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Shame and History

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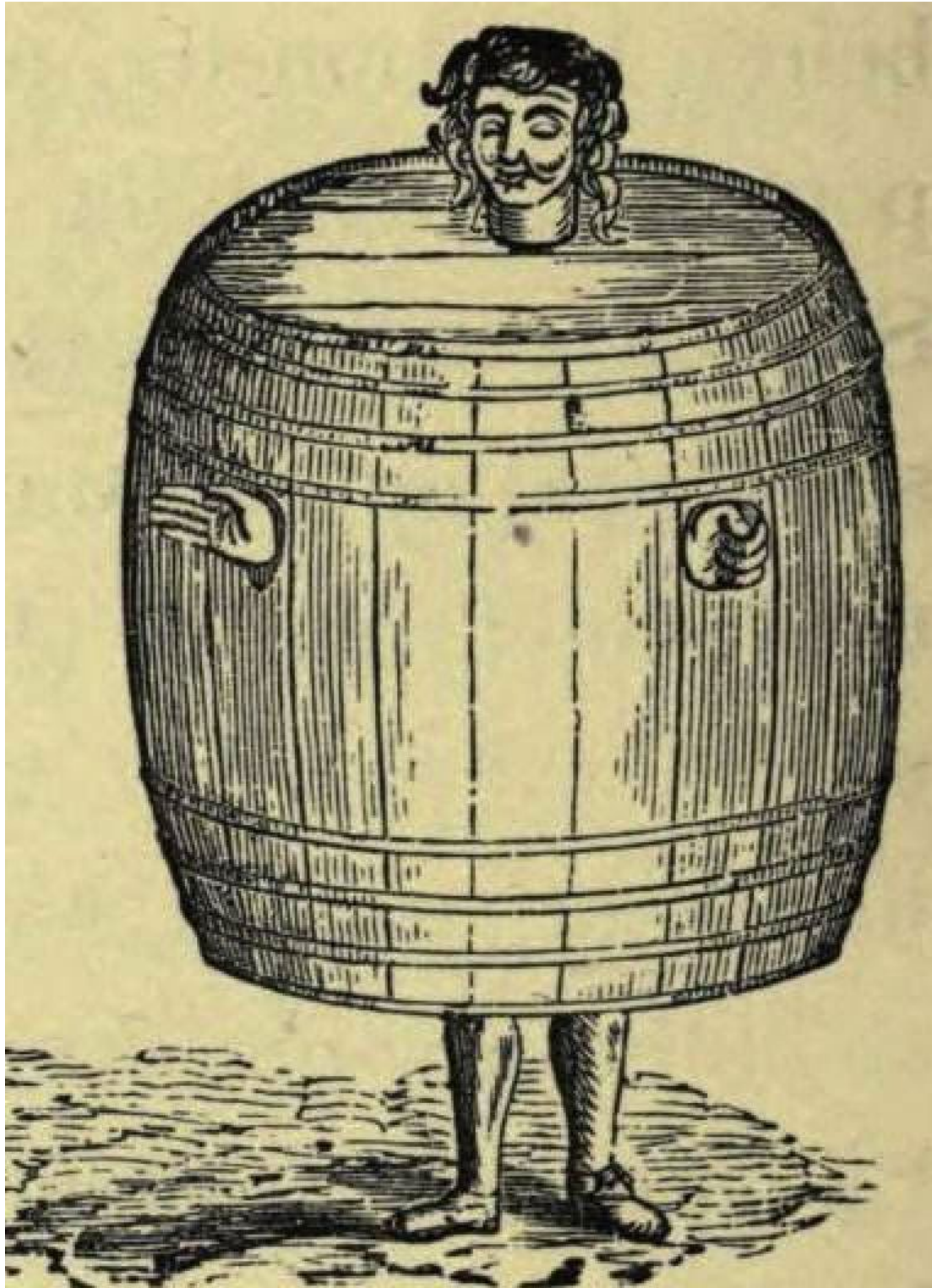
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Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera



Shame and History

by [Bennett Gilbert](#) · Published 09/01/2024 · Updated 08/01/2024



Shame;

URL: <https://londonist.com/2015/12/a-history-of-public-shaming-in-london-part-2>. Image Rights: Non-Proprietary.

