**The Individual and Society – The Social Role of Shame**

**Introduction**

In the age of the Internet and social media, much discussion has arisen around the subject of “shaming” as a noxious phenomenon by which an individual is publically chastened by the “herd” without so much as a debate, a trial or even a justified reason necessarily. Even though the feeling of shame has a long-standing role in the relationship between individual and society, shaming goes far beyond it – it is unbridled, has no moral limits, no fear of law or repercussions, and no restrictions. There is an important distinction to be made between shame and shaming, and in order to make it we must first understand the social and cultural function of the feeling of shame. Shame is a social mechanism employed in our interactions with others, and thus the externalized expression of shame has an important role to play in how an individual relates to society. Shame is the body’s reaction to dealing with social pressure.

Edelman elucidates that even though human emotions have a biological, evolutionary basis, in accordance with Darwin’s theory, it is through an individual’s interaction with his or her environment that the appropriate response is selected (Edelman 1992). Gonen, in turn, differentiates between primary emotions, such as fear, which are instilled in us from birth and interpret our physical state as processed by the amygdala, as opposed to secondary emotions, such as the complementary guilt and shame, which are acquired through learning and are located in the frontal cortex of the brain (Gonen 2003). The physiological function of primary emotions is to sound an alarm in the body in times of crisis before the sensory information has even been processed, unlike secondary emotions whose response time is very different and which involve cognizance and understanding.

Most theories of emotion place great emphasis on the way individuals judge and assess their society and more immediate environment. These assessments are shaped by culture and therefore they are highly influential in determining emotion (Gonen 2003, 46-47). They are made based on information found on the conscious level and include the individual’s judgment. Emotion is a process that molds the subject’s relationship with his or her surroundings. The distinction between positive and negative emotions is also made based on a cultural assessment. In Western culture, guilt and shame are emotions that include a negative assessment of the environment or of the self. The ways in which we experience emotions differ from culture to culture, and our emotional patterns are significantly influenced by the culture around us. That is to say, it is the significance attributed to an event that evokes the emotion, not the event itself (Ben-Zeev 1996).

In this article we will first attempt to understand the complex interaction between the individual and society, as described by numerous scholars and thinkers, and examine more closely the role of shame in this relationship throughout the history of Western culture. As mentioned above, culture has an important moral role in constructing the concept of the individual and in developing the mechanism of shame as a cultural value and as a deep structure. The methodology most fitting to examine these cultural constructs is the genealogical method, by way of which we shall come to see that shaming is not an essentially new phenomenon in Western culture, but only a new mode of expressing old patterns.

The basic assumption of the genealogical method is that the fundamental structures of any given culture are to be found deep within its roots. That is to say, culture is founded upon essential constructs that are so deeply embedded within it that one cannot see them except by looking backwards, to eras past. Genealogy destabilizes our perception of these constructs as being self-evident. That which sometimes seems inevitable is not essentially a historical necessity. The domain that genealogy deals with is the past; however, its real interest lies in understanding and criticizing present reality. In order to thoroughly understand social shaming in the present we must examine the cultural sources of this phenomenon. The term “genealogy”, in its simplest and most general sense, means the study of generations, of origins. For our purposes, we shall adopt the meaning ascribed to it in the current philosophical discourse – a type of critical methodology. Exposing the past through the use of the genealogical method brings us face to face with the contingent and minimizes the control that necessity has over our lives. It is this change in perspective that enables us to reassess our positions and take responsibility for them (Deleuze 2006, 2; Foucault 1977, 152).

**The Individual and Society**

Already in the Book of Genesis, it is written: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18). Ecclesiastes too, he of the “vanity of vanities”, emphasizes the importance of togetherness and the dangers of solitude: “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). For human kind, since antiquity and through to present day modern societies, “herd mentality” has had great influence as an instinct essential to our survival. On the one hand, the social group, the state, the nation, the party, etc. provide security and frameworks of belonging which give us confidence and womb-like protection; on the other hand, they deprive us of the independence, the singularity and the richness of solitariness (Fromm 2010).

