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Shame and philosophy

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Shaming Philosophy

Richard Paul Hamilton

Shame is a ubiquitous and highly intriguing feature of human experience. It can motivate but it can also paralyse. It is something which one can legitimately demand of another, but is not usually experienced as a choice. Perpetrators of atrocities can remain defiantly immune to shame while their victims are racked by it. It would be hard to understand any society or culture without understanding the characteristic occasions upon which shame is expected and where it is mitigated. Yet, one can survey much of the literature in social and political theory over the last century and find barely a footnote to this omnipresent emotional experience. The two books under review aim to rectify this lacuna.

These two works have much in common. Both are concerned with the relationship between shame and the great genocides of the last century. Morgan’s focus is upon the perpetrators and bystanders while Hutchinson’s interest is in the experience of survivors, such as Primo Levi. Both are troubled by philosophers’ neglect of shame and look for insight in literature and film. Hutchinson is systematically and militantly atheoretical in his approach; Morgan takes a more elliptical route but it is clear from his frequent references to Wittgensteinian thinkers, such as Stanley Cavell, that he would sympathise with much that Hutchinson writes.

Of the two, Hutchinson’s book is the more academically substantial. It is as much a contribution to ongoing debates in contemporary analytic philosophy of the emotions as it is a book about shame. Morgan’s work is more popular in style and would be well suited to an introductory course on philosophy of the emotions or


perhaps philosophy and film. Taken together, both represent a welcome contribution to the growing literature on philosophy and the emotions.

That there is such a growing literature may come as a surprise to some readers, and this is itself indicative. For much of the twentieth century the emotions languished in the philosophical backwaters. If they were discussed at all, it was generally within ‘soft’ areas such as aesthetics. The dominance of cognitivism in moral and political theory meant that they were given a cursory treatment as non-rational motives or preferences which could supply the fuel but never direct our moral endeavours. This has all changed in the last decade. Developments in the neuro-sciences, challenges to the hegemony of rational choice theory, and the ascendancy of feminism have meant that philosophy can no longer ignore our affective life.

Has the increased attention that the emotions have received negated their somewhat disreputable position? In common with Hutchinson, I would say not. One reason why analytic philosophy has eschewed the emotions may be the feeling that the traditional tools of the trade are no match for the job. Analytic philosophers typically approach a problem in the following manner. First, they survey our vernacular usage to find a core cluster of meanings surrounding a concept. Then, using thought experiments that often seem absurd to outsiders, they attempt to isolate the necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper use of the concept. More often than not, this project is conducted in an atmosphere of hushed reverence for the methods of the natural sciences, which become the gold standard against which philosophers’ endeavours are judged. There are of course significant differences between individuals. Some give more weight to philosophical intuitions, while others defer to the latest findings of the natural sciences. Since the demise of so-called Ordinary Language Philosophy what has united all of these approaches is a suspicion towards our vernacular and a preference for theoretical abstraction.

Yet, while this method may be appropriate for problems in logic, metaphysics and philosophy of science, it sits badly with phenomena as fine-grained and situation-specific as our emotional lives. I have written elsewhere and at length on the problems faced by traditional analytic philosophy in attempting to analyse love. (Hamilton, 2006) Unsurprisingly, the same problems emerge with other emotions. With a few honourable exceptions, one can only read most contemporary work on philosophy of the emotions as evasions of the central problems.

The contours of the current debate were set a decade ago with the publication of Paul Griffith’s bombastic What Emotions Really Are (1997). The book deals with many topics, philosophical methodology, philosophy of language, philosophy of psychology, even (at a push) moral psychology. But for anyone seeking enlightenment on the book’s central topic, the effect is rather like eating a Big Mac: momentary satisfaction followed by a sense of cloying disappointment. The ultimate answer is that emotions really are whatever some putative future scientific psychology of the emotions will tell us that they are.

