Abstract
This paper investigates the self-understanding implied in shame. Is Giorgio Agamben right in claiming that shame shows the simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification of the self? I would like to question this ontological claim by rereading the sources on which this claim is built: Emmanuel Levinas’s early work De l’évasion, Primo Levi’s description of survivor shame, and Robert Antelme’s account of the flush of a student who was picked out at random and shot by the SS during a death march. What will come to the fore is the ethical significance of shame in the face of atrocities. It points to a normative notion of the self whose integrity is endangered by excessive shame just as much as by the lack of shame.

The self in shame feels defective, degraded, and diminished. It feels eyes upon itself and ends up observing itself as if it would see itself from the outside. Yet, despite the devastating self-reflexivity, the ashamed self seeks to hide and to avoid the reflection that mirrors itself. This mode of manifesting, and at the same time concealing, oneself is to be distinguished from the mode of appearance of another feeling that also includes a negative self-assessment, namely guilt. Is it correct to claim that shame affects and pervades a person as a whole, while guilt is only directed to the deeds the person has done, and that, for this reason, shame has an egoistic drift, while guilt tends to lead into reparative action and is likely to foster other-oriented responses?
The evaluation of shame as a regressive and of guilt as a progressive emotion will be challenged in viewing both of them as experiences of conscience, of knowing-with oneself, and in exploring the positive potential of shame in the context of love, the quality *par excellence* of being and feeling for and with another. Shamelessness—the transgression of boundaries—negatively points to what is at risk when *one’s own* feeling of shame does not tactfully protect and affirm *the other’s* dignity, fragility, and finitude.

**Introduction: Agamben’s Thesis**

Atrocities provoke shame—though, strangely enough, not always in the perpetrators but in their victims and in those who witnessed the crime. Shame is one of the so-called self-conscious emotions. What does it tell us about the self?

In the following, I wish to discuss the thesis put forward in the book *Remnants of Auschwitz* by Giorgio Agamben: the thesis that shame is the simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification of the self and “the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness.”\(^1\) For Agamben, shame is not a psychological state but an ontological sentiment—the sentiment of being a subject in the double sense of being subjected *and* being a sovereign, of losing *and* possessing oneself.\(^2\)

Agamben’s reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s early work *De l’évasion* from 1935 is designed to confirm this thesis and to underline that shame does not derive from an imperfection in our being but is grounded in our being’s incapacity to break from itself.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 107.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 104 f.
Levinas on the Impossibility of Escape

Levinas describes escape as “the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].”4 He clarifies that this is not a flight toward death or a stepping outside of time.5 The attempt to escape is exemplified with malaise, feeling ill at ease, which appears as a refusal to remain in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation.6 Another example is the getting-out experienced in pleasure. Yet Levinas depicts it as a deceptive escape that at the moment of its disappointment is underscored by shame. He states that shame, on first analysis, “appears to be reserved for phenomena of a moral order: one feels ashamed for having acted badly, for having deviated from the norm. It is the representation we form of ourselves as diminished beings with which we are pained to identify.”7 Nonetheless, Levinas sees this analysis of shame as insufficient, for it presents shame as a function of a morally bad act. Instead, he claims that shame shows “the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself”—be it from others, be it from oneself.8

For Levinas, what is shameful does not only concern our agency but, above all, the relation to ourselves, what he calls our “intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves.”9 Shame reveals not our nothingness but the totality and the nudity of our existence. Shame is linked to self-awareness: one is aware of one’s attachment to oneself. One could ask: Well, what is so problematic about this? The problem is that one gets trapped.

Agamben summarizes this thought by saying that we experience shame when the impulse to flee from oneself is confronted by the impossibility of evasion. “Just as we experience our revolting and yet unsuppressable presence to ourselves in bodily need and nausea, which Levinas classifies along-

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5 Ibid., p. 57.
6 Ibid., p. 58.
7 Ibid., p. 63.
8 Ibid., p. 64.
9 Ibid., p. 65.
side shame in a single diagnosis, so in shame we are consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves.”10 So far, Agamben’s interpretation seems in line with Levinas’s text.

