

HOW COULD YOU DO WHAT YOU DID?¹

• Robert Spaemann •

“Guilt can be taken away from me. But shame is a feeling that no one can take away. It pertains to the fact that I was *capable of doing* what I did.”



In his tragedy *Philoctetes* a ninety-year-old Sophocles dramatized a mythological theme from the Homeric era and won first prize for it at the Athenian drama competition. In the story the Greeks, on their voyage to Troy, abandon Philoctetes on the uninhabited island of Lemnos because he has a foul-smelling wound that will not heal. They leave him a single tool of survival: his bow—the wonder-working bow of Heracles—with which he can hunt. But in the siege of Troy, the old prophecy is confirmed: without this bow, the city cannot be conquered. Consequently, Diomedes swindles Philoctetes out of the bow and leaves him to his fate. Sophocles replaced Diomedes with the crafty Odysseus. But most importantly, he introduced into the tale the figure of Achilles’ son Neoptolemos, who can more easily deceive Philoctetes because he is not acquainted with him. Odysseus remains in the background and gives Neoptolemos instructions.

It is Neoptolemos who is actually the dramatic character, however. He is supposed to lie his way into possession of the bow. Neoptolemos has scruples. He is ashamed. But Odysseus pressures

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him: “I know, my son, it’s not in your nature to talk like this, lying and cheating. But the certain possession of victory is glorious. Endure this. Later we will appear upright again. Give yourself over to me now without shame—*anaiides*—for a short part of the day. After that, fine: be acknowledged for all ages as the most god-fearing of all mortals.” Neoptolemos is torn. “I would prefer to fail at good works, Prince, than to celebrate victory in a vile venture.” But by and by he gives in and lures Philoctetes into the trap. “I renounce all shame.” When Philoctetes later notices that he has been tricked, he says to Neoptolemos: “Are you not ashamed to look at me?”

1. *What kind of face?*

It was just this that Neoptolemos feared, when he said to Odysseus: “With what kind of face does one speak such a word?” Someone who is ashamed of himself turns red. One has to have beaten something down within himself in order to look another person in the eyes naturally while lying to him. And after the deed, which Neoptolemos tries to undo, he says: “Everything becomes unbearable when one abandons one’s nature—his *physis*—and does what is not fitting to it.” In the end, Heracles appears as *deus ex machina* and solves the problem satisfactorily for all: Philoctetes is healed, the bow goes along to Troy. The final words of Heracles: “Reverence—*eusebia*, *pietas*—does not die with man. Whether he lives or dies, it will never pass away.” The drama could also be called *The Shame of Neoptolemos*. For Neoptolemos’ benefit Odysseus asserts the overwhelming importance of the “good cause” for which one might close one’s eyes and forget about shame. He does not answer the question, “With what kind of face does one bring forth so base a deception?” For Neoptolemos, renouncing shame means renouncing his nature.

A second story, the story of the origin of shame, is familiar to everyone. But the point of this story seems to be quite different. It is the biblical story of the fall of man. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The only knowledge they gained is that they are naked. They make aprons for themselves out of fig leaves, because they are evidently ashamed before one another. Before God, however, the aprons are of no use to them. When God takes a turn in the garden in the cool of the evening, they become ashamed and hide themselves. But his voice reaches them all the

same. How do they know that they are naked? Clearly they have lost the garment of glory, whose symbolic representation is presented to every child after baptism. Later, of course, the child too will find out that he is naked beneath this garment.

2. Money, sexuality

The third story is also well-known: the story of Peter's denial. It was evidently easier for Peter to defend Jesus with the sword than to allow himself to be exposed as a disciple, not by force but by the chatter of a maid. Peter denies knowing the Lord; the cock crows; he remembers what Jesus said; he goes out and weeps bitterly. Luke added another decisive detail to the story. The whole scene plays itself out in a corner of the high priest's courtyard. At the moment the cock crows, Jesus turns around and looks at Peter. It is the gaze of Jesus that brings about the change. Under this gaze Peter wants to sink into the ground with shame, as we say.

People have always been ashamed when a discrepancy between their deeds and their words becomes evident. Peter's shame must of course be seen against the backdrop of his earlier boasts. Confucius had already taught that one must not make grand claims lightly, because there is great shame when it becomes known that a person preaches water but drinks wine. But it seems that something has changed. Advertisements promise us blue skies, and no one blushes when the whole thing is exposed as a bluff. The same goes for politics. Politicians can spell out concrete promises and declare that they wish to be judged according to them, and that they will not run for office if they don't hold good on their word. Meanwhile, declarations of this kind have become so meaningless that even the opposition is generally extremely cautious about reminding people about them later. The shame normally connected with a broken promise has become alien to politicians. And people no longer even take offense at this.

