



Shame and the Self

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1 SHAME AND VIOLENCE

James Gilligan's (2003) work as a forensic psychiatrist provides the opportunity to develop a new psychoanalytic exploration of the nature of shame. Based on extensive clinical observation, his theoretical elaboration of the dynamical role of shame in violent behaviour acknowledges that such behaviour can arise in defensive avoidance of the experience of shame, seen as an emotion associated with helplessness. However, the connection Gilligan makes between shame and violence goes deeper than this, affording a new view of shame itself once we turn to psychoanalytic theory to map out the dynamics of shame in the mind.

Shame is commonly understood as a dysphoric emotion provoked by a feeling of being inadequate to or transgressive of social and moral norms, manifested behaviourally by blushing, difficulty in utterance, and gaze avoidance, and in which the individual feels not only belittled in the eyes of others but isolated from expressing the feeling or communicating it to them. It is a social emotion both structurally, since the relation to another

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is constitutive, and functionally since inflicting it provides an effective mechanism of social control. It may, however, in a sense I return to below, be seen as a pre-moral emotion.

The concept of shame is adopted into the vocabulary of psychoanalysis with its everyday usage and without extensive thematisation. Within most psychoanalytic schools, it is the relational aspect that is emphasised (for a recent review, see e.g. Steiner, 2009), but while shame is seen as an emotion accompanying the gaze of a condemnatory other, it is not notably related to violence. Violence is principally considered as behaviour resulting from primary aggression as an internal, psychical force towards action that is imperfectly contained by mental structures (Hyatt-Williams, 1998).

Gilligan's work with violent offenders can be brought into direct relation with that of psychoanalytic practitioners covering much of the same psychological ground within a psychoanalytic frame of reference (see Hyatt-Williams, 1998). Evaluative comparison is not my aim here; these approaches can inform each other, and one thing they share is an attitude of non-judgemental humanity towards persons whose acts of extreme violence arise from a deeply disturbed psychological formation which is often described by its subjects themselves as being "already dead". At the same time, as Gilligan shows, examination of the mental states accompanying violent behaviour reveals hidden affects of shame and helplessness, from which violence presents a way out for the subject. Violence towards others negates the helplessness of need and dependency on others, producing instead an affectless state in which helplessness and anxiety, shame and guilt, are no longer felt.

I take a psychoanalytic approach to the phenomenology of such states of mind to show how the internal connection to violence already exists within the structure of shame. I argue that the experience of helplessness involves the dread of a loss not just of agency but of subjectivity and of the very existence of the self. Shame should then be understood in terms of the way it defends against such profound, existential anxiety by positioning the self in a self-violent relation of extreme dependency on the figure, internal or external, of another. Exacerbating shame may challenge this object-relational defence and destabilise it, producing a catastrophic eruption of a violence no longer to be contained in the mind.

In this psychodynamic investigation, I shall step away from discussing shame as a moral emotion.¹ I shall be starting earlier in the life of the concept as both pre-moral and pre-moralised. By “pre-moral”, I mean that the concept denotes something within the psychological endowment of all human beings capable of social existence, while “pre-moralised” means the concept is being considered prior to its uptake in any moral system. It is in this sense that I shall refer to shame as a “psychological universal”. I shall argue, following a line of thought advanced by the philosopher Bernard Williams to whom I refer below, that shame has its origin in the structure of mind as a pre-moral state of mind that integrates the individual with the social world. To elaborate this, I shall draw on the contemporary psychoanalytic metapsychology of object relations in the British Kleinian tradition.²

A final qualification to be made is that little if anything that I say will engage with or challenge received conceptions of shame, guilt or violence; these are all left in place. I aim simply by critical analysis to suggest an *approfondissement* of their uses in the difficult field of human behaviour that Gilligan’s work comprehends and which he approaches from a position of fundamental humanity.

