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# STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE



21/2 (2023)

## Is Shame Morally Relevant to Ecological Ethics?

### Czy wstyd jest moralnie istotny dla etyki ekologicznej?

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Received: 12 Dec, 2022; Revised: 28 Apr, 2023; Accepted: 10 May, 2023

**Abstract:** In recent years, we have seen a resurgence of the topic of shame in philosophy and moral philosophy. The paper analyses the concept of shame as a moral emotion in contemporary moral-philosophical and environmental discourse. Questions are articulated, in which different contexts shame has already been studied, and which of them appear to be crucial for ethics and applied ethics? In the article, the author addresses the concept of environmental shame by Sarah E. Fredericks (2021) and considers the questions: is/can shame be ethically relevant for the cultivation of our attitudes in relation to the environment? Is Shame morally relevant to Ecological Ethics? Can the experience of shame affect our moral judgment, decision-making, and action regarding the man-nature relationship? Despite the differences in the understanding of shame as a self-conscious emotion or as a social emotion, in the paper, the author argues that environmental shame can have an important preventive function as well as a transformative power for the cultivation of our moral beliefs and attitudes.

**Keywords:** ethics, ecological ethics, shame, moral emotions

**Streszczenie:** W ostatnich latach, w filozofii i filozofii moralności, można zaobserwować odrodzenie się zainteresowania zagadnieniem wstydu. Niniejszy artykuł dokonuje analizy pojęcia wstydu rozumianego jako emocja moralna we współczesnym dyskursie moralno-filozoficznym i środowiskowym. Artykuł stawia pytania o konteksty w jakich pojęcie wstydu było do tej pory badane oraz o to, które z tych kontekstów wydają się być kluczowe dla etyki i etyki stosowanej. W artykule autorka odnosi się do koncepcji wstydu środowiskowego Sarah E. Fredericks (2021) i podejmuje próbę odpowiedzi na następujące pytania: czy wstyd ma/może mieć istotne znaczenie etyczne dla kształtowania naszych postaw wobec środowiska? Czy wstyd jest moralnie istotny dla etyki ekologicznej? Czy doświadczenie wstydu może wpłynąć na nasz osąd moralny, podejmowanie decyzji i działania dotyczące relacji człowiek-natura? Pomimo różnic w pojmowaniu wstydu jako emocji samoświadomej lub jako emocji społecznej, w artykule autorka dowodzi, że wstyd środowiskowy może pełnić ważną funkcję prewencyjną, a także mieć moc wpływania na nasze przekonania i postawy moralne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyka, etyka ekologiczna, wstyd, emocje moralne

## Introduction

Can we feel environmental shame? Can it represent a catalyst for change through which we adopt new moral obligations in relation to nature? Rules and norms have changed the way we inhabit our world. Today, we no longer doubt that in the new and changing conditions of the Anthropocene and climate change, new approaches to moral emotions are also being formed. The present article raises the issue of environmental shame. In this context, Peregrin (2022, 79) mentions also social emotions, such as shame, when he states: “they acquire their goals only within the ontogenesis. And what is important, they can connect and create complicated social effects – the most important of which is to follow the rules”.

Humans are relational beings. As an individual, man lives in an extensive *network* of relationships not only with people, but also with his environment. We are all part of the biospheric web (ontological interconnectedness). A relationship can be defined as “the behaviour of one being towards another” (Brugger 1994, 491). The relationship to nature, to the biosphere, to the environment is connected to the process that develops during the entire life of a person<sup>1</sup>. Our internal conditions (needs, experiences, emotional sensitivity, knowledge, and a certain level of ability to reflect and self-reflect) come into contact with external conditions (nature) and are realized in a relationship (in interaction) usually through our decisions and actions. Thus, the following are reflected in the relationship: thinking, feeling, knowledge, will and habits. When emotions related to the relationship between man and nature are considered in ecological and environmental ethics, we are talking about such emotions as love, compassion, sympathy. However, there are also theorists who deal with the moral emotions of guilt

and shame<sup>2</sup> in the context of ecological and environmental ethics. They explore the ways in which these moral emotions can transform the man-nature relationship in order to realize acceptable actions, responsibility, respect for nature. A moral emotion, unlike a non-moral one, is characterized by the fact that it is also caused by things that are not directly related to the bearer of the emotion – it appears as a reaction to events beyond the individual (injustice perpetrated on others, etc.) (Grauzlerová 2011). In this context, I understand shame as a moral emotion and an emotion of self-awareness, which is related not only to relationism (we are relational beings) but also to the feeling of belonging to the group, because it can function as a social control, as a control of compliance with norms.