I think Ruth Leys is right when she, in her book From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After, writes that Agamben appears to depart from Levinas when—seeking to “deepen” the latter’s analysis11—he claims:

To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what cannot be assumed is not external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy: it is what is most intimate in us (for example, our own physiological life). Here the ‘I’ is overcome by its own passivity, its ownmost sensibility; yet this expropriation and desubjectification is also an extreme and irreducible presence of the ‘I’ to itself. It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropiation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame.12

As Leys points out, Agamben’s analysis is at odds with Levinas’s meaning because for the latter a desubjectified individual cannot feel shame.13 Further, shame is not always tied to one’s physiology. In a passage not quoted by Agamben, Levinas writes: “When the body loses this character of intimacy, … it ceases to become shameful.”14 He invites us to consider the naked body of the boxer or the music hall dancer whose “body appears to her with that exteriority to self that serves as a form of cover. Being naked is not a matter of wearing clothes.”15 Leys concludes that, for Levinas, it is our plenitude, the

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10 Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, p. 105.
11 Ibid., p. 105.
12 Ibid., p. 105 f.
14 Levinas, On Escape, p. 65.
15 Ibid.
inescapable fullness and solidity of our total being, not our desubjectification or lack, that is shameful.\textsuperscript{16}

I agree with Leys in so far as a desubjectified subject without conscious self-presence could not feel shame. However, her conclusion leaves us wondering why our plenitude should be shameful. As I read Levinas, it is not the plenitude of our being itself that is shameful but rather its exposure, its inescapable visibility, which makes it impossible to “forget our basic nudity.”\textsuperscript{17} What is shameful is the feeling “that we cannot hide what we should like to hide” of ourselves.\textsuperscript{18} For a being that is ashamed of itself, the escape is impossible because its own consciousness holds onto it and records everything it feels, thinks, and does.

Yet, again, what is the difficulty with this? Do not the difficulties first arise when we have something to hide and when we try to cover it in vain? Here the dimension of intersubjectivity enters the picture. Cover only makes sense if one is not alone but a being that is visible also to others. Although Levinas does not want to reduce shame to a moral phenomenon that manifests itself in reaction to specific acts, he also does not reduce shame to transmoral self-reflexivity. This becomes obvious when he states that shame is “founded upon the solidarity of our being, which obliges us to claim responsibility for ourselves.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the very fact that we share our human condition with others obliges us. In shame we are directly confronted with ourselves as connected to others, and therefore, we cannot flee into irresponsibility.

It seems to me that Levinas is engaged in an implicit discussion with Heidegger. He was well acquainted with Heidegger’s work \textit{Being and Time} (1927). Heidegger’s analysis of guilt [\textit{Schuld}] corresponds to Levinas’s analysis of shame insofar as both of them do not understand guilt or shame as related to deeds and as both of them refuse to relate it to a lack in a person’s being but rather see it as a characteristic of this very being before it does any-

\textsuperscript{16} Leys, \textit{From Guilt to Shame}, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{17} Levinas, \textit{On Escape}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 63.
thing. However, while Heidegger’s description of existential guilt boils down to Dasein’s finitude, the limitations inherent in human freedom due to inevitable choices, Levinas sees something different in shame than finitude, while not wanting to escape the conditions of a finite existence.

Heidegger’s analysis of guilt appears in a section about the call of conscience. In his more recent texts, Levinas has sketched out the movement of shame precisely in terms of the bad conscience, which clearly assumes an ethical meaning as seen in its relation to alterity. Here Levinas openly criticizes Heidegger’s self-reflexive notion of anxiety and opposes to it the fear that comes from the face of the other—a fear that is for another, a fear for the death of the neighbor, a fear that one’s own home or place in the sun is an usurpation of places that belong to someone else.

Levinas’s formulations remind us of Primo Levi’s formulations of the shame or guilt of the survivor. Notice that this is precisely a point that Agamben is attacking when discussing Levi’s work.

**Levi on Survivor Shame and Guilt**

When the Germans invaded northern Italy in 1943, Levi escaped to the mountains to join a group of anti-fascist partisans. He was soon captured and eventually deported to Auschwitz. His skills as a chemist proved useful, and he was put to slave labor in a rubber factory near the camp. Having contracted scarlet fever just before the Germans began to evacuate the camp, Levi

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21 Ibid., p. 285.

was left behind, and he was liberated in January 1945. He returned to his family home in Turin and resumed his career. He committed suicide in 1987.

In Levi’s later work, shame has become synonymous with the so-called survivor guilt—a feeling of guilt that someone has without being guilty of any particular wrong. In his poem “The Survivor” from 1984, Levi addresses this recurring and depressing feeling when once again seeing the faces of the other inmates before his inner eye. “Get away from here, drowned people, go away. I didn’t usurp anyone’s place. I didn’t steal anyone’s bread. No one died in my stead. No one. Go back to your mist. It isn’t my fault if I live and breathe, eat and drink and sleep and wear clothes.”

