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THE EMOTION OF SHAME IN MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

Abstract

In her book Pride, Shame and Guilt *(1985) Gabriele Taylor argues that there are two factors in each case of shame: a self-regarding adverse judgement that one is degraded and awareness that one ought not to be in the position of being seen by a possible detached observer. Taking this as a starting-point, I first show, perhaps unsurprisingly, that there is a tradition in ancient and medieval philosophy in which the emotion of shame is understood in roughly the same way as in Taylor's book. This is exemplified by Aristotle and Aquinas. My second point is that there is another tradition in which shame involves the thought of being degraded which, however, does not include the standpoint of an objective observer. This is Augustine's theory of shame as a common feature of human consciousness. I also comment on Richard of Saint Victor's twelfth-century theory of good shame, which combines elements of caution, guilt, and modesty.*

In her *Pride, Shame and Guilt* (1985) Gabriele Taylor discusses the emotions mentioned in the title of the book as those of self-assessment. She argues that the experience of such emotions involves beliefs about the self, its relations to social norms and its consequent standing in the world. Since Taylor's work, many authors have published philosophical books or articles about shame and guilt in English, for example, Patricia Greenspan, *Practical Guilt: Moral Dilemmas, Emotions, and Social Norms* (1995), Phil Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy* (2008), and Julien A. Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion* (2012). The social, cognitive and neural aspects of the emotions of pride, shame, and guilt are discussed by many scholars in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, ed. Jessica L. Tracy, June Price Tangney and Richard W. Robins (2007).

In the first chapter of her book, Taylor comments on Hume's view of pride, which has been a popular subject among Anglo-American authors. The second chapter, which is about shame, begins with a brief explanation of the famous anthropological distinction between a shame-culture and a guilt-culture. The distinguishing mark of the former is that public esteem is regarded as the basic value and public respect and self-respect stand and fall together, as in the heroes of Homer's *Iliad*. Loss of honour in a shame-culture means that one has failed to meet the demands of the social group of which one is a member. Since people share the point of view of the group, they have failed in their eyes as well. Earlier in her book Taylor refers to medieval feudal chivalry, which exemplifies the social notions of pride and humility in a shame culture as well. While shame was an essential part of the medieval knightly system (Flannery 2012), the discussion of the emotion of shame in medieval scholarly treatises did not have many links with this social context. (See also Müller 2011.)

Taylor thinks that feelings of shame have preserved some structural features which show similarities to those of shame-culture. One of these is the fact that shame requires the idea of an audience. A person thinks or imagines being seen as deviating from a norm and in feeling shame he or she identifies with the audience's view and concludes that status has been lost. According to Taylor, there are basically two factors in each case of shame. First, there is a self-regarding adverse judgement that one is degraded, being not the sort of person one believed or hoped one should be. Second, there is the notion of the audience, which can be described as awareness that one ought not to be in a position where one could be seen by a possible detached observer. Whether one is seen or imagines there is an observer is less relevant than the awareness of an observer-description. This distinguishes shame from other self-assessment emotions.

Shame may be associated with guilt, but need not be. These are different emotions, guilt deriving from a legal context. A person is guilty if he or she breaks a law, which may be a social or religious institution or a moral principle of right. People may be guilty without feeling guilty; feeling guilty implies an acceptance of a norm authority which Taylor says may be the voice of conscience, the notion of which is clearest if it is thought to reflect the edicts of some god. The notion of authority in guilt is often as obscure as that of the audience in shame may be obscure; however, while guilt is accompanied by an awareness of oneself in relation to obligatory action or abstention, shame is about oneself under a negative observer-description.

Without evaluating Taylor's analysis, I take her account of shame as a starting-point for some historical observations. I would like to show that there is a tradition in ancient and medieval philosophy in which the emotion of shame is understood in roughly the same way as in Taylor's book. This is exemplified by Aristotle and Aquinas. My second point is that there is another tradition in which shame involves the thought of being degraded which, however, does not include the standpoint of an objective observer, at least not in the same way as in the former case. This is Augustine's theory of shame as a common feature of human consciousness. I also comment on Richard of Saint Victor's twelfth-century theory of good shame, which combines elements of caution, guilt and modesty.

1. *Shame in Aristotle*

In commenting on Heidegger's view of emotions as self-regarding moods (*Stimmungen*), Ernst Tugendhat refers to Aristotle's remarks on the awareness of the self in occurrent emotions (1986, 178-187). This aspect is most explicitly formulated in *Rhetoric* II.11 in which Aristotle explains the pleasant or unpleasant feeling associated with various acts or events. His idea is that certain evaluations of things may induce a positive or negative imagination of oneself with respect to these evaluations, which is why their objects are experienced as pleasant or unpleasant. One may also think here of Plato's remarks about pleasant and unpleasant feelings caused by the mental representations of ourselves and others in the comedies and tragedies of life (*Philebus* 50b). Aristotle writes:

> Victory is pleasant, not merely to the competitive, but to everyone, for there is produced an appearance (*phantasia*) of superiority and everybody has a more or less keen appetite for that ... Honour and good repute are among the most pleasant things, because they produce the appearance of oneself as possessing the qualities of an excellent man ... A friend is also

among the pleasant things, for it is pleasant to love ... and to be loved, for here again an appearance that one is good is produced, a thing desired by all people who are aware of it (*Rhetoric* I.11, 1370b32-1371a20).

