

# Affect Theory, Shame and the Logic of Personality

Richard Ostrofsky

January, 2003

Man is the only animal that blushes – or needs to.

Mark Twain

We live in an atmosphere of shame. We are ashamed of everything that is real about us, ashamed of ourselves, of our relatives, of our incomes, of our accents, of our opinions, of our experience, just as we are ashamed of our naked skins.

George Bernard Shaw in Man and Superman

**Note:** Parts one and two of this essay are largely precis of another man's book. Accordingly, I must begin by acknowledging my debt to Dr. Donald Nathanson for all material in those sections on affect theory and shame, and for such understanding of these as I have gained and re-package here. The misunderstandings are my own.

In this essay, I'm trying to "digest" a book called Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self, by a psychiatrist named Donald Nathanson. In turn, Dr. Nathanson's book presents and builds upon the life's work of a great experimental psychologist named Silvan Tomkins, who drew the crucial distinction between *affect* and *emotion*, and laid the groundwork for the study of *affect* as a concept in its own right. For his part, Dr. Nathanson seems to have been among the first to recognize the importance of affect theory in psychotherapy – especially with reference to the confusingly multi-faceted, critically important phenomenon of *shame* – too long neglected, in part because it was itself so embarrassing to think or write about. Today, however, thanks to the work of Tomkins, Nathanson and others, we seem to have the beginnings of an understanding of shame as affect, as emotion, and as a lynch pin of social and political behaviour. And it is this understanding that I'm trying to summarize here, and "take on board" for my own use.

Apart from the fear of sanctions – and, for well-socialized adults, well before any fear of these is consciously experienced – normal, healthy shame is the primary force impelling us to socially acceptable behaviour. It is also a major component of envy, and of that hankering for more and bigger and better that turns the wheels of our economy. Toxic shame ranks with greed and fear as a cause of war, and probably surpasses either as a shaper of political identity. Accordingly, shame affect repays thought by the political theorist, as much as by the clinical psychologist. In fact, it repays thought by anyone who wants to know what makes people tick – either as individuals or in groups.

The importance of shame among human emotions has long been known; but the problem has been to understand how can anything so basic to the human condition

– so universal and so powerful – can have such varied manifestations. Even agreeing on a definition has been difficult, because shame takes so many different forms: In English alone, we can feel *shy*, *bashful*, *inhibited*, *embarrassed*, *humbled*, *humiliated*, *chagrined*, *disgraced*, *dishonoured*, and even *mortified* – each of these words conveying shame in a different mood or flavour. A young man cannot bring himself to ask a girl for a date; that young woman blushes slightly and averts her gaze when he works up courage to do so. An alcoholic drinks to drown the shame of his addiction to alcohol. A driver flies into murderous rage and kills another driver who shows him disrespect by tailgating or cutting him off. In other times, a Japanese performed *seppuku*, to demonstrate the sincerity of his commitment to a task at which he has failed, or the purity of his will to do the right thing in an impossible situation. A European gentleman challenged another to a duel to expunge a stain on his honour.

In each case we guess that self-esteem and/or “face” – the social presentation of self – have been threatened or damaged in some way. But the physical signs of shame can be observed in infants and very young children who have yet to form much of either. We can see babies go limp and avert their eyes after failing at some effort that was beyond their power. All of us have seen toddlers hide behind mother’s leg from a friendly stranger – when mother herself is perfectly at ease with that person, and is encouraging the child to come out and make friends. Even some animals are capable of something very much like shame as humans know it. We see dogs hang their heads, avert their eyes, and look ashamed at having done something wrong. Even the independent cat occasionally shows something very much like shame when something happens that he did not intend. These postural displays cannot be learned behaviour; and they cannot literally be communicating shame in the full sense of this word, because most social connotations of the adult, human emotion could not be present. And so the question is: Just what do all the known varieties of shame have in common? Affect theory proposes a most elegant answer.

## **1 Affect: The Biological Substrate of Emotion**

The theory begins by drawing a sharp distinction, due to Tomkins, between *affect*, a hard-wired, physiological response that will eventually manifest as emotion, and the experienced emotion itself. Affect is the biological substrate of emotion. Or, putting it the other way round, emotion is the cognized perception and interpretation of affect. Emotions are intricate “co-assemblies” of affect, concept, and memory-pattern, set along lines that culture and personal experience make available. Affect is the raw stuff of emotion as a biologist might study it. We can observe and measure affect in animals and human infants, even while doubting or disbelieving that they are capable of emotion in the adult, human sense – and while knowing, as good behaviourists, that their experienced emotion is not available for observation in any case.

Adult emotion, as we’ll discuss later, includes physiological affect and much else besides – memories, narratives, possible responses, expected outcomes.

Following Shakespeare's famous metaphor – "All the world's a stage. . ." and so forth – the whole package is called a "script." In the theatre, a script connects the actor's capabilities to the requirements of the play, telling the actor what to say and do, and what emotions to display. Similarly, an emotional script, a sexual script, a life script, sets the individual in a social milieu, telling him or her how to speak and act and feel appropriately. As in theatre, actual performance is constrained by the actor's innate capabilities; and for emotion, these are the *affects*. Thus, we might compare the affect system to a box of pigments from which the painter mixes his colours. People, things and situations can matter to us only because *affect* makes them matter; and, in the last resort, they can matter only in ways that can be composed from the affects provided to us in the evolution of our species. As we'll see, however, such a theory affords the psychologist a richer basis for the explanation of value, emotion and personality than any he has enjoyed to-date. In particular, it affords a better understanding of shame than either behaviourists or Freudians could manage. At last then, with a grip on the problem of shame and the other emotions, affect theory can begin to interpret humanity in scientific terms – without mystifying, or drastically over-simplifying what it tries to explain.

### 1.1 The Concept of Affect

Tomkins was led to his concept of an affect, and thence to his identification of nine elemental affects by one of those observations so simple and obvious as to be overlooked by everyone else<sup>1</sup>. In the 1940's his wife had a baby who, like all healthy babies, could communicate distress unmistakably from its first day. Like good parents, Tomkins and his wife responded to the infant's cry, attempting to relieve its distress. But the father had a remarkable thought as well: A new-born cannot know why it is crying. Having no concepts at all to start with, it cannot identify pain or distress as such. Its central nervous system receives a sufficient trigger, and it cries. In time the experience of crying, correlated with other unpleasant sensations, will teach it a concept, and some ability to localize its distress; and that concept, with all associated memories and habit patterns, will become components of the older child's *emotion*. But for the infant, there is no emotion in anything like the adult sense. There is only crying, and a stimulus sufficient to provoke it. Thus Tomkins was led to the concept of distress (with its sufficient triggers and typical physiological consequences) as what he called an *affect*—in contrast to an *emotion* which always includes memories and concepts and habit patterns as well. In a neat formula: "*Affect* is biology; *emotion* is biography." With this simple distinction, new approaches to psychology and therapy are opened up.

An affect can be thought of as a kind of physiological program, analogous to

---

<sup>1</sup> S&P pp. 57–58

the firmware (as it is called) burned into the chips in a computer's memory. On this metaphor, the body itself is like computer hardware – the physical machine; the memories and learned behaviour that we acquire over a lifetime are like software – the instructions and data that tell our hardware what to do. But affect has an in-between status: Each one of these runs when it is triggered, like any program, but always just as it evolved and was handed down with the organism's genetic material. There is good evidence, Nathanson says, that these patterns appeared first in life forms as primitive as the reptile, and that the circuitry for human affect is located in the primitive structures of our nervous system called "the reptilian brain<sup>2</sup>."

With the concept of affect as a basis, other emotion-related terms can be fitted into a solid theoretical frame work and thereby given precise meaning. A *feeling* is an affect, or combination of affects, that has reached consciousness – of which the person has become aware. This is by no means automatic. It is possible to be suffused with anger, for example, without experiencing anger consciously. Whether an affect makes it to consciousness as a feeling depends on many things – for example, its intensity and its priority compared with other things happening at that moment. It also depends, remarkably, on the compatibility of that affect with prior scripts that one has formed. In this way arise phenomena like "repression" and "cognitive dissonance," that sometimes keep us oblivious of affects that otherwise might carry important information.

Allowing one's self to feel a certain affect is one thing. The ability to recognize and name that feeling is something else again. An *emotion*, now, is a whole bundle of feelings that one has learned to recognize and label – perhaps correctly, but perhaps not. Emotions are personal, of course, but they are also culturally patterned – conditioned by language, and by norms of social acceptability. They are more than just passing feelings, but have become stable features of our personal worlds that can be identified when encountered. And they come bundled with memories of all kinds – notably with memories of times when we experienced similar feelings, with memories of what we did on those occasions, what happened as a result, and what further emotions and feelings we then experienced. So packaged, an emotion is part of a *script*, as described above.

There is a further possibility. Affects are transient, but feelings may linger as they are triggered – or may re-trigger themselves – again and again. When this happens, the chronic feeling is called a *mood*. Mood is to feeling and emotion as climate is to weather; and it can be thought of as a persistent or recurring cluster of emotions colouring an extended period of time. A *mood disorder* then might be defined as some painful or dangerous or strikingly inappropriate mood, presenting for treatment as a medical condition. Unlike the "neuroses" that Freud learned to treat by getting the patient to talk until he felt better, they usually result from some imbalance of

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Maclean (1975); S&P p. 49

the affect system; and they respond best to some pharmacological treatment aimed at restoring the sensitivity of that system, or re-pegging it at some more appropriate level, or both.

From these definitions, it can be seen that the real thrust of the affect paradigm is in the concept itself: in the sharp distinction drawn between a very few “firmware” patterns universal in human neurophysiology, as against the full range of culturally patterned but finally personal human emotions. Regardless of how many, or exactly which affects there eventually turn out to be, the concept alone provides a rigorous basis for the concept of emotion, and therewith a badly needed bridge between behavioural and “depth” psychology – and then between pharmacological psychiatry and the “talking cure” of psychotherapy. On one hand, chronic mood disorders may be traced to affect switches inappropriately left **on** by some imbalance in brain chemistry; and these can be treated with psychoactive drugs. By contrast, neurotic scripts left over from childhood can be dredged up to consciousness, and then revised in light of adult experience. The concept of affect supports both approaches equally. Both “neurotic” rigidities of script, and “psychotic” mood disorders can be understood as problems of affects that do not turn on – or that fail to turn off – on their appropriate cues.

More generally, the concept of affect offers a biologist’s answer – at least a partial answer – to the philosophical conundrum of values. We value something because it is instrumental to some more fundamental thing we value, or because we have been programmed by evolution to value it. The affect system is what makes things matter to us – what determines how, and to what extent they matter. It guarantees that humans must be intelligible to one another at some level beneath the influence of culture or personal history. I have written elsewhere that what I called “the logic of conversation” already provides such a guarantee of possible understanding across barriers of culture and cognitive strategy. Taken together, the theory of evolution and affect theory reveal the mechanism through which that logic operates, through which such basic intelligibility is assured.

## **1.2 The Nine Affects**

Following Tomkins, Dr. Nathanson describes the human creature as equipped by evolution with nine basic affects. Before I list and describe these, a warning is needed that some of their names are misleading if the affect is confused with its similarly named emotion. Always we must be clear that affect and emotion belong to different categories – different domains of concept and language: *Affect* is a concept from biology and physiology; *Emotion* is a concept appropriated by psychology from the ordinary language of subjective mental state. In general, a whole range of feelings and emotions correspond to each of the affects. Moreover, each affect and its corresponding emotions are fully separable: A person may show the symptoms of an affect, without feeling any of the emotions that typically correspond to it – indeed,

without feeling much of any emotion at all. Conversely, it is possible to feel emotion without a corresponding affect. And then too, an emotion and the affect of the same name may feel completely different. Notably, at first sight, the affect called shame-humiliation has little in common with shame emotion. There's a profound connection, as we'll see, which might be easier to grasp if shame-affect were called by some other name entirely.

Discussion of shame must be deferred a while, however. As Nathanson says<sup>3</sup>: "It is not possible to understand shame-affect and the shame-pride axis of emotion without some understanding of the other eight affects. In particular, it is not possible to understand shame until you learn about interest and joy – the pleasures with which it interferes."

#### **interest-excitement<sup>4</sup>**

The brow creases. The eyes focus narrowly and track. The mouth may open. The head may turn to listen. The body posture is one of rapt attention. The affect called *interest-excitement* (*interest affect* for short) is said to accompany any increase in brain activity. Indeed, the affect described here sounds like what we call "paying attention." We might think of it as a mental focussing mechanism: nature's way of getting the creature to devote its resources for information processing and effort to a situation at hand. As Nathanson points out, we may or may not be able to identify the stimulus that triggers interest-excitement, but we know the affect can be triggered even in very young infants when appropriate conditions are met. We also know that certain kinds of stimuli are inherently interesting to a human infant – that is to say, especially likely to trigger interest affect. Bright colours, moderate noises, physical touching and movement are especially likely to elicit this response – depending on what else is happening at the time. In particular, it seems that a human face, or anything that looks like a face, is one of the most interesting things a human infant can see. The mutual interest affect generated between the infant and its caretakers – eventually, between any two persons – is the basis for social interaction and bonding.

Optimal mental processing and consciousness depend on the flexibility of interest affect: on the brain's ability to turn it on or off, or to redirect it as the situation suggests. We know that certain pathologies of brain chemistry may interfere with this flexibility, while an appropriate regimen of psychoactive drugs may help restore it. Dr. Nathanson mentions two such pathologies: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and bipolar affective illness (or manic-depressive disorder). In the former, the "gain" for interest affect is tuned too high, so that the individual is constantly distracted by stimuli that most people wouldn't notice. In the latter, the "gain" for

---

<sup>3</sup> S&P p. 72

<sup>4</sup> S&P p. 73

interest affect seems to oscillate on some physiological cycle, so that the individual is by turns too easily excited, and then not capable of taking interest in anything at all.

### **enjoyment-joy<sup>5</sup>**

The affect called *enjoyment-joy* is opposite and complementary to interest affect, insofar as it signals a **reduction** in the level of neural firing, and leads to further reduction. Interest affect stirs you up; enjoyment-joy calms you down. It is displayed on the face as a smile. According to Dr. Nathanson, “any stimulus that produces a reduction in high-level activity will produce a smiling face.” Think of the feeling produced by a good back rub, for example. Think of a purring cat.

This affect’s name is somewhat misleading; and Nathanson comments that a better term for this affect’s weaker forms would be *contentment*, as it has little to do with the experience called “having fun.” Rather *enjoyment-joy* signifies abrupt relief or release from tension; and, as such, appears to be the basis of comedy and humour which seem to work by building up and then abruptly releasing the psychic tension of shame and other negative emotions.

The evolutionary significance of enjoyment-joy is a matter for speculation. To the extent this affect is pleasurable, it provides an extra motivation for the creature to seek conditions that elicit it. To the extent these conditions contribute to the creature’s survival and reproduction (as by and large will be the case), so will the affect that rewards the creature for success in their pursuit. As well, one can see how a species with a social life and a long period of infantile helplessness would gain survival advantage by including a signal of pleasure and satisfaction in its behavioural repertoire: “I like what you are doing. Please don’t stop!” Or, “Please do it again soon!” And there would be still greater advantage to the gene pool if that signal were intrinsically rewarding to other members of the same species. Adults would then be motivated to care for babies, just for the pleasure of their smile. Adults might have some disposition to collaborate and help each other for the same reason. We have affects of *distress* and *anger* (to be introduced in just a moment) to communicate our displeasure – ask for help, and threaten aggressive action if it is not forthcoming. A corresponding affect to communicate pleasure and satisfaction complements these nicely, giving the creature a built-in means to reward others for their contribution to its well-being.

### **surprise-startle**

Eyebrows lift; the eyes open wide and blink; the mouth opens. There may be a rapid in-breath followed by an out-breath with the lips protruded, or even some vocal exclamation. Surprise-startle is the briefest of the affects, appearing and vanishing in a fraction of a second. Its main purpose is to clear away other affects and ongoing

---

<sup>5</sup> S&P p. 79 – 82

activities – the better to deal with some new state of affairs. Thus, its survival value is obvious. In a flash, it terminates whatever attention was being paid, whatever processing was happening, to direct attention elsewhere – to make the brain’s resources instantly available for the novel situation resulting from a sudden, dramatic, unexpected change.

Tomkins originally considered surprise-startle to be a positive affect but it is now generally accepted as neutral (Nathanson 1992). Depending on past experience, we may be disposed to expect pleasant surprises, or unpleasant ones; and the surprise affect itself may acquire positive or negative connotations. Life may have taught us to feel either optimistic or pessimistic about sudden change, before we’ve had time to look a situation over and take in its implications; but such colouring occurs at the level of script and emotion, rather than of affect itself. On the whole, we seem to enjoy being pleasantly surprised, while we dislike being startled. Here it may be the sudden disorientation and momentary loss of control that we find unpleasant, rather than the affect itself.

The visible signs of surprise affect seem to be purely functional: opening the eyes to get a good look, and snatching a quick breath in preparation for action as needed. If they serve a purpose of communication, it is hard to see what that could be.

### **distress-anguish**

The prime example of distress-affect is a crying infant: loud bawl or rhythmic sobbing, arched or knit eyebrows, mouth slightly open in the so-called “omega of melancholy,” and tears. Triggered either by physical or by mental pain, both in very young children and in adults, distress affect is a signal to one’s self and others that something is wrong, and that succour is needed. The survival value is obvious.

One interesting question about distress affect would be its connection to the *sensation* of pain. As we’ll see a little later, pain has a system of its own, with its own specific sensors. We can feel pain even when too preoccupied to pay attention to it, and even in the grip of affects other than *distress*, which normally accompanies pain and makes it, well. . . distressing. Still, there is no doubt that pain and distress are intimately connected. When we experience pain without distress – as we do sometimes in sexual activities, or as we did as children when we flicked a loose tooth to feel the twinge that resulted – it feels quite different from the pain we usually experience.

### **anger-rage**

Beyond distress lies anger. Physical or mental pain at a sufficient level of intensity, or continued for a sufficient length of time triggers the affect called anger-rage, characterized by a red face, narrowed eyes, muscle groups of the jaw, face and body in isometric tension, so that we speak of someone “quivering with anger.” There may be deep, rapid breathing, an increase in blood pressure, an open mouth, clenched jaw and a loud cry.



Anger seems to represent both a display of aggressive capability and a revving up for combat. One might argue that this affect is always inappropriate under the conditions of civilized life, but its biological value is obvious. Even so, both strategic considerations and ethical ones require that it be strictly and intelligently managed. Anger out of control is more dangerous than any other because of the spiral of answering rage and violence to which it leads. Aristotle remarks somewhere that getting angry is easy. “But to get angry at the right time, in the right way, to the right degree, is not easy.” Unfortunately, that “right way” is far from clear. In various literatures – those of religion, military strategy, martial arts, clinical psychology, civil disobedience, pacifism, police tactics and penology – anger management has been a matter for intense, continuing debate; and it is far from settled even now. In fact, it might be argued that optimal management of anger affect – “spreading the discontent” – must be the central problem of government and politics, and therefore of political theory as well.

In New York City more than 40 years ago, I saw a play by Ionesco called *The Rhinoceros*, about a global epidemic of rage – a breakdown in the management of anger affect. Its central conceit is that people everywhere are ceasing to be human and turning into hyper-aggressive pachyderms, pawing the ground, snorting, threatening each other, and charging with their lethal horns. I still remember Zero Mostel’s great performance in the leading role – at first bewildered and frightened, but finally undergoing the transformation himself, before our very eyes. In the Fifties, at the height of the Cold War, the play was topical; it would be still more so today as the rage engulfing us now is still less rational, under still less control.

### **fear-terror**

Fear-terror affect is characterized by a fixed stare with eyes frozen open, a face that is pale, cold and sweaty, and hairs standing up all over the body. Like distress-anguish and anger-rage, fear affect is a response to overload of the nervous system, and is itself distressing; but it feels completely different from these other affects, manifests completely differently, and appears to serve a completely different purpose. From a biological perspective, fear seems to have evolved to punish the creature for getting itself into trouble, prompting it to retreat to safety, and dissuading it from trying whatever produced this state again.

At the level of pure affect – e.g. for a baby who has not yet learned to assess a current situation in relation to its own powers – the sufficient triggers for fear and for anger are not easy to discriminate, though the thresholds of both seem to exceed that of simple distress. For an older child or an adult, the sense of helplessness is presumably what makes the difference. We get angry in threatening situations we feel we can handle. We are afraid in threatening situations that are beyond our capability, or where our capability is in doubt. But why does an infant experience *fear-terror* rather than *anger-rage*, or vice versa? Dr. Nathanson doesn’t really answer this

question, nor have I found an answer elsewhere. It might have to do with the timing of the stimulus. I would guess that fear affect is triggered by an abrupt, intense, erratic overload; anger by overload that is steadier and more drawn out. The research must have been done, but I have not found reference to it. This is odd, because the point has some importance. Fear and anger could not be two independent affects unless there is some difference in the quality of the triggering stimulus itself – apart from content, familiarity, or any learned association.

### **dissmell and disgust**

Two further affects, *dissmell* and *disgust* can be thought of as abstractions or generalizations of more specific systems that regulate the hunger drive. At their most concrete, they simply warn a creature that something is not good to eat. Just think what happens when some meat in your fridge is slightly off: If it smells bad, it goes directly into the garbage. If it gets as far as your mouth you may spit it out. If actually swallowed, it may be vomited before it makes you sick—or as sick as it otherwise would.

In dissmell-affect, the upper lip wrinkles, the head is pulled back, and the whole body may withdraw to distance itself. In disgust-affect, the lower lip and tongue are lowered and protruded, and the head is thrust forward and down in preparation to spit or vomit—which may or may not actually occur. Remarkably, at least in humans, both responses can occur in situations that have nothing to do with food. Feelings of disdain or contempt appear to be grounded in the concrete dissmell affect, and can be manifested in the same way: head tilted back, upper lip wrinkled, squinting down the nose. In cases of divorce or failed relationship, Nathanson says, one party may be physically sick when thinking about the activities of the other. In a real catastrophe—news of the death of a loved one, for example—vomiting may be triggered as a kind of physiological refusal to accept what has happened.

Persons on the receiving end of dissmell or disgust will be blocked or inhibited in reaching out toward the other, will suffer reduced self-esteem, and will experience the affect called *shame-humiliation*.

### **shame-humiliation**

For all the complications and subtleties of shame as an emotion, shame affect is simple enough. It may be triggered “any time desire outruns fulfillment,” as Dr. Nathanson says; and its purpose is to “protect an organism from its growing avidity for positive affect.”<sup>6</sup> Essentially, it is a physiological mechanism of renunciation—a literal turning away from what is otherwise attractive and desirable. The eyes and face are averted and downcast, the eyelids lower, and there is a loss of muscle tone in the face and neck

---

<sup>6</sup>

S&P p. 140

causing the head or even the whole body to droop. We can think of it as a biological capability to terminate positive experience (for whatever reason), when other negative affects do not avail. If a certain behaviour disgusted me, or aroused fear or simply failed to interest me, then shame would not be needed. (Social experience might teach me to be ashamed of my fear, or my desire, or both—but that would be a matter of shame-emotion, a different, albeit related story, to be told below.) The crucial insight at this point is that **shame-affect can be demonstrated in infants, who lack a concept of self as yet, and can have no problems of self-esteem. Like the other affects, shame affect can exist prior to remembered experience and cognition. It is a physiological response alerting the creature that positive affect has been blocked or impeded in some way.**

Simple as shame affect basically is, there are already some interesting things to say about it. To begin with, all the other negative affects – e.g. distress, fear and anger – are turned outwards, in a sense: We are distressed, afraid or angered by something or someone. Dismissal and disgust are likewise turned outward in the sense of requiring some object. Though self-dismissal and self-disgust are certainly possible, these responses are already linked with shame affect, and they involve a rejection of the self as if it were an external entity. By contrast, shame affect *per se* requires no such object. In shame, there is no turning outward of energy and attention; rather, there is collapse inward. Shame can limit the expression of any other sustained affect<sup>7</sup> or intention. In doing so, it cuts off otherwise desirable goals as beyond our reach, and sets limitations on any project we might wish to undertake.

Then too, shame affect is pre-eminently the adaptation of a social animal and, as a matter of fact, was probably the latest affect to evolve. The explanation is not far to seek: A creature living on its own, without a real social environment, could have little use for shame affect. It would show interest in other entities that it wished to eat or mate with, or simply investigate, and would show contentment (i.e. enjoyment-joy) when its goals were achieved. It would show distress, anger or fear, dismissal or disgust, when its world became unpleasant or threatening in some way. It would show surprise-startle when its world changed abruptly. It might have a limited use for shame affect, but only in the “sour grapes” situation described by Aesop, when significant time and energy could be saved by breaking off efforts to get at something unattainable, or in the “Balaam’s ass” situation where the choice to pursue one goal means renouncing another almost equally attractive. But the major positive use for shame would appear only when the creature is confronted with social constraints of some kind – so that it finds itself pulled in different directions on some matter, with the demands of others pitted against its own promptings. Under these conditions and only these, shame affect

---

<sup>7</sup> Only surprise seems immune because it happens too fast and stands, as it were, logically prior to shame, as it is to every other affect. We must “take in” a situation, and figure out what is happening, before we can respond to it. Surprise redirects attention and prepares for a fresh take.

comes into its own. We can guess that only a rather autonomous, intelligent creature with strong ties to others of its kind – to its young, its mate, or to the whole band or pack would suffer “mixed feelings” of this kind, and would have need for shame affect to help resolve them. Or, looking at it the other way, it is only the glimmerings of such an affect that could have enabled autonomous social creatures to thrive and reproduce. The conclusion is that shame affect and the primate condition of “unsocial sociability”<sup>8</sup> must have evolved together, with the shame-bound human as its limiting case.

Finally, shame affect bundles readily with all the other affects, and with beliefs and habits also. We can learn to expect that interest and joy will be thwarted by untimely surprises, by occurrences involving any of the negative affects, or any combination of these. We easily learn to connect shame affect with self-dissmell or self-disgust (creating shame emotion), and/or with fear of punishment (creating guilt). In such combinations, shame limits us to be sure; but, in doing so, it gives our lives their structure, and makes our social existence possible.

The crucial conclusion is this: Shame is not just the result of something done to us as children, although from one perspective it is exactly that. Rather, shame affect is something we do to ourselves for good biological reasons, and it is central to our condition as social creatures – to all we are or can be. If we hope to walk the path of self-knowledge, self-understanding, self-forgiveness and self-acceptance, we must look shame squarely in the face.

### 1.3 The Affect System<sup>9</sup>

Considered together, the nine known affects comprise a system, related to the nervous system on one hand, and to various other physiological systems – e.g. the circulatory, musculo-skeletal, digestive and reproductive systems – on the other. To grasp their systemic inter-relationship, we must notice what the affects have in common. We must understand how they work with and against each other as a system. And then we must understand the role played collectively by all the affects together, as a vital component or sub-system of the body’s higher-level systems for cognition, coordinated action and inter-personal communication.

As already noted, the affects can be thought of as **hard-wired, physiological programs**. Each one runs when it is triggered, with an intensity that depends on the nature and intensity of the triggering stimulus, and with a characteristic **profile** in time. Though the affects can be triggered repetitively and can recursively trigger themselves, each “run” seems to have a definite rhythm of rise, duration and fall. Surprise-startle is very brief. Interest fades away unless continually re-triggered. Distress-anguish remains constant until its cause is relieved. Apart from intensity, each affect is more or

---

<sup>8</sup> Kant’s superbly accurate characterization of the human dilemma.

<sup>9</sup> S&P pp. 65 – 70

less the same each time it runs. As a program, each affect is perfectly general and perfectly modular. It can be assembled, Nathanson tells us, “with any drive, any voluntary action, any function of the mind, even with other affects.”

Conceptually, the affect system is to be distinguished from the pleasure-pain system, and also from the so-called **drives** – the body’s specific needs (e.g.) for oxygen, water, food and sex. The affects are just as **urgent** – they take control of the body, and demand the creature’s attention – but, unlike the drives, they are completely **abstract** and **non-specific**. That is to say, in themselves they carry no information about cause or goal. They simply inform the creature that its situation demands attention – and moreover, some particular kind or **colour** of attention. Interest affect colours the creature’s world with interest and excitement. Fear affect colours it with fear. Dismissal affect colours it with a sense that something is “rotten,” whether in Denmark or elsewhere. In general, nothing is interesting or pleasant, or distressing, annoying, disgusting or shameful, but affect makes it so. What to do about that feeling, how to respond to it, is left open, however. Affect gives us a recognizable **sensation** of distress or fear or anger, etc. but does not dictate any response<sup>10</sup>. By contrast, hunger drive (for example) monitors blood sugar levels and fullness of the stomach, triggering not only distress affect, but salivation and a specific orientation toward eating behaviour if these fall below critical values. Low oxygen levels trigger breathing; Seminal pressure stimulates erection in males, and an orientation toward sexual discharge. The drives seem to provide specific information without evaluation. By contrast, the affect system provides evaluation based on information received; but in our own species, at least, the response is left almost completely open.

The pleasure-pain sub-system is different again. Pure somatic pain is closely related to distress affect, but must be distinguished from it. As with the drives, specific receptors throughout the body send messages of pain which in turn trigger distress affect. Unlike the affects, but like the drives, pain carries specific information about what is hurting. Like the affects, however, pain is inherently evaluative and motivating. Pain hurts! Except as the signal is overridden for some reason, when we feel pain we do what we can to make it stop. Nathanson tells us that “All of the negative affects are experienced as intrinsically painful, even though the discomforts of fear, dismissal, disgust, anger, distress and shame are qualitatively different both from each other, and from the type of sensation experienced when one of the pain receptors is stimulated. And, on the other hand, the duration, intensity and stimulus contour of pain can trigger any of the negative affects as an accompaniment.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, for many non-human species this is not the case. Nathanson mentions that “. . . mice, squirrels and other ground-dwelling animals are inherently afraid of shapes flying above them. There doesn’t seem to be any evidence of innate fears in the human.

<sup>11</sup> S&P p. 415

To repeat then: The affects are abstract, providing evaluation without specific information about source or required response. The drives are just the opposite, providing specific information about source and response but leaving evaluation to the pleasure/pain system and the affects. Pleasure and pain have properties of each, carrying information like the drives but, like the affects, carrying motivation as well.

Affects propagate throughout the body, and (unlike the drives and pain itself) have the further remarkable property of being contagious from one individual to another. We do not feel each other's hunger, or each other's pain, but we do feel each other's joy or distress or fear, and the other affects as well.

When an affect is triggered, it is carried by neural and chemical mediators (the morphine-like endorphins would be an example) to receptor sites at which the affect manifests and is displayed. Blood vessels contract or dilate. Muscle groups relax or tense. Hair falls down or stands on end. By such routes, as Nathanson says, "Affect imprints itself on all bodily function in such a way as to make the stimulus for that affect into something that correlates the stimulus with its eventual response. When we are angry, we walk and talk angrily etc." Persons in contact with us also tend to walk and talk angrily. In fact, all the affects seem to be contagious in this way. We pick up and respond to the affect in our vicinity; and the ability to avoid doing so appears to be a learned skill – as is the ability to mute the affect we broadcast.

Infants are especially powerful broadcasters of affect. They do not control their affect messages, nor is it easy to block them out. As every parent knows, the cry of a human infant is the most irritating noise a human adult can hear, and we'll do literally anything to turn it off. . .

The subtlest point Nathanson makes about the various affects is that each one "feels like an amplified analogue of the stimulus itself." In profile, and in the nature of the feeling produced, each affect somehow matches, augments and focuses the situation that produced it. For example:

- interest affect feels lively and stimulating, and indeed produces physiological changes appropriate to the situation of being interested in something;
- enjoyment feels relaxed and pleasureable;
- distress affect looks and feels like prolonged misery and complaint;
- shame affect looks and feels like sadly turning away from something desired.

Pain too behaves like an affect in this respect – a tearing, or jabbing or aching sensation analogous to the injury it is reporting.

The affect system is probably best understood as a crucial sub-system of the cognitive system as a whole. Empiricists like John Locke were mistaken in thinking that our sense organs and brain apprise us of facts about the world – facts from which we infer our values, subject to an over-arching value of personal survival. Rather, the most basic judgments of value are given us directly through the affect system as part of our biological inheritance. With that basis, in light of experience, a great deal of inference

takes place, and we come to be moved by all sorts of values that have nothing to with – and, in some cases, are really hostile to our needs as biological organisms. Nonetheless, affect is the ultimate ground of value: Events and things matter to us, and are valued or disvalued by us, to the extent, and in the ways that affect makes them matter.

#### **1.4 Affect Theory in Contemporary Thought**

The first two volumes of Tomkins' book, *Affect/Imagery/Consciousness*, were published in 1962 and 1963, but only now (Nathanson says) are beginning to be absorbed by the mainstream of theoretical and clinical psychology. One reason for this delay, we can surmise, is that affect theory clashes with both the major schools – behaviourism and psychoanalysis – that dominated psychology when it appeared. Indeed, it supercedes these approaches, for reasons we must now consider.

Affect theory conflicts with the “drive” approach of psychoanalysis – and not only with the orthodox emphasis on sex, but also with most neo-Freudian variations. The underlying metaphor is shifted: Instead of a steam engine building up internal pressures because of sticky valves, the mind is now seen as a self-programming computer pre-equipped with “firmware” routines (the affects) to judge the significance and priority of incoming data against learned scripts, and to deploy the creature's resources accordingly. In affect psychology, we no longer think in terms of innate “drives” or instinctive “attachments.” The drives are more specific and play a more modest role than in classical psychoanalytic theory. The attachments we form are seen as learned scripts that develop (or fail to develop) according to the affects we become accustomed to experiencing in our encounters with others. To be sure, both drive and attachment remain important concepts; but without their former sovereignty. In their place, affect now plays the central role, determining the “colour” (so to speak) of incoming sensation, and whether it will be admitted to consciousness at all.

Affect theory also supplants behaviourism,<sup>12</sup> although it had its origin in experimental psychology and remains fully at home there. To begin with, the concept of “reinforcement loses much of its primacy. For the behaviourists, “reinforcement” was a very simple notion: Behaviours that bring pleasure or avert pain are “reinforced” – occur more frequently, that is to say. Other behaviours occur less frequently as the reinforced ones occur more so. A version of this model is still tenable, but affect makes the picture complicated: Any positive affect can reinforce a behaviour, while any negative affect can extinguish it. The balance between positive and negative reinforcement in *any* situation will be an individual matter, dependent on a life history and the interpretations placed upon it. People, we know, can learn to like (and dislike) the strangest things. Human beings suddenly become as complicated, as individual, as

---

<sup>12</sup> e.g. the operant conditioning approach of B.F. Skinner.

difficult to predict, as we know ourselves to be.

Second, while the physiological affects themselves easily qualify as observable behaviour, the feelings and emotions that stem from these can be observed only with the greatest difficulty – with tremendous experimental ingenuity, if at all. Affect theory easily escapes the gibe that laughed behaviourist psychology out of court.<sup>13</sup> It has room for the itch as well as the scratch – and not just for the specific, highly focussed itchiness of a drive, but for the diffuse, muddled itchiness of an ensemble of affects together. Accordingly, as between behaviorism and cognitivism, affect theory would appear to have a foot in both camps, combining the scientific rigour of one with the explanatory power of the other.

Affect theory upsets some philosophic apple carts as well. In affirming that human beings, for all our mutability and cultural differences, really do have important cognitive traits in common, it conflicts with the “anti-humanist” emphasis on culture that has been fashionable among existentialists, Marxists, structuralists, and post-modern thinkers in general. There really does seem to be such a thing as “human nature”: if nothing else, the human affect system with its hypertrophied vulnerability to shame. It can be shown that value judgments are not entirely learned. Rather they are grounded in the creature’s physiology – with sensitivities that may vary as a matter of individual “temperament,” but which have nothing to do with culture. A science of anthropology is possible after all – though whether we really want one is another question.

Finally, affect theory contradicts certain brands of empiricism and rationalism, refusing to see emotion as a mere consequence or aberration of emotionally neutral cognition. On the contrary, affect is seen as central to the cognitive process. Stimuli are recognized as important to the creature, and admitted to consciousness because they trigger affect. If they do not trigger some affect – and therewith take on some definite emotional colouring—they are simply overlooked and ignored.

For anyone who wants to see the mind as a “clear mirror” of things as they really are, or as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) passively written upon by experience, this finding is scandalous. Hume, Kant and Nietzsche had already explained to philosophers that the brain must be an active organ for the appropriation of experience, and not a passive organ for its reception and storage. Experimental findings support this view, and affect theory goes some distance toward explaining how the appropriation works – how we do not so much “take in” the world as it really is, as “construe” a world to live in.

The world we actually experience is a product of our senses, the affect system and the storage-and-retrieval system called *memory*, all working together. The senses

---

<sup>13</sup> “In modern thought, if not in fact,  
Nothing is which does not act.  
So that is deemed as wisdom which  
Describes the scratch, but not the itch.”



deliver their sampling of current reality. The so-called *scripts*, retrieved from memory, afford a library of precedents. Affect appears to be the basis for experiential sampling and also for comparison and classification. We notice what matters to us. We draw distinctions and recognize similarities because they matter to us. It is the affect system that decides what matters, and in what ways it matters. It makes the difference between the meaningful world we actually live in, and the data store of meaningless measurements that might be fed to and collected by a computer.

## **1.5 Affect, Emotion and Personality:**

### **Of Scripts and Cognitive Attractors**

Much of Dr. Nathanson's book is taken up with examples of how affects combine with each other, and with the types of experience and activity they colour; and we've already mentioned that these combinations are called *scripts*, analogous to those that stage and movie actors work from. This theatrical metaphor is good, especially if we are aware that actors have to improvise around their scripts, and that no two performances are ever exactly the same. In fact, the scripts we live by should not be thought of as rules that are obeyed, more or less perfectly on each occasion. They are more like salient patterns—vivid ideas of a kind—that are re-created, re-instantiated each time they are invoked. We try to respond afresh to every new situation, every relationship, meeting it on its own terms (so to speak), without submitting to the stereotypes of past experience. But we cannot really help ourselves. All seeing is a seeing-as. We only understand the new situation or relationship through its analogies with previous ones. The so-called “scripts” are simply habits of perception, feeling and activity—too automatic to be questioned or analyzed without great effort that may sometimes be painful as well. They work, actually, like the “strange attractors” of chaos theory that allow infinite variation and novelty, while hovering within some definite region and thus remaining, in “essential” respects, the same each time.

Now, to grasp the connection between physiological affect and experienced emotion, we do not need as many examples as Dr Nathanson provides of these scripts in action. But we do need to understand clearly how scripts are formed, adjusted to one another, and modified over the years to comprise what we call a personality. Later on we'll need to understand how a great many such personalities, interacting with and influencing each other over time, come to evolve what we call a culture.

Among other functions, a culture is a system of affect management. The central point is that unmanaged affect is both peremptory and contagious, as we've already seen: It takes us over and possesses us completely for whatever time it lasts. And, in a social species like our own, it propagates readily from one individual to another through the phenomenon we call empathy, whereby the affect broadcast by one individual is received and recreated in others. Indeed, the contagiousness of affect – in homes, in communities and in society at large – generates a “climate” of affect, with balmy and barny seasons, and lethal storms sometimes, against which protection is needed. So let

us begin again with the infant who can be taken over by the nine affects, singly or in combination, without knowing why – in fact, without yet knowing anything at all, not even that it is a self-experiencing these storms.

As a function of its affect system (specifically, *enjoyment* and *distress*), the infant can distinguish comfort and pleasure from discomfort and pain. Also, it can drift off to sleep, or perk up and take an *interest* in what is happening in the tiny world that consists of its own little body and that body's immediate environment. As the crucial, still fairly mysterious aspects of taking interest, it can:

- a) assemble and remember packets of sensation, affect and feeling including those of its own body's activities;
- b) utilize these memory packets to shape and guide its present perceptions and doings; and
- c) modify those memory packets on the fly, as it were, to make them more serviceable to its needs – specifically, to its need for coherent recognition and response in the situations it encounters.

Invoking that metaphor from the theatre, we refer to the memory packet as a *script* – defined roughly as a pattern of sensation, affect and activity formed as the memory-trace of some recurring situation, and applied thereafter to more or less similar situations. The tricky bit is the judgment of what is *similar*.

Obviously, no two situations are ever exactly alike. Strictly speaking, you cannot step into the same river twice, nor dance twice in the same way to the same music, nor twice encounter an “identical” person – the same in every respect. People are slightly different each time we see them, and they change gradually over time, as we do ourselves. Accordingly, the central function of a brain is to overlook all little differences that make no real difference, compensating for these as necessary, so that a single flexible response can serve for many slightly different occasions. The *script* is what allows such flexibility. It provides a way of organizing our experience into recognizable kinds of situations, perceived as sufficiently alike to be responded to in similar fashion.

Now, in the process of script formation, affect can be shown to play a double, and even a triple role: To begin with, affect gives a charge of significance to each situation, directing attention to it and making it salient, noticeable, and requiring of classification. Second, affect discriminates and classifies like and unlike situations, since those that trigger differing affects will be experienced as *significantly* different. Finally, since affect can be triggered by memory nearly as well as by current happening, it can modify memories *retroactively*, grouping them, and then updating these groups in light of further experience. Nathanson gives the following example<sup>14</sup>: “Take, for instance,

---

<sup>14</sup> S&P pp. 244-247

all the times you go to the supermarket because there is an advertised special but are disappointed to find that they have run out of the special. When you group all these sequences into a family of scenes, and react with disgust to this new entity, disgust affect now does something to all the information held in the grouped sequences. We say that the new affect (in this case, disgust) **magnifies** everything within the supermarket advertisement and disappointment scenes. The coassembly of bundled scenes with their magnifying affect is now called a script.” The script provides a basis for response to the novel situation. Actions taken in the past need only be adjusted slightly to match the present case.

Think of the *catching* script for a simple example. Once you have learned to catch a fairly small object moving in your direction at a moderate velocity, you can adapt that movement to any trajectory. But if the object coming at you turns out to be much faster or heavier or hotter than expected, your script will not work and you may get hurt. That is the risk. Coping with any situation must involve a fallible process of recognition and current feeling followed by adaptive construction of some response.

Dr. Nathanson describes this process as having four distinct phases, as follows:<sup>15</sup>

1. the trigger and the affect itself – the physiological response;
2. the phase of association, (analogous to searching through a script library) to find a precedent with best fit;
3. the phase of choice (analogous to selecting one best-fitting script for adaptation and re-use in the present situation);
4. The phase of current emotion and activity, triggered by a stimulus and its affect, but elaborated and patterned according to the selected script.

But there is always the chance, we must remember, that this process can miscarry: that its result may be defective or inappropriate; that the script selected may not be optimal, or may not work at all.

From a therapeutic standpoint, the main point about scripts is to recognize the rigid, harmful ones when you see them. Seeing harmful scripts in others, there is the chance to stay out of their way – to avoid becoming the counter-player this other person is seeking. Seeing them in yourself, you have a chance to see why they were appropriate (perhaps) when you first learned them, but how you misapply them now. There is a work of criticism and deconstruction involved, followed by a task of reconstruction along more nuanced, flexible lines. A therapist may assist this process greatly, helping you take your scripts apart to see how they work, where they came from, what purposes they originally served – and then pointing out subtleties, possibilities, degrees of freedom you had been unable to see on your own. In fact, psychotherapy, prayer,

---

<sup>15</sup> S&P p. 307

meditation – all forms of “spiritual” practice – can be thought of as modes of work on the specific scripts that comprise (what we call) *personality*: our disposition to respond to the world in some characteristic way that is partly habitual, but perhaps innately “temperamental” (of biochemical origin) as well.

Recognizing this possibility that we can critique and edit the scripts we live by, we come to the second part of this story. For in all such work, shame-affect turns out to play a central role as the primary mechanism through which we limit ourselves – deterring some pursuits while allowing others, and assembling readily with other negative affects into scripts of weakness, inferiority, exposure and vulnerability. Sexual expression particularly, dependent as it is on the collaboration of another exposed and vulnerable person, must be a ready occasion for shame affect – and likely as well to get bound up with shame emotion in all kinds of interesting and complicated ways. For these reasons, it is scarcely overstatement to say we are defined as persons by what shames us and by how we manage our feelings of shame.

## 2 Shame

As we’ve seen, shame-affect comes into play when , but only when, some **otherwise pleasurable** experience is blocked. It involves a kind of renunciation, a literal turning-away, that may be triggered “any time desire outruns fulfilment.” As a development from this physiological reponse, the *emotion* of shame accompanies a perception that something otherwise attractive is not for me. Such a perception might form in a variety of ways, to be reviewed presently; but the point for now is that it will invariably be based on a “script” – some generalization from experience; and this generalization, based on a child’s experience, and processed with a child’s mind, may easily be an over-generalization. Left unexamined, it will dissuade the adult from activities that he or she would find feasible, safe and satisfying – dissuade the adult because a child once decided they were out of reach.

Of course, such decisions have their uses, and are not necessarily inappropriate. We should keep in mind that shame-affect serves a positive purpose, and evolved for good reason. For a personal example, as the shortest kid in the schoolyard, I decided around age nine that basketball was not my game. A little shame in this matter saved me quite a lot of frustration, and freed my efforts for more promising directions.

On the other hand, many children and adults are really crippled with shame; and the price we pay for such renunciations can be very high. At the time, perhaps they could not have been otherwise, but such definitive closing of life options may have been terribly premature. Psychotherapy, Freud’s “talking cure,” involves re-opening and perhaps revising such childish decisions. To do this, we must begin by recognizing how they were taken – how they made a certain sense at the time, and why they no longer do so.

### 2.1 Shame as Inferiority and Exposure

Writing of the shame-emotion, Dr. Nathanson offers, a long, but still incomplete list of shame-laden issues<sup>16</sup>: matters of size, strength, ability, attractiveness, autonomy, sexuality, competitiveness – in short, any quality you can think of that one person has less of than another. We can feel shamed by any aspect of ourselves, any aspect of what we or others perceive us to be. For all of us, this is a matter of common experience, but it is not obvious at first sight just how this emotion of personal inadequacy, inferiority or dishonour connects with shame affect as we defined it. The affect is simply a physiological response triggered “when desire outruns fulfilment” – for example, by a lovely apple on a tree from which we are forbidden to eat, or by a soother fallen outside the play pen – in plain sight, but out of reach. Frustrating yes, but why shameful? How does the emotion of shame come into it?

The association is natural enough, because the commonest and simplest cause of shame affect is our lack of omnipotence: there are always things we would like to do or get that are beyond our reach. This is especially true while we are very young. Furniture, utensils, language itself are designed for the convenience and physical capabilities of adults, not to mention adult knowledge and experience. As infants we can do nothing without the help of others. As toddlers and young children we get along ineptly, with much frustration along the way. The thwarting of intention triggers shame affect; but, as we readily perceive, our own incapacity is why we are thwarted.

Adults and older children do so many things that we cannot yet do. We acquire ideas of inadequacy and inferiority because, so far as we can see, this is in fact the case. Significant others may or may not reinforce this message explicitly. Some may reassure the child that they were once as little and helpless as he is, and that time is on his side. No matter. Before a child is old enough to understand that truth, he will have learned and over-learned that he is weak, ignorant and thoroughly dependent compared with the god-like beings around him.

The association of shame affect with feelings and fears of exposure and vulnerability comes just as naturally. A child organizes the whole universe in relation to him- or herself; and adults are just grown up children in this respect. Children also learn very quickly that the attention of others is important to them – but ambiguously important: an asset or a liability depending on the circumstances. If I am hungry and wanting the breast or bottle, or just bored and wanting some stimulation and a cuddle, then mother’s attention is the first step toward satisfaction, and nature has provided me with a good pair lungs to get it. When I’m a little older, doing something that mother will interrupt if she sees (even if it doesn’t get me a smack or a scolding), her attention is to be avoided. Attention from others, especially from authority figures, is all too likely to cause me shame affect when they interrupt me for their own incomprehensible reasons.

The crucial point is that shame affect co-assembles readily with fears of being seen,

---

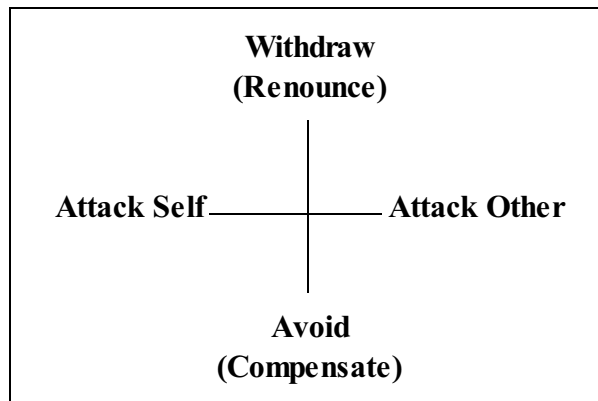
<sup>16</sup> S&P, page 317

judged, and found wanting in some way; and it is just here that we find the connection between that affect and the emotion of the same name. Shame affect helps us turn aside from pleasurable activities when, for whatever reason, we need to do so. Shame emotion typically carries a negative judgment about ourselves that is gratuitous from the affect's perspective. The affect simply gets us to desist. The emotion provides an extra rationalization (which may or may not be a valid reason) why desisting is right or necessary.