2 THE FORENSIC BASE

I start with salient observations taken from Gilligan’s forensic clinical work with violent offenders where the central object of his concern, “soul murder”, is the obliteration of a soul as carried out on another human being or on the subject’s own self. Gilligan himself situates his thinking with reference to the ancient world; pursuing this line leads us to Aristotle for whom the soul, or *anima*, is the well-functioning of what it animates. Murder, understood as fatal harm to the animating principle of the individual psyche or mind, whether of victim or perpetrator, manifests

¹ I shall also leave aside any further analysis of violence; the conception of violence that I am working with is of violence as “force out of place”.

² A “metapsychology” is a psychoanalytic theory of the way the mind works (Gardner, 1993: 175). Object relations theory is the third, and definitive, psychoanalytic metapsychology as enunciated by Freud; and taken forward by work of the theorists of the British object relations tradition: Winnicott, Fairbairn and Guntrip, and the Kleinian school represented by Bion, Rosenfeld, Segal. See Mitchell and Black (1995, chapter 5). Other schools—classical Freudian, American object relations, Lacanian—may offer analogous accounts, but with less explanatory scope and power.

psychologically in the state of mind of the multiple murderer. In this state, the sense of the self is of its own deadness, of having no emotions. In particular, in this state of psychic death, there is neither guilt nor shame. Gilligan takes guilt to manifest the presence of self-hate, while shame manifests as the absence of self-love; in psychic death neither can be felt since there is no apparent self to be the object of these reflexive attitudes. Nevertheless, absence of the self is not yet absolute; it has been elided in the mind but can still figure in a final act of self-destruction when the individual, “trying to save the self, the psyche” by killing himself/herself, acts by threatening or killing others to go down in a “blaze of glory, a hail of gunfire”, in what is called “suicide by cop”; a final act of self-determination that recalls the heroic death in battle that was valued in antiquity or the purging of shame through self-annihilation.³

Gilligan sees a powerful trigger for violence to others and to the self in the humiliation that comes from a lack of being respected; a feeling of being nothing defines the position of the shamed individual. But violence also figures in the account as a prior cause of such shame, the individual’s history revealing experiences of child abuse and violent punishment, and the experience of a lethal intent on the part of a parent, as precipitating causes of shame from feeling impotent and humiliated in the face of aggression. Shame is thus linked quite directly to prior experience of helplessness and fear, experiences which are expunged from a subject’s mind by exteriorisation into aggressive acts towards others. In this way, the shame of unmet passive-dependent needs and wishes for care, protection and love, as well as for respect and recognition, can be avoided, re-locating the humiliation and helplessness outside of the subject by inducing it in others. At the same time, Gilligan notes, the Freudian idea of the return of the repressed reminds us of the instability of such defences; wishes arising from dependency needs will make themselves felt through violent acts which gratify those wishes, often in roundabout ways. Violence not only elicits respect by imposing fear in others, whether victims or bystanders, but at the same time gratifies the perpetrator’s dependency needs by securing their return to incarceration. Moreover, the dependency needs that adverse social-political conditions bring about, particularly economic ones such as unemployment, compound and solidify this vicious circle; poverty, incarceration,

³ Thanks to the editor for this last point; see also Williams on the suicide of Ajax (1993, chapter 4).

deprivation, loss of agency, all lower self-esteem and replicate helplessness, while political-economic interventions to address and reverse this through cultural-educational changes in jails—therapy, arts, creativity—as well as literacy and skills acquisition are themselves outside of individual agency and dependent on political and economic factors.

Observation at the forensic base thus shows that shame is related to violence through helplessness. As dynamically understood, shame is defended against by denial and displacement of the experience of helplessness, in two ways. Intrapsychically, the perpetrator denies shame at their own helplessness when humiliation is displaced by visiting it on others. At the same time, the denial of helplessness is enacted when by violence, the subject acquires respect through producing fear and wreaking destruction in a public way. Such acts represent agency, invoke respect, and by reinforcing the denial of helplessness, further defend against the conscious experience of shame.

In the next two sections, I shall argue from this starting point for a further, closer connection between shame and violence, by bringing together considerations from both psychoanalysis and philosophy, centring on the role in the mind of the subject's relation to the other.

