**Public Shaming as Moral Self-Defence**

James Edgar Lim

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**Abstract**

What, if anything, can justify public shaming? Philosophers who have written on this topic have pointed out the role of public shaming in enforcing valuable social norms. In this paper, I defend an alternate, supplementary justification for public shaming: as a form of moral self-defence. Moral self-defence is the defence of one’s moral standing – being recognized as an equal in the eyes of oneself and others – rather than the defence of one’s physical body or rights. Agents can engage in moral self-defence by publicly criticizing, blaming, or expressing other negative feelings towards wrongdoers, which sometimes constitutes contributions to public shaming.

**Keywords**

Public shaming; online shaming; moral self-defence; self-defence; norm enforcement; social punishment.

1. **Introduction**

Public shaming is something that is typically very bad for those who suffer it. Cases of public shaming often contain instances of bullying, harassment, doxing, and other malicious activities.[[1]](#footnote-1) But even without any bullying or harassment, public shaming can cause a number of adverse effects, including the loss of friendships, intimate relationships, and professional opportunities. It can also cause a target to suffer humiliation, which in turn inflicts a number of harms to the target’s mental and physical health, including “major depressions, suicidal states, and severe anxiety states, including ones characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder” (Torres and Bergner, 2010: 201-202).[[2]](#footnote-2) Marit Svindseth and Paul Crawford (2019) similarly report that public shame can result in losses of self-esteem, depression, feelings of worthlessness, self-mutilation, or suicide ideation. James Fritz (2021) argues that public shaming reliably causes the shamed to experience the feeling of shame, which he regards as morally undesirable. Further, public shaming can result in other sanctions being placed on the shamed. For example, an organization might fire a shamed employee, because of the negative publicity caused by public shaming.

So what, if anything, can justify public shaming? Philosophers who have written on this topic have pointed out the role of public shaming in enforcing valuable social norms (Billingham and Parr, 2019). Public shaming enforces norms by deterring norm violations, expressing a community’s commitment to those norms, and by communicating to wrongdoers that they have done something wrong. Call this the *Norm Enforcement View* on public shaming. Paul Billingham and Tom Parr (2019: 1000) state this view most explicitly, writing that “public criticism is an important way in which social norms are upheld and reinforced”.[[3]](#footnote-3) This view is echoed by Harrison Frye (2022: 189). Nicolas Delon (2019) extends the notion of norm enforcement beyond existing norms to the establishment of new norms, writing that shame “seeks to restore compliance with an existing norm or to promote adherence to a new norm”. Linda Radzik (2016), who writes about informal social punishment more generally, argues that social punishment is justified as a form of moral pressure on wrongdoers to atone for their wrongdoing. A good example of public shaming as norm enforcement is the #MeToo movement, which involved the public shaming of perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault (among other things). Many people credit the movement with bringing a number of prominent sexual assaulters to account, such as Harvey Weinstein, a movie producer accused of 87 counts of harassment and rape, who was eventually convicted after being targeted by the #MeToo movement (Donegan, 2020).

I agree that the enforcement of social norms is indeed a valuable function and important goal of public shaming. But the Norm Enforcement View, as outlined in existing literature, has less to say on the people doing the shaming – on whether specific agents like victims of wrongdoing have special, agent-relative reasons to contribute to public shaming. This strikes me as a blind-spot, because contributions to public shaming often seem to involve significant personal stakes. Contributors are often motivated by a desire to “tell their story” or “be heard”. Given this, we might wonder if there’s more at stake for these contributors than just the desire to enforce a norm, which plays a role not just in motivating shamers, but in justifying their behaviour.

I believe there is. In this paper, I bring attention to a different justification for public shaming, which has not received much philosophical attention. In my view, some contributions to public shaming can be justified as a form of *moral self-defence.* Moral self-defence refers to the defence of one’s moral standing – being recognized as an equal in the eyes of oneself and others – rather than the defence of one’s physical body or rights (Thomason, 2018: 187). Wrongdoing can often attack the moral standing of the victim, by implying that the victim lacks the right to be treated better. Certain kinds of wrongdoing, those related to broader social issues like sexism or racism, can attack the moral standing not only of their direct victims, but of all members of the relevant social groups. My claim here is that when these kinds of wrongdoing occur, direct victims, members of relevant groups, and some individuals acting on their behalf, can sometimes be entitled to publicly express anger, contempt, blame, or criticism in order to defend their moral standing. These expressions can together constitute public shaming. I also argue that public shaming is particularly likely to be necessary for moral self-defence in cases which instantiate systemic oppression or historic injustice. In doing so, I hope to draw a stronger link between the justification for public shaming and the cases where public shaming often seems most appropriate – cases related to systemic racism, sexism, failures of public institutions, or other historically salient forms of discrimination. To be clear, the thesis is not that all contributions to public shaming constitute justified moral self-defence, nor that every contribution with the intention of moral self-defence are justified. Rather, the key claim is that moral self-defence is a justification for some contributions to public shaming.

My discussion is structured as follows. In part II, I develop the concept of moral self-defence. In part III, I explain how public shaming can be an important form of moral self-defence. In part IV, I consider some objections.

First, some terminology. For the purposes of this paper, public shaming is a (a) collective activity where (b) each contributing agent expresses criticism, blame, resentment, anger, contempt, or other negative attitudes towards another person (c) in a public forum (d) in response to a perceived violation of some norm.[[4]](#footnote-4) A *case* of public shaming refers to the aggregate set of individual acts of criticism directed towards a person/group in response to an act of wrongdoing, or series of wrongdoings. A *contribution* to public shaming refers to an individual act which is a part of a case of public shaming. For the sake of constructing a broad argument, I will not assume here that contributing to public shaming requires any specific intention or goal (e.g. intending to cause shame).[[5]](#footnote-5) The *practice* of public shaming refers to the way in which public shaming is usually carried out in society, the expectations regarding public shaming, and the social norms regulating how public shaming ought to be carried out. My project has a different focus from the public shaming discussed by philosophers like John Braithwaite, Thom Brooks, Dan Kahan, and Martha Nussbaum, who have discussed public shaming primarily as a form of criminal punishment carried out by the state.[[6]](#footnote-6) My focus also differs from that of authors like Guy Aitchison and Saladin Meckled-Garcia (2021: 6-7), who characterize online public shaming as necessarily stigmatizing. As the goal of this paper is not conceptual analysis, I will not spend time defending my definition of public shaming. For those who prefer to reserve “public shaming” for some other activity, I invite you to substitute the term “public shaming” in my paper with something like “mass public shaming”, or “public criticism”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **Moral Self-Defence**

