

Examiner's report on Matti Siem, PhD thesis

This is a clearly written, engaged, thoughtfully sustained, piece of work.

The dissertation has a nice structure, first making its case for an 'interpersonal understanding of morality', then situating its 'take' on shame and remorse in relation to such an understanding, then developing the considerations in favour or seeing remorse but not shame as having an important contribution to make to moral transformation and growth. Each of these stages in the dissertation is very well laid-out, with its different sections and their point and lines of argument nicely sign-posted.

The author shows acquaintance with a wide range of philosophical literature on her chosen themes, and engages with that literature perceptively and clearly. In the first half of the dissertation, in her reflections on shame, she offers some succinct and telling criticisms of extant philosophical discussions of the concept.

In a way described more fully below, the dissertation's greatest strength lies, in my view, in how its second half situates remorse in a wider context of reflection on moral responsiveness.

The dissertation makes very substantial use of examples, from literature and film. I concur with the author that such examples can play an important role in philosophical reflection, and play an ineliminable role in thinking about the topics of this dissertation, though that role will be well-played only when the writer's engagement with chosen examples is careful, supple and thoughtfully imaginative. The examples drawn on in this thesis are for the most part engaged with in these ways, particularly (in my judgment) the examples pertaining to remorse, in the second half of the dissertation.

That said, I have quite a few points of difference with the author on the use she makes of a number of her examples of shame – sometimes differences from her interpretation of the examples, sometimes on the use to which she puts her (in my judgment right) interpretation of this or that example, sometimes a difference arising from what I thought to be an inherent limitation in the example itself; and sometimes a difference on two of these fronts at once. My points of difference vary a lot in importance.

The extent of these differences did raise for me the question of whether to request the re-writing of some parts of the thesis before I passed it. But after careful reflection I judged that the merits of the dissertation summarised in the first five paragraphs above, along with the inherent complexity of the issues over which we differ, and also the philosophical pressure informing the author's presentation of the views with which I differ, in combination meant that it was enough for me to point out some of these differences for the candidate to ponder – and of course for her to take issue with where she considers that to be warranted!

Therefore: I am pleased to recommend, on the basis of my examination of her dissertation, that the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, without the need for any re-writing.

I now append comments on various elements of the dissertation, beginning with more general comments and then moving to more specific ones.

More general comments:

1. The sketching of the case for ‘an impersonal morality’ is nicely done, as is the discussion of ‘interpersonal morality in relation to different ethical frameworks’ (Although this doesn’t determine my evaluation of it, I am very much in favour of the general bent of the dissertation as established in these early sections.) Both of these discussions are brief and a bit sketchy, but this is to be expected given that their main aim is – and cannot for reasons of space be more than – to provide a plausible context for the explorations that follow.

A similar comment applies to the very brief discussions of Buber, Levinas and Logstrup in Chapter 1, but with the addition that – while the presentation of the views of each is adequate as far as it goes – potentially important differences between the views of the three are passed over without acknowledgment. (For instance: how much does it matter that for Buber the I-Thou relation is symmetrical from the outset, whereas for Levinas moral response originates in a one-way answer to a summons?)

2. A longer discussion of Buber in Chapter Two helps illuminate the author’s presentation of the encounter between Eugene de Kock and the widows of the two men whose murder he had orchestrated. The discussion still leaves unanswered various big questions about Buber’s views – including whether I-Thou and I-It relations exhaust the field of possible human relations, and whether some such relations might straddle I-Thou and I-It. But again, this limitation is unavoidable given the dissertation’s main concerns.

3. I did not think that the author succeeded in justifying her adoption of Westerlund’s rejection of shame as a ‘morally blind and empty emotion’. I thought that she – and Westerlund too, so far as her representation of his views is accurate – moved too quickly from saying (I agree rightly) that shame *can* be morally empty and even morally destructive, to the conclusion that shame is *inherently* morally invidious, reflecting nothing more than a ‘desire for social affirmation’. (See below for support for this judgment.)

