

**The Problem and Possibility of Unashamed Citizenship:**

**Jill Locke and Friedrich Nietzsche**

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## The Problem and Possibility of Unashamed Citizenship: Jill Locke and Friedrich Nietzsche

Tessa de Vet

Can we be without shame? As self-conscious beings, it seems unavoidable that we, at one time or another, and for some more frequent than others, will experience the emotion of shame. Ambushed by reddened cheeks and an intense desire to hide oneself, shame usually occurs when we have the feeling that we have failed for an actual or internalised audience, holding certain norms and values that we care about. Either laughed at or called out for acting in a shameful manner, we feel singled out for not fitting in, condemned for doing something morally corrupt, or humiliated for being odd. Either this actually happens or we imagine it happening, which can lead to social ostracism, gelotophobia, or other shame-bound anxieties (Titze and Kühn 2014). While feelings of guilt leave a person with a negative self-regard qua something she has done or has failed to do, shame goes beyond feeling bad about one's actions. Following Jennifer Manion and Jill Locke, I conceptualise shame as a negative global assessment of the self, including a sense of existential failure (Locke 2007, 14; Locke 2016, 18; Manion 2003, 21). Due to this grand scope, shame tends to linger on for a period of time, and is much harder to get rid of than instantaneous embarrassment.

Although shame is usually conceptualized as a moral emotion, we must not forget that it is too, like anger, a *political* emotion: one is only ashamed in front of the

community one desires to be part of (Probyn 2005, ix-viii, 39; cf. Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 496-522).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the potential to be shamed by others is dependent on the members whose judgment one cares about and what they see as reason for ridicule or condemnation. However, in the shame-infused language that continues to dominate much of the political landscape, minorities are often shamed for not adhering to dominant behavioural patterns with its attached value judgments. And while these people do not necessarily share or agree with the custom codes of conduct – and although they might *predominantly* identify themselves with certain sub-groups – the continuous experience of being shamed by other members of the society they live in is extremely damaging and worrisome. Even though it is said that a healthy sense of shame is beneficial to a democratic society in order to keep its members in check, there is a danger in restricting one's members in their modes of existing (Locke 2016, 9).

While it has been argued that the moral maturity of an agent lies in the setting of her personal moral standards, which only causes her to feel shame if she fails by her *own* standards, I argue that such an isolated view fails to take into account the social and political aspects of shame (Calhoun 2004, 128-132; cf. O'Hear 1976-77; Kekes 1988; Aldrich 1939).<sup>2</sup> Mature feelings of shame may indeed include a focus on how one appears in one's own eyes, but I find it hard to believe that this gaze can be detached from its social environment. And while one can try choosing what one finds to be good reasons for being ashamed, i.e. what community one wants to be a part of, I argue that it is of equal, but perhaps even more importance to think how one can be and live unapologetically in a society whose dominant-belief system might be hostile to non-conformist ways of being. But how do we rid ourselves of shame? How can one free oneself from the patronizing and discriminating shame spread by a dominant discourse that, through practices of shaming, tries to exclude ways of living that divert from custom? And does this mean that we become insensitive to shame altogether?

In the following I will use Jill Locke's distinction between shamelessness and being unashamed for understanding how something like moral maturity can be united with being without shame. Secondly, I will consider Nietzsche's critique of

democracy and his concept of the *Übermensch* in its political aspects, as I argue that becoming unashamed can be seen as an important part of its conceptualization – and is paired with the metaphor of becoming a child. While bringing these two authors together might seem unusual or even arbitrary, I argue that both can inform each other and ultimately help us to conceptualise the problem and possibility of unashamed citizenship in democratic societies.

### **The death of shame and unashamed citizenship**

In *Democracy and the Death of Shame*, political theorist Jill Locke offers a genealogical account of the Lament that Shame is Dead. As she argues, the current lamentation of the lack of shame in democratic society is not a new phenomenon. Rather, this narrative seems to fit into a long-existing lament that can be seen as “a nostalgic story of an imagined past that represents a longing for a mythical place and time when shame secured and regulated social life” (Locke 2016, 18).<sup>3</sup> As Locke argues, the Lament operates as a narrative of civilizational decline that expresses, above all, a fear of self-fashioning and autonomous subjects who threaten to disturb the status quo and wreak havoc on the social order. Much of this lamentation can be read as a fantasy of what shame supposedly once secured: social regulation and lubrication across difference(s) (Locke 2016, 9). As such, The Lament can be seen as a highly normative and panicked reaction in sight of unrestrained self-fashioning and self-expression, which acts as ideology, speech act and shaming practice all at once (Locke 2016, 11-3; 21).