When one thinks tribally, “I” means “we”. The development of the individual as separate from the tribe has to do with the development of self-awareness. Most of the genealogies of individualisms indicate the Renaissance as their starting point; however, there is evidence to suggest that self-awareness was already developing in the classical era, as well as in the ancient Jewish tradition. Individualism is identified as one of the central characteristics of Western culture and remains one of the traits that distinguish the West from other civilizations today (Huntington 1997). Burckhardt maintains that the individual, in the modern sense of the world, was born in the Renaissance. In Italy, in the late Middle Ages, individualism can be seen blossoming among all social classes and affecting all spheres of human activity (Burckhardt 1944). There are many factors that led to this sudden flourishing, even though signs of the development of personality as a self-sufficient and independent driving force can be spotted in much earlier cultures as well. The Renaissance, however, saw the arrival of individualism in its modern sense as man transitioned from a pre-individualistic state of existence to a state characterized by the full awareness of the self as a discrete entity (Fromm 2010). That being said, most scholars find that both individualism and humanism were renewed rather than invented in the Renaissance, since the Middle Ages also abound with evidence of personality being viewed as distinct (Shanahan 1992, 23-4).

In the Middle Ages, the individual was defined by his social role in the feudal hierarchy. With the collapse of the feudal system, this sense of identity was rocked to its core. According to Fromm, the question of identity is not just philosophical, it is existential (Fromm 2010). Many are willing to risk their lives, give up their privacy, sacrifice their freedom, their independence, their proper thoughts and personal decisions, silence the discourse that one has with one’s budding self during one’s alone time, and share everything, all for the sake of belonging to herd – if only to experience the feeling of superficial identity.

Man’s purpose is not to separate himself from the consciousness of others, for much of his understanding of himself and the world is in relation to this general framework. His goal is to try and become an individual with a high level of self, personal and social awareness. In fact, an individual is a person that views himself as responsible for personally – or socially-publicly – examining and formulating metaphysical, scientific, political and sociological axioms. This person’s individual leanings don’t necessarily align themselves with the views accepted by his social group, and he may agree with or go against the political and religious outlooks of his society (Raby, 2009). Nevertheless, disobedience and resistance to the group has a rich history of meeting with punishment and social shaming, in Western culture at least. For centuries, kings, religious authorities, feudal lords, industry magnates and parents have insisted that obedience is a virtue, while disobedience – a sin (Fromm, 2010).

The desire to belong to a social herd also stems from our fear of loneliness, which is perceived as a psychological state of sadness and melancholy due to a lack of company. Weiss (1975) points out that loneliness is not caused by one’s state of solitude, but by a life that is lacking fulfilling social relationship. Loneliness is a subjective experience that is not paramount to social isolation; rather it stems from a deficiency in the individual’s social connections. Social loneliness is also not necessarily identical to psychological loneliness, and certainly not to creative solitude, or the solitude one seeks in order to examine one’s self. A person can be socially isolated and lead a fulfilling and intensely creative mental life.

Conversely, there are those who emphasize the importance of solitude and the pleasure we can derive from it, but qualify that solitude is good when it is intermittent, when this private domain exists alongside friendship ties, when it does not take over one’s life, but is rather a coveted and voluntarily chosen part of it. Positive solitude is the solitariness and aloneness in which the “I” encounters itself. People who have rich inner lives do not feel lonely in their solitude. There is a full mental life to be had in the state of aloneness, a heightened experience of listening and attentiveness, an opening up to the world and an ampleness that is wholly unlike the loneliness which we define as a subjective feeling of emptiness, seclusion, depression and distress. Schopenhauer, for one, presents solitude in a positive light: in his eyes, only when man is alone can he be wholly himself. Man is only free when he is alone (Schopenhauer 1969).

Aloneness is required for the creation of the self. In order to lead a full inner life, one has to retire once in a while from the herd into individuality as described by Nietzsche: “Would you go into isolation, my brother? Would you seek the way to yourself?” (Nietzsche 2003, 47). But the way to the self is anything but straightforward: “But the worst enemy you can meet will always be yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and forests… You must be willing to burn in your own flame: how could you become new unless you had first become ashes?” (Nietzsche 2003, 48-49).

