Williams's Defense of Shame as a Moral Emotion

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"Nobody can be vulgar all alone"[1]

ABSTRACT

Section 1 examines four reasons most commonly adduced to support the claim that guilt is superior to shame, both psychologically and morally: a) While guilt expresses a concern for others shame is a self-centered and selfish emotion. b) While guilt appeals to autonomy shame is linked to heteronomy. c) Shame is not a reactive attitude, like guilt, indignation, blame, resentment, but an objective attitude, like disdain or disgust. d) While guilt invites us to second-person responses, shame inhibits them. The second part of the paper (sections 2 and 3) addresses Williams's analysis of the role of shame in ancient Greek literature and philosophy. Section 2 is dedicated to Williams's response to the objections concerning selfishness and shallowness and to discussing his reply to the charge that since shame belongs to the objective attitudes it tends to inhibit second-person responses. Section 3 concentrates on Williams's reflections on heteronomy by focusing on the attitude of others in shame and on the role played by the internalized other.

Introduction

It is still a widespread belief in moral philosophy that shame is a more primitive and less reliable emotion than guilt. As Stephen Darwall puts it in a recent essay,[2] shame and guilt belong to two different spheres of recognition: shame is the typical emotion of honor societies, while guilt is at home in societies in which respect for one another is mediated by a mutually accountable public space. Honor is bestowed and can be taken away by those in a given society who have the power to do so, while dignity is not something that can be taken away or, like honor, diminished by the behavior of others.

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[1] J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Washington Square Press, New York 1993, 222.

[2] S. Darwall, "Due tipi di rispetto come riconoscimento per le persone", in *Eguale Rispetto*, edited by I. Carter, A. E. Galeotti, V. Ottonelli, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2008, 1-19. A revised version appeared in English as "Respect as Honor and as Accountability," in *Reason, Value, and Respect: Kantian Themes from the Philosophy of Thomas E. Hill, Jr.*, eds. Robert Johnson and Mark Timmons, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, 70-88.

Those who consider emotions like shame and guilt from a theoretical point of view often do not distance themselves from the familiar story according to which the ancient Greeks failed to put the concept of the will at the center of their moral theories, and had a conception of human life shaped by a "culture of shame." This story is supported by the so-called progressive view of historical development, presented in a classic way by Dodds in his book *The Greeks and the Irrational* and by Adkins in *Merit and Responsibility*.[3] Dodds and Adkins detected in ancient Greek culture a progressive if slow detachment from a culture of shame towards a culture of guilt, which was thought to have reached its best articulation with the advent of Christianity. In such historical reconstruction Plato and Aristotle play the role of intermediary figures in the progressive development from shame to guilt: they anticipate some fundamental discoveries concerning human agency and autonomy, while at the same time still expressing in several ways the culture of shame to which they originally belonged.

Contrary to this line of thought, Williams is skeptical of a psychology based on the separation between body and soul (*SN*, 25-26), the notion of the will as a mental action in-between a decision and the ensuing action (*SN*, 41-46), the idea that we can be responsible only for actions that derive from our intentions,[4] and the thesis that guilt is more morally relevant than shame (*SN*, 75-102). He maintains, rather, that psychological and ethical theories can benefit from an understanding of agency that includes agent-regret, moral luck, necessity, and takes into account the role of shame. In his view, if we are open to such concepts we will no longer look down on the ancient Greeks as if they were the representatives of a primitive moral outlook.

Williams is not inclined to historical nostalgia: his point is not that the Greeks were right in their approach to the most fundamental ethical questions. Rather, he refuses to assume with progressivism that modernity, whether in the shape of Kantianism or Utilitarianism, made substantial progress in tackling problems that had supposedly not been properly addressed by classical Greek philosophy and literature. He asks us to distance ourselves from such a theory. He thinks that

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[3] E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1951; A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960.

[4] See, Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 57, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, 64: "Progressivist writers refer to a concept of moral responsibility that we supposedly enjoy and the Greeks lacked, but it is unclear what they have in mind. Their thought seems most typically to be that the Greeks, or at least archaic Greeks, blamed and sanctioned people for things that they did unintentionally, or again—though this distinction is often neglected—for things that, like Agamemnon, they did intentionally but in a strange state of mind. We are thought not to do this, or at least to regard it as unjust. But if this means that the Greeks paid no attention to intentions, while we make everything turn on the issue of intentions, or at least think that we should, this is doubly false." From now on *Shame and Necessity* will be abbreviated as *SN*.

by accepting the possibility that we can learn something from the Greeks we will also be ready to assume a skeptical attitude towards moral concepts that we tend to take for granted.[5]

Williams's strategy in *Shame and Necessity* takes two directions: 1) He tries to bring back to life a view of the Greeks' ethical life as free as possible from the prejudices of progressive history. 2) He argues that by examining our ethical concepts in the light of the psychological and ethical patterns articulated by the Greeks we can draw different maps of our emotional life.

