This paper will synthesize two articles in an attempt to better understand shame dynamics. I will first present a number of ideas from a paper by Alan Jones, a Jungian Analyst, entitled “From Oedipus to Isaac: The Abhorrence of Transformation” (2000). Jones’ framework will be used to address a number of themes presented by Halina Ablamowicz in a piece entitled “Shame as abject communication: A semiotic view” (1994). First, to clarify, shame can be understood as a feeling of being exposed for some sort of imperfection, a sense of being defective. Whereas guilt typically is about action, e.g. “I’ve done something bad,” shame does not require an action on the part of the individual, rather it is simply the feeling that “I am bad.”

Prior to this analysis, it is helpful to define the concept of individuation, to which I will refer throughout this paper. From a Jungian perspective, individuation is a process of psychological integration and transformation whereby the personal unconscious is brought into consciousness resulting in the assimilation of the whole personality.

Jones presents a case for the connection between individuation and the experience of remorse. He states “Remorse is a drawn out process of transformation...it fundamentally changes the personality...it can result in the capacity to perceive symbolic reality [emphasis added]...to bear the conflict of opposites, and to differentiate a fuller sense of the individual.” He adds that at “the heart of remorse is a profound moral and spiritual maturation.” Jones suggests that “through remorse one must assume full moral responsibility for his or her psychology” and must give an account of oneself. Through this process “We reconfigure the narrative of our life story.” He goes on to note that “this is not yet the complete story. The full story of a life needs what is said by the subject through narrative of myth. In myth, we see the reflection of how the subject responds to the demand for accountability and the demand for a new consciousness of time. These responses are represented in the images of abhorrent deeds, for example, inescapable fate, infanticide, patricide, incest, God’s command “Abraham, sacrifice your son to me,” and Abraham’s fearful obedience.”

Jones posits that such myths are not to be taken literally. He suggests that “motifs of the abhorrent are not allegories of interpersonal abuse” and that such “literal meaning is suspended.” Jones states that “these images are the appearance in these myths of what the subject suffers during the transformation by remorse. One must respond to the time of one’s existence, and one must respond to the inescapable press of individuation. This is the abhorrence of transformation.” If we only see these images of abhorrence literally, we are stuck with what Jones calls the “wounded child metaphor,” e.g. “I was traumatized, had a harsh father,” etc. Here one's consciousness is stuck in the realm of being the victim. However, if we understand these images in terms of representing a
universal process of individuation, and we engage that process, we are no longer limited to seeing ourselves as a victim and perceiving life from this perspective.

At this point I would like to emphasize how Jones makes a connection between remorse (as an integral part of individuation process) and Free Will. Jones states

Remorse hinges on a retroactive realization of culpability. To suffer remorse one must recognize how she made choices that turned the direction of her life away from her desire and psychological well-being. She begins to see how her unconscious disposition, her complexes, directed her choices; but still she can blame others for this. Weren’t there reasons enough in her personal history that caused her to have these complexes and make her decisions? But she comes to see that she betrayed herself, betrayed her own possibilities; she betrayed her own life. She sees how at that time she made these choices unconsciously. To this extent she really could not have made different choices, and she does not now bear the burden of responsibility for them. She may have chosen, for example, to turn in one direction out of an unconscious pattern of avoidance. She was unaware of this at that time. But now she is aware of it, and she realizes, through the utmost sense of honesty to herself, that she could have been aware then. Perhaps at that time she chose to deny inklings, or at least now she understands that being unconscious of her motives does not really exonerate her from the weight of responsibility....She now sees that she is both not responsible and totally responsible.

As a result, in some area of her life, to one degree or another, she wasted a period of her lifetime that she will never regain. It is gone forever, slipped out from beneath her feet, as it were, while she was standing around concerned about things that had once seemed essential to maintaining an idealized self-image. Now they are completely insignificant to her real desire. She had always thought, too, that she had lots of time for gaining what she desired; but now she understands there are finite number of days to her life.