Importantly, claiming that shame is dead – simply because changes in morality and beyond are occurring – obscures and shames those who investigate and potentially negate the commonly considered reasons for shame. But before we move on to Locke’s call for unashamed citizenship, we must however first understand what the accusation of shamelessness comprises of. As Locke argues, it is important that we do not mistake *shameful* behaviour with shamelessness. While doing something shameful does violate a largely agreed upon code of conduct, it recognises the ways one is meant to behave. Shameful behaviour is therefore not really seen as a threat,

because it recognises the social order even in its transgression.

The shameless, on the other hand, wreak havoc on societal norms: “the shameless person flaunts the requirement of shame and is therefore constituted as a threat to the social order” (Locke 2016, 20). Characterised as nonreflective and uncivilised beings who need constraint of their urges and passions, the shameless disturb and threaten civilisation by ignoring and overriding the boundaries of what is considered as publicly and politically acceptable. They do not care that they have violated social regulations – or so it is argued.

In this sense, the blame of shamelessness can be seen as an accusation of an underdeveloped, unrecognised or rejected sense of shame, and therefore as a form of *moral immaturity*. Those who are called shameless are blamed for their lack of reflection, of judgment, and of regard for other beings, meanwhile continuously placing their own needs above those of others. And while we can argue that an actual immature person (i.e. a child) without shame simply does not feel shame yet, it is the shameless adult who refuses to recognise her shame, and instead rejects it, represses it or pins it on someone else – and is, in turn, shamed for it by society (cf. Warner 1999, 3).

While the Lament judges and shames those who supposedly take their democratic freedom *too far* – missing the supposed civilised brake of shame in their behaviour – it is exactly in these moments, according to Locke, that radical democratic scepticism comes to the surface.<sup>4</sup> As the Lament singles out shameless people as threats to the political order, it negates the political protest of these citizens – formal or not – in order to preserve the status quo. Or to put it differently, as the Lament can be seen as a disciplining and excluding device, it reacts to the increase of unashamed self-fashioning and self-expression enacted in the name of egalitarian ideals. In putting forward shame as a regulative ideal, the accusations of shamelessness thus obscure political actions that self-consciously disavow the terms of shame, reimaging and renegotiating the terms of what counts as civic practice, and even who counts as a citizen (Locke 2016, 20).

In order to take seriously the critique of these protesting citizens, Locke has argued for unashamed citizenship that is to be distinguished from shamelessness, and must therefore be conceptualised by itself. While shamelessness is the accusation of having *no shame at all*, Locke argues that unashamed citizenship emerges from *within* the experience of shame, which it names and politicises in order to activate a set of political demands and practices (Locke 2016, 37). The unashamed knows the sense of shame, but strives to overcome the negative effects it has on her. Instead of withdrawing from public life, she uses her shame to open up the political sphere. The acts of unashamed citizenship can and must therefore be seen as a radical political activity, done by courageous and unapologetic people who challenge the virtue and value of shame (Locke 2016, 11-2). Being unashamed must therefore not be seen as a childish negligence of value-judgments or self-reflection, because it does not duck away from feelings of negative self-assessment. Rather, it is a conscious and self-reflexive protest against the reasons that they are felt in the first place. To be and become unashamed means to look one's shame in the eye, to see it and to name it – and by doing so, creating the possibility for overcoming it.

### **Becoming Unashamed: Nietzsche on Shame and the Problem of Democracy**

With Locke, we can see the resistance to, but also the importance of, forms of unashamed citizenship. However, we must ask: how does one become unashamed? How does one lose those self-lacerating value judgments that, in the first instance, cause a retreat rather than a resistance to social order? Although Friedrich Nietzsche is more commonly seen as an *agent provocateur* than as a political philosopher, I argue that his work is helpful to understand how self-overcoming is, as I think, crucial for becoming unashamed. Moreover, his critique of democracy alerts us to one of the more difficult dynamics of the thought and propagation of moral and political equality. Due to lack of space, I have to limit most close-reading of Nietzsche's hesitant and hostile remarks on democracy, even though this would be important for this discussion (cf. Siemens 2009). I will instead focus on three moments from the period 1880-1884 which I think are relevant for his thoughts on

democracy and shame.

