

# Shame and Cognitivism

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Cognitivist accounts of the emotions attempt to offer explanations of emotional states in terms of the propositional beliefs of the agent. Cognitivist accounts often divide emotions into two groups; emotions such as pride, shame and guilt, which lend themselves to cognitive interpretation, and emotions such as fear and disgust, which do not readily do so (Taylor 1980: 385, 1985: 1). The former are characterised as sophisticated emotions of self-assessment and the latter as less sophisticated, affective states, which are thus less amenable to cognitive accounts. Proponents of cognitive accounts can be divided into two groups: objective cognitivists such as Donald Davidson (1976) and subjective cognitivists such as Gabriele Taylor (1985).

For Davidson a propositional emotion is explained by beliefs, one of which will be universal in form. For the explanation to be rationally intelligible it must be possible to be phrased in syllogistic form. In the case of shame the syllogism would be as follows; *premise 1*: 'I failed to act to save the life of my fellow inmate'; *premise 2*: 'all morally competent people ought to act so as to save the life of their fellow inmate'. This is my universal premise. *The conclusion*: 'I am morally inept' is deduced from the two premises and serves as the belief, which identifies and is constitutive of my shame. The universal belief provides the explanation with its objectivity.

While Taylor agrees that the agent's propositional beliefs explain emotions, she argues that a universal belief is not required. Taylor's subjective cognitive approach can be identified through the following example. 'I may identify my shame through the belief that I have exposed myself in public. I arrive at work and visit the bathroom. As I look in the mirror I notice that my flies are open and I am exposing myself. I believe that I must have been doing so throughout my journey to work on the train, when I sat opposite other people, men, women and children. This belief manifests itself in my feeling shame.' This belief is supported by further beliefs about public decency: 'I believe that a decent person would diligently observe the communal norms as to what it is acceptable to expose of one's body in public.'

It is tempting to see this example in terms of Davidson's syllogistic framework with the belief that; 'all ought to observe the communal norms as to what it is acceptable to expose of one's body in public' serving as the universal premise. However, the agent might say, 'I did not intend to flout the norms of public decency, it was merely an

oversight on my part that led to the public exposure. I merely forgot to tuck everything away and button up after a rushed visit to the station lavatory prior to jumping on the soon-to-depart train. I *do* observe the norms of public decency. So what belief explains my shame? I could feel shame because I smiled and nodded at the woman and her two children sitting opposite me, and I can imagine them now reporting me to the Transport Police. It is their description of my character that I imagine them to put *me* under, which makes me feel shame. I feel shame because I imagine others to understand me, my character, as other than I *am*. I feel tainted by the description that I imagine those people to have put me under.'

The agent feels shame on imagining a negative representation of him, far from being universal it is rather a belief that is particular to the agent.<sup>1</sup> This example therefore, conforms to Taylor's notion of a rationally intelligible explanation. For while a universal belief does not play an explanatory role, the emotion is explained by beliefs offered by the agent. For Taylor these beliefs, alongside some biographical information regarding the agent - such as that he holds public office - make the agent's shame rationally intelligible.

I will now suggest a third scenario that conforms to neither Davidson's nor Taylor's demands. 'I identify my shame through the belief that I am tainted by an event in which I was involved earlier in life. When I notice a child's gaze upon me or I see a parent and child at play, I am reminded of the fact that a child died as a result of being hit by my car while I was driving. When I feel shame I begin to search for reasons, asking was I driving in a careful enough manner that day? I also reflect on the wider consequences of my action as regards the destruction of a family. I sometimes believe that what was once a happy family of four will now be barely a family at all. A brother-less little girl not understanding where her brother has gone, blaming her parents. Parents who can't help but secretly blame each other for the fact that their son was playing near the road. I occasionally believe I have done this to them. I sometimes believe all three must despise me for killing their son/brother. These beliefs may constitute my shame.'

The agent of shame in this example was not guilty. He had not contravened any laws, nor had he acted in ignorance of any social norms. So what explains his shame? Well he doesn't feel shame all the time, his shame is accessed<sup>2</sup> through his noticing the eyes of a child upon him, or his own observation of others, others whom he sees as demonstrating convivial family life. It seems that he is still looking for the belief that will explain his shame to him. As each belief is assessed, it is dismissed. It is not a stable set of *beliefs* that accompany the agent's feeling of shame in the third example but a sense of desperation as he is afflicted by shame once again and mulls over the incident that he believes gave rise to the emotion in the first place. I hesitate here to equate intelligibility of the emotional state with the discovery of an explanatory belief(s),

because I find the agent's feeling intelligible, even given the elusiveness of a stable set of reasons. The agent feels shame. This he *does* know. Why? This he does *not* know. Does this mean that shame cannot be what he feels? Can I say this to him? 'You do not feel shame! Shame is a propositional emotion, an emotion of self-assessment, it is both constituted and identified by beliefs.' Can I say this to the agent in the third example?

