

SHAME AND ‘SHAME INSTINCT’ IN KANT’S PRE-CRITICAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT: This essay addresses Kant’s discussion of the role of shame in the evolution of the relationship between the sexes. Particular attention is given to the historical and genetic development of a complex line of reasoning Kant first presented in his courses on ethics, in the beginning of the 1760s. Faced with certain perplexities that we can assume were roused in him by the reading of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, Kant confronted his students with a metaphysical hypothesis accounting for a way out of the state of nature and which involves exploring the most primitive dynamics of the shame instinct. I analyze this problem in Kant’s early texts and draw a comparative approach to the structural expansion of it, as applied to a justification of the ultimate purpose of the relationship between the sexes, ending with a note on the paradoxical conclusions it ultimately leads to.

KEYWORDS: Kant; Shame; State of nature; Anthropology; Bernard Williams.

INTRODUCTION: ON AND BEYOND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO KANT’S THOUGHT

As pretty much every reader of Kant’s practical philosophy will ascertain, there are two historical figures that have strongly impacted on the development of the complicated, strict and highly demanding account of morality he ends up delivering, first in the *Groundwork* (1785), and then, three years later, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788): Jean Jacques-Rousseau and David Hume. As targets, sources of inspiration or, more often, both, these two giants of the European Enlightenment branded Kant’s philosophy in ways not always easy to reconstruct. It is also famously the second-best anecdote about the modesty and iconoclastic

spirit reigning in Kant's life as well as in his dwelling, the fact that in it – so the story goes –, only a small portrait of Rousseau was to be seen hanging on a wall.

In spite of its crucial debt towards Rousseau's moral views, Kantian ethics has often been accused of neglecting, or – even worse – of *condemning* the role of emotions in moral action. There are some remarkable exceptions to this prejudice in both Kantian and anti-Kantian scholarship produced nowadays, such as the admirable work carried out by Krista K. Thomason and Nancy Sherman in the US (Sherman, 2014; Thomason, 2013, 2015), by Inge Römer in Germany (Römer, 2014) or by Núria Sanchez-Madrid in Spain (Madrid, 2018, 2021). But remarkable moral philosophers working mainly in the analytic school in the second half of the last century were extremely keen on systematizing traditional moral outlooks without a close eye on the evolution of the textual sources documenting those views. This was the case of Bernard Williams, whose inspiring thematization of the practical role of emotions motivates the present discussion.

In an often-quoted passage from *Shame and Necessity*¹, Bernard Williams accuses Kant – or at the very least a hypothetical Kantian philosopher – of utterly dismissing the role of shame in human relations in general, and especially within a framework for moral decision-making which stresses the universality of such a procedure, as against individual character traits or personal choice. The fundamental passage from *Shame and Necessity* on (but also against) which I will anchor my own reflections in this essay reads as follows:

In the scheme of Kantian oppositions, shame is on the bad side of all the lines. This is well brought out in its notorious association with the notion of losing or saving face. 'Face' stands for appearance against reality and the outer versus the inner, so its values are superficial; I lose or save it only in the eyes of others, so the values are heteronomous; it is simply my face to save or lose, so they are egoistic.²

As structurally accurate as this brief description of the experience of shame

¹ See Williams 1993: 77.

² Idem.

may appear, there is not, in the whole of *Shame and Necessity*, a shred of textual evidence that this is Kant's genuine view on the matter. Williams never quotes Kantian sources; he does not even allude to them. However, an accurate examination of some crucial texts in the Kantian *corpus*, on the one hand, and a deep analysis of Williams' complex reasoning, on the other, disclose a much more nuanced treatment of the topic – by both philosophers.

I shall thus first explore Kant's discussion of the role of shame in the evolution of the relationship between the sexes – in particular, the *historic* and *genetic* development of a complex line of reasoning that Kant seems to have first presented in his courses on ethics, dating from the beginning of the 1760s.³ When faced with certain perplexities that we can assume were roused in him by the reading of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, Kant confronts his students with a metaphysical hypothesis that accounts for a way out of the state of nature and which involves exploring the most primitive dynamics of the shame instinct. I present this hypothesis in Section 1.