Not all shame emotion is unhealthy. There is such a thing as healthy shame, as we'll have occasion to discuss. Still, there is no doubt that shame emotion is among the most painful, disabling and problematic of human feelings. Unhealthy shame emotions make us tense and fearful, unable to enjoy life, or to exert our energies to the fullest.

## 2.2 Defenses Against Shame

Nathanson suggests<sup>17</sup> that defensive scripts against shame fall into four quadrants, divided by the polar alternatives along two axes: that of the stance taken toward the raw shame affect, and of the stance taken toward the self. One axis is a scale indicating the extent to which the block, the shaming message and the shame affect itself are accepted or rejected. At right angles to this, the other axis measures the amount and direction of aggression generated in consequence of the shame affect, and as defence against it. The resulting diagram can be compared to a compass, as shown below:



On the **withdrawal** option (**renunciation** might be a better word), you accept the shaming message and its affect, and turn away from the object of desire. Here, the shame affect does its work in a fairly simple way: You decide this line of satisfaction is not for you, and decline to press the issue further.

Alternatively, on the **avoidance** option (**compensation** might be a better name),

---

<sup>17</sup> S&P p. 312

you reject the shaming message and affect, and go after the denied satisfaction (or a substitute) all the harder. Food, alcohol, drugs, and solo sex are commonly used in this fashion. In effect, you avoid the shaming message and its affect, displacing desire elsewhere to pursue some more available gratification instead.

On a different axis now, you form an alliance with the denying block against the desiring self, leading to the response of masochistic servility and self-abnegation that Dr. Nathanson calls **attack self**.

Or, you can seek to compensate for feelings of inferiority and shame through the strategy that Nathanson calls **attack other**, asserting your superiority and dominance over someone else.

While Nathanson's compass certainly covers a great many of the common defenses against shame, I think it omits what may be the commonest of all. I have in mind the "play it cool" strategy that Aesop satirized, where the distress of shame affect is soothed by denying that we really wanted those grapes, and/or that they were worth wanting. Perhaps Dr Nathanson considers that the "cool" defense dwells comfortably on one of the points of his compass, or that it underlies them all (as, in some sense, I think it actually does). Or perhaps he does not consider it sufficiently pathogenic to deserve a mention in that context. Or perhaps he simply overlooks or omits it because it would not fall neatly into his scheme. Whatever the reason, I think its omission was a mistake. Control of what we do and do not allow ourselves to want may be the most basic and significant of our defenses against shame because it closely defines our social identities. We affirm that we are the right sort of people by wanting the right things, and then by going after these and getting them. We convince ourselves that we are not the wrong sort by not allowing ourselves to want what we cannot have, or are not supposed to want – however much we really want it. All this to avoid admitting that we want something that is out of reach, or that other people don't want us to want. By such means a whole society ties itself up in knots, turning good into evil, and evil into good – and finally losing touch with reality.

### **2.3 Shame and Sexuality**

Freud thought that sex drive was the master key that could unlock the secrets of human personality and "neurosis." He was almost right. Today it is becoming clear that shame is more promising than sex as a master key to personality structure and its pathologies – apart from those produced by some malfunction of the brain or its chemistry. Still, shame and sexuality are so closely intertwined that it is impossible (as Freud saw) to say where one leaves off and the other begins. Sexual feelings and impulses inevitably trigger shame affect, or threaten to trigger it – to a point where sex may be conceived as shameful in and of itself. More remarkably, association works the other way also, so that shame comes to be experienced as sexually arousing. This may be the sexologist's best kept secret: truly a bit of occult knowledge, known only to those who can allow themselves to know it. But the same is true of shame theory as a whole; and if you

have read my paper this far you may be ready to accept your own shame feelings not as deep and terrible secrets, but as a normal<sup>18</sup> dimension of human experience – like sex itself.

That sexual feelings readily trigger shame *affect* is obvious from the fact that even solo sex may be interrupted just when you're really getting into it, while sex with a partner requires collaboration that may or may not be forthcoming. And it is equally liable to interruption. It's not so easy to stay aroused when the baby cries or the phone rings, and you have to choose between answering it and continuing what you were doing.

There is a second link as well. We know, and literature likes to remind us, that lives can be disrupted, even ruined, by our sexual choices or activities. Therefore, sexual impulses must be kept under control – under self-control; and the mechanism of such control is shame affect, as we have seen. When I sit next to an attractive woman on the bus, I am expected to refrain from ogling her, let alone reaching out and fondling her, though I may feel desire to do so. Shame affect, strong and unpleasant in proportion to the attraction I feel, is what helps me keep my eyes and hands to myself.

Whether sexual feelings also trigger shame *emotion* is a different question that will depend partly on the attitudes of your society, and those of your parents in particular. In our own society, for a long time, sex taboos were so severe that women felt shamed by any pleasure in the act, while men felt shamed by sex experienced as anything but rapid, brutal conquest. Such attitudes still linger. But there are cultures (and it is possible to hope our own is at last becoming one of them) that do not regard sexual pleasure as inherently wicked or shameful. However, all known cultures regulate the expression of sexual feelings – allowing some and prohibiting others – partly because their free expression would disrupt existing social arrangements, but partly because feelings of inadequacy, exposure and vulnerability are all but inherent in the condition of intimacy. Whatever sexual self-control means in a particular culture, both men and women are likely to feel inadequate and shamed when self-control slips – but also if we cannot let go at the right time and place, with the right partner. Conventions that tell us what is right at least reduce the odds of making sexual advances that will be found unwelcome or really threatening, and thereby spare us a certain amount of embarrassment.

Whether, on which occasions, and with what severity children are shamed and punished in their early sexual gropings will affect a society's sexual climate, and its emotional climate in general; but I'd conjecture that such discouragement probably matters less in the long run than the adult's ability to integrate sexual feelings and activities into the rest of his or her identity. It is possible to rebel against an inhibited

---

<sup>18</sup> The word *normal* is used here both in the clinical and the statistical sense. Only the *psychopath* (or *sociopath*, perhaps the more accurate term) is without shame. And the Internet has shown that our darkest fantasies are more common than we ever imagined.



sexual upbringing, and many people have done so successfully. The more crucial issue seems to be whether the adult can surrender to and enjoy the peculiar transformation we undergo when we are turned on. Many people do not like themselves in this state, but not just because of the arousal itself. What bothers them (it seems) is not so much that they are aroused, but the peculiar things arousal bids them do and want to do – the fantasies and images that trigger and sustain their arousal. For there is ample evidence that shame-laden situations, and fantasies of such situations, are themselves a powerful turn-on. Anyone who doubts this can confirm it by taking a cruise of porn sites on the Web – where it becomes obvious that shame itself, that of others and one’s own, is a most powerful aphrodisiac when it is not a complete turn-off.

Why is this? Sex scripts<sup>19</sup> involving the humiliation and punishment of others can readily be interpreted as a form of psychic revenge – falling readily into the *Attack Other* group of defenses against shame, on Dr. Nathanson’s compass. Scripts where I am myself the victim fall into the *Attack Self* group – the masochistic acceptance of suffering as the price of acceptance and intimacy. Dr Nathanson<sup>20</sup> eloquently presents this view, citing research by Wurmser and Robert J. Stoller in support. For myself, I think this judgment is partly correct, but an over-simplification. My own view is that the close association of sexual arousal with feelings of exposure, vulnerability, inadequacy and servitude works in both directions: These feelings can be a *stimulus*<sup>21</sup> to sexual arousal, as well as a response. It is true that the icons and rituals of BDSM comprise an intimate theatre of shame, as Nathanson (citing Wurmser) suggests. For its practitioners, however, the idea is not just to alleviate the shame of sexual intimacy but to stimulate their arousal and embroider the pattern of intimacy. As a matter of personal orientation, or according to mood and/or the nature of the relationship, we easily learn to think of the sex act either as an aggressive taking, or as submissive willingness to be taken and used; and that is just what a couple does when it decides that one will be “dominant” and the other “submissive.” Breaking the symmetry of “vanilla” sex in this fashion, BDSM provides a system of conventions, a kind of language, in which many feelings, centrally those of pride and shame, can be communicated and shared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shame’s key role will be obvious by now, as the chief device by which a self imposes limitations and imperatives upon itself so as to be an acceptable person to other

---

<sup>19</sup> For the concept of a person’s *sex script*, see for example ??

<sup>20</sup> S&P pp. 332–335

<sup>21</sup> My spelling checker caught this typo, but I thought it was too good to correct.

persons. Restraining us in some areas, goading us in others, shame defines us to ourselves, and manages the “face” that we present to others. Nothing is more difficult than a real change in this self-definition. Nothing is more painful than losing “face,” as we can tell from the lethal rage that any challenge provokes.

As novelists are aware, happenstance sometimes shatters our self-definitions abruptly. It inflicts some overwhelming stress, or some irresistible temptation and, in a moment, the protagonist becomes a different person as the walls of shame break down and self-understanding is re-arranged. Certainly, this can happen. But, for as long as its walls hold up, shame maintains the structure that we think of as character. Other emotions press against those walls, trying to break or shift them. But it is shame, as affect and emotion, that keeps the walls of character in place.

### **3 The Sociology of Shame**

My special interest in Dr. Nathanson’s book, as I said at the beginning, stems from the field of political theory. What is the connection?

I think of it this way: The currently prevailing political philosophy, the “liberalism” of John Locke and Adam Smith, is simplistic in its view of human nature. Men and women do not and cannot pursue “happiness” – self-interest, however we conceive it – in an unequivocal way. Rather, everywhere we look, we see people engaged in flagrantly self-defeating, often self-destructive behaviour – both individually and in groups. Less frequently, we also find ourselves engaged in altruistic projects that serve self-interest only by helping us feel better about ourselves. No healthy animal pursues its satisfactions as we do, but then no animal suffers from shame to the extent we humans do. “Man is the animal that blushes,” as Mark Twain and Genesis agree. Ever since Eve and Adam perceived that they were naked, invented the clothing industry and were driven out of Eden, shame has played a major role in public affairs as well as private, bidding us set aside the pursuit of happiness for abstractions like duty, honour and righteousness. Rational self-interest does not come close to explaining what the human animal is about. At least two other principles are at work in history. Whenever rational self-interest fails to explain human behaviour, it is to brute habit and then to cognized, culturally patterned shame that we must look next.

#### **3.1 Shame in History**

Dr. Nathanson devotes a good portion of his book to what might be called the social psychology of shame, taking great pains to emphasize its importance as a cause of human misery and social unrest. But he stops short of a real discussion of shame’s sociology – its role as an instrument of power, a shaper of group (as well as personal) identities, and a political force. In this section, I’ll take for granted the point Nathanson is concerned to make: that shame blights lives not just retail as it were, but by the millions. But where he tends to see this as a public health problem, to be ameliorated, if possible, through education and professional intervention, I will try to sketch what I

take to be the salient points about shame as a factor in history.

- 1) Shame's use as an instrument of social control is familiar to everyone. Parents, teachers, peer groups use shaming tactics to enforce adherence to the existing norms and arrangements, and to punish deviance. Individuals experience shame affect, blocked by the knowledge that others will disapprove of our desires; and we experience the complete shame emotion (including self-dissmell and self-disgust) to the extent we have internalized those group norms as valid and binding. Motifs of pride and shame are also deployed by skilled technicians to manipulate people's sentiments, beliefs and behaviours. Advertising, political propaganda and the esprit de corps of military units, project teams and business organizations all seek to instill feelings of pride to hold themselves together – and feelings of shame to forestall or punish disloyalty. As children and parents, as subordinates and bosses, as dog-owners if no people are beneath us in the great pyramid of Being, all of us have used shame in this way, and have been its victims.
  
- 2) Partly because we are so easily manipulated though shame but for other reasons as well, shame affect is also a major factor in *cultural clumping* (as I would call it): the tendency of people to identify and aggregate into groups that share common customs, symbols and language. If we think of day-to-day living as a game defined and played according to certain rules then, obviously, we must look for counter-players who understand and follow the same rules we do. I can only play chess with another chess player. I can only speak English with a fellow English-speaker, do business with someone who abides by similar concepts of trade and contract, or invite to formal dinner parties only people who can be relied to dress appropriately, eat with decent table manners, and generally comport themselves appropriately. If I'm into kinky sex, I can only do consensual bondage and whipping scenes with a partner who responds to my sexual script, understanding and agreeing to the conventions of its genre. Otherwise, play will be frustrating; and more specifically, what I will experience is shame-affect, as my initiatives are blocked by the ineptness or irrelevance of the other's response – or worse, by their dissmell, disgust and rejection. Throughout society, then, there will be a tendency to seek out, mingle and deal with persons whose customs and culture are similar to our own, and to avoid persons whose customs and culture are different. Even when there is no real fear of the Other but only good feelings of tolerance and acceptance, there remains a likelihood of unpleasant shame affect when cultural boundaries are crossed. The result, proverbially, is that birds of a feather gather into flocks that are uncongenial, if not actively hostile to birds of different cultural plumage – a phenomenon readily observed today in any large city. Even in the absence of geographical barriers to intermingling, even in a well-policed, civil society where government policy and communications promote “multi-culturalism” and people are thoroughly accustomed

to sharing work space and public space with safe and well-behaved strangers, a variety of shame-motivated avoidance behaviours can still be observed.

- 3) Inevitably, as such groups form, organize and gather adherents, a struggle develops for the control of public space. Each group has its customs and preferences about the way things should be done, but none has decisive power to impose its preferences. Under these conditions, lacking accepted norms to govern their interaction in public space, people can only grope their way. Gradually, as they do so, one or more ‘pidgin’ cultures develop—borrowing a bit here, a bit there—and, in the process, evolving a generic, commonly intelligible way of doing business. A hegemonic culture will facilitate this process, since its norms and values will have special clout. Even so, the dominant group will have to make compromises, cannot always have things its own way, so that what evolves in the long run is a trans-cultural or, as we say, *cosmopolitan* culture, used by the elites for their conduct of “affairs,” and for the social life that lubricates the actual negotiations. Increasingly, this cosmopolitan culture becomes obligatory not only at the summit of society, but for ambitious juniors as well. Quite simply, the requirement for promotion is a demonstrated competence with its lingo, manners and values.
- 4) Partly driving these cultural developments, partly driven by them, economic and political concentrations are also happening. Transportation and communication become cheaper. Markets and trade-routes are organized. Rival sovereignties are crushed or co-opted. Legal codes and courts are established. Business crime flourishes, but lower-class crime is suppressed. The outcome is an ecumenical, world-spanning society whose most significant result is that all persons outside its dispensations are despised, and come to despise themselves, as *barbarians*. Whether they live beyond its borders or in its teeming cities is of little consequence. Either way, it is pride and shame – pride in their distinct tribal identities, and shame in their comparative poverty and weakness – that exclude them from the benefits of civilization.
- 5) Certainly, the cosmopolitan culture wins adherents who go along with its ways to get ahead in the world it is creating. However, in its first phase, it is sufficiently vibrant to attract converts and immigrants who find its world inspiring and congenial. Why not? Civilization really does have its advantages; and the price in autonomy and spontaneity that must be paid for its material and cultural wealth will not seem excessive – certainly not to those for whom that wealth is actually forthcoming in their own lifetime, or their children’s. In time, however, even for these privileged ones, the need for universality makes for a certain dullness. Cautious neutrality and compromise are at a premium. (For how else could one rule an empire?) Affect and emotion are not just muted but extinguished altogether to

the extent possible. The elite accept constraint in public as the burden of their privilege, and learn to “let their hair down” only amongst themselves, in private on appropriate occasions. The middle classes, chronically insecure in their status, keep up respectability at all times. For them, conformity is the price of upward mobility. At the start of their careers, they pay this price because they hope to climb; eventually, they conform because rebellion would shame them before colleagues and family, and in their own eyes. Meanwhile the lower orders stay relatively docile, doing menial jobs for meagre pay, and leading bleak, frustrated lives. What keeps them quiet is partly the lack of good alternatives, partly fear of punishment for any rebellion or deviance – but, very largely, their chronic shame, reinforced every day by the message that they are fit for and deserving of nothing better.

- 6) In time, the arrangements of civilization begin visibly to erode, until eventually they break down. The reasons are various and complicated, but always with shame in a conspicuous role. In effect, shame makes the enterprise pointless, as people at all levels come to feel that their lives are not worth living. We have seen that shame can make us feel this way. When it does so across the board, at all levels of society, it is a powerful – indeed, an irresistible – catalyst for change.

The elites, or their children, grow ashamed of their power and privilege, and of the emptiness of their lives. Wanting to know what it all means, they dabble in various mystery cults – seldom deeply enough for real spiritual experience and transformation, but enough to befuddle their minds. The middle classes are ashamed of their conformity, and of an even deeper emptiness. The masses keep plodding along – working no more than they have to, numbing themselves with alcohol (or other recreational drugs), and consoling themselves with religion. Their shame is the deepest of all, and it is most visible in their entertainments. Why else would anyone watch the sitcoms on television, or go to the circus to watch the gladiators kill each other, or watch the lions feed on Christians? Why else (for that matter) would anyone march willingly onto the sands of the arena, fly an airplane into a skyscraper, or blow himself up in a shopping mall – convinced he was thereby saving his soul, and not altogether deluded on this point? When life feels meaningless, spectacular death, “taking a few of this bastards with us” is almost a rational choice.

- 7) Throughout society then, shame accumulates, thickens and festers until it becomes epidemic at a level where people will sooner die than endure it longer. Such epidemic shame now becomes a significant cause of wars and salvationist movements on all scales, both tiny and vast. The empire with its cosmopolitan culture is splintered. The issue of “proper” behaviour re-opens, and the battle for control of public space resumes.

### 3.2 Shame Management

In brief, groups use a mixture of shame and fear to hold together and control their members, but must then find ways of maintaining shame at tolerable levels, and of preventing the havoc it can cause. The deployment of shame by a given group is a vital aspect of its culture – fraught with destiny for its history, and for the personal histories of its members. In turn, the cultural management of shame is a vital topic for anthropology, sociology, social psychology, the history of ideas, and the history of ordinary life.

Always and everywhere, to the extent that culture can be thought of as a coherent system exerting shaping pressure upon its members, it does so in roughly the same way – first by evoking shame affect to set the limits of acceptable desire and striving, and then by assigning cultural meanings to the raw shame affect, assuaging its pain, draining it through prepared channels for the culture’s use. To ensure that members behave only in the desired ways and not in dangerous or disruptive ones, the culture will devise and inculcate the patterns of feeling, concept, habit and expectation that we might call *cultural scripts*, to distinguish them from the *personal scripts* internalized by individuals. Through such scripts, cultures construe and manage the emotion of shame, thereby offering to their members what amounts to a choice of lives.

Simple cultures can offer their members only a very narrow choice – perhaps only that between conformity and deviance. Once a young person chooses pride, and the way of conformity to cultural norms (rather than shame and deviance, with perhaps somewhat greater authenticity), then tradition determines everything else. Complex societies like our own offer a wide range of alternatives; but these too use scripted pride and shame to control their members, and offer basically the same choice – although the anonymity of urban life and now the Internet makes it possible to compartmentalize our lives, choosing conformity in some areas, but deviance in others. Pride in one’s “lifestyle,” and the choice to “come out of the closet” then become critical personal issues. A political struggle commences to influence the norms of culture as a whole.

