JYX

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Westerlund, Fredrik

Title: Shame, Love, and Morality

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

Copyright: © The Author(s) 2022

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Please cite the original version:

Westerlund, F. (2022). Shame, Love, and Morality. Journal of Ethics, 26(4), 517-541. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-022-09402-9

The Journal of Ethics
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-022-09402-9

Shame, Love, and Morality

Fredrik Westerlund[1]

Received: 17 November 2021 / Accepted: 15 July 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract
This article offers a new account of the moral substance of shame. Through careful reflection on the motives and intentional structure of shame, I defend the claim that shame is an egocentric and morally blind emotion. I argue that shame is rooted in our desire for social affirmation and constituted by our ability to sense how we appear to others. What makes shame egocentric is that in shame we are essentially concerned about our own social worth and pained by the perception of our self as socially worthless. In itself, shame entails no morally pertinent concern about others or understanding of what is morally significant. I contrast shame with the possibility of relating to others—and to oneself—with love and care. Indeed, I propose that love is essential for moral understanding and motivation. The argument of the article unfolds through critical appraisals of the main strategies for defending the moral value of shame. First, against the claim that shame entails respect for others, I argue that shame's sensitivity to the opinions of others is motivated by egocentric self-concern. Second, against the view that shame over failures to live up to moral values is morally valuable, I argue that regardless of whether the values guiding our shame are moral or not, the perspective of shame is oblivious to their moral meaning. Third, against the claim that shame is crucial for self-understanding, I argue that the desire for affirmation that drives shame is a powerful source of self-deception.

Keywords Shame · Love · Care · Egoism · Moral values · Self-deception

1 Introduction

Our sense of shame is without doubt one of the strongest emotional forces affecting our behavior and thinking. As such, it plays a central role in our moral lives. It can motivate morally good action and self-reform and it can punish immorality with painful shame. However, it can also prompt immoral action and make us feel ashamed of traits and actions of ours that are morally innocuous or even

✉ Fredrik Westerlund
fredrik.j.westerlund@gmail.com

[1] Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

good. Just as my selfish neglect of a friend of mine might occasion me to feel shame, I can also feel shame over my obesity or poverty, or perhaps over my effort to help my friend—say, if my friend belongs to a social group despised by my community.

How should we understand shame's relation to morality? What is the moral substance of this powerful emotion?

The latest decades have seen—as part of a strengthened interest in the role of emotions in morality more generally—an intensified debate about the moral status of shame. On the one hand, there is a widespread view that shame is a morally deficient or problematic emotion. Different reasons have been presented in support of this view: that in shame we are merely concerned about our social standing and not about moral claims as such (Adkins 1960; Benedict 1947; Dodds 1951; Gibbard 1990; Maibom 2010); that shame regularly focuses on morally innocuous traits over which we have no control (Gibbard 1990; Lamb 1983; Maibom 2010); that shame is egocentric and at odds with empathic responses (Adkins 1960; Leith and Baumeister 1998; Tangney 1991, 1995); that shame provokes rage and violence (Lewis 1971; Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Tangney 1995; Tangney et al. 1996; Wicker et al. 1983); finally, that shame elicits incapacitating self-torment and depression (Isenberg 1949; Kekes 1988; Nussbaum 2004; Orth et al. 2006; Tangney et al. 1992). On the other hand, many of the major recent contributions to the debate have been attempts to defend the moral value of shame. The most common defense has consisted in arguing that shame is not essentially a social emotion. Rather, it is a negative evaluation of our character in the light of our own values. If our values are morally good, so the argument goes, then our shame amounts to a morally valuable self-assessment (Deonna et al. 2012; Manion 2002; Rawls 1971 [2005]; Taylor 1985). Again, others have argued that shame is morally valuable precisely because it is a social emotion involving respect for others and their points of view (Buss 1999; Calhoun 2004; Thomason 2018; Williams 1993).

However, despite intense discussion and valuable contributions, I want to suggest that the contemporary debate still suffers from a basic lack when it comes to understanding the moral meaning of shame. What has been lacking is a radical enough effort at elucidating the moral quality of the motives and of the manner of understanding oneself and others that constitute the emotional experience of shame.

The primary methodological approach of this article will be phenomenological in the sense given to this term in the phenomenological tradition launched by Edmund Husserl and developed further in different ways by subsequent phenomenologists, among them Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Emmanuel Levinas. In my view, the methodological core of phenomenology, which I try to practice, consists in phenomenological reflection. Broadly understood, phenomenological reflection is the activity of reflecting on our concrete first-person lived experiences with the aim of describing and explicating the essential structures that constitute the experiences under investigation. Using this approach, I will reflect on shame and other relevant experiences in order to explicate the motivational and

intentional structures that make these experiences what they are and that are crucial for understanding their moral meaning.[1]

My use of a phenomenological approach does not imply that I will be discussing phenomenological philosophers in particular. Rather, my investigation is oriented towards the issue itself—the moral status of shame—and I will engage with the relevant contemporary literature on the issue regardless of tradition.

In what follows, I will make the case that shame is a fundamentally egocentric and morally blind emotion. The claim that shame in some sense is an egoistic emotion has been made before (cf. Adkins 1960; Leith and Baumeister 1998; Morrison 1989; Nussbaum 2004; Tangney 1991, 1995). However, it has not been substantiated and specified through sufficient analysis of the motivational and intentional structure of shame of the kind that I hope to provide here.

In a previous article (Westerlund 2019a), I presented an account of what I proposed is the basic interpersonal structure of shame. I argued that shame is rooted in our desire for social affirmation and in our ability to sense how we appear to others, and that shame is what we feel when we come to perceive ourselves as fundamentally non-affirmable or despicable. In the present article, I go on to investigate the moral dimension of shame. I argue that shame is egocentric in the sense that it is driven by a worry about the social worth and appeal of our own self whereas it lacks any genuine moral concern or understanding. I contrast the egocentricity of shame with the possibility of love and care for others, which, I suggest, is irreducibly constitutive of moral understanding and motivation. This also means that I will depart from the prevailing habit of contrasting shame to guilt (cf. Deonna and Teroni 2008; Lamb 1983; Lewis 1971; O'Hear 1977; Tangney 1991, 1995; Teroni and Bruun 2011).[2]

My account of love as essential to moral understanding will of necessity be sketchy and will likely be met with skepticism by some readers. Hence, a brief explanation of why I believe it is important for my argument is in order.

As a rule, philosophers assessing the moral value of shame have, without much argument, presupposed as their starting point some traditional philosophical conception of morality. These guiding views of morality have tended to be intellectualist in character such that, in one way or another, they have pictured morality as primarily a matter of knowing and adhering to moral values and norms. However, what has largely been missing—both in the contemporary discussion and in the tradition at large—is an effort to explore how moral understanding itself is connected to and perhaps constituted by our motives, concerns, attitudes, and emotions. How are we touched by and responsive to morality? Does not moral understanding in itself require emotional sensitivity to and concern about what is morally significant—especially human beings and animals? The common failure to pursue these kinds of questions has resulted in a general lack of clarity as regards the difference between genuine moral understanding and other ways of knowing values and norms

[1] I spell out my view of the phenomenological method in more detail in Westerlund (2020).

[2] Although I cannot argue this here, I think that guilt—like shame—is an emotion that does not necessarily entail any morally pertinent concern or understanding.

that lack understanding of and concern for their moral meaning. If correct, this in turn implies that philosophers presupposing some traditional intellectualist theory of morality will be prone to have difficulties grasping the moral deficiency of shame. In so far as shame is determined by some kind of knowledge of values and norms that are morally good and in so far as it encourages morally good actions—both of which are quite possible—what is the problem? What is it that shame is supposedly lacking?

If the above diagnosis is true and if my account of love is on target, at least as regards their basic direction, it follows that what is needed to clarify the moral substance of shame is both an investigation of moral understanding—and its relation to love—and an investigation of shame. Ultimately, I think there is good reason to turn the standard schema for investigating the moral meaning of shame on its head. That is, instead of presupposing some traditional conception of morality as our guiding light for assessing the moral value of shame, we need to realize that the task of elucidating shame—and other moral emotions such as love, guilt, and bad conscience—is fundamental and vital for understanding moral understanding and motivation as such.[3]

I do think it is possible to grasp and appreciate my argument for the egocentricity of shame while remaining skeptical of my view of love. However, I believe my account of the essential role of love in morality is important for getting a sense of what shame is lacking and of how it contrasts with moral understanding.

