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In Defense of Shame: An Ethical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspective  
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**Abstract**

This dynamic work explores shame and other moral emotions from a multidisciplinary perspective. Shame has long been perceived as a negative emotion, not unlike anger, and critics therefore push to minimize or banish it. This work starts off by defining and outlining a vocabulary for shame and moves into a re-articulation and analysis of many different conceptions of the shame emotion throughout time, notably those laid out by ancient Chinese philosophers Mengzi and Kongzi as well as ancient Greek conceptions. Following this foundation, more modern perceptions of shame and the shame family of emotions are discussed. Much effort is devoted to differentiating shame from guilt, a distinction which philosophers have been wrestling with for some time in the contemporary rhetoric. Additional themes explored within are Eastern to Western cross-cultural comparison of moral emotion and the corresponding socialization of second-level emotions in young children. Psychological study of these phenomena and the hurdles faced in the traditional study of these complex emotions are also pervasive topics throughout. The psychological and behavioral explanations of shame discussed offer adaptive explanations for why shame may have evolved, and tangible benefits to the individual and community alike for cultivating a proper sense of shame.

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## **Introduction**

Shame is a complex moral emotion. It is deeply intertwined with one's sense of identity, and can explain much of human behavior. For such a commonplace emotion, however, individual accounts can be highly subjective in description and experience, and people often have difficulty providing definitions for emotions like shame and guilt. Shame has long been perceived in Western cultures as negative or even self-destructive. Negative attitudes surrounding shame are due in part to long-standing notions from the psychological realm which did not take into account the true complexity of shame, or how difficult it can be to study from a methodological standpoint (Tangney, 2002). Reasons for this include difficulty in distinguishing shame from guilt in psychological study, facial expressions which are not easily codable, and difficulty in accurately assessing individual descriptions of emotional phenomena—all of which will be discussed in further detail.

Some of the more promising emerging literature on shame view this intricate emotion as an adaptation for mitigating or preventing social devaluation (Tracy, 2008). The 'shame is bad, guilt is good' paradigm, although persistent, eventually gave way to more nuanced approaches, and there has as of late been a resurgence of interest in the area. While there are distinctions to be drawn, shame and guilt do not have to be as dichotomous as often portrayed, and in actuality can blend into one another.

Ethical and psychological literature provide insight into the nature of shame. The re-emergence of interest in the study of shame phenomena in moral psychology provides a platform for considering and evaluating claims about shame and related emotions. Important topics in this area are shame and its relationship to guilt and other related emotions, as well as distinguishing the various kinds of shame.

In this paper I intend to provide an apt definition of shame and distinguish it from related emotions such as guilt and humiliation. I shall consider arguments that shame, not unlike anger, is purely negative or destructive. Certainly there are many forms of shame, some positive and some negative, however I wish to ultimately highlight a more positive side to shame and why it is necessary. In addition, I will highlight and discuss different types of shame, including social and ethical shame as defined by Dr. Bryan Van Norden. In conjunction with this, I intend to outline the necessary components of shame and provide evidence for shame's possible adaptive purpose from evolutionary and biological bases. Shame across several cultures and time periods will be discussed.

## **The Rhetoric of Shame**

For the purposes of this work, (although the precise linguistic terms may differ slightly as "social" will be used in place of "conventional"), I am adapting Van Norden's distinction between two kinds

of shame as well as sense of shame. He outlines a few linguistic distinctions which are pertinent to the discussion of shame:

"I shall adopt the terms "conventional shame" and "ethical shame" to distinguish the two paradigms. At one extreme, conventional shame is a sort of unpleasant feeling we have when we believe those whose views matter to us look down on us (or on those with whom we identify), on the basis of a standard of appearance we share. Ethical shame, in contrast, is a sort of unpleasant feeling we have when we believe that we (or those with whom we identify) have significant character flaws. [...] Continuing with matters of terminology, let "shamefulness" or "disgracefulness" refer to the property of an action or a situation such that a properly perceptive person who performed that action or was in that situation would feel shame, and let "a sense of shame" refer to a disposition of a certain sort. Let us further distinguish between a "sense of shame" in a narrower and broader sense. In a narrower sense, "a sense of shame" is a disposition to feel shame in situations that one recognizes are shameful for oneself or for those with whom one identifies. In a broader sense, "a sense of shame" is a disposition to recognize when actions or situations are shameful (whether for oneself or for others, and whether past, present, future or hypothetical), and to have appropriate emotional and behavioral reaction to this recognition" (Norden, 2002).

Van Norden's notion of sense of shame presupposes a meaning of shame (his definitions of social and ethical shame). In addition, this definition presupposes a meaning for 'shameful,' which is something that merits shame. Although there exist these two types of shame and one can make a distinction between them, they are not necessarily dichotomous. For instance, there could be a singular case of shame that has both social and ethical components, such as when someone is caught stealing from their community and faces both interpersonal and intrapersonal backlash.

Discussions of shame often focus solely on the person feeling the shame. As we are starting to witness, however, this is but one of many facets. Including the terms appropriated from Van Norden, I wish to highlight several important terms which serve to make up our shame vocabulary:

- individual feeling shame
- object of shame
- audience
- sense of shame [adapted from Van Norden]

The object of shame can be defined as that which elicits shame. Sense of shame traditionally comes in one of two forms: sense of shame of the audience (or of the other), and sense of shame of the individual (oneself, inner sense of shame, conscience). 'Audience' in this context can be defined as the persons who are witness to an act or trait that is potentially shameful. In addition to this vocabulary, it is necessary to define ambiguous culpability—any situation in which it is unclear as to

where culpability lies. While shame does not necessitate an audience, many shame accounts do have some audience that serves as the entity doing the shaming.

