

# THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SHAME

Edited by ALESSANDRA FUSSI  
and RAFFAELE RODOGNO

# **The Moral Psychology of Shame**

## **Series: Moral Psychology of the Emotions**

**Series editor:** Mark Alfano, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Delft University of Technology

How do our emotions influence our other mental states (perceptions, beliefs, motivations, intentions) and our behavior? How are they influenced by our other mental states, our environments, and our cultures? What is the moral value of a particular emotion in a particular context? This series explores the causes, consequences, and value of the emotions from an interdisciplinary perspective. Emotions are diverse, with components at various levels (biological, neural, psychological, social), so each book in this series is devoted to a distinct emotion. This focus allows the author and reader to delve into a specific mental state, rather than trying to sum up emotions en masse. Authors approach a particular emotion from their own disciplinary angle (e.g., conceptual analysis, feminist philosophy, critical race theory, phenomenology, social psychology, personality psychology, neuroscience) while connecting with other fields. In so doing, they build a mosaic for each emotion, evaluating both its nature and its moral properties.

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*The Moral Psychology of Shame*, edited by Alessandra Fussi and Raffaele Rodogno

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# Contents

Introduction	vii
<i>Alessandra Fussi and Raffaele Rodogno</i>	
<b>1</b> Themes in Current Psychological Research on Shame <i>Tjeert Olthof</i>	1
<b>2</b> The Moral Efficacy of the Confucian Sense of Shame <i>JeeLoo Liu</i>	25
<b>3</b> Plato on Shame <i>Alessandra Fussi</i>	53
<b>4</b> Hume on Shame <i>Lorenzo Greco</i>	79
<b>5</b> The Functions of Shame in Nietzsche <i>Mark Alfano</i>	103
<b>6</b> Shame as a Self-Conscious Positive Emotion: Scheler's Radical Revisionary Approach <i>Íngrid Vendrell Ferran</i>	117
<b>7</b> Self-Understanding and Moral Self-Improvement in Shame and Shame Based on Group Identification <i>Alba Montes Sánchez and Alessandro Salice</i>	139
<b>8</b> The Situatedness of Shame and Shaming: 'Little Worlds' and Social Transformations <i>Imke von Maur</i>	161

<b>9</b>	Shame and Trauma <i>Heidi L. Maibom</i>	181
<b>10</b>	Shame, Gender and Self-Making <i>Krista K. Thomason</i>	205
<b>11</b>	Shame on Wrong Planet <i>Katrine Krause-Jensen and Raffaele Rodogno</i>	221
	Index	243
	About the Contributors	247

## *Chapter 11*

# **Shame on Wrong Planet**

Katrine Krause-Jensen and Raffaele Rodogno

### **AUTISM AND SHAME: STATE OF THE ART**

Autism and Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) such as Asperger Syndrome (AS) are neurodevelopmental conditions diagnosed on the basis of (1) differences in social communication and social interaction and (2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association 2013).<sup>1</sup> These manifest themselves, respectively, in (1) differences at the level of social-emotional reciprocity, non-verbal communicative behaviours and the developing, maintaining, and understanding of relationships; and (2) the insistence of sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, highly restricted, fixated interests and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory inputs.

In more practical terms, individuals on the autism spectrum<sup>2</sup> have often difficulty developing language and even when no difficulties are apparent at this level, they have a harder time figuring out the more subtle aspects of neurotypical social communication. Innuendos, sarcasm, chitchat, and body language (going from eye contact to flirting) are difficult to understand or find meaningful, as may be the intentions and emotions of others as well as one's own. Failure to notice basic conversational conventions (e.g., cues signalling the end of a conversation), difficulty interpreting facial expressions made by others, and failure to notice the emotional valence of messages are quite typical. In some cases, the very nature of human relations and practices may be understood differently, as Calder et al. (2013) have observed in the case of friendship. Neurosensory inputs also contribute to make autistic life more arduous. Oversensitivity to olfactory, visual, auditory, and tactile inputs is very common as it is also often difficult to background some of these inputs in order to focus on others (think about talking on your mobile phone in a



busy train station without the capacity to set all the ambient noise in the background so as to focus on your interlocutor's voice).

These differences translate into a difficulty to grasp or appreciate entire aspects of neurotypical culture: Why gather many people in one room, as in schools, restaurants and public transport, when it is *so* overbearing? Why shake hands and touch someone else's hand (when that typically feels disturbing)? Why use roundabout and hard-to-decipher ways of saying things when one can say them straight out? Why do people react as they do when you (don't) do the things you (don't) do? And so on. To all this (and this is only a tiny part of the picture), we should of course add the constant critical, adverse, mocking or bullying reactions of others that are not so tolerant of people that do not fit in. It is not surprising, then, that for many individuals on the spectrum, living in a neurotypical society may feel like living on the wrong planet. Karli Slomka unpacks this analogy quite nicely:

Imagine you are a member of a lost race whose spaceship somehow managed to crashland on a foreign planet. You find a strange, unseen beauty in your surroundings but are taken by surprise by the people you encounter. They look just like your people, only they act differently. Their language is the same as yours, but they speak it in a way that is nearly incoherent to you. They expect you to understand, cherish and honour their customs and traditions, but you simply do not understand the purpose. They often demand things from you, but you are unsure of how such demands are to be satisfied, as you cannot comprehend their words. This so-called 'defiance' is not taken well by these aliens. They wish for you to blend in with them, to use the odd word combinations they use, to move the way they do and they even try to make you wear the tight, scratchy and impractical garments with which they adorn themselves.