Two years later, when writing *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989), Levi once again asks himself, “Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another? And in particular, of a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than you?” He examines himself and admits that he cannot block out such feelings, though he cannot find obvious transgressions. In the end, he utters the suspicion that each man is his brother’s Cain and that each of us indeed has usurped his neighbor’s place.

Agamben criticizes Levi’s chapter on shame. In Agamben’s view, Levi too hastily leads shame back to a sense of guilt as, for example, in the following sentence: “many (including me) experienced ‘shame,’ that is, a feeling of guilt.” As Phil Hutchinson has pointed out, Agamben is unsatisfied with Levi’s account of shame owing to its (perceived) conflation with guilt. Agamben sees Levi’s later writing on shame as “backsliding” on earlier insights. Yet Agamben himself fails to distinguish survivor shame (i.e., feelings of guilt minus culpability) from legal guilt (i.e., offense against the law).

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25 Ibid.
In his book *The Truce* (1963), Levi describes the scene when the liberating Russian soldiers approach Auschwitz on horseback, as Levi and a fellow inmate are carrying a corpse from the infirmary to an overflowing common grave. The Russian soldiers exchange a few timid words, throw strangely embarrassed glances at the sprawling bodies, at the battered huts, and at the few still alive. Levi recalls:

They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funeral scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man’s crime; the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist.28

Here again, shame and guilt are mentioned in one single sentence, explaining each other. We will later come back to the issue of how they can be kept apart, if at all. Right now, the next question to be raised is what alternative has Agamben to offer in order to illustrate his own notion of shame? For this purpose, he turns to the work of Robert Antelme, a member of the French resistance who was arrested in 1944.

**Antelme on the Flush**

According to Agamben, Robert Antelme “clearly bears witness to the fact that shame is not a feeling of guilt or shame for having survived another.”29 Antelme was one of the prisoners who were brutally marched from Buchenwald to Dachau as the Allies were approaching. The SS shot to death all those who would have slowed down the march. At times the decimation

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would take place by chance. One day it was a young Italian’s turn. Antelme has given an account of this episode in his book *L’espèce humaine* (1947). I quote the passage Agamben refers to:

The SS continues. “*Du, komm her!*” Another Italian steps out of the column, a student from Bologna. I know him. His face has turned pink. I look at him closely. I still have that pink before my eyes. He stands there at the side of the road. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands … [omission in Agamben’s quote, C.W.] He turned pink after the SS man said to him, “*Du, komm her!*” He must have glanced about him before he flushed; but yes, it was he who has been picked, and when he doubted it no longer, he turned pink. The SS who was looking for a man, any man, to kill, had found him. And having found him, he looked no further. He didn’t ask himself: Why him, instead of someone else? And the Italian, having understood it was really him, accepted this chance selection. He didn’t wonder: Why me, instead of someone else?30

In Agamben’s reading of this passage, it is the intimacy that one experiences before one’s own unknown murderer that can as such provoke shame. Since the student faced his death, he certainly was not ashamed for having survived. “Rather, it is as if he were ashamed for having to die, for having been haphazardly chosen—he and no one else—to be killed.”31 Such goes Agamben’s comment. But is he faithful to Antelme’s report in understanding the flush as a sign of shame?

Agamben omits a phrase that in the English translation is given as “He seems embarrassed.”32 Has Agamben turned a case of embarrassment into a case of shame? The French original has the words “*Il a l’air confus,*”33 which can mean a number of things, such as ‘confused,’ ‘muddled,’ ‘crestfallen,’ or ‘abashed,’ but does not warrant the word ‘embarrassed.’34 But let us assume

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34 See Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, p. 175.
for a while that Antelme indeed meant to express the student’s embarrassment.

What is the difference between shame and embarrassment? Following Martha Nussbaum,35 one could put it like this: Embarrassment is a lighter matter than shame, for, unlike most cases of shame, it may be temporary and inconsequential. One reason for this difference is that shame is typically connected with ideals or serious norms, while embarrassment typically deals with a short-lived feature of one’s social situation. Embarrassment is always contextual, and it depends on an audience. It may not involve a sense of defect at all; it may only involve a perception that something is socially out of place. Usually, it comes by surprise. By contrast, shame concerns matters that lie deep and thus it can be an emotion of self-assessment whether the world is looking on or not.

