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Scheler on Shame: A Critical Review*

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a critical review of Scheler's analysis of shame's structure, dynamic, and affectivity, and his explanation of phenomena of shame. This first part of the paper examines Scheler's accounts of shame's basic condition, the law ultimately governing its origin, and its basic dynamic. The second part of the paper turns to his general descriptions of what we feel when we feel shame and his analyses of two distinct forms of shame. The conclusion attempts to draw these aspects of his account of shame together to illustrate why, according to Scheler, we feel shame. Throughout the paper, some basic criticisms of Scheler's account are advanced. At the same time the paper attempts to demonstrate the virtues of his highly differentiated descriptions of experiences of shame and his attempt to weave these descriptions together into a general theory.

KEYWORDS. Scheler; Shame; Affectivity; Values.

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*So ist die Scham gleichsam die Puppenhülle,
in der die Geschlechtsliebe bis zu jener Reife
wächst, in der sie die Scham durchbricht.*¹

1. Introduction

Scheler's 1913 essay on shame is largely overlooked today.² Its at times outright sexist and chauvinist speculations, together with an ominously racist rhetoric, provide reason enough for some contemporary scholars to be wary of the value of devoting precious research time to it.³ For Anglophone scholars, the lack of a readily available, contemporary translation of the essay also undoubtedly contributes to its neglect today.⁴ Some of Scheler's observations, moreover, are bound to appear puzzling, thanks to differences in languages and eras. The fact, for example, that *Scham*, the word for shame in German, can stand for genitalia as well as for a feeling of shame, introduces a bevy of word-associations and word-combinations, the likes of which are not to be found in contemporary English. A Brit's experience of shame today may differ markedly from what a contemporary of Oscar Wilde or D. H. Lawrence understood as a shameful experience, let alone what Scheler understood by a «feeling of shame» (*Schamgefühl*) around the same time.⁵ Along with today's

1 SCHELER 1957, 130.

2 The list of secondary literature on Max Scheler since 2000, compiled by the Max Scheler Gesellschaft, contains 288 entries, only two of which (BERNET 2003, TEDESCHINI 2012) are devoted to Scheler's essay on shame. For an earlier essay in English on Scheler's essay, see EMAD 1972; for a more recent treatment in English, see ZAHAVI 2010. Scheler's essay is often cited (BROUCEK 199, 111-4; TAYLOR 1985, 60f; LANSKY & MORRISON, 253, 256; WILLIAMS 1993, 220; NUSSBAUM 2004, 174, 186; DEONNA ET AL., 2011, 150f), but rarely studied.

3 For a single passage that puts all these tendencies on display, see SCHELER 1957, 131f.

4 Manfred Frings' translation of the essay as «Shame and Feelings of Modesty» (see SCHELER 1987, 1-85) is currently out of print.

5 Wilde, *The Young King*: «Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning and Shame sits with us at night». Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: «And once, or twice, to throw the dice is a gentlemanly game, But he does not win who plays with Sin in the

ever-fading sense of «sin» (freely associated with shame by Scheler and Wilde alike), a century of psychological, sociological, and ethnological research separates us from Scheler's observations. In certain respects at least, considerably more is known today about the phenomena associated with shame than was known when Scheler penned *Scham und Schamgefühl*.

Yet, for all its outrageous speculations and outdated claims, Scheler's essay on shame remains a classic study of the subject. As I hope to show, it is worthy of close scrutiny, in part for its highly differentiated descriptions of experiences of shame and for its attempt to weave these descriptions together into a general theory. In that theory he lays out what he takes to be shame's basic precondition, its structure and fundamental dynamic, and the law ultimately governing that dynamic. He also identifies its affective character and basic forms. The result is a formidable account of the scope of shame-phenomena that is as brash and controversial as it is untimely today. The following paper is an attempt to review Scheler's analysis of shame under four aspects. I aim to identify both its potential contributions to understanding shame and some basic difficulties besetting the analysis.⁶

The four aspects of shame concern the structure, dynamic, affectivity, and explanation of shame, according to Scheler's account. By the *structure* of shame, I mean its make-up, including the components and relations that enter into the experience. By the *dynamic* of shame, I have in mind how it takes place and the principle governing that process. By the *affectivity* of shame, I have in mind the answer to the question of what it feels like to feel shame (as well as whether it is a basic sort of feeling or made up of more basic sorts of

secret house of shame».

6 The paper is thus undertaken with the conviction that critical investigation of Scheler's analyses and inferences, particularly where they are controversial, has the potential to draw us closer to core features of the phenomena, across eras and linguistic cultures. But the paper by no means provides a full-scale critical investigation of this sort. Its aim is the more modest one of preparing the way for that sort of investigation by reviewing some basic strengths and weaknesses (including ambiguities and discrepancies) of his account.

experience or feelings). By the *explanation* of shame, I mean answers to questions of why we feel shame at all. Addressing these aspects and answering the relevant questions are not peculiar to Scheler's examination of shame, but his approach to them is distinctive (and, indeed, in one crucial respect largely counter-intuitive).