3 SHAME AND THE SOCIAL OTHER

We have before us the idea that shame is “the” affect of helplessness in the sense that it is an inescapable concomitant of loss of agency. But helplessness is the human condition, both in our dependent infancy and in the limitations intrinsic to all human agency. In his writing on need, the philosopher David Wiggins (1987) argues that one must take full account of what he calls vital need for what must be supplied if the individual human being is not to suffer serious harm to their agential capacities; all human beings are vulnerable to such harm if they cannot exercise of their powers as agents in the world. But the exercise of these powers does not depend on the individual alone; humans exist, in Alastair MacIntyre's words, as “dependent rational animals” (MacIntyre, 1999), dependent on their own rationality and that of others, as well as on mutual benevolence, on social arrangements of justice and equity, and much more. If shame is the affect of helplessness and helplessness arises in powerlessness, then a liability to shame is ever-present in the natural course of a human life lived under the inescapability of what is needed for the continuation of life, and

of vulnerability to the chance necessity of events beyond individual human agential power.

The liability to shame, so understood, is one shared by all individuals; as such, shame is a psychological universal. We can seize it through its cultural manifestations if we examine the psychodynamics of a non-moralised concept of shame; shame before it becomes ensconced as a moral emotion within any particular morality system (Williams, 1985: 174–196). Both from cultural and historical comparisons and from psychoanalysis, we may learn more than from within our own morality system we thought we needed to know. In *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams explores the link between shame and the chance necessity of life in the *milieu* of the ancient Greek world.⁴ Here, Williams argues, shame as *aidos* was a pre-moralised state of mind or attitude occurring under the imposition of those forms of necessity, physical or social, which arise from the fundamental contingency of human life against which humans are helpless.

Williams's claim that there are dimensions of our understanding of shame with recognisable manifestations in ancient thought is based on his reading of textual evidence, in particular the *Iliad* but also the later canon of Greek tragedy. The uses of *aidos* in this corpus adequately capture a modern conception of shame as an emotion felt by the individual who does not satisfy the standards of their culture. Noting that shame is typically connected to being seen, and specifically being seen to be wanting, Williams writes that shame in ancient usage, as now, is “the emotion of self-protection” (Taylor, 1985: 81) against the experience of diminishing and disappearing under the gaze of society's representative, the figure of an internalised other. Shame represents this desire for self-protection as a desire to disappear, in the form of the “wish that the space occupied by me should be [...] empty” (Williams, 1993: 89).

Always a state of mind linking the individual to the social other, a crucial development is that “By the later fifth century the Greeks had their own distinction between a shame that merely followed public opinion and

⁴ One such chance was that of being taken into slavery, a state of living of life in a world where there is no place even for shame at loss of agency, nor loss of value in the eyes of another. This, to borrow a phrase of Williams from elsewhere, is not a situation that is a “real option for us” (1985: 161) even to imagine; what Williams implies in this expression is that certain situations are not imaginable by us as we are, and if we were in them we would not only not be as we are now, we would not be recognisable to us as we are now; there is a limit to our comprehension.

a shame that expressed inner personal conviction” (Williams, 1993: 95–97). This deeper understanding of shame marks the internalised other as the essential element of heteronomy, the rule of our lives by others; shame is felt, indeed is made possible, by relating the individual to the figure of the “abstracted, improved neighbour” (1993: 98). The structure of shame thus goes beyond particular values and attitudes, in a particular social context, to acquire ethical status through its universal requirement for social relatedness. Shame “mediates between act, character and consequence” as these engage our sense of who we are now and in the future in respect of our lives and their ethical demands (1993: 102). For this, shame then, as now, requires an internalised other; a figure that is not merely a group representative nor a mere compendium of group values, but one that is the bearer of enough social reality for one’s life with others to be made concrete.