If we understand well what *aidos* or *aischyne* were for the Greeks, our own understanding of the demarcations between shame and guilt will be significantly affected, and this in turn will shake our assurance that we really know what we mean when we characterize ancient Greek culture as a culture of shame.

In section 1 I will consider four reasons most commonly adduced to support the claim that guilt is superior to shame, both psychologically and morally. I will focus on the arguments mentioned by Williams, and, in two cases, on Darwall's own version of them.

In sections 2 and 3 I will address Williams's analysis of the role of shame in ancient Greek literature. In section 2 the focus will be on Williams's response to the objections concerning selfishness and shallowness, and on his position regarding the charge that shame belongs to the objective attitudes and inhibits second-person responses. In section 3 I will concentrate on Williams's response to the charge that shame, as opposed to guilt, is heteronomous and on his account of the role of others in shame. Here I will discuss three points: a) the distinction Williams finds necessary between the concrete other and the internalized other; b) the attitude of the audience before whom we feel shame; c) the internalized other as the focus of real social expectations.

1. *Four Objections to Shame*

In *Shame and Necessity* Williams argues that the opposition between guilt and shame is often rests on ideological preconceptions, but he also concedes that the progressivist position is based on arguments. In order to understand Williams's

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[5] *SN*, 5-6: "These stories are deeply misleading, both historically and ethically. Many of the questions they generate, of when this, that, or the other element of a developed moral consciousness is supposed to have arisen, are unanswerable, because the notion of a developed moral consciousness that gives rise to these questions is basically a myth. These theories measure the ideas and the experience of the ancient Greeks against modern conceptions of freedom, autonomy, inner responsibility, moral obligation, and so forth, and it is assumed that we have an entirely adequate control of these conceptions themselves. But if we ask ourselves honestly, I believe that we shall find that we have no clear idea of the substance of these conceptions, and hence no clear idea of what it is that, according to the progressivist accounts, the Greeks did not have."

own defense of shame, it may be useful to identify first the criticisms that are most commonly addressed to this emotion. Here are some of the reasons why many maintain that guilt is morally superior to shame:

1) Shame is charged with being a self-centered and selfish emotion. Adkins maintains that in Homer shame serves the competitive virtues of the warrior society. Courage in war, the ability to do heroic deeds, personal success and victory are the qualities with which the best man (the *kalos kai agathos*) is identified. Failure and defeat make someone feel ashamed of himself. Success and victory are of course public values, and this is why being good means, ultimately, to be spoken well of, while being bad is to be despised or ignored. Seeking fame is therefore the main goal, and fear of a bad reputation the central preoccupation. I care for *my* reputation: as Bernard Williams points out, when he gives voice to the critics of shame, "it is simply my face to save or lose, so its values are egoistic" (*SN*, 78). Guilt, on the other hand, expresses my preoccupation with the sufferance of others, and is therefore considered an other-regarding emotion.

2) Guilt invites us to look into ourselves, to discover our deepest intentions and responsibilities: it is an emotional expression of our being autonomous agents. We feel guilty when others ask us to give an account of our actions or omissions, and if we believe that their indignation or resentment is justified. By contrast, shame is felt when we feel exposed to the wrong people in the wrong situation (*SN*, 78). Since it is a response to how others see us, shame is connected with the idea of losing face, and for this reason it is often charged with being a superficial emotion. Shame gives central stage to appearance and the opinions of others: hence it is the emotion of conformism. So, while guilt is deep, shame is shallow. While guilt presupposes autonomy, shame points to heteronomy.

3) Differently from shame, guilt implies equal footing with others, i.e., our mutual accountability. We do not lose but rather affirm our dignity when we feel guilty: by recognizing that others have a right to consider us accountable, we acknowledge our right to speak in our defense, or to acknowledge our faults.

This is not the case with shame. As Darwall maintains,[6] shame does not belong to a second-person standpoint: it is third-personal. When we feel shame we are not interlocutors of those who call us to respond of our actions, but objects of their gaze. Shame is not a reactive attitude, like guilt, indignation, blame, resentment, but an objective attitude, like disdain or disgust.[7] To the real or imaginary spectators before whom we feel ashamed we appear as objects. Our real or

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[6] S. Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006, 70-72.

