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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02164-1>

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Hermeneutic Calvinball versus modest digital humanities in philosophical interpretation

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In “Calvin and Hobbes,” the character Calvin invents the game of Calvinball. No two games of Calvinball are alike because the only stable rule of Calvinball is that the players make up the rules as they go along, and no rule (other than the one stable rule) can be used twice. Whether a player *is winning at a particular game* of Calvinball is thus definitionally indeterminate. In philosophy, we risk playing something like Calvinball. It’s often unclear what the rules are, whether there are rules, and who gets to make up the rules as we go along. Even in the more restricted domain of the history of philosophy—the focus of the current paper—it’s often unclear what the rules are, whether there are rules, and who gets to make them up as we go along. Some interpreters of, for instance, Nietzsche, insist on sticking to the letter of the text. Others, most notoriously Heidegger and his followers, insist that what’s most important about a philosopher like Nietzsche is not what he wrote but what he didn’t write. Just like in Calvinball, because people play by different rules and make it up as they go along, it can be hard to tell *who is winning* an interpretive argument. This paper proposes that digital humanities offers a modest way forward for interpreters who don’t want to play Calvinball. In particular, it is argued that digital humanities methods can be used (1) to *set a default* for the importance of various concepts, (2) to *periodize* a philosopher’s works and *track the increase or decline in importance* of various concepts across a philosopher’s career, and (3) to *establish which conceptual connections should or should not be attributed* to a philosopher. The value of this approach is demonstrated with a detailed investigation of Nietzsche on the functions of shame.

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Introduction

In Bill Watterson’s philosophically-savvy comic strip, “Calvin and Hobbes,” the character Calvin invents the game of Calvinball. No two games of Calvinball are alike because the only stable rule of Calvinball is that the players make up the rules as they go along, and no rule (other than the one stable rule) can be used twice. Whether a player is *winning at a particular game* of Calvinball is thus definitionally indeterminate. Advancing towards a goal might seem like progress, but if the rules change so that retreating from what used to be that goal is now the way to win, all of the player’s seeming progress turns out to be regress. Likewise, whether a player is *good at Calvinball* in general is definitionally indeterminate. The fact that a player has won the majority of their previous games is not strong evidence that they will win their next game or the majority of their upcoming games.

In philosophy, we risk playing something like Calvinball. It’s often unclear what the rules are, whether there are rules, and who gets to make up the rules as we go along. This is one reason for the ongoing debates about whether philosophical progress has happened or is even possible (Wilson, 2017; Stoljar, 2017). Even in the more restricted domain of the history of philosophy—the focus of the current paper—it’s often unclear what the rules are, whether there are rules, and who gets to make them up as we go along. Many interpreters of, for instance, Nietzsche, insist on sticking to the letter of the text, but others such as Heidegger and his followers (Heidegger, 1936/1991; Derrida, 1978; Magnus, 1991; Babich, 2011, 2012), insist that what’s most important about a philosopher like Nietzsche is not what he wrote but what he *didn’t* write.

Given his monumental status in twentieth-century continental philosophy, Heidegger’s hermeneutic legislating has had an outsized influence on subsequent interpretations of Nietzsche. But even more hard-nosed scholars such as Christine Swanton (2015) and Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick (2012) base their interpretations on at most a single passage or phrase. Swanton’s interpretation of Nietzsche (1986) as a philosopher of “mature egoism” is based only on *Human, All-too-human* (henceforth HH) 95 even though he never uses the German term for this phrase (*reifen Egoismus*)—not even in HH 95. Meanwhile, Clark and Dudrick’s interpretation of Nietzsche as committed to a contrast between the “will to truth” and the “will to value” relies on *Beyond Good and Evil* (henceforth BGE) 2 even though Nietzsche never uses the German term for the latter phrase (*Wille zur Wertzshätzung*)—not even in BGE 2. If it’s possible to use both the fact that a philosopher said something and the fact that they didn’t say it (or only said it once) as evidence for an interpretation, then the evidential base of philosophical hermeneutics is tenuous at best.¹

The Calvinball problem plagues not just Nietzsche interpretation but also the history of philosophy more generally (for instance, see Corbin, 2022 for a similar complaint about Hobbes scholarship). The basic worry underlying the Calvinball problem is that we have no way to guarantee or even hope that two competent scholars of the same historical figure, with access to the same corpus of their writings and asking the same interpretive questions, will arrive at roughly the same answer about how to understand the views of the philosopher in question. Supposing they disagree, what criteria are we to use to allocate our credence in their interpretations?

The Calvinball problem is not just an issue for historians of philosophy to work out on their own. The humanities are under attack globally (Nussbaum, 2010; Rosenberg, 2012). Australia recently made it more expensive for university students to pursue a humanities degree than a degree in STEM.² Some have gone so far as to argue that we should abandon the study of the history of philosophy (Sauer, 2022, though see Sauer, 2023 for a self-

rebuttal). To the extent that a solution to the Calvinball problem in the history of philosophy can be generalized to the rest of philosophy and the humanities more broadly, we will be better able to fend off these attacks.

In this paper, I propose that digital humanities offers a modest way forward for interpreters who don’t want to play Calvinball. In particular, I argue that digital humanities methods can be used (1) to *set a default* for the importance of various concepts, (2) to *periodize* a philosopher’s works and *track the increase or decline in importance* of various concepts across a philosopher’s career, and (3) to *establish which conceptual connections should or should not be attributed* to a philosopher. Put differently, digital humanities methods can help us provide a first guess as to what a philosopher cares about, how what they care about changes over the course of their philosophical career, and how each of the things they care about relates (or doesn’t relate) to each of the other things they care about.

