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Exposed: On Shame and Nakedness

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Abstract

This article develops a new phenomenological account of the shame people typically tend to feel when seen naked by others. Although shame at nakedness is a paradigmatic and widespread form of shame, it has been under-explored in the literature on shame. The central thesis of the article is that shame at nakedness is rooted in our desire for social affirmation and constituted by our capacity for social self-consciousness. I argue that our ability to sense how others see us and judge us gives rise to a dynamic tension between our effort to control our public self-presentation and the experience of being exposed to others in an uncontrolled manner. What makes us prone to feel shame or shame anxiety at being seen naked is that we feel that we have revealed our naked and true self as potentially or actually shameful and that our public persona has been undermined. Furthermore, the vulnerability and lack of control that are part and parcel of naked exposure can be a source of shame. In my analysis, shame at nakedness encompasses both literal bodily nakedness and other kinds of uncontrolled and unguarded exposure. The article also offers an argument as to the roots of the more or less ubiquitous tendency to feel shame at exhibiting one's genitals in public. I develop my account through critical engagements with the main contemporary attempts to account for shame at nakedness, critiquing their insufficiencies and reframing their insights.

Keywords Shame · Embarrassment · Nakedness · Social self-consciousness · Self-presentation · Genitals

1 Introduction

According to the story of Genesis, Adam and Eve, when living in the garden in Eden before the fall, “were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:25). However, no sooner had they eaten of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and

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evil, than it is said of them: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (3:7).

Why did Adam and Eve feel shame upon having eaten of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? What knowledge did they gain, such that their eyes were opened and they perceived their naked bodies, in particular their sexual organs, as shameful, as something to be hidden and covered?¹

Feeling shame or embarrassment at appearing naked before others is a widespread propensity of human beings. Across different cultures and epochs, it has been common for people to feel a need to cover some parts of their body, if only just their sexual organs, and hide them from public view. In modern societies, most people are urgently sensitive to being exposed naked. However, even though philosophical research on shame and related emotions has burgeoned in the last decades, scant attention has been devoted to the paradigmatic experience of shame at nakedness. As I will maintain, the standard theories, which conceive of shame in terms of a negative assessment of the self in the light of some values or norms, have basic difficulties when it comes to explaining the shame we feel at naked exposure. A few philosophers – most notably David Velleman (2001) and Krista Thomason (2018) – have developed theories of shame especially devised to explain shame at nakedness. However, although these theories offer important insights into this kind of shame, I think they still fail adequately to account for it.

Recently (Westerlund, 2019a), I have developed a general phenomenological analysis of shame as constituted by our desire for social affirmation and our capacity for social self-consciousness (that is, our capacity to sense how we appear in the eyes of others). In the present article, I use this analysis as the starting point for illuminating shame at nakedness. My main line of argument will be that the shame we feel at being seen naked by others is rooted in the basic structures of social self-consciousness, more precisely, in what I will distinguish as other-directed – as opposed to self-directed – social self-consciousness. I make the case that the very experience of being self-consciously focused on what others think about oneself gives rise to a dynamic tension between the effort to control one’s public appearance, on the one hand, and the experience of being nakedly exposed to others in an uncontrolled and potentially shameful manner, on the other hand. For reasons that will be explained later, I will use the word “nakedness” to refer not only to bodily nakedness but also to other kinds of experience of uncontrolled and unguarded exposure.

My methodological approach is primarily phenomenological in the sense given to the term by Edmund Husserl and other philosophers in the phenomenological tradition. That is to say, I go about my task by reflecting on concrete first-person experiences of shame and nakedness so as to bring out the basic motivational and intentional structures – in particular, the structures of social self-consciousness – that

¹ For an account of shame that takes its starting point in a perceptive reading of Genesis, see Velleman (2001). In this article, I will not offer a close interpretation of the Biblical story and my analysis is not dependent on the contents of the story.

constitute these experiences and give them the meaning they have for us.² These structures, I suggest, are more or less universal and account for the general propensity of human beings to feel shame at being seen naked by others.

At the same time, it must be kept in mind that what people will experience as shame-inducing naked exposure is highly context specific, and depends on a number of factors, for example, on the traits and attitude of the agent, on who one is seen by, and on the kind of situation at hand. Moreover, when and how people will experience nakedness before others as shameful is profoundly influenced by culturally varying norms, values, and conventions regarding such things as publicness, privacy, normality, social status, the body, sex, beauty, gender, health, race, age, and ethnicity.³ For instance, in Finland, where I live, it would be quite normal to be naked in the sauna, at a medical examination, or in private with one's partner, without experiencing shame. Later in the article, I will point to some of the general mechanisms that prevent us from experiencing nakedness in the presence of others as shameful.

I will proceed as follows:

I begin by briefly sketching my basic view of shame as constituted by our desire for social affirmation and capacity for social self-consciousness. After that, I discuss previous philosophical attempts to account for shame at nakedness, in particular those of Velleman and Thomason. In the rest of the article, I try to develop an improved understanding of shame at nakedness through a series of analyses.

Eventually, it seems to me that getting a better grasp of shame at nakedness, and of the structures of social self-consciousness that condition it, can also more generally contribute to our understanding of topics such as self-conscious emotions, self-presentation, personal identity, authenticity – and, not least, the moral and existential challenges characterizing our lives with others.

2 A Phenomenological Account of Shame

Let me start by outlining the basics of my phenomenological account of shame. As said, I have set forth this account in more detail in Westerlund (2019a). Here, a brief sketch must suffice.

The contemporary debate about the nature of shame has been characterized by the tension between two opposing views. Whereas the “interpersonal analysis” (cf. Sartre, 2003 [1943]; Deigh, 1983; Williams, 1993; Wollheim, 1993; Calhoun, 2004;

² I spell out my view of the phenomenological method more thoroughly in Westerlund (2020).

³ Despite a lack of studies specifically focusing on shame and nakedness, there is a substantial literature – including fields like philosophy, psychology, the social sciences, anthropology, feminism, gender studies, and racial studies – that is relevant for understanding how body shame and shame at nakedness have varied historically and culturally and how such shame is influenced by variable social norms, values, practices, and power structures. Here is a small sample of relevant works, primarily focusing on Western modernity: Dolezal (2015), Elias (1994 [1939]), Foucault (1995), Landweer (1999), Fanon (2008 [1952]), Goffman (1959), Barcan (2004), and Wallbott & Sherer (1995). As regards literature pertaining to gendered differences in experiences of body shame and shame at nakedness, see de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]), Bartky (1990), Young (2005), and Dolezal (2015).

Rochat, 2009; Zahavi, 2014) conceives of shame as an essentially social emotion in which we are concerned about how others see and judge us, the “self-evaluative analysis” (cf. Scheler, 1957 [1913]; Rawls, 2005 [1971]; Taylor, 1985; Deonna et al., 2012; Lewis, 1992) conceives of shame as a kind of critical self-evaluation that does not necessarily refer to others at all.

In my view, the interpersonal analysis of shame is right in emphasizing that in feeling shame we are, in some sense, fundamentally concerned about how we appear to others. In what sense, however? 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 when we are all alone and do not even have an imagined audience in mind (cf. Deonna & Teroni, 2011, pp. 196–197; Deonna et al., 2012, pp. 136–139). Moreover, it has been argued – correctly, I think – that to feel shame, it is not enough that we experience that others judge us adversely. After all, shame is just one possible reaction to such an experience. We could also react, for example, with fear or anger. It seems that to feel shame, it is crucial that we ourselves also in some sense perceive and judge ourselves negatively (cf. Deonna et al., 2012, pp. 128–131; Zahavi, 2014, pp. 225–227).

The self-evaluative analysis has taken the above arguments as evidence of its central idea that shame is a negative self-evaluation that does not essentially refer to others. 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 should 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, p. 231; Zahavi, 2014, pp. 212, 222). Indeed, if we think we have failed to live up to some of our significant values, this judgement does not by itself engender the emotion of shame in particular, but may give rise to many different emotions, such as remorse, disappointment – or shame.

My 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.

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, 2003 [1943], p. 246). I agree and my own account can be seen as an attempt to further develop and expand this insight.⁴ However, the philosophical literature on shame, including Zahavi and Montes-Sánchez, has generally neglected sufficiently to explore and elucidate the interpersonal concerns and

⁴ The idea of the self as fundamentally social and conscious of how it appears in the eyes of others is also found in, e.g., Cooley (1922), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), Scheff (2003), and Rochat (2009).

motives that drive shame. A number of psychologists and sociologists – and some philosophers – have proposed that shame is motivated by our desire or need for affiliation, belonging, recognition (cf. Honneth, 1996; Kaufman, 1992; Lewis, 1971, 1981; Maibom, 2010; Rochat, 2009; Scheff, 2000, 2003). Nonetheless, I want to claim that the existing literature has not been able to clearly distinguish between the different ways in which we are concerned about others, and to identify and expound the desire for social affirmation as the driver of shame.

Here is, in brief, my take on the matter.