In this part, I will develop the concept of moral self-defence, a concept which I owe to Krista Thomason (2018). Moral self-defence, on her view, is the effort to maintain self-respect in response to “offensive behavior of a certain kind” (Thomason, 2018: 187). Specifically, moral self-defence refers to an agent’s attempt to protect her own self-respect in the face of arrogant and self-important others. As she writes, “When other people refuse to take us seriously or when they think of themselves as more important than we are, invitations to shame protect our own sense of self-respect” (Thomason, 2018: 190). My first aim in this part is to adapt her idea of moral self-defence as the more general defence of one’s moral standing – a concept which includes an agent’s self-respect, but is not limited to it. Additionally, Thomason does not provide a systematic analysis of why moral self-defence might be a kind of justified self-defence. My second aim is to provide this analysis.

Paradigmatically, self-defence involves imposing physical harm on an attacker in order to prevent them from inflicting physical harm on you. *Moral* self-defence refers to the defence of your moral standing, rather than the defence of your physical body. Your moral standing is the recognition of your intrinsic moral status as an equal member of society, by others and yourself. It is thus a combination of two components: recognition of your personhood from others – which philosophers have called “recognition respect” (Darwall, 1977: 38) – and your self-respect. Moral standing is incredibly important, as it is intimately connected with your ability to fulfil most of your other interests. If others do not recognize your status, or if you do not recognize it yourself, both parties are likely to sacrifice your interests for the sake of other goals.[[8]](#footnote-8) So any person who has interests also has a great interest in maintaining their moral standing.

When does our moral standing require defending? When someone wrongs you, they can implicitly or explicitly attack your standing as an equal. Wrongdoing can express a lack of regard for another’s interests. In writing on forgiveness and blame, Pamela Hieronymi (2001: 546) notes that intentional wrongdoing can constitute a claim “that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable”, due to the way an act reveals certain evaluations made by their author. In principle, even minor, everyday wrongs can attack another’s moral standing because they can express a lack of regard.[[9]](#footnote-9) But such threats to one’s moral standing are usually small, and are unlikely to justify very harmful defensive action. Sometimes, wrongdoers go further by explicitly asserting their own superiority, like Thomason’s (2018: 187) example of an arrogant colleague who demands deference. Worse yet are serious wrongs, like hate speech, which clearly and intentionally communicate that other groups are less important, or less worthy of moral consideration. When wrongdoing goes unaddressed, two things can happen that can impact the moral standing of the victim. First, the moral standing of the victim may diminish in the eyes of the wrongdoer and bystanders. These agents may come to believe, if they don’t already, that it is acceptable to treat the victim wrongly, and that the victim has a lower standing. Second and even more pernicious is the possibility that a victim of wrongdoing may fail to recognize her own status as an equal, or lose self-respect. When a victim fails to respond to wrongdoing adequately, she may internalize her wrongdoer’s lack of regard, losing her own self-respect. Or she may blame herself for failing to respond, leading to the same result.[[10]](#footnote-10) Not responding adequately to wrongdoing can also constituteor express a lack of self-respect. T.M. Scanlon (2013: 10) points out that when an agent has been wronged, “to ignore the indifference to her interests that his actions indicate would show a failure to take seriously her own moral status as someone entitled not to be treated in that way. This would be inappropriate, servile, and demeaning”.

There are thus two ways in which wrongdoing can threaten the moral standing of the victim – by threatening to lower a victim’s self-respect or their recognition from others. This is where the idea of self-defence comes into play. In theories on paradigmatic self-defence, those who pose threats to the vital interests of others can be liable to be harmed. There are different explanations for how such aggressors become liable. Many of these explanations can be adopted for the purposes of moral self-defence. For instance, some philosophers think that an aggressor forfeits their rights against defensive harms by posing a threat to others, which in turn causes them to become liable to defensive harm (Massimo, 2017: 324; Thomson, 1992: 366-371). Similarly, we might claim that wrongdoers pose a threat to their victim’s moral standing, and are thus liable to be harmed. Other philosophers maintain that an aggressor must be morally responsible for causing a threat (Otsuka, 2016). We might thus claim that someone is liable to be harmed only if they are morally responsible for threatening another’s moral standing. Yet other philosophers claim that an attacker is liable only if they are culpable for creating a threat (Ferzan, 2012). In turn, we can claim that those who are culpable for posing a threat to others’ moral standing are liable. The point is that just as attackers in paradigmatic cases of self-defence become liable by posing a threat to others under certain conditions, wrongdoers in cases of moral self-defence can become liable by threatening the moral standing of others, under the right conditions.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Just as there are two ways in which wrongdoing can impact the moral standing of a victim, there are two kinds of interests victims have in relation to moral self-defence. The first interest is an interest *that* her moral standing be protected. The reasons to fulfil this interest are in principle *agent-neutral*, in the sense that the interest can be fulfilled when other people stand up for her and assert her moral standing on her behalf – it does not necessarily matter who takes action. The second interest for an agent is an interest *in* protecting her own moral standing. This interest is connected with self-respect and the need of an agent to assert her own agency or power. It typically exists when an agent’s own self-respect is at stake, because of a wrongdoing they may have experienced. It’s the kind of interest at play when a victim of wrongdoing thinks “I need to do this”, or “I want to face my wrongdoer”, or “I need to be heard”. The reasons attached to this second interest are *agent-relative*, in the sense that it matters who takes action – it sometimes has to be the agent whose moral standing is at stake. The victim of a wrongdoing may have had other people criticize the wrongdoer on her behalf, but she might still feel a need to stand up for herself. She might feel like unless she does something, she will continue to feel weak or helpless.