4. The author assumes throughout that shame and guilt/remorse are always more or less clearly distinguishable, both conceptually and also in their practical ‘application’. This double assumption is at best very dubious. But the point is tricky, and it is scarcely fair for an examiner to press it hard since almost all of those who discuss the two concepts seem to share this double assumption about them. The double assumption is less dubious when remorse is distinguished from guilt in the way the author, following Gaita et al, distinguishes them. But even then it does not avoid all dubiety.

To justify this claim in general terms would take too long. But some points relevant to its justification emerge, albeit rather indirectly, in some of my more specific comments below.

5. The two preceding comments aside, much of the critical discussion of various conceptions of shame – and especially Taylor’s – in the first half of the dissertation is (as already noted above) perceptive and telling.

6. The very substantial merits of the dissertation's reflections on remorse, mentioned above, will be taken up below.

(It may be carping to note that perhaps there was some repetition, and in places some slightly heavy weather made, in the presentation of some of the (very good) examples relating to remorse.)

More specific comments (pertaining almost entirely to the author's various examples)

A: about shame

1. Pippi Longstocking: it may be that Pippi's 'lack of shame' (62) 'enables her to go beyond herself and see things from a broader perspective' than the other children can take. But juxtaposing her with children who are 'consumed' (61) by shame does not show – does not go anywhere near showing – that shame lacks all positive moral potential. Let me come at this point a bit differently: like Pippi (!), perhaps Socrates and Jesus both lacked shame; and perhaps this was an aspect of what made them such extraordinary moral paragons. But that does not show that everyone is or would be 'better off' with no sense of shame. Aristotle says that the truly courageous man faces danger in battle 'out of courage'; a 'second-best' is to not run away, out of shame at being seen to be a coward. The latter person does not have the full virtue of courage, but, not having it, he is able to act better – morally better – because of his vulnerability to shame.

Surely such a thing can and does happen. Grant that someone might do something bad out of shame. Grant also that someone might do something 'morally right' *only* out of the wish to avert another's 'dismissal' of him. That doesn't show that shame is morally vacuous, let alone essentially morally destructive. It shows only that it is morally ambivalent. It matters in Aristotle's example that the one who is shamed into 'courage' recognises that staying and fighting is what is required of him – and his shame motivates him to do that. It would misdescribe Aristotle's example to say that this man motivated by shame is concerned *only* to be affirmed by his peers. He is motivated to get the approval of his peers *for doing something that he himself approves of*. (Even Williams is drawing on this dimension of Aristotle.)

2. The example of Uli is also problematic. Surely Uli is right to think that cowardice is a vice. (Of course that doesn't justify others bullying him for his cowardice; and it doesn't mean either that everything his bullying peers represent as cowardice really is so.) The author says that "Uli...would...perhaps do... *anything at all* [my italics]...to maintain the image of being a courageous person" in the eyes of his bullying peers (74). Well, if that were true then yes his attempt at 'courage' out of shame would indeed be morally vacuous, or worse. But I must say that this strikes me as a distortion of the story. For one thing it represents Uli's shame as having nothing all to do with his *being* a scaredy-cat, and *solely* to do with his peers scorning him. But while of course his shame does have partly to do with his being thus scorned, it seems pretty clear that his being scorned *for being a scaredy cat* along with his recognising that this is not a good thing to be, is playing a significant role too. Of course confusion on his part about the relative weight of the two concerns is no doubt in play too. Putting it slightly differently, as the story comes across to me Uli's shame is presented as motivating him in a morally better direction at least partly out of his recognition that a scaredy-cat is a poor

thing to be, *even though* there is complexity, ambivalence and even moral danger in his uncertain movement in that direction.

I should add that even if the author disagrees with my (second-hand) reading *of the actual story* (as it seems she probably does), surely the 'scenario' as I describe it is still a possible scenario. And if that is so, then it is hard to see that the example does much at all to establish the *general* moral poverty (or worse) of shame.