You want to go home. Living in this world takes far too much effort, and their attempts at assimilation are unsuccessful. The people believe you to be unintelligent, but you know that this is not the case. You are intelligent and sane, just not by their illogical standards (Slomka 2017).

With this initial sketch of life on the spectrum in hand, the main question that this chapter poses is this: What do we know about shame on wrong planet? This question came to us somewhat unsolicited. During the last couple of years, we have been involved in a project aimed at collecting and thematizing qualitative data on well-being and ill-being for adults on the spectrum. We wished to understand what our informants found detrimental and what parts of their lives (activities, relations, people, etc.) they found rewarding or making life worth living. What motivated our research was not only a theoretical interest in the dynamics of autistic well-being and ill-being but also a practical interest in passing on (largely in the form of podcasts) the

wisdom so collected to the newer generations. As we thematized the data, we realized that shame and, to a minor extent, guilt were significant themes. We found this result surprising, for we asked no questions, directly or indirectly, about shame and related emotions, and had no expectation that shame would arise as a theme or sub-theme in our analysis (Krause-Jensen & Rodogno, in preparation).<sup>3</sup>

We set out therefore to gather more information on shame and autism, to have some background against which to interpret our findings. To our surprise, when considering the purely academic literature, we found that not much had been published. The most prominent body of work bears on the connection in children on the spectrum between deficits in the Theory of Mind, on one hand, and the capacity to understand and experience self-conscious emotions such as shame, on the other (Heerey et al. 2003). The available studies present mixed results: while some studies find that children on the spectrum report less experiences of self-conscious emotions, others show that they are as accurate as their neurotypical peers at identifying these emotions (see Davidson et al. 2017).<sup>4</sup>

Similar mixed results also apply to the adult population, for which academic research is even scander. One of the most quoted recent studies shows that adults on the spectrum are significantly more prone to shame and externalization (a tendency to blame others and not admit one's contribution to an unwanted event) than their neurotypical peers (Davidson et al. 2017). Given that in shame the self is the focus of negative attention, externalizing may be understood as a mechanism for protecting the self against the experience of shame. We find these results questionable, however, as shame is operationalized by way of the Shame and Guilt Scales of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA), the appropriateness of which Rodogno (2008) and others (Olthof, this volume) have had a chance to question. Davidson et al. (2017), however, found a result that resonates with our qualitative study: compared to neurotypicals, individuals on the spectrum seem to have diminished proneness to beta, or authentic, pride – pride that one feels about one's actions/achievements, as opposed to the hubristic pride one feels for one's self-aggrandized self. This is relevant, for beta pride is positively related to self-esteem (Tracy et al. 2009), which is also known to be lower in individuals on the spectrum (Williamson et al. 2008). As we will see, lack of pride (as a trait) and low levels of self-esteem, do seem to characterize the lives of our informants. In the penultimate section of this chapter, we sketch, among others, the social and affective dynamics that could generate lower levels of self-esteem and connect it to the experience of shame.

Our search for relevant academic literature did not return much other than this. The field is pretty much open. Our current contribution to it will consist

in an exploration of the nature of shame among individuals on the spectrum based directly on their experiences. This was the natural choice given the nature of the data in our hands, which, however, we have complemented with data collected from specialized internet forums and blogs. We take our task here to parallel that of feminist philosophers working on the moral psychology of shame as experienced by women and by members of other marginalized groups (Bartky 1990; Lehtinen 1998; Woodward 2000; Locke 2007; Rodogno 2015; Thomason this volume), with the difference that our approach relies more explicitly on ethnographic sources and methods as well as philosophical ones. Towards the end of the chapter, we will in fact show how our forays into the nature of autistic shame (if we may call it that) may shed light onto some of the questions discussed by feminist philosophers writing on shame.

### SHAME, AUTISM AND AUTISTIC IDENTITY

What exactly do we mean by the nature of shame as it is experienced by people on the spectrum? Why think that there'd be anything special or peculiar about it? After all, if we can identify an emotional episode as one of shame, then, as such it will be the same whether it is experienced by a woman, someone on the autism spectrum, a person belonging to an oppressed ethnic minority, or anybody else. According to this challenge, there is no such thing as autistic shame, just as there is no such thing as, say, feminist or marginalized shame; there is only shame. This challenge seems to assume that shame can be grasped, conceptualized, and experienced from a standpoint that abstracts from the social circumstances of those who experience it, and some will simply reject this assumption. This is an important methodological discussion. In this section, we will address the nature of shame in autism without entering this debate. In the next section, however, we will consider the sense in which social context, and in particular the context in which people on the spectrum often find themselves, may indeed change their experience of shame.

Part of the nature of autistic shame may very simply come to the fore by studying what triggers shame in autistic individuals. It would seem particularly relevant to find out whether aspects of one's autism or indeed whether one's identity as autistic tend to trigger shame. The ensuing shame would be peculiarly autistic in the sense that individuals who are not on the spectrum (or who don't identify themselves with their autism) would not experience it in the same circumstances or for the same reasons.

Let us begin by saying something about shame and identity. The idea that there is a strong connection between the two is a feature of many different

theories of shame. Some of these theories do indeed make identity the most prominent feature of their theories. Hence, for example, Tjeert Olthof and colleagues used the notion of an *unwanted identity* as one's realization that when seen from the perspective of important others, one seems to be what one does not want to be (Ferguson et al. 2000; Olthof et al. 2000, 2002, 2004, this volume). Olthof further argues that an unwanted identity 'might not so much concern one or the other unfavourable characteristic that people might have, but rather their fear that, when seen from the perspective of a relevant audience, their behavioral or appearance-related manifestations to the outside world give the impression of not being authored by a coherent and consistent self. Such an impression might in turn lead audiences to discredit the individual as an interaction partner' (this volume, chapter 1; Olthof 2002; Olthof et al. 2004).