These modest and defeasible purposes should help to *expose cherry-picking*. More broadly, these aims should help scholars to *reveal gaps and gluts* in the existing literature and thus to *set the agenda* for future hermeneutics and close-reading. More ambitiously, employing these methods systematically and at scale may deliver on the prospect of addressing the challenge of replicability and replication in the history of philosophy and related fields (Peels, 2019; Peels and Bouter, 2018a, 2018b).

Here is the plan for this paper: in the section ‘Nietzsche on resentment and shame vs. Nietzsche scholars on resentment and shame’, I compare the primary and secondary literatures in Nietzsche studies with respect to the emotions of resentment (*ressentiment*) and shame. While Nietzsche has much more to say about shame than resentment, the scholarship—including recent books specifically about Nietzsche’s moral psychology—tends to treat resentment as much more important than shame. In the section ‘Digital methodology’, I demonstrate how digital humanities methods reveal that shame (unlike resentment) was important to him not just in some periods but throughout his philosophical career, and develop leads as to which other concepts are associated with shame in his philosophy (e.g., virtue, conscience, contempt, laughter, solitude). In the section ‘The functions of shame in Nietzsche’, I close-read and interpret many of the passages highlighted by this approach and show that Nietzsche envisions four potential roles for shame in human life, interaction, and flourishing. I conclude with a brief reflection on the prospects of replacing hermeneutic Calvinball with modest digital humanities.

Nietzsche on resentment and shame vs. Nietzsche scholars on resentment and shame

While there is a consensus in the secondary literature that emotions are philosophically important for Nietzsche, there is less agreement about which emotions to focus on and what role they play. I suggest that the emotions he most talks about are the ones we as interpreters should also talk about. A search of the Nietzsche Source (www.nietzschesource.org) for ‘resentim*’ (the stem he uses to refer to resentment) and ‘scham* schmach* schand*’ (the stems he uses to refer to shame) in Nietzsche’s writings (but not the *Nachlass* or letters) reveals that he talks about resentment in twenty-one passages (in GM, A, TI, and EH), while he talks about shame in 159 passages, including every published or authorized work. By contrast, consider the scholarly engagement with Nietzsche on these two emotions. A search of philpapers.org conducted 25 March 2023 for works published since 1950 (the date of Kaufmann’s (1950) landmark *Nietzsche: Philosophy, Psychologist, Antichrist*) turns up 149 hits for works

mentioning Nietzsche and *ressentiment*, 70 mentioning Nietzsche and resentment (many of them the same), and 14 mentioning Nietzsche and shame. To put it a bit crudely, for Nietzsche, shame is roughly an order of magnitude more important than resentment, but for Nietzsche scholars, resentment is roughly an order of magnitude more important than shame. The resulting mismatch is the equivalent of saying the average housecat (5 kg) is heavier than the average racehorse (500 kg).

Why does the secondary literature mischaracterize the relative importance of these two emotions in Nietzsche's philosophical corpus? The irresistible answer is that a mistake by translators decades ago has snowballed into research malpractice by generations of scholars writing about Nietzsche in English. In German, the word '*Ressentiment*' can be treated as a foreign (French) word or a normal loanword. Both the Kaufmann translations and the Cambridge translations of Nietzsche's writings into English have transliterated the word and printed it in italics in every instance, as if he were using a French word. But he wasn't. It's true that the first time Nietzsche (2006) uses '*Ressentiment*' in *Genealogy of Morals* (henceforth GM) 1.10, he prints it with special typography (sperrn), which might lead one to think he was treating it as a foreign word. But even in the same passage, the other seven uses are typographically undistinguished. Of the remaining forty-one uses of the word in his published and authorized manuscripts, precisely one is typographically distinct (again, using sperrn). From this we must conclude that in the two exceptional cases he was indicating emphasis, not foreignness. Unfortunately, translators' mistaken transliterating and italicizing has led Anglophone philosophers to attach undeserved importance to resentment, all the while ignoring the emotion of shame.

This criticism is based on simple-minded tallies of search results. How robust are they? A philosopher might mention resentment or *ressentiment* a single time without devoting much attention to it. The authoritative *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (entry on Nietzsche Anderson, 2022) mentions '*ressentiment*' three times and cites six further publications with '*ressentiment*' in their titles. It also uses 'resentment' and cognates three times. It never mentions shame, though it does refer to one book with 'shame' in the title. What happens when we examine two recent books specifically about Nietzsche's moral psychology: *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* (Leiter, 2019) and *Nietzsche's Moral Psychology* (Alfano, 2019a)? According to Google Scholar's citation metrics, Leiter and Alfano are the second- and fifth-most prominent scholars of Nietzsche globally. Their books came out in the same year with Oxford and Cambridge University Presses and have nearly identical titles. Searching through Leiter's book, we find '*ressentiment*' in seven distinct passages, 'resentment' and cognates in zero, and shame and cognates in seven. Searching through Alfano's book, we find '*ressentiment*' in two distinct passages, 'resentment' and cognates in fifteen, and shame and cognates in sixteen. Thus, it appears that scholars who go to the trouble of writing whole books about Nietzsche do a better job than the overall secondary literature of reflecting his actual thinking and writing, but even they distort the relative importance of various concepts in his philosophy.

Digital methodology

Let's begin by getting a sense of the overall shape of Nietzsche's philosophical corpus. We can do this using hierarchical clustering to compare the language used in each of Nietzsche's published and authorized manuscripts, as shown in Fig. 1.

As Fig. 1 shows, starting in 1880, Nietzsche's writings developed a distinctive style, with the free spirit works (HH, D, GS) clustering together while the mature works (BGE, GM) and two of the late works (EH, TI) also cluster together.

