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THE BOND OF SHAME

A long time ago I suddenly realized that the country one belongs to is not, as the usual rhetoric goes, the one you love but the one you are ashamed of. Shame can be a stronger bond than love. I repeatedly tested my discovery with friends from different countries: they all reacted the same way—with surprise immediately followed by full agreement, as if my suggestion was a self-evident truth. I am not claiming that the burden of shame is always the same; in fact, it varies immensely among countries. But the bond of shame—shame as a bond—invariably works, for a larger or smaller number of individuals. Aristotle listed 'shame' (*aidos*) among the passions, pointing out that 'it is not a virtue' (*Nicomachaean Ethics* 1108 a 30–1). This definition still makes sense. Shame is definitely not a matter of choice: it falls upon us, invading us—our bodies, our feelings, our thoughts—as a sudden illness. It is a passion placed at the intersection between biology and history: the domain which Sigrid Weigel made so distinctively her own.*

I

But can a passion like shame be submitted to historical analysis? In his famous book *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) Eric R. Dodds argued, on the basis of literary sources—from the *Iliad* to tragedies—that in ancient Greece a guilt culture developed from an older shame culture.[1] Dodds had taken this dichotomy from Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946): an influential, and much debated, anthropological analysis of Japan as a shame culture.[2] The dichotomy has been described in the following terms: in shame cultures the individual is confronted with an external sanction, embodied by the community to which he or she belongs; in guilt cultures the sanction is introjected.[3]

Both Dodds and, to some extent, Benedict refused to consider the two cultures as mutually incompatible, allowing for the existence of intermediate stages. Other studies, however, have reshaped the dichotomy in an evolutionist perspective, with potentially racist overtones. In an article which appeared in 1972 in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Harold W. Glidden posited an 'Arab behaviour' based on a shame culture focused on revenge.[4] The implications were evident: the alternative to shame cultures, which are archaic and backward, was guilt cultures, whose distinctive features are interiority and a mature moral code—in a word, modernity.

The possible misuse of the dichotomy is obvious, but its cognitive potential deserves a closer look. For my test I will start from two books, both published in 1993, whose contents overlap: Bernard Williams's Sather lectures, entitled *Shame and Necessity,* and Douglas L. Cairns's *Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*. Their approaches are quite different from each other. Williams, the philosopher, offered a 'philosophical description of an historical reality', arguing that Greek ideas about action and responsibility were both close to and different from ours—but insisting that 'the Greek past is the past of modernity'.[5] Cairns, the classicist, carefully assembled and analysed a massive dossier in a quasi-ethnographic perspective, emphasizing the distance between Greek culture and ours.[6]

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[1] Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley 1951. Italian translation, with an introduction by Arnaldo Momigliano: *I Greci e l'irrazionale*, Firenze 1959, p. 59 ff.

[2] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, New York 1946. Italian translation, with an introduction by Paolo Beonio Brocchieri: Milano 1991, chapter X. On p. 244 Benedict writes that the dichotomy is often mentioned in cultural anthropological research.

[3] A good discussion is provided by Douglas L. Cairns, *Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature,* Oxford 1993, pp. 27–47.

[4] Harold W. Glidden, 'The Arab World', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 128, no. 8, February 1972, pp. 984–8. This article was brought to my attention by Edward Said's harsh criticism of it: *Orientalism*, New York 1978, pp. 48–9.

[5] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley 1993, pp. 16, 3.

[6] See the conclusion: 'These are the categories of our moral thinking, not those of the Greeks . . .': Cairns, *Aidos,* p. 434.

'The basic experience connected to shame', Williams wrote, 'is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition.'[7] This initial hypothesis, born from the introspective efforts of a late-twentieth-century British philosopher, is consistent with a method which explains cultural phenomena by focusing on the individual. But to assume the very notion of individualism one sets out to demonstrate seems to imply a *petitio principii*: the danger of anachronism is evident. Williams claims to avoid it by relying on 'bootstrapping': a self-sustaining cognitive process that proceeds without external help (the metaphor is inspired by a famous story about Baron Münchhausen).[8] The initial hypothesis is meant to serve as a starting point, which new data enrich and eventually reshape. To what extent did this research strategy work?