The appearance of oneself (*phantasia heautou*) as an aspect of emotion is also included in Aristotle's account of shame, which is said to involve an appearance of disgrace and to arise from this and not from its consequences (*Rhetoric* II.6, 1384a21-23). It is defined as a pain in regard to evil things, whether past, present or future, which seem likely to involve us in discredit. Shamelessness is contempt or indifference in regard to these things. Shame includes an idea of social discredit. 'The people before whom we feel shame are those whose opinion of us matters to us.' Aristotle refers to the proverb 'Shame dwells in the eyes', because we feel shame about a thing when it is done, 'before the eyes of all people'. He ends the chapter about shame by quoting Antiphon the poet who said to the others who went with through the gates to be executed: 'Why do you cover your faces? Is it lest some of the crowd should see you tomorrow?' (See *Rhetoric* II.6, 1384a23-1385a13.)

Aristotle's analysis of shame combines elements of how the notions of *aidos* and *aiskhyne* are dealt with in ancient philosophical sources, one feature of these terms being that *aidos* often refers to caution or modesty and the inclination to avoid shameful things. *Aiskhyne* is related to what has happened, though it can also be used in the same way as *aidos* (Cairns 1993, Konstan 2006, 91-110). Because of his interest in the psychology of emotions in general, Aristotle tries to identify the standard constituents of occurrent emotions in shame as well: evaluative cognition of an object, pleasant or unpleasant feeling about this, typical behavioural suggestion, and the accompanying physiological changes, in this case becoming red in the face. He stresses the idea of the audience, which Taylor regards as definitional of shame. (For the structure of emotions in Aristotle, see Knuuttila 2006, 32-33.)

A reference to an audience is also typical of the notion of shame in ancient Roman literature. In his *Emotion, Restraint and Community in Ancient Rome* (2005), Robert Kaster describes the kernel of the emotion of shame (*pudor*) in Roman authors as something experienced when 'I see my self being seen as discredited, when the value that I or others grant that self is not what I would have it be' (29). Whereas the term *verecundia* is sometimes used as a synonym of *pudor*, it is more usually understood as another emotion related to an attitude of protecting the self by not offending others. This sense is close to temperance and modesty to which *verecundia* is allied in Cicero's account of the virtue of decency (*De officiis* I.93). Kaster also pays attention to some texts in which one is said to be seen by oneself in discreditable terms even without the fear of a bad reputation (60-65).

2. *Shame in Aquinas and Richard of Saint Victor*

In his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas presents a very detailed taxonomy of emotions which is influenced by some earlier medieval theories. The contrary motions of the concupiscible power are directed towards contrary ends (sense-good and sense-evil), and the contrary motions of the irascible power with respect to arduous objects are approaches toward and withdrawals from the same object. There are eleven types of emotion: three pairs of contrary concupiscible emotions and two pairs of contrary irascible emotions; anger has no opposite. Three pairs of emotions in the concupiscible power are love and hate, desire and avoidance, and joy and distress. Three groups in the irascible power are hope

and desperation, courage and fear, and anger, which has no contrary part. 'Consequently there are eleven different types of emotions in which all emotions are contained, six in the concupiscible power and five in the irascible part' (*Summa theologiae* II-1, 23.4; Knuuttila 2006, 239-255). Shame is treated as a type of fear. It is fear of disgrace which mars one's reputation. If one fears disgrace because of what one is doing, one feels embarrassment (*erubescentia*), and if it is feared because of what one has done, one feels shame (*verecundia*) (*Summa theologiae* II-1, 41.4).

Aquinas discussed shame and honour as associated with the virtue of temperance. The emotional disposition of shame as avoidance of disgrace is said to be an integral part of temperance, the other integral part being honour (*honestas*), the love of the beauty of virtue in general. Modesty or temperance is a virtuous disposition which controls concupiscible emotions (*Summa theologiae* II-2, 144-145). While honour as an integral constituent of temperance is not problematic, the role of the shame is less clear because Aquinas, following Aristotle's remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.9, says that the disposition of feeling shame is not a virtue; virtuous people do not have a reason to feel shame because they do not behave in a shameful way. In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas states that in Aristotle's view shame might be regarded as conditionally good in the sense that if one performs a base act, it is appropriate to be ashamed, but this is not part of the virtues (IV.17. 872, 879). In *Summa theologiae*, he is willing to see shame as closer to the virtues, saying that were there something disgraceful in the life of virtuous people, they would be ashamed. Therefore shame belongs to morally good people as a conditional disposition (*Summa theologiae* II-2, 144.4; Doig 2001, 215-220).