This agent-relative interest in defending one’s own moral standing sets moral self-defence apart from acts that aim at norm enforcement. Moral self-defence has agent-relative aspects – if a victim has an interest *in* protecting her own moral standing, *she* has to act. Even when other people have already responded to an instance of wrongdoing, the victim of the wrongdoing may still have reasons to undertake some form of defensive action. In contrast, norm enforcement for the most part seems agent-neutral.[[12]](#footnote-12) If the goal of public shaming is to ensure that people follow social norms, there is no principled reason for why victims may be more justified in contributing to public shaming than other people (in practice, there may be contingent reasons for why victims may be better placed to publicly shame than others).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see moral self-defence as a purely individualistic endeavour which places the focus on agents protecting their own legitimate self-interests. Moral self-defence often has a social aspect to it. The agent-relative aspect of moral self-defence extends beyond an agent acting in order to defend her own interests, but also to agents acting on behalf of friends, family, and members of their community. People often take strong personal interests in the lives and wellbeing of others. Further, people often exist in relationships which entail mutual obligations (like friendships and family).[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, particular agents may be permitted or even morally required to engage in moral self-defence on behalf of others, even when their own moral status is not under attack, or when the moral status of their social group is not under attack. Such “other-defence” is not always adequate – as I’ve argued, victims of wrongdoing may have an interest in defending their own moral standing, and this interest cannot be fulfilled by others. Nevertheless, other-defence is sometimes very important in cases of moral self-defence. This is because our moral standing and self-respect often depends on the way others treat us. For example, if I am publicly wronged, and no one comes to my defence, I might infer that other members of my community don’t see me as worth defending.

In addition, a person’s moral standing can be threatened indirectly when wrongdoing picks out a salient social feature.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, cases of sexual harassment can threaten the moral standing of all women, even those who have not been victims of sexual harassment themselves. This is because some kinds of wrongdoing are a part of broader patterns of injustice and subordination, and can reinforce those patterns. This is why very specific instances of wrongdoing might justify public shaming from many members of the community, not just the person that has been directly wronged.

While paradigmatic cases of self-defence typically involve threats from current or future wrongdoing, a situation may warrant moral self-defence well after wrongdoing has occurred. As I argued in previous paragraphs, after a wrong is carried out, the wrong can threaten a victim’s moral standing by threatening to change the perception of others, or by lowering the self-respect of the victim. This in turn justifies some defensive act. If these ideas are correct, moral self-defence can be “backward-looking” in a way that paradigmatic self-defence is not. You may thus worry that there is a disanalogy between moral self-defence and paradigmatic self-defence, which is forward-looking. But there is also a “forward-looking” aspect to moral self-defence, because your moral standing is still on the line. Sufficiently serious wrongdoings can affect the recognition and self-respect of a victim long after the wrongdoing was committed, thus continuing to present a threat to the victim. Hieronymi (2001: 546) puts it nicely, noting that sometimes we have reasons to respond to “a past action that persists as a present threat”. Similarly,Margaret Urban Walker (2006: 19-20) observes that unaddressed wrongdoing can have lasting impacts on victims. She writes:

Victims may be uncertain about their own blamelessness and what they deserve. They need to know that others grasp the fact of the violation, its clear wrongfulness, the culpability of the perpetrator, and the reality of the harm and suffering caused them, in order to be validated . . . When these responses are not forthcoming, the victim’s situation is worse than unaddressed, it is aggravated.

A threat to a person’s moral standing can persist after the cause of the threat – a wrongdoing – has occurred. And as Walker points out, the threat can sometimes be aggravated by a lack of a response to the threat. Thus, acts of moral self-defence are done in response to past wrongdoing. But in such cases it is still appropriate to characterize moral self-defence as a form of self-defence, because the agent in question protects her interests which are still under threat.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Public Shaming as Moral Self-Defence**

What does moral self-defence have to do with public shaming? Moral self-defence often requires some expressive act, like protest or criticism. Let us start with protest. In writing on the oppression of African Americans, Bernard Boxill (1976: 61) claims that that when a person protests wrongs done to him, “he affirms that his condition is not unavoidable, he insists that what he protests is precisely the illegitimate, and hence avoidable, interference by others in the exercise of his rights”. Protest can do two things. It can influence the behaviour of others by exhorting and pressuring them to treat you as you deserve. Note that this influence can only be achieved when protest is expressed; you cannot change anyone’s behaviour with internal protest “in your own head”. But even when it fails to affect the behaviour of others, your protest is valuable in a more subtle way. As Boxill observes, protesting wrongdoing helps you acknowledge that what has been done is unacceptable, and thus helps you shore up your self-respect. Expressing protest can also help you to restore a sense of agency when you are wronged. We are often powerless to undo wrongs done to us or attain compensation for our losses. But when you express protest, you can tell yourself, “At least I said something”.

But protest does not always amount to shaming, because you can protest a state of affairs without implicating any specific wrongdoer. Public shaming often involves criticism directed towards specific individuals (or sometimes, institutions or groups). Such directed criticism can also be instrumental for moral self-defence, because it expresses not only that a person’s situation is illegitimate, but also that they have been *wronged*. Like protest, directed criticism has several functions. Some of these purposes are oriented towards others. Directed criticism admonishes the wrongdoer, communicating to them that their behaviour is unacceptable. It can also draw the attention of third parties, warning them not to wrong the victim in similar ways, and perhaps encouraging them to intercede on behalf of the victim. Directed criticism can also help a victim shore up their self-respect. When an agent recognizes that she has been wronged, and takes action against the wrongdoer, she can reclaim her sense of agency by “taking the fight” back to her wrongdoer. The #MeToo movement, for example, has been associated with a decreased relationship between sexual harassment and the loss of self-esteem among victims of sexual harassment (Keplinger et al, 2018). Victims can also address a loss of power by exerting some power over their wrongdoer through criticism. Another study focused on those who participated actively in the #MeToo movement (those who publicly criticized sexual harassers), and found that participating in the movement helps victims “find their voice and regain their power” (Swanson & Szymanski, 2020).