This figure’s defining role is to secure adherence to social and cultural values by bestowing or withholding its socially recognising gaze; it is not yet part of a moral system. What it promotes are norms that align the individual with society where the normalising force is not yet a moral imperative but resides in the nature of the subject’s relation with the internal figure. That figure is one whose character, as a bearer of social values, is more emblematic than real; the relation to it as a social one in which the individual both feels shame because their inadequacy to those values attracts the other’s condemnatory gaze, while the gaze at the same time causes shame because the subject is diminished by the observing figure’s indifference to their individuality.⁵ This ambiguity in the relation with the inner figure in shame can be compared with the more straightforward case of guilt (Williams, 1993: 219ff).⁶ In guilt, the inner figure

⁵ This complexity can be resolved if we recall that shame, as a psychological universal, is a natural psychological capacity to represent oneself in relation to an inner figure. On a psychoanalytic developmental account, primary helplessness arises from rupture of attachment to a figure on which the child is dependent. This primary fear, re-activated by the condemnatory gaze of the ego-ideal, is exploited in social shame which has the secondary, functional role of motivating compliance.

⁶ Both Williams (1993: 91) and Wollheim (1984: 220) caution against simplistically distinguishing between shame and guilt cultures.

is either a victim or an enforcer and avenger. Here the relation is unidirectional and object-specific, the subject fearing an attack, in the form of the victim's retaliation or the enforcer's anger.⁷

In the case of shame, says Williams, the internal figure is not an enforcer but a watcher; not a victim but a witness, and the subject's primary feeling in the relation with that figure is not fear (although fear of being observed and found to be wanting or at fault will motivate the avoidant behaviour of compliance in the same way as the desire to avoid the figure's anger in the case of guilt). What is felt in the relation is a consciousness of a loss of power which is felt to be brought about directly by the attitude of the internal figure. This is so even though, and when, the cause of the loss of power is chance necessity. The feeling of helplessness is felt *vis à vis* that figure, whose gaze directly diminishes or dismisses the subject as worthy of being regarded.⁸

This is as far as Williams's analysis takes us. The watcher is just an observer of the subject's inadequacy, however caused, and a with-holder of approbation. Fear of this effect of the other's dismissive gaze then motivates behaviour that is avoidant and compliant. But it is as yet unclear why the gaze of the internal figure of the abstracted other should have this potentially aversive effect. Williams himself does not elaborate here; one explanation we might canvass is that in such dismissal the watcher refuses, or threatens rupture of, any relation to the subject.⁹ This would go some way towards accounting for the paradoxical prominence within shame's phenomenology of the experience of isolation; shame constantly

⁷ The concept of shame can be deepened ethically by considering that its relation to guilt implies two dimensions of self-evaluation of one's actions: "*What I have done* points in one direction towards what has happened to others, in another direction to what I am" (Williams, 1993: 92). The first then stands to "learn from" the second: "shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself" (p. 93); we understand our own shortcomings when we can understand their effects on others.

⁸ While this emphasis on the other's gaze might make shame seem more a "narcissistic" emotion than guilt, since the gaze is turned on the subject, while the victim's anger draws attention to the victim, making guilt an other-regarding emotion, the imputation of shame as simply a narcissistic wounding is too narrow.

⁹ The power of the gaze to enforce through threat of its withdrawal is notably explored by Norbert Elias (1939). In another register, the "Still Face" experiments conducted by Edward Tronick in the 1970s show the infant's vital need for engagement with the gaze of another.

threatens dismissal. We may see this isolating quality as marking the immanence of violence within the structure of shame.¹⁰ But the place of that violence, and the affective charge of being dismissed and diminished, remain unexplained in this model. Although as noted, early experiences of violence predispose the individual to negatively experience such diminishment in later life, it is precisely this effect of the initial violence that requires explanation.

In what follows the more radical account of shame that I propose will enable us to trace the path that violence by aggressive inner or outer figures carves out in the mind, inflicting a state of inchoate, unarticulated helplessness and anxiety at loss of agency, of which shame is then the linguistic and phenomenological representation or “transform”.¹¹ As noted earlier, a psychoanalytic approach understands the anxiety surrounding dependency as a feeling of dread of the impending loss of agency and the impending loss of subjectivity this entails.¹²

4 PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOANALYSIS: SHAME DECONSTRUCTED

Richard Wollheim notoriously argues that there is nothing intrinsically good about morality’s injunctions; in a moral system controlled by guilt, the role of guilt is to force compliance to the demands of inner figures. Obedience to these is the price paid by the individual for freedom from

¹⁰ Construing dismissal by an abstracted ideal figure as an act of psychological violence, when such a figure is not obviously qualified to be an agent capable of acts of any sort, would require postulating it as the result of projection by the subject experiencing the helplessness of diminishment.

