EXAMINER'S REPORT

Thesis Title: *The Role of Shame and Remorse in the Moral Development of Children*
Doctoral Candidate: Mattimai Bakor Syiem
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Examiner's Recommendation: Pass

Review of the Dissertation

The dissertation, which is an original and mature piece of scholarship, warrants a Pass. It is a uniquely special work of philosophizing, animated by a profound commitment to the moral seriousness of children and adolescents. Mattimai Bakor Syiem's dissertation is both spirited and disciplined. She provides a nuanced analysis of two foundational moral emotions—shame and remorse—exploring their role in the moral growth of children and adolescents. She demonstrates great sensitivity, subtleness, and sophistication in her interpretations of both philosophical and literary texts, which she balances with masterful control of the dissertation's argument and surrounding scholarly debates. In short, Syiem argues that shame, construed as a self-centered or egoistic moral emotion, has a "corrosive impact" on the moral formation of youth. She contrasts it with remorse, a moral emotion that supports moral formation and requires loving environments. With this argument, Syiem makes a timely and significant contribution to the fields of moral philosophy, moral education, and philosophy of education.

A strength of Syiem's dissertation is that she seeks to "widen the domain of moral education—to show moral education can take on different layers, how caring relations provide the conditions for goodness, love, and virtues to arise" (thesis overview, 9). To this end, Syiem focuses on moral wrongdoing in the dissertation, including harming others, instrumentalizing others, and failing to fulfill our responsibilities to those others (thesis, 7). Her interest in moral wrongdoing serves two functions. First, it allows her to highlight the limitations of virtue and deontological ethics because, in the case of these theories, righting a moral wrong is more a matter of "fulfilling a 'duty' or acting 'virtuously' than about the wronged person" (thesis, 27). Secondly, it allows Syiem to highlight the formative power of an individual coming to appreciate the significance of moral wrongdoing, by way of feeling either ashamed or remorseful. The emotional frequency of shame and remorse, she argues, reveals just how difficult it is for us to behave morally towards others (thesis, 8).

Syiem's commitment to widening the domain of moral education is reflected in her focus on the moral lives and moral growth of children and adolescents: *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* and *The Flying Classroom* are for younger children, whereas *To Sir with Love* and *La Fils* are about adolescents. Given her focus on young people, I encourage Syiem to consider developing a fuller account of childhood and adolescence as distinctive and invaluable life stages. For example, she

may find that adolescence is characterized by a deep interest in and desire for freedom, which is understood as a liberation from the dependency and constraints of childhood. In this context, *The Flying Classroom* can be read as being about characters who are in the process of making the transition from childhood to adolescence as they seek to overcome their fears and anxieties by becoming more courageous, whether this involves putting themselves in harm's way, taking great physical risks, or exposing their vulnerabilities.

Syiem's dissertation is intelligently conceived, well-organized, and thoroughly researched. She begins with the development of a theoretical framework that draws upon the relational philosophies of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and K.E. Løgstrup—and which serves as the basis of her criticisms of Kantian, Virtue, and Care Ethics. She introduces and critically examines the philosophical debates about shame, defending the interpersonal analysis (Bernard Williams) against the self-evaluative analysis (Gabriel Taylor). Whereas Williams conceives of shame as morally formative, Syiem is persuaded by Fredrik Westerlund's construal of shame as a self-centered or egoistic emotion that is connected with our desire for affirmation and to make a positive impression on others. Syiem enlists Westerlund's conception of shame to argue that it negatively impacts moral education—a phenomenon, she illustrates with the reading of three children's stories, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi in the South Seas*, Erich Kästner's *The Flying Classroom* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Syiem moves from shame to remorse, focusing specifically on Raimond Gaita's writings on remorse, together with the philosophies of Buber and Wittgenstein. She argues that remorse is inherently other-directed; it focuses on the suffering of the victim by waking us up to the reality of those others who have been harmed by our moral wrongdoing. This feature of remorse makes it morally formative and morally edifying; it "can open up significant moral lessons that will educate" (thesis overview, 8). Having established that remorse is morally formative and morally edifying, Syiem tackles the difficult question of whether remorse can be taught. She considers this question through a reading of *Le Fils* (directed by the Dardenne brothers) and E. R. Braithwaite's novel, *To Sir with Love*, concluding that teachers can "foster an atmosphere of learning conducive to the awakening experience in remorse" (thesis overview, 10).