[7] For the distinction between reactive and objective attitudes, see P. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment", in *Freedom and Resentment and other Essays*, Methuen, London 1974, 1-28; for a critical assessment of Darwall's interpretation of Strawson's essay, see J. Deigh, "Reactive Attitudes Revisited", in C. Bagnoli, *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 197-216.

imaginary spectators have an *authority over us*, not, as in the case of guilt, an *authority shared with us*. While with guilt we are on an equal footing with the other, with shame we are seen qua inferior. Darwall here follows Sartre:

> By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. Yet this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other and so could not "touch" me. I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.[8]

The moment I become ashamed my freedom escapes me, because I become an object for another and at the same time I recognize that I am that object.

4) Typical expressions of guilt are in the second person: confession, apology, reparation are ways to keep the relationships with others alive. Shame, on the other hand, makes us desire to hide: we do not want to meet the other's gaze, we do not want to reciprocate, we do not feel called to respond, we are not addressed but merely looked at. We feel ugly and despised; we would want to disappear from view. Hence, while guilt invites us to second-person responses, shame inhibits them.

2. *Shame revisited*

Williams responds to the criticisms leveled against the so-called culture of shame, with which the Greeks are identified, by following a rather complex strategy.

First of all, he questions the stark opposition between shame and guilt and shows that *aidos*, the Greek term commonly translated as shame, can be properly understood only if one realizes that it contains some fundamental aspects of guilt. Secondarily, he addresses the objections to shame as a shallow, heteronomous and selfish emotion, and argues that they are misunderstandings due to a superficial reading of ancient texts. Thirdly, he explains that shame responds to concerns that are wider than the concerns of guilt and, to a certain extent, include them (in some instances, when shame fails to include the concerns of guilt Williams argues that it is for the best).

His response is conducted by analyzing literary passages: from Homer (who was the main target of Adkins' theory concerning the culture of shame) to the tragic writers. Only occasionally does Williams comment upon classical philosophical texts, and never in great detail. This is one of the main limits of

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[8] J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 222. See also 261.

Shame and Necessity, and it is especially relevant with respect to Plato and Aristotle, who, as I mentioned earlier, were mostly viewed by progressivist historians as improving upon the original Greek culture of shame by distinguishing between autonomy and heteronomy, interiority and exteriority, conventional or political values on the one hand, and moral values on the other hand.

Perhaps it is because of the priority given to the polemical stance against the progressivist view that in *Shame and Necessity* one does not find the sensitivity one might have expected from Williams to the significance of the literary aspects in Plato's dialogues. Williams is clearly aware that the characters and the dramatic setting in Plato's dialogues deserve keen philosophic attention:

> In contrasting philosophy and literature, we should remember that some philosophy is itself literature. Philosophers often suppose that the kinds of difficulties raised for them by a literary text are not presented by texts that they classify as philosophical, but this idea is produced largely by the selective way in which they use them. We should bear in mind how drastically some of these texts are being treated when they are read in this way. […] One philosopher with whom the cost of these processes is especially high is one who will be relevant to this inquiry, Plato (*SN*, 13).

Unfortunately, Williams subsequently sets aside the problem of the proper interpretation of the literary aspects in Plato's dialogues, and in chapter 4 proceeds to raise his criticisms to Plato's conception of autonomy as if he were addressing a proto-Kantian theory (and one should add that Kant himself is given a far too schematic approach in this book). Williams's criticism of Plato's stance towards shame in the example of Gyges' ring is directed to the theory presented by a character, Glaucon, whom Williams arbitrarily identifies with Plato himself. Yet, Glaucon is only one of several characters in Plato's *Republic*. Williams does not seem to appreciate the difference between theories held by characters in a Platonic dialogue and the interpretation of the dialogue as a whole.[9]

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[9] Williams's attitude towards Plato shifts from sympathetic in "The Legacy of Greek Philosophy" (in *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal*, ed. M. I. Finley, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981, 202–255) to negative in *Shame and Necessity*. It becomes appreciative again in *Plato: the Invention of Philosophy* (Phoenix, London 1998). Williams's essays on the history of philosophy (including "The Legacy of Greek Philosophy," "Plato: the Invention of Philosophy," and six more essays on Socrates and Plato) were collected by M. Burnyeat in B. Williams, *The Sense of the Past. Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. M. Burnyeat, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2006. For a reconstruction of the motivations underlying Williams's fluctuating positions towards Plato, cfr. A. A. Long, "Williams on Greek literature and philosophy," in A. Thomas, ed., *Bernard Williams*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, 155-80. For a critical assessment of Williams's objections to Plato in *Shame and Necessity*, cfr. T. Irwin, "Critical Notice of B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*," *Apeiron* 27,

With respect to Aristotle, the problem is somewhat different. It would have been helpful to find in *Shame and Necessity* a treatment of Aristotle's conception of shame, with which Williams's theory shares some fundamental aspects. Aristotle's discussion of this emotion (the terms he employs are *aidos* and *aischyne*) can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Rhetoric*. It is debatable to what extent the meanings of *aidos* and *aischyne* overlap, but, as David Konstan helpfully pointed out, in Aristotle's ethical works *aidos* never refers to past events.[10] *Aischyne*, on the other hand, can refer to past, present and future events, as is evident in Aristotle's definition of shame in the *Rhetoric*.[11] The reference to the three temporal dimensions allows *aischyne* to play a role similar to guilt with respect to actions that one blames oneself for having done, and to function as a prospective and inhibitory emotion with respect to actions that one finds debasing but attractive.

