

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Shame and self-image in Sartre and Bernard Williams

Ana Falcato

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Nova University Lisbon, Portugal

Correspondence

Ana Falcato, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas,
NOVA FCSH, Colégio Almada Negreiros
CAN room 119, Campus de Campolide, 1070-
312 Lisbon, Portugal.
Email: anafalcato83@gmail.com

Abstract

Analysis of the feeling of shame plays a crucial role in classical phenomenological accounts of intersubjectivity, and shame has increasingly become a core topic in Anglo-American moral philosophy since at least the publication of Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity* in 1993. While Williams's philosophical approach to the deep moral implications of shame was indeed groundbreaking, previous philosophical readings of the emotion were already in the offing, including Jean-Paul Sartre's prodigious representation of the moment shame reaches consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*, first published in 1943. This paper compares Sartre's and Williams's interpretive frameworks for understanding the rich (first-personal) experience of shame, explaining in detail how they not only complement but also illuminate each other, thereby offering a novel understanding of shame's relation to the moral, nonmoral, and ethical self.

KEYWORDS

Bernard Williams, internalization of feeling, Jean-Paul Sartre, pre-reflective cogito, self-image, shame

1 | INTRODUCTION

Shame is a primitive element of our human psychology and a critical aspect of our earliest socialization, above all in the context of the family. Precisely because of its interiority and felt profundity, however, achieving an “exteriorized,” systematic, and self-standing theory of its inner workings may seem daunting, if not impossible. In this paper, I offer a systematic comparison of Jean Paul-Sartre's and Bernard Williams's theoretical approaches to the first-personal experience of shame. While each of the two men brings his own philosophical framework to the discussion, the resulting accounts not only complement but indeed illuminate each other, particularly when it comes to tracing the emergence and evolution of the feeling of shame in the human mind and its moral and metaphysical implications.

Recent philosophical work on shame has attempted to resituate this emotion within the realm of morality, largely in response to the indirect underrating of its moral force within the framework of Kantian ethics (see Falcato 2021 and 2024). Williams's 1993 work *Shame and Necessity* is perhaps the main impulse for this trend. Williams's views on shame can be classified as “genealogical” in two distinct senses—one quasi-psychoanalytic, the other historical.¹ On the more psychoanalytic model, his analysis of the primary forms of shame explores the gradual emergence of the emotion in the individual psyche, beginning with the direct experience of one's own nakedness and consequent feelings of exposure, and ending with the internalization of the critical gaze of the Other. In a more historical sense, Williams uses the genealogical approach to undermine a core group of ideas, derived from modern-day renderings of Kant, that conceive of shame as a premoral or even nonmoral emotion. To this end, he challenges the presumed “moral childishness” of anthropological and philological portrayals of pre-Socratic Greek culture that perpetuate this view. By putting Homeric poetry in dialogue with the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, Williams demonstrates the extent to which these ancient literary masterpieces highlight the significance of shame in ethical life.

Sartre portrays the phenomenon of shame differently. In *Being and Nothingness*, shame is introduced as a fleeting impression that reverts the threat of solipsism that looms over any transcendental philosophical project. The well-known example that Sartre develops at length in the book is that of a man who, caught peeping through a keyhole, experiences a wave of shame (Sartre 2014, 298). Central to his analysis is an acknowledgment of the vulgarity of the gesture that triggers shame and, in Sartre's own words, the fact that shame is always “[shame] of myself before the Other” (Sartre 1992, 289). Witnessing the inappropriateness or vulgarity of my gesture, the Other, whose subjective parity I recognize, opposes my consciousness as a mediator between me and myself, triggering a psychological reaction that may at first induce either retraction or self-flagellation, both of which are due to an impression of (personal) objectification—a stance that can come to be reciprocated. Within the metaphysical structures articulated in *Being and Nothingness*, shame is perhaps the only subjective experience that makes recognition possible. As Sartre concludes at the close of this stretch of his analysis: “Thus shame is a unitary apprehension with three dimensions: ‘I am ashamed of myself before the Other’” (Sartre 1992, 289).

