An Ethics of Care Approach to Shame
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In this paper, i argue that most philosophical accounts miss an important dimension of shame:

The power dimension[1]. This dimension becomes obvious when we look at the descent of

shame: Shame evolved from submission signals (Maibom 2010). Building on Heidi Maibom's

evolutionary account and drawing on the psychological mechanisms to resolve cognitive

dissonance and internalize stereotypes, i present a picture of shame that explains why there are

social status differentials in the ability to shame (572). Ultimately, i present an ethics of care

approach that allows us to counteract stereotypes. This approach does not rely on shame since

i argue that shame is not a useful moral emotion because of its problematic tie to the status

quo.

The claim that shame is not helpful must sound audacious in light of the prevalence of

philosophical writing that argues shame can be useful as a moral emotion (see, e.g., Van

Norden 2007). I will not argue against these viewpoints. Rather, i assert that shame is not

useful with a certain end-in-view in mind: A democracy that is incorporated into our daily lives

(McKenna 2001). This two-strand democracy is more consistent with an ethics of care, which

dissolves hierarchies and stresses connections between humans (Green 2008)[2]. The empirical

evidence i review suggests that shame is a powerful emotion that too easily has negative

consequences, including ethical, making it a "moral dead end" (Noddings 2010, 140). This

becomes particularly obvious when we look at the impact of internalized stereotypes. Although

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[1] To emphasize the equality between you and me, i prefer using a lowercase "i."

[2] I explain "two-strand democracy" and "ends-in-view" in detail later in this paper.

not all shame might stem from stereotypes, stereotype-induced shame allows us to see the power dimension most clearly[3]. Together with stereotypes, the evolutionary account of shame provided by Maibom suggests that shame plays an important role in upholding social hierarchies.

Before i begin this journey, i want to highlight my overall framing of this project by answering several questions Philip Kitcher raised regarding philosophical projects[4]: "What difference can this project be expected to make? To whom? What type of difference? Is it a difference worth making?" The evidence i present shows that shame gets in the way of empathy. To build a society that incorporates two-strand democracy, we need to grow empathy, rather than shame. This can help all of us move toward a more compassionate way of living, including reducing violence. I believe that is a distinction well worth making.

1. Defining Shame

It is imperative to define shame before any exploration of its possible role within virtue ethics. Shame is a painful emotion that impacts the global self. Guilt, in contrast, is tied to a specific action (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007, 349). Shame reflects "significant character flaws," which may become obvious when we act a certain way, though the action is not the object of shame, the character flaws are (Van Norden 2007, 260). Shame emerges when we fail to measure up "to certain standards, norms, or ideals" (Maibom 2010, 566). Because of this an audience – real or internalized – is an important aspect of shame (Maibom 2010, 566).

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[3] Shame is induced by a judgment: We judge that we do not live up to a standard/norm/ideal. Stereotypes are forms of judgments: Someone judges us that we do not live up to a standard/norm/ideal.

[4] Kitcher presented these questions in an online discussion of his recent article (2011) – see http://bit.ly/eNdvwL

Using Bryan Van Norden's example of Susan who had an extramarital affair helps clarify this definition (2007, 260-1). Although the affair is an action, Susan feels ashamed to be the kind of person who would have an affair. She would like to honor her marital commitment, a standard she has failed to live up to by having an affair. Even if no one except the two people involved knows about it, Susan feels shame because she has internalized the audience that evaluates her on whether she lives up to the standard that a virtuous person honors her commitments.

2. Evidence from Psychology and Philosophy on Shame

The evidence from social psychology on shame's impact is dire. Feeling shame turns us inward, preventing concern for the harmed person (Tangney et al 2007, 351). Shame is positively correlated with anger and the tendency to externalize blame (351). Shame-prone people express their anger with hostility either directed toward self or others: Rather than leading people to move toward reconciliation, shame motivates people into escape behavior, including finding scapegoats (352). It "has a negative impact on interpersonal behavior" (Tangney & Dearing 2002, 3) interfering with our "ability to form empathic connections with others" (Tangney et al. 2007, 350). Feelings of shame motivate violence (Gilligan 1996, 111) through the externalization of blame (Stuewig et al. 2010, 99). Thus, shame is associated with internal and external violence.