With regard to instances of racial injustice, there is also evidence that various expressive actions (like criticism) can help victims of racial discrimination manage (or “cope” with) incidents of racial discrimination. In a recent systematic review of other empirical studies, Jacob at. al. (2023: 406) concluded that “Confrontation coping [like direct criticism and expressing anger towards the wrongdoer] has shown to be useful in creating good outcomes such as psychological forgiveness as well as decreased arousal and positive emotions”. Another study found that confrontation coping strategies can help victims of microaggressions overcome feelings of powerlessness (Sue et al, 2019). In addition to confrontation coping strategies, victims of racial discrimination can also use “venting” strategies (like complaining to others and members of their community), which can help victims manage negative emotions and stress when situations cannot be easily changed (Brown et al, 2019). In contrast, studies consistently show that “avoidance coping” strategies (eg. doing nothing, exiting, or trying to forget) can lead to further negative mental health effects for victims (Jacob et al, 2023). Thus, criticism, which can constitute both forms of confrontation coping and venting, can be valuable tools for agents when they’ve been wronged by racial injustice.

Public criticism also often comes with the expression of strong moral attitudes like disgust, resentment, anger, and contempt. Expressing some of these feelings can be valuable for moral self-defence, and dispassionate criticism sometimes doesn’t seem adequate in response to wrongdoing. Why? Firstly, experiencing and expressing strong emotions can sometimes help victims recognize the extent of wrongs done to them, which in turn enables them to address the possible harms associated with the wrongdoing. As Alison Jaggar (1989: 167) notes, “outlaw emotions” like anger can often give us indications that we are victims of injustice, and that “Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger or fear may we bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger”. Secondly, in standing up for ourselves, we don’t just want to communicate that we’ve been wronged. We want to communicate to the wrongdoer the extent of the hurt they have inflicted; we need them to know and recognize the badness of their behaviour. Expressing strong moral attitudes, like anger and resentment, are ways for us to communicate the extent of hurt. In fact, they are sometimes the best ways to communicate serious hurt – we are less likely to treat someone’s complaint as serious or urgent if they do not yell, curse, or cry. In particular, philosophers of emotion have placed particular emphasis on feelings like resentment,[[16]](#footnote-16) anger,[[17]](#footnote-17) contempt,[[18]](#footnote-18) disgust (Thomason, 2018: 204-205), and ridicule (Thomason, 2018: 204-205). As these philosophers have observed, having these feelings is either instrumental for, or constitutive of, possessing self-respect. Expressing those feelings is a means of defending or reinforcing our self-respect.

Why does expressing criticism (and strong moral attitudes) sometimes have to be public for the purposes of moral self-defence? In some cases, the wrongs in question involve public issues, like racist or sexist jokes posted on Twitter. These acts of wrongdoing publicly imply that a group of people are inferior. In such cases, what is at stake is not just the lack of recognition from the wrongdoer. What is at stake is the recognition of all members of society, and the public at large. Thus, some acts of moral self-defence need to be addressed not just to the wrongdoer, but to all members of the public. In other cases, the wrongs in question may be private acts connected to public issues. For example, sexual assault. Public criticism may be important in response to these acts, for many of the same reasons stated before – what is at stake is not just the lack of recognition from one or two other people, but from the wider community. Another reason for why shaming must sometimes be public is that, as mentioned earlier, our self-respect is tied to the recognition of others. When serious wrongdoing is known by a victim’s community but goes uncriticised, the victim may infer that her moral worth within her community is lower than others. This is particularly likely in cases related to systematic injustice or oppression, where a victim may already have experienced repeated attacks on her moral standing. Conversely, a community can affirm a victim’s worth through public criticism. Thus, it may be important for members of a community to publicly voice their criticism, for the sake of the victim.

The argument then, is this. Wrongdoing, in particular serious and culpable wrongdoing, can constitute an attack on a victim’s moral standing, as well as the moral standing of those indirectly affected. These attacks can harm the victim’s direct interests in being treated as an equal, and their indirect interests which depend on their standing in society. Because of these features, wrongdoers can make themselves liable to be harmed. As with paradigmatic self-defence, defending one’s interests in the context of moral self-defence is justified (and perhaps morally required), even if doing so causes harm to a liable attacker. Expressing blame, resentment, contempt, and other negative attitudes in public are all ways in which a person can engage in moral self-defence. And when large numbers of people express these attitudes in public, in response to wrongdoing, this constitutes public shaming.

When we supplement the Norm Enforcement View with public shaming as moral self-defence, we gain ways to navigate some challenges associated with public shaming. The Norm Enforcement View presupposes that contributors to public shaming have the authority, or moral right, to enforce social norms in some ways. But normally, non-state agents do not have the authority to impose serious harms on each other in the name of norm enforcement. For example, you may not normally take it upon yourself to beat up a perpetrator of sexual assault in order to deter others from sexual assault. Many commentators and academics have picked up on this fact, and have characterized public shaming as a form of potentially objectionable vigilantism (Loveluck, 2019). For example, Thomason (2018: 203) opposes shaming practices, claiming that the argument in favour of public shaming “assumes something like a moral executive right: we are responsible for enforcing community values as well as upholding them”. Later, she asserts that “When we shame, we are claiming an illegitimate authority over them” (Thomason, 2018: 205). Thus, to defend the Norm Enforcement View, we have to supply an account of why non-state agents have the authority to enforce norms, the kind of activities we may undertake in order to enforce norms, and explain why public shaming is relevantly different from paradigmatic forms of vigilantism. I do not know if such an account can be successfully supplied.