Section 2 furthers the analysis of this problem in Kant's early texts with a comparative approach to the structural expansion of this model, applied to a justification of the ultimate purpose of the relationship between the sexes. By displaying a multi-perspectival description of how the intricate dynamics of this primitive shame instinct supposedly works in relations between men and women, I end Section 2 with a note on the paradoxical conclusions to which it gives rise when compared with contemporary views on shame, understood as a moral emotion. The essay's ultimate point is to show how, properly understood, the feeling of shame represents for Kant a self-sufficient drive for preservation that is independent of each agent's will and that strives for the strengthening of the human species as a whole.

1. CONTINUITIES AND BREAKS IN KANT'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL TEXTS

Reading Kant's pre-Critical texts today, it is hard to avoid the impression that the very evolution of his thought anticipates concepts and characteristic patterns of reasoning that only the mature works would bring to fruition.

³ See Kant 1997: 48; 27-52; 22.

One such reasoning model, which displays a recognizable teleological structure while describing the sheer appearance of phenomena, can be detected in the second section of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and in some lecture notes on moral philosophy, world history or physical and pragmatic anthropology, also dating originally from the 1760s. This model traces a deep connection between one crucial end of nature – the propagation of the human species – and a sense of shame. However, Kant falls short of providing an argument for this link. Accomplishing this will be the main purpose of the present essay.

To frame my analysis of the connection Kant draws between the shame instinct and human propagation, I begin by looking at a well-known set of lecture notes taken by Johann Gottfried Herder early on in Kant's career. Herder attended Kant's lectures at the Albertina University in Königsberg between 1762 and 1764. Although in later years he would strongly dispute Kant's most important views on history and the role of rationality as the ultimate source of normativity, in his student days Herder considered himself a disciple of Kant.

Reading the many surviving notes from Kant's early courses, one can at least infer that Herder attended the lectures on Ethics – or *Moralphilosophie*, as they were commonly announced and scheduled in Königsberg. It was the German scholar Paul Menzer who, in 1924,⁴ on the occasion of the bicentennial of Kant's birth, first compiled the notes from those courses, and despite certain discrepancies between the Menzer edition of *Eine Vorlesung Kants über Ethik* and the collection of remarks attributed to Herder, some of the topics discussed in both texts clearly overlap. The range of problems discussed in what is now commonly referred to as the 'Herder Lecture Notes'⁵ is impressive, ranging from the difference between physically good actions and morally good ones, the nature of moral motivation, atheism in *sensu privationis* and *sensu contradictoriae*, and the natural evolution of the sexual impulse.⁶

It is precisely when speculating on the evolution of the sexual drive, from the state of nature to its present form in civilized society, that Kant refers to a basic shame instinct (a 'true shame instinct', as he calls it), which not only performs a

⁴ See Menzer, 1924.

⁵ See Kant 1997: 1-37.

⁶ See Menzer 1924: § 27, 48 ss.

bridging role between the two phases of humanity's development but even justifies the attainment of the latter and its perfectible teleology. Here is what Herder reports Kant as having said in his public lectures:

«The sexual impulse would not have developed so early, but once the powers of the body had matured, for it would not have been accelerated by instruction. The impulse satisfied itself merely by immediate pleasure, and there would probably not have been a permanent bond. But since, no doubt, the man would have felt that the impulse would recur, he would allow the woman to follow him into the forest; she became his companion, and both would have cared for the children. He would have had to help her while she was suckling them, and thus arouse monogamy, since there are as many women as men. The impulse would not have been so rampant then, since the fantasied pleasures of the civilized were lacking. Moreover, *this impulse is covered with the veil of shame, which is also found among the majority of savages, and is quite unlike any other form of shame and restrains the impulse.*⁷ There is much truth in the objections of the cynic: we should be ashamed only of what is dishonourable; but for all that, there is a genuine shame instinct, which has indeed no rational cause, and is strange, but whose aims are: 1) to restrain the untamed sexual impulse; and 2) to maintain the attraction of it by secrecy. The male sex, which has more principles, possesses this shame in a lesser degree; for want of principles, the woman has a great deal of it, and it dominates her; and where this shame has already been uprooted in women, all virtue and respectability have lost their authority, and they go further in shamelessness than the most dissolute of men. Such shame, moreover, has an analogon with an act that is intrinsically dishonourable, and this has produced the stupid shame of monkishness. *It is not, however, in itself the mark of an unpermitted act, but the veil of an honourable one, which propagates mankind.*» (1997: 22).