### **Differentiating Guilt & Shame**

In order to aptly talk about guilt and shame, we must first dissociate these two terms. Much of the literature regarding shame and guilt appropriates a distinction made by Helen Block Lewis. The distinction that Lewis draws between shame and guilt is that guilt evokes in us a focus on behavior, i.e. an external locus, while shame evokes in us a focus on self, i.e. internal locus (Lewis, 1971). This has been further abbreviated by Dr. Tangney and her collaborators to state that shame focuses on the self while guilt focuses on a specific behavior (Tangney, 2007). Bernard Williams differentiates shame from guilt with the notion that they elicit different emotions. Guilt arouses in us states such as anger, resentment, or indignation. Shame, however, arouses contempt, derision, or avoidance (Williams, 1993). Note that the Lewis distinction and the distinction by Williams do not have to be at odds with one another—it is possible to categorize shame and guilt as having different loci and eliciting different emotions in the individual.

In light of Tangney's take on the Locus Distinction, the following is an examination into the scope of guilt by way of example:

[S1] Adiva steals a pair of sunglasses from the Ray-Ban® store.

We are certainly safe to say that Adiva could feel guilty for this *specific act*. However, can we say that Adiva feels guilty for the act of stealing in general? In other words, does the action of stealing constitute a "specific behavior" under the Lewis definition. After all, stealing is a specific *type* of behavior, albeit not a specific instance. Thus, it is no longer time-dependent. We can likely say that Adiva could feel guilt for the action that is stealing. Perhaps she uses Mengzi's notion of *quan* (weighing and discretion) to assess the ramifications of her actions, or perhaps she uses Emmanuel Kant's notion of the categorical imperative to assess that if everyone stole from the Ray-Ban® store, it would go out of business.

Now, is it safe to say in this situation that Adiva could feel guilt for acting unethically in general? This is certainly a stretch—I would say that this is now outside the scope of guilt, as it no longer matches the Lewis definition. There is also the notion that linguistically this isn't really what we mean when we say "guilt". However, as the notion of bad actions in general is still external, a counter-argument could potentially be crafted to this effect. Let us take our hypothetical example even further:

[S2] On a separate occasion, Adiva steals a second pair of sunglasses from the Ray-Ban® store.

Obviously, it would be reasonable for us to say here that Adiva could feel a second, separate sense of guilt. However, we could say that Adiva feels *simultaneously* guilty about her two instances of stealing. Another way to phrase this would be to ask if Adiva could feel guilt for

her now-exhibited *pattern* of stealing sunglasses. It is less obvious with two instances than with a great many, but two instances can constitute a pattern. If Adiva feels "guilty" for a pattern of her actions, this is no longer external, and she is forced to look inward. Thus, it is possible for guilt to turn into shame. This could depend on whether or not the person involved is able to recognize repeated instances of behavior as being due to their character, and not circumstance.

Herein lies the problem: guilt does not allow for any observation of character patterns, because it cannot be connected back to oneself. Otherwise, one has to jump through linguistic hoops, and ceases to make sense in context with our definition of guilt: "Adiva feels guilty that her repeated behavior of stealing sunglasses has adversely affected the owner of the Ray-Ban® store." It would seem that Adiva cannot truly feel guilt regarding any character flaw of hers or any observable pattern in her behavior. She could not tie the feeling of guilt back to her character in any way. In an instance where Adiva steals sunglasses nine times from the Ray-Ban® store, guilt is not going to help her acknowledge that she is a kleptomaniac. Here shame is better suited than guilt because it prompts her to look inward.

The scope of shame, on the other hand, allows us to recognize patterns and propensities about ourselves, and to connect the dots of our actions. One instance of shame could even stop a person from enduring repeated bouts of guilt, given that the shame and the individual's reaction to it is sufficient to inspire ethical change. Continuing the activity responsible for shame's onset, or inversely, correcting behavior in a way that abates the feeling of shame, provide two very different outcomes. Shame's presence, in isolation, is insufficient to inspire ethical change. It is the combination of the impulse that shame creates to ethically change oneself, and whether the individual starves or feeds that impulse, that determines the outcome.

The need for shame over guilt is only strengthened by the notion that humans often exhibit ethical bias toward themselves; i.e., there is likely going to be some natural reluctance to notice a pattern of bad actions or connect a bad act in one area with a bad act in another. In this thought experiment, Adiva would likely be forced to acknowledge the presence of some audience or some social implications of her actions. It is often the case that ethical shame is a more permanent fix than guilt, as it is more resilient to time and circumstance.

One thing that [S2] does not highlight but is nonetheless true is that it is possible for guilt to blend into shame. In this case we can conceive of a logical person who, after enduring several bouts of guilt as a result of their actions, is forced to turn their examination inward and reflect about the self and their character. We would say in this instance that the bouts of guilt helped spark or serve as a stepping stone to an episode of shame, and that in this way they do not have to be distinct or clear-cut. After all, shame and guilt are often correlated—when one feels shame they are also more likely to feel guilt, and vice versa.



### **Shame & Similar Emotions**

This is an analysis of other dispositions within the shame family of emotions, and how they may differ. The possible alternatives which are to be examined here are humiliation and embarrassment. Emotions which we are interested in are those with potential to serve a similar function to shame. Similar fulfilled functions of like emotions could be reform on the self, for instance.

With regard to humiliation as a possible moral alternative to shame, the social component is certainly present. However, humiliation necessitates a social factor; an audience to do the humiliating. In this way, humiliation would not adequately deal with ethical shame, since ethical shame lacks the social component altogether. Here, ethical shame serves as a stimulus which prompts a person to action. In this way, one can be made cognizant of a flaw in the self without any audience present.

Moving onto embarrassment as a possible alternative, one can see that it is once again lacking an internal component. For one who relies purely on their conscience will be immune to embarrassment. Embarrassment does not require that the act in question be morally reprehensible. Research has shown that embarrassment is more likely to come into play for violating social norms as opposed to internal moral codes (Keltner & Buswell 1996). A single emotion does not need to be the only one involved in a situation, and often it is the case that multiple sociomoral emotions work in concert with one another.

### **The Bad Side of Shame: Self-loathing**

One limitation or potential downside of shame, what I am going to dub as the "bad side of ethical shame," is when ethical shame borders on or culminates in self-loathing. We see this later as well in June Tangney's discussion of psychological symptoms of shame-prone individuals.