¹¹ This suggestive term is Wollheim’s; it conveys the formal aspect of functional analysis: anxiety is the input “argument” to the function, the function itself is defensive misrepresentation, and shame is the output value.

¹² The precise detail of its uptake into a morality system is then, as noted, contextually contingent. But it will already be an effective functional force in the mind, manifesting in a variety of object-relational configurations from the (optimistic) one of a benign ego-ideal to which the subject can refer herself for validation (see Williams, 1993) to a more pessimistic one of a mind in thrall to the “projective dispositions” (Wollheim, 1984: 208–209) seen in attitudes, such as blame, resentment and sentimental idealisation, in which shame is disowned or denied. These latter states already represent an internal violence to the integrity of thought, in the splitting off of unwanted affect and its projective re-attribution elsewhere. This is the structure of paranoia, whose defensive function is the maintenance of psychic tranquillity, albeit at the expense of reality.

fear of an internal aggression. Moral compliance is the Danegeld offered to the internal figure we know as the super-ego, to mitigate its rule of terror.¹³ Wollheim's deconstructive-destructive analysis of moral injunction nicely illustrates the precept of his philosophical psychoanalysis that "phenomenology follows function"; if we simply infer a mental state's role in thought from its overt content, we risk making a mistake.¹⁴ This expands on Freud's insight that there is a difference between manifest and latent content of mental states which is produced by the mind's own representational capacities; a psychoanalytic approach augments philosophical understanding of the way the mind works, through its own critical analysis of phenomenology. Moreover, not only content, but the mental state itself can be systematically misleading. In wishful thinking, wishes present as beliefs about desires fulfilled; imaginings masquerade as memories in screen memories; fears and anxieties are projected away to return as paranoid beliefs about their external causes. Shame as a psychological universal has an originary function in relating the individual to the figure of the other, but the way it does this need not appear on the manifest face of its representation.

If we are to understand the functional role of shame in a Freudian psychic economy of anxiety, we must enquire further into shame as a state of mind that is shaped by the mind's capacity for misrepresentation in the service of psychic defence. We must go beyond the view as encountered so far, that shame works by being functionally implicated in defensive avoidance of humiliation, the experience that arises in conditions of helplessness and dependency (as noted by Gilligan) or as the "emotion of self-protection" against the condemnation accruing from prohibited actions (as noted by Williams). While this analysis is warranted by these writers' observations, it fails to tell the whole story behind the phenomenology of shame. In particular, it fails fully to account for the connection with violence.

¹³ The terror under which the subject lives is fear of the superego as the "archaic object" of Kleinian theory. This is the inner figure, initially endowed by the infant with all the powers of the parent, which then becomes further laden with its own projected and disowned aggression; the infant fears its own destructiveness.

¹⁴ I call Wollheim's approach a philosophical psychoanalysis to underline the philosophical basis of his uncritical but nevertheless carefully analytic elucidation of psychoanalysis understood as an extension of ordinary psychology; he does not seek to critique psychoanalysis but to bring out its conceptual structure. I argue (Braddock, 2016) that this structure represents a current of German idealist thought in Freud.

From Freud onwards, psychoanalysts have been concerned with the attempt to understand the constellation of states of mind of intense anxiety, when the affect of anxiety comes into prominence in the clinical setting of the transference. In *Anxiety and Instinctual Life* (1932: 94–95), Freud writes that “what is feared, what is the object of the anxiety, is invariably the emergence of a traumatic moment, which cannot be dealt with by the normal rules of the pleasure principle. We understand at once that our endowment with the pleasure principle does not guarantee us against objective injuries but only against a particular injury to our psychological economics. [...] [T]here is a twofold origin of anxiety—one as a direct consequence of the traumatic moment and the other as a signal threatening a repetition of such a moment”.¹⁵ Freud’s thinking, couched in the vocabulary of the economic theory of the mind, is more perspicuously put in terms of object relations theory: the “traumatic situation” of helplessness experienced is an object relation; specifically, a relation to a figure whose failure to meet need provokes anxiety of a sort particularly close to the self, felt as an existential threat.