Griffith’s book produced numerous responses, some advancing his project in different ways, others defending less overtly scientistic positions. The best of these responses, notably those of the late Robert Solomon (2003; 2006) and Peter Goldie (2000) recognise that whatever light the sciences may throw upon the emotions,
their insights will be dimmed if they are not accompanied by a sensitive appreciation of the contribution of literature and common experience. The works under consideration here both proceed from this recognition.

I will begin with a consideration of Morgan’s work. His central thesis is that shame is an appropriate response to genocide. By this he does not mean the banal observation that the perpetrators of genocide ought to feel shame. Rather, his point is the bolder one that all of us collectively ought to feel shame at the fact that we live in a genocidal world. Countering suggestions from the psychological and philosophical literature that shame is always a negative emotion, he argues that the appropriate type of shame ought to be a spur to action. He develops this thesis through a consideration of the genre of films devoted to the theme of genocide, starting with Alan Resnais’s *Night and Fog*. The central challenge that faces the director of any film about genocide is how to portray its horror without slipping into voyeurism or sentimentality. Much of the adverse critical reaction to *Schindler’s List* or *Life is Beautiful* focussed upon the manner in which the directors’ treatment trivialised the horror of genocide. Notoriously the shower scene in Spielberg’s film involved a portrayal of female nudity which many critics (rightly or wrongly) considered exploitative.

*Night and Fog* manages to avoid the twin dangers of voyeurism and trivialisation. Made in 1955, a decade after the liberation of the camps, Renais was concerned that they were already fading from memory. The style of the film, with its interspersing of contemporary and newsreel footage, is an attempt, according to Morgan, to shame us out of this process of forgetting. He compares Renais’s film with a more recent one, *Ghosts of Rwanda*, which documents in a less artful manner the horrors of this more recent African genocide and more particularly the failures of the international community to live up to its collective post-Holocaust promise.

While it is possible to view *Night and Fog* as an historical document, it is not so easy to distance oneself from *Ghosts of Rwanda*. This film, Morgan suggests, leads the viewer to feel not merely sympathy for the victims but a profound sense of shame that such events could occur. This sense of shame is deeply connected to a loss of face. One would like to see oneself as the kind of person who neither perpetrates nor permit genocides and yet genocide has happened once again. Shame, then is ‘our own way of seeing ourselves, not through the prism of our actions, but through the prism of how others would see us in terms of our features or actions.’

(Morgan 2008: 15).

There is, I believe, a central ambivalence in Morgan’s account here. His claim is that shame is the appropriate response to the failure of our governments to intervene in Rwanda. This raises a number of questions. It is worth noting that shortly after the Rwandan genocide and ostensibly as a reaction to it, the US and its allies developed a policy of ‘humanitarian intervention’. The first fruit of this policy was the NATO bombing of Serbia, in which the US openly supported one party in a civil war, the Kosovar Albanians, against their Serbian compatriots. Emboldened by the success of this operation, the US and its allies launched their crusades against Afghanistan and Iraq. In the latter case, when the chimerical ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ failed to materialise, the pretext rapidly became a humanitarian one.
Morgan seems seduced by the liberal illusion that our rulers actually care about our opinions. Perhaps one may agree that Western governments should have intervened in Rwanda and possibly also at a time when Saddam Hussein was butchering the Kurds. The experience of those who opposed the Iraq war demonstrates that popular opinion is largely irrelevant to those in power except perhaps for those brief periods when they are canvassing for votes. Election time comes and goes and a government is returned which carries out policies indistinguishable from its predecessor. Does Morgan suppose that if the people of Britain, France and Australia had taken to the streets in the millions, the outcome would have been different in Rwanda? Anger and frustration seem at least as obvious an emotional response as shame.