I begin the article by outlining my view of the interpersonal structure of shame. After that, I advance and argue my central claim concerning the egocentrism of shame and the moral primacy of love and care. I then go on to clarify and specify this claim by discussing three of the main recent strategies for defending shame. First, I consider the argument that shame entails respect for others and their points of view. Second, I discuss the view that shame over failures to live up to moral values is morally valuable. Third, I discuss the view that shame is constitutive of or importantly conducive to self-understanding. Finally, in the conclusion, I draw attention to why shame, despite its egocentricity and moral lack, nevertheless has an important role to play in morality.

The article primarily focuses on the moral substance of the motives and understanding that make up the experience and perspective of shame. This means that I will leave aside many questions figuring in the debate about shame and morality, for example, questions about the extrinsic effects and functions of shame in morality and society, and questions about the reaction tendencies of shame, say, about shame's relation to violence and depression. Although my analysis offers background understanding for dealing with such issues, they fall outside the scope of this text.

[3] These suggestions are in line with the steadily growing philosophical trend to emphasize the pivotal role of emotions in morality. Although I sympathize with this trend, it seems to me that much thinking in this field has still been hampered by the tendency to analyze and evaluate moral emotions in terms of overly intellectualist notions of morality. For an overview of the field, see Bagnoli (2011).

2 The Interpersonal Structure of Shame

Let me start by outlining my basic analysis of the interpersonal motives and structure of shame. As mentioned above, I have developed this analysis at length in a recent article (Westerlund 2019a). Here, a brief sketch must suffice.

The debate about the nature of shame has been characterized by the tension between two opposing accounts. Whereas what I will call the "interpersonal account" (cf. Calhoun 2004; Deigh 1983; Montes Sánchez 2015; Rochat 2009; Sartre 1943 [2003]; Williams 1993; Wollheim 1993; Zahavi 2014) conceives of shame as essentially a social emotion in which we are concerned about how others see and judge us, the "self-evaluative account" (cf. Deonna et al. 2012; Kekes 1988; Lewis 1992; O'Hear 1977; Rawls 1971 [2005]; Roberts 2003; Scheler 1913 [1957]; Taylor 1985) conceives of shame as a kind of autonomous self-evaluation that does not necessarily refer to others at all.

In my view, the interpersonal analysis of shame is on target in emphasizing that in shame we are, in some sense, fundamentally concerned about how we appear to others and how others judge us. In what sense, however? How should this fundamental concern about and presence of others in shame be understood? The standard way of accounting for the social character of shame has been to argue that shame requires the presence of an audience—a real-life audience or an imagined audience—that sees and judges us in a negative manner. However, as representatives of the self-evaluative analysis have pointed out, it seems quite possible to feel shame even when we are all alone and have no audience, not even an indeterminate imagined audience, in mind (cf. Deonna et al. 2012: 136–9; Deonna and Teroni 2011: 196–7). Moreover, it has been argued—correctly, I think—that to feel shame, it is not enough that we are confronted with adverse judgements of ourselves by others. After all, shame is just one possible reaction to such an experience. We could also react, for example, with fear or anger. Hence, in order to feel shame, it is crucial that we ourselves also in some sense perceive and judge ourselves as shameful (cf. Deonna et al. 2012: 128–31; Montes Sánchez 2015: 185; Zahavi 2014: 225–7).

The self-evaluative analysis has taken the above arguments as proof of its central idea that, at its core, shame is a negative self-evaluation that does not essentially refer to others at all. On this view, shame is what we feel when we see ourselves as having failed to live up to the values that we hold dear and that constitute our identity. However, why would this kind of failure, even if radical, give rise to shame? As representatives of the interpersonal account have noted, the self-evaluative analysis cannot distinguish between shame and self-disappointment (Deigh 1983: 231; Zahavi 2014: 212, 222). The assessment that we have failed with respect to our values does not as such produce shame in particular, but may give rise to many different emotions, such as remorse, sorrow, disappointment—or shame.

My own analysis of shame aims to overcome the limits and incorporate the insights of the existing approaches by showing how shame essentially involves both worry about how others see us and self-evaluation. My thesis is that shame is rooted in our desire for social affirmation and constituted by our capacity for social self-consciousness.

It seems to be a fact of life that as human beings we desire other people and their company as such. We long to be together with others in a mutually loving and caring manner. Furthermore, we are concerned about others for quite self-serving and instrumental reasons. We are aware of our own vulnerability and mortality, which entails that other people are present to us both as a potential threat—they can hurt us and kill us—and as our decisive means for achieving safety and control. In addition to these motives, we have a basic desire for social affirmation which centrally consist in being self-consciously concerned about how others see us and evaluate us.[4]

In their recent, Sartre-inspired phenomenological analyses of shame, Dan Zahavi (2014) and Alba Montes-Sánchez (2015) have argued that social self-consciousness is an essential constituent of shame. As Sartre himself puts it: "shame is shame *of oneself before the Other*" (Sartre 1943 [2003]: 246). I think this is a crucial insight for understanding the experience of shame.[5]

It belongs to our human constitution that we have the basic ability to sense and understand—more or less astutely—how other persons see, think, and feel about us. In their faces, gestures, and speech we can apprehend how they relate to us and feel about us (cf., e.g., Overgaard 2007; Scheler 1913/1923 [2008]; Stein 1917 [1989]; Zahavi 2014). Furthermore, we have a basic sense of how we are seen by others. We can sense in a pre-reflective intuitive manner how we appear in their eyes: as attractive, frightening, powerful, despicable, ludicrous, and so on. What I call the desire for social affirmation is nothing but our intense desire to be affirmed—esteemed, respected, liked—by, and to appear affirmable—worthy, respectable, likable—to others. In so far as we are driven by our desire for social affirmation, we are enormously sensitive to how we believe we appear to others: Do we appear likeable, worthy, and respectable or do we appear unlikeable, unworthy, and despicable? When in the grip of this desire, it seems to us as if everything—ultimately, our possibilities of achieving love, safety, and control—would depend on our achieving social value and affirmation (however, as I will argue later, the desire for social affirmation differs radically from the possibility of relating to one another with love; indeed, it is a key motive for blocking and distorting the latter possibility).

Our affirmation-seeking-and-disaffirmation-dreading social self-consciousness constitutes the core structure of a distinct group of self-conscious emotions and sentiments to which belong, for example, self-esteem, pride, shame, and embarrassment.

My thesis is that shame is what we feel when, due to some trait or action of ours, we come to perceive ourselves as fundamentally non-affirmable and despicable.

[4] While the philosophical literature on shame has generally ducked the question concerning the interpersonal motives of shame, a number of psychologists—and a few philosophers and sociologists—have proposed that shame is motivated by our desire for social affiliation and recognition (cf. Honneth 1996; Kaufman 1992; Lewis 1971, 1981; Rochat 2009; Scheff 2000, 2003). In the context of psychology and psychoanalysis, the need and desire for belonging and affiliation has been emphasized by, e.g., Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), Maslow (1954 [1970]), Rochat (2009), Spitz (1965), and Winnicott (1965). However, the relation and difference between our desire for the mutuality of love and what I call the desire for affirmation has as a rule not been examined or clarified.

[5] The idea of the self as fundamentally social and conscious of how it appears in the eyes of others is also central to the social psychology of Cooley (1922), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1959). Cf. also Scheff (2003).

While shame is essentially social in the sense that it is motivated by our desire for social affirmation, it also essentially requires that we ourselves apprehend ourselves as shameful in the light of this desire. If we merely experience that others see us as shameful but do not share this view of ourselves at all, this is not enough to yield shame. At the same time, it is the rootedness of shame in our desire for social affirmation that explains why we are so sensitive to and paradigmatically feel shame in situations of damaging public exposure.