Despite this evidence many philosophers, including Mengzi and Van Norden (2007 & 2008), regard shame as a useful moral emotion that can help us develop our character. I suggest that we might be able to understand the philosophical claims if we look at the power dimension that is at play when shaming occurs. As Nel Noddings points out, Confucianism is a

hierarchy-based system (2010, 139). Shame might be useful within such societies, although this casts doubt on those claims when considered within the context of an ethics of care since it encourages a more egalitarian way of living.

As Maibom (2010) demonstrates not everyone has the power to shame (575). While many of us might want to shame the executives of financial service corporations that brought the world economy to its knees, for instance, they are very unlikely to listen to us. After all, we do not have that kind of power even if we believe that their actions have revealed some serious character flaws (see also Locke 2007). If there are those who can shame us but we cannot shame them, the question of whose "standards, norms, or ideals" shame is trying to uphold becomes important. The people who have the power to shame also have the power to enforce their standards, norms, and ideals.

Jennifer Manion (2003) provides a first step toward looking at the power dimension of shame by investigating it within the context of the male-female hierarchy. She argues that most philosophical examinations of shame have ignored how its usefulness as a moral emotion might be negatively impacted by gender (22). She closely examines Gabriele Taylor's differentiation of genuine and false shame. According to Taylor, genuine shame is morally useful since it is informed by not living up to our *own* standards, norms, or ideals. False shame arises when they are imposed from the outside onto the moral agent but not adopted by her as her own (34). Manion contends that this fails to take into account that we might internalize standards that we do not agree with. Similarly, Maibom (2010) investigates shame felt by people who are prosecuted, such as Jews or Tutsi (572). Jill Locke (2007) calls this kind of

shame "traumatic shame" (150). Traumatic shame arises from normative power, which can be internalized as stereotypes.

3. Social Norms, Stereotypes, and Shame

Shame can manifest itself in a sense that we are not good enough (Brown 2006, 45). We feel that we are not living up to certain norms. As we have seen, these norms can be ours but as Manion cautions it is important to investigate how we have acquired these norms. Rahel Varnhagen felt ashamed of being Jewish. She likely felt that this shame is genuine in Taylor's sense (Locke 2007, 151). Yet, this shame has to be understood within the anti-Semitic context of Rahel's world. Even if she felt the shame as *genuine*, it is likely that she internalized the anti-Semitic stereotypes around her making the claim that her self-evaluation is solely based on her own standards problematic. We can better understand what is going on in Rahel's case – and with traumatic shame in general – if we consider the evolutionary descent of shame and the mechanisms of internalizing stereotypes. Both highlight the importance of power differentials in shame.

Maibom (2010) presents an evolutionary account of shame that ties it to displays of submission and appeasement in nonhuman animals. Importantly, such displays are "overwhelmingly associated with a hierarchical structure" where "the subordinate animal submits to the dominant one" (578). Submission is used for conflict resolution amongst hierarchically organized animals: The dominant animal forces the subordinate to give up resources in case of a conflict (579). In contrast to nonhuman animals, we humans internalize this "shaming audience" (585). And we also do not simply submit to a dominant other, we submit "to a way of life, with its strictures, prohibitions, and demands" (587). Maibom sees this

as an important feature for living together in a society (568). This account of the descent of

shame suggests: If shame descents from a display used in hierarchical living arrangements, it is

more useful in hierarchical societies.

If we feel shame, though, because we believe that we have serious character flaws, that

is, we do not measure up to our *own* norms and standards and feel genuine shame, the type of

society we live in ought to be irrelevant. It is not. As the articles by Manion (2003) and Locke