If one is trying to highlight a bad side of shame, they are only to be concerned with inherent nonvariable factors, as opposed to ones that are variable and non-inherent. One of the implications of this is that if we observe bad aspects that are the result of a skewed sense of shame, we cannot then make the conclusion that shame is inherently bad. A skewed sense of shame is both variable, in the sense that it can be improved upon, and non-inherent, in the way that it is not part of the nature of sense of shame for it to be skewed. A downside to shame that would serve as a cause to rid ourselves of it would need to be something that is inherent in the nature of shame and cannot be altered in any way (i.e. inherent nonvariable).

There does exist, however, a bad side to ethical shame, in an instance where a person *does* have a proper sense of shame. This bad side manifests itself in particularly shameful acts after they have already been committed. Let us consider an example:

[S3] A man kills a family of five in an automobile accident. The man is at fault for the accident.

In this situation, suicidal thoughts might well be a logical part of a proper narrow sense of shame. Thus, we have acknowledged that sometimes ethical shame could result in self-loathing. This brings us to an important question—is there always the possibility of positive ethical change in an instance of shame, or is there such a case where proper shame would necessitate permanent self-loathing or suicide?

To begin to answer this question, I will point out that committing suicide traditionally does not absolve oneself of shame. The act of suicide frees oneself of the ability to feel shame, but lacks the ethical change necessary to separate or unentangle shame from one's character. Furthermore, we know that it is not necessitated by shame because there are alternative, more constructive responses that one can take in the face of shame, such as seeking reapproval of wronged parties, taking part in charitable operations, or, if the individual feels that something more extreme is necessary, dedicating their lives to preventing similar shameful actions occurring either through direct actions or indirect contributions to a supporting charitable cause (e.g. in the manslaughter-example, the man could spend the rest of his life discouraging teens from drinking and driving, as well as donate the majority of his income to related charities—whatever he deems sufficient). After all, it is certainly more fulfilling to live for a cause than to silently die for it.

Certainly, we must take into account that suicide is not completely without merit in all cultures. Take for example the Japanese notion of Seppuku, or ritual suicide. According to traditional Japanese beliefs, the practice of Seppuku would restore one's honor in the face of death. While there is value in this, we must consider that restoring one's honor does not necessarily spur an ethical change; rather, it is only sufficient to make one not feel burdened by the weight of one's ethical shame. And while we have identified that there is some value in the action, it is still worth pointing out that there is the potential for further value to be created in a life lived in service of satisfying one's ethical shame. There is certainly a cost-benefit analysis that must occur in deciding between the two processes, but that process can only occur if the subject in question is still alive, and cannot be properly evaluated without having lived their full life already. Ultimately, committing suicide does not hold up when compared with other, more constructive, responses to shame.

Rather than seeking an instance of shame necessitating permanent self-loathing rather than offering the opportunity for positive ethical change, I would argue that it would instead be more beneficial to consider how many avenues for positive ethical change exist in any situation. For example, even in a situation where one has committed genocide, there is still room for positive ethical change—while the mass murderer cannot redeem himself in the eyes of those who he murdered, he can still dedicate the rest of his life serving other, still-existing populations. This offers not only more instrumental good, but far more room for ethical change than the self-contained act of self-loathing. That is to say, as

long as there is further room to improve the world, then there will always be room for positive ethical change in the instance of shame.

### **On Social Shame**

Whereas ethical shame serves to inspire positive ethical change, social shame serves to create either behavioral or ideological change in conformity to an audience's values. While audiences may attempt to invoke it, we must recall that by Van Norden's definition we cannot call it social shame unless it is an internal feeling of disapproval from an audience, meaning that it is possible to feel social shame without actually receiving the audience's disapproval, and to be free of social shame while actually receiving the audience's disapproval.

It is immediately apparent that this can be dangerous due to how different any given audience's values can vary, although it is worth noting that this criticism will extend to ethical shame if the individual experiencing it truly believes a corrupt system of ethics to be of the utmost good. While this is a worthy issue to notice, there is also value in noting that if an audience or ideology is volatile in nature, its odds of survival are largely decreased, meaning that this issue can be self-regulating in nature. A more immediate issue is that individual reactions to shame can vary greatly, and include negative elicited effects, like withdrawal and avoidance (Nathanson, 1994). This offers a warning that an audience's attempts to invoke social shame can easily have destructive consequences, creating an undesirable behavioral or ideological change.

Furthermore, it is possible for an attempt to invoke social shame being unsuccessful in how an individual feels about their previous behaviors despite inspiring the desired change or outward effect. This is because a person being shamed could alter their actions only to remedy the external pressure or condemnation from others. An example of this could be a political figure, who presumably is concerned with how they are viewed by the populace, but may or may not feel remorse for what they have been shamed for. These reactions are not mutually exclusive, and it is entirely plausible that an individual being socially shamed could react out of some combination of both these motivating factors.

Of course, these faults are compatible with positive outcomes occurring as a result of attempts to invoke social shame. This can be seen in the #metoo movement. When we witness a figure of power doing some ethically unsound action, our only choice is often to use public shaming as a necessary method for change. Public social shaming has the potential to directly change individuals' behavior using purely indirect methods. This is a rare quality, and one that should not be overlooked. In a situation where a specific individual is difficult to reach by conventional methods, then a mass-attempt to invoke social shame can offer meaningful benefits that would have been otherwise unattainable.

In such circumstances where this positive behavioral change is achieved, despite the person potentially changing purely to appease the audience, then we can always safely call it an instance of social shame.

So long as there is perceived social disapproval and a resulting behavioral or ideological change, then it is an instance of social shame. If the change is not accompanied by a shift in ethics, then it simply means that you have witnessed social shame without an accompanying instance of ethical shame.

### **Shame & Fear**

Williams gives an account of a "basic" definition of shame. Shame in its most basic form for the Greeks is being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. The most basic instance of this is being seen naked. "The word *aidia*, a derivative of *aidos*, 'shame', is a standard Greek word for the genitals, and similar terms are found in other languages" (Williams, 1993).

