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Shame's Value

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ABSTRACT

Shame we are told is as intense as it is unrelenting. Shame we are told, further still, is as contagious as it is transmittable. By fastidiously attending to clinical reports and theoretical depictions of shame's totalizing character, I argue in this paper that we can notice something that has broadly gone unnoticed: shame *assumes for itself* absolute value. To bear this out, I contrast my view with that of the dominant one: that shame has an instrumental value. I show some limitations of the dominant view by reflecting on the role of shame in psychoanalytic training. The picture that emerges may seem quaintly commonsensical, and even commonplace, but it has, I think, vast clinical implications. I believe that it certainly has the potential to open some new horizons. The arguments for such a bold claim will occupy the concluding section of my paper.

KEYWORDS
Shame; value; moral emotions; affect theory

> Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.
>
> Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people.
>
> – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Once considered a "sleeper" on the psychoanalytic scene, shame has enjoyed something of a theoretical and clinical re-awakening (Lewis, 1987, *in passim*).[1] The prevailing view was, of course, that Freud's account – in which shame served as an affect (Freud, 1889, p. 225; 1900, p. 242), a defense (Freud, 1905, p. 177), and a symptom (Freud, 1930, p. 99n; 1933, p. 132) – was at once undertheorized "in contrast with anxiety or guilt" (Broucek, 1991, p. 12) and marked by a "lack of clarity" (A. P. Morrison, 2011, p. 22).[2] Subsequent attempts were made to properly distinguish guilt from shame and therefore to understand shame in its own right, with some thinkers identifying it as a tension between the ego and the ego-ideal (Piers & Singer, 1953; Wurmser, 1987). Even those who wished to jettison Freud's metapsychology generally agreed that "experiences" of shame "involve awareness of failure to meet standards and ideals" (Lansky, 1999, p. 351). However, with shame, the failure to measure up is not just met with basic feelings of inferiority, disappointment, mortification, or regret. Rather, shame is unique in this respect as it is attended by an all-encompassing verdict: *I am* a failure.

Contemporary psychoanalysts, independent of their theoretical preferences, approaches, and orientations, have understood and underscored this totalizing nature of shame – namely, that shame has something of an "over-all character" (Lynd, 1958, p. 50). In *The Restoration of the Self*, for instance, Kohut describes "nameless shame" as that "ultimate recognition of a failure of all-

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[1] At the risk of mixing our fairytales somewhat, Charles Rycroft in *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* calls shame the "Cinderella of the unpleasant emotions," whereas, and as if to prove the point, Laplanche and Pontalis' *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1973) does not include an entry on this affect (Rycroft, 1968, p. 169).

[2] Indeed, one commentator has noted that "post-Freudians have written more about Freud's relationship to shame than Freud wrote on shame altogether" (Cluff, 2017, p. 3).

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encompassing magnitude" (Kohut, 1977, p. 241). Shame is, for this Self Psychologist, as comprehensive as it is incessantly unremitting in its attack on a sense of self.

From the Relational-Interpersonal theoretical orientation, we learn that shame has an intractable or otherwise impervious quality because, in this view, shame is a hallmark of dissociated self-states (Bromberg, 2006 *in passim*). That is, shame is "a therapeutic issue of immense significance" (Bromberg, 2006, p. 24) because "the affect signals" a "threatened traumatic loss of selfhood" (Bromberg, 2006, p. 191).[3] Further still, and on the same theoretical ground, we can gather that shame underpins the complementarity and the unyielding accusation and defense postures of the doer-done to position (Benjamin & Atlas, 2022, p. 426).