The following review begins with (1) Scheler's accounts of shame's basic condition, the law ultimately governing its origin, and its basic dynamic. This first part of the paper accordingly addresses the structural and dynamic aspects of shame, on his account. The paper then turns to (2) his general descriptions of what we feel when we feel shame and his analyses of two distinct forms of shame (and how the latter correspond to two of the four distinct species of feelings that he identifies).⁷ This second part of the paper addresses the affective aspect of shame. In conclusion, I attempt to draw these aspects of his account of shame together to illustrate why, according to Scheler, we feel shame and how his account contributes to a broader discussion of issues surrounding the phenomenology and explanation of shame.

7 There are several aspects of Scheler's account that, in the interest of economy, I can no more than signal here, including his loose speculations about shame's preconditions (SCHELER 1957, 70-4), his comparisons and contrasts of shame with related feelings such as pride, humility, and disgust (SCHELER 1957, 81-88) as well as emotions with which it is often confused, such as prudery, cynicism, obscenity (SCHELER 1957, 93-6), his account of both the functions of the feeling of sexual shame (SCHELER 1957, 106-44) and the differences between the feeling in females and in males (SCHELER 1957, 145-7). The central precondition is individualization (individual preservation and valuation) that – hand in hand with sexual differentiation and drives – supersedes functions identifiable solely with reproducing the species. Noting the difference, even anatomically, of the place of the reproductive parts of plants and animals (the more hidden placement of the latter), Scheler further links this aspect to the subordination of sexuality to the whole of a life, adding that this subordination might even be designated « an objective phenomenon of shame » (SCHELER 1957, 74). As for the functions of the feeling of sexual shame, its *primary* function is to inhibit autoeroticism, while promoting sympathetic, other-related sexual feelings; its *second* function is to postpone satisfaction, thereby allegedly enabling racially optimal, noble offspring as well as an intensification of the sex drive and its satisfaction; and its *third* function is to contribute to the sexual act itself.

1. Shame's basic condition, the ultimate law of its origin, and its basic dynamic

Shame is an individual, paradigmatically human experience. There is, Scheler declares, «no clearer, no sharper, and no more immediate» expression of the human condition, situated as it is between the divine and the brute. Shame is inherent to being human precisely because human beings are the bridge (the transition, the point of contact) between the essential and the actual.⁸ Inherent to this human position midway between God and other animals is «the *basic condition* of the essence of the feeling of shame»: a consciousness that is luminous – i.e., that represents a surplus phenomenon opposite all life's needs and is freed from merely illuminating vital reactions to the environment – yet bound to the life of an organism.⁹

Having outlined this basic condition of shame, Scheler identifies the law ultimately governing its origin, across all its forms. Shame is possible whenever the attention of someone immersed in an activity that is not purely biological (e.g., art, love, mathematics) suddenly turns back to the body that obscurely accompanies that activity. Since our attention can obviously turn from the activity to our bodies without us feeling shame in the process, this experience is not itself shame but opens up a sphere in which shame can occur. The sphere is one of conflict (*Widerstreit*) – the conflict of an act's *essential* claim and genuine meaning with the concrete and actual manner of its *existence* (again, reflecting the underlying condition in the case of shame). A specific form of this experience of conflict is the root of «that obscure and remarkable feeling of shame» and its attendant experiences of bewilderment (*Verwunderung*), confusion (*Verwirrung*), and that of opposition between what ideally ought to be and what factually is the case. An unbalanced and unharmonious relation between bodily

8 Shame is tied to the essentially human feeling of being a bridge between two orders of reality (*Sein und Wesen*); «No God and no animal can feel shame» but, precisely as this *Übergang*, human beings must (SCHELER 1957, 69).

9 SCHELER 1957, 67.

neediness and claims not confined to bodily needs is, he iterates, an inherent part of «the basic condition of the origin of this feeling».¹⁰ As Scheler puts it, because we're more than our bodies, we *can* feel shame; but because we are bodies we *must* feel shame.¹¹

These observations, lifted from the opening remarks of Scheler's essay, begin to provide answers to the questions of the *structure* and *process* of shame. The basic condition of the experience of shame is the human bridging of two distinct, equally inherent yet conflicting levels of living. Shame is based, in other words, on the structural difference between some pursuit or behavior and its underpinnings. Those underpinnings are purely biological in the case of sexual shame, as well as in instances of non-sexual shame, such as child's shame in soiling her pants (encopresis). Equivalently (not identically), the contrast is between a higher, more differentiated, and individualized activity or state and a lower, less differentiated, and more generic activity or state. The dynamic of feeling shame is a sudden shift in awareness from the former to the latter, tantamount to a shift from a sense of what ought to be (or at least what someone individually strives for) to a sense of what is (as part of the same individual's generic condition). A person may feel shame, for example, upon realizing that she is «putting on airs», thereby violating the authenticity to which she aspires. Herein lies the dynamic of shame, how it takes place and the principle – Scheler calls it the «law» – governing the process.