We can see here how Greek vocabulary directly implicates shame in its most basic form:

"'Dear friends, be men; let shame be in your hearts... among men who feel shame, more are saved than die.' Nestor appeals to shame 'in the sight of other men,' as well as asking the warriors to remember their wives and children, their property and their parents, whether living or dead. Indeed, the one word *aidos*, 'shame', serves as a battle cry. It is possible to see this kind of prospective shame as a form of fear. The Greeks hesitated in face of Hector 'in shame of refusing him, in fear of taking up his challenge,' and one can see them as being pushed by fear from two sources, one behind them and one in front. The verbs of shame can take the grammatical constructions of fear" (Williams, 1993).

Here, Williams discusses a fear of shame as a motivator. When he talks about the soldiers being pushed from both the front and the back, it is fear pushing them backwards from the front, i.e. stopping them from charging forth into danger, and fear of shame pushing them forward. This can be simplified if we consider "fear of shame" a forward-pushing force and "fear" a backward-pushing force. In this case specifically, the fear is that of being killed or maimed.

Notice how, in order to incite the forward-pushing force of fear of shame, Nestor invokes the families and property of the soldiers. A once-over glance at this might lead us to believe that he is simply trying to motivate the soldiers via their sentimental attachment to families: what they (likely) value most. After all, family is a great motivator. Sometimes you do things not for yourself, but for the ones around you. Charging into battle takes a lot of courage, and if soldiers were fearful about this act, which would be reasonable, the thought that they were doing it to protect their families and preserve their way of life could be the motivator that they need. Nestor invokes the soldiers' families in order to spur the forward push of fear of shame for a deeper reason as well—he does this to invoke legacy. We get a subtle hint at this when he says "whether living or dead." The fear of shame surrounding one's legacy

serves as an even-stronger forward-pushing force than just family. While family is the present, legacy is much longer-lasting.

Williams makes the distinction of internal versus external shame. External shame involves being seen, or what others think about you. Internal shame is feeling badly about oneself. Williams claims that guilt is rooted in hearing, with the sound in oneself being the voice of judgement.

"We can feel both guilt and shame towards the same action. In a moment of cowardice, we let someone down; we can feel both guilty because we have let them down, ashamed because we have contemptibly fallen short of what we might have hoped of ourselves" (Williams, 1993).

An important perspective that Williams puts forth within his distinction of shame and guilt is that shame possesses the framework to let one understand and learn from their guilt. Shame lets a person point at a disposition within themselves which needs to be altered or guided, while guilt or external examination of actions will not achieve the same effect.

### **Mengzi's View on Shame's Role in Moral Self-cultivation**

One of the key concepts to Mengzi's teachings is his theory of the four sprouts—humaneness, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. According to Mengzi, humans innately possess these sprouts, and the absence of any one sprout would render a person inhuman. Mengzi teaches that it is only through cultivation of the sprouts that we may become moral.

"The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness [rén 人]; the mind's feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness [yì 義]; the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety [lǐ 禮]; and the mind's sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom [zhì 智]" (Mengzi 2009, 2A6).

Mengzi pairs each of these sprouts with a feeling that is characteristic of it. The sprout of rightness is characterized by shame and dislike. Mengzi offers an objective account of shame, meaning that it should vary from one individual to another. However it is still possible under this account for an act to have different meaning if performed under a different set of circumstances. Dr. David Wong provides particularly excellent insight into the importance of shame for Mengzi within the cultivation of the virtues:

"Why ethical shame is crucial to moral development from a Mencian viewpoint: if we aspire to be a certain kind of person, shame is unavoidable and also a necessary consequence of one's commitment to an ideal for the self. [...] Perfectly virtuous agents cannot feel the emotion of shame about themselves. But less than perfect agents should feel shame, and it is a helpful motivating emotion for improving oneself (in media res). Moreover, perfectly virtuous agents still make and need judgments about what would be shameful for them to

do; and need such judgments to guide and to deal with others" (Wong, 2018).

A discussion of Mengzi's account of shame as it pertains to moral self-cultivation would not be complete without a discussion of *xiū wù* 羞惡. The term *xiū wù* is translated by Bloom as "shame and dislike" (Bloom, 2002). However, it is more intricate than this translation implies. The reason why outlining this particular term for shame is so important is that *xiū wù* is characteristic of the sprout of rightness. In other translations, this relationship is phrased as "the heart of *xiū wù* 羞惡 is the sprout of *yì* 義."

Bryan Van Norden attempts to clarify and define these terms within Mengzi's account of shame:

*xiū* : dislike directed at things that are regarded as reflecting adversely on oneself or those with whom one stands in some special relation. Closely related to *chǐ* 恥 (shame) and *rǔ* 辱 (disgrace).

*wù* : to hate, loathe, disdain any object (whatever one dislikes in anyone) (Norden 2002, 66).

We can use this clarification of terms to see that ethical shame is the relevant sense of shame within the sprout of rightness. Mengzi writes, "The sense of shame is of great importance to a person. One who is adept at clever schemes has no use for shame. If he is not ashamed that he is not like other people, how can he become their equal?" (Bloom 2009, 7A7)

### **Aristotle's Conception of Shame**

Aristotle thinks there is a part in the just man's life where he transcends shame or no longer has a need for shame in light of no longer performing shameful actions.

"Further, if someone is in a state that would make him feel disgrace if he were to do a disgraceful action, and because of this thinks he is decent, that is absurd. For shame is concerned with what is voluntary, and the decent person will never willingly do base actions. Shame might, however, be decent on an assumption; for if [the decent person] were to do [these disgraceful actions], he would feel disgrace; but this does not apply to the virtues" (Aristotle 1985, 115).

[S4] There exists a man who has lived a truly virtuous life in accordance with Aristotelian ethics. Over time, he becomes old and senile. One day, several of the members of his community lie to the man, convincing him that he committed manslaughter. While the man is skeptical that he would do such a thing, he is unable to recall whether this event happened or not. While the man avoids readiness to disgrace, he gradually comes to believe the others in light of their persistence, and experiences a deep sense of shame.

