

The Enlightenment of Max Schelers Theory of Shame on Moral Education for College Students

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Abstract

Cultivating a sense of shame is an essential part of the growth and development of college students in the new era. Max Schelers theory of shame encompasses two forms—self-reflection and facing others—and two types—bodily shame and spiritual shame. Contemporary college students exhibit three phenomena of shame: ignorance shame due to lack of self-discipline, fearlessness shame due to lack of external discipline, and regret shame due to lack of action. Moral educators in higher education institutions should fully leverage the educational value of Schelers theory of shame to foster self-discipline through self-reflection, external discipline by learning from role models, and action through confronting regret, thereby achieving the unity of personal and external discipline.

Keywords

Max Schelers theory of shame; shame of ignorance; shame of fearlessness; shame of regret; moral education for college students.

1. Introduction

Max Scheler defines shame as a form of self-perception, encompassing the feeling of diminished self-esteem when facing others, the introspective experience of reflecting on oneself, and the embarrassment felt for others. These three forms of shame serve to protect the self, with the ultimate goal of guiding the self toward a better version of itself, achieving a unity of autonomy and heteronomy. This article, building on the educational value of Schelers theory of shame, addresses the current issues among college students, such as ignorant shame, fearless shame, and lack of action in shame, proposing methods for cultivating shame and realizing personal value among college students.

2. The Essence of Schelers Theory of Shame

Scheeler defines man in terms of shame, and he points out: "The unique position and place of man in the grand trapezoidal construction of the worlds creatures, that is, his position between God and animals, is so clearly and directly expressed in shame that no other feeling can compare with it."^{[1]531}He describes where shame is: "It exists between God and animals, it is the light of consciousness that is unique to man; it defines the way in which a person lives: only man has shame. To give up shame, he is no longer human."^{[1]532}Thus, shame has an important role in personality development. The forms and types of shame in Scheler are as follows.

2.1. The form of shame

Scheler defines the essence of shame, saying: "Shame is a form of feeling about ourselves and therefore belongs to the category of self-perception, which is the essence of shame."^{[1]544} He defends his self-worth. First, shame is the feeling of self-esteem damage that occurs when "facing another person." "Any sense of shame causes blood to rush to the head... causing a blush."^{[1]543} Shame is a physiological phenomenon in emotional responses, manifested through facial expressions. Shame always accompanies two conflicting conscious functions: one being the essential requirements and authentic meaning of higher-level activities, and the other being lower-level specific and realistic modes of existence. When an individual encounters a more complete other, they may feel a sense of self-reproach, which involves attributing the others perspective to oneself and aligning this with the negative values one has recognized about oneself. In other words, one feels inferior to the other and loses self-respect in front of them. For example, when a student is studying at school and faces a teacher imparting knowledge that is more beneficial, comprehensive, and advanced, they may become so engrossed as to lose themselves, which is a realization of their own narrowness and limitations towards the knowledge and the teacher. This sense of shame drives the student toward a higher affirmation of value than their own. Secondly, shame is a feeling of "turning back to oneself." For instance, in a fire, a mother, in order to save her child, disregards her own clothing and runs out of the house naked, holding her child. During this process, she does not pay attention to her physical condition but is focused on running. However, once she and her child are out of danger, the mothers intention returns to herself. Recognize the current predicament and find ways to stop this sense of shame and embarrassment. Therefore, this sense of shame not only involves turning inward to ones own feelings but also includes a protective and nurturing state after turning inward. Thirdly, shame is feeling shy for others. Scheler refers to the first two types of shame as subjective shame, while the third can be seen as objective shame. Shame is not solely related to the shy individual; it can naturally extend to others, just as we feel ashamed when we ourselves are shy about something that happens to others or ourselves. For example, if two people commit the same misdeed and one is discovered and criticized, the other person who has not been caught will feel the same sense of shame upon seeing someone else being criticized for committing the same mistake, feeling ashamed both for themselves and for others.