Throughout his account, Scheler exploits the double meaning of «shame» which refers at once to the experience or «stirring» as a feeling and to the distinctive intentionality or directedness of the

10 Scheler speaks of a disharmony between the sense and claim of the human being's «spiritual person and his bodily neediness» (*seiner geistigen Person und seiner leiblichen Bedürftigkeit*) (SCHELER 1957, 69). However, since he subsequently distinguishes bodily shame from spiritual shame, this formulation appears to overreach, though it is admittedly made by way of introduction.

11 Thus, human beings in some cultures cover up their genitals even when the weather does not require that they do so. As Scheler puts it, «the most primitive form of clothing» arises from shame and not vice versa (SCHELER 1957, 75).

feeling.¹² He has in mind the German equivalent to the difference between feeling ashamed and feeling ashamed of or for something.¹³ But the intentionality of shame is by no means indiscriminate; that is to say, it is not directed at just anything. A further marker of feelings of shame (at once structural and dynamic) is the fact that they belong to the sphere of self-directed feelings. «In all shame, an act occurs that I would like to call *a turning back to the self*».¹⁴ The feeling calls our attention back to some aspect of ourselves (or, as we shall shortly see, some self), particularly after we have been immersed in some activity. Scheler gives the helpful example of a lover who, having been caught up in acts of expressing his love to his beloved, finds himself abruptly taken aback with shame when his body makes him all too aware of his purely sensual intentions. Another one of Scheler's oft-cited examples is that of a model who, in the course of posing in the nude, detects what she takes to be the painter's lustful glance, a prompt that suddenly makes her aware simply of her body.¹⁵ Her shame is a feeling of protecting herself, her value as an individual, from urges that are all too common, i.e., universal and vulgar (*allgemein* and *gemein*).¹⁶

As long as the model considered herself merely as a model and not as an object of desire, she would not feel shame. So, too, if she felt

12 Scheler criticizes positivist thinkers for confusing the forms of the expression of shame with the feeling itself (SCHELER 1957, 76). But this distinction is also not the same as the distinction between the stirring of the feeling and the self to whom it is directed. While shame requires both the stirring and that directedness, it can be directed at oneself (when we are ashamed of ourselves) or the self of someone else (when we are ashamed for someone else).

13 Scheler may have mind the fact that we can feel ashamed without automatically knowing what it is about or for whom we feel shame. In those cases, we may, upon reflection, come to see for whom we feel shame. But Scheler's point seems to be that, explicitly or not, shame is directed at a personal self, usually but by no means invariably, one's own personal self. In this sense at least, shame is inherently intentional.

14 SCHELER 1957, 78.

15 SCHELER 1957, 78-9. Other examples: a patient who feels no shame as long as she considers herself to be regarded by the physician as a token of a type and not as an individual; a lover who reacts with shame to the beloved's declaration «you are a beautiful woman», which she takes to be comparing her to others (though context may well dictate whether she takes it as signaling her individuality).

16 For justification of this *double entendre*, see SCHELER 1957, 131.

herself merely as an object of desire, there would be no shame. As noted above, the feeling of shame requires, as its basic structural condition, a conflict between two levels of living; for example, one confined to the body and its needs, and another that is not. But the conflict must be lived; it is a dynamic process. Shame sets in, not when one is regarded either as something generic or as an individual, but when, in the face of one of these ways of being regarded, one turns back to oneself as someone who can rightly be regarded in the opposite way.

Shame begins in the dynamic of that *turning back* to the self that enters neither if one knows oneself *given* as something universal nor if one knows oneself *given* as something individual. Instead, that turn back to the self makes its appearance if the palpable intention of the other *oscillates* between an individualizing and universalizing view [*Meinen*] and if one's own intention and the experienced counter-intention, with respect to this difference, move, not in the same, but in opposed directions.¹⁷

Consider, once again, Scheler's example of the model. She feels that she is given to the painter both as an individual (indeed, a unique subject) and as something universal (or, more to the point, as something quite common); his intentions are palpable to her. At the same time, as his intentions swing in one direction, hers swing in the opposite direction. The moment he regards her not as an individual but as something common, she feels herself (her value) as an individual threatened. That feeling is a feeling of shame. To illustrate this point further, Scheler notes how, «in a completely analogous way», we already feel a kind of «gentle shame» the moment we characterize one of our own, individual experiences in general terms such as «sympathy» or «love», thereby lending our consciousness a kind of publicity «to which those completely individual experiences belong

¹⁷ SCHELER 1957, 79.

just as little as our private lives belong in the newspapers».¹⁸

Shame, so conceived, is by no means limited to or even originating in sexual life, despite being deeply intertwined with sexuality. Indeed, sexual life is in a sense paradigmatic for shame precisely because it is at once the most general aspect of our lives (shared with animals, with everything alive) yet also the most highly individual aspect «insofar as [...] there is no judge of any sort other than the sentiment [*Empfindung*] itself».¹⁹ Sexual shame accordingly presents itself as a consequence of two basic movements: a movement of the generic, purely sensuous sex drive and a movement of love on some level, at once individualized, value-directed, and – perhaps above all – devoted to the beloved. Here, once again, for shame to occur, one has to be capable of both movements and the «experienced *tension*» between them. The tension is present since the move to one side remains accompanied by «a strong undercurrent of *attraction* to the matter against which it strives».²⁰ The experience of this tension, inherent in the feeling of shame, flags its complexity (a point further addressed below).