The train of Kant's reasoning is not altogether clear, and some reconstruction is needed if we are to gain a firm grasp on the inner logic of his position and a

⁷ My italics.

sense of its paradoxical outcomes. One point that Kant is certainly trying to put across concerns the establishment of monogamy in civilized societies, by sketching out a sort of metaphysical story about the first encounters of members of the two sexes, linked with the persistence of the sexual impulse and a supposedly equal number of members of each sex. But this is not the whole purpose of this speculative account of the state of nature and its evolution into a civil state; it is only a stepping stone. In Kant's complex reflection on the ultimate purpose of the association between men and women, the establishment of monogamy is but a primary condition for the propagation of the species and, one might safely infer from many other texts in the Kantian corpus besides the *Vorlesungen*, its perfectibility throughout the generations.⁸ Monogamy, Kant believes, is the first condition for a steady increase in the survival rate of the offspring of natural man and woman and, *a fortiori*, a condition for the improvement of their descendants.

As it turns out, the lengthy remark recorded by Herder on the connection between shame and the maturation of the sexual impulse in the history of humankind first introduces a reasoning pattern, which Kant will later⁹ identify as the enabling principle for the satisfaction of the ultimate purpose of the encounter between members of the two sexes. *Qua* form of restraint, Kant will argue, shame is said to creep along intersexual relations as a means of disciplining the sexual drive, taming sensual excesses, and ensuring that the human species moves forward.

When setting out to identify the most immediate and apparent features of the forms of relationship that men and women establish and maintain with each other, Kant opts for a twofold kind of description: on the one hand, he points out how behavioural norms come about, develop and become conventions among

⁸ See especially his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Third Section, 2: 236: 'This whole enchantment is at bottom spread over the sexual drive. Nature pursues its great aim, and all refinements that are associated with it, however remote from it they seem to be, are only veils, and in the end derive their charm from the very same source. [...] If this taste is not exactly fine, still it is not on that account to be despised. For the greatest part of humanity follows by its means the greatest order of nature in a very simple and certain manner. By this means most marriages are brought about, and indeed among the most industrious part of humanity [...]' (Kant 1997: 46).

⁹ See Kant 2007: 18-63.

members of each sex; on the other, he attempts to figure out what their ultimate meaning and purpose might be.

In Section Three of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* ('Of the Distinction of the Beautiful and Sublime in the Interrelations of the Two Sexes'), published at the end of the timeframe during which Herder might possibly have taken down his course notes, Kant writes the following on the 'sense of shame':

«The sense of shame is a secrecy of nature aimed at setting bounds to a most intractable inclination, and which, in so far as it has the call of nature on its side, always seems compatible with good, moral qualities, even if it is excessive. It is accordingly most necessary as a supplement to principles, for there is no case in which inclination so readily becomes a sophist cooking up complaisant principles as here. At the same time, it also serves to draw a secretive curtain before even the most appropriate and necessary ends of nature, so that too familiar an acquaintance with them will not occasion disgust or at least indifference with respect to the final aims of a drive on to which the finest and liveliest inclinations are grafted.» (Kant, 2011: 41)

This excerpt presents us with an extremely complex reasoning, which only a careful, step-by-step analysis can properly unravel. The attentive reader, however, is left with no doubt that here, too, Kant is tackling a massive theoretical issue, which relates the natural-historic taming of the sexual drive to the propagation of the species. The most important point to be elicited from this strange passage is this: the shame instinct works as a natural bridge between the two purposes ultimately ascribed to the satisfaction of the sexual impulse that brings together human beings of the two sexes. If there is a sexual force attracting men and women to each other, there is also a further drive which takes sex beyond sex, and members of each sex beyond the peculiarities of their circumstances, and that is the very 'drive of the species', which is set to continue and improve itself.