First off, 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.⁵ Second, we can be concerned with and relate to others as mere instruments for satisfying needs and desires of ours that are non-social in nature. Other people are present to us both as our decisive means for securing sustenance, safety, and control, and as a potential threat, given that they can hurt us and kill us. Such non-social and self-interested motives prompt us to desire that others relate to us in positive ways that serve the motives in question. Third, and in addition to the above, we have a basic desire for social affirmation which centrally consists in being self-consciously concerned about how others see us and evaluate us.

What I call the desire for social affirmation is grounded in our fear of rejection and shaped by our capacity for social self-consciousness. We long for loving mutual contact with others and we need them for non-social self-serving reasons. At the same time, we fear them and their possible hostility. This basic tension between our deep desire for others and our fear of rejection engenders a sensitivity to how others relate to and value us, and to the impression we make on them.

Social self-consciousness is our consciousness of how we appear in the eyes of others. As human beings, we normally have a basic ability to intuitively sense – more or less astutely – how other persons feel and react. In their faces, gestures, and speech we can apprehend their emotions and attitudes. 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 appear affirmable – worthy, respectable, likable – to others. In so far as we are driven by this desire, 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.

Our sense of how we appear to others is far from infallible and may or may not correspond to how others actually view us. In fact, in so far as it is driven by our

⁵ In the context of psychology and psychoanalysis, the basic human need and desire for belonging and affiliation has been emphasized by, e.g., Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), Maslow (1970 [1954]), Rochat (2009), Spitz (1965), Winnicott (1965), and Baumeister & Leary (1995). However, the literature has generally failed to examine and clarify what I will suggest is a basic difference between our desire for social affirmation and our longing for mutually loving contact with others.

worry about the social worth of our appearance, it tends to be deceptive in various ways (Westerlund, 2019b, 2022).

It is important to see that the drive for social affirmation is essentially different from the possibility of relating to others with love and openness. In desiring affirmation, we are self-consciously and egocentrically concerned about how others value us. By contrast, when we approach others with love – in the basic sense I give to the word here – we relate to them, and to ourselves, with openness and care without thinking about how our appearance will be valued or disvalued. In fact, although in desiring affirmation it may seem to us as if achieving affirmation is a condition for the mutuality of love, this desire is actually a key motive for blocking the latter possibility. I discuss this crucial difference and its moral-existential implications in extenso elsewhere (Westerlund, 2022). As concerns the task of this essay, the important thing to be clear about is that it is only to the extent that we are self-consciously concerned about the social value of our self that we can feel shame in general and shame at nakedness in particular. This also means that in so far as we engage with others in a spirit of love, without self-conscious anxiety, there are possibilities of being naked with other persons, and of doing other things that would otherwise make us feel shame, without being overcome by this emotion.

Our affirmation-pursuing social self-consciousness constitutes the core of a family of self-conscious emotions to which belong, for example, self-esteem, pride, shame, and embarrassment. Whereas self-esteem, broadly defined, signifies our trust in our ability to attain the esteem and respect of others, shame is the emotion we feel when, due to some action or trait of ours, we come to perceive our self as fundamentally unworthy and unattractive from a social point of view.

Here is an example to elucidate my analysis. Let us say that after presenting a paper at a philosophy conference I receive harsh criticism from some leading scholars and realize that my main arguments are badly flawed. As a result, I am overcome by shame. What is the phenomenology of my shame reaction? For me to feel shame, it is not enough that I sense that my colleagues view me with disapproval or disdain. In response to this, I could just as well react with other feelings, such as fear or anger. However, neither is it sufficient to say that my shame springs solely 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 self-disappointment. Rather, for me to feel shame, I would have to perceive my philosophical failure as a token of the social unworthiness of my self.

Discerning the structure of social self-consciousness at the heart of shame is crucial for understanding the double aspect of the shame experience: to feel shame, it is essential, first, that we ourselves perceive and sense our shameful appearance⁶;

⁶ The thesis that shame essentially involves negative self-evaluation – a variant of which I think is true – has been intensely criticized by Cheshire Calhoun (2004) and others (e.g., Thomason, 2018). According to Calhoun, this claim is morally problematic when it comes to understanding the shame felt by victims of social oppression and disesteem. The claim, she asserts, implies that the oppressed person who feels shame in the face of, say, racist or sexist contempt, has accepted the opinions of the oppressor. Hence, such persons emerge as accomplices in their own oppression, or, at least, as morally immature persons who let their judgement be determined by the shoddy views of others (Calhoun, 2004, pp. 135–138). Here, I can only briefly intimate my response to this kind of criticism (for more on my view of the mat-

second, that we believe this is the way we appear to others seeing and judging us. The failure of the standard theories to grasp the phenomenon of social self-consciousness has pushed them to conceive of shame either in terms of an assessment of how others view us or in terms of a self-assessment that does not refer to others. Neither alternative captures how, in shame, we sense how we appear to others.⁷ As I shall argue, further elucidating the nature of social self-consciousness is essential for shedding light on shame at nakedness. In particular, it is crucial to distinguish between two different ways of being socially self-conscious in relation to others that constitute two different kinds of shame: social shame and personal shame.

On the one hand, we have what I suggest calling *other-directed social self-consciousness*. By this, I mean the stance we have when, in encountering real-life others, we are self-consciously focused on how the others view us and judge us. In this, we also have a sense of how we are seen and assessed by the others. If we experience that the others view us as unworthy and non-affirmable, we feel *social shame*. On the other hand, we have *self-directed social self-consciousness*. By this, I refer to the stance of seeing and assessing our own self as an object of social evaluation without thinking about how any particular people might think about us. If we come to view our self as unworthy and unattractive, we feel *personal shame*. Whereas in feeling social shame it is essential that we believe we have been seen or judged as shameful by others, in personal shame we see ourselves as shameful without thinking that any particular others see us this way.

Let us go back to the example above to illuminate the difference between social shame and personal shame. If, as a result of the criticism directed at my conference

Footnote 6 (continued)

ter, see Westerlund, 2019a, pp. 81–82). Three points: First, I want to insist that negatively assessing oneself as shameful from the point of view of social evaluation is a constitutive feature of the experience of shame. It seems to me that Calhoun's criticisms, focusing primarily on the moral implications of the view she criticizes, do not really undermine the view. Moreover, I think that by disposing of negative self-evaluation as essential to shame, and conceiving of shame as heteronomous, Calhoun loses the ability to explain shame. Second, I think the worries raised by Calhoun can be addressed by noting, with Sandra Lee Bartky, that the shame felt in reaction to oppression typically produces a "confused and divided consciousness" (Bartky, 1990, p. 94). Seeing and judging oneself as shameful does not necessarily imply unequivocally accepting the judgement that one is such. It is quite possible that our appropriation of the perspective and values guiding our shame is more or less superficial or transient, and that this perspective may conflict with other values and understandings that are more important to us. Hence the common experience of denouncing or feeling shame at some of one's own shame experiences. If, for example, a person feels shame as a result of having, at some level, appropriated a racist or chauvinist perspective on herself this does not imply that she unproblematically accepts this view. Third, to avoid unperceptive judgmentalism and moralism concerning shame, it is vital to acknowledge that the desire for social affirmation is a massively strong motive that in general makes people – and this goes for *all* of us, with few if any exceptions – very sensitive to the judgments of relevant others. Indeed, I think the view that shame-prone people are immature or weak tends to be reflective of a disregard or suppression of the immense influence that these motives are prone to exert on our values, judgments, and personal identities – including many of the things we like to think of as autonomous evaluations.

⁷ Bernard Williams' (1993) account of shame to some extent exceeds these alternatives, as he emphasizes both the role of autonomous self-assessment and the role of heteronomous sensitivity to the views of others in the feeling of shame. However, as I have argued in Westerlund (2022, p. 532 n. 14), I believe Williams' attempt to square autonomy with heteronomy ultimately fails to overcome self-contradiction.

paper, I would feel social shame, this would mean that I would live the distressed experience of being seen as unworthy and inferior by the audience. I would feel their judging eyes on me. Typically, I would feel an urgent need to hide or disappear. Afterward, I would worry about who saw my appearance and how they judge me. I would have a painful sense of the shameful image of myself that has now become public property. However, as long as I would only feel social shame, I would not see myself as shameful regardless of whether any real persons have seen and judged me. By contrast, if I would feel personal shame I would experience my failure at the philosophy conference as a manifestation of my lousiness as a philosopher and of the basic unworthiness of my self. Here, my perception and assessment of my shamefulness would not require the sense of having been seen by others. Even when all alone, I could be conscious of and pained by my socially unworthy appearance without having any specific audience – not even an imagined audience – in mind. If I would only feel personal shame, many of the characteristics of social shame would be lacking, such as the sense of being seen by an external gaze and the acute wish to hide and flee. Instead, the perception of one's own self as shameful, which defines personal shame, is typically accompanied by the sense that one's shameful appearance is a basic and inescapable flaw in one's self.