Williams's analysis of *aidos* in the Greek world is very close to the Aristotelian view both for what concerns the intersection between the ancient conception of shame and the modern conception of guilt, and for those aspects of shame which embrace ethical phenomena wider than those relevant for guilt. For example, as Aristotle makes clear, shame (*aischyne*) can be felt not just concerning actions and behaviors for which one feels responsible, but also in situations of disadvantage with respect to one's peers, or when someone is subjected to violence and humiliation. This is a point that from Williams's perspective can be understood and appreciated in all its importance and it is a pity that it is not explicitly discussed in *Shame and Necessity*, where Aristotle's conception of shame is only left in the background.[12]

Let us now turn to Williams's response to the charges leveled against shame. Points 1) and 2) can be summarized by saying that shame is accused of being a selfish, shallow and heteronomous emotion, especially in contrast with guilt. We can of course imagine the kind of shame felt by someone who is solely driven by a

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1994, 45-76.

[10] D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2006, 95. See also the following observation: "The emotion, as Aristotle understands it, is uniform; what varies is simply the timing of the perceived ills. The lexicographers are thus wrong to split *aischyne* into sub-definitions, for there is nothing to disambiguate" (99). On the debate concerning the relationship between *aidos* and *aischyne* in EN, IV, 1128b15-23, see W.M.A Grimaldi, Aristotle, *Rhetoric II. A Commentary*, Fordham University Press, New York 1988, 105-107.

[11] *Rhet.*, ii 6.1383b13-16: "Let shame [*aischyne*] be [defined as] a sort of pain and agitation concerning the class of evils, whether present or past or future, that seem to bring a person into disrespect, and [let] shamelessness [be defined as] a belittling about these same things" (G.A. Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle: On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991).

[12] For a discussion of Aristotle's conception of shame and humiliation in light of Williams, see A. Fussi, "Aristotle on Shame," *Ancient Philosophy* 35, 2015, 113-135.

preoccupation with appearance and the opinion of others. For such a person a critical stance with respect to conventional values will be out of the question, and his feeling ashamed at his failures to adapt to the expectations of others will indeed express his conformism. However, this is not the way shame works most of the time for most people, and it is certainly not how it was meant to work in ancient Greek literature.

Let us begin with the charge of egoism. As we have seen, Adkins claimed that shame in Homer served competitive values, and was therefore a selfish emotion. If this had really been the case, Williams responds, we would find only instances of shame in the face of defeat or failure to overcome others. Yet, in the Homeric works characters are shown to be blamed for actions and situations that exemplify breaches both in competitive and in collaborative virtues. Williams invites us to remember that the terms *aidos* (shame) and *nemesis* (indignation) form a system: I will be ashamed of actions that would make me indignant or angry if they were performed by others. If we pay close attention to the kinds of actions and situations that are the object of shame and indignation in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we will realize that selfish concerns, such as personal success and victory in battle, are not the only objects of such emotions. One can feel indignant at someone running away in battle, but indignation can be an adequate response also to such actions as giving poison for arrows, sending one's mother away, or behaving like Penelope's suitors in the *Odyssey* (*SN*, 80). Shameful actions include failures to behave in a generous way, to respect one's parents, to have a sense of what I can do to others and others can do to me in such a way that we both preserve our self-respect.

Adkins' distinction between competitive and collaborative virtues does not help us to isolate those actions that in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* would be stigmatized as shameful. Failures in generosity are as blameworthy and shameful as failures in courage. The opposition between shame and guilt from the point of view of selfishness versus altruism is therefore due to a prejudice in favor of guilt rather than to the actual analysis of Greek texts.

We should note here that if *nemesis* and *aidos* form a system of reciprocal expectations and responses, then the charges raised in points 3) and 4) fall:

> The reaction in Homer to someone who has done something that shame should have prevented is *nemesis*, a reaction that can be understood, according to the context, as ranging from shock, contempt, and malice to righteous rage and indignation. It should not be thought that *nemesis* and its related words are ambiguous. It is defined as a reaction, and what it psychologically consists of properly depends on what particular violation of *aidos* it is a reaction to. As Redfield has put it, *aides* and *nemesis* are "a reflexive pair" (*SN*, 80).