Questions of identity are similarly prominent in Krista Thomason's (2018, 87) theory of shame. On this view, shame arises when a feature of a person's identity overshadows or defines their self-conception. 'Identity' and 'self-conception' are semi-technical terms here. The latter is understood as 'the way that we represent ourselves to ourselves either on the whole or in particular moments', while 'identities' 'include but also extend beyond our self-conceptions . . . [as they are] comprised of contingent features of our individual histories as well as the way we come across to others . . . our non-voluntary identities' (Thomason 2018, 93).

Other theories make a less direct and yet essential reference to one's identity. Hence, in Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni's view (2012), shame arises when individuals perceive themselves as incapable to fulfil a *self-defining* value or attachment. A person who is attached to a certain idea of themselves as compassionate, for example, may feel shame at the realization of their incapacity to show any care towards a homeless person. On one interpretation of this view, attachments are self-defining whether we actively endorse them or not, whether they are part of our 'self-conception' or only part of our 'identity'.

No matter one's theory of choice, then, we can expect significant connections between shame and identity. It would then be relevant to ask whether shame is triggered in connection to one's autistic identity. Our analysis reveals that it is thus triggered in three distinct kinds of ways: (1) shame about being autistic per se, as in 'I am ashamed that the label "autism" (with its negative associations) applies to me'; (2) shame triggered by features that one perceives as being connected to one's autism, as in 'I am ashamed of my social awkwardness'; (3) shame triggered by features that are in fact connected to one's autism but that the individual fails to perceive in these terms, as when one feels shame for one's awkwardness even before receiving an autism diagnosis.

In what remains of this section, we will look at these three classes of trigger in turn. Beside the qualitative data collected in our interviews, we will use data retrieved from a search in dedicated internet fora. The place that delivered the greatest amount of data was *wrongplanet.net*, an internationally recognized online community for individuals with Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, PDDs and other neurological differences. As we searched 'shame' in its database, we found numerous entries dating all the way back to 2005, divided into two groups: a smaller one collecting entries on *feeling shame or embarrassment about meltdowns* and a larger one with entries about *feeling shame about having autism or being autistic*. The latter question appeared in at least two more internet fora, namely, the *UK National Autistic Society* and *Reddit*. Note that, not only is it the case that the answers to these questions are provided by people on the spectrum; the questions are themselves being asked by members of the community who, in light of their experience, likely expected other members to have felt shame in connection to (some aspect of) autism. We take this as confirming once again that the topic of shame and autism is of some significance from the perspective of members of this community, and not only from the perspective of academics pursuing their own research agenda.

To start with cases squarely in the first class, consider this quote by LivAgain:

I've been having a rough time lately and feel very ashamed of a lot of things. One thing I'm certainly ashamed of is being autistic. Everything about it feels like a threat – a threat to my femininity, to my appearance, to how others will perceive me. It's hard to put into words but it's almost as though the symptoms don't worry me (I don't actually have a great deal of symptoms, really; not nowadays anyway) but the label itself is damaging me more and more every day. I feel so guilty for feeling like this but I don't want to wonder anymore. Does anyone else feel like this? (National Autistic Society UK)

What LivAgain is saying here could easily be interpreted by way of Olthof's unwanted identity view or Thomason's self-conception-vs-identity view. The label autistic casts an unwanted identity on LivAgain, or again, an identity that eclipses her own conception of herself as, for example, a feminine individual. But why would anyone feel ashamed of their autistic identity, of the 'label itself'? That wouldn't make much sense unless one could show that the label stands for things that involve stigma or, at any rate, negative associations. That these are common associations, however, is an unfortunate but well-documented fact, tellingly described by IdahoRose:

I wanted to die a few times when my mom told people I had AS [Asperger Syndrome]. She made it sound like I was really disabled, a poor pathetic victim but it's no one's fault but my head's . . . oh, God. And the books about it that describe us that way too. They make us sound like we'll forever be pathetic and abnormal and an inconvenience and a burden, and always need help, and need to be taught stuff, as opposed to simply given an opportunity to explain why, being respected as a human being who had a right to speak for himself rather than an inferior that needs to be taught. . . . I can't explain it. It's part of my resentment, part of the reason for my deep depression. (Wrongplanet)

Most people would not want to be identified with someone really disabled, pathetic, abnormal, an inferior who needs to be taught, a burden, and generally with someone who lacks so much dignity that they do not deserve the opportunity to speak for themselves (the terms 'freak' and 'weirdo' are also typically used derogatorily to refer to individuals on the spectrum, just as 'autistic' is used derogatorily on a par with 'retard' or 'spaz'). In a more roundabout way, a view such as Deonna et al.'s (2012), could also explain how such a negative autistic identity could trigger shame. Consider someone who is attached to a view of themselves as a normal, capable person, equal in worth to everybody else. Now they learn that they are on the autism spectrum and, as they do, they become the object of diminishing attitudes as expressed by society at large, including people whom they esteemed (e.g., the language of the scientific community writing on autism) and cared about (e.g., their parents). As a result, they feel shame, as they now (wrongly) perceive themselves as incapable of minimally fulfilling their self-defining standards. In time, just being reminded of their autistic label may elicit shame.