The Norm Enforcement View’s issue with authority is compounded when we consider the fact that public shaming is not just used to enforce existing social norms, but to change or renegotiate norms. Consider the use of public shaming in response to sexual misconduct. Until recently, sexual misconduct (in particular, by white men in positions of power, like Hollywood execs) was treated not so much as serious wrongdoing, but as a tolerated practice not to be spoken of in polite society. Public shaming can be seen not only as an enforcement of an existing norm against sexual misconduct, but as a tool for establishing and reinforcing new and more stringent norms against sexual misconduct.[[19]](#footnote-19) This observation compounds the issue of authority for the Norm Enforcement View, because even if members of a moral community have the authority to enforce *existing* norms,[[20]](#footnote-20) it does not follow that they have the authority to use public shaming to *establish* new norms. Thus, if the Norm Enforcement View wants to justify the use of public shaming to change norms or establish new norms, it must supply an additional account for why private individuals have the right to use public shaming in such a way.

The concept of self-defence gives us significant mileage here. It is uncontroversial (by the standards of professional philosophy) that individual agents have the moral right to impose even serious harms in paradigmatic self-defence, at least when they face serious unjustified threats from liable attackers, and when the imposition of harm is necessary and proportionate (Lazar, 2012). As noted earlier, there are multiple explanations for how attackers can be liable to be harmed. A liable attacker lacks the right not to be harmed, at least by the defender (Frowe and Parry, 2022). This gives the defender the moral right to impose harms in self-defence. Furthermore, a defender’s right to defend themselves does not depend on existing social norms, but on independent facts about whether their interests are under threat, and whether the attacker is liable. Thus, if establishing a new norm is necessary to defend the moral standing of individuals in society, or is constitutive of expressing a commitment to the equal moral standing of all people, then people may be justified in using public shaming to establish those norms. Of course, the defender may not impose any kind of harm on their attacker, and may only be permitted to use certain means. There are conditions which dictate when harming others as a form of self-defence is permissible. My aim in this paper has been to show that contributions to public shaming sometimes fit the conditions of justifiable self-defence.

Yet another common set of worries about public shaming, or shaming in general, is that it involves marginalization or stigmatization which is incompatible with the basic respect that we owe to human beings. For example, Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021: 3-7) claim that characterizations of a target in (online) public shaming “aim to publicly present their identity as being not worthy of participating in (certain) normal social relations, civil conversation, or debates as a moral equal”, and conclude that public shaming “mistreats them, stigmatising or dissuading their adoption of life goals, projects, and priorities that give shape to their lives”. They regard this activity as incompatible with recognition respect within the context of liberal social arrangements, which does not require individuals to have a specific kind of character (Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, 2021). Similarly, Thomason (2018) describes shaming as “globalizing in a morally objectionable way,” because “We take our own views of her to be the deciding factor in who she is, and we refuse to acknowledge the authority of her own point of view”. She expresses similar worries about stigmatization, which she defines as an act which attempts to marginalize or lower the social standing of another person: “Punishments that are specifically designed to manipulate the social standing of offenders meddle in their identities in ways that threaten their abilities to live their lives” (Thomason, 2018: 213).

Even though contributors to public shaming may not always aim at causing stigmatization or marginalization, it is hard to escape the fact that public shaming often does cause stigmatization and marginalization. Nevertheless, this fact does not mean that public shaming cannot be justified as a form of moral self-defence. Whether or not an act of self-defence is justified turns on whether the attacker is liable to be harmed, and whether the act is necessary and proportionate. It does not depend on whether the motivations of the defender are compatible with our norms of respect. Nor does it depend on whether the harms imposed on the attacker are physical in nature or social in nature. While marginalization and stigmatization constitute very serious harms, so are the harms in paradigmatic cases of self-defence (eg. death). These serious harms can be justified when causing those harms is an unavoidable side-effect of defending yourself. Thus, my view of public shaming as moral self-defence provides a straightforward response to the kinds of worries raised by Aitchison and Meckled Garcia, and Thomason: publicly shaming a liable wrongdoer is only unjustified if the harms caused by public shaming are unnecessary or disproportionate. The fact that public shaming can cause marginalization or stigmatization raises the harmfulness of public shaming, and therefore makes it harder for a given case of public shaming to be proportionate. But by no means does this mean that public shaming will always be unjustified. I will discuss the issue of proportionality in more detail in the coming part.

1. **Objections**

I shall now consider a few objections to my view.

*Objection 1: Necessity.* For an imposition of harm to constitute justified self-defence, it must be necessary (Frowe and Parry, 2022). With this in mind, an objection to my view is that public shaming is not necessary for moral self-defence. You may wonder whether there are less harmful ways for agents to defend their moral standing in all or most cases. Or you may further think that because of the collective nature of public shaming – where thousands of people contribute in some cases of public shaming – the power imbalance between the shamers and the shamed is so dramatic that they need not use public shaming to achieve their goals.

Contrary to what “necessity” implies, an act of harmful self-defence need not be *strictly necessary,* in that there are no alternative courses of action. Rather, a necessary act in self-defence refers to the best course of action. Frowe and Parry (2022) write that “the necessity constraint requires defenders to compare the available means of averting a threat, rank them according to some relevant moral criteria, and use only the means that is favored by that ranking”. The criteria of this ranking system include the likely effectiveness of a course of action at preventing a threat (or the expected harm that a defender will face), as well as the likely harms for the attacker (or expected harm).[[21]](#footnote-21) A course of action which imposes moderately greater harm on an attacker in exchange for much better expected outcomes for the defender will rank higher than an alternative. With this in mind, there are some situations in which it is plausible that contributing to public shaming is the best course of action for some agents, for the purposes of moral self-defence. Let us consider a real-life example:

*Amy Cooper:* Amy Cooper is a white woman who threatened to call the cops on Christian Cooper, a black man who was watching birds in central park (he had asked her to leash her dog), and falsely claimed that Christian Cooper was threatening her life (Walsh, 2020). Christian Cooper videoed the event and posted it online. Predictably, she was heavily punished for her actions. “Internet sleuths” dug into her personal life for more damning information (Jashinsky, 2020). She lost her job, her dog (she appears to treat the dog roughly in Christian Cooper’s video), and was charged in court for lodging a false report.