This issue touches upon a broader problem with the book. Many of the issues that Morgan raises touch upon an ongoing debate in contemporary moral philosophy, namely, the extent and limits of personal and collective responsibility. Although he never articulates this thought, Morgan seems to be of the persuasion that ‘we’ are collectively responsible for the actions of those in power. How this relates to the personal shame that a careful reflection upon genocide literature ought to elicit is never spelled out. Nor are we ever told in any detail how this shame is supposed to translate into political action. This represents a significant failing in the book.

Let us put political worries aside for the moment. I will focus instead upon the broader question of the nature of shame and its relationship to emotions such as guilt. While some philosophers have treated shame and guilt as interchangeable, Morgan insists upon their distinctness. His suggestion is that the distinction lies in the fact that guilt focuses upon our actions rather than ourselves. Shame, he argues, is more global in character. While one can feel guilt for what one has done, one can do so without thinking less of oneself. Shame, by contrast, forces one to question who one is. He further suggests that ‘the feeling of guilt lacks the social dimension that shame requires.’ (Morgan, 2008: 46).

Morgan is correct to stress the distinction between shame and guilt but mistaken in the manner in which he draws it. The proper distinction is normative and shame and guilt are both distinct and interrelated. It is a mistake to regard any complex emotion as more or less social than another. One distinguishes shame from guilt partly on the basis of the occasions that typically provoke them and partly by conventions of appropriateness. Guilt is in the first instance a forensic concept. One can be guilty without feeling guilty whereas one cannot be ashamed without feeling shame. Thus, to claim that guilt is less social in character than shame seems odd.

Guilt is also closely connected with a sense of personal responsibility. To feel guilty is to believe, rightly or wrongly, that one has a responsibility for some event or situation that one considers blameworthy. As both Morgan and Hutchinson highlight, shame is a distressingly common experience among victims of atrocities but this need not imply that the victims feel a sense of responsibility for the plight in which they found themselves. Shame is a common accompaniment to situations in which one is powerless to prevent oneself or someone close to one from becoming a victim.

I also believe that Morgan is mistaken to draw such a stark dichotomy between a person’s character and her actions. Although it was a common move in
twentieth-century moral philosophy to consider actions in isolation from the agents
who perform them (at least for the purpose of analysis), the trend in recent decades
has been to stress the centrality of the person to any account of moral and political
action. Indeed, the renaissance of the emotions is part of this process. At a time
when one could talk, without pain of embarrassment, about actions and their
consequences without reference to the persons whose actions they were or upon
whom their consequences fell, it was relatively easy to disregard the emotions.

These questions provide a nice segue into Hutchinson’s book, which treats the
evasion of the person as central to some of the theoretical problems in philosophy of
emotions. As mentioned above, of the two works under consideration, Hutchinson’s
is the more substantial and is at least as much a contribution to central debates in
moral philosophy and the philosophy of emotions as it is a book about shame.
Hutchinson clearly writes under the influence of Wittgenstein and especially a set of
interpretations of Wittgenstein which stress his therapeutic ambition and his
eschewal of substantive questions. It is a reading associated with inter alia Peter
Winch, Gordon Baker, and John McDowell. Many readers less sympathetic to
Wittgenstein, or at least to this particular interpretation, may find this off-putting.
This will doubtless be exacerbated by Hutchinson’s frequent insistence that he is not
offering a theory of shame and that his remarks are elucidatory rather than
substantive.

Here is not the place to deal with complex questions surrounding the exegesis of
the later Wittgenstein. Suffice to say that there are ample insights into both
shame and the philosophy of the emotions in this book and it would be a pity if
readers did not delve deep enough to find them. My own impression of the work is
that the Wittgensteinian framework is rather like the ladder which Wittgenstein
himself alludes to at the end of the *Tractatus*. The evidence of this book suggests the
emergence of a distinctive philosophical voice in the process of moving beyond its
intellectual origins. It would be a shame if a disdain for Wittgensteinians prevented
readers from seeing the genuine insights that this book has to offer.