In the paper, I argue that if we want to talk about environmental shame in the context of its potential importance for changing moral beliefs, attitudes and actions, then we should understand man not only as an individual autonomous moral actor, as a normative being, but also as a relational and cooperative being.

Although there are studies that explore the transformative potential of shame in environmental ethics, they are still rare in academic literature. It raises a number of questions. Fredericks also asks in her monograph: “are environmental guilt and shame philosophically justified? Ethically speaking, should agents feel these emotions? What is the role of the community in eliciting these emotions?” (Fredericks 2021, 19). No less important question can be the question of the mentioned author how can individuals and collectives deal with guilt and shame whether or not they are intentionally induced?

In the presented text, I have set myself the task of analysing Sarah Fredericks’

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<sup>1</sup> As the relationship between man and nature is complex, its exploration requires a comparison of both biological and cultural dimensions. We must add another a moral dimension, to these levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Explaining the differences and meanings between the words „guilt” and „shame” is not an easy task, and many theorists often confuse them. Even in English, laypeople often have a hard time defining or differentiating between the two terms.

concept of shame and seeking answers to the question of whether shame as a moral emotion is relevant to ecological ethics given its transformative potential. If so, what are its moral functions. In the presented text, I proceed as follows: after the introductory remarks and problem formulation, I address (1) shame in general and the nature of emotions, in order to distinguish the approaches and their characteristic features; (2) I am going to introduce Sarah E. Fredericks' concept of environmental guilt and shame, focusing on the concept of shame; and finally (3) I reflect on whether environmental shame has the potential to be/could be a catalyst for change in decision-making and action-taking.

If shame is morally relevant to ecological or environmental ethics, then other questions arise. Is shame always social and contextual? According to J.P. Sartre (2003), if shame is a moral emotion that reveals our being to others, then the experience of fear of shame is meaningful. When grasped in this way in the relationship between man and nature, we can consider it as a guardian of responsibility. It can be a prevention against actions and phenomena that are directed towards this world – nature as an existential habitat. However, these considerations are only a prologue to the objective of the presented text.

### **1. On the nature of shame and emotions (through the lens of moral philosophy)**

If we consider the whole spectrum of images and insights, shame has already been reflected on by many theorists. This opinion spectrum is represented not only by psychological disciplines, but also by religious, sociological, philosophical and moral-philosophical concepts. The category of shame was one of the most important in practical philosophical discourse in the ancient period. In the twentieth century, this category becomes the subject of considerations of psychoanalysis, phenomenology and existentialism, although not dominantly. Shame is a moral emotion that we examine in terms

of its transformative potential for morality and the way it can be used. It is important to note that the twentieth century focuses on the analyses of shame from the point of view of the subject's self-examination, a different view is offered in the works of J.P. Sartre (2003), who develop the concept of shame against the background of reflection of possibilities of empathy and coexistence. Shame as a specific human experience has two dimensions – private and public (Zahavi 2014). It seems, that understanding the complex phenomenon of shame requires others, as well as understanding what D. Zahavi calls self-experience, self-awareness.

For example, Haidt argues that any emotion can be moral if it is triggered by events that result in motivation to behave prosocially. Shame, as an emotion of self-awareness, is related to the feeling of belonging to the group and functions as a control so that we do not become an object of contempt, anger, and disgust (Haidt 2001). Most psychologists from the field of moral psychology approach it this way. They say that two components are crucial in recognizing moral emotions that “concern the interest of society or other people: the triggering event and the tendency to act” (Grauzelová 2011, 208).