Now, the Italian student has no reason to be ashamed of himself. That he seems embarrassed may be due to the fact that he is publicly put to death for no reason and that he does not know what to do in this absurd, and at the same time utterly significant, situation, which is to be the last painful moment of his life. Yet Antelme’s own thematization of the flush in the text suggests a different meaning, neither pointing to shame nor to embarrassment. In this point, Leys’s criticism against Agamben36 is compelling for two reasons: First, the flush seems to be tied to surprise. Antelme concludes the passage on the shooting of the Italian with the words: “Ready to die—that, I think, we are; ready to be chosen at random for death—no. If the finger designates me, it shall come as a surprise, and my face will become pink, like the Italian’s.”37 Second, the flush seems to refer to the relatedness of human beings. Soon after the episode in which the student’s face turns pink, Antelme, in a crucial passage ignored by Agamben, describes how the remaining prisoners entered a quiet little tree-lined German town, Wernigerode, in which

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36 In this section, I follow Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, pp. 176–179.
people were strolling down the sidewalks or heading home. Here Antelme refers back to the murder of the Italian student. I shall quote the most important parts:

Perhaps a child was sick in bed, and his face was pink, and his worried mother was looking at him. On the road, the Italian’s face also turned pink; death slowly entered into his face and he didn’t know how to behave, how to appear natural. The mother may be watching us go by now: prisoners. ... Who sees the pink-faced little child in his bed and yesterday saw the pink-faced Italian on the road? Who sees the two mothers, the child’s mother, and the Italian’s mother, in Bologna, and who can restore its unity to all that, and explain these enormous distances, and these likenesses? But does not everyone have eyes?

So long as you are alive you have a place in all this and you play a role in it. Everyone here—on the sidewalks, pedaling by on bicycles, looking at us, or not looking at us—has a part he’s playing in this story. Everyone is doing something that relates to us. ... They’re going to ignore us; whenever we go through a town, it’s a sleep of human beings that passes through a sleep of sleeping persons. That’s how it appears. But we know; each group knows about the other, knows everything about it.

It’s for those on the sidewalk that we’re looking so intently as we go through Wernigerode. We are not asking anything of them; they just have to see us, they mustn’t miss us. We make ourselves evident.38

Antelme wants the townspeople to see the victims, to acknowledge their existence. The prisoners strive for visibility to force the issue of interhuman relatedness: “We make ourselves evident [Nous nous montrons].”39 The passage has nothing to do with shame. If anything, it has to do with human responsibility and the guilt of those who see but refuse to recognize what they see. The emphasis falls not on the wish to hide from the gaze of others but rather on the need to be seen. The fact that Antelme connects the pink face of the Italian who is about to die with the pink face of the German baby who is perhaps sick is a rebuke to anyone who tries to tie pink to any specific emotion.

38 Antelme, The Human Race, p. 235 f.
39 Ibid., p. 236; Antelme, L’espèce humaine, p. 246.
Moreover, against Agamben’s reading of the camp as a zone of irresponsibility—“humanity and responsibility are something that the deportee had to abandon when entering the camp,” Antelme insists on the contrary. “The SS who view us all as one and the same cannot induce us to see ourselves that way. They cannot prevent us from choosing, ... the more the SS believe us reduced to the indistinctness and to the irresponsibility whereof we do certainly present the appearance—the more distinctions our community does in fact contain.” The inmates of the camp know “the greatest esteem” or “the most definite contempt” for each other. Speaking directly to the Nazis, Antelme adds: “You have restored the unity of man; you have made conscience irreducible. No longer can you ever hope that we be at once in your place and in our own skin, condemning ourselves. Never will anyone here become to himself his own SS.” Antelme refuses to accept that those who have been righteous will suffer from a bad conscience, while the conscience of the self-deluded perpetrators is at rest.

Here it becomes clear that Agamben’s interpretation distorts the meaning of Antelme’s text in the service of a commitment to a notion of shame that rejects the questions of conscience. But how does the understanding of shame, guilt, and their impact on selfhood change if the questions of conscience are not rejected?