Next, let's examine the lexical dispersion of the three German word stems that Nietzsche uses to talk about shame (scham*, schmach*, schand*), as pictured in Fig. 2. Each vertical line represents a usage of the corresponding term, and the width of the bars represents the total word count of each book. For instance, *Human, All-too-human* is Nietzsche's longest book, which is why the bar representing it is the widest. It also primarily addresses shame under the heading of scham*, with just a couple passages using schmach* or schand*. By contrast, *The Antichrist* (henceforth A) has multiple passages in which Nietzsche (2005) uses schand* and just a couple in which he uses scham* or schmach*. Manual inspection reveals that these are passages in which he quotes or references the Luther translation of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (chapter 1, verses 20–29).

These figures provide some context and demonstrate Nietzsche's ongoing concern with the moral psychology of shame. Combining all three word-stems into a single composite dictionary makes it possible to plot the relative frequency of words referring to shame in each of Nietzsche's books, as shown in Fig. 3.

As Fig. 3 shows, Nietzsche (1997, 2001) was especially interested in shame in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, *Daybreak* (henceforth D), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (henceforth Z), *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science* (henceforth GS), and *Antichrist*. Later in this paper, I examine relevant passages from each of these books to develop an interpretation of Nietzsche's conception of shame.

With which other concepts did Nietzsche associate shame? We can begin to address this question, thus setting the agenda for scholarly close-reading, by examining what other concepts he refers to in the paragraphs where he talks about shame. These conceptual collocations are mapped in Fig. 4.

As Fig. 4 shows, when Nietzsche talks about shame, he also tends to talk about conscience, contempt, laughter, solitude, and virtue. This indicates that whatever interpretation of Nietzsche on shame we come up with ought to make reference to these other concepts. Exactly *what the connections mean* is something that can only be determined through close reading, but *that there is a connection to be drawn* is already indicated by the math. Alfano (2019a, 2019b) has previously argued that Nietzsche should be taken seriously when he describes his own philosophy as "a schooling in contempt" (HH P1), and that for Nietzsche, contempt is implicated in three virtues: the pathos of distance, having a sense of humour, and solitude. It should therefore not surprise us that contempt, laughter (an expression of the sense of humour), solitude, and virtue all cluster together here. Moreover, since shame is arguably a form of a self-directed contempt (whereas solitude is a form of ingroup-directed contempt), the conceptual connections already begin to emerge. As we will see in the next section, Nietzsche envisions four main functions for the emotion of shame.

The functions of shame in Nietzsche

In this section, I identify four main functions of shame in Nietzsche's writings and show how these functions relate to the concepts suggested by the digital methodology employed in the previous section, namely conscience, contempt, laughter, solitude, and virtue. First, in a society of near-equals, shame regulates interactions and incentives in ways that preserve game-theoretic equilibria, which Nietzsche seems to regard as a positive good. Second and relatedly, Nietzsche associates the capacity to experience nuanced and appropriate feelings of shame—and to anticipate them in others—with the pathos of distance, a virtue that he associates with psychological nobility. Third, when shame is directed towards fixed aspects of human nature or the self, it transforms those aspects into vices; by contrast, when it is directed

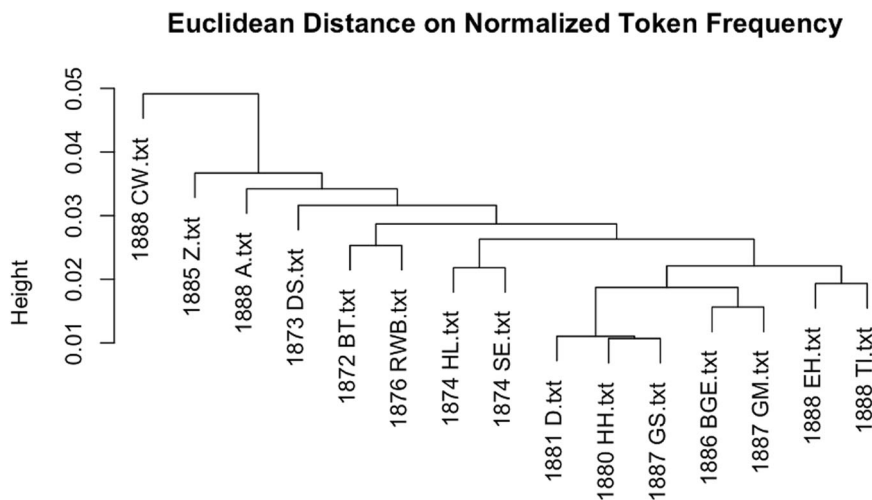


Fig. 1 Hierarchical clustering of Nietzsche's published and authorized manuscripts, based on final publication date in cases where multiple versions exist.