Clearly, social shame and personal shame may both be present in us at the same time, and they may interact with each other in various ways. Since in feeling social shame, we always have a sense of the shameful image of ourselves that we see reflected in the eyes of others, our social shame can easily influence how we perceive the social worth of our self without reference to particular others. Similarly, our shame-producing personal self-evaluations may affect how we think others see and assess us.⁸

In the following, I will be arguing that the shame we typically feel at nakedness is essentially a kind of social shame or shame anxiety, and that this explains why we normally only feel such shame when seen by others.

3 Body Shame and Shame at Nakedness

In order to get the theme of this article into focus, it is of the essence to distinguish between “body shame” and “shame at nakedness.”

I will use “body shame” as a generic term for denoting the shame we feel when we apprehend our body as flawed or failed in a way that undercuts our

⁸ In addition, imagined or internalized audiences can play different roles in shame. Elucidating this dimension would make possible further differentiations between different shame experiences. However, I will not pursue this lead here since it seems to me that the above distinction between social and personal shame is sufficient as a basis for analyzing shame at nakedness. Suffice it to note that shame experiences involving imagined or internalized audiences very often – possibly always – remain examples or combinations of social shame or personal shame. For instance, if we imagine ourselves seen by an audience that views us as shameful, then we are imagining ourselves suffering from social shame; again, if in perceiving ourselves as shameful, we have internalized the perspective of some person and audience, then we are feeling personal shame.

social worth. Since our body is at once our observable outward appearance and something we tend to identify with as a crucial manifestation or part of our self, it is prone to be a central focus of our self-conscious concern about our social value and a fit object of shame (cf. Dolezal, 2015, p. 6; Thomason, 2018, p. 109). In addition, the body tends to be charged with significance by the communal norms and values that regulate what is seen as socially valuable and what is condemned as disqualifying by the community. We are likely to feel shame when we perceive some part or aspect of our body as undermining our social worth by manifesting, for instance, our ugliness, our abnormality, our disgustingness, or our disqualifying ethnicity or gender or sexuality or class. Body shame can take the form both of social shame and personal shame. That is to say, we can feel ashamed of our body either because we think others have seen it and view it as defective or because we ourselves apprehend it as unworthy without necessarily thinking that anybody else in particular has seen us and judged us.

By contrast, I will use “shame at nakedness” to signify the kind of shame – or shame anxiety – that centrally consists in the experience of being exposed in a naked and uncontrolled manner to the judging gazes of others. The shame we typically feel at nakedness requires that we think real-life others have seen us naked and it does not seem possible to feel such shame when all alone.⁹ I want to suggest that the shame-inducing experience of feeling nakedly exposed to others is not limited to situations of bodily nakedness but also includes other experiences of being exposed to others in an unguarded and uncontrolled manner. We may, for instance, feel the same sort of shame as the result of being seen by others when being emotional, losing control, or being dead drunk.

Distinguishing between body shame and shame at nakedness, which does not necessarily concern the body, is important for grasping the latter. If we define shame at nakedness exclusively as shame at exhibiting our naked body, we may easily be inclined to explain shame at nakedness in terms of body shame. However, as we shall see, perceiving our body as flawed in the light of some values or norms – either personal or communal – does not account for the distinct experience of naked exposure to others. Conversely, when we get the experiential character and structure of shame at nakedness clearly into view, we will see that the experience in question is not essentially concerned about the body but about exposure to others. Hence, it becomes possible to comprehend shame at bodily nakedness as a paradigmatic sort of shame at nakedness while recognizing that the shame-inducing sense of naked exposure is not limited to bodily nudity.

⁹ As regards what might seem to be cases of shame at nakedness without any real-life audience, we always need to ask whether they are not in fact examples of personal body shame or of imagined social shame at nakedness. When alone, we may of course imagine that we are seen naked by other people. This only means that we are imagining a situation of exposure to real-life others and possibly feeling some shame anxiety at the thought of what would transpire.

4 Previous Theories

Although a paradigmatic and widespread form of shame, the shame we tend to feel at naked exposure has largely been ignored and unaccounted for in the literature on shame. Indeed, the standard theories of shame are not well equipped to account for this kind of shame.

Most theories share the basic assumption that shame consists in the negative assessment of one's own self as flawed or failed in the light of some values or norms – whether those of the agent herself or those of others passing judgment on her. However, it seems impossible to account for the distinct shame-inducing experience of naked exposure to the judging gazes of others purely in terms of a transgression of norms or values. The failure to get hold of the experience of exposure also entails that the standard theories cannot explain why shame at nakedness requires that we have been seen by real others.

The most common way of dealing with shame at nakedness within the framework of the standard theories is to reduce it to body shame.¹⁰ To see why this does not work, let us briefly consider Martha Nussbaum's theory of shame. According to Nussbaum, "our shame at our nakedness" issues from our infantile ideal of perfection and omnipotence, an ideal that has us experience our body as evidence of our "imperfection" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 196). In perceiving our naked body, we feel shame at being a "needy animal, mortal and highly dependent on others" (p. 221). In addition, our body is the source of "secretions" such as feces, semen, and menstrual blood, which are generally found contaminating and disgusting – and hence shameful (p. 203). However, this kind of analysis fails to illuminate the specific shame at naked exposure and why we can only feel shame at nakedness when seen by others. As Thomason has pointed out, on Nussbaum's account, we should feel shame whenever we are aware of our body and our nature as "needy animals," irrespective of whether we are naked or whether anybody has seen us (Thomason, 2018, pp. 111–112).

Still, as we shall see later, two of the themes highlighted by Nussbaum – vulnerability and disgust – are important for understanding shame at nakedness.

Another strategy for accounting for shame at nakedness from the viewpoint of the standard theories is to argue that such shame consists in the experience of having failed to live up to the value of privacy. This is the approach of Julien Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni (2012), who have offered the

¹⁰ Both Scheler (1957 [1913]) and Augustine (1972 [c. 413–426 CE]), in their classic accounts of shame, analyze the shame at their nakedness felt by Adam and Eve in terms of shame at their bodies, in particular their sexual organs. Scheler contends that the body is a prime object of shame because it is the site of our lower animal desires and impulses, such that we experience it as a threat to our higher spiritual aspirations. According to Augustine, God punished the disobedience of Adam and Eve by giving to their sexual organs the ability to stir and move against their owner's will: "there appeared in the movements of their body a certain indecent novelty, which made nakedness shameful" (Augustine, 1972, p. 578). Whether we, as Scheler and Augustine, view the body as fundamentally shameful, or we think of body shame as determined by culturally variable ideals and norms, I contend that reducing shame at nakedness to body shame covers up the distinct character of the former.

most ambitious attempt so far to account for shame at nakedness within the standard theoretical framework. I will briefly comment on the specifics of their view in a moment.

Generally speaking, it is not hard to come up with examples of shame at nakedness that do not seem to involve any transgression of values and norms. Take Max Scheler's well-known example of a nude model who initially does not feel shame while posing for the painter. However, as she realizes that the artist is viewing her with sexual interest, she feels ashamed (Scheler, 1957 [1913], p. 79). How come? As Thomason (2018, pp. 36–37) has argued, the model's shame in this scenario does not presuppose a transgression of norms or values. Neither she nor the artist views her body as flawed from the point of view of some ideal or norm. The suggestion that the model might think that she has contravened norms or values that concern privacy and public nudity is gainsaid by the fact that posing nude initially did not cause her any shame. What about norms related to professional roles and conduct? Well, if anybody has transgressed such norms it is the artist who has done so by relating to the model in a sexual way. Hence, the standard theories seem unable to account for why the model feels shame. For similar examples, think of cases in which, through no fault of our own, we are caught naked or having sex. Even if neither we nor the persons walking in on us would conceive of our bodies as defective or think of sex as bad and shameful, it would be quite possible and usual to react with shame.

A few philosophers have placed shame over nakedness at the center of their accounts of shame. Here, I will discuss two of the main attempts to elucidate this kind of shame: those of Velleman and Thomason. Both Velleman and Thomason maintain that the traditional view of shame as consisting in a negative assessment of ourselves as having failed to live up to our values and ideals – or those of our community – is unable to account for the shame we feel at being seen naked by others.

Velleman's central thesis is that the general tendency to feel shame at nakedness is rooted in the basic structure of the human will. In contrast to other animals, we humans can decide which impulses we choose to express through our behavior. By making such choices, we compose and present a public "face" or "persona." The impulses we choose not to act out become our "realm of privacy." Velleman contends that in order to be eligible targets for social interaction, we have to be – and be seen as – self-presenters capable of controlling our public persona. If we fail to be competent self-presenters, this is "socially disqualifying" as it places us "beyond the realm of social intercourse." Shame, Velleman claims, consists in our "deep anxiety" about the "threatened loss" of our standing as a "self-presenting creature" (Velleman, 2001, p. 37). Since in shame we are concerned about our standing as capable self-presenters, Velleman suggests that the primal source of shame is found in "failures of privacy," such as appearing naked in public: "When something private of you is showing [...] an inadequacy in your capacity for self-presentation is showing as well" (p. 38).