3. My critical comments above on the picture of shame being developed through the author's discussion of examples naturally enough have some application to Westerlund too, since his view has evidently influenced the author. A desire for affirmation alone, disconnected from all other aspects of value, seems to me too thin a concept – though perhaps 'too undifferentiated' is closer to the mark – to anchor a general account of shame. The author herself seems to come close to acknowledging something similar in her footnote 22 on page 31, when she writes that "there is much truth to [Williams'], namely that the internalised other is constituted by the opinions of those whom we *admire* and *respect*. It is actually common for our shame to arise from having such an audience in mind when we do something that we judge to be inappropriate". I am then puzzled by how that passage fits with the author's endorsement, on p44, of Westerlund's view that 'shame is an egocentric and blind emotion as it is "rooted in our egocentric desire for social affirmation and involves no morally pertinent concern for others and no moral understanding."' If or when we feel shame for doing something 'that we judge to be inappropriate' because we share the view of the internalised other – as the author seems in the quoted footnote to be saying does happen – our shame is then arising from something much more ethically substantial than "...our egocentric desire for social affirmation". (I think the author also underplays this 'ethically much more' in her example of the schoolchildren given the task of caring for the pet birds.)

Also consider this episode. Suppose a teenager participates at school in the routine humiliation and bullying of another student. He does this because he doesn't want to stand out from the crowd and risk being scorned as a 'goody-goody'. For all that he may very well feel terrible shame at having taken part in the humiliating. (The shame may, or may not, help lead him to desist from further participation in the humiliating.) I do not see how Westerlund's account of shame can *even make sense* of such an example, since for him shame is rooted *only* in 'our egocentric desire for affirmation'. On his account, then, shame comes into the episode *only* as something the teenager seeks to avoid by participating in the bullying. Or: he is shamed into participating in the bullying. Well, perhaps shame comes in there (I am actually unsure about that). But what of the devastating shame he may come to feel *for having participated in the bullying*? (I don't mean that he *must* come to feel such shame, only that in this case that is indeed what does happen.) I don't see that Westerlund's mere 'desire for affirmation' has anything to do with it.

I don't say that Westerlund's view never has application – although as already implied above I do think that several examples the author gives which arguably reflect what Westerlund says are trickier than the author recognises. But even if his view does apply in those cases, I have just been suggesting reason not to regard it as a perfectly generally adequate account of shame. (I am not taking a stand myself on whether we should aspire to such an account.)

The author cites a partly similar example from Westerlund himself, concerning Westerlund's own failure to intervene in the bullying of a child. The author does not report Westerlund as saying anything about *why* he failed to intervene. I find the example itself rather curious, since Westerlund (and also the author) seem to find nothing strange in the apparent absence of any shame in Westerlund for his failure to intervene. On the contrary, they seem to assume that any sense of shame he might have experienced would *necessarily* be a distraction from concerned attention to the plight of the child he failed to help. But why assume that? The author also re-describes a concern with oneself as wrongdoer as a *preoccupation* with oneself. But why so? A (suitably contextualised) concern with becoming a better person does not have to involve being *preoccupied* with oneself.

Williams' neat summary strikes me as roughly (but only roughly) right here: that shame and guilt can both aptly 'come in' in relation to the same episode – shame looking to 'what I am', and guilt looking to 'what I have done and 'what has happened to others'. (I am still critical of Williams on various other counts, including one the author highlights.) Of course shame *can* turn into a self-indulgent distraction. But why *must* it do so. In several places the author seems to jump from 'can' or 'could' to 'must' in this connection.

Here is another way of putting things that might help. The author seems to run together – or at least not to consistently distinguish – two different critical points against the moral value of shame: 1. that it involves setting store, in one's attachment to one's values, on others' judgments of one regardless of their content; and 2. that shame is inherently 'egoistic' because it focuses one's attention on oneself rather than on the victims one has wronged by one's behaviour. The difference between these points is blurred by the author's describing both under the label of 'egoistic desire'. But: while the first point marks an orientation that is inherently egoistic in an ethically invidious sense – because it does not take one outside the circle of one's desire to be affirmed by others at any cost – the second orientation need not be egoistic in an inherently invidious ethical sense. A concern with 'how terribly I have behaved', or with my deep selfishness, is 'egoistic' in the sense that it shows concern about myself, yes, but it is not *necessarily* – and in fact often is not – a concern that "precludes any pertinent moral concern for others" (152). (Again: the fact that it can sometimes come to block out any real concern for others does not count against this point.)