Scheler further underscores the point that shame is not exclusively sexual by calling attention to the fact that it is not even exclusively social. To the extent that the ultimate judge is the individual's sentiment itself (as noted above), the presence of others is obviously dispensable. Indeed, the experience of feeling shame in private, i.e., apart from the actual presence of other people, is hardly a rarity. As Scheler puts it, shame in our own eyes – «in the face of» (*vor*) ourselves – is no less basic than shame in the face of others. Yet the fact that a person privately experiences shame hardly diminishes its dependence upon some sort of real or imagined interaction. In such cases, the individual is simply taking the place of others. Scheler's own examples – an adolescent ashamed of her body parts, a person shamefully using discretion to pry into someone's secrets – confirm this intersubjective dimension, as does his description of the painter's «palpable [*fühlbare*]

18 SCHELER 1957, 79f.

19 SCHELER 1957, 80.

20 SCHELER 1957, 84.

intention», palpable, that is, to the model. The preposition *vor* (“in the face of,” “before”) expresses a duality in the structure of shame, a difference between the one who is ashamed and the one before whom she is ashamed. Scheler could have expressed himself more clearly on this point but the gloss presented here is consistent with his insistence that without love (sexual or spiritual), i.e., intersubjectivity in some sense, there is no shame («one of the profoundest and the most natural *aides to love*»²¹).

Shame is intentional in two senses; it is directed at both the object of the feeling and the basis for the feeling (more clumsily, why the shame is felt, for what or about what I feel shame). Sometimes these two senses are collapsed into the same expression. In some uses of the locution «I am ashamed of myself», for example, the genitive (*of*) can indicate that I am the object and the basis of the shame. In that case, something about me is the basis of the shame, i.e., for what I am ashamed. But these two senses can also be expressed in a way that differentiates them, as in the locution «I am ashamed of myself for being a certain way or doing something», e.g., for boasting, exaggerating. (Scheler also recognizes that there is an aboutness built into a derivative feeling of shame, what he deems «repentant shame», discussed below.²²) Another sort of the dual intentionality is, it bears adding, already present in the structural condition and dynamics of shame, since shame involves turning to oneself precisely – indeed, alternately – as an individual and as something generic.²³

At the same time, as already mentioned, shame remains a self-directed feeling (*Selbstgefühl*). Scheler points out, however, that it need

21 SCHELER 1957, 82, 97, 137. SCHELER’S remark about publicity and the newspapers, cited above, strongly suggests that, in his view, something of this sort, i.e., some level and mode of intersubjectivity, is inherent to the experience of shame. My gloss on this point differs from both Emad’s and Zahavi’s interpretations (EMAD 1972, 362; ZAHAVI 2010, 216f; ZAHAVI 2017, 215).

22 SCHELER 1957, 141.

23 Scheler does not himself draw out this dual intentional aspect and his invocation of the feature expressed by the «about» (*über*) is ambiguous. To this extent, since these features of shame seem to be common to the feeling, I am trying to give a generous interpretation of his account in this respect.

not refer to the individual self of the one who is ashamed.²⁴ We can also be ashamed *of* others and, in a different way, *for* others. Perhaps the most typical experience of being ashamed of others involves some shared identity with them. We regard what they did, for example, as demeaning of the group to which we both belong. We might say, for example, «I am ashamed of you as a member of our team», meaning that their activity brought dishonor upon the team. In such a case, we may be submitting that the person ought to feel shame even if she does not. The situation is different when we feel shame for someone else with whom we do not identify. Here, too, the person may or may not experience the shame herself. Indeed, we may or may not expect the person to feel shame. To illustrate this sort of scenario, Scheler gives the example of feeling shame and blushing if an off-color story is said in the presence of a lady but feeling no such thing if it is told in her absence. The shame is *for* her, even if she has no such feelings.

From Scheler's interpretation of this fact, he makes two important and controversial inferences. He infers first that shame is generally directed at a self, indeed, any self. Here one might hesitate to accept this conclusion since it appears to rule out the commonplace of being ashamed of a collective (e.g., a nation, a political party or movement, a group or team). He also infers – no less controversially – that shame is not «a quality of feeling that attaches to the ego». His point is that I do not experience the feeling of shame as something related to me (*Ichbezogenheit*) in the way that I experience and can perhaps share the experience of melancholy or joy. In contrast to suffering or delighting, we do not empathize with others (or at the very least not in the same way) when it comes to shame. The feeling of shame about something makes a demand quite independently of such an individual condition of the ego (*individueller Ichzustand*).