In the interpretation that Williams draws from Redfield, *nemesis* is clearly a reactive response: the indignation felt at failures of *aidos* calls the other to answer for his actions and omissions rather than treat him as an object to be judged from a third-personal point of view. And if *aidos* and *nemesis* form a "reflective pair", then *aidos* itself is a reactive attitude. The shame felt by Telemachus, when he realizes that he forgot to close the door to the storeroom from which the suitors are now taking out armors and spears, entails, among other things, a recognition of responsibility and a desire to make amends (*SN*, 50-52). Telemachus' reaction is not a desire to hide from view: rather, it is a response that recognizes the authority of others to blame him for what he (albeit unintentionally) did.

Williams analyzes the concept of responsibility in the Homeric poems and shows that it entails regret and the need for reparation. The opposition between objective and reactive attitudes, with shame belonging to the former and guilt to the latter, does therefore not apply to *aidos*, which seems rather to entail traits that the opposition in question attributes to the sphere of guilt (*SN*, 90-91). The stark contrast between shame and guilt from which the progressivist view took its bearing in distinguishing us from the Greeks ought to be reconsidered.[13]

3. *The Other in Shame*

Let us now turn to discuss how Williams addresses the charge that shame, as opposed to guilt, is heteronomous, i.e., that the person feeling shame is dependent on the opinions and values of others. In this context Williams asks us to concentrate on three points:

a) We should distinguish between a concrete other and an internalized other.

b) We should consider the attitude of the other. Do we need a critical audience in order to feel ashamed?

c) We should ask ourselves if the other who elicits our shame can be anybody or needs some further characterization.

Williams argues that it is a trivial mistake to think that shame is only triggered in the presence of others who witness our actions and find them wanting.

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[13] In his review of *Shame and Necessity* (*Mind*, New Series, Vol. 104, No. 413, Jan., 1995, 214-219) Colin Allen asks whom Williams is referring to when he speaks of "we" and "the Greeks." Williams anticipates the objection to the usage of the first person plural by explaining that it is an invitational "we": "More than one friend, reading this book in an earlier version, has asked who this ubiquitous 'we' represents. It refers to people in a certain cultural situation, but who is in that situation? Obviously it cannot mean everybody in the world, or everybody in the West. I hope it does not mean only people who already think as I do. The best I can say is that 'we' operates not through a previously fixed designation, but through invitation. (The same is true, I believe, of 'we' in much philosophy, and particularly in ethics.) It is not a matter of 'I' telling 'you' what I and others think, but of my asking you to consider to what extent you and I think some things and perhaps need to think others." (*SN*, note 7, 171).

If we understand the Homeric culture as indeed a "culture", and not just as a heap of facts from the past or a collection of actions and speeches lacking any internal structure, we have to acknowledge that the characters we encounter in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* exhibit the culture of shame in their distinctive manners: they typically do certain things, and would never do other things. Now, the idea that shame is fear of being seen by others while doing blameworthy actions fails to account for the fact that someone like Achilles would find certain actions simply below himself, regardless of whether someone or no one saw him. Can we conceive of Achilles stealing by night the gifts that he had arrogantly refused to accept from the embassy in the clear light of day? Would such an action satisfy his sense of honor? Petty stealing, doing in secret what he could not do openly, is simply not part of Achilles' character.

Achilles is not Gyges, who, having found a ring of invisibility, commits all sorts of crimes. Before finding the ring, Gyges looked like a good person. So tells us Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*, who uses the example of Gyges to prove that people follow the law not because of justice, but in fear of punishment. Williams takes issue with Glaucon's thesis precisely because the example assumes that norms cannot be internalized. [14]

If shame were operative only in the presence of concrete witnesses Achilles, one of the most important representatives of a culture of shame, would not be inhibited from stealing when nobody could see him. If such a picture is unthinkable, it is because, as Williams points out, understanding Achilles means understanding his manners, and this implies that his sense of shame is not reducible to paying lip service to the expectations of those who happen to be present in the scene of his life at the time (*SN*, 81).

If shame entails reference to another, the other must be capable of playing a role independently of his concrete presence: the other of shame is an *internalized other*. Shame plays an inhibitory role even when one is alone and certain that nobody will find out what he is tempted to do. If this is the case, then the opposition with guilt is even in this case less stark than one was initially led to believe. Shame is far from a shallow emotion: like guilt, its roots are in our interiority. The concrete other can trigger my shame, but is not what shame can be reduced to.