The absence of complementarity and reciprocity directs Phenomenological-Contextualists' perspective toward the emotional environments that organizes and gives meaning to that relational experience. Malattunement to active and reactive affects – which range from joy, pride, and excitement to anxiety, fear, anger, and sadness – creates an emotional context in which the experience of any one of those affects can threaten relational ties. Within this context of emotional interrelatedness, "the emergence of the prohibited affect is experienced as a [shameful] failure" that cuts to the very core of one's "subjective essence," as it threatens "harmonious ties" that are necessary "for upholding self-esteem" (A. P. Morrison & Stolorow, 1997, p. 82). Given these efforts to spell out the intersubjective and relational contexts that privilege certain forms of life as they disadvantage other ways of being, and to make ever clearer the emotional systems that allow or forbid certain affective responses, it may come as no surprise that shame is often viewed by Infant Researchers as a "conditional attachment strategy" (Main, 1990; cf. Chefetz, 2022; Lewis, 1971; Trevarthan, 2022).

My own view, and one that I will try to bear out over the course of this paper, is that we ought to listen carefully to these descriptions of shame, particularly their timbre. What we hear is a dark, cutting, haunting intensity: shame, we are told, is a pain so severe that it threatens to dismantle the very sense of self. Let us listen, however hard it may be, to what these thinkers tell us about the unremitting attacks shame levels because it is precisely there, I suspect, that we will hear something terribly important about shame's value. My central claim is that, by fastidiously attending to these clinical reports and theoretical depictions, we can notice something that has broadly gone unnoticed: shame *assumes for itself* absolute value.[4] To bear this out, I contrast my view with that of the dominant one: that shame has an instrumental value. I show some limitations of the dominant view by reflecting on the role of shame in psychoanalytic training. The picture that emerges may seem quaintly commonsensical, and even commonplace, but it has, I think, vast clinical implications. I believe that it certainly has the potential to open up some new horizons. The arguments for such a bold claim will occupy the concluding section of this paper.

Contesting the dominant view

When asked whether shame serves noble socio-political ends, whether its value resides in its being, for instance, a means toward greater awareness of ourselves and our place within our social surroundings, Martha Nussbaum answers in the affirmative. Although she is ultimately wary of a shame-based legal system, Nussbaum writes: "the person who is utterly shame-free is not a good friend, lover, or citizen, and there are instances in which the invitation to feel shame is a good thing" (2004, p. 216). Here shame aids in the attainment of certain socio-political goods as it may, in certain cases at least, foster better citizens. Indeed, because shame engenders the "painful awareness of falling short of some ideal," it can also, Nussbaum claims, "sometimes be a good motivation to improve" (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 268). In this view, at least, shame harbors the power to redirect our attention toward our most cherished values and to create a space for us to cultivate a more authentic relationship with these values.

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[3] It is worth noting, I think, that Philip Bromberg tells us that his own "dissociation is most frequently a response to shame" (Bromberg, 2006, p. 447).

[4] I will argue that shame claims for itself an all-encompassing, totally engrossing vantage point, and thereby assumes for itself universal value. To be clear, I am not suggesting that shame *should* have universal value, nor am I suggesting, as so many have, that it is a universal human emotion (Ekman, 1999; Nathanson, 1997; Tomkins, 1963). Rather, I am solely interested in the ways that shame, as Richard Chefetz has it, "conjures negative assessments of a person's intrinsic value" and the philosophical and clinical implications of such a global assessment (Chefetz, 2022, p. 63).

Others have also taken this "*revelatory* capacity" of shame to be its main source of value (Schneider, 1977, p. 25). Shame compels us to see ourselves and our societies in the harsh light of day, warts and all:

> Experiences of shame are a painful uncovering of hitherto unrecognized aspects of one's personality as well as unrecognized aspects of one's society and the world. If it is possible to face them, instead of seeking protection from what they reveal, they may throw light on who one is, and hence point the way toward who and what one may become. (Lynd, 1958, p. 183)

Shame, so understood, harbors emancipatory potential: it brings to light previously unseen aspects of our personal and social worlds, which can prompt us to transform both. As such, according to this line of thought, shame has clear instrumental value: it discloses and makes manifest that which was previously hidden.

