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[16] The Widening Scope of Shame
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The Hunting of the Red-Faced Snark: Commentary on Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

In the chapters we are considering here, shame is what we are hunting. All approach the hunt well equipped, and there is a great deal to be learned in these pages. Donald Nathanson writes on the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins (chapter 4); Karen Hanson writes on philosophy and shame (chapter 6). Leon Wurmser, contributing a paper on Neitzsche (chapter 7), has brought his extensive erudition to the subject of shame in psychoanalysis. Scheff and Retzinger, the most prominent contemporary "shameniks" from the sociological tradition, review the contributions of Helen Block Lewis (chapter 5), and Scheff also writes on shame in social theory (chapter 8). Jack Katz (chapter 9) contributes an empirically based sociological study of shame.

The snark should be flattered to be the object of so much interest. Yet, since this is a book about shame, we can imagine the snark blushing at being so invisible that he has occasioned such a hunt. Picture a glorious hunt the object of which is imagined through the equivalent of the sounds of bugles, the sweat of horses and riders, the excitement and fever of the chase, and the lunge toward anyone who believes he has caught a glimpse of places where the quarry has recently passed.

Nathanson (chapter 4), with all the fervor of a collector of antique medical instruments, follows Tompkins in linking the behaviors of shame to biological concepts and in subscribing to his logic and yearning for precision. "If shame is an innate affect, it must have an activator capable of triggering a highly specific mechanism." And he proceeds to demonstrate how Tomkins searches for such a

"highly specific mechanism." The search leads to the discovery of an "algebra of affect theory," the basic theorem of which is an "analogic amplifier." For Nathanson and Tomkins, such "analogic amplifiers" intensify the same affect: "Each affect is therefore a compelling stimulus for the production of more of that affect."

For Nathanson and Tomkins, science and language meet in a new scientific language of the emotions. Their "affect mechanism" is, they believe, "similar to the set of complex relationships between an alphabet, words, grammar and semantic rules." Both Nathanson and Tomkins reflect the longing for a precise, common language (the "algebra") of the emotions the modern roots of which strike back to the 18th-century Ideologues and the Champollions of this world, a Romantic desire to find a universal Ur-language, a passion for decoding previously unknown languages like Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Yet any universal language, any algebra-like formulation, necessarily departs from everyday experience. As Tomkins notes, shame is not always what it appears to be, so a logic and a set of hierarchies that depart from common experience seems essential for an "algebra of the emotions." "Discouragement, shyness, shame, and guilt are identical as affects, although not so experienced because of differential coassembly of perceived causes and consequences. Shyness is about strangeness of the other; guilt is about moral transgression; shame is about inferiority; discouragement is about temporary defeat; but the core affect in all four is identical, although the coassembled perceptions, cognitions and intentions may be vastly different."

Tompkins and Nathanson redefine shame in the context of a revised language of the emotions in which the ordinary links between our feelings, our notions of causality, and our ability to classify what we feel and what others feel can be called into question. There are great advantages to such an approach, for it allows us to look at feeling clusters in new ways. But there are also risks in proposing a model of algebraic clarity, in describing a (by definition new and unfamiliar) language of the emotions which has to be learned. And it raises an important question: how discrepant from everyday experience can a theory and language of emotions be and still be useful? And, correspondingly, to what extent does a preoccupation with a universal language of the emotions preclude attention to the range of meanings commonly associated with shame?