Following Daniel Conway and Herman Siemens, I argue that Nietzsche, in his approach to politics, is looking for the ancient or “founding question”: what ought humankind to become (Conway 1997, 2-3; Siemens 2009, 21)? Contra elitist readings where Nietzsche would *only* care for the Few, only for those “exceptional beings” whom he calls free spirits, I read his critique of the herd and herd-mentality as an attack on egalitarianism that, as Nietzsche argues, may ultimately lead to uniformity and the exclusion of difference (Siemens 2009, 25-7; cf. WS 292, BGE 242). Concerned with the future of *all* of humankind, Nietzsche feared that in its levelling tendencies, democracy would lead to a tyranny of the mob without hope for emancipation (cf. BGE 202). For this reason, he increasingly turned to those excluded by society – or as we might say, the shameless outsiders that live life on their own terms.

To locate his critique on democracy, I here focus on an 1880 *Nachlass* note that Siemens has considered as “the pivotal text” in Nietzsche's thinking on democracy (Siemens 2009, 25-6).<sup>5</sup> From here, we can see a definite switch from Nietzsche's early and more hopeful account in *Human, All Too Human* towards a pessimistic outlook for the possibility and prosperity of difference in democratic society, that was eventually radicalised in *Beyond Good and Evil* (cf. Ansell-Pearson 1994, 90-5).<sup>6</sup>

The more feeling of unity with one's fellow human gains the upper hand, the more feelings are made uniform, the more they will perceive all difference as immoral. In this way, the sand of humanity necessarily comes into being: all very similar, very small, very round, very accommodating, very boring. Christianity and democracy have done the most to drive humanity along the path towards sand. A small, weak, glowing feeling of contentment equally distributed among all [...] would that be the last image humanity could offer? (NL 1880 KSA 9:3 [98])

In their propagation of unity and equality (*very similar, very small, very boring*),

Nietzsche here points out, Christian religion and democratic polity have been practicing a systematic exclusion of difference, by perceiving being different as *immoral*. The negative value judgment that is attached to this plurality is important, because it will be exactly in those who are considered as disobeying ruling morality in whom Nietzsche will put his hope (cf. BGE 26, 242, 258, 268). Or, said differently, Nietzsche wants to argue for a new chapter for humankind, a “new image” for humanity, urging all singular individuals to:

[...] be different from all others, and take pleasure in being different from the other; the crudest monsters have certainly been eradicated under the prevailing regime of morality thus far – that was its task; but we do not wish to live on thoughtlessly under a regime in the face of wild beasts. (NL 1880 KSA 9:3 [98])

For the progress and development of humankind, then, Nietzsche wants us to be different from all others and take joy in this plurality. While most of the “crudest monsters”, or most radical individuals, have already been eradicated in the name of morality – that was its task in its equalizing tendency – Nietzsche wants the “wild beasts” to no longer thoughtlessly succumb to the status quo of the dominant moral regime.

If we now approach this problem of democracy from the perspective of shame, we can see how shaming practices are used to exclude those who are different by considering them to *be* immoral (and not just seen to be doing immoral things). Shaming them into uniformity, those who practice common morality regulate ways of living that are deemed acceptable in society. Here I would suggest a parallel to the work of Locke. Those who are shamed for not adhering to common morality are the ones singled out for being shameless. As we saw, this accusation fits into a lament about taking one’s personal autonomy to live freely *too far*, no longer fitting into the parameters that are set up for public life and politics. But as Locke too argued, this “shamelessness” is a fearful cry in sight of radical political action engaged in and through democratic scepticism about equality and plurality.

While I will come back to the problem of egalitarianism with regard to Locke and Nietzsche, I want to consider the following aphorisms in *The Gay Science* to argue that Nietzsche is, like Locke, concerned with unashamed citizenship.

*Whom do you call bad?* — Those who always want to put to shame.

*What do you consider most humane?* — To spare someone shame.