The author's summarising, and Westerlund-endorsing, judgment against shame that "at the heart of shame lies an egocentric concern with oneself that precludes any pertinent moral concern for others" (152), in my view conflates the two points I have just distinguished.

4. It is worth noting that Gaita allows remorse to involve an 'egoistic' (in the second sense) concern – when he writes that "remorse [is] the suffering recognition and acknowledgment of one's guilt" (*Good and Evil* 2nd edn p 42). That is a concern 'with oneself', but it is not an inherently morally problematic one (though of course it could become so). Incidentally, this is one of the points where I am inclined to think that the very distinction between shame and remorse tends to blur.

I can see why the author is tempted to dismiss shame as she does: it can press, damagingly, right away from remorse's other-directed attention. But it need not do so. And a less radically oppositional 'take' on the relation between shame and remorse can, and I think

should, leave space for recognising shame as sometimes able to contribute to genuine moral growth.

I realise that I have written at very considerable length about aspects of the author's discussions of shame. My doing so should be taken as reflecting some indirect credit to the author, for my finding myself pressed to extensive revisiting of my own thinking about various issues raised by her discussions of the concept.

5. I should also say, by the way, that even were the author to accept everything I have said in these extensive comments on her discussions of shame, I don't see that this would require her to withdraw or alter anything she says about remorse (and related topics or concepts) in the second half of the dissertation.

B: about remorse

1. (Again as already touched on), a particular merit of the dissertation is the way it illuminatingly locates remorse in a wider context of the potential for moral growth. I found the candidate's use of her examples in this connection, in the second half of the dissertation, engaging and persuasive. She says, in effect, that while remorse cannot be 'taught', spaces for its access can be opened by various forms of creative moral responsiveness, including forgiveness (the examples of Kostelnicka adapted from Pacovska, and of Lilly), and the genuine humility involved in coming to let oneself be undefensively present to another, and the generation of 'an atmosphere of trust' (Olivier and Francis, Braithwaite and his students). Central here is the theme of moral *responsiveness* to others, which the author is right to note is not at the centre of standard moral 'theories'.

2. The effect of this accent of discussion is that rather than being a single 'topic' of reflection, remorse becomes in the dissertation a strand in a nicely rich weave of thinking about the nature and place of 'morality' in human life. The author registers one aspect of what she is doing here as going further than Gaita and Cordner do in characterising 'the inner transformation of the wrongdoer' (p105) that is linked to remorse. (I should also say that the author's discussion (pp 110ff) of something I wrote about remorse and moral identity helped me better appreciate the import of what I was saying in that piece.)

3. Let me register one caveat about the author's range of examples in the 'remorse' half of the dissertation. In all of the main examples there is a 'two-way' interaction between a teacher and a pupil or pupils – Mr Slinger and Lilly, Olivier and Francis, Braithwaite and his students – or between two other people (Kostelnicka and Jenufa). Overlooked by this focus is a common enough context where interactions are 'three-way'. In teaching, for instance (though not only there) a teacher often has a role to play where one student has 'offended' against another student rather than against the teacher. For example: one student has bullied and humiliated another one. How is the teacher *then* to respond? If s/he just 'responds to' the bully – while ignoring the victim – then however gently or generously s/he does so the bully may well not be encouraged himself to respond attentively/remorsefully to the one he has bullied, who after all is 'not in the picture' while the teacher is instead responding to him as the bully. So perhaps the teacher needs *also* to respond to the bullied one with kindness and care, but while still responding at the same time to the bully... Of course one can imagine such 'three-way' interactions developing in various ways. My point

is just that it would have been helpful to have one or more examples-plus-discussion of such 'three-way' or 'three-cornered' interactions, especially as these would seem to be frequent and important in the educational context that is evidently of central concern to the author.

4. To avoid ending on a critical note, let me repeat that I much enjoyed reading this dissertation, and I congratulate Ms Syiem on it.

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