It is important to note the context of this case. It occurred in May 2020, during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, a response to a string of police violence against African Americans. Amy Cooper’s behaviour was interpreted not just as an isolated case of injustice, but a representation of a wider, and very serious threat that Black people face. As Christian Cooper (2023) reflected later, “it’s not about Amy Cooper. What’s important is what her actions revealed: how deeply and widely racial bias runs in the United States”. Thus, Amy Cooper’s behaviour constituted a threat in two senses. First, it was a threat to Christian Cooper’s safety and rights. Secondly, it was an attack on the moral and social standing of Christian Cooper, as well as Black people in America (even if she did not intend it as such). For many people, Amy Cooper’s actions represented the threat of racial discrimination and subordination that they experience. When Christian Cooper chose not to participate in later legal proceedings against Amy Cooper, he notes,

The blowback from some in the Black community for that decision was swift and severe. . . . This was personal for many, even within my own family: One relative by marriage was angry, only later sharing with me that her brother had spent years in a South Carolina prison when a white woman had falsely accused him of rape to cover up their affair. Some felt betrayed. Others seemed to want Amy Cooper punished for Emmett Till and every other outrage African Americans have suffered, as if this one individual should bear the brunt of all the wrongs done to us (Cooper, 2023).

Let us consider the situation of someone who saw Christian Cooper’s video, and wants to publicly criticize Amy Cooper for moral self-defence. Let us suppose that they do not coordinate further public shaming, or encourage others to publicly shame Amy Cooper. In publicly shaming her, they individually impose a tiny cost to Amy Cooper, although they contribute to a collective outcome which imposes very large costs on her. For them, publicly criticizing Amy Cooper might be a means to assert their moral worth by protesting the wrongness of her actions, affirming that her behaviour was illegitimate. In doing so, they may achieve a number of goods. First, they can remind members of a community of the discrimination faced by a group of people, and that this discrimination is unjust and intolerable. Second, as noted earlier, public criticism can help agents shore up their self-esteem, and remind themselves that they are entitled to better treatment. Thus, people can use public shaming as a means to avert threats to their moral standing in their community and their self-esteem.

Are there alternative courses of action? Yes, but each has significant disadvantages, which can make them worse options for some prospective contributors. One alternative might be to silently feel resentment, or to express it only in private spaces, to one’s friends or relatives. Another alternative would be to express one’s resentment privately towards Amy Cooper, perhaps by writing a strongly worded letter to her. I think these two options have serious disadvantages. As I argued earlier, the publicity of some issues, and their nature as public or social issues, means that private criticism is insufficient. This case is a good example. Given the publicity of the original wrongdoing, and its connection to the broader public issue of police violence, I doubt this would have been adequate for at least some people most affected by it. A third option is to rely on public institutions, like the law or the news media, to defend one’s moral status on one’s behalf. While public institutions can indeed be powerful tools for moral defence, they clearly do not cut it in some cases, like when the wrongdoing in question is not illegal. Further, public institutions cannot be relied on when the wrongdoing in question is connected to systemic injustice, like the police mistreatment of Black people, or the routine failure of the criminal justice system in punishing sexual assault. Because of the downsides to these alternatives, contributing to public shaming may well be the best option for some people.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This discussion does reveal what I regard as a positive feature of my view – that public shaming is more likely to be justified as moral self-defence in cases related to oppression, domination, and historical injustice than in other cases. One reason for this claim is that when wrongdoing is carried out by members of powerful and dominant groups in society, they are more likely to pose a real threat to the moral standing of others. For example, given the power imbalances across racial groups in America, a White person who publicly makes a racial slur is more likely to pose a threat than a Black person who insults White people. A White person in America usually does not need public shaming to defend herself from a racist attack on her moral standing, because her moral standing may be more secure. A second reason is that cases related to oppression, domination, or historic injustice also involve routine failure of public institutions to administer and deliver justice. When public institutions, like law enforcement, prove unreliable at delivering justice, public shaming is more likely to be the best course of actions for agents seeking to protect their moral standing.

*Objection 2: Proportionality.* As noted by a number of philosophers, public shaming, in particular online public shaming, usually looks disproportionate. This is because of the sheer mass of individuals contributing to public shaming in many cases of online shaming, and because no one can control how many people contribute to public shaming (Billingham and Parr, 2020). “Pile-ons” are frequent in online shaming, where increasing numbers of people express condemnation for a perceived wrongdoing, often in harsher and harsher terms. As a result, many people believe that we should generally avoid making contributions to cases of public shaming. Or as Frye (2023: 205) claims, that there should be a “strong presumption against public shaming in mass contexts such as the internet”.

It might be indeed true that public shaming is disproportionate in some way in many cases, and that agents should often be wary of contributing. Nevertheless, I do not think that the worry about proportionality is fatal for my thesis that moral self-defence can sometimes justify contributions to public shaming. Just because a case of public shaming is disproportionate in some way, does not follow that the case is automatically unjustified. Nor does it follow that all contributors are automatically unjustified in making their contributions. So even if public shaming is often disproportionate in some way, agents may still be justified in contributing to public shaming in a significant number of instances.

Let us start out by observing, as Billingham and Parr (2020: 1001) do, that a case of public shaming can be disproportionate in two different ways. It can be *narrowly disproportionate* if the harms imposed by the case on the target exceed the target’s liability (or excessive compared to the specific harm caused by the target), and it can also be *widely disproportionate* if the overall harms caused by the case are excessive compared to the overall benefits brought about the case. With this in mind, we can see one way in which the worry about proportionality can be mitigated. A case of public shaming which is narrowly disproportionate can be widely proportionate. For example, the harms that Amy Cooper experienced may be disproportionate to what she deserved or what she was liable to suffer. But it is possible that the public shaming of Amy Cooper brought about very important benefits by raising awareness about racist behaviour, enforcing norms against such behaviour, and giving African Americans an opportunity to express their perspectives on the kind of behaviour carried out by Amy Cooper. If these benefits are weighty enough, they can outweigh the moral disvalue of the narrowly disproportionate harm Amy Cooper experienced. Thus, the public shaming of Amy Cooper might be justified, all-things-considered, even if it is narrowly proportionate. Stated generally, even when a case of public shaming is narrowly proportionate, it may be all-things-considered justified.