While being outright ashamed of one's identity as autistic is clearly something reported with some frequency, our impression is that most individuals on the spectrum have a more nuanced relation to their autistic identity. To start with, there are those, like Raindrops, who may seem to be ashamed of their autism but are rather only trying to avoid the negative reactions that accompany revealing that part of their identity:

I'm not embarrassed or ashamed, but I don't like people I meet knowing I have Aspergers, as in the past people have treated me like a freak. I'd rather people not know because then I'd get treated like everyone else. People mostly can't tell I'm Autistic anyway, apart from when I'm extremely shy. (Wrongplanet)

More squarely in the second class, we find cases such as Oneironaut's (male, age 38), in which one is ashamed about aspects perceived to be connected to their autism, rather than the stigmatized autistic label as such:

Yeah, at times I am [ashamed about being autistic] but there's nothing I can do about it. I really am when I am having a meltdown or shutdown and people don't

understand why also when I unintentionally annoy people with my repetition. (Wrongplanet)

The same idea is neatly expressed by Nessa238 (female, age 53):

Though I am chronically embarrassed and sometimes ashamed of my behavior, this is a result of my difficulty with social interactions and such due to Asperger's. As for having Asperger's per se, I am absolutely not embarrassed or ashamed. I hope that makes sense. (wrongplanet.net)

Note that while meltdowns are things that may or may not be associated with autism, Oneironaut does connect them and repetitive behaviours to his autism. Similarly, Nessa238 attributes those behaviours that make her social interactions difficult to her AS and is ashamed of them as opposed to her AS identity. Hence, if their shame is triggered by having a public meltdown or committing a faux pas, their shame is ultimately not about appearing as autistic but about other kinds of unwanted identities or other eclipsed parts of their self-conception. Or again, they will ultimately see these behaviours rather than their autism as such as involving incapacity to fulfil self-defining values or attachments.

Finally, the third and most intriguing class of cases: 'Hidden Autism'. Many informants from our own Danish interviews and from the internet report experiencing shame even before receiving their autism diagnosis. This, however, does not mean that autism is out of the picture, that their shame is like everybody else's, as the fact that they actually are on the spectrum influences the pattern of their shame episodes. Here are some telling quotes from, respectively, Skybird and ShadesOfMe:

I have always been ashamed to be me and although my diagnosis last year helped me answer the questions about why I am like I am, I've still not got there with accepting it yet. People tell me that accepting it will come in time. (National Autistic Society UK)

Before I was diagnosed and had even heard of AS, I did feel ashamed of the things I struggled with as I thought it was just my fault for being stupid – a view that my parents, teachers and peers only reinforced! (Wrongplanet)

Not many individuals will simply admit that they have always been ashamed of themselves. Both individuals (and they are by no means alone in sharing this experience) felt shame for things that turned out to be connected to their autism before even knowing anything about their autism. This type of case shows that the nature of autistic shame cannot simply be accounted for by trying to connect shame episodes to perceived autistic identity or to

specific aspects of autism *as perceived by the individual*. Aspects of autism are likely to elicit shame even when individuals do not grasp them under that heading because, for example, they do not suspect being on the spectrum. To account for such cases, we need to broaden our analysis and consider a more complex set of affective dynamics and the social mechanisms that produce them. This is where our study of autistic shame has clear points of contact with the study of shame pioneered by feminist philosophers.

### AFFECTIVE DYNAMICS: SHAME AND THE EXISTENTIAL FEELING OF WRONGNESS IN AUTISM

As feminist philosophers have argued, one must consider the possibility that being in a dominant as opposed to a subordinated social position differentially affects the way individuals experience and conceptualize – understand, know about and react to – emotions, including shame. Hence, we should expect women and men to have different experiences and conceptions because they tend respectively to occupy subordinated and dominating positions in society.

According to some feminist philosophers, dominant theories of shame have been devised by individuals whose identity was not formed by ‘the characteristic sorts of psychological oppression on which modern hierarchies of class, race, and gender rely so heavily’ (Bartky 1990, 97; Lehtinen 1998, 62). Such individuals will at best experience shame as an episodic adverse assessment of self, a sudden ‘blip across the face of an otherwise undisturbed consciousness’ (Bartky 1990, 96). Although painful and unpleasant, for such individuals shame can form an occasion for moral reaffirmation; it can be salutary. For the socially subordinate individual, however, who has partly internalized the low evaluation of herself or himself, of ‘people of her or his kind’, ‘shame is not so much a particular feeling or emotion . . . as a pervasive affective atonement to the social environment’ (Bartky 1990, 85). ‘The episodic experiences, the particular feelings of shame of the subordinate are more seldom salutary than they are for the privileged individual. . . . They are unconstructive and self-destructive; and they function as *confirmations* of what the agent knew all along – that she or he was a person of lesser worth’ (Lehtinen 1998, 62).