Needless to say, such a supra-individual force of perfectibility, if at all meaningful, falls beyond the reach of empirical ascertainability, and its explanatory role cannot but be inferred from other, observable phenomena – in the present case, from the behavioural pattern which sets itself between the members of each sex. Kant seems to have been extraordinarily impressed by the fact that one purpose of this pattern of attraction is immediate and

inconsequential, whilst the other is noble and world-historical, and by the fact that it is shame that mediates between the two.¹⁰ Carefully examined, the supposed sensible features characterizing – or even determining – a feeling or impression of shame, particularly in connection with the sexual drive, are overruled by their structural design of taming a more primitive sensual experience. Although labelled ‘an instinct’, Kant’s peculiar account of shame turns the emotion into a form of self-control in the face of a most overwhelming expression of a natural drive, and thus into a pre-condition to virtue. However much one wants to insist on the sensible nature of this form of self-restraint, its functional role is to curb a much more undisciplined human instinct – one we share with non-human animals –, and one can thus witness in this peculiar genetic interpretation of the sexual impulse a sensible feeling enabling moral behaviour¹¹.

It is precisely this added twist in Kant’s genetic story about the maturation of the sexual drive, however, which will begin to expose his reasoning to paradoxes. I now turn to these paradoxes and to possible ways of resolving them.

2. IRRECONCILABLE VIEWPOINTS

As I hope my explanation of the evolution of Kant’s thoughts about the

¹⁰ Kant picks up the basic thread of his reasoning from Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*. As usual, Rousseau’s influence on Kant’s moral thinking cannot be dismissed, but their respective ideas on this point are almost at loggerheads. Rousseau wants to claim that, since in the state of nature the cultural elements of the fundamental human drives – including the sexual drive – are absent, the impulse is quickly satisfied and dies out. In the long run, it is hard to see how, given this framework, the species could have evolved. Kant, however, will insist not only that the spontaneous meetings occur more and more often, but that somehow the performance of the species overcomes the limitations of individuals, and that, through *shame*, the immediate satisfaction of the drive is both restricted and rationally linked with the continuation of humankind beyond the natural state (See Rousseau [2002] and Kant [2011]).

¹¹ It is crucial to bear in mind, though, that such form of strengthening or improving of the species as a whole has no relation whatever with what Kant usually means by moral improvement or perfectibility and which presupposes a detachment from sensible feeling and a strict grounding of moral action on strict rational principle. My reasoning here does not attempt to make of Kant an empiricist (or even a sensualist) about the ultimate goal of human evolution or its subjective take-off in relation to sexual attraction and a reproductive pattern this puts in place across generations – starting with a primeval pull to get man out of the state of nature. All I am emphasizing is the intelligible design of this primitive impulse drawing members of the two sexes to each other. In that regard, such thing as the ‘moral development of the human species’ is akin, first, to species survival and, in the second place and ideally, to the betterment of its members throughout time.

disposition of men and women in the State of Nature has made clear, it is when Kant goes from speaking about the frequency of sexual intercourse between members of each sex to suggest an explanatory model for the way out of the natural disposition that problems emerge with his hermeneutical hypothesis. I shall recur to the reflective strategy of testing an interpretive proposal from different standpoints to illustrate exactly how the model flounders.

Reconstructing the two long and convoluted remarks quoted in the previous section, one shall stress first that it is the sexual impulse itself that Kant says is covered with the veil of shame. When one interprets the first passage, from the Herder Lecture Notes, with a view to unfold its rationale, what is there described as ‘a sense of shame’ appears to work thus: by restraining the naturally ungovernable expression of the sexual drive, the so-called ‘veil of shame’ precisely allows it to attain its ultimate goal, which is not immediate satisfaction but the propagation of mankind [*die Menschenpflanzung*]. However, one should bear in mind throughout that Kant believes this to be a kind of phylogenetic inheritance from our forebears, and thus this peculiar type of experience should map out both the way the sexual drive is felt by the uncivilized man and the way we experience the drive in a civilized state¹². Once this pattern is analysed in detail, however, structural problems immediately stand out.

For one can reason as follows. From an internal, strictly subjective point of view, how can we so much as live through the curbing of the sexual impulse – mostly experienced as one peculiar kind of social restraint –, as ‘disgust’, ‘indifference’, ‘moving away’ (and thus, still as a point of contact or articulation) with the final design of that drive, which is entirely rational and concerns the sustained propagation of the species? One is usually capable of both thinking about the continuation of the human species as one of the ends fulfilled by reproduction and of experiencing the restriction of the sexual impulse as both a natural and a cultural necessity. But it hardly encompasses our experience of a limited, organized, socially framed sexual expression that it be a function of a higher purpose which, on top of everything, and being by nature *expansive*,

¹² To confirm the uniformity of this notion in Kant’s mind, both when speculating on the origins of basic drives in ‘Natural Man’ and when settling on a view of the same issue regarding human beings living in a state of civilization, we need but look at the similar note recorded in *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*, published in 1764 (at the end of Herder’s stay in Königsberg), which accounts for the general features of the relation between members of the two sexes strictly from a phenomenal point of view.

precisely contradicts a restrained form of activity.

