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The Pride and Shame of Being a Soldier

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Harry Parker's debut novel, *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016), tells the story of Tom Barnes, a soldier who steps on a mine and must then come to terms with his "incomplete" bodily existence (1). Besides being powerfully and beautifully written, the text is remarkable for two literary reasons. First, there is an almost exact resemblance between Tom Barnes and his author, Harry Parker, who also stepped on a mine and lost both legs, in this case while serving as a British soldier in Afghanistan. Second, the story is narrated from the perspective of forty-five objects, each of which slots together to form a coherent mosaic of a traumatic life narrative.

In a recent article, I argued that this text should be understood from a phenomenological perspective (Gilks 2021). *Anatomy of a Soldier* is, I argued, a phenomenological autobiography in which the author reveals how an individual's subjectivity is extended across material and intersubjective space. In a response to my article, Scotland-Stewart (2021) develops this phenomenological interpretation in two important directions. First, she draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily skill to show that Barnes/Parker's disillusionment must be understood in the context of a traumatised body. Second, she argues that Sartre's notion of shame can shed light on Barnes/Parker's self-alienation. To my mind, Scotland-Stewart is right on both of these points, and I want to use this reply to explore the second point in more depth. I seek to answer two main questions: How can Sartre's phenomenology of shame help us understand Barnes/Parker's experiences; and what can Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier*, in turn, teach us about the structure of shame more broadly?

In what follows, I make two main arguments. In Section (2) I argue that Barnes' shame should be understood not so much as a result of his bodily trauma, but rather as a broken pride. The self-alienation that Barnes experiences is indeed precipitated by the loss of bodily abilities, but the significance of this loss must be contextualised within the life narrative of an aspiring soldier who prided himself on certain abilities. In Section (3) I then explore what *Anatomy of a Soldier* can contribute to debates in the literature on shame. In particular, I focus on the significance of the Other/audience in mediating shame. I argue that although Barnes' shame may appear to be a tension between reality and his idealised self-image, this self-image is itself intersubjectively constituted. *Anatomy of a Soldier* thereby validates Sartre's fundamental point about the significance of the Other in constituting individual existence. Before developing these two arguments, Section (1) briefly outlines Sartre's notions of shame and pride.

Section (1): Sartre on Shame and Pride

To understand the relevance and coherence of Sartre's theory of shame and pride, and to apply it to the case below, it will be necessary first to situate it within his broader project in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre's intention is to offer a particular description of what it means to be human—of what he terms "human-reality". Central to his conception of human-reality is his notion of "nothingness": To be human is to be constituted by a series of negations, and these negations amount to what might be understood as a *concrete nothingness*

(i.e., not a void, but rather a “nothingness” which is constitutive of being).¹ One of the primary constitutive negations occurs between subject and object: Although being human entails inhabiting a physical body, which amounts to being an *object* in the world, the defining feature of human-reality is to perpetually and necessarily negate this objecthood in the form of *being-a-subject* (what Sartre calls *being-for-itself*, as opposed to *being-in-itself*, which is the being of mere objects). Human consciousness, as such, is a kind of rising above objecthood through negating, nihilating, and transcending that which it is (i.e., an object), and becoming that which it is not (a subject). This negation, moreover, has a clear temporal dimension in the sense that the future is a negation of the past, while the Present constitutes an ambiguous “nothingness” in which human-reality is condemned to freely exist.

Another central feature of Sartre’s existentialist phenomenology is his understanding of the significance of social encounters (and this leads him to discuss shame and pride, which he regards as fundamental social emotions). For Sartre, being human is not a solitary process but essentially a social activity: We exist not only in relation to ourselves, from which we are separated by a negation, but also in relation to the Other; and the Other has a key role in constituting the way in which we exist (thus, human *being* is not only *being-for-itself* but also *being-for-the-Other*). Indeed, the Other is defined and constituted itself by a kind of negation: I am Me in so far as I am not an Other; and the Other is an Other in so far as they are not Me (Sartre 1943, 387[324]).²