**Shame, Guilt, and Conscience**

Con-science, knowing-with-oneself, can be captured as a process of self-witnessing, of affective and at times reflective self-mirroring, in which the self is presented to itself—either in harmony, or in dissonance with itself. In

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p. 89.
44 I have elaborated on the notion of conscience and the more or less appropriate metaphors for the experience of conscience in Welz, “Keeping the Secret,” pp. 153 ff, and in the chapter “The Self as Site of Conflicts: Guilt, Recognition, and Reconciliation,” in *Religion*
the latter case, the actual self appears at a distance to its self-ideal. Through the mirror of conscience, the self is confronted with an image of itself. This image is brought about without intentional acts. The self is affected without having done anything to make the image appear. However, conscience also witnesses the ways in which the self relates to itself when being struck by an undesirable self-image. Does one dare to face this image or try to conceal it? Conscience in the basic sense of a witnessing consciousness can become the witness of conscientiousness or of the opposite.

Although the presentation of one's self-image might be due to passive synthesis,\textsuperscript{45} the concept of conscience should, in my view, not be restricted to an, as it were, automatic subpersonal prepropositional process of presencing. Rather, it should include the voluntary response to this process—the part that Heidegger called Gewissen-haben-wollen, wanting to have a conscience. If one does not want to have a conscience, one is likely to avoid facing what it presents or to indulge in willful blindness to the image presented. Then the mirror of conscience can insidiously become a distorting mirror.

Conscience is an instance of self-phenomenalization through which the self experiences itself as this specific person in the world with others. The pangs of conscience and the reproaching or warning sentiments and thoughts that conscience entails are directed to something specific and intricately linked up with the lifeworld in which they are experienced. The call of conscience recalls one's other-oriented responsibility, thereby keeping self and other separate within oneself. Conscience is not only a witnessing consciousness but also a form of normative self-awareness that refers to practical, not only logical, self-(in)consistency in relation to one's character traits, goals, and values shared with others. Viewed in the context of conscience,


shame and guilt can no longer be seen in an ethically neutral space. They highlight the relational, interpersonal character of the self and therefore, they are not just self-conscious emotions but deserve to be called self-other-conscious emotions.

As interpersonal responsibility cannot be delegated to subpersonal mechanisms, what is at stake in self-other-conscious emotions is the unity of the person who acts in a world with others. A person’s unity is based on his or her integrity.\textsuperscript{46} Integrity entails that a person’s choices and actions are truly his or hers so that he or she can live in continuity with him- or herself and in accordance with the values endorsed. Integrity involves the virtues of conscientiousness, such as honesty, fairness, truthfulness, and being a person of one’s word. The integrity of a person depends on the consistency between words and deeds, inner and outer. Without some integrity in the interaction with others, there would be no self to respect. Shame is felt about injury to, or loss, or lack of, self-respect.

The self in shame feels defective, degraded, and diminished: not in good shape. Shame seems not only to form but also to deform the self or at least the self-image. Feeling shame involves a visual element. One feels eyes upon oneself and ends up observing oneself as if one could see oneself from outside, shifting viewpoints and comparing oneself with others. Yet, despite the strong and devastating self-reflexivity, the ashamed self seeks to hide before itself and to avoid the reflection that mirrors itself. While the content of the feeling refers back to oneself—even when one is ashamed on behalf of someone else—this self-centered content appears in centrifugal forms like lowering one’s eyes, trying to turn away, and trying to withdraw from the stage that oneself provides, being simultaneously the judge and the accused.

This mode of manifesting, and at the same time concealing, oneself is to be distinguished from the mode of appearance of another feeling that also includes a negative self-assessment, namely guilt. Is it correct to claim that

shame affects and pervades a person as a whole, while guilt is only directed to the deeds the person has done, and that, for this reason, shame has an egoistic drift, while guilt tends to lead into reparative action and is likely to foster other-oriented responses? This claim has repeatedly been put forward by June Price Tangney, as a result of empirical studies. Let me first unfold and then challenge her claim.

Tangney’s claim is threefold. It deals, first, with the experience of shame and guilt in itself, second, with its impact on interpersonal interaction, and third, with the role of the self.

1. Prototypical shame and guilt experiences share the following features: both are moral emotions involving self-attributions; and both are negatively valanced, experienced in interpersonal contexts, and connected to similar events, e.g. failures and transgressions. The key differences concern the degree of distress (shame is more painful than guilt), the phenomenality of the experience (shame involves shrinking, feeling small, worthless, incompetent, and exposed, whereas guilt involves tension, remorse, and regret), and the motivational features (shame involves the desire to hide or escape, or to strike back, while guilt involves the desire to confess, apologize, and repair).