While we disagree that all ‘dominant’ theories of shame depict it *merely* as a ‘salutary’ ‘blip across the face of an otherwise undisturbed consciousness’, we certainly go along with the claim that one’s social environment and one’s position in it are likely to shape the individual’s affective life and thereby the (experienced) significance of shame for the individual. Remember the claim by ShadesOfMe in the previous section: she felt ashamed of the things she struggled with, as she thought it was her ‘fault for being stupid’, a view that



her parents, teachers and peers only reinforced. She then goes on to make the following claim:

Once I found out about AS and got diagnosed, I stopped feeling ashamed right away because I realized that there was nothing ‘wrong’ with me – I had just been struggling to make my way in a world that I didn’t understand with no help whatsoever. (wrongplanet)

Compare this with a much longer quote by June (age 27), an informant from our set of interviews:

I was first diagnosed with autism when I was 21, and until that point, and in fact for a good while after that, and at times still now, I have really had to struggle with the feeling of being different and wrong [‘forkert’ in the Danish original]. For as long as I can remember, I have felt as if I have been going around with a secret. When I was in school, I got praised a lot because I was so good at reading and was so nice, and behaved myself, and was good at writing. But as I got home, I was completely exhausted, I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t eat, or take a bath, or tidy up in my room. It simply didn’t square with the idea that other people had of me. That’s why I felt as I went around with the dark secret that, in truth, I was not good enough, that I was hiding who I really was. And it also became a secret that I wasn’t doing well. After I was diagnosed, I began to see and understand why I had that feeling of being wrong. Concretely, the feeling of exhaustion that I have had for the greatest part of my life, which is probably what best characterizes my autism, originates in the fact that I received way too much input and way too little time to process it and fall into place. I was continuously overworking to decode the social context, to try to fit in, and the like. So, this feeling of exhaustion springs from my autism and my feeling of being wrong springs from my exhaustion and being continuously overloaded. . . . I think that for many, feeling shame ends up being a kind of strategy, because it is easier to understand and manage it [one’s inappropriateness] when one finds an explanation for it, even if the explanation is ‘because I have done something wrong’. It can actually be easier to say: ‘it is my own fault that I have trouble doing things’. That’s why it can be scary to let loose of this strategy and accept that [life] is simply bloody unfair sometimes, and it is bloody hard to be an autistic. But if one dares to let loose of that shame, I think it is in fact better in the end . . . one can give more space to one’s self, dare to stick out, stop masking oneself so much, and use those survival strategies that actually help you spare your resources, for example, going out in public as visibly autistic, with headphones or earplugs, sunglasses, weighted vest and whatever else.

The narrative that the lives of ShadesOfMe and June seem to share progresses along these lines: as they move about in a neuronormative world, a world regulated by norms tailored to those with a standard neurological profile, there are many expectations they cannot fulfil, or can only fulfil at a

very high personal cost. Existence in this type of (social) reality is exhausting and becomes a burden. They begin to feel that they are inappropriate, stupid, unfitting, or insufficient, or that there is something wrong with them.<sup>5</sup> They see those around them succeed at ‘normal’ or unexceptional tasks, like going through with their school day or ‘just’ socializing with others without systematically saying or doing something perceived to be wrong. To be a successful agent in this world, they must work hard (much harder than everybody else) and often fail anyway and can’t understand why they cannot do and cannot be like everybody else. Those around them too often fail to understand that and instead of providing support, act in ways that contribute to their feeling wrong.

Our main claim in this section is that we need to understand and take into account this feeling of wrongness to understand the nature of shame in people on the spectrum. As the claims of our informants show, this feeling is often in place even before they know that they are on the spectrum. We wish to argue that this feeling of wrongness amounts to an existential feeling that is intimately connected to feelings of shame. The affective dynamics between this existential feeling and shame that we are about to describe may potentially explain not only the shame of people on the spectrum but also the pervasive shame of other marginalized individuals discussed by feminist philosophers.

To understand the feeling of wrongness, we lean on Ratcliffe’s idea of existential feelings or feelings of being (2005, 2008). Ratcliffe (2008) uses this notion among others to show how psychiatric conditions such as Capgras delusion, Cotard delusion and schizophrenia can be reinterpreted in terms of changes at the level of existential feeling. We will *not* similarly be using the feeling of wrongness to explain autism as a psychiatric condition. Our aim is rather to show how this type of feeling explains why some people on the spectrum feel the shame that they feel. While we establish no connections between existential feelings and autism as such, we do believe that members of marginalized groups other than individuals on the spectrum are also likely to develop this feeling, given the ‘right’ social dynamics. Hence the link with work on shame and feminism. In short, while we borrow the notion of existential feeling from Ratcliffe, we do not use it for the same purpose and, in fact, we do extend his analysis in two ways: by discussing a yet unexplored feeling of being, that is, the feeling of wrongness, and by shedding light on the social dynamics that are likely to generate it.

Ratcliffe homes in on the phenomenon he has in mind by listing some examples:

The feeling of being: ‘complete’, ‘flawed and diminished’, ‘unworthy’, ‘humble’, ‘separate and in limitation’, ‘at home’, ‘a fraud’, ‘slightly lost’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘abandoned’, ‘stared at’, ‘torn’, ‘disconnected from the world’,

'invulnerable', 'unloved', 'watched', 'empty', 'in control', 'powerful', 'completely helpless', 'part of the real world again', 'trapped and weighed down', 'part of a larger machine', 'at one with life', 'at one with nature', 'there', 'familiar', 'real'. (2005, 47)

Against the grain of received conceptualizations of feelings in general, Ratcliffe claims that existential feelings such as the one listed above contribute to how one's body or aspects of the world are experienced. The feelings need not themselves be an object of consciousness, but rather 'that *through* which one is conscious of something else' (2005, 46). Importantly, they are best seen not as descriptions of one's inner states or of features of the world

but of one's relationship with the world. . . . This relationship does not simply consist in an experience of being an entity that occupies a spatial and temporal location, alongside a host of other entities. Ways of finding oneself in a world are presupposed spaces of experiential possibility, which shape the various ways in which things can be experienced. For example, if one's sense of the world is tainted by a 'feeling of unreality', this will affect how all object of perception appear. They are distant, removed, not quite 'there'. (2005, 47)

The dynamics around the feeling of wrongness are quite intuitive. Imagine that you find overwhelming tasks that seem very ordinary to your peers and that unlike them you often fail in these tasks. Suppose also that individuals in your environment underline your perceived failings by remarking on it critically or, in fact, make you see your doings as failings by critically calling them to your attention. Repeat this exercise often enough during your formative years and, soon enough, you might develop the feeling that the fault rests with you and not with your environment, and hence that you are faulty, less capable, insufficient, unfitting less worthy, in short, 'wrong'. As these feelings settle in, they determine your 'presupposed spaces of experiential possibility'; they will shape the way you experience the world.