However, an attempt at describing this very situation in purely external terms does not fare much better. When reconstructing the fundamental moments in Kant's argument, we are able to understand at least this much: the original force of the sexual drive must be curbed, so that its ultimate purpose can be accomplished. Kant alleges that an effective sense of shame is what performs this dual role of i) keeping the impulse within bounds and ii) 'maintaining its attraction by secrecy'. However, and conceiving of the experience in its functional, dual-aspect role – as an inner feeling with a given external configuration pointing at a teleological design which goes beyond experience itself – one further question begins to take shape: how is *shame* supposed to do this? How can a deeply first-personal negative emotion like shame perform this ambitious role of bringing together the natural and the rational dimensions of a primitive disposition in us?

If one looks at available theories of shame (let alone first-hand experiences), ranging from first-personal approaches to the emotion as described by twentieth-century phenomenology,¹³ contractualist discussions of its impact on an individual's self-esteem, such as the Rawlsian model presented in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*,¹⁴ or to the fast-growing specialized literature from moral psychology and the empirical sciences broadly construed, one sees that shame is uniformly characterized as a deeply personal emotion that damages the core of the self.¹⁵ Even Bernard Williams' extremely nuanced analysis of this emotional pattern, whose main purpose is to disassociate the experience of shame from a purported Kantian critique of moral superficiality, matches well this intuitive description.

Perhaps the most acute criticism directed by Williams at contemporary

¹³ See Sartre (2003) and Max Scheler (1913).

¹⁴ See Rawls 1999: 388-389, § 67: 'We may characterize shame as the feeling that someone has when he experiences an injury to his self-respect or suffers a blow to his self-esteem. [...] Shame is the emotion evoked by shocks to our self-respect, a special kind of good. Now both regret and shame are self-regarding, but shame implies an especially intimate connection with persons and with those upon whom we depend to confirm the sense of our own worth'. Rawls thinks about shame at a very peculiar conceptual juncture. He claims that human virtues are *excellences*, i.e. personal attributes that increase interpersonal common good, and he furthermore takes self-respect to be a basic kind of good, essential for the flourishing of any individual agent. Shame, to the extent that it constitutes a blow to self-respect – the fundamental feature of personal integrity – threatens the possibility of social cohesion.

¹⁵ See Taylor (1985), Sartre (2003), and Thomason (2013, 2015).

advocates of Kantianism is that modern readings of Kant's practical philosophy in which the structural *moral significance of shame* is rejected (in which shame, often stemming from involuntary action, is lumped together with a recognizable cluster of subjective responses that differ fundamentally from duty or action springing from sheer respect for the moral law) function unselfconsciously against the distorting background of the Kantian moral paradigm, which is taken as *given*.

Williams's critique of the moral context that privileges the absolute autonomy of the agent's will has two fundamental stages. Within the Kantian deontological framework – so his argument goes –, the autonomy of the moral agent is defined in terms of her immunity to the judgements of others in practical decision-making, i.e. her ability to disregard such influences and instead act on principle. Autonomous freedom of choice is set against an adaptive model following which each agent determines her actions with a view to meeting external expectations. Because the experience of shame is mainly connected with the disadvantageous exposure of oneself to the gaze of another, the values at stake are superficial, and superficial in a double sense. To the extent that the basic experience is related to the physical, to appearance, it concerns the appraisal of external features. For precisely this reason, the moral relevance of shame can be criticized: shame does not concern the intrinsic value of the person and indeed replaces true value with what lies on the immediate surface—the first impression. If this were so, Williams continues (imagining the Kantian line of argument he wants to deconstruct), the experience of shame would indeed be linked to heteronomy and lack true moral value, since the self-directed adverse judgement involved in shame brings with it awareness of both the critical gaze of the other and how I appear in the light of that gaze, but nothing more. On the other hand, and because the impression of disadvantage is merely subjective, the experience might be said to lack the universality that defines the Kantian normative model, and might therefore be dismissed as *egoistic*. In fact, the two defining features tend to complement each other. An action is classified as egoistic if it is structurally motivated by the individual's desire for success and acclaim, and, it can be argued, such a practical pattern makes sense only given an environment in which the agent believes she will be seen and possibly receive acclaim. To be sure: agents can stipulate for themselves ends they would like to achieve, independently of third-party assessments or prescriptions. But even internalized expectations of personal

fulfilment are learned and structured as patterns of self-assessment in the context of appearing 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 my appearance among others.