2. In interpersonal interaction, shame is concerned with others’ evaluation of oneself, while guilt is concerned with one’s own effect on others. Shame motivates an avoidance response or defensive retaliative anger, aggression, and

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47 See Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, p. 207: “Guilt is a type of self-punishing anger, reacting to the perception that one has done a wrong or a harm. Thus, whereas shame focuses on defect or imperfection, and thus on some aspect of the very being of the person who feels it, guilt focuses on an action (or a wish to act), but need not extend to the entirety of the agent, seeing the agent as utterly inadequate.” More recently, a similar claim has been put forward by Gunnar Karlsson and Lennart Gustav Sjöberg in “The Experience of Guilt and Shame: A Phenomenological-Psychological Study,” *Human Studies* 32 (2009), pp. 335–355.

hostility. Shame is likely to externalize blame, whereas guilt motivates corrective action, keeps people constructively engaged in the relation, and makes them likely to accept responsibility. Thus, shame is a self-oriented distress response, while guilt has other-oriented concerns.

3. Regarding the role of the self, the focus in shame is on the self in its totality (I did that horrible thing) whereas in guilt, the focus is on specific behavior (I did that horrible thing). The self in shame is split into observing and observed, while in guilt, the unified self remains intact. The self in shame is impaired by global devaluation. It feels defective, objectionable, condemned. By contrast, the self in guilt is unimpairred in its core identity.

Tangney’s conclusion is that guilt serves a number of relationship-enhancing functions, whereas shame brings with it a heavy burden to our relationships with friends, colleagues, and loved ones. I see a number of problems with this account and its different aspects.

First, the assessment of shame- and guilt-proneness and their differentiation by self-report scales involves methodological difficulties that are due to the overlap between guilt and shame, which frequently co-occur. Many individuals show descriptive confusion when attempting to distinguish between the two. Moreover, before being full-fledged emotions, shame and guilt can be there as partly un- or preconscious or repressed affects. Tangney’s theoretical definition of shame seems to guide the evaluation of the interviews. By this definition, when a person feels devaluated, then this person is primarily ashamed—even if the basis for his or her feeling is a bad deed condemned by an internal standard. Further, since intense guilt involves negative self-feelings that are classified as shame by the TOSCA scale (Test of Self-Conscious Affect), the important role that guilt plays in psychopathology may be underestimated in the tests.

Second, in interpersonal interaction, feeling shame is not in any case a shame that leads to asocial behavior. We should at least distinguish between the shame of discretion [pudeur, Scham, skam], which is part of the need of sheltering one’s self and signifies a protective warning in relation to what makes one bashful, and the shame of disgrace [honte, Schande/Schmach, skændsel], which is connected to guilt and refers to the pain after misbehaving.50

Third, regarding the role of the self, it might be too one-sided to focus on the negative sense of shame that makes a person want to disappear or sink into the ground. Self-deformation is not the only thing brought about by shame. Shamelessness—the transgression of boundaries—would not be a better alternative to shame. Thus, the negativity of shame points beyond itself. It points to the positive potential within shame, which is to be explored next.

Shame, Love, and Selfhood
A nonreductionist account of shame should take into account what Tangney’s research group has overlooked: that shame also fulfills vital functions in interhuman relations and is crucial for one’s becoming oneself. In what follows, I draw on Günter H. Seidler’s psychological and psychopathological analysis of shame as related to another’s glance.51

If shame occurs in the context of love—the quality par excellence of being and feeling for and with another—it can be part of a “gentle morality” in regulating and protecting the borders between I and Thou, Mine and Yours.52 Shame is a marker of our relatedness and of the distance between us. With-


52 Ibid., p. 265.
out shame, we would run the risk of intruding into the privacy zones of others. We could not keep the secrets and respect the mystery of the people we encounter. Together with tact (derived from the Latin word tangere: to touch, to reach), the empathic perception of others’ needs and limits and the ability to say or to do the right thing without making them unhappy or angry, shame protects our being-in-con-tact.53 When all participants of a relation are tactful, they are together in tact and share their intuitions about harmony or disharmony, appropriateness or incongruity. By contrast, the shameless person aggressively ignores others’ feelings or hurts them deliberately. The shameless person is inconsiderate in the sense of not caring about the effects of his or her doing on other selves. Shamelessness negatively points to what is at risk when one’s own feeling of shame does not tactfully protect and affirm the other’s dignity, fragility, and finitude.