The cases of ShadesOfMe and June are not isolated examples of the feeling of wrongness. This was one of the most significant themes from our interviews. Hence, for example, when asked whether the self-understanding gained by receiving her autism diagnosis gave her some relief, Judith (age 37) replied that:

Both yes and no. It is with very mixed feelings that one receives such a diagnosis. But I believe anyway that the dominant feeling is a feeling of relief. You can say that the challenges are there no matter what, but what's different is to KNOW that it's not just because I don't try hard enough. It is not because I DO something WRONG, it is just the way I am . . . Because I have been blaming myself – 'why am I not ABLE to?' The others are able to so it must be because I do not try hard enough.

Similarly, Jeremy (23) says:

. . . to feel wrong or to feel like a loser . . . has been the biggest thing in my life. The greatest challenge was definitively how bad I felt because nothing worked out and to wish all the time that things did work out. I would have liked to have a life.

Finally, when asked for tips autistic youth could use to do well in life, Joan (age 49) recommended, among others, that they

. . . find a network with other autists so they can find out that they have something in common, so they don't walk through life feeling awkward or wrong or different. So . . . one does not have to live a normal life. You can choose to do exactly what YOU want to because it concerns the quality of your life and not what the rest of the world expects you to do.

If this is where an individual is affectively coming from, it is no surprise that the next critical remark or bad look they receive will elicit shame. In fact, they may well feel shame all on their own, without anyone else's remark or (imagined) gaze. Due to their existential feeling of wrongness, these individuals will tend to experience their relation to the world in a relevant negative way even when alone. The history of their interactions with their social environment has shaped them affectively so that shame becomes the most obvious response for them to have. This is nicely, though sadly, illustrated by Jake (age 40), whom, unlike the other informants quoted so far, was asked questions bearing directly on shame in a later round of interviews:

You feel shame in the explicit demands from others but also in what becomes an internalized ableism and the experience of not being good enough. This also results in what I term as shameful pleasures – which is when we feel victorious in connection to overcoming a challenge, no matter whether it is completing a special mission in *World of Warcraft* or finally paying a long overdue bill or finally doing the dishes. Then this can be a super cool moment, or it can be a really disappointing moment – because even though we succeeded, we might not allow ourselves to feel happiness or feel success because we succeeded in something that is so easy for others or which we believe is so easy for others. So, we think that it is embarrassing that we are happy that we succeeded and that we are miserable or useless or the thought that we are handicapped can appear or the thought that we are not good enough in comparison with other people. And it is not something that we feel like telling others, we are not sharing these pleasures of victory . . . it is not an Instagram moment. It becomes something that we bury inside ourselves, and we only share the moments of success, where we act in ways that are admirable for neurotypical people with neurotypical prerequisites.

Before concluding, let us tie some loose ends. Some may ask why the feeling of wrongness would flow more naturally into shame rather than, say, guilt? As a matter of fact, our informants mention guilt alongside shame (though not as frequently), which is not surprising given that the two emotions are known to co-occur (Tangney and Dearing 2002). Yet these feelings share an increased affinity with shame for at least two reasons. In line with shame, these feelings are not only about what one's conduct, but about the self, whether the latter is understood globally or more restrictedly, in connection with some of its aspects.<sup>6</sup> Also, the phenomenology of shame is known to involve feelings of incapacity, which is precisely what many informants would experience in their daily engagements with a reality that is fitted to others but unfitted to them.

Note also that the affective dynamics just described may move in a loop or vicious circle. Hence, the experience of shame, originally felt against the background of the existential feeling of wrongness, may in turn reinforce that feeling, adding an emotional confirmation to its affective base. As argued by Lethinen earlier, in this sense, shame episodes are unconstructive and self-destructive *confirmations* of what the agent knew all along – that they were a person of lesser worth.

We are not claiming here that these feelings are enough to be themselves considered episodes of shame. In this, we beg to disagree with June, who seems to take the two to be the same. Each one of the theories of shame presented above may be taken to represent what is missing to go from the feelings to the emotional episodes. While you may feel as a misfit as you engage in this or that activity, you may still fail to have the necessary perception of an unwanted identity, an eclipsed self-conception or being incapable in upholding a relevant self-defining value. In that case, your feelings will not generate an emotional episode of shame, though they may generate another kind of emotion. Consider, for example, what SoftKitty (female, 54) writes in this connection:

I'm not embarrassed by the Asperger's label itself but I am embarrassed by the aspects of the Asperger's that make people treat me differently – they can often make me feel ashamed/not as good as others. Then at other times I get angry about being made to feel bad by other people and myself taking their judgements seriously. So I go backward and forward between feeling ashamed and angry. (Wrongplanet)

SoftKitty's way of being in the world, we surmise, is characterized, among others, by the feeling of wrongness. A life of exposure to difficulties, failure and criticism has created this background feeling. Against this affective background, she often responds with shame to the remarks of others. Yet sometimes her anger also surfaces.