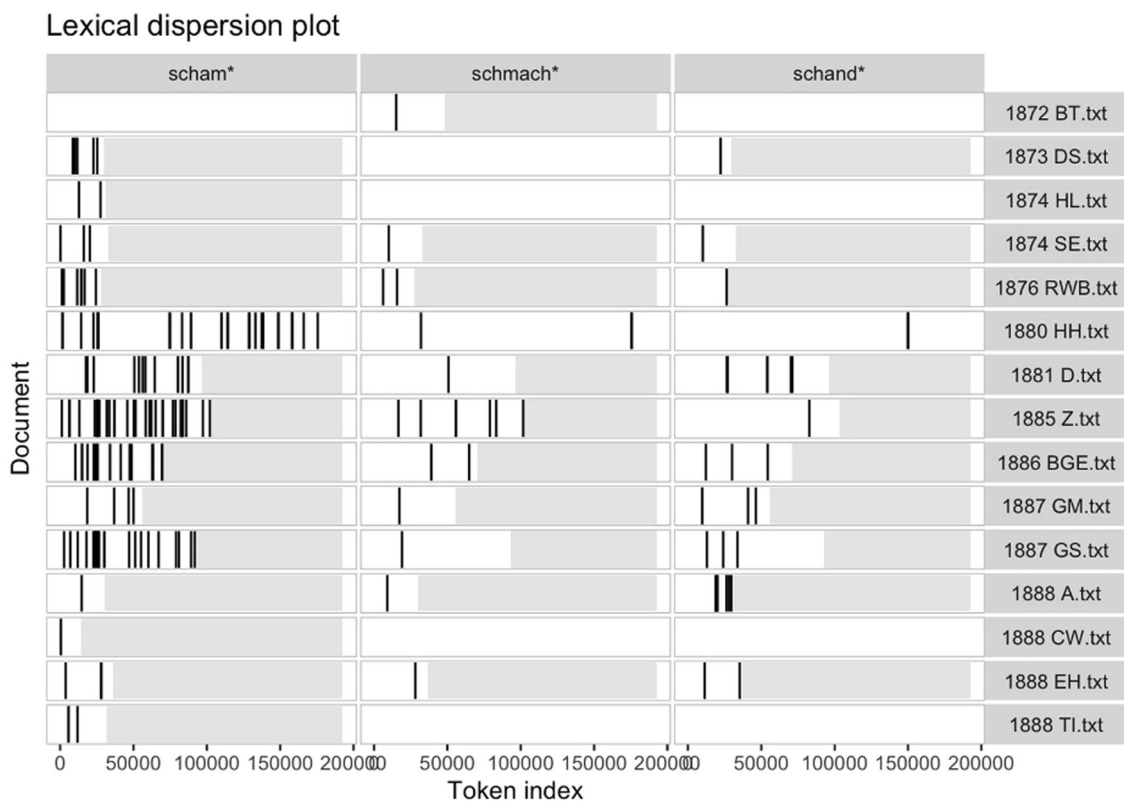


Fig. 2 Lexical dispersion of shame in Nietzsche's published and authorized manuscripts.

towards malleable aspects of human nature or the self, it may foster self-improvement and virtue. Nietzsche frequently laments the way that shame targets immutable aspects of ourselves. Finally and relatedly, Nietzsche casts counter-shame on those who would direct first-order shame on fixed aspects of human nature, as well as a paradoxical form of uplifting shame on their victims. If this is right, then Nietzsche does not offer a univocal verdict on shame. Instead, like many other emotions and emotional capacities, shame is inescapable, complex, and function-relative.

Social regulation. The first function that Nietzsche associates with shame is social regulation among (near-)equals, especially elites in societies that have escaped only recently from a quasi-

Hobbesian state of nature. For instance, in *HH Wanderer and his Shadow 22*, while discussing the *lex talionis*, he remarks:

Within a community in which all regard themselves as equivalent there exist *shame* [Schande] and *punishment* [Strafe] as measures against transgressions, that is to say against disruptions of the principle of equilibrium: shame as a weight placed in the scales against the encroaching individual who has procured advantages for himself through his encroachment and now through the shame he incurs experiences disadvantages which abolish these earlier advantages and *outweigh* them.³

In this passage, shame is conceived of not as an occurrent emotional attitude but as the social status of disgrace. Naturally,

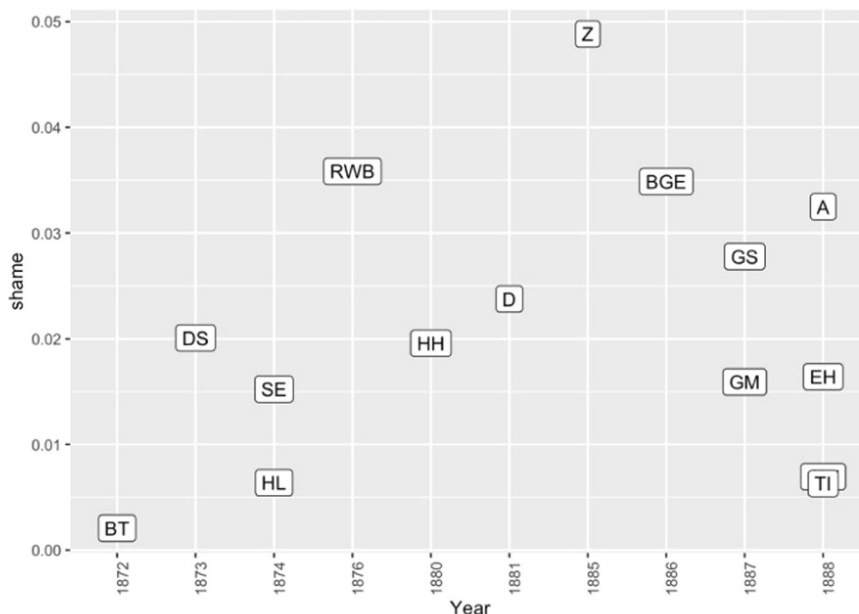


Fig. 3 Frequency of *scham, *schmach**, and/or *schand** in each of Nietzsche's published and authorized books.** The x-axis represents the year of publication. The y-axis represents the proportion of the total corpus that refers to shame.