This idea – that shame is good because it focuses us and directs our attention as it creates the space for us to see ourselves, or rather to see the gap between our purported values and the ones that we are living out – is also taken up by Lynne Jacobs:

> not all shame is toxic. Sometimes shame is inspirational and motivating. I think of this as a kind of existential shame. When I fall short of living in a way that is congruent with a cherished value, the wash of shame I suffer, even though unpleasant, provides me with a chance to reexamine the value and decide if it still suits me. If it does, then my shame is a touchstone. I generally feel a rueful compassion toward myself, and a renewed commitment to live aligned with my values. If not, I have the option of reorienting myself to values more in keeping with my life aims and capacities. (2017, p. 386)[5]

Shame, at least in its nontoxic, existential form, is plainly of instrumental value as it makes the gap between our "cherished value" and ourselves – our behaviors, our actions, our ideas – brutally obvious: we are not who we have taken ourselves to be (Jacobs, 2017, p. 386).[6] Indeed, the instrumental value of shame abounds: this value is not just to be found in what shame enables – namely, better friends, better citizens, better sex – but also in what it wards off: complacency. This makes shame "a valuable emotion of self-assessment" (Thomason, 2018, p. 1).

Principally, the instrumental value of shame, then, rests on its "revelatory capacity" (Jacobs, 2017, p. 386). Shame is valuable, in this line of thought, because of what it discloses, what it opens up, what it allows us to take in, what it makes more transparent. Indeed, another proponent of this position writes: "What makes shame valuable is that having a liability to it means that we do not take our own points of view as the only important ones" (Thomason, 2015, p. 20). Shame is valuable, in this analysis, because it reveals what is too often obscured or bypassed: where we stand in relation to our own points of view.

Is this how shame functions? Does shame admit alternative vantage points? Is shame's value to be found in the discriminatory powers it engenders? I think not. The reason for such a claim is this: clinical and theoretical descriptions tell us that experiences of shame cut to the very core of who we are. Indeed, shame lays claim to our essence – that essential feature without which we cease to be who we are. So, for example, shame would show itself to the analyst in the consulting room in this way: "I did not just inadvertently retraumatize my patient; I *am* a failure as an analyst and thus as a human being" (2008, p. 89). Put differently, shame does not concern itself with that which is merely incidental, decorative, or accidental. Shame has a corner on the absolute, essential, and the permanent: one *is* a failure. It is clear that instead of admitting to "points of view," shame narrows our vision to the simple injunction: there is only one thing to see here (Thomason, 2015, p. 20). If shame reveals, then what it discloses is its own absolute judgment. And this encourages the conclusion that shame functions *as if* it has universal value.

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[5] Here too one might worry about whether shame is the object of inquiry, rather than, say, disappointment (Maduro, 2017).

[6] Jacobs is not alone in thinking that the value of shame is to be found in the ways it engenders self-reform. In *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*, Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni write that, in the experience of shame, "the subject is painfully revealed to herself as having an incapacity that she now has strong motivation to remedy" (Deonna et al., 2012, p. 177). As such, they continue, "the motivation to self-reform is, then, likely to be among the long-term action tendencies associated with the experience of shame" (Deonna et al., 2012, p. 178).

The totalizing tendency of shame is, in its very form, completely absorbing. Nietzsche describes this as follows:

> *Centre*. – The feeling "I am the mid-point of the world!" arises very strongly if one is suddenly overcome with shame; one stands there as though confused in the midst of a surging sea and feels dazzled as though by a great eye which gazes upon us and though us from all sides. (1997, p. 166)

In the throes of shame, one is not simply self-centered, one *is* the absolute center of the world. Shame shifts our all-too-human perspective as it assumes for itself something of a God's eye view. There is only one way of seeing things; it "gazes though us from all sides" and passes the ultimate judgment. This is how shame functions.[7] If this is right, it also explains why the experience of shame can be so disorienting and so dreadfully confusing. The reason is that the experience of shame annihilates any outside perspective we may try to use to chart our course.