If history—our past, the sum of our thoughts, passions, and deeds—is so pervasive, influential, and meaningful, why then do we lose sight of it? Why do we not gain good values from it? And if it is part of our existential core, why then do we so often fail to ravel it into our deliberations?

I propose that very often and to a great degree it is shame that separates us from history. Shame: garrulous, compulsive, intense, omnivorous. A shamed person pushes away the experiences that shame her, thus cutting off the past. If personal identity requires memory of the real past of events and feelings, then suppression of history suppresses a part of subjectivity. Shame locks her in place, disabling the plasticity and adaptability that she requires to deal with what will happen to her by moving anachronically in time. When it is a sudden occurrence, whether at the hands of others or as an eruption of one's own misbehavior, that leads one to be ashamed, the shock stops time from both past and future. Even when it is not sudden, the shame nonetheless arises from a shock of recognition of pain, harm, and bad behavior. Here self-reflection and internal deliberation are deprived of the fund of past experience on which they rely and are blinded, at least for a while, to the new experiences that would deflate the shame. For shame protects itself by freezing the sufferer's diachronesis. When we are in shame, our capacity for self-reflection, never absolute, is broadly converted into the self-defense that feelings of shame generate and require. In shame the contents of one's consciousness are fewer and thinner, as we expand our shame into the available space. Typically, the shamed person, cut off from the moral force of history through the routes I described, reacts in one of two ways: either by shrinking away into powerlessness or by hardening through aggrandized power. Both are overcompensations though in opposite directions.

There are of course many kinds of shame. Shame also accompanies other affects. It can, for example, overlap guilt, regret, contempt, or resentment. Some shame can serve as a spur to ameliorative changes in feeling or action. This salutary shame can apply to both intended and accidental acts. It might seem odd to take responsibility for unintended but not if we think of a specific kind of shame and responsibility that suits the situation. Other kinds of shame for unintended acts come from suspicion of unconscious motive or disgust that life is such that one does unintended harm just because that is the way causation works. Some philosophers see shame as concerning only the shamed person.¹ The cognitivist account enhances this by regarding shame as an autonomous cognitive evaluation of one's deficiencies or losses.² Bernard Williams holds that shame does this as an internalized causality reflected from the attitudes of others.³ Max Scheler says shame can bring insight.⁴ Here I use "shame" to refer to all those feelings of shame that serve viciously to disconnect us from the passage of time, rather than to guilt. The aspect of shame I am interested in here is not that of self-assessment or evaluative practice, even though all shame requires self-appraisal, or indeed as any kind of empirical psychological descriptor. Instead, we ought to look at its role in the relations of subjects to the world to which they are naturally bound, which comes to them as the sum of common experience in which time is made meaningful to moral agents. This is not shame as a moral power; and it is not shame as an emotion of failure, loss, or inadequacy. It is failure, loss, and inadequacy as disruptors of the world through disabling the moral agency of persons.⁵ Persons in shame cease to communicate, cease to share, cease to trust, and cease to proceed with the individual and collective projects. Shame alienates what should adhere and estranges that which should be esteemed.⁶

When in shame, we englobe ourselves apart from the world to a consequential extent. This might feel spatial. Because our own minds are the station from which our routes to others in the world extend, we feel trapped in a locus when we shut off access to the routes out. If the communicating links completely collapse, we might even become agoraphobic. We might feel our body so altered as to fear touching, or sex, or being seen. But what are the worlds we retreat from and into? They are bodies of accumulated past experience and hoped-for experience. While it might seem that in shame we hold tightly onto some bad experiences and, immersing ourselves in them, refuse to let them go, this is a superficial analysis. In fact, we privilege these shaming memories above all the rest of our history, so that they block out the past. They reduce or suppress its richness. Under shame, we think about fewer things and, thus contracted, we lose the balance that the sum of us can provide. Here I mean not only that one loses the sum of herself but also that she loses the part of her that would flourish were she not isolating it in a shame spiral. The perversion of introspection that shame spiraling creates disables a person's ability to do otherwise. We reach what I call the inner finitude that is self-destructiveness.