As long as man inhabits the solitary realm of the self while belonging in parallel to the realm of the many and remains responsible for his actions, operating out of a full awareness and leading a productive, collaborative and creative discourse with his social group, his solitude will be a tonic to him, without loss of freedom or identity, according to Spinoza (Harpaz 2013). Understanding, in Spinoza’s view, is the foundation of freedom. The very state of awareness frees man from the yoke of his instincts and urges, as well as the influence of outside forces. However, in order to achieve this, man must be aware of his actions and understand the reality in which he operates.

Russell (1996) teaches us that a proper balance must be found between belonging and separateness, or aloneness, rather than a clear cut decision in favor of either one or the other. He writes that human life must contain a wide space which is ruled by what is known as the “herd instinct”, but it also must delimit a narrow space where this instinct is barred from entering. This narrow space belongs to the private domain. It is not only an intellectual domain, but a physical and emotional one as well. Only through the fully led “me-life”, through the hours of aloneness and separateness, through opening up to the rich spheres of existence, through creativity and imagination, through personal pleasures of the body and of the mind – only through these can man glimpse the full scope of his personality upon its many facets, and with it the need to discover and fulfill himself.

In addition to the private domain, the individual also needs the public domain. The encounter with the other is important for one to be able to create himself as an individual. Lévinas claims that the self is defined as a subjectivity, as a subject, as an “I”, precisely because it is exposed to the other (Lévinas 1986). In his conception, it is impossible to create a deep bond of sharing and openness with the other unless we undertake the voyage into the depths of our own souls (Lévinas & Melville 1978). The process of revealing one’s self to the other is accompanied by discomfort and sometimes even pain. The other is not just another person located outside of the self, but the internalized other who resides in the hidden regions of the I-experience. “The ethics of the other” are central to Emanuel Lévinas’s philosophy, as he sees the commitment to the other as our responsibility towards that which is not mine or which doesn’t even have anything to do with me (Lévinas 1986). The recognition of the other establishes me as a subject in relation to the other.

The relationship between self and other are also central to Buber’s dialogical philosophy, especially the mutual relationship between the “I” and the “thou” (Buber 1970). Buber sees the personal space created in a dialog as a discrete dimension shared exclusively by the two people who have entered a relationship, a true conversation. For Buber, dialog with the other is an essential condition for exiting the state of aloneness. Only when one person recognizes another as a person does he break through the barrier of his solitude (Buber 1970). In Levinas’s philosophy, on the other hand, the encounter between the other calling for help and the self being called for help is asymmetrical (Lévinas, 1986). The interaction created between the “I” and the “other” begins with recognizing the “I” as an individual, as the self. The general mechanism through which the self can develop is reflexive – it is the ability that people have of examining themselves through the eyes of others (Ritzer & Goodman 2003).

**Shame and Shaming**

Let us now proceed to examine the social and cultural function of shame in the West, as it is inscribed in the culture’s origins. Throughout the centuries, this emotion seems to have had an important role in establishing the relationship between the individual and society, and therefore society, since antiquity, has used it to chastise individuals in order to preserve established norms – a phenomenon which is currently at its peak on the various social networks.

Shame is a strong negative emotion that arises when a person feels criticized by society for an action that goes against the accepted norms. The physical sensation of shame is an admission of guilt. Darwin may have viewed shame as a universal emotion, but emotions are culture-dependent, and since the main function of emotion is communicative, it is acquired through social stimuli (Gonen 2003). Emotions dictate how an individual must act within a group. Every group finds it necessary to regulate and calibrate the ways in which its members express themselves emotionally. Some cultures regard shame as an essential emotion for normative social function and therefore they encourage its development from a young age, instructing its members to feel ashamed of certain behaviors, while other cultures don’t encourage it at all. Needless to say, shame is bound up with our sense of guilt and with our conscience.