(2007) suggest, we need to take Maibom's contention seriously that we internalize a shaming

audience. This audience inflicts shame via stereotypes, which we internalized. To explain the

mechanism of internalizing stereotypes, i will use the example of singlism. Singlism is the

stereotyping of single adults as immature and selfish. At bottom, there must be something

wrong with us – otherwise we would be married (DePaulo & Morris 2005)[5]. Singlism is

especially prevalent in the experience of single women because we are expected to define our

identities through relationships. A "failure in maintaining interpersonal relationships" leads to

shame in women (Manion 2003, 24-5). This ties singlism closely to sexism, which has also been

shown to increase shame (Calogero & Jost 2011). However, for both men and women, there is

a strong social identity built around being coupled, especially married. Single men are

stereotyped as commitment-phobic and irresponsible (DePaulo 2006). Thus, although the part

of our identity that is questioned might differ, both single men and women face an unwanted

identity: We behave in a way that undermines our self-ideal (Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker 2000,

136). This self-ideal can reflect cultural normative forces that suggest that being married makes

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[5] This can also become a vicious cycle because this stereotype works both ways: Because there is something wrong with us, we are not married. Because we are not married, there is something wrong with us.

us happier, healthier, and more mature despite evidence that paints a more nuanced picture

(DePaulo & Morris 2005). Yet, most of us hold beliefs that suggest that these stereotypes are

not stereotypes but rather reflect the way things are. Marriage and coupling are natural, we

might believe, so research results that seem to show that married people are happier and

healthier make sense to us. We do not question them. Neither do we question beliefs like we

should be coupled – only weirdoes remain single. We do not ask questions because singlism as

a stereotype is not very recognized (Crandall & Warner 2005). When we hold these beliefs and

apply them to ourselves, our self-ideals can reveal internalized stereotypes.

There is empirical evidence that ties internalized stereotypes to shame (Allen & Oleson

1999). Shame develops in response to the dissonance between our self-ideal and the reality of

the self (34). For example, my self-ideal contains the belief that i should get married. Yet, i am

single. This creates cognitive dissonance: My belief and behavior do not match (Stone &

Fernandez 2008, 316). The cognitive dissonance is resolved by internalizing the stereotype: I

am not good enough to be married; my character is too flawed to be married. I end up feeling

ashamed of being single. Thus, rather than questioning the belief, we blame ourselves.

Notice that the stereotype that labels a single person as not good enough sets up a

normative standard: The married adult. That is the norm a single person fails to live up to.

There are implicit norms in all stereotypes. Sexism assumes men as the norm; racism Whites;

classism the upper class etc. If shame, as a moral emotion, upholds these norms, it upholds the

underlying hierarchy. Such a moral emotion does not seem to fit into a democracy that

emphasizes equality between people.

Van Norden (2007) might take issue with my characterization of this type of shame as

ethical shame[6]. Based on his examples, "having low social status and poverty" (260), it seems

to be more in line with conventional than ethical shame, shame that reflects a belief in

character flaws (260). However, via stereotypes, such conventional shame turns into ethical

shame. Although being single is an appearance (the key word in Van Norden's definition of

conventional shame [259]), the stereotype suggests that i am single *because* i have serious

character flaws, which are simply revealed by my state. Someone who is poor is poor because

they are lazy (or whatever the stereotype might be). Hence Van Norden's distinction does not

hold when we investigate the shaming mechanism of stereotypes.

4. Democracy and Ethics of Care

I claim that shame is not a useful moral emotion within an ethics of care, which could be part of

a two-strand democracy. In this section, i will provide background on both ethics of care and

two-strand democracy and elaborate on how they fit together.

Judith Green (2008) introduces two-strand democracy as a way to conceptualize the

deliberative democracy John Dewey envisioned. We are most familiar with the representative

strand that enters our lives about once a year when we vote in an election. "Democratic

realists" have decried the second strand – participatory democracy – as unfeasible (232). Yet,

Dewey argued that to fully develop democracy – to radicalize democracy – it needs to become

a "way of life" (233). Only by living second strand democracy can we become a truly

democratic society. Erin McKenna (2001) provides more details on what such a radical

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[6] Van Norden uses the term "ethical shame" whereas i prefer "moral shame," since "morals" is often understood in the context of character evaluation (http://bit.ly/ethicsvmorals). Whenever i refer to Van Norden's work, i use "ethical shame."

