

Book Review  
Per una Teoria della Vergogna

Alessandra Fussi  
ETS, 2018

*Giulia Lanzirotti*  
giulietta.lanzirotti@gmail.com

We have all experienced shame, probably more than once and in different situations. Shame is a universal feeling that involves all human beings of different ages, genders, lifestyles, religions and, indeed, historical periods. In some ways, we might say that feeling the burden of shame and being pervaded by it is the first true emotion of humanity, at least as the Bible tells us. Adam and Eve, in fact, when eating the apple of sin, shift from the undifferentiated status of Edenic happiness to shame: the latter is what actually breaks the homogenous nature of their emotional lives and give birth to a plethora of differences. This biblical episode shows us how, through shame, Adam and Eve become aware of the various elements and relations that were connoted in their experiences, such as their bodies and nudity, and their own identity in contrast with the identity and, at the same time, the relationship with the other. Shame, usually considered a simple, common, negative feeling, is not just a monochrome emotion, but represents a complex phenomenon highly intertwined with the main aspects of human life.

Fussi's book, *Per una teoria della vergogna* [trans. *For a Theory of Shame*] focuses entirely on the analysis of the meaning and structure of shame and shows us how this common emotion has a layered nature and a highly articulated phenomenology, which involves the main pillar categories of our experience as human social beings in the world. Far from being merely a superficial, negligible emotion, shame leads us to reflect on how our identity and our relationships with others are linked. More specifically, it leads us to reflect on the limits, and connections between the private and public spheres, and how these two contribute to the constitution of our authentic image of ourselves. Fussi tells us that her work on shame stems from the philosophical uncertainty around this topic (p. 9): shame has largely been neglected by philosophers but has also, I would add, been culturally overlooked. In order to fill this gap, Fussi's

book presents a variety of references drawn from philosophical literature (both traditional and contemporary) but also narrative and art – such as Hurakami's *IQ84* (see *Introduction*), Sartre, Gentileschi and Rembrandt van Rijn's painting – *Susanna and the Elders*. The book is not an introduction to the theme aiming at presenting a list of different philosophical positions. Rather, Fussi identifies a selection of authors chosen to outline the themes that we need to consider in order to account for the structure of shame. One of the main methodological qualities of the book, divided into four chapters, is represented by Fussi's mastery in combining themes and authors. Even if, as already stated, the book is not an introduction and has a certain thematic architecture, Fussi chooses for each chapter a central author around whom to coalesce, in order to unfold the articulation of shame and understand its meaning. This combination has a double merit. Less expert readers will be able clearly to understand the framework within which Fussi pursues her research: specialists, conversely, will appreciate Fussi's detailed arguments, traversing different philosophical authors and debates.

Given the haziness and potential confusion around the proper meaning of shame, in the first chapter (*Bernard Williams. La vergogna tra antichi e moderni*), Fussi clarifies the difference between “shame” and “guilt”. Following Williams (and especially *Shame and Necessity*), Fussi intends to rehabilitate the notion of shame which has been deprived of its value by virtue of the alleged superiority of the Christian notion of guilt. By an extensive deployment of Homer and Greek tragic literature, Williams' re-interpretation of the so-called “culture of shame” seeks to show us that shame is far from being just a mere superficial, selfish, heteronymic emotion. On the contrary, according to Williams, shame had a pivotal role in ancient Greek culture regarding ethical social life, and can be thought of as morally superior to guilt. Fussi's analysis of Williams' reading is very dense. Nonetheless, the main observation regards the accusation of heteronomy. The question of the supposed heteronomous nature of shame and the relationship between the private sphere and the public conventional sphere are the core issues of the book. Williams, referring to ancient Greek tragedies, shows us that shame does not arise only when others *see* us while we act shamefully. Feeling ashamed does not need the concrete presence of the other, but the other should be “idealised” (p. 32). The idea of an “idealised other”, cited by Williams, opens a series of questions. When we feel ashamed, we feel a loss of power - and the possible judgment of the concrete witness on our actions becomes idealised and internalized. More precisely, the

idealised other represents someone we respect and wish to be esteemed by. Therefore, as Williams puts it, shame is neither a pure heteronomous emotion nor a pure autonomous one, but “hybrid”, as subjects share common judgments and conventions, although conceiving them as proper and necessary to adhere to. This would demonstrate how shame shows us to what extent we are always linked to others and their judgement, towards which we feel obliged and responsible (p. 45).

The second chapter (*Vergogna e Pudore*) is entirely dedicated to Aristotle’s reflections on the notions of *aidos* and *aischyne*, as presented in *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. After a brief introduction to Aristotle’s understanding of *aidos* (something like the fear of disrepute), Fussi mainly focuses on the virtue of *aischyne*, which properly translates the notion of “shame”. Fussi shows us how Aristotle’s work still represents a highly illuminating source for the understating of the nature of shame. Aristotle’s sophisticated analysis leads us to discover the structure of shame with respect to the various kinds of causes that may originate it, temporality and the role of witnesses. Generally, *aischyne* corresponds to the kind of shame provoked by past actions (see p. 53), but more precisely, according to Aristotle, the nature of shame modifies in conjunction with different temporalities. We should highlight here that one of the distinctive characteristics of Aristotle’s analysis is to have taken into account the relationship between shame and the temporal dimension ( the past, the present and the future), analysing how the nature of shame may arise from the memory of a past action as well as from present humiliation or from the fear of future disrepute. In the same spirit, Aristotle also pointed out the causes of shame, as we do not feel ashamed only for something we are actively responsible for (such as bad actions), but also for things we do not achieve (such as an adequate education) and even for something we passively suffer (p. 64 and ff). In the latter case, Fussi cites as an example – still very relevant for today’s debate on women – the feeling of shame in victims of violent abuse (p. 66). According to Fussi, Williams’s understanding of shame in terms of loss of power, inadequacy and failure (p. 68, referring to Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 220) might illuminate Aristotle’s analysis of the causes of shame. Feeling ashamed produces a hiatus between what we think, think ourselves to merit, wish to be and are revealed to be. It concerns the value of our identity with respect to what we show about ourselves to ourselves and to others.