Here we see an example of a man feeling shame due to events that did not happen. Actual shame is induced as a result of false shaming. This serves as an example of social shame inducing ethical shame. This shame scenario may even hold true under Van Norden's conception of ethical

shame, as the man believes that he has failed his own ideal for himself. This raises some implications for Aristotle's claim that the virtuous man supersedes sense of shame for the individual.

Further examining this example, the elderly man is convinced he did a bad act due to an unconscionable audience, and the shame is no different for him because he believes he did that act, even though the audience's sense of shame is an improper one. The man's sense of shame is still proper and he feels real shame. We cannot fault him for believing the audience or for not knowing his own actions due to a bad memory. It is possible that we could fault him for his trust in the audience, but trust involves memory, which this man lacks in some capacity. Maybe we could fault him for not having friends to rely on to tell him that his actions were otherwise, but this too is a hard sell. Maybe his good friends simply were not present at the time of this alleged act. We certainly cannot fault him for not having his trusted friends around all the time. Maybe this man could examine the audience's character more, but maybe it is not that obvious. Regardless, the shame that the man feels is inappropriate.

Here Aristotle implicitly acknowledges the virtuous man's capacity for a sense of shame despite his contradicting claim that the truly virtuous man would supersede the need for said disposition.

"We think it right for young people to be prone to shame, since they...often go astray, but are restrained by shame....No one, by contrast, would praise an older person for readiness to feel disgrace, since we think it wrong for him to do any action that causes a feeling of disgrace" (Aristotle 1985, 115).

Shame-proneness can be defined as readiness to feel shame. Aristotle's account implies that shame-proneness is good in young people but bad in old people. I would like to make one alteration to this, namely that for young people, shame-proneness *could be good*, but we should not assume it to be good all the time without analysis. In other words, shame-proneness is not necessarily *always* good for young people. In a case of improper shame where a teacher is reprimanding a shame-prone student in a manner disproportionate for the act, this would be detrimental and unfair on the receiving end, i.e., that of the shame-prone student. This same case could even happen in an instance where the student is not deserving of shame at all, but be some miscommunication or mistake on the part of an adult authority figure like the teacher, the student could feel shame due in part to their proneness to shame instead of taking a step back and trying to determine on their own whether or not shame need be involved, and if so, how much. The shame-prone individual defaults to shame, and that is part of the problem. This problem could also manifest within the setting of ethical shame, as a shame-prone person could feel some undeserved resolve about their character as a result of some predisposition toward a shamed state, as opposed to a potentially less-biased examination of their character triggered by an act on their part.

One might say to children "Don't do drugs," as an absolute, and only when they are older provide them with a more sophisticated argument. This

is because they initially lack the capacity for understanding. A similar rationale can be applied to a sense of shame. With younger people especially, shame is a physically-nonviolent approach to behavior modification. We could even conceive of an instance in which the parents of a child fail to provide a sufficient ethical code, yet the child is still able to gain one through being shamed at school.

Shame-proneness in younger persons in particular can be a good thing. Younger people tend to make more mistakes, and find themselves in situations meriting some degree of shame. Erring towards the side of shame is something that can be beneficial when young as it is part of a social learning process which has roots in morality and right action, especially from a group or communal perspective. However, one would think poorly of an older person who is prone to shame, because presumably they should have spent time cultivating virtues in such a way as to not endure frequent shame experiences or be extraordinarily prone to the emotion.

### **On the Work of Dr. June Price Tangney**

"The gap between the theoretical and empirical treatment of these emotions has been due largely to difficulties in the measurement of shame and guilt. These are difficult constructs to assess, first, because they are exclusively internal phenomena that are not amenable to direct observation and, second, because people do not typically have a clear sense of the distinction between shame and guilt, which poses problems for introspective accounts" (Tangney, 2002).

Tangney considers both shame and guilt "negatively valenced emotions" (Tangney, 2002). She acknowledges that they do not have clearly definable and codible facial expressions, further distinguishing them in their complexity from primary emotions like joy and sadness, however she insists that shame and guilt are distinct emotions. Her methods include self-reported ratings of past shame and guilt experiences of her students. As an introduction to one such anecdote, she writes, "Feelings of shame involve an acute awareness of one's flawed and unworthy self, a response that often seems out of proportion with the actual severity of the event." This is in line with our definition of an improper shame scenario, as the feelings of shame present are disproportionate to the object. What is more, Tangney's definition and description of the shame phenomenon itself is one of excess. She is already setting herself up for the finding that shame is not a constructive moral emotion. A table of her conclusions on available methods of assessing shame and guilt is pictured below.



**TABLE 3.3. Pros and Cons of Various Approaches to Measuring Shame and Guilt**Shame- versus guilt-inducing situations

Assesses reactions to "shame-inducing" versus "guilt-inducing" situations. Ratings for "shame-inducing" versus "guilt-inducing" situations are aggregated to create indices of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, respectively.

- *Limitations:* Assumes that shame and guilt are distinguished by differences in the content of eliciting situations. Much research challenges this notion; thus researchers would be well advised to carefully examine the assumptions underlying such measures before selecting this type of assessment.

Global adjective checklists

Checklists of shame- and guilt-related adjectives. Respondents rate how well each adjective describes the self or how frequently they experience such feelings.

- *Advantages:* High face validity; easy to administer.
- *Limitations:* May require very advanced verbal skills; respondents must be able to distinguish between the terms "shame" and "guilt" in the abstract; poses respondents with a shame-like task in the absence of any specific situational context, so it is difficult to assess guilt about specific behaviors separate from the global self.

Scenario-based measures

Respondents are presented with a series of specific common situations, followed by brief phenomenological descriptions of shame and guilt in the specific context.

- *Advantages:* Structure of the measure is more conceptually consistent with current notions of guilt; does not rely on the terms "shame" and "guilt" that may confuse laypersons; less likely to arouse defensiveness.
- *Limitations:* Relatively low internal consistency; constraints on the range of shame- and guilt-inducing situations; potential confound with moral standards.