A crucial test for Williams's initial hypothesis is the frequent use of *aidos* in the *Iliad* to inspire courage on the battlefield. *Aidos!* ('Shame!') is a reproach addressed to warriors, sometimes followed by a compressed argument: 'have shame each of the other in the fierce conflict. Of men that have shame more are saved than are slain.' In other words, acting courageously is the best way to survive. This formula recurs twice in the poem (5, 529–32; 15, 561–4). But in a famous passage (15, 661–6) the face-to-face relation is expanded into something different: 'Friends', Nestor says, 'be men, and set in your heart (*thumos*) shame (*aidos*) for other men, and remember, each of you, your children and wives and property and parents, both those of you whose parents are alive and those whose parents are dead: I beseech you here on their behalf, though they are absent, to stand bravely, and not to turn into flight.'[9]

Williams briefly quotes from this passage and then comments: 'It is possible to see this kind of prospective shame as a form of fear.'[10] But this suggestion leads to a further development, prompted by a word often paired with *aidos* in the *Iliad*: *nemesis*, evoking anger, indignation:

> *Nemesis*, and *aidos* itself, can appear on both sides of a social relation. People have at once a sense of their own honour and a respect for other people's honour; they can feel indignation or other forms of anger when

[7] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 78 ff, 219–23.
[8] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 'Endnote 1', pp. 219–23: 'Mechanisms of Shame and Guilt', pp. 219 ff.
[9] I have used the translation by Cairns, *Aidos*, p. 69.
[10] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 79.

> honour is violated, in their own case or someone else's. These are shared sentiments with similar objects, and they serve to bind people together in a community of feeling.[11]

'People have at once a sense . . . they can feel indignation or other forms of anger . . . These are shared sentiments with similar objects'—on what grounds, we may ask, does Williams make assertions like these? Does he claim to have access to the inner feelings of 'people' on the basis of his own experience? Does the reference to 'people' imply that the connection between 'shame' and 'anger' is a transcultural phenomenon? The curious wording of the aforementioned passage is contradicted by Williams's laconic reference to James M. Redfield's *Nature and Culture in the 'Iliad': The Tragedy of Hector* (1975). In that work, the evidence for passions and feelings experienced by ancient Greeks is provided not by our own passions and feelings (they can only work as questions) but by linguistic evidence. In fact, the connection between *aidos* and *nemesis* had already been pointed out by a great linguist (and a great philosopher), Émile Benveniste, in his *Noms d'agent et noms d'action en indo-européen* (1948):

> From this point the evolution of the meaning [of *nemesis*] can be illuminated by that of a term with which it is associated in Homeric usage, *aidos* (cf. N 122 *aidos kai nemesis*); both refer to *collective* representations. *Aidos* stands for the collective sense of honour and the obligations it implies for the group. But this feeling is strengthened and these obligations are felt most keenly when collective honour is wounded. At that moment the abused 'honour' of all becomes the 'shame' of each.[12]

Benveniste translates the connection between *aidos* and *nemesis* into an argument accessible to us. We are far from the misleading transparency of psychological self-scrutiny. Let us listen once again to Williams: 'These are shared sentiments with similar objects, and they serve to bind people together in a community of feeling.'

Does 'they' refer to the shared sentiments—or to words? To evade the question by answering 'both' would not help. The relationship between

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[11] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 80.

[12] Émile Benveniste, *Noms d'agent et noms d'action en indo-européen*, Paris 1948, p. 79. See also É. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes, I: Economie, parenté, société*, Paris 1969, pp. 340–1 (on *philia* and *aidos*). The latter work is mentioned by Cairns, *Aidos*. On *nemesis* and *aidos* see *ibid.*, pp. 51–4. Neither Williams nor Cairns used Benveniste's *Noms d'agent*.

the continuous flow of sentiments and emotions and the discrete taxonomy created by words still baffles us. Will we ever be able to assess the impact of the word *aidos*, shouted on the battlefield, on the 'bonding, interactive effect of shame'?[13] What would have happened if that powerful performative word, *aidos*, had not existed?

But *aidos* is, and is not, identical with 'shame'.[14] In Homeric language, as Cairns showed in his detailed inquiry, *aidos* and related words also meant 'fear', 'respect', 'honour', 'veneration', 'modesty', 'sexual parts'. The Latin noun *verecundia* covers a similar ground: a range of meanings which include 'religious fear', 'shame', 'veneration', 'sexual parts' (*verenda*).[15] When we look at other languages we immediately realize that nouns like fear, *Furcht*, *crainte*, *timore* overlap only partially with the range of meanings associated with *aidos*. Once again we are reminded of two simple truths: translations are always possible; translations are always inadequate.

Simple, but also challenging truths. Nestor's words addressed to soldiers confront us with the counterintuitive association between shame and honour.[16] *Aidos* is a feeling (a passion) which involves a community, both visible and invisible, including the living and the dead: 'Friends, be men, and set in your heart (*thumos*) shame (*aidos*) for other men, and remember, each of you, your children and wives and property and parents, both those of you whose parents are alive and those whose parents are dead.'