A number of concepts of emotions with an emphasis on their function in regulating behaviour and action refer to intersections between evolutionary and social psychology and ethics. In relation to the subject of our research and in the context of ecological ethics, we could agree that moral emotions are the trigger of our inner morality, they help moral evaluation in terms of good – evil, right – wrong, desirable – undesirable. As regards emotions, we now know that there is no reason for a philosophical and ethical discourse on emotions that is isolated from evolutionary biology, neurology and neuroethics. I agree with T. Sedová that the question of the relevance of the nature and essence of emotions, their ontological status, their intentionality and propositional content remain in many ways a philosophical

problem (Sedová 2009). In simple terms, emotions are the opposite of rationality, but they play an important role in our being and in social life – they fulfil a regulatory function. As Sedová states, emotions as an important part of our mental world specifically give value to life and meaning to human existence. Aristotle, the Stoics, Spinoza, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume have already investigated their relevance and developed various concepts of emotions in connection with the understanding of morality, knowledge, human nature, and character (Sedová 2009).

The essence of a person's nature, his moral beliefs, judgments and actions (for example in relation to the environment) is the answer to what it means to be moral. In these contexts, it can be said that emotions have important functions and roles in moral life, in ethics and moral education. And the answers of philosophy and science to these questions are essential for ethics as a theoretical reflection of morality<sup>3</sup>. I would like to remind that I am basing this on the well-known relationship between ethics and morality. It starts by stating that ethics and morality are not synonyms, and that ethics is generally understood as a theoretical reflection of morality<sup>4</sup>.

3 Sedová also states that, according to de Sousa, two approaches crystallized on the ground of philosophy when investigating emotions. On the one hand, we have authors who emphasize the diversity and ubiquity of emotional states that differ in their causes, effects, and functions in regulating behavior in a social context (both intrapersonal and interpersonal). On the other hand, there are theorists who acquire knowledge from neuroscience and clinical and experimental psychology (Sedová 2009).

4 As a philosophical discipline, ethics critically reflects on human behaviour (good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, acceptable, just), its reasons, and also examines moral beliefs and values that underlie moral judgments. They exist in ethics various traditional attempts to justify (for example to justify morality, such as on natural basis, Kantianism, utilitarianism, and contractarianism), as a system of values, principles, norms, and attitudes that define the rightness or wrongness of conduct and regulate all areas of human life. According to Tugendhat in his famous work *Probleme*

Sartre's phenomenological analysis of shame is a well-known and widely accepted phenomenological analysis, although it is certainly neither the first nor the most extensive. Authors Scheler and Straus both argue against the views that shame is a negative emotion which brings us harm, and which should be suppressed and get rid of due to its negative effect on human behaviour. Scheler considers the ability to feel shame to be ethically valuable and connects it with conscience and with the knowledge of good and evil (Scheler 1957, 142). Scheler's essay was positively evaluated by Nussbaum (2004). According to Nussbaum, shame is an emotional response to revealing and showing our weakness, imperfections, and mistakes and precedes any concrete learning of the norms of a certain society (Nussbaum 2004, 173). Despite the differences in the understanding of the essence of shame as a moral emotion, there is a fundamental question that many ask themselves. Dan Zahavi also asks: Should shame be primarily classified as a self-conscious emotion, or it is more of a distinct social emotion? (Zahavi 2014).

At this point it is necessary to clarify what role the others play in this. According to Zahavi, it is not convincing to say that shame only occurs in the presence of others. A person can also be ashamed of something that he keeps secret, that does not reveal to the audience, to the social dimension (Zahavi 2012, 229). However, at the same time, he says that a more precise differentiation between the various members of the family of shame would show that it can be shame, humiliation, mortification, etc. It seems convincing, we can even feel ashamed if we succumb to the urge and eat meat, although we have decided to become

*der Etik*, with respect to normative ethics, morality can be understood as: a) a system of mutual demands; b) expressed in obligatory sentences; c) obligation is supported by feelings of unwillingness and shame; d) a concept of a morally good person is part of this system; e) such a normative system must be considered sufficiently justified (Tugendhat, 1993).

a vegetarian. We can also be ashamed, for our cowardly attitude, if we do not have enough moral courage to defend ourselves in society against someone who shows racism or intolerance. These are just some examples that show that we can be ashamed of ourselves. Sartre would probably deny it. As Zahavi critically reflects on the objections of various theorists, he also refers us to the work of Deonne and Teroni, who insist that we should carefully consider what social emotion means.