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[14] *SN*, 98-101. The problem with Williams's objection is that he attributes Glaucon's thesis to Plato. In my view, Socrates responds to the example of Gyges when, in book IV of the *Republic* he introduces *thumos*, the part of the soul responsible for the internalization of norms. *Thumos* makes us respond with anger and indignation to the injustices committed by others, and with shame when we are to blame. I have discussed Williams's objection to Glaucon's example, as well as what I take to be Socrates' response, in A. Fussi, "La critica di Williams alla *Repubblica* di Platone," *Méthexis*, Volume 22, 2009, 39-59; see also A. Fussi, "Inconsistencies in Glaucon's Account of Justice," *Polis, The Journal of the Society for Greek Political Thought* (UK), vol. 24.1, Spring 2007, 43-69.

Let us now focus on the other's attitude. Do we need a critical audience in order to feel shame?

In shame one feels *exposed.* In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre discusses two examples: in the first example, a person making a vulgar gesture suddenly realizes that he is being seen. Now the gesture, which had previously clung unreflectively to the subject, abruptly becomes a matter of judgment, a vulgar gesture, something that makes him shudder in shame. In the second example (which Williams takes up in his discussion) someone is induced by jealousy to peep though a keyhole. He is entirely absorbed in the action when he is abruptly brought to self-reflection by the sound of some steps in the hall. In both cases shame comes as the painful realization that the person is doing something vulgar at the same time as he realizes that he is being observed.[15] Shame is seeing ourselves through the eyes of another whose gaze is critical of us.

From Sartre onwards, scholars assumed that most cases of shame would involve an audience taking a negative attitude towards a subject, who, in turn, shares the audience's critical view. Yet, as Gabriele Taylor has pointed out in her pivotal study on the emotions of self-assessment, one can feel ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience or for the wrong reasons.[16] If I feel contempt for someone, his admiration can trigger my shame. If the other has reasons to feel that I should be flattered by his admiration, I may, in turn, have reasons to feel ashamed of it.

Williams, like Taylor, refers to Max Scheler's example of a model who, having been sitting naked for a painter, at some point realizes that the painter is no longer absorbed in his work but looks at her body with desire. All of a sudden the model is no longer protected by an impersonal relation with the painter: she feels exposed and ashamed of her nudity.

Of course shame might not be her only reaction: she could feel anger at the painter's unprofessional attitude, or fear if she thought that he might assault her. Two paintings come to mind, one by Rembrandt and one by Artemisia Gentileschi, in which we see a woman realizing all of a sudden that her nudity is exposed to the gaze of two lecherous men.[17] The scene portrayed is the famous biblical episode of *Susanna and the Elders.* Two corrupt judges blackmail Susanna, the virtuous wife of a wealthy man, having introduced themselves into her garden while she was bathing, and demanding sexual favors.

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[15] See J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 221 for the first example and 259 for the second example.

[16] G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt. Emotions of Self-Assessment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, 59ff..

[17] I owe to Peter Hacker, who let me read part of his book manuscript on the emotions (*The Passions – a Study of Human Nature*), the reference to Rembrandt's *Susanna and the Elders* as an "an archetypal representation of the primal feeling of shame."

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1647. Oil-on-panel painting, 76.6 by 92.8 cm
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Germany.

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and The Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas, 170 by 121cm. Graf von
Schonborn Kunstsammlungen. Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden, Germany.

In Artemisia's painting, the two well-dressed men are very close to Susanna's naked body, so that the stress is not as much on their gaze as on their threatening proximity. They are whispering to each other, while Susanna averts her face in revulsion.

Rembrandt portrays Susanna while she is looking away in front of her. We can imagine she is meeting the gaze of the painting's viewers, who are thus involved in the voyeuristic scene. One man is grabbing the cloth which barely covers part of her body; more than excited by her nakedness he looks reflective and malicious, as if he were pondering how he could profit from the situation. The other man, more at a distance, is leering at her with a sort of amused lust.

Artemisia portrays a woman who feels in danger — the scene is one of terror — while Rembrandt focuses our attention on Susanna's shame at being exposed to the two men's intrusive and lascivious gaze. In both paintings the men show no sign of uneasiness about what they are doing. They are shameless.

Even though the two painters represent differently Susanna's emotional reaction to the men's voyeurism, she certainly does not face a critical audience. Susanna (or, rather, her body) is represented without any doubt as an object of desire in the men's eyes. If what we recognize in Rembrandt's painting is shame, then we have to wonder if a critical gaze is relevant at all in generating this emotional reaction.

