

## On shame

Shame is an extremely unpleasant feeling. As soon as we remember an unpleasant and embarrassing situation from our own experience, we immediately perceive the return of painful feelings of shame. At its core shame is the feeling of unworthiness and unfitness. It does not affect just a part of us, but our very core. It makes us hide from ourselves and from others.

Shame affects us unexpectedly. It bursts suddenly, without warning and without preparation. We are instantly overwhelmed by the intense desire to disappear from the face of the earth. Although we have neither wanted nor planned it, we feel we'd rather go through the floor. Shame appears where the norm is broken, or where in the others' eyes or in our eyes an undesirable part of us appears. This feeling reveals to us that we are not such as we would like to be, nor such as the others find us to be. An act or a word has betrayed us. We have done something we should never do or we have uttered a forbidden word and it has instantly turned out that we are different. An invisible part of our being has been disclosed. A previously unseen part of our being has shown itself. Shame is a momentary flash of awareness that we have been disclosed, denuded, denounced. This awareness sets us a sudden blockade. It inhibits our will to act and takes away our ability to speak. It prevents our spontaneity. It forces us to hide in order to avoid possible objections, a sense of inferiority and painful experiences of our own inadequacy. The sense of shame can be so strong that man may bring the most radical decision to take his own life.

Shame is intentional and directed toward someone who should be respected and toward something that requires consideration. It may be God or some authority; it may be morality, ethical requirement or expectation of humaneness, honour or decency. Shame is directed to an authority that passes judgement or condemns. The authorities can be different: God, social or academic authority, a significant other, other people, our ego, i.e. our superego. However, the objective of shame is the entity who, if there is a violation of values, is threatened by exposure, embarrassment, shame and disgrace.

The idea of shame involves different aspects. They are valued differently in different cultures and they are differently accentuated. The first aspect is forbidding. In shame it is demonstrated that something very specific is forbidden to be done or said. Violation of the ban is paid by the punishment of embarrassment. Even before I do or say something improper, I know that it is forbidden and shameful. The other aspect is condemning. If I do or say something

that is related to the threat of shame, I experience shame and condemnation of my actions and my words. I shouldn't have done or said that, and since I have done that and by that violated the ban, condemnation and shame have crashed on me. Others condemn me and I condemn myself. I am ashamed and I feel disgraced. It is a painful awareness of our own compelling sinfulness and imperfection.

The feeling of shame positions itself in the place where fragility appears. Once nestled, it is difficult to remove. It lasts. It outlives the infamous experience and remains in memory. It appears always with the memory of what has happened. When the time has gone by and I recall the shameful act, the same shame grasps me again. But, it may also happen that in time the feeling of shame fades or completely disappears. What used to be shameful, it is no longer. This indicates the moving of the limits of shame. Shame does not stand permanently at the same limits. The limits of shame are shifting. Sometimes they move as far as to the disappearance of shame. Just because of this mobility of limits, shame can be a good indicator of social and identity changes. In time, society shifts the limits of shame, as well as the individual. Thus, the memory of shame also records its shifts. There is another moment related to the feeling of shame. It is quite contrary to the negative aspect and shows its *stimulating* side. It steers us to the sense of honour that arises when we pursue the good, noble and correct things. Respecting the limits set by shame, we turn to the entirely opposite. Thus shame is no longer a threat, but a helpful reference to what is desirable and socially acceptable. Turning our back on shame, we see that its limits can be an incentive to the good.

Along with the feeling of shame we also find, and sometimes mistake them for the shame, the feelings of shyness, insecurity, fright, timidity and fearfulness. These should be distinguished from shame.

Aristotle quotes in a proverb that shame dwells in the eyes. Here the social side of this feeling comes to the foreground. Shame occurs where no one sees me to do or say shameful things. In other words, my feeling of shame is greater if others can see me doing or speaking something socially unacceptable, than if I am all alone doing the same, hiding from others' eyes. However, this works only when the social side of shame is concerned. It does not work if it is a religious authority or our inner authority. Namely, God sees us in secret, as well as the inner authority, judging not only our actions and words, but also our thoughts and intents. By this the feeling of shame gets more severe, since it takes along a danger of hypocrisy, a possibility of showing yourself in a socially acceptable light in front of others, but inside I am actually quite different.