Here is an example to concretely elucidate my analysis. Let us say that I present a paper at a philosophy conference. After the talk I receive harsh criticism from some prominent scholars, whereupon it dawns upon me that my main thesis is completely trivial and my arguments to support it are flawed. I blush and find myself trying to defend myself with even more stupid arguments. Now, let us say that I react by feeling deeply ashamed of myself. What is the phenomenology of my shame reaction? For me to feel shame in the above situation, it is not enough that I sense that my colleagues view me with disapproval or contempt. In response to this, I could just as well react with other feelings, for instance with fear or anger. To feel shame, I myself need to see myself as shameful. However, neither is it sufficient to say that my shame springs from my judgment that I have failed to live up to the values that constitute my identity as a philosopher. This kind of failure does not in itself explain my shame but could also yield other feelings, such as more or less severe self-disappointment. Rather, for me to feel shame in the situation above I would in some manner and at some level need to perceive my philosophical failure as a token of the non-affirmability and unworthiness of myself.

The values and ideals that make up our personal identity—our sense of who we, ideally, are—play a major role in determining what we feel shame about (cf. Westerlund 2019a: 76–82). The reason for this is that we tend to invest our desire for social affirmation in them. What this means is that we conceive of the values constituting our identity as standards that we need to live up to in order to retain our social worth. If we fail to do this, we are bound to perceive ourselves as shameful and non-affirmable. However, our pre-held values do not alone determine what we can feel shame about. Because of our basic consciousness of how we appear to others, we are open to appropriating new perspectives on ourselves as shameful, for example, as the result of experiencing social contempt or hostility of one sort or the other.

It seems possible to distinguish between two major kinds of shame: "personal shame" and "social shame" (cf. Westerlund 2019a: 79–85). Whereas in personal shame we see and evaluate ourselves as socially non-affirmable without having any particular others in mind, in social shame it is essential to the shame experience that we think we have been seen in a shameful way by others, in particular others belonging to the circle of people whose affirmation we long for. However, even in social shame it is crucial that we ourselves have a sense of the shameful image of ourselves

that we believe lives in the eyes of others. This is why social shame can easily transmute into personal shame.[6]

The analysis sketched above allows us to account for the emotional quality and existential centrality of shame. Shame is not just about being afraid of others or of being more or less disappointed with ourselves; it is an evaluation of the social affirmability of our self. Given our ability to be conscious of ourselves in the light of our urge for social affirmation, we are open to the possibility of perceiving ourselves as non-affirmable and despicable. Whatever the specific trait or act may be that occasions our shame, it belongs to the experience of shame that we view this trait as signalling the basic non-affirmability of our self. Since in shame we feel that our possibilities of achieving affiliation, safety and control have been undermined, the feeling of shame generally goes together with feelings of anxiety and depression.

3 The Egocentrism of Shame Versus Love for Others

In this section, I will present and try to substantiate the basics of my thesis that shame is a fundamentally egocentric and morally blind emotion. However, as backdrop for and contrast to my discussion of shame, I will first present my view of love as constitutive of moral motivation and understanding.

My thesis that love for or care about others is constitutive of morality is influenced by philosophers who view our second-personal relating to other persons as the source of morality—such as Levinas (1961 [1969]), Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1956 [1997]), Martin Buber (1923 [1970]), and Stephen Darwall (2006)—and by philosophers who stress the essential role of love in our moral relations to others—such as Scheler (1913/1916 [1973], 1913/1923 [2008]), Raimond Gaita (2000), and David Velleman (1999).[7]

My account of the primacy of love in morality will of necessity be sketchy and far removed from a fully argued account. Moreover, it will not be possible here to detail how it resembles and differs from other kindred views. However, as previously stated, it seems to me that outlining my perspective on love and morality is nevertheless important for shedding light on the moral deficit of shame.[8]

Love, as I use the word here, signifies our very basic ability to be touched by and care about others. It belongs to our interpersonal life that we experience and understand others as living human subjects who look back at us; who experience others and the world; who feel, think, and desire; who have great potential for goodness, happiness, and pleasure but also for evil, unhappiness, and suffering; who are

[6] In addition, imagined or internalized audiences can play different roles in shame. However, I will not say more about this here as it seems to me that the distinction between social and personal shame is sufficient for present purposes.

[7] My perspective on loving understanding of others as the source of morality has also been significantly influenced by the work of my colleagues Joel Backström (2007) and Hannes Nykänen (2002).

[8] For more on my view of love as essential to morality and of the desire for social affirmation—including self-conscious emotions such as shame—as egocentric and morally lacking, see Westerlund (2020, 2022).

sensitive, vulnerable, and mortal beings. This experience of others as living subjects from the outset engages and appeals to our ability to care about and feel for them. Indeed, I want to suggest that it is our loving concern for the other person that constitutes our moral sensitivity to the existential weight and significance of her life. Without any such concern, our understanding of others would be morally impervious and blind. We could, of course, through basic empathy—in contrast to sympathy (cf. Scheler 1913/1923 [2008])—have a certain sense of what others are feeling and thinking, and we could also have various degrees of understanding of the workings of their psyches. However, we would lack an understanding that would be sensitive to the import that their lives have for them and for others.

To grasp the idea of love as constitutive of moral understanding, it is important to see that the basic love for others that I have in mind is not selective or partial but amounts to a universal responsiveness to all human beings.

To relate to another person with love, in this sense, is to be open toward and concerned about the other as the living I whom we encounter when our eyes meet. In this, we are not liking her or caring about her in virtue of her particular characteristics and traits. Rather, we are relating to the other person as this other I, who in an important sense transcends her traits and her history: who looks back at me; who feels, thinks, acts, and speaks; and who, in all this, is free to relate to me, to herself, and to the world, in ways that are not thoroughly determined by her given traits. To be sure, when we care about someone our love will involve caring about her traits and her whole personal history—indeed, about anything that matters to her and to us. However, what we essentially care about here is the other as this living personal I who is not defined by her traits.

It is precisely because in love we are open to the other I beyond her traits that makes love at once genuinely personal and universal. As Velleman has pointed out, if we would love another person on account of her individual traits—be they more or less unique or not—the other would in principal be exchangeable for someone else exhibiting these traits (1999: 366–70).[9] This also means that love is universal in the sense that we are fundamentally open to the possibility of responding to all people—regardless of their traits and of the historical situation—with love and care.

The fact that we do not always relate to others with love does not show that this possibility is not always there for us. The problem is that loving others is difficult, so difficult that this possibility is very often repressed and covered up. The prime reason for this is that our desire for social affirmation constitutes an extremely powerful force influencing how we relate to others and to ourselves. From the perspective of this desire, the possibility of love basically appears dangerous and unsettling since

[9] I think Velleman is on to something essential when he claims that love is a moral emotion in which we are directed toward the "the true or proper self of a person" Velleman 1999: 348) over and above how we might value her individual traits in comparison with the traits of others. Nevertheless, I find Velleman's attempt to articulate his view of love through the lens of his interpretation of Kant's notion of respect problematic. For Velleman, the ultimate object of both moral respect and love is the "rational will" (348)—the "faculty of acting on lawlike maxims" (347)—of the other person. By contrast, I want to insist that in love we are open to the other as a pure personal I whom we are touched by and care about beyond her traits.

it requires opening up to and caring about others regardless of how this affects our sense of our social worth. Moreover, the values and norms regulating the valuations and judgments of the historical community whose affirmation we desire, regularly tend to cover up the possibility of love and ordain conceiving of some groups of people as more or less depersonalized or dehumanized. Nevertheless, I want to insist that others are always present to us as persons that concern us and appeal to our love, even in historical situations where dehumanizing conceptions and practices have become solidly normalized and institutionalized.[10] The ever-present possibility of love shows itself in the existential impossibility of responding to others as non-persons—say, on account of their race or ethnicity or gender—without repressing and dissimulating, in an emotionally charged way, our primary openness to them as persons to care about.

In short, my suggestion is that our basic love for others fundamentally constitutes our moral understanding and motivation. It seems that we cannot account for the meaning of moral understanding and concern in terms of relations to such impersonal matters as values, norms, and principles. In fact, my suggestion is that it is our loving understanding that makes it possible for us to apprehend and judge values, norms, principles, goals, character traits, and actions in terms of their moral significance. A value or an action may strike us as morally good or true insofar as it expresses or serves what our loving understanding of others gives us to see. Conversely, it may strike us as evil and untrue if it distorts or counteracts this basic understanding. As far as I can see, without our basic capacity for love, there would be no such thing as morality.

What About the Moral Substance of Shame?