The book begins with a lengthy discussion of Griffiths’s *What Emotions Really
Are*. Although it is more than ten years since its initial publication, Griffiths’s work
is a seminal one. But, as Hutchinson’s incisive criticisms make clear, it is hard to
understand why, unless one has a broader understanding of the scientistic climate of
much current Anglo-American philosophy. Hutchinson identifies Griffiths as a
particularly strident example of this trend. In keeping with this tradition, Griffiths
compares recent philosophical work on the emotions to the latest putatively
scientific findings and surprisingly enough finds the philosophers wanting. He
argues that the dominant ‘cognitivist’ theory of the emotions, which analyses
emotions in terms of their distinctive propositional attitudes, is a ‘degenerative
research programme’ in the Lakatosian sense, before breathlessly proceeding to
outline what alternative scientific programmes have to offer.

As Hutchinson suggests, Griffiths’s project begs at least as many questions as it
answers. To begin with, it is far from clear that philosophy consists of a series of
‘research programmes’ whether degenerative or progressive. Moreover, it is unclear
what the rather loose group of thinkers that Griffiths lumps together have in
common, except for a refusal to regard the task of philosophy of the emotions as a
quasi-scientific one. They are cognitivist in that they share to some extent a concern
with analysing the characteristic judgements and beliefs that accompany the
emotions, but they vary widely as to the extent they are prepared to assert that this is
all there is to an emotion. At most they share a common conception that the main
contribution of philosophy to understanding the emotions is conceptual rather than
empirical. With some philosophers engaged in conducting poorly constructed
surveys in the name of ‘Experimental Philosophy’, this is no doubt an unfashionable
view. However, it is useful to be reminded, as Hutchinson does, that many
philosophers continue to resist the idea that philosophy is a poor relation to the
natural and behavioural sciences.

Unfortunately, Hutchinson has a tendency to show the same lack of charity
towards his opponents as Griffiths does. I think his critical treatment would have
been more insightful had he had a more subtle appreciation of the basis of Griffiths’s
work in philosophy of biology. For instance, Hutchinson attacks Griffiths for using
the concept of ‘psychological phenotypes’ when dealing with child development
and suggests that this is merely rhetorical posturing without content. This attack can
be seen as badly aimed once one appreciates the programme of developmental
systems theory with which Griffiths is closely associated. Developmental systems
theory is a radical attempt to rethink the nature-nurture dichotomy. In this context, it
is entirely appropriate to consider child development in biological terms without
raising traditional fears of ‘biological reductionism’. Properly understood, Devel-
opmental Systems Theory is profoundly non-reductive. It is in fact surprising to find
that a philosopher of biology, whose hallmark is a careful handling of conceptual
distinctions and a rejection of attempts at theory reduction in biology, can be so
slapdash when he turns his attention to human affairs. Indeed it is not always clear
that Griffiths himself fully appreciates the radical nature of the material that he is
dealing with in biology, in a way that other philosophers of biology, such as John
Dupré, clearly do. Some understanding of Griffiths’s work in the philosophy of
biology would only have strengthened Hutchinson’s case.

Hutchinson does a better job when it comes to assessing Griffiths’s views in the
philosophy of language. Although few of his arguments are original, he is able to
marshal a powerful series of Wittgensteinian insights against Griffiths’s invocation
of natural kinds semantics. Griffiths is right to argue that our current emotional
language is not well understood in terms of Putnam and Kripke’s semantic theory,
not because of the inadequacy of our vernacular (as Griffiths claims) but rather
because of the incoherence of that theory. It is unfortunate but Hutchinson is
unlikely to get a fair hearing for his arguments in our current scientistic intellectual
climate. As he notes, Putnam himself has long resisted the attempt to interpret his
theory of meaning in essentialist terms, but with little success.