The worry about proportionality can be further mitigated once we consider the agent-relative aspect of public shaming. As I argued earlier, public shaming as moral self-defence highlights that contributors to public shaming can have agent-relative reasons to contribute. An agent’s interests in contributing to public shaming can sometimes only be fulfilled when the agent herself takes action. So even when a case of public shaming is disproportionately harmful from an agent-neutral point of view, and even though my potential contribution can make the case slightly more disproportionate, I may still have agent-relative reasons to make that contribution. If those agent-relative reasons are weighty enough, they can exceed my reasons not to contribute. Thus, agent-relative reasons mean that *my* contribution to public shaming can be justified, even when I contribute to a case of public shaming that is overall disproportionate (either narrowly or widely).

For the sake of illustration, suppose that by making a tiny contribution to a case of public shaming, I will somehow prevent myself from experiencing clinical depression. Even if thousands of people have already contributed to public shaming, resulting in disproportionate harm, it appears that my own contribution is justified. This is because my interest in avoiding clinical depression is weighty enough to justify making a tiny contribution to a larger, albeit disproportionate, set of harms. Of course, real-life contributors to public shaming are unlikely to have such dramatic and stark stakes in a single case of public shaming. Not all agents with agent-relative reasons to contribute are permitted to contribute to public shaming, because some of these reasons may not be sufficiently strong to exceed an agent’s reasons not to contribute. But the point is that the agent-relative aspect of public shaming means that there is another way for individual contributions to public shaming to be justified, even when they contribute to overall unjustified cases of public shaming. And I suspect that a person’s interest in moral self-defence can sometimes be strong enough for these purposes.

*Objection 3: Superfluousness.* It might be thought that my view of public shaming as moral self-defence adds little to our existing knowledge. Norm enforcement, to some extent, has a defensive function. We enforce norms against murder, assault, theft, and other crimes partially in order to reduce our own risk of falling victim to those crimes. We also sometimes enforce norms to protect our moral standing, because norms can play important roles in expressing or protecting the moral standing of people. Even in cases of changing norms, a version of the Norm Enforcement View can cover a lot of what my view has to say. When we establish new norms, our actions can be understood as an attempt to establish norms that better reflect and express the moral standing that we ought to have.[[23]](#footnote-23) So the enforcement of norms and the establishment of norms can potentially be framed as ways of protecting our moral standing. Thus, it could be argued that all I have done here is explore one dimension of the Norm Enforcement View, rather than bring a new way of justifying public shaming to the table.

Public shaming as moral self-defence may indeed overlap significantly with public shaming as a form of norm enforcement. But what matters is how public shaming as moral self-defence highlights important dimensions of public shaming which have previously been overlooked. Earlier, I pointed out that moral self-defence highlights the agent-relative justification for contributions to public shaming. This can lead to some conclusions that the Norm Enforcement View does not seem to capture. Consider again the position of someone who wants to contribute to the public shaming of Amy Cooper. Their reasons for wanting to contribute may include the desire to enforce a norm against racist behaviour. This is a somewhat agent-neutral goal, because *they* need not contribute to public shaming for the norm against racist behaviour to be enforced. But their reasons to contribute may also include agent-relative reasons – they may want to speak out against Amy Cooper in order to reclaim their agency, pride, and self-esteem which has been threatened by their own experiences of racist discrimination.

What would the Norm Enforcement View say to this potential contributor? If thousands of people have already shamed Amy Cooper, the Norm Enforcement View might advise this potential contributor not to contribute. With thousands of shamers, it looks like the norm against racist behaviour has already been enforced as much as it can be in that instance. As a result, any additional contribution to the case of public shaming looks like gratuitous piling-on. But public shaming as moral self-defence makes a different claim. As I noted in the last paragraph, one reason in favour of a person’s contributing to public shaming is to reclaim their agency, pride, or self-esteem. Even when a norm has already been enforced, a potential contributor may still have something important to defend by contributing. If the contributor has an agent-relative interest in defending their own moral standing, they can continue to have those interests even after many people have already publicly shamed Amy Cooper. Thus on my view of public shaming as moral self-defence, the potential contributor could be permitted to publicly shame Amy Cooper, long after thousands of people have already done so.

*Objection 4: Victimless Wrongdoing.* Many people might believe that public shaming is a valuable tool in some cases of victimless wrongdoing. For example, the use of public shaming in response to environmental destruction.[[24]](#footnote-24) The problem for public shaming as self-defence is that it only justifies public shaming when wrongdoing threatens the moral standing of someone. Thus, victimless wrongdoing, which may not threaten the moral standing of anyone, is not something that justifies the use of public shaming.

My main response to this objection is to bite the bullet. I acknowledge that moral self-defence is unlikely to justify all cases of public shaming which we think are justified, but this is not a surprising conclusion. That said, it is worth pointing out that many cases of apparently victimless wrongdoing can in fact threaten the moral standing of some people. Environmental destruction, for instance, can reduce the wellbeing of future generations, minorities, and indigenous groups. Each instance of environmental destruction assumes that the interests of the members of those groups can be subordinated to the interests of others. Thus, if left unanswered, environmental destruction can threaten the moral standing of those groups by normalizing the subordination of their interests. So many cases of “victimless” wrongdoing are not in fact so victimless. We might even extend the notion of moral self-defence, or other-defence, to non-human animals. Even if non-humans are not our moral equals, it is likely that at least some non-humans are entitled to some recognition as beings with moral claims. If some wrongdoing threatens the recognition that non-humans are entitled to, we might in some instances be justified in publicly shaming in order to protect this recognition.