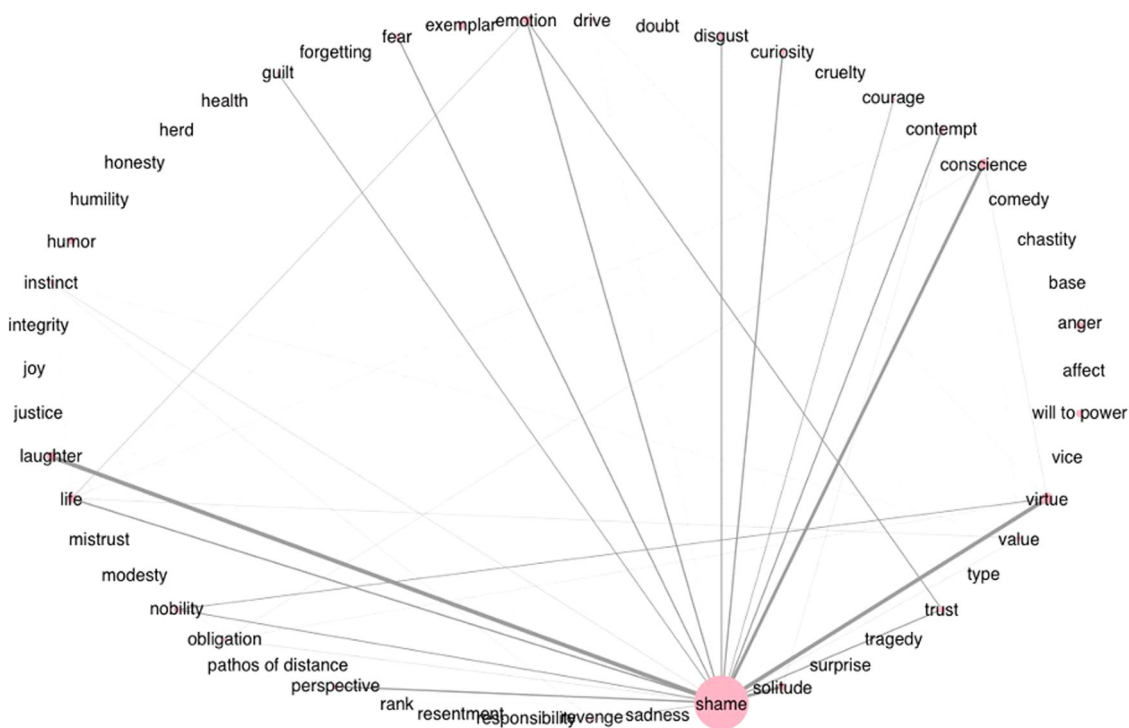


Fig. 4 Paragraph-wise conceptual collocation egonet for shame in Nietzsche's corpus. Node size = weighted degree. Edge width = weight.

these two are often connected. People who endure disgrace are likely to feel shame, and people can also feel shame without suffering disgrace, but disgrace characteristically aims to induce feelings of shame. The loss of social status that comes with being the object of contempt and shame ensures that ill-gotten gains cannot be leveraged to further advantage. Moreover, when all members of such a society are aware that their ill-gotten gains will be met with proportionate shame or punishment, they realize that pursuing such gains is pointless, which in turn reduces the amount of actual conflict in the society and contributes to a stable equilibrium.⁴

Moving to the mature works, Nietzsche says in BGE 265 that this recognition of equality can be so well instilled that people become comfortable with it. The “noble soul,” he says, admits that “there are others with rights equal to its own. As soon as it is clear about this question of rank, it will move among these equals and ‘equally righted’ with an assured shame [*Scham*] and a gentle reverence equal to how it treats itself.” As we will see below, this shame is not actually felt but rather dispositional. The noble soul is not ashamed of her actions or herself. Rather, she knows how to comport herself among equals in such a way that she does not bring shame upon herself.

In a later passage (GM 2.5), Nietzsche returns to the theme of inflicting shame in order to regulate social interactions among people who see themselves as capable of both inflicting harm on and suffering harm from one another. Again, he seems to be envisioning a society that has recently escaped from a state of nature, and in which relationships of trust are at best fragile. In this imagined pre-history, he says, “the creditor could inflict all kinds of shame [*Schmach*] and torture on the body of the debtor” should the debtor fail to repay. While this scenario surely involves plenty of distrust, the key for Nietzsche is that it remains one in which conditionally-trusting contractual relationships such as borrowing and lending are possible. If the creditor were not assured that they could extract value from the debtor in the form of the pleasure of shaming and torturing in the case of non-payment, they would not be willing to enter into the relationship in the first place. And for that to be possible, society must be organized in such a way that the creditor can be reasonably confident that these alternatives to remuneration are guaranteed. In other words, the creditor-to-be must have enough social power that they can’t be completely steamrolled by a shameless debtor. And, in all likelihood, the debtor must be aware of this as well, inducing caution in the seeking of loans. In such a society, only those who are likely able to repay their debts will seek credit in the first place, and creditors will therefore infrequently need to exercise their awful powers of shaming and torturing. In other words, Nietzsche is again describing how shame can contribute to social equilibria. Shame is, in a sense, *self-effacing*: if someone has a dispositional sense of shame, then they will avoid putting themselves in situations where the occurrent emotion of shame is called for.

Pathos of distance. The dispositions that people end up developing in the sorts of societies described above often end up coalescing into a nuanced sensitivity to hierarchy and rank—a virtuous sense of shame that Nietzsche sometimes calls the pathos of distance—which both informs them about shame-relevant situations and behaviours and motivates them to avoid such situations and behaviours. The pathos of distance is a virtue that attunes its bearer to status and rank, which one would need to negotiate the fraught social world in which shame is constantly one misstep away. Like contemporary authors such as Adam Morton (2013; see also Alfano, 2016), Nietzsche understands shame and contempt correlatively: shame is the emotion one experiences when one imagines and endorses a point of view from which one is the object of contempt. This can occur concurrently (being ashamed) or prospectively. In the latter case, one experiences what Van Fossen (2019) calls protective shame, which motivates its bearer to avoid the action or omission that would occasion occurrent shame.⁵ The pathos of distance subsequently develops into a fine-tuned sense for the contemptible, and those who lack it are, in Nietzsche’s view, bound to end up doing shameful things even if they don’t realize it.