One might worry that I have overplayed my hand here. That is, in bringing to mind the variant version of this argument, one might point to that kind of humanizing shame which engenders "creative and sustaining object relations" (Kilborne, 2007, p. 11; cf. Kilborne, 2002). Other vantage points and values, it may be argued, are plainly on offer here. As such, one might contend that I have exaggerated the totalizing tendency of shame, all the while minimizing the roles that "existential shame" (Jacobs, 2017, p. 38), "humanizing shame" (Kilborne, 2007, p. 11), "creative shame" (Grand, 2018, p. 92), "protective shame" (Schneider, 1977, p. 201), and other modes of nontoxic shame may play in augmenting our perspectives.

My response is simple: the qualifier tells us the story. In closely tracking the argument, what we find is shame tempered, augmented, modified, maybe even softened. It is worth remarking that tracking the value of, let's say, "humanizing shame," is not the same as evaluating the experience of shame itself. It is to move the goal posts, so to speak, and to net something else: namely, the value of processing, holding, withstanding, or otherwise bearing a shame state. So, it is the processing, holding, withstanding, or bearing of the emotion that has value, rather than the shame itself. To lay my cards on the table, my objection is not to the value of these capacities. Learning to bear a shame state, to highlight but one example, has real and important value. It is, without question, a heroic achievement for many. What I object to is the sweetening of the pot, so to speak, as this serves to further obscure the fundamental issue: how shame manifests itself clinically and the value it assumes for itself. An example, familiar to many that have undergone psychoanalytic training, will bear this out.

On shame in psychoanalytic training: Only one can survive

As psychoanalytic training programs take a tripartite form, requiring controlled case supervision, didactic courses, and personal analysis, we could naturally take our point of entry from a range of places. We might be curious about how unacknowledged shame is passed between a candidate and his supervisor or freely around a seminar room – between the candidates themselves, of course, as well as by and through their instructors. We may wonder, as some have, what limits the identifying and naming of shame throughout training. We could notice the ways that humiliation and embarrassment are warded off (e.g., the collusive avoidance of challenging topics) or safeguarded against (e.g., reaction-formation or defensive grandiosity) and weaponized (e.g., "you are shaming me").

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[7] Several research studies conducted by June Price Tangney have reached this same conclusion, namely, that shame generates "global feelings of self-contempt and disgust" (1995, p. 1142; cf. Tangney, 1992; Tangney et al., 1996, 2011).

That last instantiation – the one that concerns the weaponization of shame in analytic training – is the one that interests me most, not least because it has gone markedly underappreciated. What principally interests me, here, is the issue of mechanics it lays bare: when shame is deployed as a tool of oppression, we see power crystalize into univocal dictate, we see power coalescing in "omnipotence" as power shifts to one person, we see the complementary relational dynamics in tension with mutuality (Benjamin, 1995, p. 43). What we see, to put it another way, is how shame assumes a universal value, how shame admits of only one vantage-point, how shame locks us into complementary relations, and how shame requires submission.

This expression of shame (e.g., "that is shaming") in the seminar room can function at the procedural level, broadly out of conscious awareness, as a way of reestablishing a sense of personal efficacy, of re-asserting control and managing feelings of humiliation or embarrassment, powerlessness or helplessness. The mechanism for how this can be achieved – by and through shame – should not go unremarked: in carving out and assuming the position of *the abused* (the shamed), one is concurrently shaping the others and casting them as *the abusers* (the shamers). The relational dynamic that emerges, as Jessica Benjamin might describe it, is that "one person is recognized, the other negated; one is subject, the other object. This complementarity does not dissolve omnipotence but shifts from one partner to the other" (Benjamin, 1995, p. 43). It is clear, I think, that shame underpins the doer/done to complementarity (Benjamin & Atlas, 2022, p. 426). It is also clear why: by assuming a universal value, by claiming a corner on *the* truth of the matter, shame serves as a powerful organizing force dividing the shamed from the shamer; the powerful from the powerless; the recognized from those that struggle to be seen.