In Western culture, shame has to do with the gaze of the other. Shame is the discomfort created when one feels one’s self transformed into an object. According to Sartre, the man who is ashamed is stripped of his humanity because he is denied the independence of being the looking subject rather than the looked-upon object (Sartre 1956, 287-289), an idea which also appears in his famed play *No Exit* (Sartre 1989). The play takes place in a room which, as it turns out, is located in hell. The three characters in the play are led into the room at different points in time. The door is then locked and all three of them expect their torturer to arrive imminently – however, no one else comes into the room. As their conversation evolves, it turns out that the differences in each of their world views and systems of values make their company insufferable to each other, makes it hell. This revelation comes from the shame that each of them feels in turn as they are made into the object that the other two observe. The other, as Sartre posits in the play, becomes a mirror to each of them, reflecting who they are back at them, and the individual has no way of knowing who he is without this reflection. The exposure and the unrelenting gaze make this relationship into a hell: “So this is hell. I'd never have believed it” (Sartre 1989, 45). Hell is the gaze of the other: “each of us will act as torturer of the two others” (Sartre 1989, 21).

We first learn about the power of the gaze from the book of Genesis. The word “ashamed” appears in the story of Adam and Eve even before they’d eaten from the tree of knowledge: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). After they’d eaten from the tree, however, their eyes are open: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7). With the opening of their eyes comes the awareness of nakedness, which is followed by the need to cover up and even hide: “and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). They hide from the gaze, which is perceived as threatening, condemning, uncomprehending and unaccepting. The words for “shame” and “genitals” in biblical Hebrew are derived from the same root. Shame is implicit in the revelation of one’s sexuality in the presence of the other; the emergence of awareness following Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge puts an end to the possibility of walking around naked in the Garden of Eden.

Shame often entails the feeling of overexposure. It makes people act with extra caution for fear that they might expose themselves to situations in which they might experience rejection, disgrace or dishonor. People fear being looked at with scorn or pity, and above all, they try to avoid the self-castigation provoked by the gaze of others around them. The social sanctions of ostracism, shaming and public denunciation were thoroughly described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), one of the most prominent thinkers of the Enlightenment, as well as one of its harshest critics. When he published his books *The Social Contract* and *Emile*, his writings were banned and Rousseau was forced to leave Paris. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau talks about the social malaise, the shaming and the public scorn he’d experienced, as well as his subsequent loneliness:

All the time when, untroubled in my innocence, I imagined that men felt nothing but benevolence and respect towards me and opened my frank and trusting heart to my friends and brothers, the traitors were silently ensnaring me in traps forged in the depths of hell…Would it not have been better to combat my persecutors with their own weapons, adopting their principles rather than clinging to my own illusions, which I cannot defend against their onslaught? (Rousseau 1984, 56-58)

I swear to Heaven that if I could instantly retract the lie which exonerates me and tell the truth which incriminates me without blackening myself still further by this recantation, I would do so with all my heart, but the shame of thus being caught in the act is a further obstacle to honesty and I feel genuine repentance without daring to make amends. (Rousseau 1984, 74)

As we’ve established, shame is a social mechanism that is put into action in our interactions with others. The understanding that the individual is made to feel shame by the society of which he is a member whenever he commits a moral transgression or goes against the accepted social norms, has throughout history served authorities and governments as an educational tool in employing deliberate public shaming.

The most ancient example of shaming mentioned in the Bible is the “mark of Cain”, which is part of the story of Cain and Able, the story that recounts the first murder in human history. Able was a shepherd, whereas Cain worked the earth. Cain made sacrifices to God and brought him an offering made up of the fruits of the earth. Following his brother’s example, Able offered God his herd’s first-born lambs and their mothers’ milk. God accepted Able’s offering graciously, however he rejected Cain’s sacrifice. Cain chose to deal with his disappointment and jealousy through violence, and so he murdered his brother. “And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground” (Genesis 4:9-10). Cain feels guilt and shame and elects to hide his act of murder from God, thus his sin is twofold. God punishes Cain for his sin by cursing the earth which he used to work and condemning him to a life of endless wandering: “And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth” (Genesis 4:11-12).

Cain, realizing that a life of rootless vagabonding will leave him exposed to great danger, turns to God with a complaint that expresses his great fear. He is scared of the animals on one hand, and of the elements on the other, in case they should decide to kill him in return for the atrocious murder he has committed. Therefore, God chooses to brand Cain with a mark that will give him protection and shelter from his enemies and quell the fear in his heart: “And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him” (Genesis 4:15). On the other hand, the mark of Cain carries an important social, educational and moral message: it is forbidden to take the law into one’s own hands, and it is doubly forbidden to seek retribution of the eye-for-an-eye variety. The term “Mark of Cain” has since passed into colloquial use. It has come to denote a negative label, a tag that attests to some moral flaw, analogous in fact to public shaming.