In the literature on shame, the charge that shame in some sense is an egocentric or narcissistic emotion has been voiced before (cf. Adkins 1960; Morrison 1989; Nussbaum 2004). [11]Several empirical studies also suggest that shame is correlated with egocentric self-focus and with a tendency toward diminished empathy and concern for others (cf. Leith and Baumeister 1998; Tangney 1991, 1995). However, the charge has not been elaborated and substantiated by way of analysis of the

[10] In a like manner, Levinas maintains that we cannot avoid being addressed and touched by the ethical appeal of the other person: “The being that expresses itself imposes itself […] without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness” (Levinas 1961 [1969]: 200; cf. Levinas 1996: 7).

[11] Note that my concept of the egocentricity of shame should be distinguished from the psychoanalytic notion of “narcissism,” which signifies an infantile desire for omnipotence, completeness, and control. For instance, Martha Nussbaum, drawing on object-relations psychoanalysis, argues that there is a kind of pervasive “primitive shame,” which presupposes a narcissistic expectation of omnipotent control and perfection. This narcissistic desire gives rise to a “primitive shame” at being a vulnerable and imperfect creature (Nussbaum 2004: 183). Nussbaum distinguishes between such primitive narcissistic shame and shame that has “moral content” (207). In the latter, we feel shame, not at our failure at perfection, but at our failures to live up to ideals that are morally valuable. By contrast, my thesis that shame is egocentric concerns not the particular values that guide our shame, but its basic motivational structure. Hence, I will argue that whatever the values determining our shame may be, what drives our shame is our egocentric concern about the social worth of our own self.

motivational and intentional structures that constitute the experience of shame. The task here is to provide such an analysis and show that the central concern and perspective of shame is egocentric and morally blind.

As maintained above, shame—like other self-conscious emotions such as pride and embarrassment—is rooted in our desire for social affirmation. This implies that what we essentially care about in these emotions is our own affirmability and our prospects of being affirmed by others. In being concerned with how we appear and what others think about us, we are fundamentally concerned about *ourselves*, about how *we* appear in the light of our urge for affirmation and in the eyes of others. In feeling shame, what pains and unsettles us is the image of ourselves as non-affirmable and despicable. Note that I am not just repeating the elementary claim—about which practically everybody agrees—that in shame we are intentionally focused on our own self. What I claim is that in shame it is the affirmability of our self that matters to us and that we care about. As such, shame does not involve any morally pertinent care about others.

Here is an example to bring out the moral deficit of shame and how it contrasts with moral understanding:

Let us say that on my way home from work I see a schoolboy being bullied by a group of other boys. The others have formed a circle around him. They take his glasses. They call him names and push him around. Shrinking from the challenge of intervening, I hurry my steps, telling myself some suitable excuses designed to cover up the corruption of my behavior: it was not my responsibility, the boys were just fooling around, or the like. Now, suppose that later that day my concern about the boy breaks through the walls of my excuses. I am overcome by remorse. The bullied boy's anxious face haunts me and I am appalled at myself for having let him down. In reacting with love, here in the form of remorse, I am concerned about the boy—hopefully not at the expense of the bullies—and about my way of relating to him. However, note that the attitude of love does not as such involve or motivate shame or any other self-conscious emotion. For shame to enter the picture, something else needs to happen. To be overcome by shame, I would need to take my actions as signifying that I am a non-affirmable and despicable human being. In reacting with shame, I would be touched and pained, not by the boys themselves, but by the sight of myself as a despicable cowardly and selfish looser.

Reflecting on the example allows us to grasp why shame in its core structure is egocentric and morally empty.

First, shame as a distinct emotion arises only in so far as we are worried about and see our self as an object of social evaluation and affirmation. Without any egocentric concern about our social worth, we could feel many things, such as moral anger at ourselves, or remorse or sorrow or disappointment. However, we could not feel shame in particular. Second, the fact that we can feel shame at our moral failures without this involving any genuine moral concern or understanding implies that moral understanding does not essentially belong to the experience of shame. It is precisely the moral sightlessness of shame that explains the familiar circumstance that shame can be determined by all sorts of values and ideals, be they morally good, morally corrupt, or more or less amoral.

It seems clear that both love and shame may be present in us at the same time and interact in complex ways, one or the other dominating our attitude. In the example discussed, I might, for instance, be moved to intervene by my sense of shame, that is, my dread at the contemptible person I would become if I failed to do so. However, I could also, simultaneously, at some level, be genuinely concerned about the boys. Nevertheless, the motives and viewpoints of shame and loving understanding are essentially different and need to be sharply distinguished from one another.

I see no good reason for postulating a difference in kind between moral and non-moral shame as concerns the motives and understandings that constitute shame. To be sure, shame and love may both be there in us, and—as will be discussed later—our moral understanding may influence the values that affect what we feel shame at. Moreover, our sense of shame may motivate morally good behavior and action. However, these are not reasons for positing a difference between a moral kind of shame that would be constituted by moral understanding and a nonmoral shame that would not. This is because the emotional reaction of shame essentially consists in an assessment of the social worth of our self which is egocentric and involves no moral understanding. In so far as our shame would be accompanied by love and moral understanding, this would not mean that we would be experiencing a special kind of moral shame; rather, it would mean that our shame would be connected to or influenced by something other than shame, namely love.[12]

In short, although our desire for social affirmation and our love for others both tend to be present in us, they are radically different motives that fuel different kinds of emotions. To the extent that we are driven by desire for affirmation—which manifests as self-conscious emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and pride—we are egocentrically concerned about the social worth of our self. To the extent that we motivated by loving understanding—which can manifest, for example, as bad conscience, remorse, sorrow, and joy—we are concerned about the other and our relationship to her.

In claiming that shame is egocentric and morally void, I do not mean that shame is an immoral and malevolent emotion in the sense that it would in itself involve a desire to devalue or harm others. What makes shame morally perilous is the fact that the desire for social affirmation that drives it—and other self-conscious emotions—is a powerful motive for blocking and repressing our love for others. What's more, it is commonly the central motive behind our tendency to degrade and dehumanize others as a strategy for bolstering or defending our own social value.

However, even granted that shame does not entail loving understanding of others, could it not be said that shame is motivated by self-love of a morally substantial kind? Is not shame's concern for one's own social value an expression of such

[12] For a similar critique of the tendency—present in, e.g., Rawls (1971 [2005]), Nussbaum (2004), and Mason (2009)—to posit a distinction between moral and non-moral shame, see Thomason (2018: 25–40). I agree with Thomason that the distinction is ad hoc and grounded in a wish to save the moral status of seeming cases of moral shame by discarding morally dubious cases of shame as exemplifying another kind of emotion.

self-love? Since I cannot deal with the complex question of self-love in detail here, I will only briefly indicate how I see the issue.

To my mind, there certainly exists a morally perceptive way of relating to oneself that might be called "self-love." I am referring to the possibility of caring about our own self in its moral significance; of openly taking in our existential concerns and possibilities; of wanting what is good and meaningful and joyful for ourselves. However, the desire for social affirmation that drives shame does not equal this kind of self-love. In shame, we are self-consciously focused on our social value and the perspective of shame does not as such entail any love for or will to understand ourselves beyond this. Here, we are afraid of losing our standing and it seems to us as if our significance and our possibilities of being met with love would depend on this. By contrast, to relate to oneself with love means appreciating that one's moral-existential significance does not depend on one's social value, as does not the possibility of relating to one another with love. Indeed, the perspective of shame tends to block the perspective of love. Still, from the viewpoint of self-love it is possible to understand the drive for affirmation as the simultaneously deep-seated and problematic motive that it is, that is, as a motive that we both have to care for and try to rise above.

Ultimately, it seems to me that love for others and self-love are not just analogous but deeply interconnected motivations. In so far as we relate to ourselves with love's concern for our basic existential desires and for what it would mean to live a good life, we will find among our deepest desires precisely our love for others and our longing to be in contact with them in a mutually loving manner. What this means is that loving our own self essentially implies and calls for relating to others with love.

4 Shame and Respect for Others

In his well-known defense of the moral value of shame in *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams argues that shame is not egoistic since it entails "respect" (Williams 1993: 102) or "concern" (97) for others and their points of view. This line of argument has later been developed in greater detail by Sarah Buss (1999) and Krista Thomason (2018).