The argument developed in this paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I analyze Williams's view of shame, focusing mainly on the first sense of the genealogical reading described above. I then compare this analysis with Sartre's classic reading of the phenomenon of shame (*honte*) in the third part of *Being and Nothingness* (1992, 221ff.). Shame is a crucial emotion in Sartre's ontology, revealing that I exist *for-the-Other* and that such openness or self-exposure is co-constitutive of the human reality that Sartre, following Hegel, defines as the *for-itself*. In comparing Sartre's view of shame with that articulated by Williams, it becomes clear that the latter harnesses shame for a very different philosophical task. Whereas for Sartre the philosophical relevance of investigating shame is to provide resources for defending his account of the self against the threat of solipsism, Williams's central goal is to reveal the specifically ethical importance of shame. In section 3, I argue that Williams's idea of emotional internalization is not only ethically illuminating but can also further Sartre's anti-solipsistic ambitions, thus pointing the way toward a new, post-Kantian metaphysics of morality. Sections 4 and 5 close the argument, by deploying the virtues inherent in each view.

¹Jonathan Lear (2006) stresses the affinities between the genealogical approach and the psychoanalytic model.

2 | WILLIAMS ON SHAME AND THE MECHANISMS OF SHAME

In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams analyzes the relevance of shame for both ancient and modern moral life, taking as his point of departure Homeric poetry and the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, especially *Antigone* and *Hippolytus*.² A key passage in which Williams links the basic experience of feeling ashamed to one of the main meanings of the Greek term *aidōia*, usually rendered “shame” in modern English, argues: “The basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. It is straightforwardly connected with nakedness, particularly in sexual connections. The word *aidōia*, a derivative of *aidos*, ‘shame,’ is a standard Greek word for the genitals, and similar terms are found in other languages. The reaction is to cover oneself or to hide, and people naturally take steps to avoid the situations that call for it” (Williams 1993, 78). Williams’s study articulates a schematic Nietzschean model that dismantles and reframes modern moral outlooks as part of the task of recovering a pre-Socratic philosophico-literary framework. The moral worldview unearthed by Williams has long been underrated by philosophers and modern literary critics, in particular those working within the paradigm of the absolute *autonomy* of the moral agent. This particular normative paradigm is a widely acknowledged legacy of Kantian practical philosophy. Perhaps the most acute criticism directed by Williams toward contemporary advocates of Kantianism—developed in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (see Williams 2011, 60–79)—is that modern readings of Kant’s practical philosophy in which the structural moral significance of shame is rejected play out unselfconsciously against the distorting background of the Kantian moral paradigm, which is taken as *given*. In these readings, shame is lumped together with a recognizable cluster of subjective responses to human action, even though it is a largely involuntary reaction and thus differs fundamentally from responses to actions prompted by duty or springing from respect for the moral law (see esp. Adkins 1960). In projecting the Kantian norm of autonomy onto a specifically classical ethical outlook, modern Kantians assume, incongruently and anachronistically, that the main features of the Kantian moral subject are no less relevant to the classical framework. The result is a view according to which shame in Homeric culture remains *pre-moral* or *non-moral*.

Williams’s critique of the moral context that privileges the absolute autonomy of the agent’s will has two fundamental stages. In the Kantian deontological framework, Williams argues, the autonomy of the moral agent is defined in terms of her immunity to the judgments of others in practical decision-making—her ability to disregard such influences and instead act on principle. Autonomous freedom of choice is set *against* an adaptive model according to which each agent determines her actions in light of the pursuit of external expectations. Because the experience of shame is mainly associated with exposure to the gaze of another, the values at stake are doubly superficial. To the extent that the basic experience of shame may be related to the physical, to one’s *appearance*, it concerns a third-party appraisal of external features. For precisely this reason, the moral relevance of shame can be brought into question: in particular, it could be argued that shame does not concern the intrinsic value of the person and replaces what we might call one’s “true” value or worth with what lies on the surface—a first impression. If shame really did have this character, Williams continues, the experience of shame would indeed be linked to heteronomy and would lack genuine moral value; the self-directed adverse judgment involved in shame

²Williams pays close attention to Sophocles’ *Ajax* and Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. Whereas in Sophocles shame seems to work as an appeal to courage on the battlefield, in Euripides the internal mechanisms defining shame are displayed in the psychological features of the main characters. Of special relevance to our analysis here is the following exchange (quoted by Williams) from a dialogue between Hippolytus and Theseus: “Oh! How I wish that I could stand in front of myself / And weep at the miseries that I am suffering.” To which Theseus answers: “You have always been more inclined to be in awe of yourself / Than to treat your parents decently” (*Hipp.* 1215, in Euripides 2007, 174).