24 Scheler takes note of «shame before oneself» (*Scham vor sich selbst*) and «being ashamed of oneself» (*Sichschämen vor sich selbst*) (SCHELER 1957, 78). Presumably, he means something like the following. We may experience shame directed at ourselves (e.g., someone else being ashamed of us or our recognition that something about ourselves is an object of shame, even if we are not ashamed) or we may be ourselves ashamed of ourselves.

The basic phenomenon lies rather in being ashamed that is always a being ashamed *about something* and is related to a *state of affairs* that “demands” it of itself and completely independently of the condition of our individual ego. This “being-ashamed” is an emotional movement of a sui generis sort that does not entail being ashamed *of oneself*, that is to say, it does not entail any experience of being related, in the feeling, to the I, let alone the fact that I am ashamed “about” myself.²⁵

This detachment from how I otherwise feel personally, i.e., from the condition of my ego, explains why, Scheler adds (quoting Petrarch), the feeling of shame uniquely «wells up» and «overcomes» us.

This second inference seems to overreach, though it is hard to deny that Scheler has his finger here on something distinctive if elusive about shame. He is certainly right to claim that I can feel shame for someone else in the sense he describes without feeling ashamed of myself in the same way. But is shame then as impersonal as his gloss suggests? Is that feeling of shame not vicarious in some sense, such that it could be shared empathically with someone else? In the setting described above, isn't the feeling sometimes as contagious for others (including the lady herself) as the blushing? And don't feelings of joy and melancholy well up in us just as much as shame does before we manage, if at all, to get a handle on them?

2. Shame's complexity and basic forms

According to Scheler, shame is a not a sensation (*Empfindung*) like seeing or hearing, but a feeling (*Gefühl*). In general, feelings are

25 SCHELER 1957, 81. The observation about the necessity of being «about something» in this passage further supports the claim, made above, that shame is intentional in two respects, being directed at some self as its object and at some basis (being ashamed for or about something).

experiences that are far more intimately bound up with the person having the experience than are experiences of sensing, imagining, thinking, or willing (presumably even if in the case of shame, as he claims, the feeling is also impersonal, i.e., detached in a certain sense from the condition of the ego). What someone feels is as much a part of her as the act of feeling, something that cannot be said for what she sees (or thinks) and the act of seeing (or thinking). Because a person lacks this distance from her feelings, she is accordingly less able to control or manage her feelings at will (Scheler 1921, 344f).

The complexity of the affective character of shame, as Scheler interprets it, presents two sorts of phenomenological difficulties. In this section I address (2.1) this complexity and the challenges introduced by it, before turning to (2.2) Scheler's differentiation of the two basic forms of shame in terms of his taxonomy of feelings.

2.1 The complex affectivity of shame

The basic condition of shame is, as noted, a conflict between two levels of living, a conflict that is experienced as a tension, pulling us in two directions at once. Given this tension and the ways of feeling it, the affective character of shame is complex to the point of challenging the notion that shame can be described as a single specific or unified phenomenon. Scheler makes four relevant observations that underscore the complexity of shame. He describes the feeling of shame as (1) an individual's feeling of protecting herself (*Schutzgefühl*) and her «individual value against the entire sphere of the universal» (Scheler 1957, 80). The idea that shame is a protective feeling corresponds to the notion that it has a certain potency, capable of rising – to a degree – above the tension. Thus, it is «passionate» and powerful enough at times to put up resistance against «lower» urges, i.e., inclinations to act in purely generic ways and thereby surrender strictly personal (individual) meaning and value (a process patently recognizable in both bodily and spiritual shame).²⁶ It is even a

26 SCHELER 1957, 124, 130, 132. Williams inherits this account of shame as « an emotion of

commanding feeling, i.e., a source of commands, enjoining us against succumbing to those urges.²⁷ So, too, Scheler refers to its «restraining force», capable of inhibiting or curbing various appetites until, as he colorfully puts it, love breaks through.²⁸

Of course, the impulse to protect entails a sense of something worthy of protection. Shame accordingly also involves (2) a feeling of the value of oneself (*Selbstwertgefühl*), a feeling akin to (but, nonetheless, distinct from) the related feeling of honor (*Ehrgefühl*).²⁹ Shame, on this account, includes an individual's feeling of her own unique value combined with the feeling of safeguarding – and being able to safeguard – herself and this value against the threat of being solely defined by the very same universal (generic, public) characteristics that admittedly co-define who she is.

In keeping with the basic condition of shame and the ultimate law of its origin, we have the feeling of protecting ourselves precisely because we also have feelings that identify us with the universal (including the connotation of the common or vulgar). As a result, we have every reason to be fearful or anxious of the prospect of losing ourselves, our value as individuals, to the universal dimensions that we – quite literally – embody. Scheler accordingly also characterizes shame as (3) an individual's feeling of something «akin to anxiety» (*gleichsam Angst*) about sinking down into lower values. As such, shame is the feeling that comes of the «reaction against» (*Gegenreaktion*) the universal and generic.³⁰

Those universal and generic elements are, it bears stressing, felt by

self-protection » from Taylor who appropriates it from Scheler's notion of *Schutzgefühl*; SCHELER 1957, 80; WILLIAMS 1993, 220f; TAYLOR 1985, 60f. Williams does not use the expression «negative feeling», but he does regard it as a reaction to a consciousness of a loss of power, as viewed by an internalized viewer or witness, a reaction that presumably (in contrast to guilt) need not involve fear at the internalized viewer's anger.