The third chapter (*Vergogna e giudizio*) gathers different authors and debates, and seeks to identify the proper nature of the (negative) judgment that

may provoke shame. While Rawls holds that shame corresponds to a loss of self-esteem, Taylor talks about a loss of self-respect, as respect, if compared to esteem, occurs when the other ascribes it to us. Fussi agrees with Taylor that the emergence of shame is connected with the loss of self-respect, which is something that the other can, in an eye-blink, take away from us. Self-respect implies feeling rightfully to belong to a certain class of individuals (80), therefore it implies, as Velleman states, feeling like “someone”. Similarly, Deonna, Rodogno and Teroni have claimed (*In Defense of Shame*) that shame corresponds to feeling an “undesired identity”. Nonetheless, Fussi argues against these latter authors as they claim that shame, in its essence, has nothing to do with fear of disrepute, reputation and protection of intimacy – three elements that represent, for Fussi, the pillars of the structure of shame.

The fourth chapter (*Vergogna e identità sociale*) tackles the question of the emergence of shame with respect to our social context. Fussi takes into account the relationship between the individual and private sphere with the general, collective, social one, since one of the main characteristics of shame concerns the will to protect our own body, person and identity. We do protect the relationship between the valued entity we wish to incarnate and its appearance within society, as we worry for our identity (123). Fussi, reading Velleman, reminds us how our social masks play a pivotal role in our life and in the building process of our identity, becoming not just a merely fake and hypocritical version of ourselves, but rather a protection for our deep intimacy against the indiscrete social infiltrations that we experience every day. Here again, we can appreciate the complicated nature of shame as something in between an autonomous or a heteronomous emotion.

Despite the obvious quality of Fussi’s work, I would like to remark on some minor issues. Although the book is not an introduction and, consequently, does not aim to give the reader an exhaustive picture of the state of the art on the topic, that reader might find it slightly odd not to find in the first chapter, at least in passing, the name of Nietzsche. Nietzsche is probably outside the philosophical horizon as chosen by Fussi, but Williams’ *oeuvre* does belong to the galaxy of Nietzschean studies. Arguably, Nietzsche is still the main reference point and most fertile source for fully understanding the implicit dynamics of guilt (see especially, *On the Genealogy of Morality*) and a good starting point to redeem the experience of shame in ancient Greece. Williams redefines the distinction between shame-culture and guilt-culture, aligning it more closely to Nietzsche’s contrast between “master morality” and “slave morality”. Among

the common issues we might expect to find in a book about shame, Fussi does not spend many words on the role of sexuality and the female body. Nevertheless, Fussi's reference to Scheler's example of the female model and the painter gives us the elements to evaluate the role of the body and sexual interest as potential causes of shame. The most trivial kind of shame concerns our body, as the most exposed element of our personality. Conversely, we can find in Fussi's analysis the true issue at stake when we feel ashamed of our bodies or our nudity, as they represent the sphere of individual non-objectifying intimacy that may be looked upon and glanced at by generalising and objectifying behaviours.

Following the thread "private-social", Fussi's analysis reminds us of the role of codes and norms. As *zoon politikon*, we are framed into social normativity, dense with habits, rituals and cultural prejudices. As Foucault tells us, these represent a plethora of impositions that we may try, not without difficulty, to criticize and overcome. Still, we can look at the socially "imposed" normativity in a different light, which gives social rules a positive role within the regulation of the relationship between our inner ego and others. This point is briefly hinted at by Fussi but it is indeed a major point of debate. Similarly, how shame works – and therefore how the relationship of "private-social" changes – , within social media in the digital era, is a crucial problem. How shame emerges in social media (when the other is "virtual") seems a challenging question, as it implies reconceiving the dynamics of intimacy and social masks, the dynamics between being visible and invisible, the relationship with the other, not concrete but virtual, not here but there.

Nonetheless, I would value the aforementioned points as hints for further reflection on the theme and not serious faults of the book. Fussi's objective in showing us the proper meaning of shame, the variety of the components implied in it and how these are articulated is fully achieved. Fussi's book can be read on three different levels. 1) Those readers who are not experts on the subject will find in the book a well-tailored path, combining both themes and authors. In so doing, it gives readers the chance to acquaint themselves with the main questions revealed by the problem of the structure of shame and the potential authors and debates that they may follow in order to conduct their own philosophical research. 2) At the same time, already informed or expert readers will appreciate Fussi's meticulous arguments, highlighting the diverse critical points in which different theories, perspectives and philosophical positions gather, cohere or clash. This "double level" stems from the rhythm of the book

which introduces its arguments from a broader angle and then addresses them directly, narrowing the focus step by step towards the problem embedded in the various theories presented here. 3) The third level that I wish to highlight is the one that makes a philosophy book an *excellent* philosophy book: that is, the ability to raise fundamental philosophical questions within a specific perspective. In other words, Fussi's book has the ability clearly to identify those questions that are not only fundamental for ethics but involve the pillar of philosophy as broadly construed. Readers and researchers with different interests and from different areas of philosophy will not only find in Fussi's book an extremely interesting foundation for a theory of shame, but also numerous suggestions for further and fundamental reflections – on matters such as personal and social identity, the question of identity, the problem of the other, self-perception, the role of convention, etc. These main questions belong to epistemology, ontology, digital science and politics, as those themes that unify the various disciplines of philosophy.