I am not suggesting that the wielding of shame need always take this complementary relational form, of course. I can readily imagine that many analysts and analysts-in-training have the capacity to express their shame states – "I feel ashamed of how I handled that case" – in a way that fosters mutuality. Mutuality, however, as far as I can see, introduces other perspectives and, thereby, contains and undoes shame states precisely because such an introduction of competing views invalidates shame's claim to universal value.[8]

Revisiting shame's value

At the start of this paper, I noted that the picture of shame and its value that I am painting may seem somewhat run-of-the-mill or pedestrian. My claim that shame obscures or limits what can be seen because it assumes an unconditional value may now strike one as commonsensical. However, as I will claim by way of conclusion, even the mundane can have a number of important clinical implications. Let me highlight just four.

First, I think that this account helps us to further explain why self-analysis is so tricky. It is not just – as Karen Horney puts it in a remark reported approvingly by Helen Block Lewis – because the countertransference is so hostile, though of course it can be.[9] It is not just the pain or the aggression turned against the self to which one can object, though, of course, one can. The problem with this mode of analysis is not to be found, as Horney and Lewis seem to have it, in *why* things remain out of view, but rather *that* they do. Understood in this way, the issue is as follows: self-analysis forever obscures the very thing that one seeks to understand and transform. An endless repetition of the same, there is only one way of viewing things: it binds categorically, and it plays continuously on repeat. The Horney/Lewis objection to self-analysis only serves to further obfuscate the most salient of clinical issues: the patient comes to the analyst denuded of another perspective. Which, if what I have said so far is plausible, is the propensity of shame itself. The problem of self-analysis, becomes, if you will, the problem of shame. The reason concerns what both admit to seeing, or better, what they do not admit: a multiplicity of perspectives. And, like it or not, another way of looking at things requires another person. "There is," as Donna Orange puts it, "no hope of escape from the enclosure of this world except through the encounter with another with whom I must again enter worlds of shame" (2008, pp. 89–90).

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[8] To wit the statement – "I feel ashamed of how I handled that case" – reflects several possible perspectives: the candidate's perspective on himself as an object of inquiry; the candidate's perspective on his case; and the candidate's perspective on his colleagues. That is, the simple "I feel" places his shame in a context, in a place among a range of other possible feeling states, as well as in relationship to and in conversation with "the case." It also harbors, at least implicitly, a longing and desire to be seen by his colleagues. This might very well introduce his colleagues as another vantage point. As the candidate longs to be seen, and shame invokes the desire to hide, the statement implies that the shame state has already passed and he is no longer in its throes.

[9] Helen Block Lewis (1987) credits Karen Horney with this gem: "[Horney] was once asked what she thought was wrong about self-analysis. She is said to have replied that self-analysis doesn't work because the countertransference in self-analysis is so hostile" (p. 24).

This is further supported by a second point, which concerns shame in the analytic dyad. Of particular interest is the "strong tendency of a patient's shame to stimulate (or resonate with) shame experiences of the analyst, often leading to collusion between the two to avoid articulation and exploration of this emotion because of its painful consequences to *both* of them" (A. P. Morrison & Stolorow, 1997, p. 76). The insights here are valuable, especially when cast in the light of our first claim that any escape from the enclosure in which the shame-prone patient finds themselves requires another person. For this reason, shame presents a unique clinical challenge: the shame-prone analysand is in need of an analyst up to the task of working through this affective state, which both parties are apt to avoid. This is the case, I think, not merely because shame states are painful. Rather – and this is my key point – it is the very engagement with shame that has a tendency to augment the analyst's vantage point, to replace the contextual with the universal, the particular with the absolute. This is not just painful; it is downright disorienting. It is the loss of perspective – of one's analytic bearings, so to speak – that makes the articulation so challenging and exploration so treacherous.