I think Velleman is on the right track in insisting that our shame at naked exposure is somehow anchored in the tension between our effort at controlling our public self-presentation and our failures to do so. However, his account of shame also suffers from basic problems.

First of all, in my view Velleman's theory falls short as a general theory of shame. Velleman does not provide enough of an analysis of the basic motives and intentional structure of shame to be able to account for the distinct emotional experience of shame and its different varieties. His central thesis is that we feel shame when we fail at being competent self-presenters and, as a result, fear that this incompetence makes us ineligible for social interaction. However, this account does not explain why we feel shame in particular and not, say, precisely, fear and anxiety, at the prospect of being socially disqualified.¹¹ Furthermore, it seems wrong to claim, as Velleman does (pp. 41–42), that shame is exclusively concerned with failures at self-presentation, and that negative assessments of the self in terms of, for example, ethics and social standing, do not belong to the essential content of shame. It seems to me that by recognizing the desire for social affirmation as the driver of shame, it becomes possible to explain how both naked exposure and all sorts of perceived flaws of our self can make us feel shame or shame anxiety.

As concerns shame at nakedness, Velleman maintains that what makes us feel shame at being seen naked is that being so seen demonstrates our general incapacity for controlled self-presentation. This means that in feeling shame at nakedness, we are strictly speaking not concerned about our naked self having been seen by others. Rather, we are ashamed of our incapacity for self-presentation, of which the fact that others have seen us naked is merely a contingent example (cf. Velleman, 2001, p. 40). Since what is at stake in shame is our ability at self-presentation – not the exposure as such – Velleman also claims that only failures of privacy for which we are responsible, as opposed to violations of our privacy for which we are not to blame, “properly occasion shame” (p. 38). However, contrary to what Velleman claims, it seems that in feeling shame at being seen naked, our shame typically concerns precisely the fact that some part of us that we did not want others to see is now seen naked and exposed: we are alarmed at the naked image of ourselves that is showing; we feel the burning gazes of the others on us; we experience the impulse to hide and cover ourselves; afterwards, we tend to worry about what we have shown and how we have been seen. Moreover, it is plainly wrong to claim that we can only feel shame at being seen naked if we take ourselves to be responsible for the exposure in a way that reflects badly on our capacity for self-presentation. Instead, it seems fully possible to feel shame at naked exposure regardless of whether we think we are responsible for it or not. The reason for this is that – *contra* Velleman – it is exactly the naked exposure as such that concerns us. Finally, Velleman's analysis does not explain why we typically

¹¹ I believe Velleman – alongside other representatives of the interpersonal account of shame – is right to insist that in shame we are, in some sense, concerned about the reactions of others. However, Velleman does not – and this goes for many other representatives of the interpersonal view – do enough to explore and illuminate the specific interpersonal concerns that drive shame. In defining shame in terms of anxiety at becoming ineligible for social interaction, he leaves it very open what is at stake for us here and how it is that the concern in question makes us feel shame and not, for example, fear, say, of bad treatment or loneliness. By contrast, my theory of shame as anchored in our self-conscious desire for affirmation allows us to account for the distinct emotionally charged assessment at the heart of shame: the painful experience of our own appearance as socially non-affirmable and unworthy. To be sure, the shame experience can be, and often is, accompanied by anxiety regarding the possible consequences of shame. However, such anxiety at fearful consequences does not make up the central emotional content of shame but is rather an effect of it. I discuss this issue in more detail in Westerlund (2019a, pp. 73–74).

feel shame at nakedness only when seen by real-life others. On Velleman's view, the fact that others have seen us naked is only a possible elicitor and does not belong to the essential content of our shame at being bad self-presenters. Hence, according to his view, we should be able to feel the same kind of shame at our inability at self-presentation even when we are alone and have not been seen naked by anybody.¹²

Here is an example to bring out the distortions of Velleman's analysis. Let us say that for some strange reason I feel a need to change all my clothes in the middle of a philosophy video conference. Well, I turn off the video feed and undress, only to realize that the video is on and that I am full naked on the screen. Let us say I would feel shame and try to get my dick off the screen as quickly as possible. In this, I think it would be essential to my shame that I would feel that I have exposed myself to the gazes of others. However, according to Velleman's analysis, in feeling shame I would not be concerned about what I have exposed to others but only about the potential damage done to my capacity for self-presentation. The analysis would also imply that the main shame-inducing event was not the exposure itself but the carelessness I demonstrated when not properly checking that the video was off. This also means that were I to realize – and perhaps also convince the audience – that my computer had been hacked and that I was not responsible for the exposure, my shame would evaporate. In fact, according to Velleman's analysis, I could and should feel the same kind of shame at the mere thought of my carelessness, even had the expose never happened. Nothing of this seems to be true of the shame I experience in the example.

In line with Velleman, Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni have offered an analysis of shame at nakedness, which conceives of such shame as a failure of privacy. However, unlike Velleman, who grounds shame at nakedness in the structure of the human will, Deonna and colleagues try to explain this kind of shame within the framework of their traditional theory of shame as a negative self-evaluation. The main idea is the shame we feel at being seen naked is a reaction to a perceived failure to exemplify a specific value, namely, the value of controlling our "privacy" (Deonna et al., 2012, pp. 138–145). I submit that this account suffers from the same problems as Velleman's. According to Deonna and colleagues, the essential content of the shame we feel at public nakedness consists in a judgment about our general incapacity to control our privacy. However, this analysis – and the claim that in feeling shame at nakedness we are strictly speaking not worried about what we have exhibit during the exposure – does not capture the shame we typically experience at being seen naked. Furthermore, their analysis does not explain why we tend to feel

¹² Before me, Thomason has presented a similar criticism, focusing on both Velleman and Deonna et al. (2012) (whose theory, as we shall see, suffers from the same kinds of problems as Velleman's). She argues that in conceiving of shame at nakedness in terms of a failure of privacy for which the agent is responsible, Velleman and Deonna et al. are forced to make the carelessness of the agent that led to the exposure the central object of shame. In this, they fail to explain why we typically feel shame at nakedness only when we are seen by real-life others (on their accounts, we should, also when alone, be able to feel the same kind of shame at our inability to control our privacy) and why we tend to feel shame at the very fact of having been seen naked regardless of whether we are responsible for the event or not (Thomason, 2018, pp. 34–35, 114–115).

shame at nakedness only when seen by others. On their view, we should be able to feel shame at our incapacity to guard our privacy irrespective of whether we have de facto been seen naked (cf. Thomason, 2018, pp. 34–35; Westerlund, 2019a, p. 83 n. 13).

We find another kind of account of shame at nakedness in Thomason's 2018 book *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life*. With a view to providing a unified account of all kinds of shame, including shame at nakedness, Thomason drops the traditional idea that shame essentially involves negative self-assessment. Instead, she suggests that shame is constituted by the tension between our "self-conception" and our "identity" (2018, p. 87; cf. Thomason, 2015). By "self-conception," she means our own conception of who we are and it includes the features of our self that we conceive of and embrace as central to our person (pp. 88–92). By "identity," she refers to the nonvoluntary features of our self that we do not see as belonging to our self-conception but which we nevertheless view as expressive of who we are (pp. 93–101). These features may include such things as our bodily appearance, our sexuality, our class, and our skin color. She also points out that our sense of how others view us and judge us may – and very often does – influence how we view our identities and what we feel shame about (pp. 97–101). According to Thomason, when we feel shame, we feel "that some feature of our identity eclipses, overshadows or defines our self-conception" (p. 87).

Thomason thinks her account can shed light on the shame we typically feel when we realize that others have seen us naked or having sex. She ventures to explain this kind of shame by focusing on experiences – such as having sex or being in the throes of strong emotion – in which we are absorbed in our bodily-emotional experience and not controlling our outer appearance. If, when in the midst of this kind of experience, we suddenly realize that we are being watched, we are apt to be wrenched away from our immersion in our bodily emotion, and become conscious of how we look from the point of view of others. Here, we are prone to feel shame if we sense that we have exhibited an "unmediated" or "uninhibited" (p. 115) version of ourselves that overshadows our self-conception: "Others have seen me in a way I did not want them to, but they have still seen *me*. In fact, I might fear that what they have seen is somehow the 'real' me. Because they see me in an uninhibited moment, the way I appear to them under normal social circumstances might now feel like a sham or a fraud" (p. 115).

Thomason's exposition contains some crucial points. First, it appears that Thomason is right in claiming that in feeling shame about nakedness, we sense that our "unmediated" or "real" self has been exposed. Second, it is illuminating to conceive of the experience of shame at nakedness as not limited to the experience of bodily nudity but as including a wider set of experiences of naked exposure. Nevertheless, I contend that Thomason's theory is insufficient for accounting for shame at nakedness.