Upon examination, we find that it is above all in two contexts that the word "shameless" is employed: money and sex. "Shameless amassing of wealth" is a common expression. It is shameless either because it is attained by disreputable means, or when it is so completely disproportionate to the dire need of others that no manner of achievement could justify it. And a particular kind of shamelessness consists in making an uninhibited display of such

wealth. I am speaking here of amassing wealth, not simply of riches. Wealth can be inherited, after all. In one of his aphorisms, Nicolás Gómez Dávila expresses the opinion that the only respectable wealth is that which is inherited. In this contemporary epoch of globalization, which radically reduces all spheres of life to the economic, the parameters set by shame are torn down, basically without reservation. The word “honor,” the objective correlate of shame, tends to provoke a weary smile, since honor cannot be expressed in terms of monetary value. By contrast, Aristotle divided people up into the noble and the ignoble, depending on whether they were driven by honor or money. One could also say, depending on how high a person’s shame threshold is.

What is most notable is the public destruction of the shame threshold in all matters sexual, that is, in the sphere in which shame is paradigmatically located. One cannot help but blush when accompanying visitors from countries with Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, or Confucian traditions as they familiarize themselves with our civilization. At every turn they encounter manifestations of shamelessness that evoke first astonishment and gradually only silent contempt. It gives one pause that Karl Popper, the great theoretician of liberal society, was calling for a censor for the European media already in the 1970s. By way of what we, in the meantime, already perceive as almost normal—for instance, discussions in reputable publications of pornographic film productions as serious works of art—Europe is in its own way placing itself at odds with a millennia-old consensus of humanity.

3. *What is new*

What is it exactly that has been lost here to such an alarming degree? What is alarming is not so much the increase of shamelessness. That could just be an optical illusion, after all. In the seventeenth century, the Duke of Saint-Simon was already complaining about the same decline in his memoirs. And at the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Scheler wrote something similar. To be sure, what Max Scheler wrote is more pertinent to us in a quite specific way; and it is more alarming because it is no longer simply a matter of complaining about the mores of the day on the basis of recognized standards of good and bad. What is new is that the standards themselves have been called into question. What is

unsettling is not that more people comport themselves shamelessly but that the value of something like shame is fundamentally doubted—or, if not doubted, then reduced to a biological or social function. But a functional explanation of morality always represents a dismantling of morality, because it means the beginning of a search for functional equivalents and, moreover, of calculations of the sort proposed by Odysseus to Neoptolemos. After all, what is at stake is the victory of the Greeks! In the face of this, shame has to retreat. “I’m my own man—up to one million,” said the cynic Talleyrand in answer to the question of whether there are any people who are not corrupt.

When the value of shame is called into question theoretically, it is good to look more closely at what is actually at issue. For the concepts of shame, of being ashamed of oneself, of shaming, and of modesty cover a whole range of different phenomena—phenomena that nonetheless are deeply bound together. The principle of Greek ethics before Plato and before the ascendancy of the concept of virtue is *aidos*, a reverent modesty. *Aidos* and *aischyne*, shame, are closely bound up with one another. In contrast to our concept of shame, modesty is a posture of the actor (or, as the case may be, the one who refrains from acting). Shame, on the other hand, can motivate actions or omissions, but the word also means that particular kind of malaise or even piercing pain following an action that is irreconcilable with due modesty.

One might be led simply to identify modesty and shame with conscience: modesty with the judgment of conscience before the action; shame with the twinge of conscience afterward. But this is not quite accurate. It is true that there are good reasons, supported by ethnological findings, to assume that shame—and particularly the shame that pertains to the relations between the sexes—is the fundamental paradigm of morality, out of which what we call conscience emerges only later. But in contrast to shame, conscience is not primarily a feeling, but a judgment: a judgment of practical reason, a judgment pertaining to good and evil, one that like every human judgment can also err. And like every capacity for judgment, it too can be developed. Shame is a feeling. It pertains to particular contents and situations prior to every judgment about good and evil.

Since shame itself is not a judgment and the capacity to feel shame is not simply equivalent to the capacity to make judgments, it is not really possible to instill a sense of shame. Shame is a natural endowment that, in dealing with children and young people, one

can either foster and respect, or damage and destroy: for instance, through an instrumentalization of shame—through frequent shaming—and also through superficial rationalizations. Since shame is a feeling and not a judgment, it also cannot err. If someone is ashamed, he is ashamed. At most, one can make it clear to him that he is mistaken about the matter at the root of his shame. But it makes no sense to try to talk someone out of shame, as little sense as it would make to tell him he ought to be ashamed. This expression, “you ought to be ashamed of yourself,” is actually almost never meant as an exhortation to be ashamed; rather it is a reproach because shame did not keep someone from doing what he did. The sentence, “you ought to be ashamed,” is harsher than the sentence, “you should be sorry,” which pertains to the moral quality of an action. “You ought to be ashamed”—this is not the same as “you ought to be sorry that you did that.” Rather, it is the expression of disappointment that the other is someone who *could* do what he did.