Now, if one goes back to Kant's direct pronouncements on the topic of shame – which Bernard Williams never mentions –, it is extremely difficult to relate the first, naturalized function, highlighted by the quotations above, and which Kant (alongside many anthropologists, phenomenologists and moral philosophers) ascribes to the emotion with the supposedly noble, teleological aim, which that first, intuitive role should pinpoint and which concern the betterment of the human species. For unless one can prove either that Kant is using the notion here with a double connotation – objective and subjective, let us say, or external and internal – or that he is dealing with a *sui generis* notion of 'shame', it is going to be hard to make a case for this interpretative model once its rationale is fully understood.

It might be useful to insist, once more, that this complex scenario admits of three separate descriptions. There is, first of all, a reflective exercise one must undertake in order to grasp the inner logic of Kant's association of an ungoverned sexual drive, which is dominated by shame, with the fulfilment of its ultimate end – an accomplishment that is only reached to the extent that shame curbs the instinct, thus enabling propagation. In a way, this effort objectifies the content of Kant's ideas about the problem in the sense of making it fully explicit. A second description focuses on the purely subjective experience of this supposed association between the two aims of the impulse (a person feels ashamed of his or her sexual appetite and tames it, immediately unaware that she is thus fulfilling its ultimate evolutionary purpose). And finally, this inner experience or set of related experiences matches a kind of behaviour in the individual arguably targeted by this form of shame, which we can also describe, but *hardly as shame behaviour*, as long as one respects the two main features suggested by the first description, i.e., restriction of the drive plus a rational justification of its ultimate

design¹⁶. The latter, being empirically unverifiable, demands the stretching of our rational powers, which enables us to make sense of a natural phenomenon.

Now, having unpacked the main elements structuring Kant's complex reasoning, I would like to specify where my hermeneutic difficulties ultimately lie, when one brings together the external and the internal features of the phenomenon under analysis.

It is certainly conceivable that the kind of experience Kant describes as (i) restricting an untamed sexual impulse and (ii) maintaining the attraction to the impulse via secrecy, is observable as shame behaviour. As a matter of fact, the two features might well encompass, in broad terms, a certain awkwardness with which human beings live out their sexuality in different social settings. At the same time, it is at least plausible that this can be seen as a typical form of self-restraint characteristic of shame feelings. What is in any case counter-intuitive is adding to this form of shyness the functional role that Kant claims it is meant to perform – the higher goal of propagating the species – while retaining the necessary features that define experiences of shame.

Should Kant's own thought experiment seem too grand, or my exposition thus far too abstract, think of the following, quite common, first-personal reflection. Kant's ingenious line of reasoning concerning the fulfilment of the 'great design of nature' would seem to find support in the calculated planning involved in crafting policies, whether in the home or at the state level, concerning future generations. Individuals, couples, states and corporations make and participate in birth control programs, design laws and social plans to increase (or decrease) birth-rates, rely on fertility cycles, even shape entire aspects of work and social life in accordance with the limited potential modern life allows for reproduction – and this may imply the effective channelling of sexual energy to

¹⁶ In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant will again discuss a two-pronged approach to the morally flawed action and underline the duty to expose its shameful aspect as against its harmfulness to the agent him- or herself. The brief assessment of the shameful aspect of the morally bad action (to the effect that its shameful aspect has precedence over its badness whenever the education of the moral sense is at stake – 1996a: 595; MS 6: 483) contrasts with the notes on the shame-instinct I have been exposing thus far in two major ways. At the level of emotional self-discipline, one has, in the latter example, a form of third-personal control and policing over the morally bad behavior as against a first personal, natural mechanism of instinct curbing and restraint. On the other hand, it is the external, morally defective aspect of the shameful act, which is exposed and expunged with a view to educate the moral sense in young people as against the inner control over the excesses of sexual inclination.

the right moments.