It is hard to see that Thomason's basic analysis of shame in terms of the tension between our "self-conception" and our "identities" – a distinction that I do not find entirely clear – is able to clarify the experience of shame. The mere experience of being overshadowed by one of one's identities – regardless of whether one views this identity as socially damaging or otherwise negative – does not in itself

amount to shame. Rather, it seems that what Thomason is describing as the heart of shame is basically an experience of alienation of sorts, which does not necessarily produce shame and that can trigger many different emotional reactions, such as anger, inauthenticity, or amused play acting. For instance, if, on some occasion, others would view me merely as a decent cook or as a son-in-law, this might surely be an alienating experience. Still, it would hardly make me feel shame.¹³ Furthermore, Thomason's analysis does not allow her to differentiate between shame for which it is essential that we have been seen by real-life others and shame that we can feel about ourselves irrespective of whether we believe others have seen us. As a result, she fails to deliver on her promise to explain why we generally feel shame at nakedness only when seen by real others. In her analysis, the presence of others merely serves the contingent function of awakening us from our immersion in sex or other emotions and making us aware of how we look from an external perspective. This implies that even when we are alone, we can experience the same kind of shame if "we think about how we might look" (Thomason, 2018, p. 115).

Going back to the example above, Thomason's analysis would imply that my shame at having been seen naked by the audience of the video conference would centrally consist in my sense of being overshadowed by the image of my naked body regardless of whether I would view this image as detrimental to my social worth or negative in some other way. However, this kind of alienation would hardly – as would not the experiences of merely being viewed as a cook or as a son-in-law – be enough to produce shame. Rather, it seems that to feel shame in the situation at hand, I would need to fear or believe that my naked exposed self will be judged by the watching others as in some way flawed and undermining my social standing. Moreover, Thomason's account implies that I could feel the same kind of shame if, when alone, I would imagine my naked body seen by others and being caught up by this image as overshadowing my self-conception. However, it appears essential to the shame I would feel before the web camera that I would sense that the real audience has seen me. If I would become convinced that the exposure never happened and that I was only imagining things, my shame or shame anxiety would duly disappear.

In sum, although Velleman's and Thomason's analyses point to crucial features of shame at nakedness, they do not suffice for elucidating the phenomenon. In what follows, I will put forward an account of shame at nakedness which resituates and clarifies the latent insight of Velleman and Thomason.

¹³ In fact, in her book Thomason declares that the feeling of being overshadowed by one of one's identities is a "necessary feature of, but not a sufficient cause of shame": "That is, someone might feel overshadowed by some feature of her identity but feel something other than shame" (Thomason, 2018, p. 87). However, it seems to me that this acknowledgement on Thomason's part does not invalidate my criticism. If an account of shame only targets some necessary feature of shame without being able to say enough to differentiate shame from other reactions and emotions, then it is fundamentally lacking as a theory of shame. Indeed, most theories of shame bring out – with varying clarity and argumentative force – some more or less basic features of shame without, however, being able to provide a satisfactory account of this emotion.

5 Shame at Naked Exposure: The Basics

My thesis is that the shame or shame anxiety we tend to feel at naked exposure is a form of social shame and that it springs from the tension between controlled self-presentation and uncontrolled exposure which characterizes our social self-consciousness when we are directed at real others.

As suggested above, shame is constituted by our capacity for social self-consciousness and our desire for social affirmation and consists in the perception of our own self as appearing socially unworthy. In so far as we are driven by the urge for affirmation, we have a strong motive for presenting a socially valuable appearance in our encounters with others, especially others belonging to the groups with which we identify and whose affirmation we desire.¹⁴ We have a sense of what the others value and disvalue; we have a sense of how we are seen and judged; and we want to present an image of ourselves that will be valued and appreciated. In trying to present a worthy public persona, we suppress and hide such aspects of ourselves that we fear will not be valued and that will stain our persona. The effort to present ourselves as socially affirmable can influence all dimensions of how we act before others: our speech, our behavior, our facial expressions, our bodily appearance. However, the possibility of and effort at presenting a worthy appearance essentially comes with the reverse possibility of failing to keep up this appearance and exposing one's self behind the persona.

My proposal is that the core of shame at nakedness consists in the sense that we have been exposed to the judging gazes of others in an unmasked and uncontrolled manner. In this, we sense that, in contrast to the public appearance we normally present to others, our naked "real" self – I will come back to what this means in a moment – has been seen as possibly or actually shameful (cf. Thomason, 2018, p. 115). The experience of shame at nakedness, so defined, is not limited to situations of literal bodily nakedness before others. Rather, the sense of naked exposure can be occasioned by many different kinds of experience of losing control over one's self-presentation or otherwise failing to keep up one's public appearance. Think, for example, of becoming emotional, of being drunk, of having a mental health episode, or of appearing self-forgetfully absorbed in sex before others.

Why, more precisely, does the experience of naked exposure make us feel ashamed? The experience includes three shame-inducing aspects.

To begin with, the sense of being exposed naked and unmediated before the judging gazes of others is fraught with shame anxiety. In so far as we experience that we have been seen in an uncontrolled manner, in contrast to our normally controlled

¹⁴ Of course, there is immense variability as regards how people can manage their self-presentation in relation to different groups. A person may be unconcerned about or actively reject – for instance, out of resentment or contempt – affirmation from some groups while seeking affirmation from other groups. Typically, we present to some extent different images of ourselves to different people, tailoring our self-presentation to the specific expectations of each audience. This is why we are inclined to feel embarrassed or ashamed when we find ourselves in the midst of people from different spheres of our life. Here, we may fear that the persona we present to one group of people will make us appear deficient or fake in the eyes of another group, and vice versa.

self-presentation, we sense that whatever we now disclose will be judged by others as our “real” or “true” self. If what we reveal happens to be shameful, we sense that the shameful image of ourselves will from now on live in the eyes of the others as the naked ugly truth about our self; hence, the acute shame anxiety that tends to accompany such exposure. Crucially, when I say that we feel that our “real” or “true” self has been exposed, this is meant purely as a description of the agent’s subjective experience of the exposure in terms of the contrast between controlled self-presentation and unmediated exposure: the sense that others have seen me as I am behind my social mask and measured behavior. However, the experience of having exposed one’s “real” or “true” self may very well conflict with one’s basic understanding of who one is, and it may be existentially false and deceptive.¹⁵

Furthermore, the experience of naked exposure involves the sense that our public appearance or persona is under threat or undermined. If we feel that we have been exposed to others in an unmediated and uncontrolled manner, such that our true self has been seen in its possible shamefulness, we are prone to experience that our public persona has been revealed as false or fake. Given that we have presented an image of ourselves to others that we think of as safeguarding our social worth in their eyes, having it undermined will tend to result in feelings of shame and lowered self-esteem.

Finally, the very situation of naked exposure may be experienced as shameful in virtue of the fact that we have here lost control of our self-presentation and are vulnerable to the judgments of others. The vulnerability and lack of control that are part and parcel of the exposure potentially makes us experience shame-inducing failure to come across as persons with the power and capacity to command attraction and respect. So, the naked exposure does not only make us vulnerable to negative judgements; the vulnerability itself can be experienced as shamefully undercutting our social allure.

Let me draw attention to how my analysis both incorporates insights and departs from Velleman’s and Thomason’s accounts. Although Velleman is right that shame at nakedness is anchored in the tension between controlled and uncontrolled self-presentation, I contend, against Velleman, that in shame at being seen naked we are typically not concerned about our capacity for self-presentation. Rather, we are concerned about having been exposed to others in an unmediated manner, such that others have seen our true and possibly shameful self in a way that undermines our public persona. Thomason, for her part, is correct to point out that in shame at nakedness, we feel that our true and unmediated self has been exposed and that it overshadows the self-conception we want to present. However, by arguing that shame is constituted by the experience of being overshadowed, without this necessarily involving any negative self-assessment, Thomason ends up describing, not shame, but some sort of alienation. By contrast, I am claiming that what makes us feel shame anxiety or shame at naked exposure is that we feel that our naked and unmediated self has potentially or actually been seen as shameful and nonaffirmable. It is precisely for this reason that we feel that our public persona, in which we have invested our urge for affirmation, is not just more or less temporarily

¹⁵ In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (Westerlund, 2019b, 2022), I think the kind of self-evaluation that is involved in the shame-family of emotions and rooted in the desire for affirmation, is generally misleading and deceptive in many respects.

being overshadowed, but that it is threatened or undermined by what the others have now seen as the ugly truth about us.¹⁶

As concerns the contested question of whether shame at nakedness entails negative self-assessment, we need to distinguish between different aspects of the experience. First,