5 SHAME AS AN OBJECT RELATION

When shame arises in the analytic clinical setting, it is an indicator of an object relation of this sort, behind which lies the patient’s history and trajectory to this point. The object relation is, so to speak, the bare bones of the transference; this is explored by the analyst bearing in mind that for psychoanalytic understanding quite generally, phenomenology follows function. Psychic defence is achieved as a (necessary) defensive self-misrepresentation within the structure of a subject–object relation of dependency. Hence, we may say that with shame as with other states of mind directed to the analyst, the representation of the subject’s state

¹⁵ For Freud, anxiety is anticipatory fear of a “situation of danger”; the danger that is threatened is the “traumatic situation”; the experience of helplessness in the face of disruptive incursion into the mind, crucially, of need unfulfilled. This is a “particular injury to our psychological economics” which overwhelms the mind’s capacity (operating under the pleasure principle) to process or contain the disruption. This failure is the “traumatic situation” which is to be avoided and so is signalled by anxiety, most particularly in the form of dread as an objectless affect; what is traumatic is experience itself, here of helplessness; the representation (in memory) of the traumatic situation of helplessness supplies the affect of anxiety with an object. Anxiety then is object-directed; most usually, it is the object whose presence would meet the instinctual need (1932: 94).

of mind is with respect to its function a misrepresentation; it is the fundamental dependency on the figure represented by the analyst, and the anxiety that goes with it that, which lie behind the affective relation of shame *vis à vis* the figure who is the analyst. Thus, to say that shame is the transform of dependent helplessness is to say that shame gives representational form, and hence meaning, to the anxiety that surrounds unmet need; what is represented is the object to which the dependency is directed, held in place by the needing subject's relation to it.

The object-relational metapsychology is premised not on a structural system whose energetics underlie but do not explain, subjectivity; nor on a functional (quasi-social) conception of agencies within the mind organised to the maintenance of a psychical life, but on an intrinsically intersubjective subjectivity which constitutively follows a developmental trajectory through the life cycle from infancy to maturity (and thence, though figuring theoretically less, to old age and death).¹⁶ More simply put, we understand the individual subject in terms of the ways that in her mind she has now come to represent both herself, the figures of significant others, and of the groups, communities and institutions they stand for, and the affective relations between her and them.¹⁷

Psychoanalysis treats this as a developmental account: how the subject is now depends on what has happened, developmentally, to this point. But it also sees her psychological status or condition now in synchronic terms, as the ongoing result of her relating to others from the basis of the point she has arrived at on her developmental trajectory. Here, it is important to note that this trajectory amounts to her own idiosyncratic history, her "case", up to this point in the human life cycle; all this contributes to her formative relations with others and the way they are inflected by her inner world of object relations.

Shame can be given an analytic deconstruction in terms compatible with the psychoanalytic model of the mind enunciated as the theory of object relations. Retaining the analysis of shame Williams provides as, in effect an object-relational account, shame is the affect experienced in

¹⁶ See footnote 4.

¹⁷ This differs from American versions of object relations theory in its emphasis on the affective transformation of content posited in Kleinian theory's conception of unconscious phantasy.

relation to an internal watcher capable of turning an annihilating condemnatory gaze upon the transgressor of cultural norms.¹⁸ The power of the ego-ideal lies in the violence of an annihilating gaze in which the transgressor is viewed by the watcher as of no account. The threat of this violence is, as with the super-ego's threat of retribution in the case of guilt, a motivator of avoidant or compliant behaviour on the part of the subject who anticipates and forestalls the other's annihilating gaze. Thus far shame, as an emotion of social control and in its moralised form as an emotion of self-control, is explained on lines already encountered.