But why is shame also pivotal to the development of individual identity? Let me explain this by referring to the story of Narcissus and Echo54 as it is told in Ovid’s Metamorphoses III and in Aesop. Echo, a nymph, falls in love with a young man named Narcissus. According to the seer Teiresias, Narcissus “would live to a ripe old age, as long as he never knew himself [si se non noverit].” Self-knowledge comes about by meeting another. One day, when Narcissus is out hunting, Echo follows him through the woods, longing to address him but unable to speak first. When Narcissus finally hears footsteps and shouts, “Who’s there?,” Echo answers, “Who’s there?” And so it goes, until finally Echo shows herself and rushes to embrace Narcissus. He pulls away from the nymph and vainly tells her to leave him alone. Narcissus leaves Echo heartbroken. She spends the rest of her life in lonely glens, pinning away for the love she never knew, until only her voice remains.

This shows that rejected love can also induce shame and isolation. Hence, love is not the easy solution that in any case helps to bear the heavy burden of shame. Self-acceptance seems to depend on the reciprocal look of love, on

53 Ibid., pp. 263 f.
54 Ibid., 78-89.
Claudia Welz: Shame and the Hiding Self

loving and being loved. This indicates a problem also for Narcissus. As the story tells it, he becomes thirsty and goes to drink from a stream, but he will not touch the water for fear of damaging his reflection, so he eventually passes away, staring at his own reflection. The Narcissus flower then grows from where he dies. According to a variation of the story, he becomes entranced by his own reflection and tries to seduce the beautiful boy, not realizing it is himself. He tries to kiss the boy, and reaches out over the water only to fall in and drown.

Narcissus’s problem was that he could not recognize himself, for he did not tolerate another’s nearness. Since he could not grasp otherness as otherness, he could not give of himself and drowned in lonely self-reflection. By contrast, Echo’s problem was that although she had her own desires, she could only be another’s voice, repeat another’s words. She could not begin by herself, and she could not respond. Still, she preserved and expressed another’s past. Nonetheless, she lost herself to another and reduced herself to nothing more than the memory-of-Narcissus, blurring the borders between ‘I’ and the non-‘I.’

Both figures, the voice that loses itself in loving another and the self-loving look that excludes the other, stand for desperate attempts to communicate with another—the other outside or inside. The repetitive voice that imitates the other would need the mirror’s self-reflection, and the fading mirror-image of the self would need the other’s voice. Without a dialogue with the other, the self cannot develop an inner dialogue. An echo is not the same as an answer. Both figures in the story lack response-ability and suffer from an inability to see themselves as others. They lack the internal self-reflexive re-doubling that is essential for conscience as knowing oneself vis-à-vis another and for shame as seeing oneself being seen. Therefore, neither Narcissus nor Echo can perform the double movement that is essential for loving oneself and the other: the movement of receiving in giving, of self-expenditure and the return to oneself. Echo cannot give of herself, and Narcissus does not want to give of himself.
Shame that is experienced through conscience is both the discovery of the other than oneself and of the other within oneself. Shame implies the interiorization of another’s look and its transformation into a function of self-observation. As Günter Seidler has called it, shame is a “Schnittstellen-Affekt.” It is the affective junction where the foreign is encountered in the familiar and where the outer is distinguished from the inner. Shame is experienced in a situation of noncoincidence with oneself, which allows one to realize one’s self-relation in relation to otherness. Total incommensurability just as total identity of subject and intentional object would annihilate self-consciousness.

So, what is the relation between the self hiding itself and the self hidden in shame? Is Agamben right in conceiving of their relation as simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification? I will now return to the question raised in the beginning.

**Conclusion: The Hiding and the Hidden Self**

In my view, shame is an emotion of conflict, confronting us with the question of who we are, who we wish to become, and how we wish to be seen. In shame, we are oscillating between manifesting and hiding ourselves. We are present and yet we try to escape from presentation. As we have seen, the hiding self is in some cases ashamed of itself because it acknowledges its identity with the hidden self. When shame is connected to bad conscience, one desires to hide oneself. In other cases, one feels shame and lowers one’s eyes in order to hide a sight before oneself, although it is not oneself to be hidden. In this case, one identifies with another. One feels ashamed in his or her place, or one tactfully wants to protect the other from too much curiosity.

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55 Ibid., pp. 43 f, 51, 69.