¹⁶ A comment by one of my anonymous reviewers raised the question how the difference between my account and the accounts of Velleman and Thomason might be spelled out in terms of the common distinction between the “particular object” (PO) and the “formal object” (FO) of shame (cf. Kenny, 1963; Teroni, 2007). (For those unfamiliar with this distinction: beyond the multitude of POs at which an emotion can be directed, the FO signifies the implicit evaluation which characterizes a certain emotion type. For example, where the PO of my fear might be the dog or the approaching storm, the FO of the fear would be the dog or the storm as dangerous or threatening.) More specifically, the reviewer suggested that introducing this distinction might help Velleman and/or Thomason escape my criticism that their theories fail to capture the phenomenology of shame at nakedness. Above, I claimed that Velleman’s theory implies that in shame at nakedness we are merely concerned about the damage done to our capacity for self-presentation (and not about others having seen the shameful of our exposed body/self); furthermore, that Thomason’s theory entails that in such shame we are concerned about being overshadowed by some part of our identity (and not about others having seen our shamefully exposed body/self). Could not Velleman and Thomason simply respond by saying that only the FO of shame at nakedness concerns damage to self-presentation capacities or being overshadowed, and that the PO of such shame is precisely our nakedly exposed body? Let me briefly indicate how my account and my criticisms of Velleman and Thomason could be articulated using this kind of distinction, and why introducing the distinction does not help them. Using the PO/FO distinction (it bears noting that the distinction can be given somewhat different meanings and be applied in somewhat different ways when analyzing a complex emotion like shame), the aim of my article could be said to be to provide an account which entails, first, determining the general FO of shame, and second, offering a description of the specific FO of shame at nakedness. The FO of shame at nakedness is a variation or modification of the general FO of shame and allows us to distinguish between shame at nakedness and other kinds of shame. On my view, the FO of shame in general is the PO – some trait or behavior of ours – *as demonstrating the unworthiness of our self in the eyes of others*. The FO of shame at nakedness would be the PO – my naked body/self – *as exposing my naked self (in contrast to my controlled self-presentation) to real-life others, such that my naked self is seen as socially unworthy*. As argued in the article, I think this account captures the phenomenology of shame at nakedness and explains the necessary presence of real-life others as part of the content of such shame. As regards Velleman, my criticism concerns the failure of his theory to adequately account both for the FO of shame in general and for the FO of shame at nakedness (Velleman does not differentiate between the two FOs because he thinks the shame felt at nakedness is the essence of all shame). On Velleman’s view, the FO of all shame is the PO *as demonstrating my incapacity at controlling my self-presentation and, hence, as making me ineligible for social interaction*. As I have proposed, this definition fails to capture the distinct emotion of shame and distinguish it from fear and anxiety. Moreover, Velleman’s account cannot make sense of the phenomenology of shame at nakedness. According to Velleman, what we feel ashamed of when seen naked is *not* our nakedly exposed body/self as shameful. Rather, what makes us ashamed is that we see our public nakedness as an example of our general incapacity for controlled self-presentation. Employing the PO/FO distinction, this means that, as per Velleman, the FO of our shame is the PO – our naked body/self – *as an arbitrary example, which is not shameful as such, of our general incapacity for self-presentation* (another possible way of applying the PO/FO distinction, which does not change anything essential, would be to say that for Velleman, the PO of shame at nakedness is not our naked self but our incapacity for self-presentation, and that the FO is the PO as socially disqualifying). Not only does this account fail to capture the phenomenology of the shame we typically experience at being caught naked, and for which it is essential that we experience our naked body as revealing our shameful naked self to an external gaze. Velleman’s account also erroneously implies that we can experience the same kind of shame – shame at our incapacity for self-presentation – regardless of whether anyone else is present. As regards Thomason, my argument implies that what would be her determination of the FO of shame in general – the PO *as a feature of my identity, which overshadows my self-conception* – is insufficient for accounting for shame and distinguishing it from alienation. I think Thomason is on to something crucial when she points out that shame at nakedness involves the experience of being seen in an uninhibited

the very experience of naked exposure to the judging gazes of others is not explicable in terms of a negative self-judgment but is constituted by the tension between controlled and uncontrolled self-presentation. Second, what makes the naked exposure so shame-producing is exactly that we here experience ourselves as acutely and emphatically vulnerable to negative assessments as regards our naked self. Third, the negative self-evaluation that we experience or fear does not necessarily take the form of a transgression of values or norms. It can also consist in the sense that our power to obtain and control the affirmation of others has been undermined, for example, by our manifest vulnerability or weakness, or by others reacting, for instance, with pity, disgust, or ridicule. Such experiences can negatively undercut our sense of the value and attractive force of our self without this implying that we have transgressed personal or communal values or norms.

Above, I demonstrated the inability of Velleman's and Thomason's analyses to account for the shame I might feel at appearing stark naked – or, alternatively, suffering a panic attack – at a philosophy video conference. It appears that my own account can shed light on what could make me feel shame here. The experience of having my private parts or my panic seen by others would likely make me feel acute shame anxiety at the others now judging my unmediated naked self and finding it potentially shameful. Moreover, I could dread that my cherished public persona as a socially worthy philosopher has been undermined and exposed as a fake mask by what has now been revealed to the audience as the shameful of my unmasked self. Lastly, I could experience my very vulnerability in the situation as a shamefully debilitating.

6 Shame Anxiety and Shame

It is possible to roughly distinguish between two different emotions from the shame-family that we may experience in response to being seen naked.

In so far as we feel painfully self-conscious at the fact of being seen naked by others without believing, as yet, that we have been judged shameful, we are experiencing what I suggest calling “acute shame anxiety” – or perhaps “embarrassment”¹⁷ – rather than “shame”. Here, we are feeling the gaze of the others on our exposed self and acutely dreading the possibility of them seeing us as shameful. Being exposed without yet knowing what the others have seen, creates a – possibly very strong – feeling of shame anxiety. This kind of anxiety is typically experienced as a consequence of appearing literally

Footnote 16 (continued)

and uncontrolled state, a state which, one is apt to sense, reveals one's real self. However, in Thomason's analysis, the role of a possible real-life audience is merely the contingent one of awakening us from our immersion in sex or other emotions and making us aware of how we look from an external perspective. This is not enough for accounting for the distinct phenomenology of shame at nakedness and explaining why the sense of having been seen by real-life others is essential to such shame. For Thomason, the FO of shame at nakedness would be the PO – my naked body/self – *as exhibiting my real self and as overshadowing my self-conception*. This definition does not entail any reference to the presence of real-life others, and it implies that it is possible to experience the same kind of shame when we are all alone and come to think of what we look like in an immersed state.

¹⁷ It seems that in everyday parlance, “embarrassment” has two aspects of meaning. First, it can refer to milder or weaker forms of social shame that do not exceed the sense of being seen in an awkward but not properly shame-producing manner by others. Second, it can refer to the kind of acute shame anxiety at pub-

naked or losing control before others. Another typical situation that may elicit acute shame anxiety is the situation of appearing before an audience and sensing its piercing gazes on oneself while feeling unable to perform one's part.¹⁸

By contrast, we experience social shame proper to the extent that we believe the others have seen our naked self and judged it shameful. In this, we are always also conscious of the shameful appearance we have put on display. In the example above, my shame anxiety at realizing that I am seen naked by the conference audience would transmute into shame if I would come to believe that my privates or my panic have been judged by the others as the shameful truth about myself.

Ultimately, I want to suggest that the feeling of being nakedly exposed is an aspect to all social shame. Even when our social shame is not preceded by pure shame anxiety at being exposed in an uncontrolled manner, it seems that this kind of shame always involves the sense of others having seen our real shameful self behind our controlled self-presentation. If we would think that the others would merely have believed themselves to see and assess the image of ourselves that we are presenting, without thinking that this image reflects our true self, we would hardly feel shame. To feel social shame, we need to sense that others have perceived our shameful appearance – our stupidity, our violence, our weakness, our dirtiness – as revelatory of our true self behind our persona.

7 Why do we Feel Ashamed of Our Nakedness Only When Seen by Others?

We typically feel shame at our nakedness only when seen by others. Why? The answer, I submit, lies in the difference between what I have called other-directed and self-directed social self-consciousness and in the ensuing difference between social and personal shame.

The reason why we feel shame at nakedness only when seen by real-life others is that the possibility of experiencing oneself as nakedly exposed is only possible

Footnote 17 (continued)

lic exposure discussed here. Often, it refers to experiences containing both aspects. However, in the philosophical literature on shame, “embarrassment” is mostly defined exclusively as a mild form of shame in a way that does not capture the second aspect. For example, Deonna and colleagues define “embarrassment” as the experience of making an awkward appearance before others while being confident that the incident does not unsettle their assessment of one's self (Deonna et al., 2012, pp. 115–117; cf. Thomason, 2018, pp. 26–28). I believe this kind of definition, by ruling out the experience of acute shame anxiety at being exposed to the judging gazes of others, is also prone to misconstrue mild or weak shame. This is because often, if not always, the experience of weak shame or awkwardness before others is accompanied by some degree of anxiety – ranging from mild to quite intense – at the prospect of the present situation eventually exposing oneself as shameful to the others. It seems to me that Deonna et al., by making too waterproof a distinction between shame and embarrassment, cannot account for the shame anxiety at possible escalation typically supplementing the experience of embarrassment. Cf. Westerlund (2019a, pp. 82–85).