The display of one individual’s deed in public, for the eyes of all to see, has the moral intent of deterring others from committing the same deed: “And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously” (Deuteronomy 17:12-3); “many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” (Psalms 40:3). In ancient times, and even in the Middle Ages, it was common to mete out punishment that would shame the perpetrators. In some places, the guilty or the accused were made to go out in public wearing a wooden board advertising their crime and demeaning them. This sentence, consisting basically of humiliation, was considered harsher than a monetary or physical penalty.

The religious customs of a culture have immense influence over many generations. When worldviews are deeply entrenched in the religious experience, which we might assume based on Jung, they have the hidden power to exert force and orient culture while constantly changing and preserving themselves in the secular experience as similar structures but with new forms of expression (Jung 1916). Jung demonstrates this using the example of Catholicism, showing that despite the disappearance of certain Catholic ideologies in the period following the Middle Ages, their vitality was never extinguished and they are still present in the culture. Our modern consciousness, according to Jung, is soaked through with Christianity (Jung 1916, 81-82). Freud too concludes that religion has tremendous power to control mankind’s most visceral emotions (Freud 1990). Religion has constructed a comprehensive and ensnaring world view, which has withstood countless major shocks to remain firm and valid to this very day. Therefore, we shall proceed with a genealogical examination of the emotion of shame and its social function in the religious foundations of Western culture.

First, let us examine the place of shame in the Jewish sources that underlie the practice of confession, as a comparative basis for Catholicism, which is the foundational religion of Western culture. In Judaism, during Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), confession of sins does not entail shame. It is vague and general, forgoing the mention of names, times and places. The confession is made in the first person plural, without placing blame on one sinner in particular: “We are blameworthy. We have betrayed our ideals. We have denied the rights of others. We have used empty words” (Mahzor Seder Avoda 2004, 403). The supplication for general forgiveness – “we implore thee, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, to forgive all our failings, pardon all our wrong-doings, and grant us atonement” (ibid, 495) – nevertheless contains a detailed list of sins, divided into categories: “For our sins committed by opening our lips,” “for our sins committed through illicit relationships,” “for our sins committed openly or secretly,” “for our sins committed through deceit and falsehood”, “for our sins committed through neglect of parents and teachers,” “for our sins committed through the desecration of religion” (ibid, 497-499). The confession is not individual or personal; it is collective and pronounced out loud in first person plural and therefore does not entail the shame that is needed to feel guilt.

The personal confession, in Judaism, is whispered to one’s self, internally, without public sharing. Thus, no wonder that there is some controversy over the subject of specifying the sin: “Some decree that the details of the sin must be given…for the sake of shame…for the sinner must feel **ashamed** of his sins…while some opine…that there is no need to describe the sin. He can pronounce the sin in alphabetical order, even out loud, for this is not describing the sin in detail, as everyone pronounces it equally” (Zevin 1965, 412-455).

The attitude of the Jewish Sages (the Chazal) towards shame is divided – on the one hand they said “a bashful one cannot learn” (Pirkei Avot, 2:5) and encouraged the students to be bold, not to be afraid to ask questions that may seem shameful. On the other hand they also said “The brazen—to purgatory; the bashful—to paradise” (Pirkei Avot, 5:20). Thus there is a need for a measure of shame, for when a man is utterly shameless, he may act in detrimental ways without any consideration for others or society as a whole. It is important, however, to note that they likened shaming others or humiliating them to murder: “It is more comfortable for a person to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to humiliate another in public to avoid being cast into the furnace” (Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia, 59a); “Rabbi Elazar of Modi'in would say: One who…humiliates his friend in public…although he may possess Torah knowledge and good deeds, he has no share in the World to Come” (Pirkei Avot, 3:11).