A familiar example is when a group has been shamed for its actions, and especially when this rises to the level of collective guilt, some people will harden themselves into hostile renunciation of either the wrongfulness of the shameful acts or crimes or of their own responsibility for what they or those they want to protect have done. They might wear the symbols of the regime that corrupted their group with defiance and aggression. In such cases, they are disconnected from history even though lost in some part of the past, and they utterly lose the affordances of knowledge and experience of the past to generate moral deliberation and obligation. In the opposite mode, a shamed person might lose all healthy assertiveness or even the will to live. Such a person, too, is disconnected from history precisely because she is trapped in one piece of it. Of both these modes we well know the unhappy results. One cannot reject a part of history and yet become a moral person, any more than one can reject a part of humanity. This is the way shame brings moral change for the worse. The opposite direction of entering into history in full does not guarantee moral improvement, but at least it makes it possible. Without it, our ability to know ourselves is hampered because we are shamed into cowering before the complexity of the world; the knower, too, being ashamed, hides and, starting in ever so small ways, becomes self-destructive, even when not carrying this drive to completion. When we drain our saturated experience so that all feeling is funneled around losses that evacuate our self-respect, we lose respect for our others as well.

By debilitating our energies, shame affects the future as well in a way that is best understood as proceeding from disconnection from the past just as much as the operation of shame on one's present is to be understood. Under shame, hope diminishes or disappears. Kant recognized this connection between shame and the future, and indeed it is one of the sources of his interest in attempting a philosophy of history. In *The Critique of Judgment* he defines respect (*Achtung*) as "The feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us."⁷ It is an affective response to our recognition of the greatness of the moral law as a reality that is sublime, that is more powerful than we but not with the effect of scaring us but rather with the effect of causing us to enter into a profound connection with itself.⁸ The affect is an inclination toward its object caused by its real properties and so not necessarily one of pleasure, though Kant sometimes sees inclination as a kind of liking.⁹ Respect here pertains to something we want though we are limited in our capacity to take perfect possession of it. But respect is not merely awareness of

limitation or of our finitude. It includes something else that pulls us toward this object with a species of rational desire. For the awe inside of respect also

... betrays [to the imagination] its proper vocation of making itself adequate to the same as a law. Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an Object of nature ...; and this feeling renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility.¹⁰

Incapacity to be perfect does not, or should not, displease us, at least when it comes to the moral law, that is, the Good Itself. It is not a matter, for Kant, of either pleasure or displeasure, though both course through the experience. Now, Kant sees respect as a step toward accepting moral duty, but what is more relevant here is the connection with hope, which becomes the engine of his views on history.¹¹ If we lose respect for something, we have no hope in regard to it—no hope for its success, perhaps, but especially for our attaining the goal we seek from it. If we do not respect the moral law, even though moral duty in itself is worthy of respect without our having to create respect for it and of itself has “dominion” over our sensibility, we lack hope for attaining it. Hopeless, we do nothing, but it requires our effortful striving.¹² So respect is tied to hope; our hopes are attached to what we respect enough to reach for. When we are in shame, we do not respect ourselves, and therefore will not hope for our improvement, and then will not respect the moral law or other persons.¹³

And now the law of duty, through the positive worth that observance of it lets us feel, finds easier access through the respect for ourselves in the consciousness of our freedom. When this is well established, when a human being dreads nothing more than to find, on self-examination, that he is worthless and contemptible in his own eyes, then every good moral disposition can be grafted onto it, because this is the best, and indeed the sole, guard to prevent ignoble and corrupting impulses from breaking into the mind.¹⁴

Loss of self-respect, or shame, darkens the future. Inside of this observation is the fact that we need the past in order to go forward. Shame finds no hope in the future because it has lost hope in the past. Under shame we see our past as entirely conditioned and its misfortunes straitened into a pre-determined future.