Tangney and her team are not alone in their difficulties measuring and assessing shame and guilt in test subjects. Kugler and Jones (1992) used numerous metrics in an attempt to distinguish between shame and guilt, but was unable to empirically back the distinction between the two.

"Research over the past two decades consistently indicates that proneness to shame is related to a wide variety of psychological symptoms. These run the gamut from low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety to eating disorder symptoms, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation" (Tangney et al. 2007).

It is necessary to draw a distinction between "shame-proneness" and "shame". While shame-proneness may be less of a bad thing when observed in children than adults, as mentioned previously, unfettered proneness to shame is never a distinctly *good* thing, because it does not take into account whether or not feeling shame is appropriate within the context of the situation. Shame-proneness runs a high risk of disproportionate sense of shame of the individual. If we follow Mengzi and treat sense of shame like a virtue, then shame-proneness would represent a deficiency in cultivation of a proper sense of shame. Aristotle, too, outlined modest,

shameless, and bashful as a mean, excess, and deficiency despite him not considering sense of shame a virtue (Aristotle, 1985).

As Aristotle's work helps to illustrate, shame-proneness comes in different forms. A certain proneness to shame, namely a discriminatory one, is good. However, a kind of shame-proneness in which an individual defaults to the shame state, not taking into account how much an object truly merits shame, is not good for the individual. To treat shame-proneness as the same throughout is a mistake, and does not leave room for complexity in the disposition.

When looking at Tangney's empirical citations, we must take into account that correlation does not imply causation, as any statistics professor would remind us. If we took a sample of individuals whom exhibited psychological symptoms such as suicidal ideation, eating disorder symptoms, depression, etcetera, not only would we not be surprised to see the presence of shame-proneness, we would likely expect it, from the simple matter that these things seem to go hand in hand. However, this is *not* an examination of which of these is primordial. "In sum, empirical results converge, indicating that guilt but not shame is most effective in motivating people to choose the moral paths in life" (Tangney, 2006). Tangney uses empirical evaluations of guilt-proneness vs. shame-proneness to jump to bold conclusions about guilt versus shame. Many of the conclusions made here from the results presented are simply non-sequitur. Proneness to shame often presents itself in connection with other pathologies. Thus, one would expect it to have a correlation with other negative emotions and dispositions.

"We suggest that people can respond to the devastating pain of shame in two very different ways: the shamed individual can become angry at the world, attempting to shift the blame onto others; [...] or the shamed individual can withdraw from others, holding in or internalizing the shame, and thereby becoming vulnerable to a host of psychological symptoms, especially depression" (Tangney, 2002).

Much of Tangney's research examines correlation and similar relationships. She acknowledges in Tangney (2006) that in many of the shame scenarios examined, ambiguous culpability was present. Her research has been and continues to be important, however, it focuses on negative types of shame.

It is worth noting, however, that in most scenario-based measures of shame and guilt, the majority of situations are relatively ambiguous regarding responsibility or culpability [...] Problems are likely to arise when people developed an exaggerated or distorted sense of responsibility for events beyond their control or for which they have no personal involvement (Tangney, 2006).

Demographic information for George Mason University reveals that the student body is around 8% international (GMU Dem. Stat., 2019). Subjects are predominantly college undergraduates at those universities (who were often students in Tangney's introductory psychology courses). The demographics of the test subjects used fits the WEIRD description, which

dictates that participants of scientific study (esp. psychology) overwhelmingly fit the description of being western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic. This information suggests that one potential reason for Tangney's research results is that the student pool is disproportionately Western, leaving Eastern notions of guilt and shame largely unrepresented. Tangney et al. (1996) did pull participants from an airport and an elementary school, even if these additional pools were also largely made up of persons raised in Western society.

All aspects considered, Tangney's work exhibits bias towards Western persons. While Tangney's work was groundbreaking at the time that it was conducted, and it is certainly valid in some capacity, it is, retrospectively, overly focused on western cultures, and on shame and guilt *proneness* as opposed to the emotions themselves. There are of course unhealthy types of shame, which much of Tangney's research focuses on. However, there exist other forms of shame which are more healthy than portrayal in Tangney's work indicates. Shame can and sometimes is accompanied by undesirable effects. However, in a case where shame is proportionate to the object, shame is beneficial whenever it leads one to try to change the dispositions that lead to shame.

Similar research, if done using non-Western test subjects, could yield different conclusions about shame and guilt. Some modern researchers are acknowledging Tangney's work, but also recognizing a clear cultural difference in how shame is regarded or valued. The distinction being drawn is that Western, more individualistic societies view shame more negatively than their Eastern, more collectivist counterparts, who better utilize prosocial attributes of shame. Western and Eastern persons differ even in how they experience shame (Bedford 2003, Ho et al. 2004). Prosocial behavior as a motivator was also observed in Western persons. Miceli (2018) acknowledges this cultural component, while also providing evidence that guilt as well as shame both have adaptive and maladaptive characteristics.

### **Psychological Aspects of Shame**

Emerging literature on moral emotions is of critical importance, as work previously relegated to theory alone is becoming more testable. Results from recent empirical literature provide support for adaptational origins for shame and other moral emotions. More specifically, it is useful to point to any situation in which shame could be beneficial from an evolutionary standpoint. One possible evolutionary explanation could be that in defeat, an individual displaying shame can prove to their community that they can still be trusted:

If individuals display signals despite inherent risks (e.g., revealing oneself to a predator in the process of alerting others to the danger), onlookers can trust the message's sincerity. Thus, the potentially risky open posture associated with pride (and nonhuman primate dominance displays) may have originated as a way of conveying the validity of the individual's belief in his/her dominance or success. Similarly, although displaying behaviors associated with shame

or submission requires individuals to place themselves physically beneath adversaries and thus within their control, doing so may indicate the veracity of their submission. This display likely originated as a way of conveying acceptance of an aggressor's power, thereby removing the need for conflict and sparing resources. In humans, the ancient submission display may have been ritualized into a shame expression that also serves a secondary function: appeasing onlookers who observed the failure. By nonverbally communicating an awareness of one's transgression, the individual can maintain [their] reputation as a trusted group member who accepts social norms" (Tracy, 2008).