Syiem's exploration of the educational context of *Le Fils* and *To Sir with Love* is richly detailed, with many aspects of the school and classroom being explored. Syiem focuses on the teacher and student encounter, arguing that these teachers are open to what their students bring to the encounter, giving the educational relationship an emergent quality. Both teachers are concerned to respect their students' experiences and to embrace their students' subjectivities. They refrain from moralizing, which is more conducive to feelings of shame rather than remorse. Thus, Syiem concludes that trust and forgiveness are the single most important factors in sustaining and encouraging educational relations conducive to remorse because they open students to morally creative possibilities.

Comments and Questions

I have divided my comments and questions into four sections: philosophy and literature, shame and shaming, shame and remorse, and youth and forgiveness.

Philosophy and Literature

Syiem artfully draws from literature and film to address the philosophical questions of her dissertation. She defends her turn to literature and film on the grounds that:

a. There are precedents for it in the philosophical literature
b. Literature, as opposed to philosophy, is grounded in everyday realities and the complexity of our human condition.
c. Literature gives us unique access to the role of moral emotions—specifically shame and remorse—in the lives of children and adolescents.

I wholeheartedly support Syiem's turn to literature and agree with her about its value for moral philosophy, especially when the focus is on the moral growth and moral education of children and adolescents. I wonder though if she might have strengthened her interpretation and deployment of the literary texts by addressing some of the following questions:

1. Are there perhaps subtle differences between the literature and film worth considering in the context of analyzing moral emotions, specifically shame and remorse? Here, I have in mind the scholarship of Stanely Cavell, Robert Pippin, and Francey Russell, who all write on film and literature, arguing that they offer distinct possibilities where self-understanding is concerned.

2. Are there subtle differences between children's and adult literature that are worth considering in the context of the analysis? For example, *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* and *The Flying Classroom* are illustrated. What, if anything, do the illustrations add to our interpretation of the text? Is it significant, for example, that when Lily reads the note from Mr. Slinger, she gets smaller and smaller? Does this have any relation to Gaita's characterization of remorse?

Shame and Shaming

Might there be a difference between shame—the moral emotion that individuals feel as a consequence of having embarrassed themselves or done something wrong—and shaming—something we do to others with a view to making them feel ashamed? Such a distinction—

between a self-directed emotion (shame) and an other-directed activity (shaming)—makes it possible to claim both that:

a. Caring and forgiving environments are important for moral growth
b. Shame need not have a corrosive impact.

Within the context of schools, shaming is normally done by individuals in positions of authority or power. Adults—teachers, school heads, and parents—seek to make children ashamed of what they have or have not done. The teachers in the stories considered by Syiem are a welcome exception; Mr. Slinger, Rick Braithwaite, and Justus Bökh all refrain from shaming their young charges. A possible reading of the stories then is that the students are nonetheless motivated by shame and the desire to avoid shameful acts precisely because their teacher isn't seeking to shame them into the standards of bravery, decency, and conviviality.

The easiest way for me to explain my reasoning is through a reading of the stories that Syiem considers in this context. Beginning with *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, Mr. Slinger reprimands Lilly for not listening to his instructions and waiting her turn, by removing her glasses, quarters, and purse. He returns them to Lily at the end of the day, complimenting her on her items. His note says: "Today was a difficult day, Tomorrow will be better." Mr. Slinger is not in the business of shaming Lily, either individually or in front of her classmates. However, he does want her to see the error of her ways and to be encouraged to try harder tomorrow. This opens the possibility for Lily to feel ashamed of the intense anger she directed at Mr. Slinger through her rudeness and the uncharitable drawing that she sneaked into his book bag at the end of the school day. She realizes that she sought to hurt Mr. Slinger and seeks to make amends the next day.

To atone for her hurtful behavior, Lily draws a more flattering drawing of Mr. Slinger and writes a story in which she apologizes to him. She also denies herself the pleasure of watching her favorite cartoons by choosing to sit in the uncooperative chair, saying to herself, "I'll stay here a million years for Mr. Slinger." Although Lily is awakened to Mr. Slinger's suffering, this need not disqualify what she is feeling as an instance of shame (understood as the moral emotion that we feel). Shame need not preclude "genuine care and reaching out for the other person(s) involved" (thesis, 71). If it did, then there would be no reason to think of it as morally formative in the first place. I am suggesting that *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* can be read as portraying how Lily's shame arises in response to Mr. Slinger's efforts to avoid shaming her while nonetheless correcting her behavior. Shame is shown to be a morally positive emotion in that it allows Lilly to have a better next day: she shows off her treasured possessions during Sharing Time and then puts them away until the end of the day; she engages in an interpretive dance with Mr. Slinger; and she enjoys her mother's baked cheese balls with Mr. Slinger and her classmates.