A similar point can be made with respect to the model in Scheler's example. The painter is certainly not critical of her. Actually, she might even feel that from his perspective she should consider herself flattered by his sexual attention. The shame she feels cannot derive, then, from her identification with the attitude of the audience. Taylor suggests that what is involved here is a more complex reflective structure:

> The model need not see herself as the artist sees her. But as the result of realizing her relation to him she sees herself in a new light. The point can be expressed by introducing a second, higher order point of view from which she is seen not as an object of sexual interest, but is seen as being seen as such an object. With this point of view she does identify, and this point of view is a critical one. The adverse judgment, however, comes not from the artist, but comes from herself. It is critical in that it pronounces it wrong for her to be so seen, at least at this time and by this audience.[18]

Williams, in turn, does not think that we necessarily need to imagine two kinds of judgments — the positive judgment belonging to the concrete other (the painter's desire for the model), and the negative judgment, belonging to the model (that she should not be seen as a sexual object by such a man). What is relevant in the scene is that the model feels suddenly exposed. Previously her nakedness did not make her feel vulnerable: as Williams puts it, "she had previously been clothed in her role as a model; that has been taken from her, and she is left truly exposed, to a desiring eye." (*SN*, 222). In other words, the feeling of shame is a reaction to the consciousness of her loss of power.

The idea that shame may be connected to a loss of power is interesting, though in this particular case, as we have seen in the two different pictorial interpretations of *Susanna and the Elders*, the sense of being exposed could cause fear rather than shame. What is it that makes Susanna's awareness of her loss of

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[18] G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985, 61.

power turn into shame rather than fear?

 In the case of shame the loss of power is not linked, as in the case of fear, to a concern with the consequences for one's safety, but, rather, to a concern with one's worth. The model feels ashamed at the thought that the painter might think it appropriate to look at her like that. If this is the case, though, one can see why Taylor thought it necessary to introduce a second, higher order point of view. Williams, on the other hand, introduces the higher order point of view as a second step in the process by which a certain figure is internalized. In his view, what initially appears as a loss of power in the eyes of a concrete observer, can become a loss of power or a failing in the eyes of an internalized other:

> The root of shame lies in exposure in a more general sense, in being at a disadvantage: in what I shall call, in a very general phrase, a loss of power. The sense of shame is a reaction of the subject to the consciousness of this loss: in Gabriele Taylor's phrase, quoted in the text, it is "the emotion of self-protection." [...] More generally, the loss of power is not actually constituted by the presence of a watcher, even though it is still a loss of power "in the eyes of another." A process of internalization is now possible, and "bootstrapping" can proceed in terms of an increasing ethical content given to the occasions of shame (*SN*, 220-221).

In other words: what in the experience of nakedness is a loss of power caused by a concrete observer, becomes, with internalization, a loss of power or failing in the eyes of an internalized figure, and being actually seen by someone while doing something that one would consider a failing is no longer necessary. Suppose I am a writer. Realizing that my novel appeals to people whose tastes I despise makes me feel like a cheap writer. Someone I despise, however, can be right about my failings. In this case my shame is compounded: I agree with the negative assessment, and I find it even more painful because it comes from a person whose views I normally do not take into account.

Williams takes up Taylor's point concerning the attitude of the audience, and applies it thus to his theory of shame:

> Shame need not be just a matter of being seen, but of being seen by an observer with a certain view. Indeed, the view taken by the observer need not itself be critical: people can be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the wrong way. Equally, they need not be ashamed of being poorly viewed, if the view is that of an observer for whom they feel contempt. Hector was indeed afraid that someone inferior to him would be able to criticize him, but that was because he thought the criticism would be true, and the fact that such a person could make it would only make things worse. The mere fact that such a person had something hostile to say would not in itself

necessarily concern him. Similarly on the Greek side of the war, the opinions of Nestor carried weight, and those of Thersites did not (*SN*, 82).

Shame is not just *in the face of someone*, but *about something*, and, as we have now seen at some lenghth, some actions do inspire shame even if those whose gaze is upon us applaud what we are doing or believe that we should be pleased by what they are doing.

This implies that we should distinguish the perspective of the agent from the perspective of the audience by focusing on the content of the judgment that plays a role in shame. The concrete other whose gaze triggers our shame may or may not judge things the way we do. If we despise someone's judgment we will not be ashamed in front of him, unless we realize that what we are doing is indeed shameful, and we come to realize it not because our witness is reliable, but because having a witness makes us take a distance from what we are doing.

In sum: there is a difference between the internalized other and the concrete other. The internalized other is someone whose judgment we share; the concrete other is someone who may be critical, admiring, indifferent, and whose judgment we need not share.[19]

If being admired by someone we despise makes us feel ashamed, then the internalized other, the other whose judgment we share, does not coincide with the concrete other who happens to approve what we are doing. It is not true, then, that shame is fear of losing face before any kind of audience, or that it is a superficial emotion which relies only on external appearance.