Beneath this however lies a more profound violence than that residing in the other's power to avenge or annihilate. When Williams writes that in shame, there is a "wish that the space occupied by me should be [...] empty", we are at first inclined to read this as showing the extent to which avoidant behaviour might go in escaping the other's annihilating gaze. But on a psychoanalytic reading, the wish is a misrepresentation of the subject's state of mind, which is one of fear. An experience that is feared to be actual and present, once misrepresented as a wish, is displaced into a time that is possible and future. We see here the effect of the early experience of violence: as the psychoanalyst Winnicott remarked, fear is memory in the future tense. Extreme violence by a parent, felt by the child as lethal, cannot be thought; it has no representation in the mind. The occurrence in a state of shame of the wish to disappear is not simply anticipatorily placatory towards the violence of the other's annihilatory gaze. It is the attempt to represent in thought the experience of an extreme anxiety about the self's survival in the early experience of violence. By occupying the place of a shamed individual in the relation to an observing other, the continued existence of the self is made dependent on the existence of that other under the condition of the continued violence contained in the refusal of their gaze. Shame stands as a final plea by the threatened self for averting withdrawal of the gaze and for retaining at least as much of a relation as that continued gaze implies. While in guilt the self attempts to avert the violence of a punitive inner figure in order to survive, in shame the self attempts to survive by inviting the ongoing violence of a condemnatory figure's dismissal. This is a violence the self brings upon itself, as the price paid in order to survive. It is in this way

¹⁸ As Jonathan Lear (2004) has noted, in postulating an inner figure as bearer of cultural norms and values, Williams comes near to a psychoanalytic account of moral psychology.

that the connection between shame and violence is so explosive; what is at stake is the subject's survival as a conscious subject and agent, one whose ultimate act is to invite the violence of the other's dismissal.

6 THE PSYCHICAL IMPASSE OF EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

In summary so far, then, the experience of helplessness from the infliction of violence, is the experience of loss of agency in which the experience of counting for nothing and the loss of subjective sense of self are bound together. The affect behind shame is indeed fear, but pre-morally the fear is not of the other's gaze, of which the individual's diminishment is constructed as an effect, but of the never-absent state of diminishment and helplessness as tending to a self-dissolution whose unthinkableness calls the defensive object relation of shame into being. The indifferent gaze of another is sought as the sign of a relation with them that makes this experience intelligible to the helpless individual striving to remain an agent and a thinker. By opting to count as someone who is as nothing for the figure of the other, the subject retains an object relation, albeit one of the most exiguous kind. As the "transform" of helplessness, shame turns the feared situation of total dependency, and the threat of extinction of the self, into an object relation which provides a defence against that fear. The misrepresentation is held in place by its function, which is to keep the individual in relation to the other held responsible for that experience, thus warding off the annihilation itself under the condition of retaining the ever-present threat of it.

This object-relational accommodation with helplessness has the potential to produce a psychological impasse, in the form of an unstable amalgam of existential anxiety and self-violence. The affect that dominates the experience of helplessness is a fear of diminishment of the self towards a state of being without: an agent without agency and a subject without the capacity for subjective thought. Existential anxiety is the term which captures the import, and the content, of this fear; anxiety for one's existence as a subject with agency, hence as a subject in any meaningful sense.¹⁹

The significance of this object-relational deconstruction of shame is that in despite of stasis, the relation offers the possibility of change; with the retention of the figure of the other, however remote and threatening,

¹⁹ Psychoanalytic theorists disagree over whether "annihilation anxiety", as a term used to designate the fear of one's non-existence, can have any content.

there is the possibility of an analytic retrieval of that figure as less hostile and more responsive to the patient's needs. Donald Campbell describes a patient whose adolescence had been marked by depressive and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and religious fears including the belief he would go to Hell, and a hypnogogic image of a black hole in his mind. As an adult, he compulsively masturbated and frequented sadomasochistic online chat-rooms where he sought a dominatrix who, representing his actual cruel, castrating mother, would humiliate him, while at the same time he would secretly see himself as in control of her. When eventually the analyst could read through the patient's surface descriptions of his compulsive sexual behaviour to the underlying profoundly disturbing fears of damage to his mind, he interpreted that the patient was afraid that he, the analyst, was the figure who would shame and confuse him and damage his mind. In that moment of understanding the patient "became very still [...] and wept silently until the end of the session" (Campbell, 2017: 98).