Distinguishing the moral emotion of shame from the moral activity of shaming others can inform an interpretation of *The Flying Classroom*. The story narrates several instances of Uli's classmates shaming him for his cowardice: they place him in a trash can and hang him from a hook behind the teacher's desk and they tease him mercilessly for always running away, e.g., a student says to him "you have to stay here and help us retreat. You're really good at that!" (Kästner 1935/2014: 83). However, the readers of *The Flying Classroom* e are introduced to Uli as a young boy who is already deeply ashamed of his cowardice: "he was wondering yet again how he could get to be brave" (Kästner 1935/2014: 83). His shame, intensified by the relentless taunts of his classmates, leads Uli to publicly jump from a school building with only an umbrella for a parachute. He survives the jump but could have very easily died. While the story does not endorse the extreme nature of Uli's action—Martin feels remorseful for having suggested that Uli seek to earn the respect of his peers by doing something impressive—and is critical of the shaming that culminated in it, I am not convinced that it is critical of shame. Instead, I am suggesting that *The Flying Classroom* be read as seeking to explore both the positive and negative role of shame in the moral formation of these young students.

I am suggesting that Syiem explore the role of remorse in the moral lives of children and adolescents while leaving open the possibility that shame can be a positive moral emotion in the formation of youth. In this regard, I am persuaded by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Myles Burnyeat's interpretation of Aristotle, that shame can contribute to the moral formation of youth because it is informed by a desire to emulate behaviors perceived as praiseworthy (see Jiminez 2020). Youth guided by a sense of shame can be spurred to perform decent, noble, and beave deeds, even while they lack the requisite practical wisdom to discern what is genuinely the most appropriate thing to do in a situation. We only need to think of *The Flying Classroom* in this regard: Uli undertakes a "heroic" act; Martin forces himself not to cry when he discovers he won't be going home for Christmas; and, Matthais always comes to the rescue of his weaker and wiser friend. The motivational outlook of these Kirchberg students is in stark contrast with the motivational outlook of students at the local public school who, in an act of revenge, kidnap Rudi Kreuzkamm and burn the dictation books he was carrying, break their word and refuse to free the prisoner, and "lack any sense of decency" (Kästner 1935/2014: 55). Unlike Martin, Uli, and Matthais, these students are not motivated by a sense of loyalty, decency, and nobility; rather, they are motivated by revenge and self-interest.

Surely, there is something to be said in defense of how the Kirchberg students endure pain and fear—the frigid temperatures, punishment, and a beating—to act honorably. Even Uli has been quietly and steadily working on becoming braver, especially through his friendship with Matthias. It is poignant that Kreuzkamm remarks between repeated slaps to the face: 'What surprises me most is that you're not ashamed of yourselves." (Kästner 1935/2014: 58). The Kirchberg students know that they will be punished for leaving the school without permission, but go anyway because they know that rescuing their classmate is the right thing to do.

Ironically, it is the housemaster, Justus Bökh, who congratulates them on their behavior, at which "[t]he five of them beamed like five little full moons" (Kästner 1935/2014: 69). They value being praised for acting in a praiseworthy manner. Sometimes, their shame is misdirected—Matthais is ashamed to admit how much he and his housemates love Justus Bökh (Kästner 1935/2014: 70)—but mistakes are what it is all about if what one is seeking is to develop practical wisdom and become good.

Given Syiem's interest in the role of moral emotions in the moral growth of children and adolescents, I wonder what Syiem makes of this paragraph towards the end of *The Flying Classroom*:

> 'Uli's a strange person,' said Johnny. 'He's still the smallest in the class, but he's quite different from the way he used to be. Matthias does anything he says. And so do all of us, more or less. Uli isn't physically large, but there's a kind of power in him, and no one can resist it. Uli doesn't do it on purpose, but when he looks at you, you do what he wants.' (Kästner 1935/2014: 154).

I find myself haunted by this passage because I don't know what it means. I can't work out if it is a positive or negative assessment of the person that Uli has become. Are we to believe that there is something to be gained from having confronted our demons? Or, has Uli become a little frightening? I would be curious to hear Syiem's thoughts on the matter, given her reading of the story.

Shame and Remorse

I would like to begin this line of questioning with a quotation from Frances White that I think Syiem might appreciate. It also offers an alternative, perhaps more nuanced, way of relating shame and remorse. White writes:

> Shame may be *among* the emotions of a remorseful person but true remorse internal self-condemnatory pain overshadows external public-condemnatory pain. The difference between shame and remorse is also manifested physically. Shame brings a hot feeling, a flush to the face; it is felt on the surface. Remorse gnaws at the innards and claws at the pit of the stomach; it is felt deep inside. It is this internalized nature of remorse that identifies it as a more specifically ethical matter than regret, guilt, or shame (White 2023, 16).