For an individual who has some perceived failure in a communal setting, i.e. one that is witnessed by members of their community, the display of shame may more easily allow that individual to get back in to the good graces of their community, i.e. regain acceptance. For what seems a more likely path for acceptance back into a social community following a transgression, the individual of question displaying indignance (or perhaps obliviousness) at their wrong action, or an individual displaying shame? A shame display in this instance serves as a sign of the individuals' own recognition of their transgression. Shame in this situation is morally beneficial, and a better alternative to alienation from the group, with the exception of an action so heinous that alienation from the group seems the better, more logical alternative, with shame of any degree insufficient. This is because the act of alienation from the community, even if mutually agreed upon, will more likely result in resentment. An added benefit to an individual rejoining their community after a transgression is that they are able to repent, be held accountable for their wrongdoings (atonement), and ultimately make amends with anyone who may have been negatively affected by their moral failures.

There is also the idea that individuals may sometimes hold back on exhibiting innate forms of shame due to various cultural influences. Behavioral expressions associated with both shame and pride are likely to be innate, but the shame display may be intentionally inhibited by some sighted individuals in accordance with cultural norms" (Tracy 2008).

Although the evidence is introspective, I imagine that the reader can imagine a time when they, amidst some failure resulting in the feeling of shame, held their head high regardless for perceived benefit to some onlooker, likely a close friend or family member, or maybe even an enemy. To quote former President Teddy Roosevelt talking about the man in the arena, "who at his best knows the feeling of high achievement, and who, if he fails, at least knows that his place shall never be among those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." One can conceive of an instance where they, even in failure, would fight the feeling of shame setting in and act as if it were not present, for their own mental benefit or for some ostensible purpose.

On the topic of proneness to shame (and its variability), *information threat theory of shame* dictates:

"Shame is an emotion program that evolved to mitigate the likelihood or costs of reputation-damaging information spreading to others. In social environments where there are fewer possibilities to form new relationships (i.e., low relational mobility), there are higher costs to damaging or losing existing ones. Therefore, shame proneness toward current relationship partners should increase as perceived relational mobility decreases. In contrast, individuals with whom one has little or no relationship history are easy to replace, and so shame-proneness towards them should not be modulated by relational mobility." (Sznycer et al. 2012)

The authors of the study tried to quantify variability in shame proneness, and how that might vary cross-culturally. The basis for how shame prone an individual is shaped, at least in part, by the individual's social ecology. Most interestingly, the study found that Japanese subjects were more shame-prone than their American and English counterparts. In addition, there was found to be a negative association between relational mobility and shame proneness towards friends. Relational mobility can be defined as the degree to which individuals are able to end old relationships and form new ones.

These theories are contained under a larger adaptationist perspective which postulates that an emotion is a "subordinate control program". Under this theory, emotions function "to orchestrate mechanisms in the brain and body so that they act in a coordinated way to solve particular adaptive problems". The emotion of shame, then, is an adaptation for mitigating or preventing social devaluation. The theories postulated have been empirically supported (Sznycer et al 2012; Tracy 2008). Adaptive theories of shame are critical as they provide evidence of positive forms of shame by highlighting the benefits of shame displays and the shame emotion.

Intuition into which cases and for which people shame can be beneficial can be gained from recent work on the topic of perfectionism. Positive perfectionism involves setting realistic goals motivated by positive things like satisfaction in oneself. The authors point out that behaviorally this type of behavior is rewarded through recognition and accomplishment. If a goal is not reached, a positive perfectionist takes healthy and adaptive measures, such as reevaluation of goals. Contrarily, negative perfectionism is motivated primarily through fear of failure. From a behavioral standpoint, these ideas are reinforced by ridicule, shame, and criticism. Any failure or transgression results in a negative perfectionist viewing themselves as inadequate. This sounds like how Williams talks about Greek notions of fear, with fear of shame pushing one forward.

Fedewa, Burns, and Gomez (2005) view positive perfectionism as adaptive and negative perfectionism as maladaptive, which is supported by their results. Accordingly, any of the measures associated with positive perfectionism (i.e. state shame, guilt-proneness, etc.) can be viewed as being associated with an adaptive trait or even as adaptive itself; the contrapositive is true for correlates of negative perfectionism. 'State

shame' and 'state guilt' in this context refer to experiencing these emotions in the moment.

"Positive perfectionism was correlated with pride and negatively with state shame and anxiety. Pride's negative correlations with anxiety, hostility, shame-proneness, and negative perfectionism support the notion that it is an adaptive emotion. Negative perfectionism was significantly related to anxiety, hostility, state shame, and shame-proneness."

In this particular study guilt was not found to be adaptive, which clashes with Tangney's suggestions in her research. Kaufman (1996), however, argues:

"The target of shame can be either the self or the self's actions, just as one can feel guilty about deeds or else feel essentially guilt-ridden as a person," which challenges Tangney and Dearing's model. Kaufman describes shame and guilt as deriving from the same or similar affect, but differing in their activators, targets, and reducers. Guilt is activated by transgressions that warrant self-judgment, whereas "shame becomes activated whenever fundamental expectations (imagined scenes of interpersonal need) or those equally fundamental expectations of oneself (imagined scenes of accomplishment or purpose) are suddenly exposed as wrong or are thwarted" (Kaufman, 1996).

Pertinent to the discussion as well is work done in the field from a cross-cultural standpoint, as was discussed in the section on Tangney. One study regarding the socialization of shame in Chinese children may offer some telling insight. A key takeaway from Fung (1999) is that children were able to discern if the shaming that they received, whether from a caretaker or parent, was proportional to the act committed. The study cites an example of a young girl named Angu who challenged her mom's actions in a previous shame scenario. An interesting point made is that from the perspective of the child, the caretaker had broken some sort of unspoken shaming rule and shamed her too harshly in front of company. This is referred to as a case of "unbalanced shaming," and the child's challenge can be characterized as negotiating shaming.