Scheff and Retzinger share with Tomkins and Nathanson this vision of themselves as decoders of a universal language of the emotions and, in the search for universals, as a hallmark of the scientists they see themselves to be. In their discussion of the world

of Helen Block Lewis (chapter 5), Scheff and Retzinger remind us that she too seeks to redefine shame by including sequences of shame-related feelings ("shame loops") and by wondering about the extent to which shame (and its related feelings) are unconscious. And Scheff and Retzinger usefully provide five themes in terms of which Lewis's writings can be organized: 1) the prevalence of shame and its preeminence as an emotion; 2) "unacknowledged," "bypassed" shame, which Scheff and Retzinger point out might have been more effectively referred to as "unconscious" shame; 3) feeling traps, lengthy episodes involving "emotional reactions to one's emotional reactions"; 4) shame implies the experience of being disconnected from self and others; 5) the primary role of shame in treatment failures. As Scheff and Retzinger note, however, Lewis's notions of feeling traps do not include "shame-shame cycles" or "shame loops." Also, Scheff and Retzinger criticize Lewis for not clearly enough distinguishing between normal and pathological shame. This distinction raises an interesting question: can writers on shame themselves be organized into two groups—those who think that they cannot deal with shame without clearly distinguishing between the normal and pathological and those who would say there are no categorical differences between the two?

In chapter 8, Scheff, like Tomkins and Nathanson, looks for precise definitions and for a "new language" of the emotions. Yet in his enthusiasm to find universals, he makes telling assumptions. For instance, he writes: "false pride corresponds exactly to the meaning of the Greek word hubris." So far as I know, there is no word in another language that means exactly what some translation we would give it can mean. While this is a very small point, it has, I think, a wider implication: that the concern to establish a universal language runs counter to an understanding of context and meaning in specific situations, times and places. And although Scheff lists Greek, Latin, French, German and Italian "equivalents" for our terms "disgrace" and "modesty," he does not ground his ideas in a thorough examination of linguistic, etymological, cultural, and historical evidence. He does not provide us with the basis on which to judge the adequacy of the correspondence among these various terms or explore their meanings in the original language.

This seems to me useful to consider. Scheff underestimates the difficulty of translation in part as a consequence of his passion for finding a common language, a pan-human form of communication, universally the same. "Since the denial of shame is institutionalized in our civilization, a vital new language is needed, an emotion language, that calls shame and other primitive

proper names." Does the fact that our civilization "institutionalizes the denial of shame" necessarily mean that one has to view as useless whatever culturally specific meanings of the shame experience might be found? Can denial (or any other defense) be "institutionalized"? Is it necessary to reach for universals to say anything meaningful about shame at all? How do we know that the "names" that Scheff proposes are the "proper" ones if he does not demonstrate this? And in what does the "properness" of their names consist?

Writing as a philosopher, Karen Hansen (chapter 6) provides us with a shame-filled philosophical panorama of more than two millennia. Historical sequence and context are somewhat jumbled, as she careens vertiginously across the centuries, producing an impressive mass of ideas about shame. First she talks about Descartes, then Augustine, then Nietzsche, then Kant, and not too long thereafter Aristotle. By the end of her chapter, one's head is fairly spinning. Yet out of that emerges an extraordinary welter of ideas about shame and its complications which defies easy classification. Even a division between philosophers who see shame as negative (e.g., Isenberg) and those who see shame as positive (e.g., Descartes) cannot be made. The difficulty echoes the problems facing those who wish to distinguish between "good" and "bad" shame.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1885), Neitzsche wrote that, because there is no reliable opposition between a true and an apparent world, "there is only one world, and this one is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning." Thus "the philosophy of power became the philosophy of the lie." Consequently, Nietzsche was caught having rendered inauthentic the primary basis for power, (and having given a sense of power to his inauthenticity) a position in which he could only emptily affirm antidotes to the shame at the core of his being. Wurmser (chapter 7) elucidates this fundamental and intractable problem. As Wurmser so justly points out, "Nietzsche's importance consists in his having drawn out attention to an ethic built on categories of shame. . . . He made the fundamental mistake, however, of putting this ethic in absolute, categorical terms: he reduced guilt to shame." Wurmser writes, "By reducing the guilt-oriented conscience to a matter of shame and to a supposed external imposition of sanction that left the individual helpless and passive, he accomplished the entire 'transvaluations of values.'" And in the process provided shame with a disastrous mass appeal made still more disastrous by shared persecutory and megalomaniacal delusions severed from an essential sense of social justice.