27 SCHELER 1957, 140.

28 SCHELER 1957, 130; see, too, the opening quotation of the present essay.

29 SCHELER 1957, 82.

30 While likening shame to *Angst*, Scheler also distinguishes it from *Angst*, albeit – in contrast to the difference between shame and fear (*Furcht*) – without explaining the distinction in detail; see SCHELER 1957, 80, 88.

the individual as hers no less than the feelings she deems and values as uniquely hers. The individual is, in that sense, accountable for those feelings – the very feelings against which she seeks to protect herself. In view of this last consideration, it is not surprising to find Scheler characterizing the feeling of shame as (4) an individual's feeling of accountability (*Schuldgefühl*).³¹ One could also translate *Schuld* as «guilt» but guilt suggests responsibility that may, but need not, accompany shame. I am not responsible for my sexual urges (i.e., I did not choose to have them), even though I am accountable for them (i.e., they are mine).

The characteristically anxious, and accountable feeling of shame, strongly protective of the worth of the self to whom it is directed, is apparent in sexual shame. Sexual shame is anxious about protecting the individual value of love from succumbing to purely sensual, common desires, for which the individual herself is nonetheless accountable. As Scheler aptly puts it, shame is «love's conscience».³² To be sure, how these different aspects come together into one feeling of shame is by no means obvious. Feeling the value of ourselves and feeling protective of it are one thing, feeling anxious and accountable, quite another. At best, if we countenance these different feelings and their role in shame, it seems that shame is a complex, episodic feeling that runs the gamut of feelings of strength and worth, anxiousness and accountability.

A further difficulty arising from Scheler's account of shame's affective character is his contention that, far from being a negative feeling, it is a «positive feeling of the value of oneself» which it shares with pride. Scheler is not speaking simply of the meaning or import of shame, but of the feeling itself.³³ In contrast to humility, for example, in shame an individual's «positive worthiness» is given to him. Does that mean a feeling that is closer to something joyful and uplifting than feelings of sadness and dejection? Scheler does not say as much but if

31 SCHELER 1957, 81.

32 SCHELER 1957, 124.

33 Thus he chides educational theories for attributing only a negative meaning to shame (SCHELER 1957, 98).

so, his account differs from most standard, contemporary treatments and, indeed, definitions of shame.³⁴ Scheler himself distinguishes shame from repentance (*Reue*), a negative feeling, directed at some loss of value (some negative value), which seems, indeed, to coincide with those standard conceptions of shame.

Matters in this regard are complicated, however, since Scheler himself recognizes the existence of an intermediate sort of shame that often combines with the feeling of the repentant. Recalling the double sense of «shame». i.e., signifying both the stirring of the feeling and the object/direction of the feeling (e.g., one's own self or that of someone else), he notes how being ashamed of oneself can coincide with a sense of being repentant. A person experiences this intermediate shame when, for example, she feels the disgracefulness (*Schande*) of lying. Although repentance is directed at some negative value, the latter can apparently coincide with an intermediate form of shame, presumably in the sense that she can feel ashamed and repentant for something she did because she also feels her self-worth and the need to be protective of it. Why call it «intermediate»? Perhaps because pure shame is the feeling that she is better than that, i.e., better than what the object of repentance and intermediate shame indicates.

Still, the very idea that shame in some genuine or pure form is a positive feeling has to strike contemporary readers as counterintuitive. «Feelings of shame» typically designate unpleasant experiences, even if those experiences in some sense suppose a positive sense of our worth as individuals. Moreover, even though, as discussed in the next section, pleasure and pain belong to a class of feelings different from feelings of shame, Scheler does not shy away from characterizing the feeling of shame in these terms. Thus, he distinguishes the extremely painful, «burning shame» that accompanies repentance from the «warm and often even pleasure-accentuated» experience of shame as

34 According to OED, shame is «the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonoring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's conduct or circumstances [...], or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency». See, too, GIDDENS 1991, 64; TRACY & ROBINS 2007, 13.

the immediate, protective, and anticipatory feeling we have in relation to a sexual coupling «not guided by a decided love». Penitential shame (*Schamreue*) consists in «looking back and seeing a transgression of what the feeling of shame in the latter [more positive] sense had forbidden».³⁵

Yet the example of an experience of shame colored or accentuated in a pleasant way (*lustbetont*) provides an important clue to Scheler's otherwise counter-intuitive claim about the positive character of the feeling of shame. Genuine sexual shame – not to be confused with prudery, coyness, or coquetry – amplifies a sense of well-being, precisely by contributing to the possibility and anticipation of sexual love. The climactic yet lasting joy of that love, a joy that is global and shared, bringing two entire bodies and lives together, requires the restraint that is joyful because, though the love is still undecided, the shame beckons to it. Scheler seems to have this sort of experience in mind when he claims that «genuine shame is constantly built upon the sensation of a positive value of oneself».³⁶ Yet even if this interpretation of sexual shame is countenanced, the question of its generalizability remains.