2.2. Types of shame

Shame manifests as physical shame and spiritual shame. "Physical shame is premised only on the sensory and instinctual levels of life, whereas spiritual shame is grounded in the personal existence of the spirit... Physical shame is universally present in humans and within the time of human personality development, even in higher animals... Spiritual shame is certainly not a universal attribute of humans, nor will it appear at every stage of individual or national development."^{[1]558} Body shame exists in all people and at all times of their existence and development, with sexual shame being the most representative form of body shame. Sex is not only present in human production activities but also in the vast majority of living beings, such as animals and plants. Animals and plants maintain their existence through sex, yet this behavior among them is merely "an act that appears to be non-selective (mating, union) at a certain point on the lower levels of life, akin to the combination of two chemical elements."^{[1]535} All living beings in the world possess a sense of shame, but humans differ from other creatures. Humans can recognize their own shame and that of others, and strive to prevent the continuation of shame. For most plants and animals in nature, all their actions arise solely from their inherent nature, not out of deliberate intent, but as a natural response to the environment. Therefore, plants and animals lack a soulful sense of shame; it exists only in individuals with a personality. "For physical shame is based on sensory and instinctual levels of life, while spiritual shame is grounded in personal mental existence."^{[1]558} Human beings have

the will to guide them, so they can deliberately put themselves in a state of shame or get rid of it. In summary, the sense of shame is a unique human nature; neither the lowest animals nor the highest gods possess this nature, and we cannot imagine a shy god.

3. The Reality of The Lack of Shame Among College Students

College students are an invaluable resource of talent, the hope of the nation and the future of the country. The prevailing trend among college students in the new era is positive, healthy, and uplifting. However, the influx of complex Western cultural trends and values into schools inevitably has immeasurable impacts on students who are at a critical stage in forming their worldviews, outlooks on life, and values. This article, based on Schelers theory of shame, combines the current realities of college students to summarize several phenomena of shame deficiency prevalent among student groups.

3.1. The shame of ignorance due to lack of self-discipline

The essence of shame is a feeling of self-reflection, a sense of embarrassment when facing values that are more advanced, sacred, and complete than ones own. It is a state of protecting and nurturing self-awareness. Compared to the desire for fame and success, vanity focuses on ones social image, while the pursuit of fame and success marks the beginning of ones achievements in society. Although these values are related to higher forms of affirmation such as love, respect, and reputation, they often lead people to become lost in the external world, valuing others evaluations or their own material wealth, thus neglecting the intimate self-care and nurturing. Pragmatism is a typical representative of this trend. This ideology takes establishing beliefs as its starting point, taking action as the primary means, and achieving results as the ultimate goal. Since its introduction to China in the early 20th century, it has had a significant impact on Chinese society, encouraging people to focus on useful, precise, positive, and tangible external matters, thereby overlooking the intrinsic value hidden behind them.

Currently, there is a phenomenon in universities where students focus solely on their major courses and neglect general education courses such as required ideological and political theory, college English, and advanced mathematics. They generally appear in class as "heads-down" individuals, glued to their phones, which is actually a manifestation of pragmatism. Many students believe that these courses have no significance and are not applicable in real life. Those who do not take civil service or public institution exams do not need to study ideological and political theory courses; those who do not work in foreign trade do not need English; and they will not use calculus in real-life shopping situations. These facts all indicate that students do not value their overall self-growth and development in the future. They only prioritize the practical utility of passing exams or obtaining graduation and degree certificates, while being completely unaware of the future development of their majors and the true value of life, which is clearly a shame of ignorance. If education is merely about memorizing knowledge points, passing exams, and obtaining graduation certificates, it would be a failure for the entire education sector. True education should involve learning how to learn—understanding learning methods and accumulating learning experience in any course, not just learning for the sake of learning but learning with purpose. Of course, most students are not unaware of the importance of learning. Let them know in their hearts what to do or what to achieve, but they do not act. The Ming Dynasty thinker Wang Yangming proposed the idea of unity between knowledge and action, believing that knowledge contains action, and action contains knowledge; the two are interdependent and inseparable. True knowledge must manifest as action; without action, it is not true knowledge. In the face of todays intense social competition, some students adopt a laid-back or Buddhist attitude. Although they know how to act in the future or what to do now, they do not put it into practice.

3.2. Fear of shame in the absence of external discipline

Scheeler, when discussing the relationship between shame and similar emotions, proposed that soul shame is very similar to awe. Fear is a premonition of danger, appearing before dangerous things or events affect an individual. Awe is also a form of fear, but it does not emphasize its dangerous aspect; instead, it embodies respect, love, and reverence. In any case, it is perceived and given as a carrier of higher positive values, thus it is a sense of soully shyness in the face of values that are more advanced and sacred than itself. This sense of shock and awe endows the world and the soul with a mysterious depth, making us feel a breadth and richness beyond our wilderness. Confronted with them, reason is crushed, and we become aware of our own narrowness and limitations^{[1]556}The current human society is in a diverse and information-rich era, where the abundance of information and its rapid dissemination are truly remarkable. Not only has this led to the proliferation of materialism, hedonism, and extreme individualism, but it has also fostered such negative trends among college students. For students who are at a critical stage in forming and developing their worldviews, outlooks on life, and values, these negative influences undoubtedly have adverse effects, potentially leading to serious incidents. Recently, in Handan City, Hebei Province, a case occurred where three junior high school students aged 12 to 14 brutally murdered their classmates and buried the bodies in vegetable greenhouses. When the victims were discovered, forensic experts confirmed that their faces had been mutilated by shovels, and they suffered severe physical injuries, indicating extremely cruel methods used by the perpetrators. This case is quite extreme, but there is a phenomenon among college students: they show indifference and disregard when faced with teachers questions, watching movies or playing games in class with a sense of entitlement; they approach exams with an indifferent attitude, believing that obtaining a diploma is enough, while other aspects can be ignored. "The pressure of high school studies is too much; I want to take a break after entering university," "It doesnt matter if I dont pass this time, there will be another chance," "As long as I get my diploma, its fine." These are the current attitudes and lifestyles of many college students, ultimately stemming from a lack of shame and reverence! They fear neither life nor death, freedom, law, or authority, which is an excessive form of fearlessness. Therefore, contemporary college students must always keep the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, showing respect for laws, regulations, and moral norms, as well as for those who hold power, and strive to do good.

3.3. Shame of regret for lack of action

The experience of shame is different from the content of shame. The experience of shame is mediated by others and is being shy in front of others. The content of shame is "feeling ashamed about something." Scheele points out that "shyness is always about being shy about something, it is related to a fact that spontaneously requires shame."^{[1]547}Shame has two mechanisms of occurrence. The first is predictive and protective, the sense of shame that arises before an event happens. For example, before making a mistake, a student might anticipate the consequences and the embarrassment it would bring, thus preemptively preventing the wrong action to protect their self-affirming value. The second mechanism involves retrospective reflection, where people find they have violated the predictive requirements of shame, leading to a post-event feeling of shame, also known as regret. For instance, when someone feels ashamed about an action, they might think to themselves, "I am really like this," unconsciously placing their personal value in this pessimistic state of shame. Scheler believed this experience to be extremely harsh and merciless, "especially focused on pain; it is not the gentle, physical, slightly blushing maidenly shyness, but rather a burning shyness—— It seems to torment and destroy life and soul, always linked with self-hating actions and condemnation of ones own existence."^{[1]613}

Currently, among college students, there is a widespread phenomenon known as the "Lying Flat Tribe" and "Buddhist Youth," referring to individuals who remain indifferent to whatever happens around them, showing no reaction whatsoever. This appears to be an optimistic attitude of calmness and composure in the face of adversity, but in reality, it represents a state of mediocrity and lack of ambition. With the rapid development of industrialization and informatization, various social trends and ideas have become increasingly noisy and chaotic. While people can achieve great satisfaction in material terms, they feel more spiritually empty and impoverished. This is also true for today's college students, who generally feel lost and confused about the future, have no insight into their chosen majors, and are unwilling to engage with new things. They either follow their parents or elders' advice, choosing subjects that seem practical for future careers; or they hear about higher-level students' experiences in passing civil service exams, pursuing postgraduate studies, or starting businesses, and may even listen to enthusiastic discussions from peers on certain topics, but remain completely unaware of the true circumstances! Without concrete goals for the future, these individuals often confine their aspirations to mere fantasies, falling into what is called "lying flat" and "Buddhist Youth," only to later regret when graduation approaches, thinking to themselves, "I was actually like this."