democracy could look like. It requires that we take responsibility for our lives on a personal and a social level (85). This means that we critically examine our past and present to evaluate what needs changing in order for us to move closer to an end-in-view. Ends-in-view are flexible goals that we might adjust when more information becomes available, information gathered by critical examination of the impact of moving toward the end-in-view. Because humans are interdependent and adapt to our physical and social environments end-states are impossible, thus Dewey introduced the idea of ends-in-view (86). Ends-in-view also capture the idea that means and ends are interrelated: Once reached, an end-in-view can become the means for a new end-in-view. It is important that we ground the ends-in-view in current reality: They address and propose to overcome social conditions that emerge from a critical examination of our present (Kitcher 2011, 253). For example, two-strand democracy can be an end-in-view that grows out of our current representative democracy, which the interests of people with financial influence threaten to overpower.

An important end-in-view – and means – of this two-strand democracy is open and free communication (McKenna 2001, 112). Participation of all citizens in a democracy requires that these citizens feel comfortable expressing their views. One way to ensure this comfort-level is to encourage empathic connections. Empathy leads us to try to understand what another person is feeling in order to connect with them from their perspective, which we communicate to the person (Batson 2009). Empathy, thus, involves four skills: Our ability to see the world from another's perspective; to remain nonjudgmental; to understand what another is feeling; and to communicate this understanding (Brown 2006, 47). This way of communicating establishes an empathic connection foregrounding interrelationships.

Although in her earlier work, Noddings differentiated her ethics of care from empathy, in her newer work, she uses empathy "as a shorthand in discussing preparation to care. We can equate the development of empathy with growth in the capacity to care – that is, with the development of people who are prepared to care" (2010, 57). For her, sympathy, which leads to action, is important, therefore, she highlights that empathy contains "the possibility for sympathy" (56). An ethics of care, through its focus on empathy, interrelationship, and caring, seems especially conducive to radical democracy. Because of this, an ethics of care is an important end-in-view for a two-strand democracy.

Noddings (1984) introduced ethics of care as an ethical approach that is based on women's experience as caregivers. Our actions, in order to be ethical, need to reflect "an attitude/motive of caring toward others" (Slote 2007, 10). This emphasizes the centrality of our interrelationships with others. While this also makes an ethics of care partialistic – since there is a requirement to know the other we are interacting – Noddings suggests that this simply means that to extend our caring to distant strangers, we also need to consider justice, which can be informed by caring (11). Because Noddings places priority on the reciprocity of caring relationships, an ethics of care values equality between people. Instead of claiming that we are more powerful and therefore should only be cared for, we are expected to return the care.

We behave ethically because we are motivated by moving toward our ethical ideal (Noddings 1984, 81). This ethical ideal develops from two sentiments: Our natural empathy toward another human being and our wish to show and experience care (104). It is diminished when we avoid "the call to care," as is the case when we are ashamed of who we are (89).

When evaluating the morality of an action within an ethics of care, we need to understand its context. Returning to Susan, the woman from Van Norden's example who had an extramarital affair, we can spell this out more. Van Norden claims that she is in a "happy, successful marriage" (261), yet her behavior seems to contradict this. Thus, an ethics of care approach would dig deeper. We would want to understand if Susan truly felt happy and fulfilled in her marriage. Most importantly, we would not condemn her – or shame her – rather we would try to understand her, to connect with her empathically. Noddings explicitly rejects shame as a form of pain and because it has been used to maintain codes of honor closely linked with violence (2002, 218). From an ethical perspective, it might also be important to consider if shame would lead Susan to change her behavior. The psychological evidence suggests that it would not. Susan's shame is likely to turn her inward, possibly leading to depression, or outward, blaming, for example, her husband for the affair. Her preoccupation with shame would prevent her from reaching out to her husband to make amends and reconcile with him, which is the goal of an ethics of care (Noddings 2002, 228). Shame does not change our behavior (Locke 2007, 149).

5. Empathy

Despite all of this, we often feel shame. Therefore, in this last section, i offer some suggestions for using shame as an indicator for a need to self-care and self-concern (Manion 2003). Thus, there might be a use for shame even within an ethics of care: It might serve as a reminder that we are in need of some empathic connections to help us understand the source of our shame. As is clear from the definition of shame, it is a powerful and painful emotion that reflects a

"negative global self-assessment" (Locke 2007, 149). However, not all shame is felt equally

intensely[7]. The self-care options will depend on its intensity.