As more literature emerges in this area, relevant persons in the field will be able to discern which of the previous philosophical speculations on moral emotions, and their positive and negative attributes, will stand the test of time. While empirical work offering evolutionary rationale for shame is exciting, it is currently little more than suggestions for potential biological bases of these complex emotions. While this work has much merit, it does not yet prove any argument or viewpoint, and of course must hold up to any new literature.

### **Shame & Culture**

Several conceptions of shame have been discussed throughout. These include ancient greek notions (Aristotle), modern greek notions

(Richards), older eastern notions (Mengzi, Kongzi), and modern eastern notions (Van Norden).

Much of the literature suggests that the socialization of shame in children happens earlier and to a more advanced degree in Eastern cultures when compared to their Western counterparts. In her study, *Becoming a Moral Child: The Socialization of Shame among Young Chinese Children*, Fung offers the following insight:

"In response to a questionnaire survey, 43 percent of parents of preschoolers in Taipei, Taiwan, agreed with the statement, "A preschool-age child should be shamed if he or she does not follow social rules," whereas none of their Euro-American counterparts in Chicago did (Wang 1992:52-62). Chinese children also acquire shame-related terms earlier than American children. When mothers of preschoolers in mainland China and the United States were asked to report which emotion words their children learned the earliest, 95 percent of the Chinese mothers claimed that their children understood xiu (shame or shyness) by age three. In contrast, only a small number of American mothers reported that their three-year-olds could understand embarrassed (16.7 percent) or ashamed (10 percent) (Shaver et al. 1992:197-199)."

Of course, this insightful claim is consistent with the Confucian notion of filial piety.

Characterization of what is shameful appears attached to cultural norms and taboos. This makes sense in context with how shame is inextricably bound to sense of self. The previous discussion of shame in the Chinese vocabulary illustrates how language, too, can affect conceptions of shame. There are likely insufficient terms in the English language to denote all members of the shame family of emotions (Nathanson, 1994). Linguistic and cultural expression of emotions that vary in structure and content provide evidence for viewing shame in a manner which is sensitive to context. It is evident that shame varies in its expression from one culture to another, with the most consistent generalization being socialization of shame occurring earlier and at a more increased rate in Eastern cultures than in Western ones.

## **Conclusion**

To highlight a few notions from our discussion of shame in moral psychology, Tangney (2002) and Kugler (1992) provide evidence that shame in particular can be a difficult emotion to assess and quantify. The purpose of drawing attention to this is not to obscure the weight of meaningful results from moral psychology, but rather to make note of the need to be careful in experimental design, assertions of what is being measured, and interpretation of results. Psychological methodology in this area has improved over the last several decades, part of the reason being realizations among researchers in metrics used to measure and distinguish between complex emotions. One of the most promising theories which has emerged from psychological study is the *information threat theory of*

*shame*, viewing shame as an emotion program which evolved for the purposes of mitigating harm to the self. Another is the *individual-community response theory*, dictating that in transgression, an individual who displays shame will have an easier time regaining the trust of their community.

In the examination of the philosophical literature on shame, starting with the foundation laid out by Mengzi, the predominant idea one should take away is that shame can motivate an individual to address flaws in their character. In other words, one benefit of shame is moral self-improvement. The major conclusion from the literature on the adaptivity of shame is that shame is able to serve a constructive purpose for the individual who feels it by reconciling the individual in with their community. This, along with the results from the Fung (1999) examination of shame socialization in Taiwanese children, help to outline the functional purpose that shame has.

Shame can be an especially intense emotion, which is a plausible reason for why people tend to avoid shame. As Nathanson reminds us in his psychological assessment of the emotion, "almost any alternative emotion feels better than shame." This can include anger. Even still, a sensible individual would respond accordingly to a reaction from members of their community dictating that they should feel shame for some bad action. This would involve a contemplation of the moral transgression in context with the culture and norms of that society.

Our case study about a girl who steals RayBan® sunglasses revealed how shame and guilt can vary in scope. Ultimately, while guilt can inform an agent regarding a negative type of behavior they are exhibiting, shame is much better suited to tie this moral transgression back to oneself and one's character. In other words, shame is better able to lead to the realization that this is not just a behavioral pattern, but indicative of some flaw in character. In this way, shame can be distinguished from guilt by virtue of it allowing more freedom to be connected back to one's character. Shame is useful any time an individual, through bias, apathy, or something else, is unable to recognize that they are in need of an adjustment of character. Sometimes an experience with a certain level of magnitude or shock-value is needed to prompt self-evaluation. It can be the case that one needs to be knocked down in order to then be able to get up and take two steps forward.

While further nuances can be drawn between shame and emotions such as embarrassment and humiliation, each of these emotions has a subset of situations or cases for which they are best-suited. Shame, more so than other moral emotions, is intensely personal and tightly bound to our sense of identity. It can reflect positively or negatively on our character as well as our family members, friends, and really anyone with whom we associate.

We have come to understand that both social shame and ethical shame offer potential for both negative and positive outcomes; with the nuance that ethical shame will always offer the potential for positive ethical change unless it is rooted in a corrupt system of ethics, and attempts to produce social shame can be ineffective, despite its existence in any



scenario where behavioral or ideological change occurs—whether that change is rooted in corrupt or just audience beliefs. There are tangible positive benefits to the use of shame, and contexts where shame is the preferred moral emotion, or one which is able to work as part of a sequence of emotions for the betterment of an individual. There are aspects of shame which are not as easily picked up from the phenomenological experience of other similar moral motions (e.g. humiliation). There is a need to be conscientious of the ways in which a society might attempt to invoke shame in an individual, and the norms to which the society may adhere to. In general, however, it's reasonable that social shame is employed primarily for good—to usher in adherence to some standard, whether strictly voiced or implicit. As shame is connected to a society's social culture, as culture shifts, so will shame in its manifestation.

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