2.2 *The forms and feelings of shame*

Scheler introduces two forms of shame – bodily shame and soulful shame – corresponding to two different sorts of feelings – a vital feeling and a spiritual feeling – respectively. In *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (drafted roughly the same time as the study of shame), he uses similar terminology in the course of differentiating four irreducible sorts of feelings:

- (1) sensory feelings (*Empfindungsgefühle*);
- (2) vital feelings (*Lebensgefühle*) or, perhaps more informatively, feelings of being alive, feelings of vitality or,

35 SCHELER 1957, 83, 140.

36 SCHELER 1957, 100.

- equivalently, someone's feelings of her body as a whole (*Leibgefühl*) and of herself as a body (*Leiblich*);
- (3) soulful feelings (*seelische Gefühle*), i.e., feelings pertaining to someone's psyche or, alternatively, feelings someone has of herself as an ego (*Ichgefühle*); and
 - (4) spiritual feelings (*geistige Gefühle*).

Vital feelings stand for Scheler in sharp contrast to sensory feelings.³⁷ A sensory feeling – e.g., pain (*Schmerz*), not to be confused with suffering (*Leid*) – is a mere condition of a part of the body. As such, it is both localized and transient, completely absorbed in the present. Unlike functions or intentional acts, it is not itself meaningfully related to anything beyond itself. By contrast, in addition to being neither transient nor confined to a particular part of the body,³⁸ vital feelings are wrapped up in a nexus of meaning and value involving the past and future (memories and anticipations) as well as relations to (feelings for) other things (in the case of bodily shame, relations to others).³⁹ Vital feelings (e.g., contentment, weariness, vigor), moreover, are directly personal (clinging to the ego) in a way that cannot be said for sensory feelings, a fact that also explains why, Scheler adds, sensory feelings are more subject to control (e.g., by removing the relevant stimulus). Vital feelings cannot produce or eliminate sensory feelings, but they can control or inhibit them. Thus, the vital feeling of sexual shame curbs purely sensory, sexually gratifying feelings.⁴⁰

Vital feelings are at the same time bodily feelings. That is to say, part of their make-up is a consciousness of oneness with our body (*jenes einheitliches Bewußtsein unseres Leibes*). The same cannot be said for soulful feelings, such as sadness, grief, or joy.⁴¹ These soulful feelings

37 On the non-intentionality of *Empfindungsgefühle*, see STUMPF 1997 (1907).

38 In English as in German, we do not ask where the shame is in the way that we ask where it hurts.

39 SCHELER 1921, 353: «Was aber von ganz besonderer Bedeutung ist, ist die Tatsache, dass schon das Lebensgefühl, *nicht* erst die geistigen Gefühle, der Funktion des Nachfühlers und Mitfühlers teilhaftig ist».

40 SCHELER 1957, 107.

41 SCHELER 1957, 106. This sense of oneness is not to be confused with a fusion

pertain not to the ego as a body, but to the ego simply, albeit to varying degrees. This «layer» of feelings can combine, to be sure, with different layers and degrees of sensory and bodily feelings, but without surrendering – short of mental illness – its *sui generis* status. For example, only someone out of kilter would consistently confuse being sad with being weary.

«Spiritual feelings», the final category of feelings, designate feelings such as serenity or despair. These sorts of feelings differ from soulful feelings precisely by superseding the realm of anything given to the ego, for which (or for the value of which) the ego is in some sense responsible. They take such complete possession of someone that it is a misnomer to say that she experiences them in the way she experiences pain or sadness. Their value is the absolute value of the person herself, not a value relative to or dependent upon something the person knows or does.⁴²

Lining up Scheler's account of shame's basic forms with this taxonomy of feelings presents a problem. Whereas Scheler understands bodily shame as a vital feeling, he characterizes the other form of shame in terms that cut across the last two sorts of feelings. Thus, he differentiates bodily shame from shame that he describes as *soulful* and *spiritual*. However, as should be evident from his account of the latter sort of shame, he seems to regard it as a kind of soulful (not spiritual) feeling.

In any case, both forms of shame suppose its pre-condition, a conflict between higher, value-determining and lower, value-indifferent functions, and they are alike experiences of the tension of the unresolved character of that conflict. So, too, each form exists solely within a sphere in which someone shelters her self-worth as an

(*Verschmelzung*) of sensory feelings and sensations, Scheler contends, not least since a positive vital feeling can be combined with negative sensory feelings (SCHELER 1921, 352).