In his myth on the ring of Gyges, Plato describes the difference of human behaviour in visible and invisible circumstances. The one who is invisible is allowed to do whatever he wants. He is no longer subject to the judgement of others. Gods behave like that. Whatever they do, they are not subject to the judgement of others. They are not visible. Humans are constantly exposed to the eyes of the other and, consequently, behave in accordance with their expectations and in accordance with moral norms. If they were invisible, they would not be obliged to behave morally. The myth shows that morality depends on the presence of others. However, norms and expectations are not only about the presence of the other. Norms have already moved into the inner self. They can come from the outside, but show their strength only when they take root in our inner self.

Shame plays an important and powerful educational role. It protects against violations of norms, wrongful acts and words. Shame stands between two extremes, says Aristotle. Shamelessness stands at one side and timidity at the other. Shame is somewhere in the middle. Shameless is the one who does bad deeds, and does not feel ashamed because of that. On the other hand, timid is the one who feels ashamed for something that is neither illegal nor shameful. The former does not see the limits of shame, the latter sees them everywhere. Shame is a preventive feeling which makes us avoid the acts or words causing the painful and unpleasant feeling of shame. Therefore, shame goes along with education. Young people would do many bad things if there were no threat of shame. Shame restrains them from doing so.

Shame is connected with strong physical reactions. It is felt like a tight corner, narrowness, exposure to condemning eyes that sneer and mock at me. The best known and most visible way of physical showing of shame is the flush of cheeks. This sudden and unpleasant change is not physically painful, but shows all the pain and discomfort of shame. Blushing betrays me. It warns others of something that I feel shameful, and that they may not even have noticed. Blushing betrays me not only against my will, but even when others wouldn't have noticed it by themselves. Shame appears as a feeling of stiffness, immobility and inability to act. It arises suddenly and we experience it as a disaster which prevents any kind of activity. When it seizes us, we are not able to stand other people's looks, that's why we lower our gaze. We can't meet the others' eyes, so we try to hide ours. We avoid meeting face to face because our shame in the eyes of the other is unbearable.

Shame can be viewed differently. This feeling, on the border of visible and invisible, mine and others', spiritual and physical, is at

the same time a feeling that speaks not only about my relationship to the norms and the others, but also about myself. It is a privileged feeling of self-awareness.

At first glance, shame seems to belong to moral order. We are ashamed because we have behaved wrongly or have done something that does not correspond to moral demands. We find ourselves before our own image which neither corresponds to the image we would like to present to others nor is the image we would like to represent us. Shame is the pain of this divergence, of what we would like to be and what has been presented before the others' eyes. Shame is a painful sting which reminds me that I do not match to the ideal image I would want others to have of me.

But all the drama and harshness of shame lies in the inability to avoid identifying with ourselves, with what we are, and what has partly become like something foreign in our inner self. Shame makes us take responsibility for ourselves, just at a time when we would not want to; to take responsibility for what we would prefer to eliminate from our identity.

Emmanuel Levinas thinks that shame expresses our inability to forget that we are naked in our flesh. It refers to all that we would like to hide and from which we would like, but are not able, to escape. The nakedness that causes shame is not only and primarily physical nakedness. Shameful is the thing that we want to hide from others and from ourselves. Shame indicates that we cannot hide what we want to, and that we cannot run away from ourselves. Shame has to do with our intimacy, our presence before ourselves. Disgrace does not show our wretchedness, but the whole of our being.

Our time records the shifting of the limits of shame up to their disappearance and at the same time the increase of public disgracing and humiliation of others, above all in the anonymity of virtual world. The pronounced movement of shame between these two extremes leaves our intimacy intact until the moment when we ourselves become exposed to public disgracing. In these moments we painfully feel the destructive power of this feeling and destructive energy that the virtual world hides. However, just these moments show that the best protection against the negativity of this feeling is to comprehend and to accept ourselves. The longest way is the one to your own self. It's a complex way. It leads through relationships with others and with what we consider to be good, truthful and beautiful. It leads through the pain of self-realization. The plague of virtual shaming of others proves how difficult and uncommon way it is.

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