But it is hardly imaginable that any sort of prudential measures springing from thoughts akin to the one Kant expounds in both texts encompasses anything even remotely associated with a shame instinct. There may be self-imposed restrictions, and typical, primitive impressions of shame in relation to the sexual act may equally occur, but the very plan of leaving progeny will remain unaffected by both.

There may be objections to this brief account of how the shame instinct operates in Kant's framework, and I alluded to some of these above. One might think, for instance, that Kant is here dealing with a rather technical – or circumstantial – notion of 'shame' (more precisely, a 'shame instinct'), and that applying it to common forms that the emotion assumes in daily life is simply out of place. At least the first half of this objection is accurate, and it is indeed pointed out by Kant himself.¹⁷ It does not invalidate my reconstruction of the argument, however, and this for two reasons. On the one hand, the objection is unsatisfactory because although the concept Kant is treating is *sui generis* and somehow *ad hoc*, its components are those I have stressed above, and in at least some of its applications, as my above example shows, their conditions for truth are mapped out by very primitive shame experiences with which we are all familiar. On the other hand, there are other contexts – for instance, when relating shame to the privacy of prayer¹⁸ – where Kant deploys an idea of shame that precisely maps the definition laid out for us by moral psychologists and phenomenologists. Therefore, even in purely conceptual, non-empirical terms, Kant certainly had the notion that modern moral theories¹⁹ commonly endorse.

One could further object that what Kant in fact proposes is a functional account of how a process which is based on experience becomes ultimately

¹⁷ If one is to trust Herder's notes, it seems likely that Kant was aware of the peculiarities surrounding the experience of shame in relation to sexual intercourse. See esp. Kant 1997: 27:99: '[...] there is a genuine shame-instinct, which has indeed no rational cause, and is strange...'

¹⁸ See *Moral Philosophy Collins*: 'The more upright a man is, the more readily he is ashamed if surprised in an act of devotion. A hypocrite will not be ashamed, but on the contrary, will let himself be seen. For a man is ashamed if another thinks ill of him, even though he has committed no fault' (Kant 1997: 27: 337, 119).

¹⁹ The more robust contemporary accounts of shame as a moral emotion – aside from Williams's –, undertaken from the standpoint of its intersubjective and subjective impact upon us are, respectively, those provided by John Rawls (1999) and Gabriele Taylor (1985).

intelligible only once reason is stretched beyond experience in order to make full sense of it, and thus that any appeal to an empirical order which justifies it is question-begging and any explanation of its operative dynamics from distinct viewpoints utterly off the mark. I still find fault with this objection, however, and again for two reasons. For even if what Kant is in fact providing is a kind of a-perspectival explanation of a very complex, natural and historical phenomenon which only a fiction of reason enables us to fully grasp, nothing prevents the modern interpreter of these lecture notes from shaping their most abstract ideas from the point of view of individual agents. In fact, when one frames Kant's *modular experience of the shame instinct* in terms of singular perspectives, common features of our personal and interpersonal acquaintance with it immediately stand out. The structural articulation of its parts by no means functions *only* as a rational fiction.

It seems indeed highly plausible that, if anything in the structure of Kant's reasoning, as presented both in the *Lectures on Ethics* and later in the *Observations*, works to block full intelligibility of its composing elements when brought together under a unified standpoint, it is the supra-individual justification of partial features of individual experience. Thus, if Kant's rational account of a chain of natural phenomena fails, this is due to the unwarranted confluence of its explanatory layers rather than the presumed partiality of descriptive points of view. As stressed above, his full explanatory model is altogether general and supra-individual, but parts of it only make sense once framed from personal standpoints.

Finally, and precisely on account of the reconstructive effort taken to explain how exactly it is that Kant tries to relate two dimensions of a single phenomenon with the help of a third notion – a phenomenon which corresponds to one of the most primitive forms of human experience – an objection (or perhaps merely a query) to the effect that he might be using the notion with distinct subjective or objective/internal or external interpretations is blocked. Kant has a persistent but undeveloped idea of how the shame instinct operates in order to accomplish all that it is designed to accomplish. Once the hidden pieces of this puzzle are brought into the open, problems emerge: not only is it extremely difficult for the individual to experience restraints on the sexual impulse as a means of expanding the human race, but it is also counterintuitive to associate this behavioural pattern with the emotion of shame, intuitively understood and phenomenologically

described.