Shame arises when we notice that we are not living up to certain norms or standards.

As Noddings puts it, we "fail to act in accordance with our own ethical ideal" (2002, 216) and

we evaluate this act as reflecting "significant character flaws" (Van Norden 2007, 260). This is

an indication, as Manion (2003) points out, that some deliberation is in order: We need to

figure out if those norms or standards are our own or if they reflect the normative pressures of

the society around us. This deliberation is likely difficult unless we give ourselves empathy first.

Empathy is a shame-antidote (Brown 2006, 49). It creates the distance needed to evaluate our

action objectively, decide what action(s) we want to take to make amends, and how we might

be able to avoid acting similarly in the future. In other words, we move from beating ourselves

up as not good enough to reconciliation. It also allows us to take a look at the influence of

stereotypes on our actions. Maybe we verbally lashed out at our partner because we are in a

relationship because we think we should be but would really prefer to be single. Maybe Susan

had an affair because she beliefs that married people are happy and, thus, she cannot admit

that she is not happy. Depending on the intensity of the felt shame, reaching out to others for

help might be important to receive this empathy.

A useful tool for an ethics of care approach to shame is *Nonviolent Communication*

(*NVC*) (Rosenberg 2003). As Noddings stresses, needs are "a fundamental concern of care

ethics" (2010, 8). *NVC* focuses on needs and the feelings associated with met or unmet needs.

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[7] I am grateful to Bryan Van Norden for drawing my attention to the importance of the intensity when evaluating an emotion (personal correspondence).

Self-empathy in *NVC* involves obtaining clarity about our feelings and needs. To return to the unhappily partnered person, maybe he feels frustrated and stifled because he longs for having many authentic relationships rather than channeling his time and energy into one. Once he understands this, he can look at why he is in a relationship: He thinks he should be! The "should" is a tip-off that this belief is an internalized stereotype, in this case, the internalized singlism that suggests that to prove our lovability, we need a partner, not friends. Instead of feeling shame for not living up to this singlist standard, he could now talk to his partner to find out if they can work out a way of living their relationship that meets both of their needs. Susan, looking at her feelings and needs, might discover that she is longing for acceptance of her unhappiness and maybe wants reassurance that she is not a bad person for not being happy in her marriage. Thus, rather than feeling ashamed for her affair, she can use it as an impetus for change. As mentioned before, if we are stuck in shame, we might need help to establish the empathic connection that allows us to move forward[8]. Someone else can give us empathy by stating what they observed us do, guessing the feelings and needs that contributed to the action, and checking with us to see if the guess feels right.

Once we have moved out of shame through empathizing with ourselves, we can investigate the shame further, as indicated above. We can enter into a "self-concerned reflection" from an "intersubjective and impersonal perspective" (Manion 2003, 31). This self-concern involves weighing the reasons from the perspective of someone who cares for us. It requires that we challenge ourselves to "justify our preferences" (33). If it turns out that the

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[8] The interplay between providing self-care and asking for help might be an important skill to form and maintain attachments as adults (see http://bit.ly/ptattach).

preferences are based on stereotypes, we can let go of those preferences and adjust our choices. Our actions might have reflected that we did not weigh our reasons correctly and the supposed character flaws were really internalized stereotypes. Susan, for example, might have placed more weight on honoring a commitment than on her own happiness. Wanting to live with integrity and self-respect, which according to Taylor are necessary and sufficient for living with moral authenticity (32), we reject the internalized stereotypes. We can only do that, though, after reestablishing an empathic connection with ourselves, which was lost because of shame, and self-concerned reflection that allowed us to understand internalized stereotypes as the source of the shame.

Aside from indicating that we are in need of some self-empathy and deliberation, shame has no role to play within an ethics of care. We need to refocus ourselves from evaluating our global self toward understanding our reasons for acting a certain way. This, then, opens us up to consider the harmed other(s) in a caring way by enabling restitution and consideration of alternative ways of acting in the future, moving us closer to our ethical ideal.

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