For example, in SE 4, Nietzsche contends that “Whoever is seeking to answer the question of what the philosopher as educator can mean in our time has to contest this view”—optimism about the German Reich—and “must declare: it is a downright scandal [*Schande und Schmach*] that such nauseating, idolatrous flattery can be rendered to our time by supposedly thinking and honourable men.” The idea here is that among those allegedly of a high spiritual rank (“thinking and honourable men”), the pathos of distance should be sufficiently prevalent to prevent such shameful displays. Nietzsche also alludes in this passage to the virtue of solitude, since the shame in question is not individual but collective: it is the shame of scholars on behalf of scholars, rather than the shame of a scholar on his own behalf.

Later, in HH 1.100, which is entitled “*Shame* [*Scham*],” Nietzsche remarks that feelings of shame extend not only to social relations but also to embodied markers of rank and hierarchy, such as religious spaces and kingship. Such spaces are typically forbidden to those of lower rank, and so mystery, as well as intrusions into mysterious spaces, comes to be associated with shame. He goes on to claim that “The whole world of interior states, the so-called ‘soul’, is likewise still a mystery to all non-philosophers; through endless ages it has been believed that the ‘soul’ was of divine origin and worthy of traffic with the gods: consequently it is an adytum and evokes shame.” He expresses a similar idea in HH 1.461, saying that “Men traffic with their princes in much the same way as they do with their god.” What he calls an “almost uncanny mood of reverence and fear and shame [*Scham*]” attaches to anything and anyone of high rank. Thus, for example “The cult of the genius is an echo of this reverence for gods and princes.” These passages suggest that the sense of prospective shame can be mis-attuned and hyper-vigilant. This is a theme that crops up in several other passages, including HH *Wanderer and his Shadow* 69 (see also GS P4), which is titled “*Habitual shame* [*Scham*].” Reiterating the association between shame and mystery, Nietzsche says that “Whenever we feel shame [*Scham*] there exists a mystery which seems to have been desecrated, or to be in danger of desecration, through us.” He then goes on to suggest that “all *undeserved grace* engenders shame” because it involves the sense that one has received benefits that were reserved for those of higher rank. But, he points out, if we consider that “we have never ‘deserved’ anything at all, then if one acquiesces to this proposition within the Christian total view of things the feeling of *shame* will become *habitual*.” The sense that one has violated a space that is set aside for those of higher rank engenders shame. When one’s pathos of distance is well-tuned, such shame may be appropriate, but when it is hyper-vigilant, it becomes pathological.

In the mature works, we see Nietzsche’s continued reflections on the nature and functions of a sense of shame. In BGE 40, he addresses the prospective shame of those who would be ashamed to put others to shame, saying “Everything profound loves masks; the most profound things go so far as to hate images and likenesses. Wouldn’t just the *opposite* be a proper disguise for the shame [*Scham*] of a god?” The phrase “shame of a god” may strike us as bizarre. What Nietzsche is talking about here is a powerful being who confers significant benefits on another, and is aware that receiving such benefits may put the beneficiary to shame. The shame of a god is thus prospective *other-regarding* shame: a disposition to be sensitive to the shame one may cause in others through one’s gifts and benevolence. Such sensitivity is not possible unless one has a finely-tuned pathos of distance, such that one is keenly aware that another will be put to shame by receiving an unearned or extravagant benefit. Nietzsche goes so far as to suggest that “There are acts of love and extravagant generosity in whose aftermath nothing is more advisable than to take a stick and give the eye-witnesses a good beating: this will obscure any memory traces.” And the eye-witnesses very much include oneself: “Many people are excellent at obscuring and abusing their own memory, so they can take revenge on at least this one accessory:—shame [*Scham*] is inventive. It is not the worst things that we are the most ashamed [*schämt*] of.” The emerging picture is one in which shame makes one sensitive to facts and considerations of rank, and thus can be apt or inapt in various ways. When it is apt, it is self-effacing insofar as it motivates actions that forestall both one’s own and others’ occurrent shame. When it is inapt, it can lead either to shamelessly ignorant actions and omissions, on the one hand, or undue shame, on the other.

These impressions are further borne out by BGE 263, another passage about the pathos of distance. Nietzsche first remarks that, “It is a great achievement when the masses [...] have finally had the feeling bred into them that they cannot touch everything, that there are holy experiences which require them to take off their shoes and keep their dirty hands away.” He goes on to make an invidious distinction between the masses and scholars (with whom he also identifies): “what is perhaps the most disgusting thing about so-called scholars, the devout believers in ‘modern ideas’ is their lack of shame [*Scham*], the careless impudence of their eyes and hands that touch, taste, and feel everything.” He ends by suggesting that, in a certain sense, there is more “nobility of taste and tactfulness of respect within [...] the peasantry, than among [...] the educated.” This ambivalence towards scholars is echoed in GS 358, in which Nietzsche gives the Lutheran reformation a backhanded compliment, saying that if “one wanted to give it the credit for having prepared and favoured what we today honour as ‘modern science’, one must surely add that it also shares the blame for the degeneration of the modern scholar, for his lack of reverence, shame [*Scham*], and depth.”

Finally, in EH Wise.4, Nietzsche returns to the topic of shame-sensitivity, saying, “My problem with people who pity is that they easily lose any sense of shame [*Scham*] or respect, or any sensitivity for distances.” The same criticism also crops up in Z 2.Pity: “Indeed, I do not like them, the merciful who are blissful in their pitying: they lack too much in shame [*Scham*].” Once again, Nietzsche’s criticism is that those who have no pathos of distance or an ill-tuned pathos of distance inevitably bring shame either on themselves or others. Those who pity are so intrusive with their attentions and concerns that they are liable to put to shame the very people they allege to help. Perhaps if they had the “shame of a god” mentioned in BGE 40, they would be in a position to help anonymously or without bringing shame down on their beneficiaries. But because they lack this disposition, they compound injury with insult.