4. *Soul and body*

The feeling of shame is an index of the dualism of soul and body, of personal subjectivity and a vital embeddedness in a life-force that is prior to individualization; it is an index of the tension between immediacy and reflection. After all, Adam and Eve were also naked *prior* to the Fall. Shame comes into being at the same time as reflection on nakedness—a curious discovery, since the two had not known anything else. But by way of reflection, one’s own body takes on a peculiar double valance. In the first place it is simply the immediate presence of the human being, just like any animal, but in contrast to the body of an animal, a human body is an immediate expression of personal self-being. But through reflection it becomes a thing, an objective thing in the world, and what is more, a living thing that is determined by drives that do not originate in personal self-being and yet nonetheless are experienced as my own. As Freud said, we are not masters in our own house.

Shame has its source in this gap, which is constitutive for the human being. And not as a feeling of inferiority, but rather the opposite: shame is a guardian against objectification, a guardian of interiority and of one’s own body as the presence and expression of this interiority. In this way shame is at the service of personal love, understood as the restoration of that immediacy and innocence that

is lost through reflection. The sex drive of animals is spontaneous and immediate. It is immediately directed to the sexual partner and does not reflect on satisfaction, which simply takes place. Animals do not attempt to generate sexual enjoyment any more than they seek the enjoyment of food.

Human beings have lost immediacy. The hypertrophy of sexuality in our hedonistic civilization rests on the hedonist's wish to square the circle: the hedonist wants the immediacy of pleasure undisturbed by reason or morality, but he wants to enjoy this immediacy consciously. But then it ceases to be immediacy. The hedonist does not want to give himself over definitively to the beloved person, but rather seeks the pleasure of an imagined devotion. But this reflection about one's own pleasure—and perhaps even about the pleasure of one's partner, since it heightens one's own—renders the hedonist incapable of experiencing the heady joy that the true lover experiences. The human being cannot return to the immediacy of the animal realm, nor does he want to. Heinrich von Kleist says in his writing on the Marionette Theater that reflection “must pass through an infinite” in order to win back the immediacy that has been lost. In the relationship between the sexes this passage through an infinite is called “love.” Only personal love can re-establish a new immediacy. Only through such a love is the body transformed from an object in the world, an instrument for evoking pleasure, into the immediate presence of one's own self and the self of the other. But shame is at the service of the maturation of the self and of love. As Max Scheler wrote, shame represents “love, against the blindness of the sex drive.” Shame, he continued, is “like the chrysalis in which love can slowly ripen until, fittingly, it bursts out of the chrysalis.”

The effort to shield the act of intercourse from the eyes of others is one of the most elemental forms of shame. Here the perspective from within and the perspective from without diverge radically. Letting oneself go, together, and together plunging into the prepersonal life force is essentially a stripping away of the social “persona,” the self-styled role without which people avoid presenting themselves to others. To be sure, the image of the chrysalis can deceive: as though shame had finished its work once the shells have fallen away. Shame remains the “conscience of love”—again, an insight of Scheler. In preserving the integrating power of love, shame forges a unity of soul and body, soul and passion, and remains the guarantor of life's maturation and intensification. Shame secures

the expressive character of the sexual act by impeding not only a fixation of attention upon particular regions of the body, but also ultimately every intentionality that destroys immediacy.

5. *Love of self*

If it is true that the phenomenon of shame is embedded most basically in the region of bodiliness and sexuality, then we must ask ourselves what overarching and generalizable structure discloses itself in that foundational area. And we would do well to ask again what distinguishes shame from conscience.

In contrast to conscience, shame does not pertain in the first instance to actions but to the being of the actor: his social, his natural, and his personal being. Shame is possible because we are capable of relating to that which we are. Personality manifests itself as the relation to oneself. In this relationship our sense of self-worth is also always in question. Shame is at the root of a positive sense of self. Whoever despises himself does not feel shame any longer but rather lives according to the motto that if one's reputation is already lost, one might as well live it up.

My actions can show me that I am not who I would like to be or pretend to be. I can regret such an action. The one I have injured can forgive me this act. And yet I persist in feeling ashamed when I think about it. Why? This phenomenon has nothing to do with some purported inability to forgive oneself. "I can't forgive myself for it" is a stupid expression, behind which lurks pure arrogance: I consider myself to be the judge and as such am merciless. This is nonsense. No one can forgive himself. "I can't forgive myself"—in truth this means, I do not want to let myself be forgiven, because I will be obliged to be grateful to the one who forgives me. No, guilt can be taken away from me. But shame is a feeling that no one can take away. It pertains to the fact that I was *capable of doing* what I did.

Shame is a natural feeling that arises when someone is confronted with the fact that—beyond and before any willing—he is not the one he would like to be, thought he was, or pretended to be. The discovery that he is not the master of his own house is, objectively, a shaming of the person. The person does not experience this as normalcy, nor by any means as guilt. The doctrine of the effects of original sin gives a more adequate account of the actual

phenomenon. The capacity to be ashamed is a matter of holding onto one's self-respect, without deceiving oneself and without becoming cynical. Modesty and shame are the tender roots of our very humanity. These roots are torn out by an ethic that understands the right life to be a technology of selflessly optimizing the world, just as surely as by the cynicism of unscrupulous self-assertion.—One has to love oneself in order to be able to be ashamed.—*Translated by Lesley M. Rice.* □

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