1. **Conclusion**

I have argued in this paper that public shaming can be justified as a form of moral self-defence. Agents can sometimes engage in moral self-defence by expressing criticism or other negative attitudes publicly, and when many people behave in such a way in response to a single target, this can constitute public shaming. The claims made here depart from the way existing scholarship has thought about public shaming, as a mostly agent-neutral activity aimed at enforcing valuable social norms. Instead, my arguments focus on the agents carrying out the public shaming, their own reasons for actions, and whether their individual contributions can be justified. By no means are these ways of thinking about public shaming mutually exclusive – I think they are both important facets of the issue. By characterizing public shaming as a form of moral self-defence, in addition to the usual characterization as norm enforcement, I believe that we gain additional insights into many of the compelling cases which motivate our interest in the topic in the first place, like the #Metoo movement, and other cases of public shaming in response to systemic discrimination and historic injustice.

*Australian National University*

James.lim@anu.edu.au

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1. Aitchison and Meckland-Garcia (2021: 7) claim that public shaming portrays its targets as “being not worthy of participating in (certain) normal social relations, civil conversation, or debates as a moral equal”, and thus worry that public shaming is inherently and necessarily disrespectful and unfair. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Torres and Bergner (2021) describe humiliation as the rejection of a person’s status claim (eg. a claim to be a respectable colleague). Because public shaming often involves the publicizing of a person’s flaws, their claim to be a respectable member of society is often threatened. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*., 1000. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is a modification of a definition offered by Billingham and Parr (2019: 998), who define public shaming as “a practice of public moral criticism in response to violations of social norms”. I have chosen to offer a slightly different definition which places emphasis on the collective nature of public shaming. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some philosophers think that “shaming” should be reserved for a specific act designed to induce feelings of shame or to stigmatize targets. I depart from this in my use of “public shaming”, mainly because I engage with some existing literature which uses “public shaming” as public criticism (eg. Billingham and Parr’s definition), as well as some non-philosophical use of the term. Billingham and Parr (2019: 998), for instance, note that authors like Jennifer Jacquet and Jon Ronson use the term “public shaming” to talk about public criticism. Philosopher Krista Thomason (2018: 180) also defines shaming as holding up “flaws and misdeeds for public view”. This does not involve a specific intention. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Braithwaite (1989), Brooks (2008), Kahan (2003), and Nussbaum, (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Another conceptual issue is the distinction between public shaming and *online* public shaming. A number of scholars, including Aitchison and Meckland-Garcia (2021), as well as Solove (2007), have claimed that the harms associated with online public shaming are qualitatively distinct from in-person shaming. This may be correct. However, the goal of my paper is to explain and defend a possible justification of contributions to public shaming, and is less about the particular harms associated with public shaming, or when public shaming is all-things-considered justified. As we shall see, my account of moral self-defence is intended to be general, and can apply in both online and offline contexts. Thus, I think that a distinction between online shaming and public shaming is not necessary for the purposes of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rawls (1971: 440)) makes a point like this about self-respect, noting that “Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Certain acts, like offering sincere apology or compensation, can often remove a threat to a person’s moral standing, thus removing the need for any defensive action. However, a comprehensive discussion on the role of apology and forgiveness is outside the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The link between wrongdoing, failure to respond to wrongdoing, and self-respect has been noted in studies on racial and gender discrimination and self-esteem. See for example Harris-Britt, et al (2007), Kim and Park (2018), Bourguignon et al (2006), and Verkuyten (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Because theories of self-defence require an unjust threat, and a liable wrongdoer, in order for justified self-defence to be carried out, agents cannot justify imposing harm as a form of moral self-defence, when they face perceived but non-existent threats, or just threats to their moral standing. For example, a racist cannot appeal to moral self-defence in order to justify harming those who threaten to bring about a more equal society. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. To my knowledge, most authors writing on public shaming have not discussed agent-relative permissions to publicly shame. Frye (2022: 193) explicitly claims that “any person in a group that shares a norm can—all things being equal – represent the community in enforcing the norm against a given violator”. An account that is an exception here is Radzik (2011: 597)), who argues that an agent’s standing to sanction wrongdoers can be defeated by a number of considerations, most notably “the interests victims have in asserting their own authority”. Adkins (2019: 82-83), whose focus is not on the justification of public shaming, notes that shaming can be a way for agents to assert their epistemic and social authority. Both claims made by Radzik and Adkins converge nicely with my own view on the notion that individuals can have agent-relative interests based on their interests in asserting their own moral standing. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See footnote 24 for some studies on the relationship between racial, ethnic, gender, or religious discrimination on self-esteem. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The notion of moral self-defence can also explain an intuition about punishment that many people have, but is only indirectly implied in some philosophical theories (like Expressivism); that punishment is valuable because it vindicates victims. When an offender is punished, a community broadcasts the claim that it considers the offense wrong and unacceptable. One beneficiary of this broadcast is the victim – she is given clear evidence that her moral community resists the act which wronged her, and that her community denies that she can be treated in such an unjust way. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Jeffrie Murphy (2005: 35)), who writes that resentment defends the values of “self-respect, self-defense, and respect for the moral order”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thomason (2020: 94) argues that “anger is part of the recognition that another person has treated me with disrespect or ill will”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Macalester Bell (2013) claims that contempt “puts those who manifest vices of superiority in their place by presenting its targets as comparatively low in status in virtue of their superbia [the vice of feeling superior to others]”*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A similar point is made by Jacquet (2015: chapter 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example, Frye (2022: 189) claims that “a social norm confers upon individuals the standing to act in the name of enforcing that norm”. Even if true, Frye’s view does not entail that individuals have the standing to establish new would-be norms, because for him, a social norm is one that is accepted by a sufficiently large portion of a community. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A more precise proposal, made by Seth Lazar (2012: 18), is that some harmful act of self-defence (H) is necessary to avert a threat (T) if and only if:

    There is no other less harmful course of action H\*, compared with which the marginal reduction in harm to the prospective victims of T [the threat] achieved by H is insufficient to justify the marginal increase in defensive harm. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Note that this is consistent with claiming that public shaming in her case was all-things-considered unjustified for other reasons. Perhaps, for example, the eventual harms imposed on Amy Cooper were disproportionate in some way, which can potentially give agents decisive reasons not to publicly shame. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Notably, Jacquet (2015) defends the use of public shaming in environmental issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)