No matter how complex and ultimately paradoxical Kant's interpretation of the shame instinct turns out to be, however, there is certainly a highly structured explanatory framework to be found behind these undeveloped associations. Following their lead gives us a genuinely *Kantian view* of the emotion of shame – a view which is true to the letter and not just the spirit of what acting morally 'in the scheme of Kantian oppositions' amounts to. If he had taken a more congenial approach, this aspect of Kant's thought, put forth in some crucial writings, could also have been encompassed by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity*.

3. CONCLUSION

In the present essay, I have tried to put an end to two 'hermeneutic myths' that are deeply ingrained both in popular accounts of Kantianism and in certain trends in Kantian scholarship itself. One of these concerns the supposed lack of relevance of the emotions to Kant's practical philosophy, broadly construed. The second myth concerns an often-assumed theoretical and formal *hiatus* which is taken to separate the pre-Critical from the Critical texts.

Bernard Williams – who never presented himself as an advocate of Kantian doctrines – is probably most responsible for spreading the first prejudice against Kantian ethics in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Always keen to take up philosophical challenges head-on and to restrict his discussions of Kantianism as a moral system to the better-known treatises, i.e. the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Williams omits from his interpretive model a wide array of reflections on anthropology, history, religion, pedagogy, and the natural sciences, in which Kant never loses sight of moral considerations. As it happens, the longest extant textual discussion of the role of shame in human history can be found in notes from the courses that Kant gave on the subject of ethics for more than three decades.

In the first half of the 1760s, Kant clearly based part of his teaching on the most important pieces Rousseau had written the previous decade – even picking up the same anthropological models and specific examples – while putting forward solutions to the enigmas at the root of morality that were almost the opposite of Rousseau's.

The astute reader of the essays and notes from this period will identify the emergence of the more personal formal features which define the Kantian mode of explaining both natural and moral phenomena – a rational and finalistic mindset – even when he covers the slippery ground of attempting to justify the development of a basic affective disposition in ‘Natural Man.’ It is of course at this problematic juncture that the idea of a primitive instinct of shame is first discussed, and we have seen that Kant was somewhat obsessed with discovering its ultimate purpose in the history of humankind. One is well justified to infer that, if the problems are Rousseauian, the solutions bear a distinctly Kantian mark.

At this point in the evolution of his philosophical system, which would be fully consolidated only within two decades, Kant deployed reason as a ‘thinking disposition’ more than a separate faculty of the mind. In other words, in the 1760s Kant seemed to conceive of human reason as an indispensable intellectual tool for explaining reality rather than a *thing* with supra-historical powers and attributes.

As such, not only could no natural or metaphysically hypostasized phenomenon remain unexplained – as in the case of the supposed sexual dynamics of the race in the natural state – but Kant wanted to discover, *rationally*, where it led. And to that end, an emotion like shame – with its intrinsic double bind, implying exposure and spontaneous recoil – is instrumental. Thus the role played by shame in Kant’s reasoning becomes clear once its most primitive features are rationally displaced. Once this process of explanatory displacement is carefully thought through, two things become apparent. One is that, even in his early lectures, Kant begins to sense that there is something more substantial behind animals’ (including human animals) sexual appetite – something like a trans-individual force fighting for the species and oblivious to our will.²⁰ One logical counterpart of this supra-personal instinct in us, however, is that individuals can just as well be oblivious to the true motives of their sexual

²⁰ This feature of Kant’s thought has been widely acknowledged by evolutionary theorists, from Darwin to the present day. See, e.g., Darwin (1859), Maynard-Smith (1978) and Colegrave (2002). For more than twenty years now, the biologist Nick Colegrave has been arguing that sex can speed the rhythm of evolution, helping new organisms to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Although he insists the evolutionary advantage varies with population-size and the structure of the mating organisms, this is one crucial point where some insights of Kantian Anthropology meet modern Theories of Evolution.

behaviour – even when claiming that they are planning to have *their* children.

On all accounts, the idea matters morally to Kant, as does shame, as the enabling emotion underlying it.²¹

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This work was supported by National Funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia). The author is supported by FCT under the contractual programme in accordance with articles 4, 5, and 6 of the Law Decree no. 57/2016, of August 29, altered by Law no. 57/2017, July 19.

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²¹ This work is funded by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the project UIDB/00183/2020.

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