Epistemic Shame and The Beliefs that Bring you Down to Size

Once, during my time as a graduate student at Cornell University, I was reading in its iconic Big Red Barn when a few undergraduate students sat down at the table beside me. They were discussing the various ways their parents had protected them from bits of information that were deemed *too burdensome for them to bear* as busy college students. The examples ranged. One family hid a large-scale home renovation so their child would not worry about their life without a fully functional kitchen. Another set of parents kept the fact that their child’s ex-partner had moved on to another while the child was away in Ithaca. The students shared their feelings about these omissions with humor and lightheartedness. The overall mood seemed to be one of mild annoyance colored with understanding. I gathered my book and set off for my shared TA office down the hill. On that walk my mind veered towards the question, “what is my family keeping from me”?

Three years prior when I left Barrio Hollywood in Tucson for New York state, I knew there would be bits of information kept from me. I was leaving at the onset of big things in my family: my parents took on a restructuring of debt earlier that year and each of my three younger siblings’ welcomed their first children which I knew would raise financial and emotional stress given that my siblings ranged in ages 19-23 and only two of them had high school degrees. Although it was safe to assume that difficulties similar to the ones we faced while I was growing up would arise, weekend calls regularly failed to mention those things. My family did not divulge their worries about childcare, issues getting the correct amount of peanut butter through WIC, the status of the bankruptcy, whether there were any broken down vehicles, whether any of my siblings were stuck waiting for public transit in the scorching Southwest sun carrying a
cranky toddler, or anything like that. When I asked how things were on those fronts, the topic quickly changed. On that short walk, I began to identify what I was feeling by the omissions I knew were present in my life: shame. I now take this experience to be one of *epistemic shame*.

Here, I sketch a short rationale for this claim. I briefly summarize very recent work on epistemic shame careful to highlight two components of it: 1) this affective state relates to a belief that one holds and 2) the intensity of an experience of epistemic shame is a function of the judgements other people make about one for holding a false belief. I suggest that the above experience of epistemic shame I described is some motivation to extend this current understanding.

Current work in philosophy and psychology takes epistemic shame to be the shame that one feels as a result of holding a belief that leads to contradiction or holding a false belief. Of course, the specifics are put forth using different theoretical tools and concepts special to the relevant disciplines. For instance, Ancient Greek theorist Laura Candiotto (2019) offers an account of epistemic shame based on the role it played in the process of belief purification in Plato’s Socratic dialogues.

Candiotto shows that shame, captured by the Greek terms *aidôs* and sometimes *aischynê*, was an affective state that some of Socrates’ interlocutors would enter upon finding themselves in the unpleasant state of *aporia* (i.e., finding themselves lost or without a path forward towards knowledge). However unpleasant, the result of discovering that one of their own beliefs lead to contradiction and the shameful feeling following Socrates’ elenchus were necessary components of improving one’s beliefs (2019, pgs. 76-78). Candiotto writes,
This feeling of inferiority is a prerequisite for purification. Shame was a virtue, the one that allows an agent to recognize their inadequacy, and through it to purify them from wrong behaviors—from those wrong behaviors that are false beliefs according to the Socratic tradition—and, thus, to activate a process of purification (2019, pg. 77).

That is, to experience epistemic shame one must hold a false belief and believe that one is an inferior thinker when compared to others (implied by “inferiority” in the above). These beliefs are necessary (i.e., prerequisite) steps for one to feel motivated to improve their beliefs. Furthermore, Candiotto notes that the degree of shame one felt as a result of being brought into a state of aporia from one’s own beliefs is often a function of other people’s judgements of one.

Specifically, Candiotto notes that the level to which one feels ashamed for their false beliefs differs across group-facilitated processes of belief improvement (e.g., discussion based inquiry) and individual processes (e.g., private meditation). They write, “[…] group aporetic states, described as the social procedure of belief-purification, may be more painful than the recognition of our faults while ruminating alone[…]. They unmask the agent’s inadequacy to the other members of the group that are evaluating the agent’s beliefs[…].” (2019, pg. 79).

Similarly in psychology Elisabeth Vogl, et al., (2019) treat epistemic shame this way. They liken it to an achievement emotion. Achievement emotions are those arising as a result of some agent’s partaking in an action at which they can fail or succeed. Two prototypical ones are pride and shame. Put simply, many psychologists think that we tend to feel prideful when we win and shameful when we lose. The epistemic variants would be emotional states arising when one

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1 Here Candiotto also argues that group judgement and esteem for one as a thinker can shape how likely it is that the experience of epistemic shame triggers belief revision. Partially because in groups where true belief is valued there will be considerable pressure to revise. Limited space prevents me from discussing the full account and upshots of epistemic shame in this paragraph.
learns whether or not one has achieved true belief or succeeded at some cognitive task like correctly answering a math question (Pekrun, 2018; Vogl et al., 2019).

