Goldie (2009).

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<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Antonio Gómez Ramos for this formulation, which so neatly captures the reciprocity of shame.

<sup>30</sup> The two names that one must mention here as original proponents of this idea are, of course, in their respective traditions, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/2007) and Paul Ricoeur (1990). Their ideas have had an enormous influence, and other philosophers have given them much thought, refined and criticised them from many perspectives. My account of shame here will try to keep a sense of the importance of narratives in order to make sense of our lives, while arguing that shame can be a warning sign against some dangerous tendencies spotted by critics of the narrative view.

The first versions of the idea of a narrative self came under much (justified) criticism for several reasons: they seem to give the self excessive authorial power and exclusive ownership of the truth about the “authentic” self; they seek to invest a life of a coherence and a meaning that stories can have, but events in the real world rarely possess; they therefore encourage self-deception, invention and fictionalising, and seem to be relatively impervious to criticism, as no internal elements of a narration can enable us to distinguish between reality and fiction. Thus put, these criticisms seem too unnuanced to be completely true even of Ricoeur or MacIntyre, but they do catch the main objections and dangers of narration, they were taken on board, and most accounts of narrative identity nowadays include constraints that answer to these worries. Marya Schechtman (1996), for example, argues that having a narrative doesn’t mean that the subject is entirely transparent to herself nor that this narrative is the authentic expression of it. This rather means that the subject possesses a structure that enables her to lead the life of a person. Because personhood is intrinsically social (personhood necessarily entails living with others), *one needs a self-concept that is basically in synch with the view of one held by others* (Schechtman 1996, p. 95). Moreover, when thinking about narration of the story of our lives, one need not think that this narration has to take the form of a traditional novel, with an omniscient narrator, a linear succession of events, an exposition, a climax and a resolution. Modern novels, films and so on have taught us that many other kinds of narrations are possible.

The idea I want to put forward here is that shame can be a warning against the danger of self-deception in our personal narratives. Because of its social character, it can help us think about ourselves in terms that are more in line with the world and its expectations and reorient the way we think about our future. Shame can happen in the present or be backward-looking, of course, it can be tied to real actions or situations; but it also has a forward-looking, preventive side, which allowed Ancient Greeks to link it closely to virtue. Shame can help us understand the role of others in our lives and in our narratives; it certainly prevents us from forgetting it completely.

But shame can also be a way of engaging with our past, productively, if we learn from it, like Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*; destructively, if we can’t accept it and run away from our actions, like King Lear in Shakespeare’s tragedy, or Lord Jim in Joseph Conrad’s novel. Marya Schechtman (2001) has also argued that in order for our identity to survive, in order for us not to become so alienated from our past that we also literally become a different person, we must have what she calls “empathic access” to our past. That means being able to remember it in the first person, from the inside, and having “a fundamental sympathy for the states which are recalled in this way” (S. 2001, p. 106). Peter Goldie (2011) disagrees, because he thinks Schechtman’s conditions are too restrictive and we can’t take seriously the claim that, through an identity crisis, we literally become a different person. I agree with him in this, because I think that taking such claims seriously would leave us facing very undesirable implications for responsibility, morality and our relationships with

others. Besides, I believe there is a very important sense in which we never mean what we say when we say that we have become a different person. Shame shows us this. Deep shame contains a powerful element of disidentification, but at the same time it tells us unequivocally that “this is me”, however much we may wish it weren’t. If this weren’t me, shame wouldn’t even appear. Again, Lévinas:

*Shame’s whole intensity... consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend... What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself.* (Lévinas 1935/2003, pp. 63-64)

Shame, thus, would precisely be the wish not to be the person I know I am.

Let me illustrate my point through a beautiful example, discussed by both Gabriele Taylor (1985) and Peter Goldie (2000). It’s an example taken from James Joyce’s short story *The Dead*, the story that closes his *Dubliners*. The situation is neither particularly tied to morality nor, on the face of it, would it seem an exceptionally important event in the main character’s life. Yet it clearly shows, on the one hand, the dissonance between the character’s personal narrative and the world and, on the other, how shame can be an identity-preserving relation to one’s past without implying empathy with it.

The situation is the following: Gabriel Conroy and his wife, Gretta, have been to a Christmas party organised by Gabriel’s aunts. On their way out of the house, as they are putting their warm clothes on and saying their goodbyes, Gretta pauses, with an absent and melancholy expression, to listen to the piano still playing in the drawing room. Seeing her thus, Gabriel finds her incredibly beautiful and starts evoking their happy past together, which arises in him feelings of intense tenderness and desire for her, and launches him into a reverie while they move through the streets of Dublin with other guests returning home. When they finally arrive to their room and are left alone, Gabriel discovers that Gretta has not been thinking about him, but remembering a love story from her youth, the story of a fragile and sick boy who always used to sing the song they had heard from a distance at the party. A youth that died “for her”, Gretta says, many years ago, after waiting under her window in the cold to say goodbye, before she was sent to school to Dublin in order to separate them. Gretta doesn’t have the slightest suspicion about what has been going on in Gabriel’s thoughts, but he, who had feebly tried to stop her telling the story by making ironic remarks, feels deeply ashamed:

*Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead... While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lust, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of*



*in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back more to the light, lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead. (Joyce 1914/2000, p. 221).*

Why should he feel thus? What's so shameful about showing he cares for her adoring aunts, delivering the flattering speech everyone expected, romantically evoking the past and desiring his wife? Besides, when he is left alone with Gretta, he doesn't coarsely impose his desire on her. On the contrary, he treats her with delicacy and he is sensitive and caring enough to listen to her tale, in spite of the emotions it arises in him. He does lend her the ear she needs and represses the expression of his own feelings in consideration of hers. What does he have to regret? Granted, she didn't feel the same desire for him at that very moment. But is there anything extraordinary or shameful in that lack of synchrony of desire in any couple? Wouldn't they have experienced it many times, after several years of marriage and a few children in common? Moreover, she hasn't even rejected him, because he didn't actually ask for anything. Why, then, that deep shame that extends back to his behaviour of the whole evening?

The emotion is intelligible, of course, and we understand it through the narration of the evening's events and of Gabriel's thoughts. But we don't understand it because it harmoniously fits into the story, but precisely because we perceive the dissonance and the gap that opens between Gabriel's image of the world and of Gretta, on the one hand, and reality, on the other. Gretta's story fractures and unsettles Gabriel's narration. It is the screech that makes us realise the dangers of narration, of self-deception, and also, crucially, makes us become conscious that we are not so autonomous as the author status would seem to imply. Some times, others and the world clash against our narrations and completely destabilize them. And in this particular case, paradoxically, the effect is even stronger because, as already noted, she doesn't reject him: she didn't have a chance to do it, because he didn't even express his desires. Gabriel merely desired, and unquestioningly expected that things would turn out the way he wished. When he asks Gretta about her thoughts, he is left facing the enormous gap between his own image of the world and the reality of it, which makes him throw into question all his unreflective beliefs, all those things he took for granted about his place in the world.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Gretta never even suspects her husband's shame, her presence, and the way Gabriel represents to himself his own image in her eyes, should she know what he was thinking, are indispensable for his shame. He sees his own reflection in the mirror, of course, but chiefly the mirror where he sees himself is she. Without others, who teach me that there are different perspectives to look at the world and to look at myself, there would be no self. And yet, there's something curious in this case: judging from the way Gretta is described by Joyce, by her behaviour toward her husband and her in-laws, by the things we are told about her relationship with him, it seems quite implausible for her to judge Gabriel as he judges himself. She is no more –no less– than the counterpoint he needs to be able to look at himself in the mirror. He looks at himself and, seeing his

narration derail, his trust in himself, in his charm, his tenderness, his eloquence and his social skills suddenly turns into an impression of his vanity, absurdity and conceit.

Helen Lynd implies something like this when she says that shame means a loss of trust in oneself (in one's life narrative) and, simultaneously, in the world, because both develop at the same time and run parallel (Lynd 1961, pp. 43-49). In such cases what comes to the fore is subjectivity, the ability to analyse and criticise my own narration and my identity-labels, both those I receive from the outside and those I create for myself. There is the narration, the life that's being narrated and the narrator, the subject, who is only a co-author of that narration. This is precisely the difference between a narrated life and a fantasy: the first must conform to the world and admit others as co-authors if it is to be successful; the second is unilaterally created by each one of us according to our fancy, unbound by constrictions. Deep shame doesn't (necessarily) alienate us from our past or from our actions: it shows us that our narration needs to bring in the perspectives of others if it is to be more than mere self-fantasy, it shows us the limits of our authorial powers.

Of course shame can be completely inappropriate, fantasized and lacking in basis. I don't mean to imply that shame is *the* answer to how to bring the perspectives of others into our life narratives, or that it can't have a destructive side. Far from it. All I mean is that it carries a sense of the importance of the perspectives of others, which is crucial for our narrations. Whether in each particular case the internalised other actually matches the real other in the world is another matter. Also, shame is an important form of non-empathic identity-preserving engagement with my past, which carries significant moral implications, because it tells me that "this is me", however much I might wish it weren't. It preserves a sense of responsibility. It makes me rethink myself. Again, whether one succumbs to the impulse of escaping and hiding, as Lord Jim did, or one decides to face the fact that this is me and I would like to change, is entirely another matter. The second option seems both better suited to make sense of responsibility claims and more productive in terms of learning and thinking about the future. This is why I agree with Goldie (2011) that we don't always need empathy, but the right emotional relation to our past, which may some times be shame. This is why I agree with Williams (1993) that, by virtue of this connection to identity and subjectivity, to the ability to reassess our past and rethink our future, shame has an important role to play in our moral lives.

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