This passage from the *Iliad* explains why the bond elicited by shame may be extended not only to the act of being ashamed of oneself, but also to the act of being ashamed for the behaviour of somebody else, dead or alive. In a footnote Cairns explicitly addresses this extension of *aidos*, citing the example of Aeschines, the orator, who recalled that 'right-minded men . . . covered their eyes, being ashamed for the city', when they came upon the disgraceful aspect of Timarchus's naked body.[17] The *Pathos*- and *Logosformel* which Homer had referred either to face-to-face relations or to family connections involving living and dead, was later expanded to include the city.

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[13] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 83.

[14] Cairns, *Aidos*, p. 14 and *passim*.

[15] Jean-François Thomas, *Déshonneur et honte en latin: étude sémantique*, Louvain 2007, pp. 401–39 (on *verecundia*).

[16] Cairns, *Aidos*, pp. 12–13.

[17] Cairns, *Aidos*, p. 294 n. 100. See Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, I, 26.

Shame embodies the relationship between the individual body and the political body. Man, as a political animal, cannot be identified exclusively with his physical body: this is why the boundaries of the ego are an issue. Echoing Ernst Kantorowicz, we might speak of everybody's two bodies.

2

Ancient Greeks had no specific word for guilt.[18] It would be tempting to assume that this absence encapsulates the difference between a shame culture like that of ancient Greece and a guilt culture like our own, shaped by the Judaic and Christian emphasis on original sin and the Fall. But this sort of clear-cut dichotomy would be deceptive. Ideas of original sin and primeval guilt were not unique to the Book of Genesis: they spread around the Mediterranean and were found in societies shaped by the 'community of honour'.[19] How did these very different sets of ideas interact?

A case study may provide an answer. The obvious choice would be Augustine, the pagan professor of rhetoric who described in detail the long and painful trajectory which led him to Christianity. From its very title—*Confessions*—Augustine's account is centred on guilt. But the language Augustine used in confessing to God is full of nuances. In speaking of his sins he insisted on distinguishing between *facinora* and *flagitia*. The same distinction is spelled out, more or less at the same time, in his *De doctrina christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*).[20] *Facinora* are invariably a crime. In a famous passage Augustine recounted that, when he was sixteen, he and his friends stole innumerable pears from a tree in his village: 'not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs, after barely tasting some of them ourselves. Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden [*dum tamen fieret a nobis quod eo liberet, quo non liceret*].'[21]

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[18] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 88 and *passim*.

[19] Cairns, *Aidos*, p. 70.

[20] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, Chicago 1996, pp. 744–5 (*De doctrina christiana*, III.10.16). I analyse the distinction, from a different point of view, in a forthcoming essay: 'The Letter Kills: On Some Implications of 2 *Cor*. 3, 6'.

[21] Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. Albert C. Outler, London 1955, II, IV, 9.

Looking back in dismay, Augustine tries to understand what he did and why:

> What was it in you, O theft of mine, that I, poor wretch, doted on—you evil deed [*facinus*] of darkness—in that sixteenth year of my age? Beautiful [*pulchrum*] you were not, for you were a theft . . . Those fruits that we stole were fair to the sight [*pulchra*] because they were thy creation, O Beauty beyond compare, O Creator of all, O thou good God . . . And now, O Lord my God, I ask what it was in that theft of mine that caused me such delight [*quid me in furto delectaverit*] . . . (II, VI, 12)

Some modern readers ridiculed this passage: to make such a fuss over a few stolen pears! They missed the point. Augustine was suggesting to his readers that his boyish theft of pears re-enacted the scene of the original sin: 'And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes [*pulchrum oculis aspectuque delectabile*] . . . she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.' (Gen. 3, 6)

Man's propensity to evil comes through, Augustine suggests, even in a boyish theft. After the Fall, nobody is innocent—not even babies: 'But if "I was conceived in iniquity, and in sin my mother nourished me in her womb" (Ps 51,5) where, I pray thee, O my God, where, O Lord, or when was I, thy servant, ever innocent?' (*Conf.*, I, VII, 12)

But Augustine carefully traced a distinction between criminal *facinus* and shameful *flagitium*, the latter a sphere which, he insisted, had to be evaluated according to circumstances.[22] In *De doctrina christiana* Augustine wrote: 'Because it is shameful [*flagitiose*] to strip the body naked at a banquet among the drunken and licentious, it does not follow that it is shameful [*flagitium*] to be naked in the baths . . . We must, therefore, consider carefully what is suitable to times and places and persons, and not rashly charge men with sins [*flagitia*].'[23]

The former professor of rhetoric, used to the notion of decency or appropriateness (in Greek, *to prepon*), was implicitly rereading the Book of Genesis: 'And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed [*et non erubescebant*].' (2, 25) After the Fall, shame enters

[22] Thomas, *Déshonneur*, pp. 179–213 (on *flagitium*).
[23] *On Christian Doctrine*, pp. 745–6 (*De doctrina christiana*, III. XII, 18–19).