To sum it up briefly: the characteristic experience of shame, that painful emotion (both neurophysiological responses and motor manifestations), often involves the belief that others would not do it. It is characteristic of an action that violates moral standards that it evokes moral emotions, that is, feelings of guilt and shame. It appears that, we feel moral shame in a characteristic way whenever we lose our self-confidence in the eyes of others, which implies a loss of self-worth, which can be central to our relational being<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. Environmental shame and guilt (based on Sarah Fredericks)

Environmental guilt and shame as moral emotions mean, according to Sarah Fredericks, a response to anthropogenic environmental degradation, including climate change, because what we do as individuals and as collectives to each other, to other biota and ecosystems, or to non-human beings is horrifying. In her work *Environmental Guilt and Shame: Signals of Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Need for Ritual Responses* (2021) she says that our behaviour and actions that damage nature (biosphere, environment) have consequences long after we interrupt and stop these actions. Seas threaten cities, homes, and people as they rise. Warming and mild winters allow the spread of vector-borne diseases, while also bringing extremes in weather. Changing rainfall patterns pose

risks to agricultural production. People and ecosystems that are already vulnerable are often disproportionately harmed by climate change. Under these extraordinary circumstances, questions of the relevance of environmental guilt and shame research, their nature and essence, are ethically problematic and need to be explored. Fredericks explains (2021, 24): “My understanding of the world and our experience of it, like that of many pragmatists, is not based on a sharp line between fact and value. Rather, I recognize that what we value shapes how we understand the world to be, and how we take the world to be shapes how and what we value even as the world pushes back on our theories and values.”

Methodologically and conceptually, she grounded her research in philosophical pragmatism and action theories, but was also inspired by religious studies, where rituals, stories and emotions play an important role. She proceeds inductively, so to speak, because the values she examines are concretized in relation to concrete experiences in various practical situations. She recommends that they should be open to ongoing assessment, evaluation and revision (Fredericks 2014). I am aware that the evaluation of human decision-making, behaviour and action is complex. It may concern the consequences of the action, we can understand it as based on good intention or motive, we can point to situational relativism in its evaluation.

When Sarah Fredericks attempts an ethical analysis of diverse cases of environmental guilt and shame, it is characteristic of this author that particular experiences of environmental problems challenge current, pre-existing norms. She points to this in several places, emphasizing the questions of whether the existing norms are sufficient, suitable, and effective. This approach resonates with the questions of what kind of action is relevant as a response to climate change and who specifically is responsible for it. Western societies are dominated by rational approaches to human action, where

<sup>5</sup> See and compare (Tugendhat 1993).

the actor is perceived as an autonomous, rational being. However, these approaches overlook the experiences of specific people with environmental degradation. I believe that in order to conduct ethical analyses, we must understand the world and values as interconnected. With a certain simplification, I understand the relationship between knowledge and values as mutually conditioning. Through cognition, we try to depict things, events of our world objectively, in their real form. By evaluating, we leave a neutral standpoint, and the subjectivity of the moral actor (i.e., his moral beliefs, desires, feelings, propositional attitudes) are fundamental, as are the norms on which our evaluative judgments are built.

As Fredericks explores the values of both environmentalists and diverse collectives, she invokes sets of values including human dignity, participatory justice, accountability, efficiency, and feasibility. Recognition and respect for the dignity and value of all people is the most important value of this project for the author. He identifies the aspect of human dignity as follows. “The first is motivational. Beyond curiosity about environmental guilt and shame, I am concerned for the many people who are harmed when contributors to environmental degradation do not deal with their guilt and shame in productive ways and therefore perpetuate environmental harm” (Fredericks 2021, 26). She states that differences and different ways of environmental degradation affect the value of human dignity.<sup>6</sup> According to her, the commitment to dignity is related to the value of justice. “It includes

multiple forms—restorative justice, as mentioned earlier; as well as distributive justice, the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens of human interaction with the environment; and participatory justice, the ability of people to meaningfully participate in decision-making that affects them” (Fredericks 2021, 28). Fredericks says that shame can help people recognize their previously unrecognized ethical priorities, alerting them that their actions are inconsistent with their values. They may recognize flaws in their character or identity when they feel ashamed that their actions threaten the lives, well-being, and prosperity of others. Through these experiences, values can be identified and extended to new situations. She reflects on collective identity and writes that that collectives can have the identity and agency necessary to have responsibility and can have collective emotions, it is reasonable to ask whether there are times when individuals and/or collectives should feel guilt and/or shame.

