

Thinking About Shame

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John Covaleskie's essay "Shame and Moral Formation" presents us with important and difficult ideas, ones that will be discussed and criticized at numerous forums. This response certainly cannot do justice to the paper's complexity and depth of conceptual analysis. I only concentrate on three aspects of the paper: (1) the relationship between identity shame and moral shame; (2) social norms and shame; (3) shame and moral education.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY SHAME AND MORAL SHAME

According to Covaleskie, identity shame refers to "a demoralizing judgment imposed on individuals in consequence of their membership in some disfavored and/or marginalized group," whereas moral shame is a consequence of a person's actions and based on "the fact that I behave badly in some way." While the identity shame is based on some external, unjustified, stereotypical, biased views, moral shame is dependent on the personal acceptance of social norms, personal identification with those norms, and one's identity. Identity shame cannot be changed unless social norms evolve; moral shame is motivation for self-reflection and self-change.

After clarifying the differences between these two forms of shame, Covaleskie understandably states, "when I speak of 'shame,' I shall mean this specific form of shame [namely, moral shame], activated by the commission of shameful actions." Though understandable and probably even a necessary analytic move, this logical division between two types of shame is highly suspect for the following reason: social norms are not only indicative of the normative community to which we belong, but also the identities we form. As a woman growing up during a historical period with restrictive gender norms, those norms contributed to the identity I developed. Similarly, African-Americans growing up in the South during slavery or the long period of segregation had their identities shaped according to those social norms. In other words, these social norms were internalized with identity shame norms shading into moral shame norms. Even though those caught in this trap should see their shame as being an externally mandated "connection between who I am and what I do," they may also believe it is based on "the fact that I behave badly in some way." In their deep structure, the norms for assessing whether I have fallen short in who I am and those for assessing my actions are identical.

To go a step further with this, Covaleskie notes that "four points ... are relevant to an understanding of shame as a morally educative experience." However, these four points also indicate the futility of separating identity shame from moral shame. Point one: in line with the first point, that "shame requires a violation of norms," misogynistic social norms may designate narrowly defined behavior for women. A woman who plays baseball, instead of doing needlework may violate accepted norms. In this case, the woman would have internalized the gender-appropriate norms, but have a strongly valenced desire to play baseball. This desire and carrying out the desire creates dissonance and shame.

Point two: the audience requirement. As a member of a social community, this woman is also an audience member who witnesses her own action and feels shame about that action even when no one is present. Playing baseball is shameful, even when she does it on the sly; for she has internalized the moral and gender norms of her community.

Point three: the self-judgment component. This woman does not merely feel shame, but judges that her playing baseball is a breach of accepted social norms. She does not approve of conduct that rejects social norms. Since her conduct breaks social norms, she judges herself harshly and feels shame. If asked whether she would want her daughter to play baseball, this woman would say, "No," because it violates social norms.

Point four: the redeeming and redemptive nature of shame. Knowing that she has broken a social norm, that she feels shame for playing baseball, and that she is not the type of woman she wants to be, shame should have a redemptive feature, namely to motivate the woman to change. But if she changes and does needlework, she has not necessarily satisfied the social norm. For in this case, others may still castigate her, saying that she is trying to fool them and herself by doing needlework, but actually prefers to play baseball. In other words, whether she plays baseball or does needlework, her behavior can be rejected by the communal audience. The only object of these overly brief comments is to indicate that on Covalleskie's own analysis of moral shame, the identity shame experienced by women, African-Americans, lesbians, gays, and numerous others, cannot be divorced from moral shame.

SOCIAL NORMS AND SHAME

One of the problems confronting liberals and at times even radicals, but not affecting conservatives and religious fundamentalists, is deciding which social norms should give rise to shame. In other words, except with regard to certain core social norms, liberals have not been able to specify the boundary of norms that people should accept and base their behavior on.

The boundaries remain fuzzy and elusive. Liberals often cannot state in specific terms the norms which should give rise to shame when they are broken. But further, in all probability, liberals should not be able to stipulate such a laundry list. If they could, they would no longer be liberals. On the other hand, conservatives have found it fairly easy to stipulate such norms. And this ability seems to give conservatives an advantage over liberals. Is this only an illusory advantage? Yes and no. Following in the realist tradition, conservatives are able to pinpoint their shame-generating norms. Liberals, on the other hand, following a Deweyan or Enlightenment process-oriented view of shame cannot stipulate a list of social norms that when broken cause shame. The conservatives blatantly reject any social norms except their own. With its cognitive and process dimensions, liberals would seem to have a more open-ended approach to shame. However, Covalleskie's neo-liberal view of shame does not accommodate a critical element, the dimensions that are sensitive to the nightmares of identity shame.

SHAME AND MORAL EDUCATION

Learning and internalizing social norms, knowing that one wants to be a person who follows those norms, does not guarantee that one will be ashamed when breaking the norms. One problem is that virtues and shame have a strong emotional component that Covaleskie does not adequately acknowledge. How does shame occur? Does it automatically follow when the various, connected points are met? Covaleskie carefully shows that shame is not humiliation or embarrassment. However, what is not as obvious is under what conditions a child, a student will feel shame. Distinguishing shame from humiliation, Covaleskie states,

Humiliation is vindictive; shame is not. Now to a child, there may be no immediate difference between these experiences. The difference appears to lie in the motives of the person passing judgment and in the long-term effects of the experience.

I would not expect that a child will appreciate “the long-term effects of the experience.” I do not believe that a young child will understand the difference “in the motives of the person passing judgment,” often the teacher. Even if one theoretically accepts the efficacy of adult shame, I am not at all sanguine about the acceptability and virtue of making shame a centerpiece of moral education, especially in schools.