A closer look at the texts reveals that the theses argued for by these authors are of two different kinds. Strictly speaking, both Williams and Buss only offer arguments for the claim that shame involves *epistemic* respect for the viewpoints of others. The idea is that shame, through its respect for other points of view as potentially epistemically valuable, has an important role to play in critical self-understanding. However, even if this were true, it is no counterargument against—but perfectly compatible with—the thesis that shame is egocentric. It is quite possible to epistemically respect the viewpoints or capacities of others because we think they might contribute to our knowledge in some respect without our being morally concerned about the other persons as such. I will return to the question regarding shame's alleged epistemic value in the section on shame's relation to self-understanding.

By contrast, Thomason argues for the claim that shame is constitutively connected to a sort of *moral* respect for others. Her thesis is that our "liability to shame

is partially constitutive of our respect for others as moral agents" (Thomason 2018: 155). Shame, she argues, is conditioned by and linked to our basic respect for the "authority" of other people as independent evaluators who can make demands on us and compel us (156). Respecting others in this way involves seeing oneself as "accountable" to others, that is, as beholden to respond to their demands and to justify one's actions and views to them (156). In shame, our respect for others takes the form of a recognition of the authority of others to "call attention to ourselves" as a fit object of external evaluations and judgments (155). Thomason insists that in respecting others we give "practical"—and not only "epistemic"—weight to others and their viewpoints (152). In other words, when we respect the authority of others to make claims on us and demand justifications, we do not respect it in virtue of the potential epistemic value of their opinions and capacities. We do it regardless. However, what does such moral respect amount to?

In fact, Thomason does not provide much in the way of moral psychological explication of how others concern us and of how we relate to them in respect. Her account remains fairly vague and unsubstantiated. As my previous reflections on the primacy of love in morality suggest, I am skeptical toward the tendency to conceive, following Kant, of respect as our basic moral attitude toward others (cf. Buss 1999; Darwall 2006; Velleman 1999). As I see it, moral openness and care toward others have little to do with respecting their authority. It seems that in so far as we only respect the other as an authority in some sense, we are not open to her as this particular personal I; rather, we relate to her as an authority who, in virtue of some impersonal trait she possesses, such as her reason or her sheer social power, has the power to compel us and judge us regardless of whether we care about her as a person. Succumbing to such authority does not seem to be a moral motive at all. However, I cannot offer a general critique of respect here.[13] Instead, I will concentrate on shame. What Thomason depicts as respect certainly fits quite well with the attitude that we take to the audience before which we feel shame. However, I think Thomason fails to capture the moral meaning of this attitude.

So how do we relate to others and to ourselves in shame? Clearly, our liability to shame comes with a liability to be concerned about what others think about us. However, what does this concern amount to, morally speaking?

Above, I argued that the negative self-assessment at the heart of shame is motivated by our egocentric desire for social affirmation. Now, it is precisely this desire that also makes us sensitive to how others see us and judge us. In shame and other self-conscious emotions, we are sensitive to others as the audience that has the power or authority to judge our social worth, to elevate us or bring us down. In shame, we experience the judging gaze of others as a contemptuous and depreciatory look at our social worthlessness. If, in the example above, I would feel shame as a result of not having intervened to stop the bullying of the schoolboy, the contemptuous gaze could be present in two main ways. If I would feel what I have called "personal shame," I would be struck by shame regardless of

[13] For critique of the idea that morality is a matter of submitting to authority, see Løgstrup (1956 [1997]); Stern (2019a, 2019b); Westerlund (2022).

whether I believe others have seen me or view me in this way. I myself would see myself as essentially shameful, the contemptuous audience—anybody who could see me—being implied as the anonymous horizon of my self-perception. Alternatively, I could feel "social shame." This would mean that I would believe, for example, that my cowardly escape has been witnessed by some significant acquaintances of mine. Here, I would feel shame because of what I believe is the disdain with which the others now view me.

As concerns the question of morality, we need to see that this kind of sensitivity to what others think about us does not in itself entail any morally significant concern about them as persons. It is only because we are concerned about our social worth that we care about and succumb to the authority of others to judge this worth.

The moral deficit of shame sticks out with special clarity in the shame we may experience in reaction to attacks by aggressors and oppressors of various sorts. It seems clear that we do not need to care about the aggressors as persons—for instance, the aggressor violently attacking us or the racist or bully humiliating us—in order to be sensitive to their assaults and feel shame as a result of them. It is enough that our desire for affirmation makes us sensitive to the image of ourselves as shameful that issues from their attacks.

We can of course—and are often especially liable to—feel shame before people who we love and who are close to us. However, this does not imply that the shame we feel before our loved ones would be an expression of our love for them. Rather, I would suggest that what makes us prone to be sensitive to the judgements of those who are close to us is that they, by being our significant others, constitute a prime group of people whose affirmation we are concerned about and whose values and ideals we have often to some extent internalized. To the extent that we feel shame before someone we love, we are, as always in shame, fundamentally concerned about our own affirmability and relate to the other as a judge or our social worth. This does not exclude that we also genuinely love the other person. However, our shame is not a manifestation of this loving attitude. In fact, our sense of shame is a motive that makes us liable to shy away from love's unselfconscious and open mutuality, and instead succumb to the effort of making our appearance affirmable and attractive in the eyes of the others.

In addition to relating to others as the audience judging our social worth, our self-conscious desire for affirmation also comprises other ways of relating to others. For instance, we may relate to others as impersonal characters whom we have to handle in certain ways in order to live up to the values determining our shame. Or we may conceive of others as competitors and objects of comparison in relation to whom we measure of social worth. In all these ways of relating to others, our attitude is basically egocentric and instrumental.

5 Shame and Moral Values

The most common way to defend the moral value of shame has been to argue that to the extent that shame is guided by morally good values, it is a morally valuable emotion. Not surprisingly, this is the standard defense of shame by those who view shame as centrally consisting in autonomous self-evaluation (cf. Deonna et al. 2012; Manion 2002; Rawls 1971 [2005]; Taylor 1985).[14] In fact, it seems clear that no small part of the attraction of the self-evaluative analysis of shame comes from the opportunities it offers for conceiving of shame as a morally valuable emotion. The basic line of argument goes as follows: Given that moral understanding consists in autonomously understanding and being guided by moral values, and given that shame essentially is a critical assessment of oneself in the light of one's autonomously held values, shame is, in so far as one's values are morally good, a principal and unproblematic form of moral self-assessment.

The most extensive and clearly argued defense of this claim is found in Julien Deonna's, Raffaele Rodogno's, and Fabrice Teroni's 2012 book *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*. The authors work out their view in contrast to the thesis that shame is a social and heteronomous emotion. If, in feeling shame, we would only be heteronomously concerned about how others see and value us, regardless of whether we adhere to the values in question, shame would never constitute "a response to the moral aspects of the circumstances […] but rather to the morally irrelevant fact that someone else regards it as such" (36). However, Deonna et al. argue that shame is essentially autonomous, which means that to feel shame we need to be "attached to" and "concur with" (130) the values that regulate our shame. Shame is the negative self-assessment that we, due to some action or trait of ours, have proved ourselves unable to live up to the values we hold dear. Hence, the authors conclude that shame, as such, is "morally neutral" (179) and that its moral relevance is a "function of which value is at stake […] in a given shame episode" (131). To the extent that the values guiding our shame are morally good, shame

[14] Representing the view that shame is a social and partially heteronomous emotion, Bernard Williams has also pursued the argument that shame is a sound moral reaction if the values guiding it are morally good. However, it seems that this kind of argument can only be stated in a plausible manner if one maintains that shame registers a failure to live up to autonomously held values. If shame is heteronomous, we are only concerned about what others think about us, not about what we autonomously recognize as moral failures of ours. Williams tries to tackle this problem by ascribing both an autonomous and a heteronomous aspect to shame. On the one hand, he rejects the idea that shame would be "immaturely heteronomous" (Williams 1993: 81) in the sense that we would merely care about how we are seen and judged by random real-life others. Instead, he argues that the other before whom we feel shame can be an "imagined other" (82) who "may be identified in ethical terms […] as one whose reactions I would respect" (84). On the other hand, he insists that the "internalized other is […] somebody other than me" (84), somebody who transcends and limits my own perspective and "carries some genuine social weight" (100). However, as far as I can see, Williams' attempt to square autonomy with heteronomy fails to overcome self-contradiction. If, in shame, we autonomously care about our moral values as the ground for our respect for others, then this autonomous moral understanding is independent of how we think others view us. If, conversely, shame's concern about our values is motivated by our sensitivity to what others think about us, then it is not autonomous at all. Ultimately, I believe the incongruity of William's analysis is due to his failure to interrogate the driving motives of shame radically enough.

is the morally valuable assessment that we have failed in respect to these values. Ultimately, the authors suggest, with Williams (1993), that shame is morally more valuable than guilt. Whereas guilt only focuses on the defects of our actions, shame focuses on the faults in our character that are the source of these actions. Hence, shame constitutes a “deeper form of moral awareness” (184).