would bring with it an awareness of both the critical gaze of the other and how one appears in the light of that gaze, but nothing more. On the other hand, because the impression of disadvantage is merely subjective, the experience of shame might be said to lack the universality that defines the Kantian normative model and may therefore be dismissed as egoistic. Indeed, these two defining features complement each other; an action is *egoistic* if it is motivated by the individual's desire for success and acclaim, and, it can be argued, such a practical pattern makes sense only if the agent believes she will be noticed and possibly receive praise. Even internalized expectations of personal fulfillment are learned and structured as patterns of self-assessment in the context of living in a world shared with others. What becomes in some sense inner—a part of my personal moral makeup, the backdrop against which I assess myself and my progress in the world—has its psychological roots at the level of how I appear to others. Modern-day Kantian criticisms leveled at the actions of the archaic Greek hero only sustain this comparison, Williams argues, by insisting on the competitiveness of the classical moral code, for in a competition the aim is to win a contest whose rules are accepted by all disputants.³

Granting that the internalizing process is a widely acknowledged psychosocial fact, Williams goes on to clarify that the mechanisms pertaining to shame are neither strictly *egoistic* nor strictly *heteronomous* but rather reside in a middle ground of internal self-assessment that is rooted in the psychological internalization of external standards present in critical judgment.⁴ Interestingly, this deprives these mechanisms of *moralistic* connotations, whereby standardized norms of conduct are at once compulsory, made uniform, and acritically enacted.

Before we continue, it is important to distinguish between the different mechanisms by which external standards are internalized. Williams, together with Gabriele Taylor (whose 1985 book on moral emotions, *Pride, Shame and Guilt*, greatly influenced Williams's work) and Sartre in his well-known account of the experience of shame through the “look” of the Other (see my section 3 below), are unanimous in their rejection of the idea that an *actual* look of reproach must be directed at *me* in order for the feeling of shame to arise. They do so on different grounds, however. Williams elaborates on the idea of the internalized figure of the witness or observer of the shameful act.⁵ The observer's reactions might lead one to conclude, as Sartre writes, that “I am as the Other sees me” (Sartre 1992, 222) or that I must reconsider my values (as may occur, for instance, when I experience a compliment as being fully inappropriate given my self-understanding). The example usually provided to illustrate this is that of a shady politician or employer whose character I abhor but who commends my action or makes my words his own. In such a situation, there is an undesired external identification that, when

³“When it is complained that the Greek ethical outlook, or at least that of the archaic Greeks, is both egoistic and at the same time heteronomous, because it rests conventionally on the opinion of others, there is a constant and powerful tendency for these two complaints to turn against each other. Which is supposed to be the trouble, that these people think too much about others' reactions, or too little? The only thing that makes it seem as though the two complaints line up with one another is the simple idea that the ethic of archaic Greece was competitive. A competition is precisely something in which you have the egoistic aim of trying to win, but you also unquestioningly accept rules that have been laid down by someone else” (Williams 1993, 100).

⁴It is worth stressing here that Williams's use of these terms does not carry the connotations of the Kantian vocabulary, which would weaken his position if the reader were to fall for a projective fallacy regarding his book's terminology, similar to that which Williams identifies in present-day Kantian readings of Homeric culture. For Kant, autonomy and heteronomy apply not to individual actions and experiences but to principles regulating action itself. In the *Groundwork*, for instance, Kant defines “heteronomy” as follows: “If the will seeks that which should determine it anywhere else than in the suitability of its maxims for its own universal legislation, hence if it, insofar as it advances beyond itself, seeks the law in the constitution of any of its objects, then heteronomy always comes out of this” (Kant 2002, 58).

⁵See Williams 1993, 220 n. 1: “In the case of shame, the story is in one respect more complex. If we start from the elementary situation of actually being seen naked, there is no direct route to internalisation, for the reason mentioned in the text: nakedness before an imagined watcher is no exposure. It may seem mysterious how any process of internalisation can explain shame. The answer lies in the fact that the root of shame lies not so much in observed nakedness itself, but in something of which that is, in most cultures but not all, a powerful expression.... The root of shame lies in exposure in a more general sense, in being at a disadvantage: in what I shall call, in a very general phrase, a loss of power. The sense of shame is a reaction of the subject to the consciousness of this loss: in Gabriele's Taylor's phrase, quoted in the text, it is ‘the emotion of self-protection.’”

projected onto me, prompts me to realize that I have not lived up to my own moral standards.⁶