4. The Inspiration of Scheler's Shame Theory to Moral Education of College Students

College students who lack the unique experience of shyness will fall into a barren, animal-like existence. Shyness serves as a protective mechanism that safeguards self-worth; it can elevate one's moral character. Only by being in a state of shyness can one consciously cultivate oneself. Scheler said, "Just as there is a similar root in facing oneself with shyness and feeling shy about oneself in every aspect of the word shyness, just as there is a similar root in being shy in front of others."^{[1]543} Shame can be formed by others, which can form heteronomy; shame can be formed by oneself, which can form autonomy. From heteronomy to autonomy, it must be accompanied by personal active practice, that is, actions facing regret.

4.1. Self-discipline that is good at "turning oneself around"

When discussing emotions consistent with the direction of shame, Scheler mentions humility in addition to awe. He compares and analyzes shame, pride, and humility. Both shame and pride involve a sense of self-affirmation, such as being proud of one's good looks or eating, dressing, and using things better than others. Therefore, the affirmed value of pride is a certain value that has already become a reality within an individual and can be maintained by them. If the value they take pride in is attacked or defamed, they will retreat into a more substantial realm of self to firmly grasp their affirmed value. In contrast, shame is a protective feeling towards the individual self, lacking a sense of pride in existing self-value but rather a love and recognition for higher values. On this level, shame is similar to humility. In humility, we embrace the higher value of others with love, losing ourselves. For humility is a reflection, where the higher value embodied in love projects its light onto us.^{[1]548} Therefore, when we face new things that are positive and upward, we must always keep a sense of shame and humility, so that we can constantly introspect and maintain self-discipline.

Regarding the shame of ignorance, Confucius also proposed his approach: "Be quick to learn and eager to ask questions without feeling ashamed to seek advice from those who are less knowledgeable; this is what we call cultivation." (The Analects, Gongye Chang) Being intelligent and diligent in learning, and not feeling ashamed to ask questions from those who are inferior to oneself—this is the proper attitude towards scholarship. However, looking at some students today, they are like flowers in a greenhouse, living under the all-encompassing "love" of their

parents. When faced with those who are less capable than themselves, they do not show humility, nor do they maintain a sense of reverence or respect even when dealing with teachers or elders more learned than themselves. When they need help from their teachers, they strive to appear cooperative; once the help is done, they disappear without a trace. In *The Analects*, Chapter Weizheng, it is recorded: "The Master said, If you govern by law and enforce punishment, people will avoid punishment but lack a sense of shame. If you govern by virtue and enforce propriety, people will have a sense of shame and conform to the law." Confucius believed that governing the state through legal means and managing the people with criminal law would lead them to seek ways to avoid punishment without any sense of shame. If the state is governed by virtue and propriety, and the people are restrained by these principles, they will refrain from immoral acts due to a sense of shame. Therefore, external constraints such as laws or the stern warnings of parents, teachers, and elders often make students lose their ability to think independently and make decisions. For educators, what we can do is only this: There is a lot of teaching, guidance and inspiration, rather than mandatory indoctrination. Through guidance, students spontaneously observe their own self, ashamed of their own shortcomings, and finally achieve self-discipline of individual personality.

4.2. The heteronomy of learning from role models

Scheeler pointed out the experience of feeling shy in front of someone, (an important dimension being "feeling inferior to others." On this point, Confucian culture strongly advocates. Mencius said: "If one does not feel ashamed of being inferior to others, how can they catch up with them?" (Mencius, Chapter Jin Xin Shang) This means that if a person is not ashamed of being less capable than others, how can they possibly catch up? Fu Xuan said: "One's virtue surpasses others, hence one knows shame." (Fu Zi, Chapter Ren Lun) Confucianism holds it shameful to fall short of others. Thus, the sense of shame shares common ground with the idea of "seeing the virtuous and aspiring to emulate them." College students who feel ashamed should learn from role models and strive to surpass others in virtue.