42 Forming the correlate of the ethical value of the person's very being itself (beyond any relation to community, friends, state, and so on), these feelings are «metaphysical and religious self-feelings» (SCHELER 1921, 356). The role of clothing is accordingly based upon shame, since the genitals remind him of his body and his sexual functions when he aspires to more.

individual, protecting it from absorption into any purely generic or universal dimension, where she is nothing more than a token of type.⁴³

The difference between the two forms – bodily shame and spiritual shame – lies in the composition of the sides making up their respective conflicts. Bodily shame is the index of the tension between “value-selecting vital love” and sensory feelings of pleasure. The strongest, most compelling sort of bodily shame is sexual shame, where the conflict is between sexual *love* (*life-drive*) and the sex *drive* (*sensuous drive*) or, equivalently between a vital feeling of love (not to be confused with a spiritual feeling) and a sensory feeling of pleasure.⁴⁴ A person experiences sexual shame when she finds her desire for sexual pleasure to be at odds with her aspiration to sexual love.⁴⁵ Spiritual shame is, by contrast, the index of the tension between spiritual love and the basic vital drive of preserving or augmenting the power of living. The capacity for spiritual shame is confined to persons, i.e., those who have the spiritual capacities of loving, willing, and thinking.

Summing up the contrast between the two basic forms of shame, Scheler writes:

Since the feeling of bodily shame presupposes only the stratification of sensory and vital drive and feeling, but the feeling of soulful shame presupposes the composition of a spiritual person, the former [i.e., bodily shame] is also universally on hand, without exception, in human beings and at every period of their development. Indeed, traces of it, while difficult to discern, are already present among higher animals. By contrast, the feeling of soulful shame is

43 SCHELER 1957, 90.

44 Sexual love is the central, defining expression of the life-drive; hence the distinction between them. Since even sexual love is selective and value-driven, it is distinct from expressions of needs and pursuits of fulfilling needs that are common to the species. In Scheler’s view, spiritual love is on a different level altogether.

45 Scheler gives a detailed, speculative account of the emergence of these conditions for sexual shame. The fundamental condition, specified by the other conditions, is a turn toward individual over species-specific prioritizing.

certainly not universally human, let alone on hand at every stage of development of individuals and peoples.⁴⁶

This text reminds us that Scheler prefaces his account of the pre-conditions of bodily shame with speculations on the development of the life-world (*Lebewelt*) in general, with musings about the differences between plant and animal forms of propagation as well as the decisiveness of sexual differentiation.⁴⁷ In this way, he argues for the naturalness and universality of the phenomenon of bodily shame. This claim is certainly not above controversy, depending – not least – upon how that shame is conceived and how the criteria for identifying traces of it in the animal kingdom are determined. But what is even more controversial is the apparent denial in this text of the presence of spiritual shame across peoples. Given the superior value that he attaches to the capacity for spiritual love and shame, it is hard to see how this denial, unsupported as it is, does not amount to a chauvinist rant.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Scheler's differentiation of the two basic forms of shame, corresponding to two different sorts of feelings, undoubtedly captures a basic gradient of feelings of shame, ranging from types of bodily shame to types of spiritual shame. The former are feelings unmistakably rooted in our sense of being more and, indeed, being more *for others* than our bodies alone can reveal. The latter are feelings of shame that spring from a sense of being more than our lives alone can reveal. It is one thing to feel ashamed for making an untoward sexual advance, quite another to feel ashamed for willfully betraying a friend's confidence.

3. Explaining shame: summing up Scheler's model

According to Scheler, shame is a feeling that is directed at some self for

46 SCHELER 1957, 91.

47 SCHELER 1957, 70.

being or acting a certain way. The self at which it is directed may be myself or someone else (I am ashamed of myself or for (*für*) someone else), but always (a) as someone individual and yet universal, and (b) in the face of (in the eyes of, *vor*) myself and/or others.⁴⁸ The feeling itself is born of the tension between two inherent but conflicting aspects of the self in question, i.e., a value-directed aspect and value-indifferent aspect – the former an individual property of someone capable of love, the latter a generic property. The feeling combines a positive feeling of the worth of the self as an individual and thus capable of love, a feeling of the need and capacity to protect that worth, and an anxiousness – at times even pleasant anxiousness – about the undecided outcome of the person's conflicted state. The feeling takes place precisely when attention shifts back from some common behavior or generic aspect of a person to her worth as an individual, capable of love.

Why do we experience shame? We experience shame to protect ourselves from ourselves or, to put it less paradoxically, to safeguard our better selves from our lesser selves. Shame is the feeling born of anxiety of losing ourselves (and thus a capacity to love) to what is not uniquely ours, whether in the form of generic, biological urges, common to every animal, or in the form of social institutions and practices that we have not made our own.

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48 Shame can be broken down structurally into four components: (1) the act of feeling or being ashamed, (2) the object of the shame (myself or someone else), (3) the reason for the shame (i.e., for being or acting in ways that conform to my generic, value-neutral status at the cost of my individual, value-centered status), and (4) those in whose eyes the reason is shameful. (2) and (3) correspond to what I have construed as the dual intentionalities of shame.

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