The question of shame in the context of confession is fundamentally different in Christianity. The sacrament of confession and atonement is supposed to afford constant moral betterment with the purpose of gradually approaching that impeccable obedience to God which characterized man’s existence before the original sin. Christian confession, from the thirteenth century onwards, had become a ritual of primary importance in the Christian world, one with long-term psychological and social repercussions. Thirteenth-century theologians were aware of the cleansing power of confession as an act that unburdens the conscience and resolves internal conflicts stemming from the confessor’s great shame and sense of guilt. The call for self-examination and the admission of failures was a positive element in and of itself (even though the sin was in the eyes of God and the moral code was that of austere Catholicism), however widespread misuse of this tool has led to mass anxiety and excessive guilt (Horowitz 1979).

In the world of the Middle Ages, Catholicism created a cycle of judgment, guilt and punishment. Spiritual existence came to be governed by a pendulum swinging between threat and encouragement, between punishment and forgiveness, all in order to allow believers to get over the main and inescapable obstacle to confession – shame. Initially, Christian confession was not conducted in a private confession booth, but publically before the whole congregation, because the element of shame and the act of shaming was an essential part of the ritual (Kleinberg 1995). In the immediate sense, confession and atonement granted the sinner the right to receive communion and take part in the social life of the congregation. But the propaganda efforts that the preachers resorted to in order to encourage confession did not skim on threats of hellfire and brimstone, and thus went a long way to contribute to the air of magic and mystery that became attached to this act (Horowitz 1979). The Church authorities looked on with apprehension as, under the influence of preachers, a growing folklore developed around the practice of confession. This folklore largely did away with the psychological aspect of unburdening one’s soul, and emphasized the immediate causal and quasi-mystical connection between speech and redemption – right here, right now. This was, as we’d mentioned earlier, the result of the work of the more militant factions among the preachers. With time, the Church transformed confession into a recurring private ritual, rather than a public-communal spectacle because the shame of it became too much to bear.

Feuerbach, on the other hand, gives us a somewhat different perspective on the power of confession (Feuerbach 1957). He posits that the exaggerated importance attached to sin stems from the exaggerated importance which became attached to the individual. The only way an individual can be driven to hair rending and self-flagellation over his sins is if he sees himself as complete, if he has no need of others (Feuerbach 1957, 44-45). As Thomas Kempis puts it: “No man is worthy of heavenly comfort unless he have diligently exercised himself in holy compunction” (Kempis 1959, 42). Nietzsche too recognized the gravity of the situation: according to him, systems of religion and morality based on feelings of guilt and shame, such as Christianity, are the main reason behind the weakening of man’s natural force and thus also the stagnation and atrophy of culture and intellectual progress (Golomb 1987, 130).

Christianity, according to Rosenheim, had instilled feelings of guilt and shame in its followers and had thereby amplified its psychological influence (Rosenheim 2003). After all, fear is a very effective tool for securing dominance. On the theological level, there is correlation between fear and behavior, in that the anxiety that the sinner experiences and the great shame that accompanies confession is already punishment for the sin that has been committed. In Freud’s analysis, religions had never underestimated the importance of guilt as an element of culture, for they claim to redeem mankind from this feeling guilt (Freud 1994). The sense of religious guilt, our conscience, is the sentence meted out by the strict super-ego (Freud 1994, 51). This relationship between the individual and religion is based on fear, judgment and punishment. In comparing Christianity to the ancient Greek religion of antiquity, Nietzsche claims that the Greek religion never demanded that people tarnish themselves in their own esteem. On the contrary, the Greeks even let their Gods reflect the darker sides of their personalities (Nietzsche 1924, 43).

Shame can also be viewed as an indispensable emotion, in that it nudges the consciousness and evokes regret and self-awakening. Without it, there is no change, growth, forgiveness or turning over a new leaf. The possibility of biographical rehabilitation, the re-biography so to speak, depends on whether the meta-codes dictating a person’s life have a hermetic or a hermeneutic attitude towards the past; whether they allow for a reinterpretation of the personal past (Rotenberg 1997, 84). The great problem arises, of course, when an external, authoritative power, such as religious authority, social pressure, parents or even the super-ego overuse and abuse shame. Culture, in many instances, is something that is imposed upon a reluctant majority by a minority that has managed to take over the means of power and coercion (Freud 1994). Personal, internal shame is essential for psychological change, however, when it becomes public and degrading, it has no positive value, for it carries with it no opportunity for rehabilitation, only destruction, fear and ostracism, and has no psychological benefit.