Shame usually involves an expectation of limitation or diminishment. It usually catastrophizes some part of the future the shamed person expects. This fear seems to the sufferer to be a kind of pre-cognition, a prediction about self and world made on the basis of present feelings about self as reflected by the world internalized and by any other portions of character that might be innate. Hope for pleasant and beneficial things in the future may well run pretty much the same way. And both are generally compounded of dispositional wishes and falsifiable inferences. But with shame something is at work that does not operate in the case of other fears or in the case of disappointed hopes. The all-cognizing subject, the scientific inquirer proceeding along empirical lines or the metaphysician confecting ascending totalities, is undermined by an abyss in her own personhood. Hope itself, as well as the past, is cut off; and the regularities and repeatability we expect of experience on which we hope to grow are wounded. By freezing time into the shaming events preserved by and repeated in memory, the person becomes self-destructive in greater or lesser measure. Any humiliation inside of an instance of shame extends to knowledge itself and

especially to the pretension to totalized knowledge and the vanity of the all-knowing subject. Loss of the past and loss of the future are nothing less than the capacity of self-destruction that we exercise when we are in shame.

This capacity is both a reflex against and a product of our vulnerability and fragility. Fears shape what we do as we face our contingent existence in finitude. Shame is a judgment on our limitations and inadequacies, a pained awareness of how little we can do and how frightful is fortune. We suffer from all this, but we also make it worse. Left to itself, shame spirals downward. We cause pain for others and for ourselves and then cause more pain through the collapse of moral agency in shame. We can, of course, resume moral agency, to which guilt is more of a spur than is its partner shame; we can resume our agency by practices or beliefs we come to trust more than we do the mix of pleasure and sin that shame gives us. But it is more accurate to call it a resurrection: there is no seamless resumption, no matter how gradual, without there having been a breakdown under shame and an awareness of the break that somehow comes to grips with it. We face natural challenges with our moral labor; we succeed but partially and partially, or fully fail, and are always in the face of having to accept great losses and an ultimate loss; the trying, succeeding, failing, shaming, and recovery from shame are also all moral labor, which ceases only when shame numbs our strength. We damage ourselves by shame when reacting to limitation and inadequacy, and we then lash out from shame through the many affects that can hurt ourselves and others—or we turn instead to the acts and attitudes that nourish the community of persons, including our own selves, and the world we inhabit.

Our labor as moral agents facing the challenges of nature and society with our accumulated experience—our most fundamental instrument—creates our moral worlds. Persons pursue and react to their trans-generational interdependence as the historicity that is culture and civilization through these moral worlds. It is through them that persons cultivate individual and collective moral agency in their labors to do good and to improve the lives they care for. To understand moral life through the history by which persons necessarily build up their moral agency requires that we understand history in terms of moral labor. But by isolating us from history, shame twists the force of the moral orders and distorts our moral labor.

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1. For example, Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. [↗]
2. Matthew Stewart Rukgaber, “Philosophical Anthropology and the Interpersonal Theory of the Affect of Shame,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 49, no. 1 (2018), 83-112, 88ff. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-12341338>. [↗]
3. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 82-84. [↗]
4. Scheler writes largely about sexual shame, which he believes can lead to readiness for Christian redemption, in “Shame and Feelings of Modesty,” in *Person and Self-Value: three essays*, ed. M. S. Frings. Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987, 1-86. [↗]
5. Rukgaber, “Philosophical Anthropology,” 99, 100, 102, and 105. [↗]
6. This is a novel employment of the concept of shame, though it is broadly in line with what Scheler called its “metaphysical” significance, seen through phenomenology, and is influenced by the work of Rukgaber and others. But most of all it is an ethical approach but different from that of Williams and followers. [↗]
7. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated from German by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 105 /256-257. [↗]
8. *Ibid.*, 96/249). [↗]
9. *Ibid.*, 63/22); but cf. 49/209-210). [↗]
10. Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Practical Reason,” in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation*, translated from German by Mary Gregor. Vol. 4: Practical Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 106/4:460-461. [↗]
11. Especially in the “Idea for a Universal History.” [↗]
12. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 126/273. [↗]
13. Kant develops this in “The Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Cambridge Edition*. Vol. 4, 557-558/6:435. [↗]
14. Kant, “Critique of Practical Reason,” 128-129/8:457-458. [↗]

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