*What is the seal of liberation?* — No longer being ashamed of oneself. (GS 273-5)

As we can see here, Nietzsche considers no longer being ashamed of oneself as the seal of liberation. Moreover, he condemns “those who always want to put to shame”, or, those who continuously engage in practices of shaming. Exactly because through shame we promote a specific set of morals, shame is hurtful to the openness needed for plural ways of living; thus the most humane thing to do – and I would add, for the *sake of* humanity – is to spare someone shame. And while Nietzsche can also be seen as lamenting the lack of shame in his day, I argue that most of his complaints rather have to do with epistemological modesty and his unfortunate misogyny, than with moral feelings of disgrace (cf. Schneider 1977; Speirs 2013).<sup>7</sup>

But how does one become unashamed of oneself? If we take Nietzsche’s conception of the *Übermensch* as the liberated one through self-overcoming, it must be stressed that this project has at least two dimensions. That is to say, the *Übermensch* does not only refer to the individual project of continuous self-overcoming, but is also committed to the idea of striving towards collective enhancement (i.e. the future of all humankind) (cf. Früchtel 2009, 182-90). From this it follows that the exceptional individuals that Nietzsche praised do not function as exclusive beneficiaries, but as “the great experimenters” which are only key elements in the general aim of perfecting human kind as a whole (cf. Siemens 2009, 30).

It is in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that Nietzsche, through Zarathustra’s teachings, argues for three stages that one has to go through in order to liberate oneself (Z I, 1) – which we can see as the three stages needed for self-overcoming, or for the

process of the *Übermensch*. In the metaphorical style that is characteristic of the book, Nietzsche describes the first step as becoming a camel: one deserts from the herd, while loading oneself with one's own weight of existence. As a camel, one runs off into the desert, i.e. solitude, where the second transformation must take place: one becomes a lion. As this lion wants to "capture freedom and be lord in its own desert" (Z I, 1) – as it struggles with the great dragon of Thou Shalt, i.e. common views of morality, in order to attain self-mastery. In its attempt to achieve self-legislation, and in order to say "I will" and free itself from external views of moral values and social obligations, the Lion learns to say its own No. However, it is unable to create for itself, and therefore, a third transformation needs to take place: the lion has to become *a child*. "The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, *a sacred Yes*" (Z I, 1). For Nietzsche, this Yes is needed for the "game of creation"; the affirming of one's own life, and of willing one's own will.

That Nietzsche uses the image of the child in its negation of common morality must not be mistaken for a propagation of having no sense for morality *at all*; indeed, he is continuously arguing for finding out what is important to us, to figure out where one's own moral judgements come from and what they can tell us about ourselves and others.<sup>8</sup> The child is, thus, *at least* a double metaphorical image: it is not about gaining (moral) immaturity, but about not being bound or defined by socially standardised conducts. Moreover, linking this to the problem of shame, as a child has not yet developed the full sensibilities for shame, she still makes her choices with reverence to herself and what she wants, and is not yet restricted by potential prospects of shame. Becoming a child then means to become without shame; it is becoming unashamed of oneself.

To see that Nietzsche indeed links becoming a child with becoming without shame and self-overcoming, we can have a look at the aphorism *Of the stillest hour*, where Zarathustra, in deep contemplation, engages with his own voiceless thoughts:

'O Zarathustra, you shall go as a shadow of that which must come: thus you will command and commanding lead the way.' And I answered: 'I am

ashamed.'

Then again something said to me voicelessly: 'You must yet become a child and without shame [*ohne Scham*]. 'the pride of youth is still in you, you have become young late: but he who wants to become a child must overcome even his youth.' (Z II, 22)

As we see here, Zarathustra commands himself that he must become a child and become without shame. Importantly, becoming a child means even overcoming one's own youth – thus, not a return to overt childishness or youthful pride, but a consciously chosen boldness in life that chooses and affirms itself.

As Nietzsche-Zarathustra argues that he would rather "see shameless ones [*den Schamlosen*], than those with distorted eyes of their shame and devotion" (Z, II 4), we should be careful to see that Nietzsche here too, at least to some extent, falls into a lamentation of shamelessness. However, I argue that the strand of becoming *unashamed of oneself* is a stronger one that should not be ignored – also because, as we can see, Nietzsche would *rather* have someone without any kind of shame, than full of shame and devotion.

I came to my truth by diverse paths and diverse ways: it was not upon a single ladder that I climbed to the height where my eyes survey my distances. [...]

All my progress has been an attempting and a questioning – and truly, one has to *learn* how to answer such questioning! That however – is to my taste:

Not good taste, not bad taste, but *my* taste, which I no longer conceal and of which I am no longer ashamed.

'This – is now *my* way: where is yours?' Thus I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For *the* way – does not exist! (Z III, 11)

Nietzsche wants us to be unashamed of our *own* way, which as he argues is unlike that of anyone else (for *the* way, or the universalised standard that would fit anyone right, *does not exist*). But in order to get to know our way – and, importantly, in order to be able to affirm it – we must learn how to judge for ourselves, by gaining both self-knowledge and the ability or strength to say no to that which is commonly accepted, simply because it is the largely agreed upon moral code.