Who can be called a role model? In real life, our direct superiors or bosses can lead and constrain us directly; we must follow their instructions and arrangements as followers. If we do not comply, we will face corresponding penalties. However, they can only be called leaders, not role models. True role models and true followers cannot perceive each other's relationship like a superior-subordinate dynamic. Leaders know who they should lead, and followers know who they should obey. For a role model, however, one cannot realize that they are a follower's role model. Only the follower understands that this person is a role model, guiding them. A role model does not depend on time, space, or other constraints. We can view Aristotle and Plato as role models, or Nietzsche's "Übermensch" as a role model; all transcend the limitations of time, space, and reality. In the hearts of followers, a role model is always seen as good, sacred, and perfect, an object to be revered and pursued throughout one's life.

In the small social group of universities, teachers, classmates, roommates, and senior students can all serve as models for students to emulate, and students should choose the best ones to follow. There are many role models in society, and there are also many role models on campus; all these role models may become role models for different people. For a student majoring in Chinese language, the role models might be literary giants like Lu Xun, Tolstoy, and Tagore; for a student majoring in painting, the role models might be art masters like Picasso and Van Gogh. Different individuals have different role models, and following them is free. For an individual, following a role model is inevitably filled with love, direct and natural, even heart-stirring and irresistible, driven by an impulse that cannot be suppressed. When you truly face your role model, you cannot help but approach him, imitate him, understand him, and love him. This personal experience is something others cannot feel, nor can those who are seen as role models. Facing him, you are filled with passion and reverence, always striving to move toward the

direction he points out. This is not forced but entirely spontaneous, a natural feeling that fills your heart. Of course, such role models do not necessarily need to be fixed. It can be for a specific other person, or it can be for oneself, that is, the self in one's heart and the future self.

4.3. Take action to face regret

"Regret restores youth to virtue."^{[2][218]} Scheeler said as much. From the perspective of traditional beliefs and real life, regret is generally considered evil. For instance, the fear theory of regret posits that regret is a wish: hoping not to have done something. People resist the wrongs they have committed, unwilling to bear the consequences. Another example is the guilt theory, which views regret as a negative and pessimistic behavior, accompanied by an oppressive mindset towards the past that has passed and cannot be changed, such as the remorseful self-blame felt by a student who cheated and was punished by the school. Determinists argue that regret is superfluous and useless; we can no longer change what we did in the past, and harboring resentment will lead one to blindly dwell on the past, stagnate in the present, and lose sight of the future. In short, regret is an expression of disgust or hatred towards things that have passed, plunging one into a burning sense of shame and robbing them of the courage to correct their mistakes and start anew. But is this really the case? Was what we did in the past truly wrong? Should we really feel no regret at all?

Scheeler believed that throughout the long river of human life, what we do now is not only focused on the present but also reflects the past and future. Individuals control the present and the future; while we cannot change what has happened in the past, its meaning or value is constantly evolving. Through new narratives, the past can be given a fresh significance. In other words, what was once considered wrong may turn out to be right in the future, as long as the events we experienced have not yet had their full impact, their value remains unfinished, and their meaning unassigned. For example, after the Opium War in 1840, China gradually became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, suffering national humiliation, people's hardships, and cultural degradation. The Chinese nation endured unprecedented calamities, with the entire country and people under extreme exploitation and oppression. Although this history brought endless suffering, in the course of history and in practical learning, we still place this humiliating past in our classrooms. This is because without evil and sorrow, there would be no awakening of national consciousness, no appreciation for the current peaceful era, and no aspiration to strive for the nation's prosperity and happiness. It is not just about striving for the strength and happiness of the country, but also about striving for one's own well-being.

4.4. Conclusion

For contemporary college students, they should be good at facing their own ignorance, fearlessness and remorse, constantly reflect on their personal behavior, reflect on themselves every day, set a healthy and good example for themselves, and always motivate themselves to move forward. Of course, if you are unintentionally dizzy and do something wrong, you must also actively correct it, have the courage to face the "shame", and take timely measures to make up for your mistakes, so as to truly become a young person in the new era who dares to think and act.

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