

## Shame and Responsibility

*Some Notes for the Talk by Prof. Abdolkarim Soroush on 3/5/2013 (Workshop "Entangled Categories? Shame, Moral Sentiments and the Visual")*

"It continues to strike me - despite a number of publications [...] - how odd it is that shame gets such little attention" thus says Phil Hutchinson in his book on "Shame and Philosophy" (2008). Later on in the introduction to the book he makes a stronger remark to the effect that philosophy as a subject should feel ashamed that it has not studied shame as a moral/philosophical concept more extensively.

Back in 1946 Ruth Benedict, a cultural anthropologist from Columbia university, published her very influential/controversial "Chrysanthemum and the Sword" in which she depicted Japan's culture as a culture of shame in contrast to the American culture as a culture of guilt.

In Abrahamic religions' mythology, shame seems to be the first emotion to develop in our arch father and arch mother after having the forbidden fruit. They lose their dress and stand naked in front of each other. Imbued with shame they try to reach out to the olive tree to cover their genitals with its leaf. It is much later that they realize they have committed the sin of disobedience, therefore have to repent.

Bernard Williams, the philosopher, blames Kant for his too narrow a conception of moral autonomy and rehabilitates the shame oriented person as morally autonomous. Thus he says in his "Shame and Necessity" (1993): "Shame can transcend both an assertive egoism and a conventional concern for public opinion" (p.88); and again: "The Greek understanding of shame [...] was strong and complex enough to dispose of the familiar criticism that an ethical life shaped by it is unacceptably heteronomous, completely dependent on public opinion." (p. 97).

As one can feel from B. Williams, shame is making a comeback not only as a positive emotion but also as an existential state; this can be clearly seen in Giorgio Agamben's remark, in a post Heideggerian spirit, that: individual's awareness of the self is felt as shame.

My analysis of shame goes a little bit further, taking shame as the fundamental virtue without which no morality can be conceivable. Moreover, over and above the two paradigms of rights and duties one can construct a third paradigm of shame in which rights and duties are embedded and at the same time transcended.

Ruth Benedict's book received very harsh criticisms especially on the ground that she had moralized the issue, implying, in an orientalist spirit to be criticized by Edward Saeed later on, that American culture was perhaps superior to the Japanese one. I will argue that it comes from a gross mistake, conflating the shame as a negative emotion to be overcome, with the existential shame as a precondition of pride and person-hood.

End.