Many readers unconcerned with contemporary debates in analytic philosophy of
the emotions will be tempted to skip the first chapter. They will be rewarded by a
chapter that, in my opinion, is the finest of the book. Hutchinson moves from the
pristine climate of contemporary Anglo-American thought into the heady air of
European philosophy. The target here is Giorgio Agamben and the treatment is
much more dialogic in character than his earlier somewhat polemical handling of
Griffiths. As he notes, Agamben has a much greater concern for elucidating the
lived experience of shame than in constructing quasi-scientific theories of the
emotions.

Hutchinson situates Agamben’s account of shame, developed over several works,
in the context of his broader philosophical and political project. Agamben sees the
origins of modernity in the collapse of the Aristotelian distinction between \textit{zoe} and
\textit{bios}. In modernity, an attempt is made to base politics upon a bald conception of
human nature (\textit{zoe}) and not upon the human beings acting in pursuit of their proper
ends (\textit{bios}). The empty formal concept of citizen comes to replace its richer
Aristotelian predecessor in modern liberal thought. The problem here, as critics such
as Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) have noted, is that we continue to retain the moral
categories previously rooted in the Aristotelian framework. Planting them in the
poor soil that is contemporary liberal theory leads to a failure to flourish.

This analysis has significant consequences for our understanding of guilt and
shame. The experience of the \textit{Musselmänner}, those inmates that the system had
completely defeated whom Levi and other survivors so vividly describe, speaks to
the possibility of reducing a human being into a mere human animal. Agamben
further argues that modernity has impoverished our moral discourse in that shame is
increasingly assimilated to a legalistic concept of guilt. In this light, he offers an
interpretation of a key passage in Primo Levi’s \textit{If This is a Man/The Truce} and
compares it with a later passage from \textit{The Drowned and the Saved}.

Levi is discussing the liberation of the camp by Russian soldiers. He describes a
look on the face of the Russians, a look that is all too familiar to the inmates. It is ‘a
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’s crimes; the feeling of guilt that
such a crime should exist, that it should be introduced irrevocably into the world of

Commenting on this, Agamben argues that Levi clearly distinguishes the ethical
from the juridical. However by the time of his later work, \textit{The Drowned and the
Saved}, Levi quotes this passage again and in Agamben’s interpretation of it, crucially introduces the expression ‘feels remorse’. He suggests that this represents
‘backsliding’ on Levi’s part from his earlier insight. Hutchinson takes issue with this
interpretation and argues that if there is backsliding taking place it is by Agamben.
Rather than attempting to take seriously the experience of this most insightful of
survivors, Agamben seeks to pigeonhole Levi’s account into his theoretical
framework in which shame is always and everywhere the inescapable awareness of
one’s own subjectivity. Levi’s literary and expressive power stems in part from his
sensitivity to the conceptual connections within our everyday language. That he
resists the legislative pretensions of the philosophers is to his credit. Rather than
imposing an arbitrary schema, Levi is aware of the resonances of words and the fact
that concepts like guilt, shame, and remorse are related to one another in
innumerable ways. One cannot fully understand one of the concepts without
understanding the similarities and differences to the others.

Hutchinson offers a similarly perceptive analysis of Agamben’s use of the
testimony of another survivor, Robert Antelme. In a particularly poignant passage,
Antelme is describing the death marches at the end of the war. During the march, an
Italian student is selected for arbitrary execution. Antelme talks about the student’s demeanour and states that he ‘seemed embarrassed’ at his selection, going so far as to remark upon his blushing. In citing this passage Agamben entirely omits the section about embarrassment. Hutchinson suggests that once again, this reflects his desire to shoehorn survivor testimony into a pre-existing framework. Rather than allowing the survivors’ accounts to speak for themselves they become merely vignettes to illustrate Agamben’s broader theoretical analysis.

In a discussion that many readers will find controversial, Hutchinson identifies Agamben’s (mis)reading of Derrida as the culprit. At its best, Derridean deconstruction can be an aid to the sluggish imagination, unsettling some of our preconceptions about the way language must work. At its worst, deconstruction becomes just another metaphysics of presence. In Agamben’s case, this manifests itself in the use of etymologies to uncover the ‘essential’ meanings of concepts which then come to occupy an existence autonomous of those who use them.