How, then, is this critical figure internalized in the individual psyche? According to Williams, this process is structurally bound up with a feeling of disadvantage or *loss of power*, which gradually gains shape in the individual psyche via an empirically conditioned process of adaptation to a set of socially shared values and principles—the experience of being caught naked (the conditions of which will vary from culture to culture) is but a detached symbol. For Williams, the positive ethical dimension involved in the experience of shame relates to the shared expectations and values triggered by an undue, risky exposure to a situation of disadvantage. In this experience, I acknowledge my moral parity with those who are looking upon me critically without thereby imposing or presupposing an abstract, unbreakable bond between us and the formal law of morality. Williams is especially critical of the *characterless* dimension of the Kantian moral agent, arguing that the multifarious reasons and actions capable of triggering the feeling of shame bear witness to the personalization of the Other—of any and every other—qua moral peer.⁷

Where Williams's model of internalization centers on the feeling of disadvantage or loss of power in the eyes of an erstwhile experienced witness, whose potential presence becomes habitually anticipated, Taylor (1985) develops a different model to account for the experience of shame in the absence of a real audience. She begins by offering an example from Max Scheler's *Über Scham und Schamgefühl* (1957 [originally 1913]): an artist's model who, after posing naked for some time, suddenly realizes she is no longer seen by the artist simply as a model and has instead become an object of sexual desire. Taylor's main idea is that the sense of shame in such a scenario is triggered by an external, *second-order self-description* on the part of the agent at the center of the experience. Taylor's explanatory model accounts for the woman's present state primarily as one of “*seeing herself being seen* under a new description” (Taylor 1985, 77). Williams (1993, 221 n. 1) interprets this move as the introduction of a “second, imagined, viewer,” but this is neither what Taylor suggests nor what Scheler originally proposes. What actually occurs—in Scheler's original presentation—is a renewal of self-consciousness in a move he describes as a “turning in upon oneself” (*Rückwendung auf ein Selbst*) (Scheler 1957, 198). In terms of Scheler's structural explanation of the concrete conditions that make the phenomenon of shame possible, this means that the subject suddenly apprehends her spiritual activity as encroached upon by a lived body, of which she was not previously *aware*.

On the more cognitivist approach that Taylor uses to explore Scheler's example, however, the model comes to incorporate within her own psyche or vision of herself the desiring view of the artist, and it is this view of herself which she finds unappealing—at least in this specific circumstance—and from which she wants to escape.⁸ As Taylor rightly stresses, the model need not see herself as the artist now sees her. Still, through the mediating awareness of the artist's consciousness, she now realizes that she has become a sexual object, and thus

⁶The very experience of *failing to measure up to ideals* can induce varied responses. Self-retraction is a passive response, a form of mortification. Quick-witted people, for instance, might come up with different responses to an experience of shame without thereby wanting to deny that they are reacting to shame. Furthermore, when the feeling of shame relates directly not to the agent but to someone she is related to, with whose shameful position she identifies, common reactions might include hiding the other from the gaze of those who provoke the feeling, avoiding acknowledgment of an existing relation between her and the shame-ridden person, and, in a face-to-face situation, speaking for the other or drowning out her words with one's own.

⁷See Williams 1993, 84: “But this tells us something more about what I have called the internalised other: it explains, in fact, why the other need not be a particular individual or, again, merely the representative of some socially identified group. The other may be identified in ethical terms. He (and I should stress particularly here that the pronoun carries no implications of gender) is conceived as one whose reactions I would respect; equally, he is conceived as someone who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed to him.”

⁸“All that seems necessary is that [s]he shift her viewpoint from that of the creator of the work to that of the critical assessor, and [s]he can fulfil both these functions” (Taylor 1985, 58).

her initial self-conception in, and of, her role as model undergoes a transformation. Her position under this new self-description is now fundamentally negative. As Taylor (1985, 61) concludes: “Being seen as she is seen is to be in a position in which no decent woman should find herself.”

Whether we account for shame in terms of the internalization of the critical gaze of the Other (Williams), as a process of self-redescription made by the light of one's sense of how one is viewed by another (Taylor), or in relation to the sort of metaphysical structures elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*, the outcome of this peculiarly painful experience is always a critical self-positioning in line with an accepted intersubjective code.⁹ Philosophers have constructed *ethical*, *epistemological*, and even strictly *ontological* interpretations of this intersubjective dimension of human reality. Williams's main purpose, as we have seen, is to restore shame and its importance to our ethical lives, challenging the radical undervaluation of the emotion within Kantian morality (in particular within a certain Kantian interpretive framework that was dominant in Anglo-American philosophy during his lifetime [see Falcato 2021 and 2024]). Williams accomplishes this purpose by reintroducing a wide range of classical scholarship into contemporary debates on ethics, broadening our philosophical understanding of what might, and ought to, count as an ethically relevant emotion. On his view, thanks to the variability of its objects, including shame as one such emotion allows for the *personalization* of the moral agent and helps to move ethics away from the cumbersome machinery of Kantian duty.

With this account of Williams's approach in hand, let us now consider Sartre's conception of shame and what it provokes at the level of the pre-reflective cogito, before comparing the two views and assessing what such a comparison reveals about shame, the ethical subject, and the metaphysics of morality.

3 | SARTRE ON SHAME (*HONTE*) AND THE COGITO

Sartre's approach to shame (*honte*) sharply contrasts with the kind of *internalization mechanisms* considered thus far. Instead, what shame reveals to the cogito is a new form of self-apprehension, one that is *mediated by the Other's transcendence*. For Sartre, what is important about shame is not that it reveals to me the Other's presence as an “audience” before whom I am ashamed but that *what I am ashamed of is only constituted in and through an immediate encounter with the Other*. In what Sartre calls an “ekstatic” moment of consciousness, shame discovers the for-itself in its constitutive mode of *being-for-others*. It thus seems that, contrary to the *internalization* of a critical figure, what Sartre's interpretative model delivers is an *externalized* form of self-constitution.

Sartre writes the following of this new form of consciousness:

Consider for example shame.... It is a non-positional self-consciousness, conscious (of) itself as shame; as such, it is an example of what the Germans call *Erlebnis*, and it is accessible to reflection. In addition, its structure is intentional; it is a shameful apprehension of something and this something is me. I am ashamed of what I am. Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame, I have discovered an aspect of my being. Yet ... it is in its primary structure shame before somebody. I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. But now suddenly

⁹See my description of Sartre's alternative to the view of shame offered here by Williams and Taylor in my ensuing paragraphs.

I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed....[I]n the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine. But the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as *I appear* to the Other. (Sartre 1992, 221–22)

And yet:

All of a sudden, I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness, but in that I have my foundation outside myself....Shame is only the original feeling of having my being outside, engaged in another being and as such without any defense. Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an object*; that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other.

(Sartre 1992, 265)

Two fundamental conclusions can be drawn from these two passages. To begin with, shame provokes an ontological transformation of my most basic sense of myself, that is, at the level of my freedom. Through shame, I become an object; my *nature* is given to me by the Other. Since this new “reified conscience” is but a moment in the constitution of self-consciousness that possesses (and delivers) the same kind of apodicticity as the cogito itself—it is “the cogito a little expanded,” as Sartre (1992, 282) puts it—the empirical, factual presence of the Other-as-Object is utterly dispensable when it comes to my certainty of its presence *as a subject*. (Sartre can reasonably be regarded as agreeing with both Williams and Taylor on the possibility of experiencing shame in the absence of an audience, albeit for metaphysically different reasons.)

In Sartre's view, since intersubjectivity is a pure encounter of consciousnesses, and given that what I feel ashamed of is *myself as an object* constituted by the pure subjectivity of the Other, the physical presence of the Other-as-Object is not only ontologically secondary but also irrelevant to the moment in which shame arises.

Sartre's terminology for describing the moment at which the experience of shame overwhelms one's consciousness is particularly strained, as anyone familiar with *Being and Nothingness* can avow. Even so, in light of the discussion above, I would like to focus on a key phrase that Sartre uses in the section entitled “The Look” (Sartre 1992, 252–303). Here, he characterizes the kind of consciousness I have of myself before the Other at the moment when shame supervenes as “degraded consciousness” (Sartre 1992, 273). To appreciate how this notion fits into the theoretical framework of *Being and Nothingness*, let us first consider what Sartre understands by *consciousness*.

The most elemental form of consciousness is pre-reflective self-consciousness, a thin layer of subjective *self-affection* that allows one to *think of the negation of actual* external scenarios and to conceive of perceptive experiences beyond the current one. It is this kind of self-spontaneity with the power to negate that shapes one's inner experience of oneself and that, when properly understood, must be regarded as the ultimate form of human freedom. *Freedom, then, in purely Sartrean phenomenological terms, is the freedom to negate, in thought, one's current external, material scenarios, given perceptual inputs.*

In the experience of shame as presented by Sartre—to be even more precise: in *shame-consciousness*—what occurs is a double limitation of this subjective experience of individual freedom. First, when faced with the sheer presence of a critical Other, the harsh, sudden, and flagrant appearance of my inconvenient and unexpected feeling of shame bars—or even blocks—my ability to imagine alternative external scenarios (his face is a landmark of opacity for my conscious creative capacity). Second, the imposition of an alternative, impenetrable, external, subjective structure, separate from my own self and bearing seemingly parallel features

of spontaneity and conscious self-negation and Other-negation, creates a barrier to my own temporal self-apprehension, which not even reflection can subsume.

Within the complex narrative of the for-itself articulated by Sartre in part 3 of *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1992, 221–413), shame provides an occasion to present two fundamental philosophical puzzles inherited by Sartre from his phenomenological predecessors: first, the threat of solipsism; and, second, the impossible intersubjective solution to the worldly trajectory of the for-itself (*pour-soi*)—which Sartre (1992, 615), in a note with Hegelian undertones, ultimately describes as “a useless passion.”

Unlike more theme-specific philosophical and psychological approaches to shame and its consequences, which focus on the complex genetic structures of our basic mechanisms and corresponding internalization processes (both of which serve as methodological and substantive motives in Williams's *Shame and Necessity*), and unlike primarily moral discussions of the basic dispositions of human subjectivity, against which experiences of shame constitute an assault, *Being and Nothingness* positions shame as fulfilling a largely performative role.

What this means, given Sartre's extremely intricate description of the moment at which the clash of two separate consciousnesses occurs—itself anchored within a dramatic presentation of the primeval moments that make up the structure of individual self-consciousness—is that shame ends up being the very temporal constitution of the for-itself. Thus, in a final self-forming step, the instant of shame finishes forming the self (*soi*), literally in front of another self.

Within the ongoing dynamic of permanent conflict between subjectivities, each struggling for self-sufficiency, shame imposes a *recognition* mechanism that is unique in Sartre's metaphysical system. This unique recognition mechanism has two sides to it, which are potentially in tension. On the one hand, in identifying shame as key to the completion of self-consciousness, Sartre positions a negative emotion at the heart of his analysis. The mechanism this emotion triggers is dependent on the impact produced by the look of another human being, whose continuous influence depends on its force (Sartre 1992, part 3). (It is crucial to this form of self-awareness that this external influence already implies the presence of another who is also a human being; hence the extensive phenomenological discussion of the *look* rather than “seeing.”) Moreover, at a more neutral and fundamental level that cannot fail to be of interest to a theory of subjectivity, the dramatic experience of shame described by Sartre brings with it the forced abandonment of individual sovereignty, to which the thorough analysis of intersubjective perception itself bears witness.

On the other hand, it is part of Sartre's aim in *Being and Nothingness* to articulate the sources of self-knowledge and the uselessness of attempting to bring the for-itself in line with itself, which the terminology of *Being and Nothingness* calls the project of being *en-soi-pour-soi* (in-itself-for-itself). To the extent that this occurs beyond the limits of subjectivity, what is required for the completion of this residual part of oneself, which lies outside oneself (that is, in the Other's gaze upon one), presupposes what only another human being can see of oneself. What is therefore needed is the impact, on the very structures of the *pour-soi*, of a subjectivity that transcends mine. In the *moment of shame*, the Other completes the revelation of what I am. In this petrifying moment, I cease to be a subject and become a *thing* (Sartre 2014, 260–61).¹⁰

In tracing Sartre's extended analysis of the lead-up to my feeling reified or petrified by the force of the Other's look, it becomes clear that the conclusion drawn from this final impression—my becoming and feeling thinglike—depends on *reflection*. In the actual momentary experience of shame, only the first descriptive moment (of a loss of subjectivity) is available to the cogito.

Thus *we see that shame is, for Sartre, of metaphysical rather than moral importance*. The crucial consequence of the fleeting impression of shame described in part 3 of *Being and Nothingness* only occurs following a moment of reflection, its being structurally unavailable in the first moment of the intersubjective encounter. The clash of two mutually alienated

¹⁰See Sartre 1992, 261: “Now, shame ... is shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object.”

consciences is followed by a further step-by-step gradation of the subjective impact, bringing into being the final (complete) mode of self-consciousness that now incorporates the mediated evidence of another's self-presence into the cogito. On Sartre's account, this initial clash of consciences is of value precisely because it blocks any threat of solipsism. Shame reveals the experiencing subject to itself in the certainty of *the transcendence of another's conscience*.

For Sartre, it is the first moment that reveals the first-personal impact of shame to the pre-reflective cogito, but only the second, qualified form of self-experience discloses the true impact of this fleeting impression on the intimate core of the self, thereby incorporating into one's own self-apprehension the transcendence of another's self-presence.

4 | WILLIAMS AND SARTRE: BRIDGING THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL GAP

Even if one extrapolates some kind of normative force from Sartre's metaphysical analysis, it in no way resembles that underscored by other philosophical approaches to this negative emotion, including Williams's. This is noteworthy given the ethical and existential importance of shame for Williams's theoretical project as a whole. Indeed, most contemporary theoretical models of shame—in the wake of Williams's *Shame and Necessity*, which reorganized and re-oriented the debate—insist on the normative relevance of shame when it comes to ethical correctness (see O'Brien 2020; see also Falcato 2024). As noted above, however, none of this is featured in Sartre's analyses of the emotion, even in those passages, in both *Being and Nothingness* and Sartre's early writings, where terms or phrases with seemingly normative import (such as “degraded consciousness”) are used.¹¹

Thus, an ethical-existential reappraisal of shame—in Sartrean terms—is not easily assimilated with mainstream moral readings of the emotion. Even if Sartre conceived of shame—precisely in the way he thought about human emotions in general—as a form of *consciousness soaked in feeling*, it would still be a serious challenge to assimilate his view to the types of views typically put forth by moral philosophers, as there are incommensurable methodological issues at play.

In understanding what Sartre has to say about shame and the complex dynamics of intersubjectivity, it is crucial to appreciate the value of a methodological precept that he establishes in his phenomenological analysis, namely, the importance of clearly stipulating what a phenomenological treatment of a given phenomenon *cannot* capture, in order to better grasp what it *can* account for. The ultimate aim of Sartre's analysis of shame within the metaphysical story of the *pour-soi* (for-itself) is to understand how human consciousness finds its way within a world of inert objects, against which it determines itself as being *for-itself*.

These important differences between the moral and the metaphysical approaches to shame notwithstanding, however, the connections between them are illuminating. Indeed, I would argue, Williams's observations on the internalization mechanisms at work in shame shed important light on the Sartrean model of shame. In particular, Williams's notion of a (psychologically influent) world of *internalized figures*¹² can help us to make better sense of Sartre's account of the moment of shame as an *externalization* of self-consciousness—a

¹¹Sartre 1992, 273: “Thus the Me-as-object for-myself is a Me which is not Me; that is, which does not have the characteristics of consciousness. It is a degraded consciousness.”

¹²Williams 1993, 100: “If we now think, plausibly enough, that the power of reason is not enough by itself to distinguish good and bad; if we think, yet more plausibly, that even if it is, it is not very good at making its effects indubitably obvious, then we should hope that there is some limit to these people's autonomy, that there is an internalised other in them that carries some genuine social weight. Without it, the convictions of autonomous self-legislation may become hard to distinguish from an insensate degree of moral egoism.”

term that Sartre himself does not use but that offers a useful framework for understanding the mechanism at work in his conception of shame. As we have seen, Williams relies heavily on psychological material and terminology, deploying the notion of “internalization mechanisms” and “internal figures” to explain the effects of shame on the human mind. Sartre likewise seeks to understand the effects of shame on the human subject, although his analysis moves in the opposite direction—from the solipsistic bubble of the pre-reflective cogito to the outer counterpart of the Other and its impact on the self. Despite their differences, Williams's description of the (empirical) mechanism at work in shame—the internalization of external figures—aligns with the ultimate effect of Sartre's (metaphysical) *clash* of two (separate) consciousnesses at the moment of shame: the discovery of the non-isolation of the self.

Recall that on the Sartrean dialectical model it is the me (*moi*) who achieves particularization through shame (arriving at a new form of “ontological thickness,” as it were, even though this is just the degraded nature of a *thing*) and who, through a pre-reflective self-consciousness of myself as lying outside myself, gains a new sense of being, conferred upon me through the Other's gaze.¹³

This has a certain resonance with Williams's understanding; although it is not a matter of being given a “character,” as Williams would have it, this experience nonetheless involves the discovery of a new dimension of the self that is not available to the cogito through any form of pure reflection—a dimension which the Other confers upon me in a direct encounter.

The recipient of a new set of features (and indeed metaphysical concreteness) through the experience of shame is the me—not my moral peer, as Williams supposes—to the extent that I am made aware of a new dimension of my being as lying outside myself and constantly escaping a totalized form of self-apprehension. Yet what is valid for any one specific for-itself is valid for all, and thus Sartre's highly pessimistic “solution” to the problem of intersubjectivity ultimately emerges, through shame, as a de-totalized universalization of mutually alienating freedoms.

Sartre and Williams both insist that any philosophical analysis of shame must be based on a concrete description of the experience of the emotion.¹⁴ Each thinker urges this approach for different reasons. Williams, whose thought has a markedly Humean flavor, is interested in showing how our ethical lives are reasonably shaped by the reactions of those with whom we interact and that, accordingly, the feeling of shame provides good evidence for the social constitution of the agent, psycho-genetically accounted for in terms of the utility of integrating a community of shared norms. In the philosophy of freedom developed by Sartre, in contrast, the feeling of shame fundamentally reveals two things: (i) that the Other is the immediate limit of my freedom and (ii) that her presence to pre-reflective consciousness is a moment in the constitution of the cogito, one that occurs via exposure to another transcendence. In the first instance, a set of figures is internalized (to borrow Williams's notion) in the individual's mind; in the second, part of my consciousness of myself is constructed outside myself. Both Sartre's and Williams's accounts thus demonstrate a shared appreciation, albeit arrived at by different

¹³Peter Caws 2001 [originally 1990], 97: “The mode of my own being yielded by nausea is the for-itself, the mode yielded by shame is the for-others. Note that this is not a mode of the other's being, but of my own as seen by the other—or rather as seen by me through the mediation of the other.”

¹⁴In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre is not interested in offering a descriptive analysis—with all the phenomenological tools the book itself puts in place—of the structural features of the impression, the affection, or the emotion of shame. (In thinking about this work's conceptual narrative, it is of special importance to separate the *emotion* from the *impression* or brief affect of shame, to the extent that the emotion is intuitively understood as extended in time, intentional, and even constitutive of the core psychology of a human being, whereas the affect is brief and often difficult to pin down in terms of its qualitative features or phenomenal manifestations and personal impact.) What does interest Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* is the fundamental structure of a radically new type of self-consciousness—any detailed analysis of which involves delving deeply, descriptively, into the moment of shame.

routes, of the extent to which shame reveals the fragility of the ideal of maximally sovereign subjectivity.

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although Sartre's and Williams's analyses of shame belong to different philosophical traditions and adopt contrasting methodologies, this paper has highlighted the historical and philosophical benefits of bringing these two approaches into genuine dialogue. Their distinct philosophical engagements with this particular emotion notwithstanding—one focused on lessons for our moral lives, the other on understanding our metaphysical identity—the former undoubtedly illuminates the latter. Moreover, given that Sartre's metaphysical view of the role played by shame in subjectivity and intersubjectivity underpins his account of human freedom, and thus of moral choice, Williams's notion of internalization can serve a dual ethical purpose, offering a way forward for a new existential metaphysics of morality—all the more so given that contemporary discussions of shame and its role in human relations continue to misrepresent historical sources, including Sartre.

Williams clearly specifies what it is about the experience of shame that gives it its ethical relevance: the internalization of figures in fleeting interpersonal exchanges and the resulting shaping of character. Understanding this psychological mechanism can enrich a historically comparative approach to shame as a moral emotion, revealing the presence of a similar mechanism in Sartre's earlier articulation, celebrated as one of the foundational accounts of shame in the history of philosophy. While Sartre never explicitly discusses the “externalization mechanisms” of the cogito, putting these thinkers in dialogue helps to reveal the inward and outward movements that characterize both accounts, offering a promising foundation for a more nuanced phenomenology of shame and its role in the formation of the moral subject.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ana Falcato holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Nova University Lisbon. Between 2013 and 2015 she was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (<https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/connect/explore-the-humboldt-network/singleview/1150947/prof-dr-ana-c-serralheiro-falcato>) and the University of Oxford. Her work has appeared in such as venues *Studies in the Novel*, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *Kant-Studien*, *Wittgenstein-Studien*, *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, *Research in Phenomenology*, and *Philosophy Today*.

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