Now, it is a clear and uncontested fact that shame can be guided both by morally good values and by morally bad or morally empty values. Moreover, everybody, including me, would agree that shame, when guided by morally good values, can motivate morally beneficial actions and serve moral ends. For example, my values may include being a loving and courageous person who helps people in trouble or need. I may sense that I need to live up to these values in order to respect myself and avoid shame. I may even experience the need to sacrifice central interests of mine for the sake of realizing these values in order to evade plunging into shame.

However, is it self-evident that the shame I may feel over my failure to live up to good moral values that I hold is morally good? Not at all.

My claim about the moral deficiency of shame concerns the moral substance of the motives and the understanding that constitute the emotional experience of shame regardless of which particular values happen to determine the shame reaction. What does Deonna et al.:s analysis say about this issue?

It is precisely to secure the moral standing of the attitude of shame that Deonna et al. appeal to its supposed “autonomy.” The idea is that in shame we are not just heteronomously concerned about the morally irrelevant issue of what others think about us. Rather, we are concerned about living up to values that we are autonomously attached to. Does their argument show that the attitude of shame is moral?

As mentioned above, I think there is a very basic problem with the analysis of shame as an autonomous value judgment. The problem is that it does not really account for the emotion of shame. The essential experience of shame as depicted by Deonna et al.—consisting in the assessment that we have radically failed to live up to some value of ours—does not in itself produce shame in particular but is compatible with many emotional reactions. Depending on how we relate to the value at stake and the situation at hand, we may feel, for example, disappointment, sorrow, remorse—or shame. Strictly speaking, then, Deonna et al.’s analysis does not arrive at shame itself, that is, at the distinct emotional experience of perceiving one’s self as non-affirmable and despicable. It does not capture the specific self-assessment that constitutes the experience of shame.

What is more, Deonna et al.—like other proponents of the self-evaluative analysis of shame—do not sufficiently explicate their central idea of autonomous attachment as a morally responsive attitude to values. In fact, they do not offer almost any analysis of what autonomous moral motivation and understanding amount to. Their basic argument for the autonomy of shame is that in order to feel shame, the agent herself must assess herself as failed in the light of her own values. However, as long as the concept of autonomy is merely given the meaning that the values guiding our shame must be our own, that we must be attached to them as part of our identity, nothing has been done to account for the fact that the ways in which we can be attached to values can be very different, morally speaking. On the one hand, we can be attached to moral values—good or bad—for nonmoral reasons. In particular, our desire for

social affirmation is a strong motive for being drawn to and appropriating values. Here, we cherish the values in question—for example, being loving, courageous, honest—because we sense that they are valued by our group and that exemplifying them would make us socially worthy. On the other hand, our attachment to values can be motivated by genuine moral concern about others and oneself, such that we see the values as expressive of such moral understanding.

Deonna et al.'s notion of autonomous attachment to values does not account for the difference between morally responsive and morally deficient ways of relating to and understanding values. Moreover, given the authors' general failure to zoom in on shame as such, they fall short of demonstrating that their conception of autonomy captures the distinct self-assessment of shame. At the end of the day, their argument does nothing to show that shame as such—anymore than, say, self-conceit or envy or rage, which may also extrinsically promote moral ends—would harbor any moral sensitivity or sight, and that it is not just an amoral emotion that may sometimes play a morally beneficial role.[15]

My own thesis is that whatever the values guiding our shame may be, the basic attitude of shame to these values is egocentric and morally sightless.

The moral deficiency of shame is straightforward in cases where our attachment to our values from the outset is motivated by the same egocentric desire for affirmation that drives our shame. Returning to the example of me failing to intervene in the bullying situation, let us imagine that being a courageous and dependable man who acts resolutely in situations like these is an important part of my identity. Moreover, let us assume that I am attached to these values only because of my sense that being this kind of person makes me socially worthy. Hence, as a result of what I see as my cowardly flight from the scene, I am overcome by shame over the worthless person I now see myself as being. In this kind of case, no moral motive is involved either in my relation to my values or in my shame experience.

However, our values and our identity can also be influenced by true moral motives and understanding. This raises the question of how to think of the shame we can feel at having failed to live up to values that are rooted in moral understanding?

Our love and concern for others and our thoughts about what a good life with others in the light of such concern could amount to—including both our personal relations and the community at large—can certainly play a more or less central role in influencing what we value and who we want to be. For example, my sense of my ideal self as a loving and just person may to a greater or lesser degree give expression to a genuine understanding of the moral significance of these values. As part of my identity, my sense of what kind of person I want to be, these values can also influence what I feel shame about. This can happen to the extent that I also take the values as measures of my social affirmability. However, does the fact that our values

[15] In a similar vein, Thomason has pointed out that the kind of argument put forward by Deonna et al.—that shame as such is neutral and that its moral relevance is determined by the values at stake—only supports the claim that shame is morally "permissible" or "appropriate" when the values informing it are morally good. However, this sort of argument does not show that shame would be "morally valuable" in the sense that it would play a crucial part in our moral psychology (Thomason 2018: 142).

are originally inspired by moral motives imply that our shame at failing in relation to these values is moral?

Let us consider this question by looking at the case of feeling shame over lack of love.

Suppose that being a loving person is a crucial value in my identity and that this self-conception is actually influenced by a moral understanding animated by love. Now, imagine that a friend of mine suffers from severe distress after having gone through a difficult divorce. However, because I find engaging myself in her situation awkward and demanding I shut my eyes and my heart to her anguish and just go on chitchatting about everyday matters as if I had noticed nothing. However, let us say that later I am overcome by shame over the way I turned my back on her. I now perceive myself as an unloving and egoistic bastard who has betrayed my friend, and I feel ashamed at the despicable character that I see in the mirror. What happens here and what is the moral substance of my shame reaction?

To clarify this question, we must, again, distinguish between different existential possibilities. On the one hand, my perception of my own moral failure may indeed be expressive of my love towards my friend. This means that what I essentially care about is my friend and my way of relating to her. However, my remorseful love toward my friend and the pained soul searching that it motivates do not as such have anything to do with shame. On the other hand, I may feel shame over my failure to relate to my friend with love. To feel shame, I must take my lack of love as expressive of the social worthlessness of my self. In this, I am egocentrically concerned about my social affirmability and I am pained by the image of myself as non-affirmable.

Of course, in the case above, I may both feel shame and relate to my friend with love. However, what we need to see is that the core experience of shame is fueled by our desire for affirmation and does not as such involve any love for others. Hence, to the extent that I only feel shame over my lack of love, my shame is in fact lacking in love. I have here lost contact with my love for my friend and with what it means to be a loving person. I do not see that my shame is an expression of the same kind of self-concern that led me to forsake my friend in the first place. This means that even if at some level I possess an understanding of love informing my values, this understanding is no part of and is eclipsed by my unsettling assessment of myself as shameful. Then again, in so far as genuine love for and concern about my friend would enter and be part of my reaction, this would—exactly—be love as opposed to shame. The self-deceptive irony of shame over lack of love is that it as such is oblivious to what love is all about.

In a word, the values and ideals that guide what we feel shame about may be more or less influenced by genuine moral concern and understanding. Moreover, loving understanding and shame may exist side by side in us, the one or the other dominating our attitude. However, none of this makes shame as such a morally responsive emotion.

6 Shame and Self-Understanding

Finally, what should we think about the common notion that shame is essential or importantly conducive to moral self-understanding?