In the above accounts we get a sense that epistemic shame is an emotion that arises in someone as a result of a belief that one has discovered leads to contradiction or is false. Simply put, one has to have a belief to feel epistemic shame about. However, content is not the only component of a belief we care about. Rightfully or wrongfully, the way beliefs might make us feel, the questions beliefs might inspire in us, and the inferences beliefs can trigger are all things we care about. In addition to whether the content of a belief is true, any of these ways that beliefs impact our mental life can inspire pride and shame in us. At least, that is what my shame above leads me to conclude.

My experience of epistemic shame (possibly one shared by many first-generation scholars whose families tried to support their focus on education in similar ways) illustrates how this form of shame can result from one lacking beliefs altogether. One might wonder, what could make this a shame inducing state that is interestingly distinct from the state we default to after the simple acknowledgment that there are an infinite number of possible beliefs we lack?

I have come to believe that there are some beliefs I think I ought to have because carrying the burden of these beliefs is an ingrained component of my identity. Moreover, carrying the burden of certain beliefs is part of my purpose because without carrying those burdens I am powerless to alleviate them. By not sharing the load of those beliefs from which my family was protecting me I was letting myself down on some level. That is what was shameful. I believe I ought to carry some of the mental weight that they do. I believe I ought to share in it because if not, my identity and purpose have ventured too far away from them.
My family and my roots in Tucson have and continue to be a huge motivator in continuing my scholarship; but the connections between the two felt impossible in my first three years of grad school. The only connection I could feel at first was one of using my past a source of inspiration. Every time the vulnerable process of submitting work was too immense, I would quickly think back to the days when my dad would bring all four of us kids to his weekend construction jobs and have us help smooth grout in cracks between terra-cotta bricks and hold rebar steady while he checked foundations for levelness. The work of my people is a different form of hard work. They dug holes in 90 degree weather to subsidize my education in anyway they could. They cleaned houses and designed landscaping so I could have a bike to get to my classes and text books about topics like unrestricted quantification. When I thought back to that, I could find inspiration to dig deeper and try to be confident in my work (although, this is still a huge process). It was not until the second year of my Ph.D. program that I realized the connection between the burdensome beliefs I felt ashamed for not having actually seemed to matter in a philosophical sense.

Cornell lucked out when a young professor joined our department and taught (what I believe to be) one of the first courses in non-ideal theory during my second year of grad school (besides our feminist philosophy course). Simultaneously, one of my good friends and I started a chapter of MAP. All of a sudden the world of philosophy looked really different to me. Philosophy’s distance to those real life worries experienced by people like my family members felt a bit shorter. The epistemic shame I had for escaping burdensome beliefs began to look more like the kind of shame anyone who cares about understanding good action, good character, and justice ought to feel on some level. I was finally learning that in writing for all, many of the ideal
theorists I had read through the years were failing by their own estimation in the same ways I was. They were trying to answer these important questions about the role of a human being in supporting goodness and justice, but for some reason they were not experiencing the burden of the practical injustices and misfortunes that these answers depend on. They were simply avoiding these possible beliefs that were burdensome. I would not do that anymore. I decided to stop allowing the re-directions from my family to be successful at omitting me from relating to them in this important way. I would push (with a “gently obnoxious” approach as my sister describes it) for the full picture and try to help.

This reflection illustrates two things. First, one can feel epistemic shame because of beliefs they lack and the avoidance of the burdens those beliefs could give rise to (i.e., not merely because they hold a false belief). In my case, these were burdens I found important to bear because doing so felt like part of my identity and because of the instrumental value of these epistemic burdens (e.g., worry) have. They help me to help people I care about. Epistemic shame led me to realize that I should not lackadaisically accept efforts to omit these beliefs from me.

This happens to reflect the upshot of epistemic shame describes by both Candiotto and Vogl et al.. Both think that epistemic shame might lead to belief revision. Candiotto puts it in the following way “[t]hrough the challenges of others, an epistemic agent may feel ashamed for their epistemic errors and, thus, have the desire to overcome this unpleasant situation through epistemic purification” (pg. 78). Vogl et al. (2019) agree to some extent, while also noting several studies that show shame to have a variable effect on how motivated someone is to improve at the cognitive tasks that triggered with their shame (pg. 627). Regardless, we can be certain that it is possible for experiences of epistemic shame unrelated to the holding of a false
belief (and the judgement of others) to also lead to better belief gathering processes. For example, my own experience shows that I pushed to stop the omissions. I take that to be an improvement in my belief system even if it is not the most comfortable one.

Second, epistemic shame seems possible when the only judgement at play (or the most pressing) is one’s own. I could not imagine living a truthful and fulfilling life as a scholar and not sharing the epistemic burdens of my family. I cannot imagine being fulfilled by housing all of these creative and critical thinking skills only to bust them out for things like derivations (no matter how fun). On the contrary, working with them to come up with solutions, help them write resumes, how to ask for raises, etc. gives me a sense of worth that I just would not have otherwise. In lacking beliefs and their associated burdens I was failing on my own standard, not anyone else’s. As a first-generation scholar, this feels typical. It feels as if it would be a failure to not understand their success as a part of my own. They made me who I am. Finally, non-ideal theory and this fascinating and empowering shift in philosophy has made me realize that this is a valuable thing.

Works Cited