In short, the material provided by our informants invites us to focus on the relevant social context and the processes of exclusion and marginalization that operate within it. The latter generate existential feelings of wrongness in marginalized individuals, which in turn feed and are fed by episodes of shame. While the episodes of shame are what they are, the idea is that they would have not been there if the wider affective dynamics and the social context that produced them had been different. What is more, there is nothing remotely positive or reformatory in shame episodes that arise from such a background. They are not salutary blips across the face of an otherwise undisturbed consciousness, but emotive punctuations of one's existential feeling of wrongness.

With this view in hand, we can return to the claim that for the socially subordinate individuals who have partly internalized the low evaluation of themselves 'shame is not so much a particular feeling or emotion . . . as a pervasive affective atonement to the social environment' (Bartky 1990, 85). What we propose is simply that Bartky's 'pervasive affective atonement' be understood as nothing other than the feeling of wrongness: a sense of incapacity, inferiority and wrongness that structures experience, feeding and being fed by episodic shame. As argued earlier, this solution would preserve a conceptual and psychologically real distinction between feelings of wrongness, on the one hand, and shame episodes on the other. The (episodic) shame of marginalized individuals is like the shame of everyone else but, as we widen the scope of our analysis to consider the affective dynamics produced by the social context, we can point to clear differences between marginalized and non-marginalized shame regarding the social mechanisms that generate the feeling of wrongness and its impact on shame.

Thomason (2018, 36–38; this volume) argues that accounts such as Bartky's (or for that matter also Taylor 1985; Nussbaum 2004; Deonna et al. 2012) require us to accept the claim that marginalized individuals – as a class or group – 'must have internalized the perception that some part of themselves is lesser or diminished. That is, they must in some sense accept or agree with the judgment that they are abject in some way' (this volume, p. 211). The problem with this, she goes on to argue, is that we are then forced to attribute persistent self-loathing to members of these marginalized groups, as they must believe that they are in some sense defective. This line of thinking, she concludes, should be rejected as it betrays 'a specious tendency for a dominant social group to pathologize a marginalized social group' (this volume, p. 211).

In the context of autism, the idea of neurodiversity is grounded precisely in the belief that a dominant social group unjustly pathologizes a marginalized social group. As a movement, the *raison d'être* of neurodiversity is precisely to counter this type of tendency. It is clearly *not* our intention here to question the existence of such specious tendencies. We will nonetheless draw attention

to three points, one driven by data, the other by theory, and the last by the first two. First, our interviews with autistic informants do bring up evidence of self-loathing. To introduce this evidence, we should explain that a lot of our informants received their autism diagnosis as adults, some time as late as in their fifties. For many, this was a watershed moment, as it brought about a reinterpretation of many aspects of their past lives, including many of their attitudes towards themselves and others. As they received their diagnosis, many informants realized that they had been blaming themselves for being defective, incapable, wrong, and so on. This showed up in their apologetic attitude towards others (for things they were not responsible for). Most interestingly, they came to the realization that there was nothing wrong with them; the problem was rather with their social environment. Finally, to use their own powerful words, they started ‘forgiving themselves’ and accepting themselves for what they were.

The second point has to do with the idea that if you feel shame in connection with aspects of your autism, your gender, your skin colour or ethnicity, and so on, then you must have ‘internalized’ the relevant standards, and must ‘accept’, ‘believe’, ‘agree with the judgement’ that you are defective in the relevant sense. The view is often accused of involving patronizing and pathologizing attitudes towards those whose shame is being explained, as it involves the claim that these individuals must believe that they are inferior, which it would be irrational for them to believe. To avoid ending up with these attitudes, one may try to show that these marginalized individuals have not internalized the relevant (bad) norms and standards. This, we believe, is the strategy chosen by Thomason (this volume): the self-conception of marginalized individuals, she claims, is not something they accept, endorse, or believe to be true of them but is continuously challenged by the (marginalized) aspects of their identity (race for racial minorities, gender for women, etc.) imposed from the outside.

Another option would be to refrain from describing the process of internalization in strong cognitivist and voluntarist terms. We don’t always know what standards or norms we have internalized, and *a fortiori* we have no beliefs and make no judgements about them and have no endorsing attitudes. In fact, we can often figure out what norms we have internalized by observing and interpreting our emotional reactions. Explicitly endorsing certain norms (whatever that may amount to) is neither necessary nor sufficient to show that we have internalized them. The process of internalization is for the most part involuntary; not the linear and immediate product of willing and choice, but the result of forces that are for the most part outside our control. As a member of a marginalized group, you are confronted from very early on with *only one* normative reality that does not fit you. You don’t have much of a choice but to accept it, even if it will mean misery for you; everybody around you

pressures you into conformity. That reality will prove difficult if not impossible to live by; and yet you witness many of your peers sailing through it. You will likely develop feelings of inadequacy, incapacity, lesser worth and wrongness. These feelings, as such, do not involve explicit judgements of any kind. They are the result of the protracted clash between the person that you are, on one hand, and the unfitting normative reality in which you have evolved, on the other. As Bartky would put it, they are your *affective* atonement to your social environment.