Hutchinson’s reading of Derrida is surprisingly sympathetic for one obviously trained in the Anglo-American tradition and he ably defends him against crass criticisms such as those notoriously advanced by John Searle. He interprets Derrida’s views on writing as somewhat akin to Wittgenstein’s logico-grammatical observations. Agamben, he argues, mistakenly takes Derrida’s observations as the foundations for a new and more correct theory of meaning. In this, despite the many differences in outlook and approach, Agamben’s project is not that far from the work of a philosopher like Griffiths who seeks to inform ordinary competent speakers of the language what our concepts truly mean.

In the second half of the book, Hutchinson develops his own account of the emotions which, in Wittgensteinian spirit, he insists is not a theory. His ‘world-taking cognitivism’ is intended to avoid some of the pitfalls in other versions of cognitivism and make persons and their experiences central to any understanding of the emotions. Emotions are a feature of the world, but not the disenchanted world described by the natural sciences. They are rather a feature of a world populated by language-using beings such as ourselves who are able to take the world to be a certain way and in doing so recognise the ability of others within that world to so take it.

Cognitivist views of the emotions are often criticised for entailing the absurd view that one can never be mistaken in one’s emotional responses. I have always thought this an oddly misplaced criticism. On the contrary, unlike the longstanding view of the emotions within analytic philosophy and psychology as visceral grunts at the world of varying degrees of articulacy, cognitivist views, properly understood, open up the prospect of both mistaken and correct emotional responses. Within the virtue framework that Hutchinson and I broadly share, moral life consists among other things in training ourselves to respond appropriately to the world we share with our peers. It is not enough simply to go through the motions or abstractly to follow rules. We must do so with the appropriate disposition.

In this light, to experience shame is to respond to features of our common world that one takes to appropriately elicit shame. What unites all versions of cognitivism is the recognition that our emotional responses are truth-apt. In some versions, he argues, this is interpreted in an overly intellectualised way, as the view that all
emotional responses embed propositional judgements. Such a view is open to the obvious criticism that it ignores the viscerality of many of our emotional responses. Hutchinson believes that seeing emotions as answerable to the world (a view which he inherits from Charles Travis) avoids this problem.

In the course of developing his view, Hutchinson attempts to dissolve a number of philosophical problems, most especially the ongoing dispute within philosophy of emotion regarding the relationship between the viscerality and the intentionality of the emotions. (Prinz 2004; Deigh 2004) Philosophers have erected elaborate apparatuses to attempt to reconcile this apparent discrepancy and their usual strategy in doing so involves ‘imbu[ing] something sub-personal with cognitive powers.’ (Hutchinson, 2008:125) He ably demonstrates the problems and absurdities in this project and the manner in which, once again, it draws us away from persons and the world they inhabit. The correct response is to look for the solution within this interpersonal world, rather than in some mysterious computational inner world.

Hutchinson’s position is a distinctive and interesting one, and it is to be hoped that he develops it into a broader account of the emotions. Many of his criticisms of current philosophical treatment of shame could be applied with equal force to work on love or jealousy. At the very least, Hutchinson may be able to perform the time-honoured role of a philosophical gadfly urging philosophers not to lose sight of the human person in their endless pursuit of a chimerical theoretical clarity.

Morgan challenges us to feel shame at inhabiting a genocidal world; Hutchison attempts to shame philosophers into paying attention to the subtleties of the world we share. Both highlight the importance of film and literature in helping us to understand our common emotional experience and both are sceptical of the lofty imperiousness of overly theorised accounts. Both works are written in a lively and engaging style that is a welcome change from the anodyne technicality or pretentious bombast of much of the current literature. I fear that they represent a minority voice on the fringe of the philosophy of emotions, but I hope that it is a growing one.

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