One task of social science might be to map and compare the devices of shame management in known societies and cultures. Offered here, very briefly, is just a personal impression of how shame affect is scripted and managed in the culture that formed and continues to influence me, but from which I am trying to free myself to whatever extent may be possible.

Its massive use of advertising and conspicuous consumption is one place to begin. Shame affect is evoked constantly in the effort to make me want things I cannot have – for which I lack the purchasing power. Think of an attractive toy waved in front of a young child, but snatched away as soon as he reaches for it. That is the central experience of life for literally billions of people today. I’d consider myself relatively privileged, but it is so for me: Desire outruns fulfillment every time I turn on the

television, or go to a Hollywood movie, or take a walk on an upscale street.

Of course, this shame is not evoked merely for its own sake. The idea is to get me to spend the money I have in my wallet or in my bank account, or that I can borrow on my credit card. I am even told it is my patriotic duty to buy all I can, to keep employment high, and the economy booming.

To procure the necessary wealth, I have to be smart, work hard and *succeed*. Just what I am to succeed *at* is beside the point. I'm not encouraged to ask what needs doing – what is worth doing for its own sake. Success is an abstraction – a state in which I can afford, have already afforded, the things that money can buy, and am recognized as having done

so by all those whose esteem counts. Every purchase is a down payment on pride – or self-esteem, as we prefer to call it. Every time I reach for my wallet what I am buying is a respite from culturally scripted shame.

The price of success is a certain brutality – to myself first of all (since self-indulgence of any kind would impair efficiency and competitiveness), but then to other people, and to nature itself. To the extent success is a supreme value, the requisite brutality becomes a virtue, and even a source of pride. “Sensitivity” of any kind is a shameful weakness, to be trained out of children and young people, and scorned in adults. I must take and do, but must not allow myself to feel. Feelings raise doubts, create entanglements, and cause the will to falter. Having feelings, being capable of having feelings, just shows everyone that I am not of “the right stuff.” By contrast, having learned to be ashamed of my own feelings I become reliable – someone the group can count on.

As we've seen, the affect system evolved for a reason. It is a source of information for the creature, about its own values and priorities. Attaching shame to the feelings, training me that my own feelings are something to be ashamed of can be compared to putting out my eyes, or puncturing my ear drums. It deprives me of a vital source of information, makes me dependent on information supplied to me by others. Having learned not to be moved – not even to be aware – of my own values, I become the reliable instrument of my group – really of its leaders, my superiors. And I will be taught next to take pride in being such an instrument – in having the self-control to put the group's norms and the wishes of others ahead of my own. It's so easy to confuse the virtue of self-discipline with affect anaesthesia – the inability to recognize and respond to my own feelings. And this is not a distinction society has any interest in keeping clear.

On another level, various publicly esteemed religions teach me to feel ashamed of my selfishness and my crass materialism. Money is a lot, but it isn't everything. This is, after all, a God-fearing nation. On one hand, I am expected to try my hardest in the competition for wealth and power – put to shame if I do not make the effort, or if my efforts do not succeed. On the other, institutions and paid professionals explain to me that worldly success is not the name of the game at all – at best, a sign that I am doing

something right, but possibly a serious hindrance in the soul's real business, its journey toward salvation. As an ideal, at least, a message is passed that the rich and powerful should be superior to their success, as if their wealth were just a convenient bonus, not really important in the grand scheme of things. Nor is this just a quaint, religious notion. In winning admission to the best society, other values – how I obtained success, my contribution to the public good, the lifestyle I maintain withal, my democratic ability to be affable and “keep in touch with” the common man – will be considered along with my bank balance and position. Too crass a materialism is almost as shameful as poverty – the mark of a parvenu, and not a gentleman. Thus, even the very rich are not immune to manipulation through shame. Spending my money in the right ways can be as important as having it to spend.

Such reservations surround our feelings about success, and might even be said to overarch them. And they serve some important social functions, in justifying the wealth of the wealthy, in distinguishing a true aristocracy from the merely rich, in maintaining the fiction of a fundamentally democratic society with all souls equal before God and the Law, and in getting many good works accomplished. But it would be wrong to make too much of them. Mostly, they are for evenings and Sundays. On work days, during business hours, the predominant ethos values competitiveness above all else, revelling unashamedly in the spoils of victory – not least, the pleasure of rubbing the faces of others in the shame of their defeats.

The contours of life in North America today are familiar enough, but the role of shame in this lifestyle is not so easy to grasp until we bring ourselves to admit that something is wrong – that we are not happy people. In fact, the word is getting out. Travellers to third world countries regularly come back to tell us that people in places with half the North American life expectancy, and a fraction of its standard of living, seem closer to their families, friendlier to their neighbours, and more at peace with themselves than we are. For all their misery, they seem more spontaneously *alive* than we know ourselves to be. They don't walk around with the load of shame that we are lugging.

The system of shame management is designed to keep our noses to the grindstone in hateful jobs; working with people who are just as dull, frustrated and angry as we feel ourselves becoming; supporting thankless families (who really want something quite different) in the affluent lifestyle we are supposed to give them; envying people who have more than we do, while rewarding ourselves (and perpetuating the system) by showing contempt to those with less. A mug's game – if we allow ourselves to see it. We could use our wealth and know-how to enjoy more leisure, more freedom, more genuine pleasure and satisfaction, if culturally scripted shame did not block us at every turn.

The alternative to the rat-race is not to “turn on, tune in, drop out.” That slogan itself posed a false dilemma, conceding far too much to the cultural shame scripts, and playing right into their hand. The real alternative is just to run at your own pace, no



faster than you actually want or need to run. At that point, shame is no longer a stick that others can beat you with, but simply a judgment you make for yourself that certain things, however desirable, are not for you.

#### 4 The Lessons of Shame

At several points in his book<sup>22</sup>, Nathanson speaks of learning “the lessons of shame” without saying exactly what these are. But I am sure he is right that there are important lessons here, if we are wise enough to accept them. Painful as it can be, shame is not a purely negative experience. The affect itself, as we now see, evolved for a good reason, as an adaptation that helped an autonomous, social animal to survive and pass on its genes. Such a creature cannot live peacefully nor collaborate successfully with others of its kind, without some ability to inhibit impulses that would disrupt its crucial relationships if followed. Indeed, intelligence and civilization by their nature must increase and ramify shame-affect as they evolve, setting increasingly complex conditions on the free flow of desire toward satisfaction. A faculty of self-restraint, self-inhibition, is indispensable to thrive and prosper in any imaginable human society. Yet there is no doubt that such a faculty can be over-learned to the point where it becomes crippling, stifling the creature’s vitality and its enjoyment of life.

We need some balance here. The problem is to manage shame affect so it can do its job without over-doing it. Painful as it is, each of us needs to reopen and rethink the lessons we drew from it as children, to see what meanings it holds for us as grown-ups.

As a child, my responses to shame fell along the lines of Nathanson’s compass: I abandoned projects beyond my capabilities at that time, and set limits for myself accordingly. I sought and grew addicted to satisfactions more easily available. I ganged up with others against myself to maintain certain crucial relationships. When it seemed safe, I kicked at others to reassure myself that I was not powerless. All these were lessons learned from shame – perhaps the best, or the only lessons I could have learned at that time. Today, hopefully, I can do a little better.

The English language has an excellent word for shame’s positive lesson. That word is *humility*. In contrast to the defensive formations of that compass, it is the trait acquired when we can accept shame’s teaching instead of pushing it away. Humility requires that we see through our defenses **as** such; then forgive ourselves for being what we are; and then resolve to do the best we can with the cards as dealt.

Lao Tzu says “Who feels punctured must once have been a bubble.” This puts it perfectly. Shame is the deflation we experience when some positive affect is blocked. This can happen any time, because we are not omnipotent. If we can accept this, we do not feel destroyed by shame affect. We are deflated a little; and then we pull ourselves together and go on from there. Our scripts for shame will then allow let us to

---

<sup>22</sup> e.g. S&P p. 377

take failure and the disapproval of others in stride. They may not be pleasant, but they are something less than “mortifying.” We do not experience them as a kind of death. But then, even death becomes simply the end of life – not personal failure, or defeat or self-betrayal.

## References

Shame and Affect Theory Forum

<http://www.behavior.net/forums/shameandaffect/welcome.html>

Interview with Nathanson

<http://www.behavior.net/column/nathanson/>

Dimensions of Emotion

[http://members.tripod.com/~alternativ\\_psy/diserta4.htm](http://members.tripod.com/~alternativ_psy/diserta4.htm)

Tomkins' Affect Theory

[http://www.affectivetherapy.co.uk/Tomkins\\_Affect.htm](http://www.affectivetherapy.co.uk/Tomkins_Affect.htm)

Affect and Script Theory Resources

[http://www.geocities.com/drlynch\\_2000/AT/resources.htm](http://www.geocities.com/drlynch_2000/AT/resources.htm)

Scripts, Therapy and the Movies

<http://www.behavior.net/orgs/ssti/bltn04.html>

Affect and Cognition: Theoretical Orientation

<http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~psych765/theory.html>

EMDR and Affective Therapy

<http://www.affectivetherapy.co.uk/news.htm>

James Park: The Sex Script Hypothesis

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/syn-sex.html>

Very good article by Nathanson

[http://www.restorativepractices.org/Pages/nacc\\_nat.html](http://www.restorativepractices.org/Pages/nacc_nat.html)

Shame and Group Psychotherapy

<http://members.tripod.com/~tbirchmore/id17.htm>

Myers-Briggs Personality Model

<http://menthelp.net/psyhelp/chap9/chap9c.htm>

Five Factor Personality Model

<http://www.personalityresearch.org/bigfive.html>