The same idea also crops up in GS 273-5, in which Nietzsche asks himself three questions and answers each in a single sentence: “Whom do you call bad?—He who always wants to put people to shame [*beschämen*]. What is most human to you?—To spare someone shame [*Scham*]. What is the seal of having become free?—No longer to be ashamed [*schämen*] before oneself.”

Vicious shame. Shame becomes especially pathological when it is directed towards a fixed aspect of the self or is counter to one’s nature. In D 109, one of his most extensive discussions of the nature and dynamics of drives, Nietzsche catalogues a range of strategies one may employ to modulate one’s own drives. One pathological approach that he explores is described thusly: “he who can endure it and finds it reasonable to weaken and depress his *entire* bodily and physical organisation will naturally thereby also attain the goal of weakening an individual violent drive.” Doing so weakens all of one’s drives en masse. Nietzsche compares the person who employs this strategy to the ascetic, who “starves his sensuality and thereby also starves and shames [*zu Schanden*] his vigour and not seldom his reason as well.”

While this strategy of self-shaming may be successful in the short term, Nietzsche worries that it risks overall degeneration and cautions against it. For example, in Z 1.Warriors, Zarathustra encourages the warriors to not be ashamed of their hatred because it is a fixed aspect of their character. Likewise, in Z 4.Ugliest, Zarathustra encounters the ugliest man, the murderer of God, who acted out of shame at his fixed traits. Zarathustra overcomes his own revulsion and shame, rather than falling into ineffectual pity (*Mitleid*). Importantly, Zarathustra does not get stuck in shame but rather *overcomes* the temptation to wallow in

it. Nietzsche reiterates this point in BGE 65: “Knowledge would have little charm if there were not so much shame [*Scham*] to be overcome in order to reach it.” Shame that can be overcome is shame that does not attach to fixed aspects of oneself. Instead, it is shame over malleable aspects of oneself that can then be given up and gotten past.

By contrast, Nietzsche laments it when shame attaches to fixed aspects of oneself or of human nature more broadly. In BGE 195, he says that during the slave revolt in morality the priests “melted together ‘rich’, ‘godless’, ‘evil’, ‘sensual’ and for the first time coined an insult [*Schandwort*] out of the word ‘world.’” Nietzsche returns to this theme in GM 2.7, saying that he doesn’t want to “provide our pessimists with new grist for the discordant and creaking mills of disgust with life,” and that, on the contrary, “at the time when mankind felt no shame towards its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than it is today, with its pessimists. The heavens darkened over man in direct proportion to the increase in his feeling shame [*Scham*] at being man.” One cannot change one’s species. To be ashamed of being human is clearly to be ashamed of fixed aspects of oneself. For Nietzsche, this is the making of vice and degeneration. He goes on in GM 2.7 to decry the “tired, pessimistic outlook, mistrust of life’s riddle, the icy ‘no’ of nausea at life” that arises from “the mollicoddling and sermonizing, by means of which the animal ‘man’ is finally taught to be ashamed [*schämen*] of all his instincts.” Later, in a discussion of “men of resentment” (GM 3.14), Nietzsche says that they will only be satisfied when they have “succeeded in *shoving* their own misery, in fact all misery, *on to the conscience* of the happy: so that the latter eventually start to be ashamed of [*zu schämen begönnen*] their happiness and perhaps say to one another: ‘It’s a shame [*Schande*] to be happy!’” Once again, Nietzsche laments not shame itself but shame that runs counter to human nature by condemning as shameful something so fundamental to us as the pursuit of happiness.

Finally, in *The Antichrist* Nietzsche alludes multiple times to the Luther translation of Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians. The key line is one in which Paul says “*God hath chosen* the foolish things of the world to shame [*Schanden*] the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to shame [*Schanden*] the things which are mighty.” Once again, Nietzsche objects because Paul is casting shame precisely on things that humans cannot help but desire: wisdom, knowledge, and power. To follow Paul is to guarantee that you end up feeling ashamed of desires and drives that you cannot help but embody. This, for Nietzsche, is vicious and paradoxical. And he goes on to castigate Paul for seeking to induce such shame. For example, in A 59, while discussing the slave revolt in morals and lamenting the loss of ancient culture and science, he exclaims that these were not lost in military conflict or natural disaster but “instead shamed [*Schanden*] by sly, secretive, invisible, anaemic vampires!” As we will see below, Nietzsche responds to Pauline shaming of human nature with a sort of counter-shame.

Counter-shame. One central case in which Nietzsche thinks it is appropriate to cast shame on others is when they are promoting or victims of the sort of vicious shame identified in the previous section. For instance, in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (henceforth RWB) 11 (see also GS 99), Nietzsche proposes several evaluative contrasts: “that passion is better than stoicism and hypocrisy, that to be honest, even in evil, is better than to lose oneself in the morality of tradition; that the free man can be good or evil but the unfree man is a shame [*Schande*] to nature and is excluded from both heavenly and earthly solace.” It’s debatable what exactly Nietzsche means by “the free man,” but the basic idea seems to be that a certain kind of unfreedom is contrary to human nature and thus a matter of deep shame. The same sentiment crops up in GM

1.11, where Nietzsche says that resentful individuals, “These bearers of oppressive, vindictive instincts [...] represent the *decline* of mankind! These ‘instruments of culture’ are a shame [*Schande*] to man.”