To some extent it is true that shame exposes our being dependent on the opinions of others, but we should also add that the others in question must be

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[19] See *SN*, 82: "Even if shame and its motivations always involve in some way or other an idea of the gaze of another, it is important that for many of its operations the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do. It is not so, of course, with the most elementary case, the shame of exposure when naked; someone who was afraid in that case of being exposed to a merely imaginary observer would be afraid of his own nakedness, and his fear would be pathological. But the imaginary observer can enter very early in the progression towards more generalized social shame. Sartre describes a man who is looking through a keyhole and suddenly realizes that he is being watched. He might think that it was shameful to do it, not just to be seen doing it, and in that case, an imagined watcher could be enough to trigger the reactions of shame." Sartre is claiming that what forces the man to move from being completely immersed in the activity of looking through the keyhole to becoming conscious of himself is the presence of another. Williams may be moving too quickly here from exposure to the gaze of another to the imagined gaze of the imagined other. For a critical view of the role of the internalized other in the explanation of shame, see J. A. Deonna, R. Rodogno, and F. Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

people whose opinions we respect. This was a central point in Aristotle's treatment of *aischyne*.[20] Williams finds it expressed in Homer:

> Nausikaa is afraid of what people will say if they see her with the handsome stranger, and that there will be a scandal; but she adds:
> 'And I myself would think badly of a girl who acted so'.
> [...] An agent will be motivated by prospective shame in the face of people who would be angered by conduct that, in turn, they would avoid for those same reasons. Nausikaa is conscious of how she shares with others the reactions that they might have to her. [...] There has to be something for these interrelated attitudes to be about. It is not merely a structure by which I know that you will be annoyed with me because you know that I will be annoyed with you. These reciprocal attitudes have a content: some kinds of behavior are admired, others accepted, others despised, and it is those attitudes that are internalized, not simply the prospect of hostile reactions (*SN*, 83-84).

Let us now turn to the third point highlighted by Williams. By distinguishing the views and the attitude of the concrete other from those of the internalized other we come to realize that the problem of heteronomy is more complex than the usual charges raised against shame may lead us to believe. However, even if we grant that the other of shame is not just anybody who happens to be our witness, we could still object that the values on the basis of which we respond with shame are heteronomous in the sense that the internalized other is a representative of the society, of the neighbors, of others with whose moral criteria we uncritically identify.

Here Williams warns us about the risks of a Manichean attitude. It would be tempting to defend shame from the charge of heteronomy by assuming that the internalized other is free of any influences derived from the contingent factors of our social, historical and political life. In this perspective the other, in so far as he or she plays a role in shame, would simply be someone whose judgment we share. The important point is not *who* the other is, but *what he or she thinks*. If he thinks what we think, we preserve our autonomy of judgment: the charge of heteronomy vanishes, or is in any way considerably weakened. The internalized other, if we follow this line of thinking, is just an echo of our conscience.

If we assume this purified sense of the internalized other, however, we face a problem: in what sense can we still talk of an "other," if all that remains after

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[20] "Since shame is imagination (*phantasia*) about a loss of reputation and for its own sake, not for its results, and since no one cares about reputation [in the abstract] but on account of those who hold an opinion of him, necessarily a person feels shame toward those whose opinion he takes account of" (*Rhet.*, ii 6.1384a24-27).

having purified the other of its accretions is the content itself (that this or that action is vulgar), and not the gaze that makes us aware of our vulgar gesture, and the perspective from which it appears vulgar?

We cannot have it both ways. We cannot hope to save shame from the charge of heteronomy by grounding its content in our own judgment, while at the same time holding on to the phenomenological insight that in shame we feel *exposed*, i.e., that we feel shame in the face of another. If we think that the real or imaginary other does indeed play a significant role in the emotion we cannot allow it to turn into a ghost empty of all determinations.

Williams's solution is not to defend shame from the charge of heteronomy at all costs, but to make us aware that an attack on shame in the name of autonomy may be misguided:

> It is a mistake to take that reductive step and to suppose that there are only two options: that the other in ethical thought must be an identifiable individual or a representative of the neighbors, on the one hand, or else be nothing at all except an echo chamber for my solitary moral voice. Those alternatives leave out much of the substance of actual ethical life. The internalized other is indeed abstracted and generalized and idealized, 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 (*SN*, 84).

Once again it is by reference to Greek literature that Williams invites us to see why it is important to hold on to the idea that the internalized other is "potentially somebody rather than nobody." Someone who, like Ajax, is led by shame to consider suicide a necessity, may appear at first sight irrational. Williams's subtle analysis makes us listen to the other whose disappointment Ajax cannot face. He cannot continue to live in a world in which those he respects can no longer respect him.

One can try to fill the concept of respect with purely abstract content, or claim that the voice of autonomy is pure and our dignity unshakable. Williams leads us down the opposite path: by paying heed to shame we become sensitive to the reciprocal expectations that bind us with each other, and willing to question the idea that concepts like dignity or autonomy are really helpful in establishing clear-cut historical boundaries.