Jack Katz (chapter 7) sets out to describe shame, not by redefining emotional categories or deciding which clusters of

emotions shame might or might not fit into, but rather "empirically," by asking students how their understanding of shame relates to everyday life. Katz finds that there is a "great deal of consistency, both in the types of experiences that are treated in a taken-for-granted manner as shameful in self-reports and in the examples of shame cited by analysts." He states at the outset of his essay that, like other everyday emotions, shame takes a "narrative form, beginning and ending, rising and declining, evolving in a process that has more or less emphatic phases."

But then, having defined shame as a dynamic process existing in time (in contrast to the injection of time by other authors through sequences of emotions), Katz focuses on three categories with which to snare his Snark: an interpretive process ("how one sees oneself from the standpoint of others"); a "form of praxis or a way or organizing action"; and what he calls a "distinctive sensuality." These three approaches leave out individual fantasy and the unconscious. To see oneself from the standpoint of any particular other, let alone "others" (however they might collectively be imagined even by the most inventive sociologist), requires imagination and fantasy.

As Pirandello and others have eloquently observed, what we really have are idiosyncratic fantasies of how we appear in the eyes of specific others, and these are fundamentally and necessarily at odds with what might or might not actually be "there." Such a discrepancy is itself one of the driving forces of shame. After all, how did Adam and Eve imagine their nakedness? Did they necessarily know that God saw them naked? Or, feeling ashamed, did they imagine what God saw? And why does it matter?

Whether or not one accepts Katz's categories, one will be instructed by his examples. Linking shame to a sense of isolation from family and community, Katz suggests that a "wide range of shame experiences are triggered by the sense that one has primordial ties to another person who one sees as shamefully exposed." He illustrates this notion with the example of one student who felt ashamed of his father for wearing his hair in a ponytail and riding a motorcycle and felt ashamed of this shame. Or speaking about vulnerability in shame, linking it both to experiences of poverty and of false accusation (e.g., for many students it was more painful to be falsely accused of shoplifting than actually to be caught). Or his observation that "it is frequently the defeat of an effort to treat loss as emotionally resistible that leads to the powerful devastation of shame."

In all the chapters considered here, the subject of shame is sought out and imagined in various ways, as the object of a new and

precise language of the emotions, as the model for a theory of affect regulation, as a means to describe the limitations of rational action, as the affect of the social bond. In closing, I wish to add a footnote on the extent to which shame is inherent in the human condition, an intractable part of being conscious, yet more than we can ever imagine it to be. Pirandello conveyed this point tellingly when he spoke of the difference between Orestes and Hamlet. "Suppose that, at the climax, when the marionette who is playing Orestes is about to avenge his father's death and kill his mother and Aegisthus, a little hole were torn in the paper sky above him? Orestes would still want his revenge, yet when he saw that hole, he would feel helpless. Orestes would become Hamlet! That's the difference between ancient tragedy and modern: a hole in a paper sky." Descriptions of shame will inevitably fall short of the mark not only because this is in the nature of the limitations of human description, but also because it is difficult to take into account the "hole in a paper sky." Shame can perhaps be said to be that hole in our paper sky, something that reminds us of our flaws, something that threatens our ability to communicate what we have in a way that can be taken seriously by others, something that punctures our image of ourselves and puts a rent in our experience of the social fabric, yet something without which human relationships and consciousness would be inconceivable.

Always and everywhere, ideals of precision and clarity run up against the untidiness and excesses of everyday meanings. Our "red-faced" Snark is difficult to hunt, in part because no fanfare and ceremony of the hunt can ever guarantee a quarry. And, because of the "hole in a paper sky," those who seek a "precise algebra," or a scientific language of the emotions will have trouble bringing home their Snark. Indeed, the Snark may have changed its name.

> *In the midst of the word he was trying to say,*
> *In the midst of his laughter and glee,*
> *He had softly and suddenly vanished away—*
> *For the Snark was a Boojun you see.*
>
> —Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

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III

THE FAMILY