### 3. Ecological ethics and environmental shame

As was mentioned in the beginning of the text, man is a relational being, at the same time he is a normative being. If, in the context of ecological ethics, we ask about “what we need to know and how we should act with regard to the ecological dimension of our being” (Stekauerová 2003, 6), we ask about how we should act in relation to nature, i.e., to non-human beings, geological objects, or entire ecosystems. In this understanding, ecological ethics is an effort emphasising a good life aimed at the well-being of man and the well-being of nature. We can also describe it as a harmony between human needs and ecological possibilities, between freedom and responsibility, between knowledge (ecological and ethical), decision-making and action-taking (pro-natural)<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, ecological

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<sup>6</sup> Fredericks conducted her research focusing on the experiences of ordinary people mainly in Western English-speaking countries and the United States. She writes: “If people in the United States—a very individualistic nation, where denial of anthropogenic environmental degradation is common—are experiencing guilt and shame about the environment, then one would certainly expect people elsewhere, where responsibility for climate change is even more widely recognized, to also experience these feelings, likely at greater rates or with more strength” (Fredericks 2021, 33).

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<sup>7</sup> So if we agree with S. Fredericks, not only individual but also collective actors (e.g. industrialized

ethics asks “what should be the way of life that we should strive for” (Stekauerová 2003, 6). What potential does shame have in this effort? With a certain simplification, we can understand shame as a loss of self-worth in the relationship between man and nature. Shame in ecological morality is not only a self-conscious emotion but assumes the influence of a social group and self-identification with that group.

It seems that we should also consider the role of shame as a mechanism of responsibility, and therefore a tool for motivation responsibility for our actions in relation to nature. Can shame be a motivating force and our sensitivity to doing the right thing? Our responsibility for the “well-being of others” and “ethics of responsibility for the future” (Jonas 1997, p. 145) pose questions for us about the relationship between shame and responsibility. When H. Jonas justifies the theory of responsibility, he says that we must deal with both: “the rational reason for the obligation, that is, the claim to a binding obligation, and the psychological reason for its ability to set the will in motion” (Jonas 1997, p. 134). This means that ethics has an objective and subjective side, “the first concerns reason, the second concerns feeling” (ibid, p. 135), both of which are integral parts of ethics. The factual givenness of feeling, “to which man cannot be deaf” (ibid, p. 135), is the connecting force between abstract sanction and concrete motivation, and therefore moves our will. As H. Jonas says, feeling “places something worthy of choice in the light” and reason knows, chooses and considers. “The phenomenon of morality is based apriori on this connection” (ibid, p. 136). Strictly speaking, in relation to nature, according to H. Jonas, man cannot endanger something that does not belong to him and that can endanger the interests and future of others. He notes that “this element of guilt must be taken into every action” (p. 68). Despite the above, we

must emphasize and state that, according to H. Jonas, it is difficult to justify the principle of responsibility based on feeling/emotion. The justification must be based on rationalized reflection of metaphysics that transcends the subjectivity of human emotional states. This is the foundation of ethical theories. According to H. Jonas, it is an ethics based on categorical imperative, not in accordance with human sense and subjectivity.

If we apply the normative approach according to Tugendhat, when we are ashamed, it may mean that we have evaluated our actions in relation to nature as wrong, bad. This means – in a fundamental sense – that we have violated some moral standards. Tugendhat says that we are a community of cooperating beings (Tugendhat 1993) and this confirms that if we talk about morality, we are talk about the morality of a particular community. On the other hand, if we examine morality from the point of view of ethics of care, the complex relationship of moral decision-making and action-taking is also influenced by moral feelings. Our actions in relation to nature, i.e., what I call ecological morality (Klimková 2015) can be anchored on our practical strategic decisions, it is not based only on reason and deductive reasoning. Our cultural practices (they can be moral as well as legal) are always contextual.