This constitutive role that the Other plays is illustrated in the case of shame—which for Sartre is not merely an emotion we sometimes feel but rather a basic feature of human-reality, more akin to the Christian notion of shame. For Sartre, shame is defined as the process of becoming acutely aware of oneself as an object in the eyes of the Other: “shame is shame of *oneself*; it is the *recognition* that I really *am* this object that is looked at and judged by the Other” (Sartre 1943, 358[300]). The famous example used to illustrate this process is of spying through a keyhole on somebody: While I am spying, I forget myself and become a pure subject; I am looking at the Other who does not see me, and the Other for me is reduced to an object. I then hear footsteps behind me, and realise that I myself am seen by an Other. In this moment, I suddenly become aware of *myself* as an object for the Other and I experience shame as “an immediate shudder that runs through me from head to toe, without any discursive preparation” (Sartre 1943, 308[260]). In this moment, I cease to be a subject; and the transcendence that I *am* is suddenly transcended by the Other’s look, which objectifies me (Sartre 1943, 360[302]). The Other’s look, as such, alienates me from myself (as a subject) as my fate is “arranged far away from me” (Sartre 1943, 362[304]). Thus, having become merely an object which is determined by the Other, “I *live* myself as frozen in the midst of the world” (Sartre 1943, 366[307]), no longer free to choose what I am. Although this example is limited and cannot capture all types of shame, as has been shown (e.g., Taylor 1985, 58), Sartre’s main intention—which the example serves—is to capture the intersubjective processes of being an object before the Other. This is what Sartre calls “pure

¹ On the notion of “concrete nothingness”, see Catalano (1985, 64).

² For citations to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, page numbers in square brackets are to the original French edition.

shame”: “not the feeling of being this or that reprehensible object but, in general, of being *an object*, i.e. of *recognizing* myself in that degraded, dependent and frozen being that I am for the Other [...] and of needing the Other’s mediation to be what I am” (Sartre 1943, 392[328]).

Building on this notion of shame, Sartre goes on to define what he understands as the existential structure of pride. Pride is essentially a dishonest—or self-deceptive—kind of shame in which one tries to assume responsibility for the object that one is in the Other’s look: Like shame,

[I]n pride I recognize the Other as the subject through whom objecthood arrives in my being, but in addition I recognize myself as responsible for my objecthood; I place the emphasis on my responsibility, and I accept it (Sartre 1943, 394[329]).

Pride is therefore a kind of reaction to shame which attempts to celebrate and indulge in being that which I am. As such, the mood which pride generates, while it persists, is starkly different to shame: While in shame the Other’s look alienates me from myself, in pride the Other mediates me with myself, validating my own self-image. Furthermore, the Other is regarded differently in each case: In shame, I accept the Other’s freedom as a subject to look at and judge me—indeed, I surrender my own freedom/subjectivity to their judgement; in pride, meanwhile, the Other is reduced to a sort of camera, someone who exists merely to witness that in which I take pride. Ultimately, however, pride is in what Sartre calls “bad faith” and it therefore “bears within itself its own contradiction” which will eventually lead it to disintegrate: In pride,

I try to act upon the Other in so far as I am an object: I aim to make use of this beauty or strength or intelligence that he confers on me in so far as he constitutes me as an object in order to assign to him, by reversing the direction of flow, a passive feeling of admiration or love. But in addition I demand that this feeling, as what sanctions my object-being, should be felt by the Other in so far as he is a subject [...]. In fact that is the only way of conferring absolute objectivity upon my strength or my beauty (Sartre 1943, 394[330]).

Pride, as such, overlooks—or rather tries to negate—the Other’s freedom in judging us; and we are therefore always vulnerable to a reality check when we become aware of the Other’s free judgement.

Shame and pride are therefore central to Sartre’s broader philosophy since they encapsulate the logics of social existence; and it is through an analysis of shame and pride that we can understand why an essential aspect of *being-for-itself* is *being-for-the-Other*.

Section (2): Shame as Broken Pride

I believe Scotland-Stewart is right that Sartre's notion of shame can facilitate a better understanding of *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Indeed, both in terms of its substance and form this text might be understood as centred around the protagonist/author's shame in the Sartrean sense of self-alienation. In this section, I seek to build on this interpretative angle and argue that Barnes' shame can be better understood as a broken pride.

The broadest sense in which *Anatomy of a Soldier* can be understood through the Sartrean notion of shame is in its literary method of object narrative. Parker narrates his story through forty-five objects, each of which coldly recounts a fragmented aspect of the protagonist's trauma and gradual recovery. Narrating the opening chapter, for example, a tourniquet describes how "I closed around his leg until his pulse pushed up against me" (2). I argued before that this method illustrates not so much the author's alienation from the socio-material structure of war, but rather his alienation from his (former) self as someone who once embraced and played a role in constituting that structure (Gilks 2021). In this case, it is the wounded veteran who is alienated from the soldier he once was; and the achronological narrative arc is about coming to terms with this trauma. This self-alienation that Parker's objects narrate offers an interesting illustration of what Sartre means by the alienation experienced in shame. The objects themselves become subject-like and speak of protagonist Tom Barnes as if he were himself merely an object. As Scotland-Stewart observes, this is especially true in the medical scenes where Barnes is unconscious and his physical body is something to be "discussed" by Others (78). An endotracheal tube, for example, observes how "I was inside you, at the edge of your lungs. Oxygen-rich air pulsed through me and I started breathing for you" (22). This literal lack of subjectivity during his weeks of unconsciousness can be understood as symbolic of the shame which characterises the entire text.

As a particular response to bodily trauma, however, Barnes' shame as a wounded veteran cannot be understood in isolation from the broader context of the life narrative of the protagonist who once aspired to become a soldier. Indeed, it is this broken pride, ruptured by bodily trauma, which exposes the underlying structure of shame. Although not substantively dominant, we do get glimpses of this pride throughout the text. We hear several times, for example, of the brave and astute captain leading "his men" in battle (123). We also hear of how he was meant to cope with pain and injury. His dog tags, for example, recount how

You had imagined being brave if you were injured. It was always a wound from a bullet and you would have fought on, commanding your men in battle, and afterwards you would have walked back into camp with a dressing over it and would have been a hero (304).

Such is what it meant for Barnes to be a "soldier". Yet we have already learnt that this was a fragile illusion. Earlier in the text, for example, a call button beside his hospital bed describes pain as enveloping anxiety and observes how "You remembered you were meant to be brave and withstand pain, a rite of passage, but you cried silently and were ashamed" (66). In such

scenes, we see how Barnes' shame (and indeed his pain and his suffering) stands relative to and is characterised by his former pride.

This analysis also points to the importance of the broader socio-cultural context in understanding shame and pride. In this case, Barnes' pride and shame occur in the context of aspiring to become a brave and physically robust "soldier". In its ideal form, a soldier is someone who exists in relation to two constitutive Others, namely the citizen he protects and the enemy he fights. In Barnes' case, the most significant Other seems to be the citizens he protects. This becomes evident at a key moment of his shame when he is receiving his operational service medal as a wounded veteran. When it is his turn to receive his medal, the audience claps, and Barnes "wondered what they were clapping for. You shouldn't clap failure, he thought and he was ashamed and he wished they'd stop" (263). In his pride as a soldier, he would have treated the citizen in the audience as an Other who is *there* merely to reflect back a self-image he had of himself as a brave soldier. But now he cannot be that soldier, and those in the audience have suddenly become free subjects able to express pity on him. He perceives himself merely as an object in their eyes and he cannot take responsibility for or celebrate that which they make him realise he now is.

Section (3): Anatomy of Shame and Pride

Shame, and to a lesser extent pride, have been extensively studied across several fields, including psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and ethics, and in this last section I want to briefly reflect on what *Anatomy of a Soldier* might contribute to our understanding of these emotions within and across these fields.