While shame in general can be seen as imperative for change and growth, public shaming is destructive and impossible to rehabilitate – it is the mark of Cain. In many cases, shaming is motivating by dark feelings of vengeance, the desire to humiliate and injustice. The kind of shaming that is rampant in the social media today consists of putting people on instantaneous public trials which tarnish their reputations in the eye of society without any sense of proportion in regards to the transgression attributed to the accused or any consideration for their positive deeds and qualities. As Sartre writes in *No Exit*, “can one judge a life by a single action?” (Sartre 1982, 43).

Institutional and social shaming is also perceived as punishment and has an element of deterrence – the objective to prevent this kind of behavior from the individual or within society in general in the future (Sellin 1980). This kind of destructive, public and unbridled social shaming used to take place in the distant past in the town square. For example, the 17th century puritans of New England had a particularly cruel system of punishment that included public shaming, as documented in one of the public records from the era: when a carpenter asked for an exorbitant price for a hanging post, he ended up hung from the very same post that the town authorities had ordered from him (Rotenberg 1994). In 1787, Benjamin Rush, one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, wrote an incisive article demanding that public beatings, pillories and other punishments by humiliation that used to be carried out in the town square for public viewing be banned (Runes 1947). Fifty years later, public punishment ceremonies were banned in every state in the U.S.A., with the exception of Delaware.

As previously stated, we must distinguish between shame as an emotion vital to the development of a healthy conscience and shaming, which is an ancient and reprehensible social act. In most social systems, shaming is triggered by an individual’s disobedience to social norms. Obedience is perceived as the highest of virtues, while disobedience is the worst of sins. The individual feels shame and fear while performing the act of disobedience. At the basis of these emotions, according to Fromm is the Christian education that interprets man’s disobedience to God as the single act that corrupted him and his seed so fundamentally that he could only be saved by divine grace (Fromm 2010).

In our current era, with social networks continuing to expand, giving every individual access to a pulpit from which they can express their opinions and determine the fate of a person or a company for better or for worse, the phenomenon of shaming has returned to center stage, this time in a more widespread, viral and global fashion than ever before. Society necessitates shame as a personal emotion based on free will and morality; however it is a great shame when society begins to shame publically, ruthlessly and violently, in the absence of human respect and compassion, just as the fanatical preachers did in the thirteenth century Church. These Christian extremists did so in the name of God, and thereby, at least according to Nietzsche, shamed God by their actions (Nietzsche 1974). Since, as Nietzsche put it, “God is dead”, our responsibility as a society is even greater. The idea of God’s death, “Gott ist tot”, first appears in *The Gay Science*, as spoken by the mad man:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours. ran to the market place. and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" -As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one…The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him-you and I. All of us are his murderers…What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? … Do we not feel the breath of empty space? (Nietszche 1974, 181).

The death of God, according to Nietzsche, is not simply a shift in the scientific worldview; it is an event of dire ethical implications. He does not speak, of course, of the objective existence of God in physical reality, but of God as the foundation of morality in the soul of mankind. The death of God in the modern era, for Nietzsche, has left man without morals to guide him. This could lead to nihilism (Nietzsche 1974, 287), a problem that Nietzsche tried to resolve by seeking out new, deeper values than those of Christianity, which man could believe in and live by.

Killing God is described by Nietzsche as a “grand act”. Now that the religious system of morals has been lifted, the door is open to create new theories of morality that are independent of religion. Nietzsche believed that man is something that must be overcome. Man creates morality rather than the herd with its social norms. By his will to power, man will distance himself from social morality and revel against it. Man must free himself from the conventions and ideals of his era, and examine the world independently, without illusion. The valueless and unbridled social herd is dangerous, as Nietzsche takes pains to describe and to warn: “Life is a fountain of delight, but where the rabble also drinks, all wells are poisoned” (Nietzsche 2003, 72).