¹⁸ What I call “acute shame anxiety” should be distinguished from more chronic or attitudinal forms of “shame anxiety,” which consist in continuously being sensitive to and anticipating possible future episodes of shame. It is essential to the kind of acute episodic shame anxiety I am talking about that the agent experiences that she is presently the object of a piercing judging gaze that may at any moment discover her shamefulness.

within the domain of social shame. In so far as in our encounter with others we are focused on what the others think about us, our perspective is essentially characterized by the contrast between the possibility of presenting a socially worthy appearance, and the possibility of losing control over our self-presentation. This contrast makes possible shame at nakedness as the experience of having revealed one's unmediated and uncontrolled – and possibly shameful – self to others. Several characteristics of shame at nakedness flow from the experience of the painful encounter between our naked self and an external judging gaze: we feel the judging gaze as burning since we sense that whatever shameful thing it will spot on us it will view it as the naked truth about our self; we tend to feel an urgent need to hide or cover ourselves; we are concerned about who have seen us and what they have seen, about what they think, about how the word has spread. If we become convinced that nobody – or at least nobody whom we deem important – has actually watched our naked appearance, our shame anxiety or shame evaporates.

By contrast, when all alone, we cannot feel the same kind of shame at nakedness. When alone, we can of course feel personal shame if we perceive our self as socially unworthy. However, we cannot feel shame at nakedness because, with nobody else present, the contrast between presenting a controlled appearance and appearing naked and uninhibited before others is lacking. When we monitor and judge the affirmability of our own self without thinking that we have been seen by real-life others, everything in us is in principle accessible to our judgment. The sense of being exposed to and burnt by an external gaze is missing. To be sure, in personal shame, we can, among other things, perceive our body or our propensity for getting emotional as shameful aspects of ourselves. Moreover, in so far as we feel personal shame at different aspects of our self, we will likely be prone to think and fear that, when encountering others, these aspects will be seen and judged shameful by them. Hence, although the personal shame we can feel when alone does not entail the experience of naked exposure, it can influence what will make us feel exposed and socially ashamed before others.¹⁹

8 Shameful Genitals

Why did Adam and Eve, to dissolve their shame, cover their genitals and not, say, their arms or their feet? Despite great cultural variation, there is a very general tendency to conceive of public disclosure of one's genitals as shameful. In many languages, the genitals are linguistically associated with shame, and in most cultures, covering one's genitals is considered the minimum of decent clothing to wear in

¹⁹ However, does the general claim that shame at nakedness requires a real-life audience hold true even if we broaden the concept of nakedness to include experiences of non-literal nakedness? One anonymous reviewer worried that this might not be so as it seems that, even when alone, we can feel shame about being emotional or having a mental health episode. I do think the claim holds true also for shame at episodes of non-literal nakedness. To see why, we must recognize that it is possible to experience either social shame at nakedness or personal shame – or both at the same time – in response to matters such as becoming emotional or having a panic attack. If I experience shame at nakedness, I experience my becoming emotional in front of others as revealing my naked shameful self to them. In this, my shame exhibits the characteristic phenomenology of shame at naked exposure to an external gaze. If, on the

public. Of course – and as will be discussed shortly – there are many circumstances that may prevent us from feeling shame at appearing literally naked in various situations. Moreover, the values, norms, and practices – concerning privacy, the genitals, the body, sexuality, gender, and so on – that influence when a person feels shame at publicly exhibiting her genitals and sexual body parts, vary a lot between different cultures and groups. For instance, people living in modern Western culture, with its charged conception of sexuality as crucial to personal identity, its highly ambivalent attitude to sex, and its emphasis on privacy, seem to be especially sensitive to public exposure of the private parts. Nevertheless, the tendency to feel shame at this kind of exposure is more or less ubiquitous.

This may seem strange. Even if we do not think – and even if we do not think the people around us think – that possessing genitals is shameful in itself, we may still be prone to feel ashamed of exposing our sexual organs. In fact, just mentioning that we have them tends to make us embarrassed. When writing the example of me undressing before the web cam, it struck me that merely saying aloud publicly that I have a dick or a penis felt rather awkward. Why is this so?

Here, I can only provide some rough suggestions as to the grounds of our tendency to feel shame at exhibiting our genitals. What I will say is a far cry from an ample treatment. However, it seems to me that venturing a provisional outline is worth the risk. In addition to indicating how, given the previous analysis, I am inclined to view the matter, an outline serves the purpose of opening up possible directions for further thinking and research.²⁰

Let us begin by observing that the human body possesses certain features that make it disposed to become an object of shame and of experiences of naked exposure. As noted above, our body is at once our observable outward appearance and something we tend to identify with as a crucial manifestation or part of our self (cf. Dolezal, 2015, p. 6; Thomason, 2018, p. 109). Moreover, our body is to a large extent given as a natural and elemental dimension of our identity, which precedes our conscious choices and controlled self-presentation. This means that the body is liable to stand in a tense relation to our efforts at controlling our persona. In so far as we conceive our body as expressive of who we are and as charged with import for our social standing, we will be prone to experience it as potentially revelatory of our identity behind our measured self-presentation and as potentially revealing the shamefulness of our naked self. This, I propose, is an important reason for the unrelenting energy with which people in all times and all cultures have gone about the task of manipulating their bodily appearance. Besides the motive of making one's body look valuable and attractive in the light of prevailing norms and values, there is the motive of eliminating the naturally

Footnote 19 (continued)

other hand, I am overcome with personal shame, I perceive my emotionality as a shameful feature of my self, regardless of whether I think I have exposed myself to others or not. If this is what I experience, then the typical phenomenological features and action-tendencies of social shame at nakedness are missing.

²⁰ Another related question, which I cannot treat here, is how sexual desire and pleasure are linked to shame and to the dynamics between covering oneself and revealing oneself.

naked and revealing dimension of the body by making it part of one's controlled self-presentation by way of clothing, painting, make-up, tattoos, piercing, exercise, plastic surgery, diets, and so on.

Of course, any part of the body can in principal become invested with social meaning, evaluation, and potential shame. However, whence this general tendency to experience public exhibition of one's genitals, in particular, as shameful?

Perhaps a guiding clue can be found in the fact that there are two body parts that are especially prone to induce shame and that tend to be associated with shame in many cultures and languages: the genitals – and the face. It seems clear that the reason why the face is a locus of shame is that, as the saying goes, it is the window to the soul. Our facial expressions potentially manifest our entire range of intentions and emotions. However, in contrast to the genitals, the face is something that people in most cultures habitually show up without feeling shame. This is because, in contrast to the genitals, we have some degree of control over our facial expressions and standardly make great efforts at controlling them. Hence, the face only becomes naked and exposing when we lose control over our facial expressions. “To lose face,” the common turn of phrase, refers precisely to the experience of having one's social mask removed in a shameful manner, be it by losing control over one's literal face or by being exposed as unworthy in some other way.

What about genitals?

My proposal is that we are liable to experience our genitals – or sexual body parts more generally – as shamefully exposing because we conceive them as expressing our self in a physical manner that is beyond conscious control.

In his account, Velleman points in this direction when he suggests that the reason our genitals – especially the male genitals – are a primal locus of shame, is that through their behavior they can exhibit our sexual desires in a way that is beyond our control. Hence, showing them in public is prone to make us feel shame since the exposure undercuts our controlled self-presentation (Velleman, 2001, 39). However, I think Velleman's argument must be critically modified and developed in two ways. First, as argued above, it is inaccurate to say that revealing our genitals is shameful because it demonstrates our incapacity for self-presentation. Rather, in feeling this kind of shame, we typically experience that our genitals themselves have revealed something shameful about us. Second, I believe we need to broaden the conception of the expressiveness of genitals. To be sure, the genitals can – the penis by stiffening, the female genitalia by lubricating and swelling – express our present sexual feelings in a way that we cannot control. However, their expressiveness reaches far beyond their episodic behavior. In their very capacity as our sexual organs, sensitive to touch and capable of pleasure, our genitals are the physical manifestation of our desire for sex and love in relation to others.

By being a physically observable manifestation of our erotic desires for others, our genitals are expressive of our self in way that precedes and escapes intentional and controlled self-presentation. They are, as it were, essentially naked. Hence, when publicly exposed, we are prone to experience them as revealing an unmediated

part of our self and feel shame anxiety at the prospect of others seeing and judging our real unmediated self as shameful.

What is more, it is part and parcel of the above experience that we tend to feel vulnerable in a shame-inducing manner. The sense of vulnerability has two aspects. Not only are we vulnerable before the judging gaze of the audience, which monitors and assesses our nakedly expressive body parts. Besides, it belongs to our erotic desire for others that it expresses a need and longing for others, for their desire and love for us, which we cannot control. Hence, in being seen naked, we are liable to experience that we have been exposed in our vulnerability and neediness. The experience of vulnerability before others, and of failure to come across as a person with power and capacity to command respect and attraction, can itself be a source of shame.²¹

Finally, let us note that our sexual organs are liable to become objects of disgust, and that this adds to their natural propensity to provoke shame. As pointed out by Nussbaum, since our genitals are at once our sexual organs and sources of waste products, the possibility of them becoming objects of disgust is always close at hand. It seems we have a strong inclination – partly natural, partly enculturated – to feel disgust at bodily secretions such as feces, urine, semen, and menstrual blood. Hence, when we expose our sexual organs in public, we may sense the risk that our genitals be seen as associated with bodily secretions in a way that would produce a disgusting image of our naked desiring self (cf. Miller, 1997; Nussbaum, 2001; Thomason, 2018).