Syiem's analysis of shame leads her to conclude that "a person who responds to another from a sense of shame rather than remorse or a loving concern stands in danger of being concerned only with oneself (with how one is perceived) and losing touch with the moral reality of the situation and the people concerned (thesis overview, 7). She follows Westerlund in distinguishing shame,

self-esteem, and self-respect—emotional states concerned with the affirmability of the self—from bad conscience, remorse, and sympathetic sorrow and joy—emotional states concerned about others and our relationship to them (thesis, 70). Such a distinction can force a (false) choice between shame, on one hand, or remorse, on the other. It is more likely, however, that both moral emotions have healthy and unhealthy forms, and that it is the healthy forms of each that are morally formative, even as they do different kinds of work in the context of individual moral growth. It is along such lines that I wonder if there are moral emotions for which we don't yet have names. Perhaps the literary texts considered by Syiem should be approached as depicting moral emotions more varied and nuanced than just that of shame or remorse. Perhaps the lesson is for us to seek a more extensive psychological vocabulary to name and describe the different moral emotions, especially as we experience them in different stages of life.

I wonder if Syiem's account of remorse does not do justice to what Raimond Gaita calls "the recognition of the reality of evil—evil done and evil suffered—is the recognition of evil as *sui generis*" (Gaita 2004, 78). I raise this as a question for two reasons. First, remorse refers to an extreme form of human suffering. So extreme in fact that White enlists Simone Weil's idea of affliction in her treatment of remorse (see White 2023). Evil is profoundly traumatic; it is so much more than an act of wrongdoing. The best example, I think of is *La Fils*—an excellent choice on Syiem's part—although the movie leaves it unclear at the end as to whether what Frances feels is remorse. Secondly, remorse is as much about "evil *done*" as it is about "evil suffered". It is as much about what happens to the individual who commits such an unforgivable act. If we recall Plato on this point, remorse is the shock of recognizing that the worst evil consists of becoming an evil-doer, from which there can be no turning away or turning back, captured in the thought that "We will never be again as we were" (Gaita 2004, 431). It is this feature of remorse that leads Gaita to conclude that genuine remorse is "a kind of dying to the world because it is the discovery of a dimension of ourselves that cannot enter into common and consoling fellowship with others."

It is hard to know if Lily or Frances experienced themselves as evildoers who could no longer enter into consoling fellowship with others. The suggestion is that Lily felt the need to isolate herself in the uncooperative chair and atone for what she had done. Francis was also isolated. That said, I agree with Syiem that remorse can lead to healing experiences of repentance, reparation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Forgiveness and Youth

This thought is less well-developed, but the title of White's book gave me pause. I don't doubt that children and adolescents feel some sense of remorse for their acts of moral wrongdoing. That said, I found myself wondering over the past months whether a young person can commit a truly unforgivable act. In other words, there is a reason that adults do not hold children entirely

accountable for their actions. If children and adolescents are not fully responsible for their actions in the way that adults are, then perhaps they should be encouraged to recognize moral wrongdoing as they seek to be kind to themselves. Here, I am reminded of the alarming rises in suicide rates, substance abuse, depression, and addiction. In the United States alone, recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveal a 25% increase in deaths by suicide across most age and ethnic groups since 1999. Moreover, suicide is currently the leading cause of death among young adults in the U.S. Though many factors may contribute to this increase, the trend may stem from the inner sufferings of young people, especially if they despair of ever recovering from their mistakes which so many of them lived out publicly in social media.

If there is anything to this idea, then we find ourselves at a critical crossroads. We urgently require a novel perspective on the ethical education of our youth. Perhaps the appropriate thing to do is to discourage them from feeling that their actions ever qualify as unforgivable. Instead, as adults, we should heed the advice implied in Syiem's exemplary dissertation and seek to provide loving environments that allow children and adolescents to confront feelings of shame and remorse as they seek to become their best selves. Perhaps this line of thought explains why we learn so little about Francis's horrific crime in *La Fils*. It is intended to highlight the mystery at the heart of any seriously significant moral wrongdoing by a child or young adolescent.

Recommendations

I recommend Raymond Carver's story "So Much Water So Close to Home." It shows, I think, how feeling ashamed of one's actions can lead to the moral emotion of remorse.

References

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Jimenez, Marta (2020). *Aristotle on Shame and Learning to be Good*. Oxford University Press.
White, Frances (2023). *Iris Murdoch and Remorse: Past Forgiving*. Palgrave.