Nietzsche does not use counter-shame indiscriminately only for expressions counter to human nature writ large. He also distinguishes cases in which it is shameful only for certain people to engage in certain actions and expressions. We already saw this above in the passage from SE 4 condemning “supposedly thinking and honourable men” for their flattery of the German Reich. Others may be ignorant, Nietzsche thinks, but they ought to know better. In particular, he shames them because they are *better* than they’ve shown themselves to be. This is the opposite of Pauline shaming, which insists that everyone is equally sinful and deplorable. What Nietzsche castigates is instead the failure to live up to potential that he thinks is still there, if only dispositionally. We see the same sort of counter-shaming in Z 3.Apostates2, where Zarathustra tells those who have gone back to religion that “it is a shame [*Schmach*] to pray! Not for everyone, but for you and me and whoever still has a conscience in his head. For *you* it is a shame [*Schmach*] to pray!”

Finally, in *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche reaches the apex of his counter-shaming. In A 26, he laments the depths to which, through the slave revolt in morals, Jewish religion was sunk in Pauline Christianity:

The concept of God falsified; the concept of morality falsified:—the Jewish priesthood did not stop at that. The whole *history* of Israel proved useless: get rid of it!—These priests performed a miracle of falsification and we have large portions of the Bible to prove it: in an unparalleled act of scorn for tradition and historical reality, they translated the history of their own people *into religion*, which is to say they made it into an idiotic salvation mechanism.

Nietzsche then goes on to cast counter-shame on the instigators of the slave revolt in morals, saying, “This is the most shameful [*schmachvollsten*] act of historical falsification that has ever taken place.” Likewise, in A 38 he laments “what *miscarriages of duplicity* modern people are, that in spite of all [their clearly non-Christian actions] they are *not ashamed* [*schämt*] to call themselves Christians!” And in A 62 Nietzsche ups the ante, declaiming, “I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great innermost corruption, the one great instinct of revenge that does not consider any method to be poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty* enough—I call it the one immortal blot [*Schandfleck*] on humanity.”

Conclusion

In this paper, I have systematically reviewed Nietzsche’s discussion of shame in his published and authorized works. I argue that he conceives of shame as the emotion one feels when one is or imagines oneself the object of contempt. Shame can be felt occurrently, but it can also be encountered prospectively—leading one to avoid the shameful action. This more dispositional understanding of shame also extends to other people and may lead us to avoid actions or omissions that put others to shame. Nietzsche thinks that shame is an inevitable, all-too-human emotion, and so our aim should be to regulate it rather than simply promote or eradicate it. In some social conditions, the sense of shame helps to regulate incentives and interactions so as to promote game-theoretic equilibria. Because of its value in promoting such equilibria, people tend to develop nuanced senses of shame that guide their behaviour. However, not everyone’s sense of shame is well-tuned, and things can go wrong in multiple ways. Being disposed to feel shame when it is inapt is deleterious, but so is being disposed not to feel shame when it is apt. Nietzsche is also

keenly aware of the potential to induce shame in others, and he thinks that we are often not cautious enough about doing so.

The sense of shame can easily become pathological in circumstances where it is directed at fixed aspects either of human nature writ large or at fixed aspects of oneself. These represent cases in which the paths of distance is severely mis-attuned. Nietzsche thinks that such misalignment has been systematically promoted by Pauline Christianity. To oppose this hypertrophied shame, Nietzsche sometimes casts counter-shame. His counter-shaming takes two forms. First, and more directly, he casts counter-shame on those who would promote first-order shame that targets fixed aspects of human nature or of individual humans. Second, he casts counter-shame on individuals whom he considers *better than* they’ve shown themselves to be through their acceptance of Pauline Christianity. Thus, paradoxically, Nietzschean counter-shame can be *uplifting*, whereas shame is commonly thought to be *downputting*.

This interpretation of Nietzsche’s thoughts on shame depends both on close-reading all of the passages in which he discusses shame and on digital humanities methods that reveal that an interpretation of shame should be tied to his thinking about contempt and the virtues that govern it, namely having a sense of humour, pathos of distance, and solitude. Thus, in this paper, I hope to have demonstrated by way of a detailed case study the preferability of modest digital humanities to hermeneutic Calvinball in the history of philosophy.

Data availability

All data (in the form of .txt files) and code (in the form of an RMarkdown file) needed to reproduce the analyses and visualizations in this paper are available at the Open Science Framework site associated with this project: https://osf.io/5vdj9/?view_only=1447867d28024814be91c6ea591a6190.

Received: 26 March 2023; Accepted: 25 September 2023;

Published online: 06 October 2023

Notes

- Note, too, that this problem is not isolated to philosophers. For instance, Germanist Rohit Sharma (2006) has written a monograph titled *On the Seventh Solitude: Endless Becoming and the Eternal Return in the Poetry of Friedrich Nietzsche*. His title is derived from Nietzsche’s usage of the enigmatic numerological phrases ‘seventh solitude’ [*siebenten Einsamkeit*] and ‘seven solitudes’ [*Sieben Einsamkeiten*] in GS 285, GS 309, Z Noon, *Ecce Homo* (henceforth EH) Books Z.5, and DD Fire Sign. Oddly, Sharma insists that Nietzsche uses the phrase seven times, even though there are only five recorded attestations in the published and authorized manuscripts.
- See url = <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/19/australian-university-fees-arts-stem-science-maths-nursing-teaching-humanities>, accessed 25 March 2023.
- Details on translations are at the end of the paper, though in some cases I have made minor modifications for the sake of clarity. For instance, in this passage, *Schande* is standardly translated as ‘disgrace’, but to preserve continuity I have changed it to ‘shame’.
- Nietzsche’s speculative argument here has been borne out by game theoretic work on reputation in iterated games, e.g., Kreps et al. (1982).
- For more on the history of prospective shame—and its connection to both conscience and guilt—see Sorabji (2014). Contemporary researchers such Deonna et al. (2012) also theorize what they call the “sense of shame,” which serves a similar purpose.

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Author contributions

The sole author wrote the full paper and did all relevant research that contributed to it.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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