CHAPTER 7

# Concluding Remarks

We started writing this book because of our years-long discussion about the question, can shame serve a positive purpose in human life? We have seen that several authors maintain that it is possible. On a biological level, some experience of shame seems important for the development of a child's brain. Moreover, psychologically, experiences of shame will, most likely, inevitably be the consequence of what Kohut calls optimal frustration. But in both these cases, the neurological and psychological facts are not sufficient to argue for shame taking on a constructive role throughout the life of the individual. When shame interrupts the child's agency, it can only play a limited positive role for a restricted period of time. There is nothing in these dimensions of life that suggests that shame should have a continued role as a tool for regulating, disciplining or controlling behavior.

We can substantiate these principled remarks on the restricted role of shame with a further look into Martha Nussbaum's work. Nussbaum's considerations about shame's positive consequences are restricted and cautious. Much of what she claims seems to be in accordance with the position that we have developed. But Nussbaum also argues that shame can, in fact, serve positive functions later in life, because it can point us in the direction of goals and ideals that may be valuable, and does so when we have failed to live up to them. Furthermore, shame does not always present us with unrealistic ideals but can provide guidance on how to live and what actions to avoid – similar to what Deigh suggests when he says that shame contributes to the regulation of behavior. "It often tells us the truth: certain goals are valuable and we have failed to live up to them. And it often expresses a desire to be a type of being that one can be: a good human being doing fine things."[685] Under such circumstances,

685 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 207.

shame can take on a positive character or have a function related to more than social approval or disapproval, Nussbaum holds. Accordingly, shame may inform us about which projects are worthwhile to engage in and orientate oneself towards. Thus, shame may not only contribute to regulating behavior according to the norms and conventions of society, as Scheff and others have claimed, it may also serve to strengthen social bonds – or put otherwise – the responsive movements of shame tell us that the social bonds to those who we care about may be at stake.[686] Therefore, we seek strategies to restore these bonds. Through the movements of shame we seek to ameliorate or restore the shameful situation so that our social bonds may again be confirmed.

However, on the more critical side, our extensive analyses have already suggested that the information or cognitive content that shame conveys concerning conduct is not morally reliable. Shame presents us with problems that are linked to its origin in what Nussbaum calls "primitive shame," which is the shame that results from the failed desire to be complete and completely in control. It also testifies to our vulnerability and to us being too susceptible to the judgment of others. The positive achievement that shame allows for may therefore be contingent. Hence, we do not consider Nussbaum's argument as strong, so far.

Even when shame is adequately motivated, narcissism and its concomitant aggression represent a danger, according to Nussbaum. Therefore, shame as a social instrument appears to be a problematic tool for the regulation of social behavior, be it in moral, educational or religious contexts. In other words, because shame from the outset is the result of a negative relationship between the self and others in the world, it proves problematic to employ it as a valuable social tool. Shame contributes to impeding the subject's experience of both self and world because it restricts the perspective by which to assess the situation.

An adult bearing narcissistic, primitive shame presents us with "the image of a hungry, enraged, empty self, full of impotent anger at being frustrated, and fearful of a world which seems as hateful and revengeful

686 Scheff, "Shame in Self and Society"; "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory."

as the patient himself."[687] In Norway, we find perhaps the most prominent example of this rage expressed in the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011. These attacks were a profound example of how shame-driven rage often constructs its own object. There is not necessarily a reality behind the creation of enemy images such as those then in play – a shameful and raging narcissist may pick whatever is in the surrounding environment as the most plausible surrogate for the original source of frustration.[688]

The negative relationship between the individual and the world that is constituted and manifested through shame points to its limitations when it comes to its role in, for example, education and child-rearing. A child is susceptible and vulnerable to the behavior and responses of significant others.[689] Nussbaum's view is, accordingly, "that any appeal to shame in connection with the child's human weaknesses, whether bodily or mental, would be a dangerous and potentially debilitating strategy. And since the child is always so vulnerable to the parent's power and can so easily interpret even a limited moral shaming as a painful humiliation, we are inclined to say that shame is always dangerous in the child-rearing process."[690] Hence, to allow shame to interrupt the child's agency may, in the long run, affect the child's potential for individuality and self-reliance.

This argument can also be applied more broadly. Being bodies among bodies, we are always fragile and vulnerable, always forming and being formed in relation to the other(s) with different levels of self-reliance and self-esteem and within different power relations. As works-in-progress, we are interwoven in a web where the other always matters to us. The humiliation of shame interrupts our intentions and projects, and informs us that these are not alright or accepted as valuable. Thus, using shame as a social tool is dangerous. We seldom know the vulnerability and fragility of the other fully. Shame may severely affect the self of the other.

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687 Otto Kernberg, here quoted by Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity,* 210.

688 Ibid., 211. Cf. also for narcissistic rage, shame and humiliation, James William Jones, *Blood That Cries out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), passim. On the analysis of the events of 22 July from an interdisciplinary point of view, see also Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Studier I Ondskap* (Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 2014).

689 An obvious example here is the effect of parents' comments on the weight or other bodily characteristics of their children. See for devastating effects in this regard, Jane Megan Northrop, *Reflecting on Cosmetic Surgery: Body Image, Shame and Narcissism* (London: Routledge, 2012).

690 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 214.

Nussbaum is nevertheless open to the fact that some cases can be addressed in other ways than pointing to guilt concerning inappropriate behavior. Shame may be one of these. However, even though it might be adequate to both feel shame and sometimes use shame, it does not imply that it should be encouraged either in child-rearing or in other social contexts. A person may feel shame because he was caught on tape uttering an immoral and racist personal comment about another person in public. It is certainly appropriate to feel shame in this situation, especially if the person is incapable of feeling guilt, and shame is all we have. Hopefully, shame will cause him to refrain from making such comments again. But that does not imply that shaming is the way we should deal with racist language. It is preferable to argue cognitively for adjustment in behavior, and such arguments are also better than a mere infliction of shame. Mere shame is not sufficient to develop a moral attitude that is truly rooted in the self's capacity for moral behavior and development. Consequently, we argue that fighting shame is *appropriate* and should be encouraged in almost all cases. If shame emerges in ways that address features such as skin color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so forth, it should be addressed as morally repugnant. In short, it is our responsibility to fight such shame in a social web where we both form and are formed by the other.

This allows us to pick up our discussion of shamelessness. Nussbaum does not think that being totally shameless is a recommendable attitude: "Whether one is young or old, it seems appropriate to be sensitive to an invitation to shame, and related self-examination, issued by people one loves and respects. Indeed, if one were 'shameless' toward people whose ideals one shares and on whose good will one has learned to rely, that would be a dangerous sign, itself, of narcissism."[691]

We have argued in both Chapters Two and Four that there is a distinction between shamelessness and fighting shame. We initially introduced shamelessness in connection with "the shameless Arabian daughters" who used the concept rhetorically in order to fight the use of shaming as a tool for what they claimed was immoral social control. Thus, what the

691 Ibid., 216.

Arabian daughters suggested was in fact not shamelessness, but a call to fight shame and pursue freedom to realize their own projects without the restrictions of shame. In the analysis of Manion in the previous chapter, we made a distinction between shamelessness and lack of shame, which applies here. "The daughters" pleaded for lack of shame, as shamelessness is not an antidote to shame. As we argued in Chapter Two, shamelessness is the opposite of what we call protective discretionary shame. In this sense, shamelessness breeds shame because it does not protect the borders and the vulnerability of the other. Thus, discretionary shame is ethically informed insofar as it sees, respects, and protects the vulnerability of the other. To sum up, actual shamelessness is morally destructive because it manipulates and disrespects the fragile boundaries of the other. Discretionary shame is morally constructive as it entails a moral judgment of the situation of the other. Other types of shame may serve moral functions, but the basic tenet is that it is retrospective and reactive, holding little value for our capacity for moral behavior or development. As such, shamelessness should not be considered a preferable option.

Against this backdrop, let us also look at Nussbaum's notion *aspirational shame* as a relevant but not recommendable element in child-rearing. In our view, parents not only endorse valuable ideals and encourage children to live up to them, but often, they are "rigidly imposing personal ideals and expectations on a child who has different talents and wishes." The discrepancy between parent and child then causes shame in the child. A serious similarity to this lack of acknowledgment of the child's talents and wishes is when the child experiences shaming as an expression of the parents' lack of love and acceptance.[692] "Again, a focus on acts, in the context of expressing love for the child, seems a more constructive and clearer message."[693] We could also add to what Nussbaum says here that such shame undermines the child's self-confidence and self-esteem in ways that make it even more prone to shame in the long run. Under such circumstances, he or she learns that being perfect is the only condition for being accepted and affirmed by her peers.

692 Ibid., 215.
693 Ibid.

Again, we will argue, on the basis of our analyses in the second part of this book, that to encourage ideals of perfection is problematic in all the contexts we have addressed: body perfection, moral perfection, or religious perfection are all contrary to the realities of the human condition. The gap between what in reality is reasonably attainable and impossible ideals serves to produce shame. Shame exploits the vulnerabilities that emerge from body image, and moral and religious imperfection.

As we have argued, shame is part of the complex architecture of the self and manifests itself through responsive movements when the self sees that these projects or ideals can never be realized fully. Thus, it places the self in a limbo between ideal and work in progress, guiding the focus away from more realistic, fulfilling and maturing projects. Through the presence, tacit implicitness and power of the disciplining forces of society – whether these address gender, ethnicity, or religious affiliation – norms and ideals become part of the internal self-policing structure of the subject. Thus, the possible appropriateness of shame is contingent on the morality of the framework to which it refers. As we have tried to show in the analysis of both body and religion, there is little doubt that shame, at least for the most part, has been used to support or reproduce immoral power structures and frameworks that have served, and still serve, to repress and hinder the flourishing of groups and individuals.