Remorse requires that she mourn for the self-inflicted loss of a part of her life. And it ends in a resolute choice of affirmation. She decides to live from now on affirming her desire, adjusting her goals to what is now realistically possible. She accepts her loss, but also liberates her desire. She has now accepted accountability in its double meaning. She has assumed responsibility for her life. She has embraced agency. She has also given a new account of her life to herself: she has always been the agent of her fate. Her becoming accountable, however, is not based on the exoneration of those who failed her in childhood. It rests on the sense of being an autonomous individual from day one. This is a paradigm shift that makes it possible to conceive that all the circumstances of a life are indispensable openings to depth. This is, of course, a brief outline of a long process of making complexes conscious, mapping their dynamics, and working through regressive attachments to a great deal of personal history (pp. 9 – 10).

So here Jones argues for the connection between remorse and free will. In other
words, through remorse we become personally accountable for our lives and begin to exercise free will. As one individuates, they begin to assert their free will – there is no longer a victim of past circumstances, but a fully autonomous individual in control of her life.

With regard to shame, many of the images of the abhorrent that Jones cites involve shame (patricide, incest, etc.). If we are stuck in a pre-individuation stage, it is most likely that we are not interpreting symbolically and, as such, we are still understanding the world literally. In this position, we are stuck experiencing events in just such a literal manner, perceiving “shaming experiences” as concrete, objective acts. Such experiences “have” to be shaming, there is no other explanation. We have not yet developed a personal psychology that allows us to stand back and understand these instances as part of the painful process of transformation. In other words, when we limit our understanding of the world to the literal, it is very likely we will interpret many acts/experiences as shaming. Although we are not conscious of it, we are making a choice in terms of how we perceive the world.

The pre-transformation, pre-remorse stage of being (with life experience typically being described through the lens of a victim narrative) lends itself to a very limited psychological understanding – the world is literal – symbolism is ignored or misinterpreted. Hence, while shame may be experienced, at worst we will try to avoid it or push it out of consciousness and, at best, try to address and attempt to reconcile and understand it. In either case, it is not seen as an opportunity to engage in the transformative, but painful, process of individuation. As such, when one is in this pre-individuation, self-as-victim mode, because he/she is not aware of his/her capacity to exercise free will, shame is experienced as a phenomenon which must be defended against.

Having presented Jones' perspective, I will now provide and overview of Ablamovicz's thesis. Ablamovicz argues that the “existing conceptions of shame predominantly emphasize its negative dimension as a phenomenon” and that contemporary society views shame as an intensely undesirable emotion which implies “powerlessness, degradation, deficiency, and misery.” She states that with shame being understood in this manner, in response the individual must avoid or eliminate it. She also states that the rejection of shame has become a cultural norm – that it is an impediment to growth and self awareness.

Ablamovicz contends that contemporary psychoanalytic literature is oriented toward approaching shame as a “symptom of abnormality requiring special treatment. She states that shame is considered “an illness from which a person must recover” and there are no “enriching aspects attributed to it.” She then wonders why current perspectives define shame “as an enemy to be eliminated” ignoring the ideas of those, such as Scheler and Sartre who have framed it as a “positive and authentic human property.” Ablamovicz asks “Why, instead of participating in the powerful signification of shame as a self-actualizing dimension of interpersonal communication, do we perceive it as a problem and try to "deal" with it?”
Alblamowicz cites Schneider in noting that the “contemporary rejection of shame is derived from the modernist faith and devotion to reason and its models in science. The practical consequence of the idealism of reason and individual autonomy is the determination now to regard shame as a sign of disgrace or personal deficiency.” However she does note that there are some psychoanalytic theorists who contend that shame “needs to be understood, studied, and not rejected or avoided.”

In the spirit of identifying the benefits of addressing shame Ablamowicz cites the work of Scheler noting that shame needs to be “understood as more than just a sense of disgrace, inferiority, or a 'sickness of the soul.' It has the capacity to reveal the self to oneself. To know one's self is a painful experience. To avoid the pain of shameful self-revelation we are willing to participate in self-deception. It should be emphasized, however, within the philosophical tradition, that in the very exposure before an other whom we cannot deny, we come into a confrontation with ourselves as shame”

In response to what Ablamowicz considered a limited, negative view of shame, she presents findings from a phenomenological study she conducted. Ablamovicz states “Although the persons participating in the study feel pain and ultimate exclusion when ashamed, they also seem to be able to accept it as a natural and necessary aspect of human communication experience. They detect the disadvantages of shame, and yet, they are able to transcend and use them for their own self-actualizing purposes. As reported by the individuals, shame is indeed experienced as a "horrible" and degrading act in which one feels deprived of the world because of his/her failure, but only in connection to the specific event that produces that awareness. Once an individual is able to reflect on shame in abstraction from any immediately lived through situation, it becomes possible to see it as a very human and universal condition.”