The third point reaches further than either of the two previous points: the actual intersubjective origins of shame are masked and concealed by its claim to universal value. This idea that shame is born in a relational context can be illustrated as follows:

> Affects can be seen as organizers of self-experience throughout development, if met with the requisite affirming, accepting, differentiating, synthesizing, and constraining responses from caregivers. An absence of steady, attuned responsiveness to the child's affect states leads to [. . .] significant derailments of optimal affect integration and to a propensity to dissociate or disavow affective reactions. (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984, p. 105)

The central claims – concerning the intersubjective origins of affect integration and its thwarting – are as crucial as they are true. What interests me most, however, is that the univocal and absolute manner in which shame presents itself obscures such relational contexts. As shame removes conditionality from view, instead of seeing misattunement to affectivity on the part of the caregivers, what remains is the objective conviction that self-loathing of such a magnitude captures the essence, or the heart of the matter. This is of obvious clinical value for a number of reasons: (a) it makes plain the way in which shame states assume an air of objectivity for themselves; (b) in so doing, it alerts the analyst to the fact that the all-too-human, messy, contingent, intersubjective origins of shame have been covered over; and (c) it points the way toward the overcoming of such states through attunement which, in providing an alternative relational experience, opens up an alternative viewpoint, perhaps some additional vistas.

If plausible, this also explains, incidentally, why it is something of a red herring to contend – as Nussbaum does – that "shame requires self-regard as its essential backdrop. It is only because one expects oneself to have worth or even perfection that one will shrink from or cover the evidence of one's nonworth or imperfection" (2004, p. 184). Given our claims about the intersubjective origins of shame, Nussbaum puts the cart before the horse. Shame marks a breakdown of relating and is evidence of the "derailment of optimal affect integration" (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984, p. 105; cf. Ikonen et al., 1993, p. 100; Lansky, 1991, p. 242; Orange, 2008). Shame, to put it another way, attends the expectation that one's affect will not find a relational home. Accordingly, shame's backdrop is not some simplistic self-regard, as Nussbaum claims, but other-regard. Or, to put it less glibly, shame marks the absence or failure of the other to attune. Hence, Nussbaum misses the fundamentally intersubjective underpinnings of shame.

The fourth, final, and arguably most significant point concerns how we might best describe the conditions of being held captive by a universalizing or totalizing perspective. To bring this out in its starkest form, we would do well to bring to mind Andrew Morrison's account of shame as something rather like a dense fog, that admits "substanceless impressions" (1994, p. 19). With even the densest of fogs, as we know, come fragments or snatches of view. Silhouettes of passersby. White lines on the highway. The same is true of impressions. Impressions are such because they are vague. Shame, however, does not come piecemeal and it does not trade in likenesses. There are no fragments but rather, as David Foster Wallace puts it, an "excluded encagement in the self" (1996, p. 694).

Though he does not often speak directly of shame in *The Restoration of the Self*, Kohut seems to have settled here too. In writing of those who, once middle-aged, experience "guiltless despair," he identifies that: "The suicides of this period are not the expression of a punitive superego, but a remedial act – the wish to wipe out the unbearable sense of mortification and nameless shame imposed by the ultimate recognition of a failure of all-encompassing magnitude" (Kohut, 1977, p. 241).[10] For Kohut, as I indicated at the start of this paper, shame does not merely "distort [our] vision" (A. P. Morrison, 1994, p. 19); it takes that capacity over: it is the "nameless" "ultimate recognition" "of a failure of all-encompassing magnitude" (Kohut, 1977, p. 242). Which means, of course, that my question about how best to describe shame is something of a nonstarter: as shame assumes universality, it defies specification. So, in the final analysis, as we truly end where we began, it may well be that Toni Morrison's description of her protagonist in the throes of shame is much closer to the mark: "she would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (1993, p. 47).

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[10] For more on shame's role in suicide see Faber (1967) and Lansky (1996).

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