One of the central debates in the scholarship on shame is the role of the audience/Other — whether shame requires an audience, or whether it can be felt alone. As we saw above, for Sartre shame is not only intrinsically social but it also reveals how the Self is fundamentally contingent on the Other in its existence. Sartre has been criticised, however, for using overly narrow examples to make this argument. In her own seminal work on shame, for example, Gabriele Taylor argues in opposition to Sartre that

[I]t is plainly untrue that all cases of feeling shame are cases of public exposure, untrue, that is, that an actual observer is required for shame to be felt. Nor is it true even that the agent must believe, rightly or wrongly, that he is being observed by some other person. One may feel shame when quite alone and knowing this to be so (Taylor 1985, 58).

Those who take such an approach generally argue that shame is rooted not in the Other's judgement but in a conflict of values within one's self which leads to a sense of feeling unworthy and degraded (Deonna and Teroni 2011, 207). In psychoanalytic terms, shame is understood as an intrapsychic tension between one's ego and ego-ideal (Piers 1953, 15). As such, shame reflects a "*depleted* self", a self which has "failed to receive responsiveness from the *idealized* selfobject" (Morrison 1989, 83).

This psychoanalytic understanding of shame seems to apply well to Barnes' experiences. As is clear from the text, the Other—in the form of the medical staff, the audience at the medal ceremony, and his family and friends—does not seem to be the origin of Barnes' self-alienation; rather, we get the sense that Barnes' shame originates within his own ego as he realises that he can no longer be the soldier he once dreamt of becoming. In this sense, Barnes' shame might be understood as an intrapsychic tension between his ego and ego-ideal. Indeed, the Other is largely implicit and their judgement is not an objective thing out there in the world which causes shame but rather a product of his self-conscious imagination. Recovering from existential trauma is therefore not a matter of changing what Others think of him, but rather changing what he thinks of himself.

Yet this psychoanalytic approach does not undermine Sartre's arguments but is simply a different (more superficial) level of analysis. Indeed, I want to argue that the case of *Anatomy of a Soldier* shows that to reduce shame to an intrapsychic tension would be to overlook how intrapsychic phenomena are themselves socially constituted. As we saw above when discussing Barnes' pride, his self-judgement occurs within a broader socio-cultural context of what it means to be a soldier; and to be a soldier is to be a soldier *for* and *against* Others. In Barnes' case, it is these *social* ideals which are broken and which then cause intrapsychic tension. Thus, if there is an intrapsychic conflict within Barnes' ideals it is because he has internalised the Other's judgement in constituting his pride—a pride which then became incommensurable with the body he came to inhabit after his injury. The Other, as such, is internalised and becomes part of one's self-understanding.

Those studying shame as an ethical emotion have realised the significance of this internalised Other. As Bernard Williams observed, although the internalised other is abstracted, generalised, and idealised, he is also

[P]otentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relation to the world around me (Williams 1993, 84).

It is true that Sartre's main example of spying through a keyhole implies that the Other must be concretely present in mediating my shame back to me; but this does not undermine his broader point that shame requires an Other *somewhere*, and that even when that Other is absent they still serve the fundamental role of mediating my shame/pride and of showing me that I exist not alone in the universe but rather that my very personal subjectivity is the product of intersubjective processes (Sartre 1943, 381[319-320]).³ In my view, the object narrative method adopted in *Anatomy of a Soldier* exposes these intersubjective structures of intrapsychic phenomena.

Conclusion

³ For a similar argument, see Zahavi (2014, 217–39).

In this reply article, I have sought to build on Scotland-Stewart's observation that *Anatomy of a Soldier* can be better understood through Sartre's notion of shame. I have made two main claims. First, I argued that Barnes' shame must be contextualised in relation to his former pride—a pride which was contingent on certain bodily skills. Second, I explored what *Anatomy of a Soldier* can teach us about the structure of shame and pride more broadly. Here, I argued that even though shame may appear as an intrapsychic tension, such tension may at a deeper level be the result of internalised intersubjective structures. Overall, therefore, not only can Sartre help us understand Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier*, but *Anatomy of a Soldier* can in turn help us make sense of the structure of shame and pride in social life.

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