Aquinas includes virtuous shame in temperance with respect to concupiscible emotions. As for the irascible desire for good things, he argues that it should be moderated by humility. This was an important virtue in monastic tradition to which Aquinas refers, but he discusses it from the point of view of Christian life in general. He says that the virtue of humility is not found in Aristotle because it is based on the Christian awareness of being a servant of God. While humility is meant to control false pride and arrogance, it includes a certain pride in itself which expels false humility. Aquinas describes this by paraphrasing Psalm 48 about the man who 'not understanding his honour, compares himself to senseless beasts, and becomes like to them' (*Summa theologiae* II-2, 161.1). Seeking honour in a social context is not a bad thing if it remains moderate (I *Summa theologiae* I-2, 131.1, ad 1).

In his *The Twelve Patriarchs*, Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) offers an allegory of spiritual psychology on the basis of the biblical history of Jacob, his wives and their children. Having dealt with moderate emotions and other attitudes represented by the elder sons, Richard moves on to Dina who represents true shame (*pudor*). She is described as the sense of shame for one's sinfulness, which prevents pride and vainglory and moderates anger towards moral shortcomings of other people (45). Shame as a social emotion is said to be felt because of the disgrace which falls on the subject who deviates from the standards appreciated by others. People may even feel shame for their morally evil acts because of the fear of disgrace, if they do not first hate sin:

> If you are caught in sin and confounded with shame when you are caught, I do not believe that you are ashamed of the fault, but of the infamy. For such shame descends not so much from the sin itself as from the damage to the reputation (46).

True shame is accompanied by an act of conscience by which sinful acts or thoughts as such are condemned as shameful. While the mundane emotion of shame is audience-oriented, the true shame is

internalised in the sense that the audience is reduced to the person him- or herself. True shame involves a judgement which has a reflective structure as follows:

> The person who judges and the person who is judged are the same, as is he who condemns and he who is condemned and he who punishes and he who is punished (48).

There are examples of internal shame without an actual social aspect in ancient sources as well. Richard takes this as the basic form of true spiritual shame. The self is the object of one's inner sight and of the knowledge of God and the angels. Richard thinks, like Aquinas, that shame as a standard human emotion is fear of disgrace and bad reputation. He differs from Aquinas in developing the concept of good shame as a matter of conscience, which evaluates the subject from the point of view of divine commands and is ready to confess one's fault. Combining elements of caution, guilt and modesty, good shame moves one to avoid action which makes the inner representation of the self disagreeable. It is a virtue which makes the soul beautiful, but it is not among the high spiritual virtues.

3. *Shame in Augustine*

According to Augustine, the original fall was followed by the shame which Adam and Eve felt when they realized they were becoming ruled by the movements of the lower soul and the body, the functions of which should be under the control of the rational part. Culpable disobedience of the higher part became penal disobedience of the lower part, the relative autonomy of which continuously reminds humans of their shameful condition of not being what they should be.

> And no doubt, in the order of nature, the soul is above the body; yet the soul commands the body more easily than itself. Nevertheless this lust (*libido*), which we are now discussing, is the more shameful because the soul neither has therein command of itself so effectively as not to lust at all, nor of the body so fully that the shameful members are moved by the will rather than by lust; for in this case they would not be shameful. But now the soul is ashamed that the body, which by nature is inferior and subject to it, should resist it ... When the soul conquers itself in an orderly fashion, so that its unreasonable motions are made subordinate to mind and reason, while the reason again is subject to God, this is virtuous and laudable. Yet there is less shame when the vicious parts of the soul disobey it than when the body does not yield to its will and command, for the body is distinct from it and inferior to it, and its nature has no life without it. (*The City of God* XIV.23)

Augustine's theological conception of shame concentrates on the awareness of one's having lost a higher position. The spontaneous lower movements, which one should try to control as well as possible, form a constant reminder of this metaphysical degradation. Because the penal divide of the soul is not voluntary, Augustine thinks that the shame felt for it belongs to humans simply by being a member of the human race.

While nothing like this is found in Aristotle or Hellenistic philosophical schools, it was known to Augustine from Plotinus's Neoplatonic view that existing in a body is a form of being with which the higher soul should not identify itself (*Enneads* I.6.5, 48-59). Porphyry famously wrote that 'Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body' (*Vita Plotini* 1,1). In Augustine's modification of Plotinus's view, the shame does not derive from being in the body as such; it is about the

permanent deterioration of the soul which is visible in the uncontrolled psychosomatic reactions. (For Augustine's view of the soul, see O'Daly 1987.) Metaphysical shame does not refer to a social ranking because the downgrading of human beings is universal and democratic in this sense. It is primarily meant to explain the human sense of shame in regard to sexual matters.

Richard of St. Victor does not mention Augustinian shame in his meditation on Dina, the good shame, which is born in the mind when it first learns to hate sin. His description of the judgement of conscience as the basis of good shame is associated with the notion of guilt rather than the shameful status of humans. The reason for this may be that Richard's treatise is a spiritual guidebook the first part of which explains the role of various moderate emotions in spiritual development. Augustine's metaphysical shame as a permanent disposition is part of the degrading punishment which recalls the fallen state of humankind, in the same way as bodily pain does, which in Augustine's view was not part of the original human physiology (*The City of God* XIV.10).

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