As we saw above, Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni—representing the self-evaluative analysis of shame—contend that shame's assessment of how one fares with respect to one's autonomously held values constitutes a deep "self-awareness" (Deonna et al. 2012: 184). If the values guiding our shame are morally good, and if the judgements determining our shame are rational with respect to how we judge our own actions and capacities, then shame's self-evaluation amounts to morally valuable self-understanding (108–12). Representatives of the interpersonal approach have also, albeit in a different manner, argued that shame has an important role to play in self-understanding (Buss 1999; Thomason 2018; Williams 1993). The basic argument has been that shame's sensitivity to how others think about us embodies a kind of epistemic respect for the values and judgments of others. To quote Buss: "shame is the experience of the authority of an external point of view" (Buss 1999: 533). The argument starts from the observation that our autonomous power of reason is essentially fallible and finite; it is not—as Williams puts it—"enough by itself to distinguish good and bad" (Williams 1993: 100). Hence, it is argued that due to its epistemic sensitivity to external viewpoints that may challenge and complement our moral self-understanding, shame is of key importance for the practice of such self-understanding.

Although seemingly convincing, I think the idea that shame amounts to or assists moral self-understanding is misleading.

Above, I argued that the self-evaluation of shame is essentially concerned with measuring our social value and affirmability and does not as such involve any morally pertinent care about others. In being sensitive to the opinions of others, we are not open to them as persons and as potential sources of moral insight; we are only sensitive to how they judge our social value. As far as I can see, genuine moral self-awareness and self-understanding requires being guided by a loving understanding of the moral significance of others and of oneself, and of one's ways of relating to others and to oneself. From this perspective, it is possible to morally reflect on and assess our attitudes, our motives, our actions, our emotions, our identity, our values, and so on. By contrast, the self-evaluation of shame suffers from a fundamental lack of moral sense and understanding.

Let us, however, pursue the general question of shame's relation to self-understanding a few steps further. My suggestion is that shame not only lacks an interest in self-understanding; it is also a powerful source of self-deception.[16]

The first critical thing to note is that our desire for social affirmation and the sense of shame that it fuels does not as such involve any interest in self-understanding. What we here centrally care about and assess is our affirmability. In so far as we are driven by our sense of shame, we are not interested in openly

[16] In Westerlund (2019b), I examine in greater detail the potential of the desire for social affirmation to obstruct and distort self-understanding.

understanding ourselves; we are only concerned with assessing and reflecting on how different matters—our values, actions, and traits, as well as the opinions and judgments of others—affect our social worth. Moreover, the desire for affirmation is an extremely powerful motive for repression and self-deception. Since it is a desire to appear affirmable—and a dread of appearing non-affirmable—it motivates us to conceive of our social worth as positively as possible and to repress and interpret away anything that threatens this worth. And, since our capacity for self-deception is immense, its influence is habitually great. Potentially, the drive for affirmation may influence our understanding of all domains of reality in so far as they are relevant for how we see our worth, for example, our sense of what is valuable and moral, our sense of how others see us and of which people are important, our views of philosophy, religion, work, politics, science, economics, sexual identity, race, et cetera. It happens, of course, that we fail to avoid plunging into shame, anxiety, and depression. However, our anxious and disparaging self-consciousness is just as lacking in self-understanding and tends to push us to conceive of the world and ourselves in ways that confirm the image of ourselves as shameful losers.

The above kind of assessment of our social worth constituting our sense of shame should be contrasted with the possibility of actually wanting to understand oneself. It is not impossible to want and be willing—to a greater or lesser extent—to openly understand and reflect on central aspects of our self and our life, for example, our desires, goals, emotions, values, relationships, capabilities, identities, and shames. If this is what we want, we will, being the fallible and finite creatures that we are, also naturally be interested in all the help we can receive from others in terms of new perspectives, knowledge, criticism, and clarifying dialogue. However, such a will to understand does not essentially entail or require any sense of shame. On the contrary, to be willing to understand oneself in an open and unqualified manner is, crucially, to be willing to face and understand oneself regardless of how this venture affects one's sense of one's social worth.

Against this background, it is possible to discern the confusion in the standard picture of how shame motivates self-understanding. Say, for example, that my sense of shame prompts me to reflect on myself and on what I need to do to live up to my identity as a loving person and a good philosopher. Does this mean that it motivates me to understand myself? What we need to see is that if I am only motivated by my desire for affirmation, then I lack any incentive for understanding myself. In this case, my self-reflection is only geared to assessing and strategically managing—in an emotionally charged way inviting self-deception—the affirmability of myself. Whatever I do in this mode of thinking—assess my character and my behavior, reevaluate and change my values, attempt to reform myself, unleash contempt or violence against unsavory external judgments—serves this purpose and entails no will to understand myself. By contrast, to the extent that I would want to openly understand myself, this would be something very different from my shame-managing reflections. It would mean that I would want and be willing to think about and clarify the moral-existential meaning and psychology of my life—for example, by reflecting on what love and philosophy is, and on my own motives and emotions—without being guided by the intention of administering the social worth of my self.

What's more, I want to suggest that the self-assessment constitutive of shame and other self-conscious emotions has an inherent tendency to deceive us about the meaning of what it assesses. In self-consciously worrying about and monitoring our social affirmability, it easily seems to us as if all our existential possibilities in relation to others, including the possibility of love, depend on our achieving affirmation. The image of myself as socially worthless appears as an abyss that undermines my possibilities of being met with love by others. However, this impression is deceptive. The possibility of loving others—and of being met with love—is radically different from the possibility of being socially valued by others. As claimed above, love consists in opening up to and caring about other persons beyond their social roles and worth. Just as being considered socially worthless in a certain social context does not make me unlovable, my possessing social worth does not grant me any love. In fact, in occupying the perspective of shame, we are apt to cover up and repress the possibility of relating to others with love. Hence, the perspective of shame tends to distort the moral-existential meaning of both love and shame (cf. Westerlund 2019b).[17]

Still, should we not at least grant that, if nothing else, shame constitutes a good enough measure of our social worth? Well, there is some truth to this claim. However, it needs to be strongly qualified not to be misleading. In addition to its tendency to deceive us about the meaning of what is measures, it must be noted that shame is a very unreliable measure of how others judge us. Our sense of shame is not a mere awareness of how others see us. It is an emotionally charged evaluation of our own social worth, which may be only loosely tied to a perceptive awareness of others. This is why it is so common that we project our self-evaluations onto others, such that we imagine what "everybody" or "they," conceived as a homogenous group, think of us, without really being aware of how the others actually see us.

7 In Conclusion: Morally Blind and Yet Morally Important

In this article, I have tried to show that shame—along with other similar self-conscious emotions—is a morally blind and empty emotion. I have argued that the emotional sensitivity at the heart of shame is rooted in our egocentric desire for social affirmation and that shame consists in the painful perception of ourselves as non-affirmable and socially worthless. Shame, as such, involves no morally pertinent concern about others and no moral understanding. Indeed, the affirmation-seeking self-consciousness that constitutes shame is a strong motive for evading and repressing the possibility of approaching others and ourselves with love and understanding.

Let me end by stressing that although shame is a morally empty emotion, the way we relate to and direct our shame is of crucial moral importance. Our desire for social affirmation is one of our most intense desires or needs and our sense of shame is one of the most powerful forces influencing individual and collective thought and

[17] For kindred accounts of how the desire for affirmation inhibits and distorts the possibility of love, see Backström (2007, 2019) and Nykänen (2009).

action, and shaping historical-political developments. Two moral lessons can be drawn from this: first, that our desire for social affirmation and recognition, as vital for our existential well-being, is a concern that we need to acknowledge and care about; second, that the question of which values and ideals guide our shame is of critical moral significance since our sense of shame plays a massive role in promoting actions that can be good or evil in their effects. However, let it be remembered that our very sense for the moral importance of shame and for the moral significance of our actions comes not from shame itself but from our love and concern for others.

Acknowledgements I wish to thank Andreea Smaranda Aldea, Jaakko Belt, Mirja Hartimo, Sara Heinämaa, and Mikko Salmela for valuable comments on earlier drafts of the article. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks, which led to improvements in the manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU). This work was supported by The Academy of Finland (grant number 21000046561).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Adkins, A.W.H. 1960. *Merit and responsibility: A study in Greek values*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Backström, J. 2007. *The fear of openness: An essay on friendship and the roots of morality. Doctoral dissertation*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press.

Backström, J. 2019. Hiding from love: The repressed insight in Freud's account of morality. In *The Oxford handbook of philosophy and psychoanalysis*, ed. R. Gipps and M. Lacewing, 595–616. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bagnoli, C. 2011. Introduction. In *Morality and the emotions*, ed. C. Bagnoli, 1–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Benedict, R. 1947. *The chrysanthemum and the sword*. Reprint New American Library.