In conclusion, if we ask whether individuals on the spectrum are likely to internalize neuronormative norms that cause them to adopt negative existential feelings and ultimately shame, our answer is that many of them in fact do and will continue to do so for as long as their social environment remains the same. If we ask whether they are irrational or defective in any way for doing so, the answer is 'Surely not!'. Neuronormativity is the dominant game in town; they simply do not have much of a choice and, until the recent birth of neurodiversity, it would have been hard for anybody to imagine an alternative normative order. The stories we have collected show that, when real choice is available, individuals on the spectrum, like any other intelligent individual, will tend to move away from any attempt to live by norms that are not suited to them. Once again, however, internalizing a new set of norms may take time and emotional adjustment. Many informants remember how they had to rethink many parts of their lives and dreams. In some cases, receiving the diagnosis spurred the realization that some of their important projects and dreams were best dropped. One informant, for example, claimed that her autism, in connection with other conditions, meant that she would never be able to start her own family, as she had hitherto been dreaming of.

## MAKE ROOM ON THE PLANET

Shame is sufficiently significant to emerge unsolicited as a theme in conversations that were ultimately about something else, that is, well-being and ill-being for adults on the spectrum. Similarly, shame is considered enough of a topic as to prompt searching queries on relevant internet forums. When asking in what sense, if any, this shame is autistic the answer is split in two. First, autism triggers shame insofar as one perceives one's autism label negatively or, again, insofar as one perceives aspects of one's autism in negative terms. The work that society must do here is to remove these negative associations. There is, however, another, more sinister form of autistic shame, one that arises even in the absence of any perceived or explicit connection with autism. To understand these episodes of shame we need to broaden the scope of our analysis and understand the social circumstances and wider



affective dynamics that affect people on the spectrum. The key notion here is the existential feeling of wrongness, which, we argued, may well amount to Bartky's 'pervasive affective atonement' and ultimately generate Lethinen's unconstructive and self-destructive shame episodes. Here people on the spectrum feel shame in the absence of any overt connection to autism. Yet it is their autism that makes them vulnerable, along with other marginalized individuals, to the social circumstances that lead to feelings of wrongness and to self-destructive shame.

If the analysis in this chapter is along the right lines, we should avoid social circumstances that generate the types of negative existential feelings identified earlier. When meeting individuals who do not quite fit the mould and may even react negatively to our injunctions, we should not always take it personally, and not attempt to make them fit it anyway. Criticism, mockery and bullying won't work either. We should ask ourselves whether the individual doesn't fit the mould because they come from a different mould, even if they look very much like us. Nor is tolerance worth much unless it is matched by the construction from the bottom up of alternative normative orders, ones which would give people on the spectrum the possibility of creating forms of life that would be fitting for them. When confronted with people on the spectrum, we need first and foremost understanding, *as do they*. This can only be gained through epistemic humility: we need constantly to remind ourselves that the lived experience of the other (whether you are the other or not) may be very different from ours, perhaps different in ways that are beyond our grasp. As we learn to understand how the other inhabitants of the planet are different, and make room for them, we may begin to see fewer and less crippling feelings of wrongness and shame.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. The original quote from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) uses 'deficits' in lieu of 'differences'. Members of the autistic community may find the original language 'pathologizing', an attitude which we will discuss below. Also note that with the publication of the DSM-5 in 2013, Asperger Syndrome (AS) no longer appears as a separate autism condition. For the sake of clarity, however, we did explicitly refer to it because some of the qualitative data used in this study predates 2013 and because many today still refer to Asperger's Syndrome and to those affected by it informally as Aspies.

2. We tend to use the expression 'individuals on the autism spectrum' to avoid taking a stance on whether the expression 'autistic individuals' is preferable to 'individuals with autism' or vice versa. We do, however, at times use these expressions as well as the expression 'autistic shame'.

3. Given the predominantly inductive and experiential approach adopted in our study, unexpected results such as these should not be seen as poor theorizing. The approach is an instance of the interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) (Willing 2013; but also Giorgi and Giorgi 2003), the aim of which is precisely to generate understanding of the world as much as possible as the participants experience it. Our coding procedure was descriptive and, beyond that, a form of empathic interpretation. We have strived to understand the data by extrapolating the meaning implicit in it rather than by applying external, pre-determined well-being dimensions or other theoretical concepts. To this end, we have discussed the plausibility of our analysis with members of the autistic community.

4. While mixed, these findings are not contrary. Someone could indeed be aware of having only few emotions and be very accurate in identifying which emotions they are experiencing, while someone else might have lots of emotions and not have a clue about how to name them. Alexithymia is a subclinical condition characterized by difficulties in identifying and describing one's own emotional state. Its incidence in the typical population is about 10 per cent. Among people on the autism spectrum its incidence is estimated to be between 40 and 65 per cent (Bird and Cook 2013, 1). This may partly explain why the results gathered so far are mixed.

5. In our interviews, the term 'lazy' often appears at this junction. The idea here is that the systematic perception of failure in achieving certain tasks, accompanied by the usual dose of reproach and self-reproach, generates the idea that, if not inadequate, one is at least a lazy individual.

6. See Lewis (1971, 30) and Niedenthal et al. (1994) for the claim that guilt focusses on action while shame focusses on the self. See Deonna et al. (2012, 104–107) for a defence of the claim that the focus of shame is not necessarily the self as a whole, the global self, but rather aspects of the self, the localized self.

7. We are grateful to the Velux Foundation for believing in the importance of our project ('Autistic Role Models: Positive Pedagogy for Youth on the Autism Spectrum'), for their generous financial help, and for their unflinching support throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. We would also like to thank Alessandra Fussi, Ken Richman, and Krista Thomason for their invaluable comments, and the participants to our study who have kindly let us in on their planet and without which none of this would have been possible.

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