In naming the patient's fear of being shamed in the transference, the analyst names also the shame the patient experiences but cannot articulate when in his relation to the figure of the dominatrix it drives his behaviour. This object-relational shaming is held in place functionally because it gives representational form to the patient's fear for his mind in terms of the relation to someone who threatens his subjectivity in the paradigmatic abusive relation enacted in the chat room relation.

Shame is then the price paid for a continuation of any sense of self at all, under conditions of existential threat which must be continually placated by submission; any protest will realise the threat. In object-relational terms then, shame is the minimal possible object relation compatible with and necessary for psychological life as a subject at all. The un-giving mother, the aggressor or some other figure felt to inflict helplessness, is introjected and constructed as an indifferent, dismissive or hostile figure that is co-opted into the object position of watcher and held there by the relation of shame with the subject. Shame as fear of annihilation under that gaze is the price paid for a continued, bare existence as a subject, in a state of ongoing stasis. Such an outcome in the mind is the last stage before the self's disappearance from itself, the ultimate realisation of what Melanie Klein called "psychic catastrophe".²⁰

²⁰ The full extent of the catastrophe is reflected in the phenomenology of what may be called "extreme states of mind"; the "deathly state of mind" described in Kleinian analysis as canonical for the working of the Death drive. I would argue that this clinical

7 THE PSYCHIC CATASTROPHE AND THE REAL WORLD

What is the practical relevance for social thought of such seemingly abstruse theorising?

Important themes are signalled by Gilligan on the multiplicity of ways that shame and violence relate. Violence may, by abrogating agency through trauma and helplessness, produce shame; violence may unthinkingly express shame in a repudiation of helplessness, which in its loss of control may produce shame; shame may directly cause violence marshalled in a form of last-ditch agency for survival; shame may aim to obliterate itself and the subject's own knowledge of it through violent (omnipotent) destruction of the subject's capacity to know or will to power; shame may directly cause attack aimed at the (supposed or actual) shame-inducing agent. Shame with any of the above originating conditions and dynamics, once it finds its way into the morality system, will bring with it the condition and its defensive needs and dynamics. All this baggage means that shame is the perfect emotion of social control for pathological social formation involving gender or race; the pathway from pre-moral shame to morality carved out in the individual offers a multitude of affordances for power to hook into.

Starting as I have from shame as a pre-moral state of mind, and showing how shame becomes embedded in the mind as a defensive formation against existential anxiety, has involved bringing both pre-moral shame and its descendent moralisation under the framework of the object relations theoretical model of the mind. This offers a way to integrate the clinical, psychological, social and political aspects of the ongoing psychic task of maintaining a sense of self under the threat of existential anxiety. It also offers to connect, intelligibly, the different levels and dimensions at which shame is produced, in the psychological, political, social and economic conditions that arouse existential anxiety, and at which shame then determines disturbed, affectively-driven, violent behaviour.

picture, while aptly described in these terms, is nevertheless a misrepresentation of the mind's attempt to think its predicament.

According to the idea I have been developing, shame is an attempt by the mind to contain existential anxiety by binding it into the self-violence that the object relation of shame requires.²¹ Violence is then defensively necessary as the transducer between the individual's existential anxiety and their existence in relation to the other of society. In transforming anxiety into an object relation of shame, violence, one might say, demands to be understood. Violence, that is, is not only or primarily the cause of the helplessness that leads to shame; behind it lies helplessness expressed. Violence is ambiguously enactment, the psychic catastrophe exported into the world, and also helplessness's "voice".²² It both expels helplessness by visiting helplessness on others, and it thereby expresses it. Protest is an act both expressing and communicating helplessness and the violence produced by shame is violent protest; the expression, inchoate and directed only in the sense of having a direction, as the last possible act of expression that is open to helplessness. The conclusion, that the humanity of physicians like Gilligan presents us with, is that social understanding, like psychoanalytic understanding, should find ways to reconnect violence with its meaning.

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²¹ I have intentionally avoided explaining the self-violence of shame in terms of masochism. Provisionally, I take the question, whether psychoanalytic theory entails that preservation of subjectivity must involve sexualisation, to be answered in the negative.

²² Freud notes that the infant's helplessness is expressed in the forceful expulsion of its cry.

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