Having presented the perspectives of Jones and Ablamovizc, I offer the following thoughts:

One potential limitation with Ablamowicz's thesis is that shame is not portrayed as subjective. For people with the courage to endure the painful feelings of remorse that are an inherent element of the individuation process, there begins to develop an awareness of agency or Free Will. This perspective allows us to no longer experience the world from the vantage point of the wounded child or victim. As such, events or episodes that, pre-individuation, were experienced as shaming might no longer have that effect. This addresses the subjectivity of shame. What is shaming to me pre-individuation might not be shaming to me when I no longer see myself as a victim and begin to exercise my free will. Implied in the idea of the subjectivity of shame is how it relates to the "semiotics of the observer" (Grishakova, 2002). As Grishakova argues, the progress of physiological optics in the 19th century demonstrates that the world is to a certain extent “created” by the observer: such phenomena as colours or mirror reflections are devoid of autonomous physical existence and evoked
through the observer’s interaction with the external world. Every act of perception changes the reality (Gibson 1940: 40). Therefore, to continue the thought, every observer is a creator of an imaginary world and thus an “artist” in its own right. M. Merleau-Ponty highlights a creative aspect of attention: attention “is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon” (Merleau-Ponty 1981: 30). (p. 531)

If one considers the subjectivity in the interpretation and understanding of phenomena which Grishakova describes, we can see how this process would similarly apply to shame dynamics. As opposed to shaming “experiences” being objective “signs” which are experienced similarly by all, one's stage of individuation greatly influences how the individual “creates” their world and what is felt to be “shaming.” This concept echoes Jones’ contention that remorse allows us to perceive symbolic reality.

Typically shame is not seen as a defense but rather it is an experience we defend against. From a pre-individuation perspective, shame is seen in this way, as an emotion against which we defend. This suggests that in the pre-individuation stage, although essentially unconscious, shame is actually a defense against individuation – against the possibility that one no longer has to be a victim controlled by the world, but can actually change and become an integrated being, one who exercises her free will, autonomy and agency. If the individuation process involves the gradual and increasing exercising of one's free will then, prior to this process, we can see that shame is a defense against, or an escape from, freedom.

One could argue according to Ablamowicz's thesis shame similarly can be seen as a phenomenon which we do not have to defend against, but rather should accept as a vehicle for personal awareness. However, individuals, such as those in her study, can self-reflect and understand shame as way to learn about oneself without necessarily having engaged in the individuation process. For example one of the participants quoted in her research, whom Ablamowicz presents as an example of an individual who has a more constructive view of shame, states:

Is shame always connected to an event or circumstance or is it just kind of a way of being that you feel as a self-reflected person at all? ... If you are just the kind of person that never thinks what you do, then you'll be less likely to feel shame or you'll feel shame in connection with a specific event. I can feel shame for no reason at all that I can identify . .. maybe that we all feel inadequate in face of all the expectations of others.

We can notice that even with this more enlightened understanding of shame, the individual still suggests that “maybe we all feel inadequate in face of the expectations of others.” Why would we still feel inadequate? Part of the individuation process is to fully integrate all aspects of oneself. This includes acknowledging many personal
shortcomings and faults. However, acknowledging that, as humans, we all possess vulnerabilities does not mean that we necessarily feel inadequate in the face of the expectations of others. So here I would suggest that it is not enough simply to be tolerant of shame and willing to reflect on shaming experiences. The way in which we perceive shame will change considerably as we individuate and begin to exercise our autonomy and agency.

With these ideas in mind, I would suggest that what is necessary is not accepting shame as a way to learn about oneself, but rather to understand how shaming experiences can hold within them the same meaning as the mythology relating to the abhorrence of transformation...that we must go beyond the literal understanding of the shame experience and consider that the pain of such events is not an “allegory of interpersonal abuse.” Rather one has the opportunity in the wake of shaming experiences to “suspend the literal meaning” and consider Jones' observation that “these images are the appearance in these myths of what the subject suffers during the transformation by remorse. One must respond to the time of one’s existence, and one must respond to the inescapable press of individuation. This is the abhorrence of transformation.”
References

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