Bowlby, J. 1969. *Attachment (Attachment and loss series)*, vol. 1. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. 1973. *Separation: Anxiety and anger (Attachment and loss series)*, vol. 2. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. 1980. *Loss: sadness and depression (Attachment and loss series)*, vol. 3. New York: Basic Books.

Buber, M. 1923. *[1970]. I and thou, transl. W. Kaufmann*. New York: Scribner.

Buss, S. 1999. Respect for persons. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29(4): 517–550.

Calhoun, C. 2004. An apology for moral shame. *The Journal of Moral Philosophy* 12(2): 127–145.

Cooley, C.H. 1922. *Human nature and social order*. New York: Schribner's.

Darwall, S. 2006. *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect, and accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Deigh, J. 1983. Shame and self-esteem: A critique. *Ethics* 93(2): 225–245.
Deonna, J.A., and F. Teroni. 2008. Differentiating shame from guilt. *Consciousness and Cognition* 17(3): 725–740.
Deonna, J.A., and F. Teroni. 2011. Is shame a social emotion? In *Self-evaluation: Affective and social grounds of intentionality*, ed. A. Konzelman-Ziv, K. Lehrer, and H.B. Schmidt, 193–212. Dordrecht: Springer.
Deonna, J.A., R. Rodogno, and F. Teroni. 2012. *In defense of shame: The faces of an emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Dodds, E.R. 1951. *The Greeks and the irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Gaita, R. 2000. *A common humanity: Thinking about love and truth and justice*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
Gibbard, A. 1990. *Wise choices, apt feelings: A theory of normative judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Goffman, E. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor.
Honneth, A. 1996. *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts, transl. J. Anderson*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Isenberg, A. 1949. Natural pride and natural shame. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10(1): 1–24.
Kaufman, G. 1992. *Shame: The power of caring*, 3rd ed. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books.
Kekes, J. 1988. Shame and moral progress. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13(1): 282–296.
Lamb, R.E. 1983. Guilt, shame, and morality. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43(3): 329–346.
Leith, K.M., and R.F. Baumeister. 1998. Empathy, shame, guilt, and narratives of interpersonal conflicts. *Journal of Personality* 66(1): 1–37.
Levinas, E. 1961. *[1969]. Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority, transl. A. Lingis*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, E. 1996. *Basic philosophical writings, ed. A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Lewis, H.B. 1971. *Shame and guilt in neurosis*. New York: International Universities Press.
Lewis, H.B. 1981. Shame and guilt in human nature. In *Object and self: A developmental approach*, ed. S. Tuttman, C. Kaye, and M. Zimmerman, 235–265. New York: International Universities Press.
Lewis, M. 1992. *Shame: The exposed self*. New York: Free Press.
Løgstrup, K.E. 1956. *[1997]. The ethical demand, transl. T.I. Jensen and G. Puckering*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
Maibom, H.L. 2010. The descent of shame. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80(3): 566–594.
Manion, J.C. 2002. The moral relevance of shame. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39(1): 73–90.
Maslow, A. 1954. *[1970]. Motivation and personality*, 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row.
Mason, M. 2009. On shamelessness. *Philosophical Papers* 39(3): 401–425.
Mead, G.H. 1934. *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Montes Sánchez, A. 2015. Shame and the internalized other. *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics* 17: 180–199.
Morrison, A.P. 1989. *Shame: The underside of narcissism*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
Nussbaum, M.C. 2004. *Hiding from humanity: Disgust, shame, and the law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Nykänen, H. 2002. *The 'I', the 'you' and the soul: An ethics of conscience, Doctoral dissertation*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press.
Nykänen, H. 2009. *Samvetet och det dolda—om kärlek och kollektivitet*. Ludvika: Dualis förlag.
O'Hear, A. 1977. Guilt and shame as moral concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 77: 73–86.
Orth, U., M. Berking, and S. Burkhardt. 2006. Self-conscious emotions and depression: Rumination explains why shame but not guilt is maladaptive. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 32(12): 1608–1619.
Overgaard, S. 2007. *Wittgenstein and other minds: Rethinking subjectivity and intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Husserl*. London: Routledge.
Rawls, J. 1971. *[2005]. A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Roberts, R.C. 2003. *Emotions: An essay in aid of moral psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rochat, P. 2009. *Others in mind: Social origins of self-consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sartre, J.-P. 1943. *[2003]. Being and nothingness: An essay in phenomenological ontology, transl. H.E. Barnes*. London: Routledge.
Scheff, T.J. 2000. Shame and the social bond: A sociological theory. *Sociological Theory* 18(1): 84–99.
Scheff, T.J. 2003. Shame in self and society. *Symbolic Interaction* 26(2): 239–262.
Scheff, T.J., and S.M. Retzinger. 1991. *Emotions and violence: Shame and rage in destructive conflicts*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
Scheler, M. 1913. [1957]. Über Scham und Schamgefühl. In *Schriften aus dem Nachlaß, Bd. 1: Zur Ethik und Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. M. Scheler, 65–144. Bern: Francke Verlag.
Scheler, M. 1913/1916 [1973]. *Formalism in ethics and non-formal ethics of values*. transl. M.S. Frings and R.L. Funk, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
Scheler, M. 1913/1923 [2008]. *The nature of sympathy*. transl. P. Heath, London: Routledge.
Spitz, R. 1965. *The first year of life: A psychoanalytic study of normal and deviant development of object relations*. New York: Basic Books.
Stein, E. 1917 [1989]. *On the problem of empathy*. transl. W. Stein, Washington, DC: ICS Publications.
Stern, R. 2019. *The radical demand in Løgstrup's ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Stern, R. 2019. Levinas, Darwall, and Løgstrup on second-personal ethics: Command or responsibility. In *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. M.L. Morgan, 303–320. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Tangney, J.P. 1991. Moral affect: The good, the bad and the ugly. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61(4): 598–607.
Tangney, J.P. 1995. Shame and guilt in interpersonal relationships. In *Self-conscious emotions: The psychology of shame, guilt, embarrassment and pride*, ed. J.P. Tangney and K.W. Fischer, 114–142. New York: The Guilford Press.
Tangney, J.P., P.E. Wagner, and R. Gramzow. 1992. Proneness to shame, proneness to guilt, and psychopathology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 101(4): 469–478.
Tangney, J.P., D. Hill-Barlow, P.E. Wagner, J.K. Borenstein, J. Sanfter, T. Mohr, and R. Gramzow. 1996. Assessing Individual differences in constructive vs destructive responses to anger across the lifespan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70(4): 780–796.
Taylor, G. 1985. *Pride, shame, and guilt: Emotions of self-assessment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Teroni, F., and O. Bruun. 2011. Shame, guilt, and morality. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8(2): 223–245.
Thomason, K.K. 2018. *Naked: The dark side of shame and moral life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Velleman, J.D. 1999. Love as a moral emotion. Ethics 109(2): 338–374. In *Self to self: Selected essays*, ed. J.D. Velleman, 70–109. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Westerlund, F. 2019a. To see oneself as seen by others: A phenomenological analysis of the interpersonal motives and structure of shame. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 50(1): 60–89.
Westerlund, F. 2019b. Who wants to be understood? The desire for social affirmation and the existential challenge of self-understanding. In *Moral foundations of philosophy of mind*, ed. J. Backström, H. Nykänen, N. Toivakainen, and T. Wallgren, 309–327. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Westerlund, F. 2020. *Heidegger and the problem of phenomena*. London: Bloomsbury.
Westerlund, F. 2022. What is moral normativity? A phenomenological critique and redirection of Korsgaard's normative question. In *Contemporary phenomenologies of normativity: Norms, goals, and values*, ed. S. Heinämaa, M. Hartimo, and I. Hirvonen. London: Routledge.
Wicker, F.W., G.C. Payne, and R.D. Morgan. 1983. Participant descriptions of guilt and shame. *Motivation and Emotion* 7(1): 25–39.
Williams, B. 1993. *Shame and necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Winnicott, D.W. 1965. *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.
Wollheim, R. 1993. *On the emotions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Zahavi, D. 2014. *Self and other: Exploring subjectivity, empathy, and shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.