It follows that our evaluation of shame must differ regarding different kinds of shame. I agree with Phil Hutchinson that “survivor shame” is baggage one should dearly like to help those survivors shed, because feeling shame for surviving while others died or for having borne witness to the inhumanity present in humanity continues to subject the survivors to the crime they are said to have survived.\(^57\) It is shame’s phenomenological and conceptual closeness to guilt and remorse that serves to continue the effects of the moral crime, leaving the survivors persistently questioning themselves. Shame in this context is a regressive emotion that does not serve any useful purpose. However, if shame occurs in the context of the “gentle morality” described above, it can play a constructive role. In the face of atrocities, human integrity is endangered just as much by excessive shame as by the lack of shame.

Now, Agamben sees human existence as a paradox and claims that “human beings are human insofar as they are not human,” or, more precisely, “human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman.”\(^58\) What does inhumanity mean here? In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, it designates both the brutality of the perpetrators and the bare life that is left of their victims. The remnants of Auschwitz are the witnesses—subjects of testimony who bear witness to their desubjectification.\(^59\) Not only words but also the feeling of shame transmits this message. But is Agamben right in claiming that shame is the structure of all subjectivity? There is one striking fact that speaks against his thesis: the shameful lack of shame on the side of the German perpetrators in the camps. It seems as if they shut themselves off against the awareness of their inhumanity. Many of them claimed to have a clear

\(^{57}\) Hutchinson, *Shame and Philosophy*, pp. 147, 69–71.

\(^{58}\) See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 121. The paradox disappears, though, as soon as one notices that ‘human’ is a *biological* category referring to human beings belonging to *homo sapiens*, while ‘inhuman’ is a *moral* category referring to atrocious acts committed by these human beings. It might be more adequate to speak of an equivocation than of a paradox here.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 121, 134.
conscience. Yet they produced vicarious shame—shame on their behalf, and shame that is passed on to the second and third and fourth generation of Germans who have a hard time with the history of their country.

One could follow Agamben to a certain extent and argue that subjectivity is indeed ambiguous. On the one hand, every subject is sovereign insofar as one has the power to relate somehow to what is happening, and on the other hand, one is subjected—if not by others’ deeds, then by the weight and by the consequences of one’s own doing, which always has some retroactive effect on the agent. Everyone is determined by how he or she determines his or her life. In this sense, we can indeed experience “the coincidence of agent and patient in one subject.” However, there are also traumatic limit situations in which one loses one’s sovereignty, and with it the possibility of choosing between different modes of relating to events. One is, for example, stricken by terror, paralyzed by pain, or overwhelmed by something that is no longer in one’s own control. In these moments, when one is overcome by one’s own passivity, one does not feel shame. The shame might come afterwards, when one can reflect on what has happened and has regained a certain distance from the event.

Therefore, it seems inadequate that Agamben takes extreme situations of trauma and the Muselmann, the living dead, as paradigm cases describing the normal situation of ordinary human beings. Rather than seeing shame as an ethically neutral ontological structure that is always there and shared by all human beings, I would like to restrict the scope of this concept to concrete instances of an emotion that occurs for various reasons—be it because one is overcome by another’s acts, be it because oneself has done something wrong or failed to live up to one’s own and others’ expectations, or because one wishes to protect the boundaries between us. If shame becomes all-pervasive,

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61 Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, p. 111.
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it ceases to be an emotion by which one is moved on specific occasions, and this means that it is, in the end, no longer felt at all because one gets used to it as an unavoidable condition of one’s being-there.

Shame as an emotion involves a certain movement or event including blushing, turning away, etc., while shamelessness seems to be a state that makes people act tactlessly. Does this mean, then, that shame and shamelessness are asymmetrical notions, or are they still symmetrical? I think they seem to become symmetrical, at least if one takes Agamben’s notion of shame as an ontological structure shared by all human beings. Yet, at second sight, this very definition of shame makes it impossible to speak of shamelessness at all. The opposition between shame and shamelessness simply dissolves. However, there is a sense in which shame can become a state, namely in traumatic situations where the victims have to numb their feelings in order to survive. They have to distance themselves from what floods them. As a suppressed emotion, shame may remain hidden even from those experiencing it, but it may nonetheless determine their behavior. In this sense, shame can also be defined as a state or condition that lasts in symmetry with the persisting shamelessness of some perpetrators who have never acknowledged their responsibility for the crimes they committed.

My critique is also directed at those formulations in Levinas that make it appear as if the human condition in itself were something shameful. To feel shame about being bound to oneself, about being a hiding self that nonetheless is never fully hidden, is not very helpful. The question that remains is rather this: How can we live in such a way that we are able to stay with ourselves, capable of looking into the mirror and into each other’s faces?

62 I wish to thank Daniel Dayan for raising this question.
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