In addition to the above, the genitals and other body parts associated with sexuality and reproduction, tend to be invested with meaning by varying cultural and ideological values and norms regulating social evaluation and condemnation. The relevant values and norms may concern a plethora of things: sexuality, ethics, reproduction, humanity, autonomy, gender, beauty, privacy, race, class, love, honor, purity, corporeality, personal identity, naturalness, and so on.

In short, my suggestion is that underlying the great cultural variation as regards genitals and shame, our propensity to feel shame at having our genitals seen in

²¹ It is precisely the vulnerability and lack of control manifested in our sexual organs that also make them potential objects of ridicule. Why? Well, ridicule is typically occasioned by the perception of persons who express their desires and try to make them come true without having the ability or power to do this. As we see their naive yet hopeless effort at getting what they want, we are prone to find them ludicrous and laugh at them. This laughter, I think, builds on our basic painful identification with the shameful situation of the poor fool, an identification from which the laughter allows us to detach ourselves. Now, in exposing our genitals, we exhibit our desires for others to view, desires that crave and appeal to the loving response of others without our having the power to determine that response. This is precisely the kind of situation that typically occasions ridicule. In being conscious of the image of ourselves that we are exhibiting we are prone to anticipate the potential reaction of ridicule at our ludicrously desiring and powerless – and, hence, shameful – self.

public is grounded in our basic tendency to experience of our genitals as exposing our naked self, and as closely linked to vulnerability and disgust.²²

9 Shame or no Shame at Nakedness?

Clearly, being seen by others in a literally naked or uncontrolled state does not necessarily generate a shame reaction. So, what decides whether appearing naked before others makes us feel shame or not?

As mentioned at the outset, there are many factors that play a role in determining when and how people feel shame at being seen naked. In addition to the individual traits and attitude of the subject, we have all the culturally varying norms, values, and conventions, which strongly influence when people will experience social nakedness as shameful.

I will confine myself to indicating a few of the basic experiential factors that hinder us from feeling shame at nakedness. It follows from the analysis above that what is decisive is whether we experience the situation at hand as exposing our naked self – in contrast to our clothed and controlled self – as potentially shameful. Here are three basic structural factors that stop this from happening.

First, there is the possibility of experiencing our nakedness as part of our controlled self-presentation and not as exposing our self in a shameful manner. This way of experiencing nakedness typically occurs in social contexts and practices in which nakedness is accepted and normalized as part of the self-presentation of the participants. Moreover, it is common that the conventions and norms of such contexts guide us not to apprehend and attend to naked bodies and genitals as sexually expressive and potentially shameful revelations of the self. Think, for example, of going to the sauna, practicing nudism, or seeing a doctor. As noted above, there is also a common inclination to want to transform one's nakedness into an aspect of one's public persona by way of cosmetics, tattoos, exercise, plastic surgery, more or less naked posing, and so on. Often, it is an important part of the point of such practices to guard oneself against vulnerability to exposure and shame by transforming one's nakedness into another layer of self-presentation.

Second, we may conceive of ourselves as playing – and of the audience as seeing us as playing – a character or role, which does not express our self. In so far as this is the case, we do not experience our naked appearance as exposing our own self as potentially shameful. This is why actors, be it on stage or in a movie, can appear naked in front of large audiences without feeling shame. In this, they feel that the

²² As I will argue in the next section, one way to block our shame at being seen naked is to conceive of ourselves – and, also, conceive of our audience as seeing us – as actors playing a role. If we experience our nakedness as belonging to our role character, there is no reason to feel exposed. However, it is interesting to note that when actors expose their sexual organs or sexualized body parts in a theatre performance or in a movie, there is a great risk that the fictional contract is undermined, such that the viewers slide into gazing at the naked actor or actress behind the fictional role character. This phenomenon seems to attest to our inclination to view genitals as expressive of our unmasked self.

nakedness they exhibit belongs to the role character and is not revelatory of their own self.²³

Third, there is the possibility of relating to others – and to oneself – without being dominated by self-conscious desire for social affirmation. I am thinking about the possibility of relating and responding to other persons with love and openness without being self-consciously concerned about how the others judge us and value us. When and to the extent that we relate to others in this way, it is quite possible to be naked in front of them without experiencing our nakedness as shameful.

What about the common idea that shame at nakedness is primarily or exclusively a phenomenon of the public, as opposed to the private, realm? It seems, to use Erving Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, that we are more likely to experience shame at naked exposure when "on stage" than when "off stage" (Goffman, 1959). Obviously, there is a lot of truth to this idea. However, what is it about privacy that blocks the experience of shame at nakedness? The concept of privacy can refer – and often refers in an ambiguous and undifferentiated way – to both factor one and factor three above, such that either factor or both factors may be in play. First, privacy can refer to a domain of social life, paradigmatically the home or the intimate sphere of the family, without this implying anything about the attitudes of the persons belonging to this domain. In the domain of privacy, the conventions and norms may be, and typically are, such that certain forms of nakedness are part of normal self-presentation and do not manifest a revealing contrast to it. Moreover, due to the seclusion typically characterizing the realm of privacy, we may feel that whatever we do or display here will not be disseminated and become the object of public judgment. Second, privacy may signify – and the social realm of privacy may entail – that the persons involved relate to each other with love and openness and trust of a kind that to a greater or lesser extent is free of anxious self-consciousness and shame-instilling judgment.²⁴

²³ However, see the previous footnote.

²⁴ Disambiguating the notion of privacy in this way, we can say that there is nothing about privacy, understood purely as a social domain or setting, that would make it exempt from shame. Rather, privacy, so understood, is a domain of social life exhibiting its specific patterns of shame and shame sensitivity. These patterns stem, for example, from the private sphere's being a domain that we typically share with highly significant others, from its being sheltered from the wider public sphere, and from its having its own norms and conventions for accepted and normal behavior. Not seldom, life in the private domain is characterized by some variant of the following tension. On the one hand, the significant others of the private sphere – our parents, partners, children, close friends – are people whose reactions and assessments mean a lot to us and whose potential negative judgments of us may be a vital source of shame. On the other hand, our relations to our significant others can, in varying degrees – but sometimes not at all – be characterized by mutual love and care of a kind that allows us to interact and communicate without self-conscious shame-anxiety. Thanks to one of my anonymous reviewers for raising the question about privacy, and for suggesting that Goffman's metaphor might be useful.

Let us, to finish, once more return to Scheler's example of the nude model. A plausible explanation for why the model initially does not feel any shame while posing for the artist is that she conceives of herself as acting in her professional role of a model, and of the artist as relating to her in terms of this role. The practice in question, and the roles of model and artist, entail that the nudity of the model is not viewed as expressive of her personal selfhood and sexuality. However, as soon as the model becomes aware of the sexual interest of the painter, she is prone to feel naked in a new shame-inducing way. Sensing the sexual gaze of the painter, the model is liable to feel that she is stripped of her professional role, that a part of her unmediated self in showing, and that she is vulnerable to the gaze of the artist. Moreover, herein she may fear or experience that her naked self is seen as ugly, as sexualized in a reductive way, as abnormal, or the like.

10 Conclusion

So why did Adam and Eve feel ashamed of their nakedness upon eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? The central thesis argued for in this article is that the tendency to feel shame at being seen naked by others is grounded in the desire for social affirmation and the structures of social self-consciousness, more precisely, in the dynamics between our effort to control our public persona and the experience of having one's unmediated and uncontrolled – and potentially unworthy – self exposed to the judging gazes of others. As explained in the article, when and how people will feel shame in response to public nakedness is influenced by a range of experiential and attitudinal factors, and by a host of culturally varying norms, values, and conventions. As a reading of Genesis, the analysis presented here amounts to the claim that the story of Adam and Eve depicts the birth of social self-consciousness as the basic structure that opens up shame in general and shame at nakedness in particular. As soon as we have been equipped with desire for social affirmation and social self-consciousness, we are forever barred from living out our impulses in relation to others in an inescapably and completely self-forgetful manner – whatever sense, if any, we can give to this supposed state of affairs in the garden of Eden.²⁵

²⁵ As concerns the moral implications of the birth of social self-consciousness, I eschew the Biblical inclination to equate the attainment of social self-consciousness and shame with the achievement of knowledge of good and evil. In Westerlund (2022), I argue that shame is a fundamentally egocentric and morally empty emotion, and that the sources of moral understanding lie in our loving concern for other persons.

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