I have not yet reached a satisfactory result when thinking about shame as a moral emotion in the context of ecological ethics, but already at this point of the research I claim that the key to ecological morality will not be only reason, freed from emotions, interests, motivation. Shame can be a motivation to behave pro-naturally.

As we have already stated in this text, understanding shame and its motivational power for environmental attitudes can be diverse: shame as a moral emotion that cultivates our green virtues, shame as a reactive attitude for responsibility transformation, shame as experience with degradation of environment. Johnson (1993) points out

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nations) are responsible for climate change, land degradation, forest loss and other global problems.

that if there is shame, virtue may emerge. The ability to feel shame can be a prerequisite for virtues. Therefore, shame can have a transformative effect for human moral beliefs, character and action. Jamieson turns to “green” virtues for individuals as models and motivators for ethical action (2014), bypassing questions of responsibility. S. Fredericson often uses the term “identity,” rather than “character” as is typical in virtue ethics, because “identity” captures not only the characterological dimensions of an agent that develop and change over time. “Agents, whether individuals or collectives, need to develop their identity and habits to live an ethical life. Identity formation can occur through a combination of emotional and physical experience, engagement with other people, action, and reflection” (Fredericson 2021, p. 23).

“Shame often prompts existential reflection about what it means to be oneself, a part of one’s society, or to be human in general. Frequently, the result is a desire for future ethical behavior coupled with knowledge that failing to live up to ideals is inevitable” (Fredericks 2021, 15).

## Conclusion

The presented text is essentially the basis of current theoretical and future empirical research that deals with shame as a moral emotion in the man-nature relationship. New stimuli for the discussion of the transformative power of shame in ecological and environmental ethics depend on the clarification and interpretation of the ontological status of shame and its ethical functions. If we talk about the ontological status of shame and its ethical functions in relation to the environment, it also raises questions about whether the experience of shame helps the necessary change and cultivation of our attitudes, the support of ethical ideals of values, and subsequently also norms and measures. Or on the contrary, it prevents this moral progress. In this context, the question naturally arises, if shame has a transformative potential, how does it

function in our moral beliefs and attitudes (which are a triad and synergy of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions)? For these reasons, it is necessary to conduct research of moral emotions, moral beliefs in relation to the values and principles of ecological and environmental ethics. In my research so far, I have examined theoretical approaches in the understanding of shame as a moral emotion, and I am gradually beginning to uncover its ethical functions in the experience of moral actors (not only) in relation to the environment. In the next phases of the research, I will conduct phenomenological interviews, case studies, and analyse moral dilemmas from everyday practice. In the concept of environmental shame and guilt, Sarah E. Fredericks in her work *Environmental Guilt and Shame: Signals of Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Need for Ritual Responses* (2021) demonstrates how to judge these moral emotions. She says that it is important to determine when these cycles of shame are appropriate, how to deal with them, how to gradually enforce rituals in our everyday life, which would induce a positive change in the relationship between man and nature. I am convinced that further theoretical and empirical research on shame is relevant and can be a support for the moral actor’s self-awareness that we are responsible for our decisions and actions in relation to nature. Such research can indicate the direction of the empirical investigation of shame as a moral emotion, including how to interpret its results competently and usefully.

Today we often encounter the new phenomenon of eco-shaming. A number of papers on the experience of environmental shame show that people who educate themselves, read and focus on their actions in the local environment can deal with environmental shame or environmental anxiety. As an individual actor, I cannot make the Great Pacific garbage patch disappear, but I can sign a petition on plastics in our country, clean up a park near our home, fly less, shop less, etc. In conclusion, I will allow

myself the words of Sarah E. Fredericks: “Recognizing the environmental guilt and shame of everyday environmentalists also provides indirect evidence for the spread of environmental values writ large. After all, if agents do not have values that they break or fail to achieve, they will not feel guilt or shame” (Fredericks 2021, 199).

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the VEGA contract no 1/0020/21: *The development of the concept of shame in ancient and contemporary moral philosophy with an emphasis on its ethical functions.*

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research. The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results.

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