The agent goes over the event in his mind, whenever the emotion is upon him, he plays the event over and over. 'I am and have always been a conscientious driver. That day I drove very slowly, aware I was in a residential area. I was alert, had not been drinking and had not had a late night the night before. I always switch off my phone when I am driving, my God I do not even have the radio on because I think it distracting. My car was new and was in good working order. Even the policeman who attended said it was not my fault and that I had his sympathies! The kid just came from nowhere; just shot into the road in front of me on his bike, I had no chance to stop. Given that the child died after being hit by my car while I was driving I could not be any less responsible for the child's death than if someone else had been in my place. But it was *me* there, driving, in control of the vehicle that killed the child and destroyed a family - I did that, I killed the child and now, when a child looks at me I am overcome by shame. When I see parents at play with their children I feel sick with shame as I begin to think of my part in denying a family days like those.'

Shame is felt in situations where the agent is reminded of an incident that involved him earlier in his life. But he cannot explain this through the invocation of beliefs. He tries to, but seems doomed to go round in circles looking for the belief(s) that explains his shame. Explanation, even in Taylor's delimited sense, is not available to him. There just seems to be no *reason* for his shame. All he can do is persist in offering descriptions of the original event in the hope that reasons will become manifest. So is his shame rationally intelligible? I argue that if we have a degree of imaginative engagement with the agent of the emotion, if we imagine what *he* is going through, then *his* shame might become intelligible to us. But the insistence upon *rational* intelligibility rules out situations like the third example where I feel shame but can offer no stable reason for that shame. 'I am oppressed by shame yet all attempts to offer reasons for my shame fail.' Along with Taylor and Davidson we may well desire more than what is on offer. We want to justify or verify our use of the word shame to others and this leads us to want to support it with a rational syllogism or reasons. In this respect I find I apposite a remark of Wittgenstein's in *On Certainty*,

And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for. (Wittgenstein. 1975: §307)

Davidson's understanding of rationality leads him to assert that beliefs which explain an emotion must be able to be phrased as a syllogism conforming to principles of deductive reason. These are the grounds Davidson gives 'for my way of going on', that is, for my feeling and expressing shame. Taylor's understanding of rationality leads her to argue that beliefs, serving as reasons, explain the emotion. These beliefs are the grounds Taylor gives 'for my way of going on', that is, for my feeling and expressing shame. Davidson's and Taylor's approach would either misrepresent or fail to recognise the shame expressed in examples two and three, and three respectively. The reason for the emotion, for the feeling of shame, in example three is there for all to see. Rationality is not required, what is certain is my shame.

In the third example no stable beliefs operate as reasons for my shame. The cognitive building blocks are absent, yet the shame is felt and expressed. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein we might say the language games within which shame is expressed are not based on grounds, they are neither reasonable nor unreasonable (*ibid*: §559). But for Taylor, in the absence of stable beliefs constituting my shame it becomes difficult to justify that shame. So can I justify my shame? Taylor must answer no. In the absence of beliefs Taylor is forced into questioning the justifiability of the individual's shame. Her theoretical depiction of shame, as resting upon rational foundations, holds her captive. Individuals who feel and express shame are not fettered by such theoretical considerations. One might add that the grammar of shame proffers no such restrictions either. Whether I talk of shame as an emotion, affective state, or a feeling, I need offer no reasons for my shame because I can simply say I feel, am effected by or experience the emotion - *this is simply what I do* (Wittgenstein 1963: §217). The desire for a theory or definition of shame serves only to restrict our view of the ways in which people feel and express shame.

Contra Davidson and Taylor, it is admissible for an agent, in response to a request for reasons for their shame, to say 'this is simply what I *feel*'. That is not to say that Davidson's or Taylor's theses misrepresent *all* expressions of shame. We might very well not exhaust the justifications demanded by either Davidson's or Taylor's theses and feel shame with the attending beliefs. However, how these beliefs might be demonstrated to be constitutive of the individual's shame and not merely outcomes of or attendant to it, is unclear. We must remain open to the possibility that causes and justifications might not be available, and at this point bedrock is reached (*ibid*). Davidson's and Taylor's theses support nothing. That is to say people will feel shame even when unable to fulfil the criteria laid down in Taylor's definition, indeed others may even find that feeling intelligible.

To conclude, there was an event, which involved two people, an adult and a child. The outcome of that event was the death of the child. The event *is* what links the two

people and leads to the feeling of shame. Again taking the voice of the agent. 'My shame is intelligible because I feel it. Shame acts upon me in these situations since this event. Does this not make sense to you? I *feel* shame! I do not rationally arrive at a state of shame, whether through deduction or the presentation of reasons.'

## References.

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## Endnotes

- \* The following people have been helpful during the writing of this paper: Rebecca Neal, Veronique Pin-Fat, Nigel Pleasants, Philippe Rouchy & Wes Sharrock.
- 1 It should also be noted that not all negative representations, imagined or not, would necessarily bring about a feeling of shame. Indeed this imagined negative representation might not have brought about this feeling of shame for this agent at another time.
- 2 'Accessed' can lead one to imagine something is there waiting. It should not do so. Also, I have to fight a tendency to want to say shame 'is brought to the surface' but this implies that 'it' lies in wait and, that 'it' does so is not at all established nor do I have any desire to attempt to establish this!