Although Nussbaum works hard to find the positive functions of shame, it is evident that her first choice is not to have shame in any case, and that it is mostly not within the horizon of recommendable choices at all. However, she mentions some cases that lie within the parameter of morality and where shame neither reinforces nor undermines narcissism. "Shame over laziness, lack of dedication, and other failure to pursue valuable personal ideals" may be constructive for aspirational purposes, but "it seems most appropriate that the invitation to feel shame come from oneself." Nevertheless, her final words on the topic are that "it seems wiser to focus on acts, even if they do form a pattern that is generally defective."[694] Thus, Nussbaum touches upon the role that shame can play in the motivation for specific modes of agency. Its role, as she describes

694 Ibid., 214.

it, is nevertheless ambiguous: In the social dimension, it is possible to feel shame if one displays a pattern of underachievement, and then, it can play a constructive role that motivates dedication and hard work. But in similar contexts, shame can be paralyzing or debilitating as well. To some extent, the different functions it takes on may be dependent on the extent to which shame is issued by oneself or by another.[695]

Nussbaum elaborates on this point in a way that adds to Deigh's underscoring of the necessity of a conception of shame to integrate the idea that it reflects one's concern for the reaction of others. To be a mature person is to accept one's own moral imperfection, she writes. Part of this self-understanding means that one also has to recognize that "one's efforts toward valuable personal ideals (including moral ideals) can always be improved by the insights of others."[696] Accordingly, the interruption that others may cause to our agency is possible to handle and to be prepared for in different ways. If you have come to accept that you are not perfect, that is a personal competence that can bolster you against shame. Furthermore, if you consider the one who interrupts the agency that may cause shame a friend, shame may not have a strong impact on your self-esteem or self-respect.

The upshot of Nussbaum's analysis of shame is that even though it can be constructive, there are always dangers inherent in every invitation to another person to feel shame. As we claimed above, the fragility, vulnerability and fortitude of the other are never fully known to us. Thus, shame is ambiguous, as is the invitation to feel it.[697] So, although Nussbaum explicitly affirms the constructive role of shame in promoting responsibility, her analysis is primarily focused on the dangers that arise. Accordingly, she sees in shame "a threat to all possibility of morality and community, and indeed to a creative inner life."[698] Shame is therefore not the first instance

695 Ibid., 215.

696 Ibid., 216f.

697 Ibid. "Such invitations may be non-narcissistic or even anti-narcissistic, but they may also bear a concealed narcissism at their core—as when a parent, under the guise of encouraging a child to work harder, tries to control the child and make him just like the parent's ideal self-image. And they may be expressions of respectful criticism in a relationship of love or friendship, but since love and friendship are hardly immune to the dangers of narcissism, even here they may bear subtle messages of narcissistic control that belittle the very humanity of the person shamed."

698 Ibid., 208. Cf. also a similar assessment of her position in Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*, 149.

to incite or encourage in interpersonal relationships or psychological contexts that aim at freedom, creativity and emotional transparency.

The above points may also prove relevant in the other contexts we have analyzed. Without doubt, shame will continue to exist and exert its role in relation to the body, in morality, and in relation to religious contexts and other contexts of disciplining. However, we need to differentiate between what is the case and what ought to be the case in all the contexts of shame we have analyzed. In some cases, shame may be all we have, and hopefully it can serve as a bulwark against immorality and oppression when other more appropriate social tools are not present. But that does not imply that this ought to be the case. Against the backdrop of our analyses above, there is no strong case for the active employment of shame in any of these contexts, with the exception of discretionary shame. On the contrary, we have seen that shame entails a movement towards the community that should be supported by those who care for the shamed. Shame is usually only effectively overcome when one establishes inclusive practices that express dignity, worth, and recognition. These are the elements that also enable the building of communities that allow for diversity: be it in body shape, ethnicity, religious stance, or moral commitments.

Shame interrupts. While it may sometimes be useful to stop and ask what is happening, when shame interrupts, it is a disturbing and unpleasant experience – not an occasion for pondering and reflection. It may also confine the individual within concerns and feelings about him or herself. Thus, experiences of shame may actually hinder or restrict the potential resources available from broader contexts of agency. This fact suggests that one should work to reduce instances of shame and shaming as much as possible, because other conditions for agency and community may work better in the long run. To make a twist on the title of this book: we should try to interrupt the development of conditions that lead to shame as much as possible, and we should encourage others to move away from using shame as a tool in social contexts where experiences of self-worth and dignity are at risk.