the world: 'And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked [*cumque cognovissent se esse nudos*]; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves aprons.' (Gen. 3, 7) The meaning of nakedness had changed. Man and wife felt the need to cover their sexual parts, now turned into shameful parts (*pudenda*). Forever after, shame will be associated with the human condition, along with fear and guilt, inextricably intertwined in Adam's answer to the call of God after the Fall: 'I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he [i.e., God] said, Who told thee that thou was naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee, that thou shouldest not eat?' (Gen. 3, 10–11)

But notwithstanding his use of the Book of Genesis as a subtext, Augustine was eager to stress the social dimension of nakedness—as well as, more generally, of *flagitium*. Another passage from *De doctrina chistiana* refers to dresses instead of nakedness to point out that the perception of some behaviour as shameful or disgraceful may change with the times: 'For while it was disgraceful [*flagitium*] among the ancient Romans to wear tunics reaching to the heels and furnished with sleeves, now it is disgraceful [*flagitium*] for men of honourable birth not to wear tunics of that description: we must take heed in regard to other things also, ensuring that lust does not mix with our use of them . . .'[24] The context of the passage—a discussion of the polygamy of Biblical patriarchs—makes Augustine's remark even more striking. Marriage customs change as dresses do; how they are perceived may vary from place to place and year to year; sometimes they may look shameful. *Facinus* is not subject to change; *flagitium* is. Shame is part of the history of mankind.

Augustine's *Confessions* presents itself as a soliloquy addressed to God. In his innermost being, through relentless self-scrutiny, Augustine discovered a God who was an eternal judge—but he was also aware of the approval and disapproval of different communities. In his experience guilt culture and shame culture were closely intertwined.

3

We started from a widespread experience: the country one belongs to is the country one is ashamed of. We may try to test the argument, either

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[24] *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 746 (*De doctrina christiana* III, 13, 20).

narrowing the scale of reference (town, family) or enlarging it. Then a question arises: if shame implies closeness, what are the possible boundaries of a shame-based community?

The beginning of Primo Levi's *La tregua* (*The Truce*) may be recalled in this context. The war is over; Levi, with a group of survivors from Auschwitz, encounters the liberators, four Red Army soldiers on horseback:

> They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal 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 that Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime, the feeling of guilt that such crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defence.[25]

The victims and the liberators, Levi argued, were ashamed and felt guilty of having been unable to prevent injustice; the perpetrators and their accomplices were not ashamed. Those words, written in 1947, were published in 1963.[26] In his last book, *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), published in 1986, Levi returned to the same subject in a chapter entitled 'Shame'. Once again he mixed shame and guilt: 'shame, which is a feeling of guilt'; 'a feeling of shame or guilt'. In pages of intolerable lucidity he explored his feelings of guilt and spoke of those who had survived the death camps only to kill themselves. Then he mentioned a 'vaster shame, the shame of the world': shame for the evil committed by somebody else, shame born from the sense of belonging, as the perpetrators and accomplices did, to humankind. 'The sea of grief, past and present, surrounded us, and its level rose year after year nearly to the point of drowning us'.[27] Levi committed suicide one year later.

Only in extreme cases does the world experience this sort of shame. But its very possibility throws some light on the general issue I have

[25] Primo Levi, *La tregua* (1963), in *Opere*, I, ed. by M. Belpoliti, introduction by D. Del Giudice, Torino 1997, p. 206 (*If This is a Man*, and *The Truce*, trans. S. Woolf, London 2001, p. 188). I am grateful to Pier Cesare Bori who brought this passage to my attention a long time ago.

[26] Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), in *Opere*, II, p. 1047.

[27] 'Il mare di dolore, passato e presente, ci circondava, ed il suo livello è salito di anno in anno fino quasi a sommergerci': *I sommersi e i salvati*, p. 1057.

mentioned: the boundaries of the ego. To speak of every human being having two bodies (the physical and the social, the visible and the invisible) is insufficient. It is more helpful to consider the individual as the point of convergence of multiple sets. We simultaneously belong to a species (*Homo sapiens*), a sex, a linguistic community, a political community, a professional community, and so on and so forth. Ultimately we come across a set, defined by ten fingerprints, which has just one member: ourselves. To define an individual on the basis of his or her fingerprints certainly makes sense in some contexts. But an individual cannot be identified with his or her unique features. To achieve a fuller understanding of an individual's deeds and thoughts, present or past, we have to explore the interaction among the sets, specific and generic, to which he or she belongs. The emotion I started from—being ashamed for somebody different from us, for something we are not involved in—is a clue that helps us to rethink our multiple identities, their interaction and their unity, from an unexpected angle.