A little earlier in the 19th century, John Stuart Mill also warns us against modern herd mentality and the danger of losing one’s unique identity. Mill warns us that if we think we’ve done a great thing in making ourselves similar to one another, we forget that it is the differences between one man and the next that attract our attention, that makes one curious regarding the other’s flaws or his preferences, or the possibility of combining the various advantages of the two to create together something better than each could be separately (Mill 1871).

The structure of modern society has affected man in two main ways: he has become more independent, more critical and self-reliant, but at the same time he has become more isolated and more terrified (Fromm 2010). This following, among other things, the blurring of the traditional lines between the public and the private spheres, which began in the course of the 20th century and led to a rising preoccupation of the individual with his unique emotional world, mainly through various techniques of exposing the “self” and his relationships to others (Illouz 2008). If the subject is not defined as essentially different than the object, i.e. the other, or if he is not separate from him in a demarcated way, then his internal self will swallow the “outside”, the object, into itself. This way, the uniqueness of the subject is abolished and the limits between the subject and the object, between the “I” and the “other”, are blurred.

In his book *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor presents his apprehensions of the dark side of individualism in the “me generation” and goes so far as to call is “malaise”. This same preoccupation with the “me”, according to Taylor, flattens and narrows the scope of our lives, voids them of meaning and makes the individual more apathetic towards the other and society as a whole (Taylor 1991). This kind of individual is not interested in the other. However, the “other”, by the very fact of his existence, disturbs the peace of mind of the “I”. The “other” is a constant provocation that forces an awareness of the other’s “otherness” in the equation.

**Epilogue**

The new town square and the sharing that takes place nowadays on social media must be understood as part of the overall conception of the Internet as a democratic, open and free space that enables non-hierarchical communication between the individual and society. The absolute or relative anonymity offered by the Internet, as well as the control and filtering of the ways we express ourselves in cyberspace has allegedly opened the gates to introverted personality types or those who have difficulties communicating, for whom the Internet can be an empowering space. On the one hand, some see this new society and its social connectivity as a new evolutionary stage (Christakis & Fowler 2009). They call this new stage “Homo dictyous” – the connected, or networked individual – and claim that the Internet enables us to express the altruistic aspects of our natures, as well as collaborate better with likeminded individuals. Others, however, see the current digital culture as one that encourages “Clicktivism”, whereby people pay lips service to a project or a cause by clicking alone and not through real collaborative partnership (Graham & Dutton, 2014). In instances of public shaming too, at times the act of shaming involves a simple click with no attention paid to the ethical repercussions of one’s actions.

In today’s world, we are caught in a kind of digital vertigo in which we lose our bearings in regards to what is appropriate or inappropriate to share, what is private and what is public, and no less importantly – what is an acceptable response to the “other” and what is not. In many ways we have regressed to the herd mentality and the herd instinct. As Kimchi puts it, online social media users tend to believe that one can fully know a person based on a narrowed down list of their basic qualities, and equally judge them based on superficial information alone, including giving consent, or at least not objecting to shaming (Kimchi 2010). As time goes on, humanity finds itself in a new social state known as “alone together”. This is a social illusion which gives the individual the impression of being connected to society, whereas in fact the connection in question is superficial and impersonal, as opposed to real, intimate, interpersonal discourse (Turkle 2011).

This inherent change has had a dramatic effect on the interpersonal and social relationships between people, causing us to move further and further away from face to face discussions and focus more and more on social ties based on digital communication. Bauman adds and claims that the appearance of virtual closeness has rendered human contact to more frequent, more superficial, more intense and briefer (Bauman 2003). The phenomenon of shaming that we see on social media is the result of a herd dictatorship that tolerates no discussion, thorough deliberation or reasonable resolution. The herd has the ability to influence us all for the worse, as Seneca described over two thousand years ago:

You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd. It is something to which you cannot entrust yourself yet without risk. I at any rate…never come back home with quite the same moral character I went out with; something or other becomes unsettled where I had achieved internal peace, some on o other of the things I had put to flight reappears on the scene. (Seneca 1969, 41)

“Avoid,” I cry, “whatever is approved of by the mob, and things that are the gift of chance. Whenever circumstance brings some welcome thing your way, stop in suspicion and alarm…Anyone among you who wishes to lead a secure life will do his very best to steer well wide of these baited bounties. (Seneca 1969, 45)

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