### Conclusion: Shame and Plurality

As I have tried to argue, both Locke and Nietzsche are occupied with the problem of pluralism and shame in democracy. Clear for both is that shame, in its political dimensions, works as a regulative ideal of how one should go about one's public life and posits certain normative ideas on how to behave. This is a problem for societies that want to embrace plurality and be hospitable to different styles or ways of living. However, it is interesting to see that Locke argues for unashamed citizenship in the name of egalitarian ideals, while Nietzsche was sceptical about the possibility of genuine (unashamed) plurality in democratic society exactly because of its egalitarianism, which he argued ultimately leads to uniformity. However, as Nietzsche stays (perhaps purposively) unclear as to how his exceptional outsiders relate to democracy, or indeed as to what kind of community would have his full support, there are perhaps other authors who are more helpful in regard to this problem.<sup>9</sup> But, as I have tried to show, what Nietzsche does help us to consider is how being unashamed emerges from *within* the experience of shame, as a self-reflective moment of both protest and affirmation. This is not an immature rejection of shame, but a consciously working through it and a decision to not accept it – or as Locke would say, a radical political activity, done by courageous and unapologetic people.

### Notes

1] Here I am following a theoretical framework offered by Silvan Tomkins and supported by Elspeth Probyn. According to Tomkins, shame operates only after interest (or enjoyment) has been activated. This interest involves a desire for connection, for communication, and lines of reciprocity – or in other words, to be part of a certain community (and recognized as such). Probyn adds to this that shame holds an ambiguous state that can go two ways: either moving forward into more interest (and possible adaptation) or falling back into humiliation (moving further inwards). The feeling of shame itself is the moment of interruption – the break in connection – but also signals or promises a return of interest and connection. As Probyn writes, “the shame of the cultural outsider is fed by a deep desire to fit in and an abiding interest in being able to do so [...]. The more interested you are in fitting in, the more you are likely to feel ashamed when that interest is not enough to allow you to move smoothly in another culture and space.” Probyn 2005, ix–xviii, 8, 14, 28, 39; cf. Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 496–522.

2] In her analysis of how to reconcile shame with autonomy, Cheshire Calhoun has called this view the moral pioneer strategy, and mentions Anthony O'Hear, John Kekes and Virgil C. Aldrich as its defenders.

3] Currently, the supposed rise of shamelessness is often blamed on the decline of the public/private distinction, the loss of privacy, and the general rise of selfish individualism and self-fulfilment that seem to give rise to forms of ethically outrageous behaviour (Locke 2016, 6).

4] Locke notes that the Lament most pointedly emerges “when ordinary people, especially these lacking significant political power and states, resist and refashion the demands of shame and its requirements” (Locke 2016, 16, 20).

5] Siemens here argues that Nietzsche combined and concentrated two hesitations he had already voiced concerning democracy (tyranny of the people and promotion of uniformity) into a new thought: the systematic exclusion of difference.

6] Cf. HH 275, 281; WS 230, 275, 289, 293; BGE 44, 202–4, 212, 242.

7] Carl Schneider has for this reason argued that Nietzsche's account of shame is a dynamic one, where one must have a sense of shame, but not be ashamed of oneself (Schneider 1977, 23). On his account, Ronald Speirs explains Nietzsche's ambiguous remarks on shame partly on etymological foundations: “While [the German] ‘Scham’ frequently refers to experiences that give rise to a feeling of disgrace or humiliation, its usage can also be positively charged, conveying a sense of modesty, reticence or propriety, including the obligation to spare another person hurt or embarrassment, or the ability to acknowledge, without resentment, greatness in another human being” (Speirs 2013, 2).

8] We can see Nietzsche becoming increasingly occupied with this, most notably in *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, and most self-reflectingly, in *Ecce Homo* (cf. GM Pref. 1, 6; BGE 4, 6; EH, “Why Am I so Wise”).

9] While it makes sense to turn to Hannah Arendt for a political thought of plurality, also see Locke’s chapter on Arendt (Locke 2016, 134–66).

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**Biography**

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Tessa de Vet obtained her BA in Cultural Studies at the University of Amsterdam, focusing on cultural history, sociology of culture and aesthetics. She is currently finishing up her research master in Philosophy at the same university, writing a thesis on the eternal recurrence in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze.