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On Shamelessness¹

Michelle Mason

Abstract: Philosophical suspicions about the place of shame in the psychology of the mature moral agent are in tension with the commonplace assumption that to call a person shameless purports to mark a fault, arguably a moral fault. I shift philosophical suspicions away from shame and toward its absence in the shameless by focusing attention on phenomena of shamelessness. In redirecting our attention, I clarify the nature of the failing to which ascriptions of shamelessness might refer and defend the thought that, as an evasion of moral self-censure, shamelessness can be morally pernicious. Far from foregoing shame, I conclude, we should be mindful of its moral importance and unapologetic in its defense.

Introduction

There is something, it seems, philosophically suspect about shame. Philosophers' recent attempts to resuscitate shame as a moral emotion reveal this no less than do philosophical cases against it. Consider, for example, the assumptions that must be in play when a defense of shame is offered only apologetically.² It seems as if, for us moderns at least, the default assumption is that shame is something we do well to forego.³ From

I presented early versions of this work in 2002 at the APA Central Division meetings, the Aristotelian Society meetings, and the University of Canterbury (NZ); in 2003 at Dartmouth College and Harvard University; and in 2004 at the Minnesota I.C.E. conference. I thank Neera Badhwar, Norman Dahl, Julia Driver, Raja Halwani, Valerie Tiberius, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for comments; Julia Annas, Martha Nussbaum, and David Velleman for discussion of their work on shame; and James Harold for first recommending Greene's novella.

2 See, e.g., Cheshire Calhoun, 'An Apology for Moral Shame,' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12:22 (2004): 127-146.

3 This assumption gains support from, e.g., Arnold Isenberg, 'Natural Pride and Natural Shame,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10:1 (1949): 1-24, Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), R. E. Lamb, 'Guilt, Shame, and Morality,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43:3 (1983): 329-346, and John Kekes, 'Shame and Moral Progress,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 282-296. Even philosophers who acknowledge a morally constructive role for (at

this counsel concerning practice, it would appear to be but a small way to the conclusion that contemporary moral theory forfeits little in relinquishing shame of its role as an important response to moral failure.⁴

Yet, to call a person or action *shameless* often purports to mark a fault, arguably a moral fault. To say someone shows ‘a shameless disregard for the truth,’ for example, is to express our disapproval of his lack of a response we believe he properly *should* have toward such disregard: such disregard is something that we believe should prompt one’s shame. Far from encouraging suspicion about shame, such observations encourage suspicion about its absence, that is, suspicions about shamelessness.

In what follows, I aim to shift philosophical suspicions away from shame and toward its absence in the shameless. Focused on the person who *is* prone to shame, and perhaps caught up in sympathy for the poor fellow, philosophers largely have ignored what a shameless

least certain forms of) shame often assume a defensive stance: in addition to Calhoun (2004), see Bernard Williams’s concern about ‘being seen as a classicising reactionary,’ *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 6 and Martha Nussbaum *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Some empirical psychological literature might also appear to support worries about shame. For claims of the coincidence of shame-proneness, aggression, and psychopathology, for example, see June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002). However, this literature is insufficiently clear on distinctions such as those between what I refer to as autonomous versus heteronomous shame and between the effects of feeling shame oneself and being shamed by others—distinctions that must be acknowledged in assessing shame’s status. For discussion of the latter distinction, see Julia Annas, ‘Shame and Shaming Punishments,’ (manuscript). For a discussion of the empirical literature that counsels caution about shame while admitting that it has constructive moral forms (and which explicitly rejects endorsing shamelessness), see Nussbaum (2004).

Finally, suspicion about shame arguably reflects a broader cultural phenomenon: witness the attitude manifest by the participants in certain ‘reality’ television shows, as well as the culture of indiscriminate self-esteem.

⁴ Kekes, e.g., defends ‘the undesirability of regarding shame as an important moral force’ (1988, p. 295). Compare, more recently, François Schroeter: ‘I take it that the question of the moral rightness or wrongness of our actions has more importance in our evaluative thinking than the question of their shamefulness,’ ‘The Limits of Sentimentalism,’ *Ethics* 116 (January, 2006): p. 353.

doppelgänger would be like.⁵ In redirecting our attention, I clarify the nature of the failing to which ascriptions of shamelessness might refer and defend the thought that, as an evasion of moral self-censure, shamelessness can be morally pernicious. Far from foregoing shame, I conclude, we should be mindful of its moral importance and unapologetic in its defense.⁶

I. Admirable Shamelessness?

My case for affording shamelessness greater attention in moral theory proceeds from a garden-variety observation about practice: To call a person or action shameless often purports to mark a moral fault in that person or action. Call this *The Common Assumption*.⁷ The Common Assumption requires its qualified scope in order to accommodate three types of case where an ascription of shamelessness does not appear to be disapproving.

First, there is the kind of case to which Aristotle draws our attention when he writes ‘if shamelessness—not to be ashamed of doing base actions—is bad, that does not make it good to be ashamed of doing such actions.’⁸ Although Aristotle begins by supposing shamelessness is bad,

5 For a rare exception, see Robin Dillon, ‘How to Lose Your Self-Respect,’ *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 29:2 (April, 1992): pp. 125-139.

6 If we take the retributive emotions to be those attitudes involving censure (among them self-censure) or—as Lucy Allais describes them—involving devaluations of the esteem that one merits, then shame is a retributive emotion and shamelessness a rejection of self-directed retributivism. (Lucy Allais, ‘Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness,’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 36:1 (2008): p. 55.) If, in contrast, one takes the retributive emotions to necessarily involve a desire to inflict suffering on their targets, then shame might not be best understood as retributive. In particular, those concerned to retain a pejorative sense of ‘retributive’ might find reason to defend the latter understanding. That defense is beyond the scope of the present essay.

7 I assume, further, that *experiencing the emotion* of shame—not merely grasping its propositional content—is necessary for avoiding the charge of shamelessness. Although more needs to be said about the possibility of people who judge their actions or themselves to be shame-worthy but who never register that recognition affectively, I neglect this complication in what follows.

8 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terrence Irwin, Second ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999): 1128b31-33, p. 67.

he proceeds to acknowledge a form of proper shamelessness: the form of shamelessness that the perfectly virtuous, because they do nothing base and have nothing of which to be ashamed, exhibit. There is no place for, because there are no proper occasions of, shame in the life of the perfectly virtuous.

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to conclude, as one shame suspicious philosopher does, that Aristotle is not committed to affording shame an important moral role.⁹ Aristotle clearly is committed, for example, to the important role of shame in the moral education of the young.¹⁰ Because youth are subject to temptations to which the perfectly virtuous are not, shame functions in the young as a form of restraint in the face of temptation—a morally significant form of restraint that a moral education inattentive to shame would deny them. Aristotle thus at once embraces an admirable form of shamelessness appropriate to the perfectly virtuous adult while acknowledging the significant role that shame plays in the moral education of the young.

Given the scarcity of Aristotelian paragons of perfect virtue, admirable Aristotelian shamelessness is at best rare and its relevance to modern moral theory slight. We find a more pedestrian form of admirable shamelessness in cases where we ascribe it to applaud a person's independence or autonomy. There are two types of case to distinguish here.

Cases of the first type highlight one's resistance to having a false conception of the proper objects of shame imposed on one. Consider, for example, the teenage ballet dancer unwavering by the taunts of his football-playing classmates. Rather than hiding the fact of his passion, he shamelessly strides past football practice with his leotards dangling from his shoulder. In admiring his shamelessness, I take it we admire his assertion of autonomy in resisting distorted values that others

⁹ Kekes interprets Aristotle's comment to suggest that shamelessness is not a vice and that Aristotle is not committed, as is Plato, to recognizing shame as 'one of the important safeguards of morality.' See Kekes (1988), p. 282.

¹⁰ See, again, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1128b17-20. For a more skeptical assessment of the role of shame in the education of the young, see Nussbaum (2004), pp. 213-215.

would impose on him. The dancer's classmates endorse a misguided code of masculinity whose flouting provides no proper occasion for shame. This type of shamelessness thus serves to assert shame's proper bounds.

Cases of a second type arise in the context of what we otherwise regard as acting badly or wrongly. 'Her rebuff was shameless!' one exclaims, 'You should have seen it!' If the target of the shameless rebuff was instead owed a debt of gratitude, the ingrate (unlike the ballet dancer) mistakes shame's proper bounds. Nonetheless, her rebuff (like the ballet dancer's stride) manifests an independence of mind or spirit that is admirable in itself.

Note that the possibility that shamelessness can manifest such autonomy or independence assumes a certain conception of shame, namely, a conception according to which shame internalizes another's evaluation.¹¹ If we conceive of shame as thus heteronomous, then shamelessness (even in the face of wrongdoing) might express an admirable autonomy in the face of others who presume to judge one—precisely because of such presumption and independently of the truth of their judgment.

The Common Assumption's qualification that to call a person shameless *often* is to mark a fault accommodates cases of the three types I have described. The qualification acknowledges that imperviousness to shame is no fault in the perfectly virtuous or on those occasions where one has nothing of which to be properly ashamed.¹² It also recognizes that a conception of shame as a potentially heteronomous phenomenon underwrites instances of shamelessness whereby an agent might manifest distinct, admirable qualities even if the shamelessness is, ultimately, in the service of a bad end.

11 The other's assessment need not be negative for it to properly prompt one's shame. On this point, see David Velleman, 'The Genesis of Shame,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 30 (2001): 27-52.

12 My endorsement of the latter as admirable shamelessness is at odds with Aristotle, who writes: 'the distinction between acts really shameful and those reputed to be so is immaterial, since one ought not to do either.' *Nicomachean Ethics* 1128b20-25.

In what follows, I will not be concerned with the fact that shamelessness would not be a fault in the perfectly virtuous, concerned as I am with the relevance of shamelessness to the rest of us. In that context, regarding the remaining two cases of admirable shamelessness as paradigmatic turns on an account of shame—as a distinctively heteronomous response to another’s judgment—that I reject.¹³

II. Shameless Lovers and Toads

I suggested that a focus on the person who *is* prone to shame might feed suspicions about the attitude. Shame is, after all, unpleasant to experience and—arguably unlike guilt—it can take forms that so denigrate one that it becomes difficult to imagine any redeeming qualities of its experience.¹⁴ Emphasizing an exclusively heteronomous conception of shame at the expense of its arguably non-heteronomous forms adds to the worries: If to be prone to shame implicates one in a relationship where one stands as a kind of evaluative slave to another, it is easy to assume that the shameless person embodies an admirable moral ideal of being one’s own master, slave to no one.

Those raised on the music of Billy Joel are likely to hit on an alternative possibility: that it is the shameless person who is slavish. Joel is on to something decidedly *not* admirable about shamelessness when his shameless lover sings,

Well I’m shameless when it comes to loving you

I’d do anything you want me to

I’d do anything at all

And I’m standing here for all the world to see

There ain’t that much left of me

That has very far to fall

13 I am silent here on the question of the moral significance of heteronomous shame. See, however, Calhoun (2004) and Williams (1994).

14 Nussbaum (2004) makes such a case for what she calls ‘primitive shame,’ a case that leads her to be more wary than I about endorsing even ‘constructive’ forms of shame.

You know I'm not a man who has ever been
 Insecure about the world I've been living in
 I don't break easy, I have my pride
 But if you need to be satisfied

I'm shameless, baby I don't have a prayer
 Anytime I see you standing there
 I go down upon my knees¹⁵

Whatever else the lyrics suggest, they above all convey a picture of a man in utter subjugation to his beloved. He will do anything, he sings, at his beloved's request and solely in order to satisfy the beloved. Acknowledging that shame would tend to check such subservience, he assures his lover that he is, in fact, 'shameless when it comes to loving you.'¹⁶

Contrast here the example of a chattel slave who in obeying the demands of his master does so only with shame about his subjugation. Provided the slave is not simply being shamed by his master but, rather, is affectively registering a failure to achieve his normative ideal of himself, we have an example where actual physical subjugation fails to occasion the kind of evaluative subjugation or moral evasion that I argue shamelessness might signal. This chattel slave, that is, retains a propensity to feel shame that is occasioned by having to do, at his master's behest, things that the slave properly takes to demean a person. The slave's sense of shame here expresses his moral ideal of himself as having a dignity that renders certain things beyond the pale.

Joel's slavish lover, in contrast, suffers an evaluatively internalized form of subjugation. Not only does he do as his beloved beckons him to do, and solely because the beloved so beckons, he moreover does so without scruple. He fails to experience his subjugation to his beloved's demands as demeaning, even in the eyes of all the world.

¹⁵ The title of Joel's song is 'Shameless.' Lyrics by Billy Joel.

¹⁶ Joel's lover resembles Thomas E. Hill, Jr.'s example of the servile in the relevant respects. See Hill, 'Servility and Self-Respect,' *The Monist* 57: 87-104 (1973).

The chattel slave in my example possesses, and Joel's shameless character as I interpret him lacks, what I call *autonomous shame*. I will argue that, far from implicating one in relationships where one is slave to another, autonomous shame precludes one from a form of slavishness: that constituted by the evasion of any evaluative ideal of the person or by the total subjugation of one's evaluative scheme to another person or unworthy end. If this proves correct, then, shamelessness can manifest one's vulnerability to a morally suspect form of heteronomy.

If a disposition for autonomous shame would suffice to guard against the predicament in which we find Joel's lover, it is something more to argue that a propensity for autonomous shame is necessary to accomplish as much. To be sure, one might think, Joel's shameless man is pitiful—but that is because he utterly lacks self-respect. No self-respecting person would allow himself to sink so low. Moreover (the alternative narrative continues), a proper self-respect is manifest in a repertoire of moral psychological attitudes that need make no place for shame; it suffices that the self-respecting moral agent be prone to guilt and the restitution of his wrongs (whether those wrongs be directed toward others or oneself).¹⁷ This reply, however, is far less compelling once we begin to populate the ranks of the shameless with a richer cast of characters.

Graham Greene, in his novella 'Doctor Fischer of Geneva, or the Bomb Party,' describes at length some characters similar in relevant respects to Joel's lover. The characters form a circle of cronies that Dr. Fischer's daughter dubs the "Toads."¹⁸ Each of the five Toads has settled in Geneva either to escape paying taxes in their own country or to take advantage of

17 The alternative narrative I mean to reject proceeds with a conception of respect on which it calls for the recognition of duties or obligations owed (to others or self) and whose violation makes appropriate resentment or guilt. For discussion of a different conception of respect that may facilitate understanding the Toads' failure as failures of self-respect (but which agrees with me in seeing such failure as calling not for guilt but shame), see, again, Dillon (1992), especially p. 127.

18 Among the Toads are: 'An alcoholic film actor named Richard Deane, a Divisionnaire—a very high rank in the Swiss army ...—called Kreuger, an international lawyer named Kips, a tax advisor Monsieur Belmont, and an American woman with blue hair.' See Graham Greene, *Dr. Fischer of Geneva, or the Bomb Party* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1980), p. 10.

'otherwise favourable cantonal conditions.'¹⁹ Dr. Fischer, a millionaire toothpaste inventor, rules over the Toads, we are told, as if they were his donkeys: 'with a whip in one hand and a carrot in the other.'²⁰ His interaction with the Toads consists in a series of elaborate dinner parties where they allow Fischer to put them in compromising circumstances as a condition of his then bestowing on each of them some expensive and exquisite gift. These are people who will allow their fingers to be crushed in the claws of live lobsters as they catch and cook their meal, or don bibs and eat cold porridge, or withstand the criticism, however true, that they 'would have sat down with Hitler in expectation of favours'—all this at the behest of their host and in order in fact to secure some expensive favor from him.²¹ During the culminating 'bomb party' of the book's title, Dr. Fischer invites the Toads to draw from a group of six crackers, one of which they believe to be rigged for a likely fatal explosion and five others of which each contains a check for two million Swiss francs.²² Although we have earlier learned that the Toads regard the exchange of checks among friends as distasteful, each of them but a lawyer named Kips takes the bait.

The attitude that the Toads evoke in the moral compasses of the novel—the narrator and Dr. Fischer's daughter—is one of contempt. As for each Toad's attitude toward him- or herself, they are accurately described as shameless, showing imperviousness to shame in the circumstances Greene describes. Indeed, just those considerations that one would appeal to in defending the moral warrant of others' contempt for the Toads support the case that shame is an attitude the Toads should take toward themselves.²³ Note the parallel case of resentment and guilt. If I have wronged you, then—absent overriding moral reasons—it is morally justified for you to resent what I have done and for

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 That is, approximately \$1.7 million U.S. dollars each at an exchange rate of 1 Swiss franc = 0.8622 U.S. dollar.

23 For my corresponding defense of contempt as a moral emotion, see 'Contempt as a Moral Attitude,' *Ethics* 113 (January, 2003): 234-272.

me to experience guilt. Shame, we might say, is a first-person analogue of contempt just as guilt is a first-person analogue of resentment. Why, then, do philosophers who show little inclination to discredit guilt as a moral emotion balk when it comes to admitting shame to the class of emotions that do important moral work?

III. Sources of Suspicion about Shame

In the context of modern moral philosophy, one may trace suspicion of shame as a moral attitude to two related tendencies of thought. On one line of thinking, shame is not a properly *moral* attitude at all, understanding ‘moral’ here to function descriptively in delineating an area of practice characterized essentially by a concern with obligation and individual responsibility. On this first view, any practice lacking essential conceptual ties to notions of obligations and individual responsibility is not properly regarded as a practice of morality. Perhaps it is more than a system of etiquette but it cannot occupy the role that morality arguably occupies in our lives. Call this line of thought the *No Essential Moral Content* critique of shame.²⁴

On a related line of thinking that nonetheless differs in promoting a weaker case against shame, it is not a properly *modern* moral attitude but instead a psychological remnant that finds its conceptual home in forms of moral thinking, albeit primitive forms of moral thinking. That such so-called shame moralities are primitive is reflected in the rather smug thought that it is modern morality’s good fortune to have evolved beyond them.²⁵ Those who demand to know why such moral thinking is primitive

24 The critique finds support in, e.g., Isenberg (1949) and Lamb (1983). It is also implicit in the insistence that to speak of ‘morality’ in a sense where it delimits a domain broader than that centered on moral rightness and wrongness is to speak in a ‘fairly loose’ way. See, e.g., Alan Gibbard, ‘Moral Concepts: Substance and Sentiment,’ *Philosophical Perspectives* vol. 6 (1992): pp. 199-221. For analysis of those features of the ‘morality system’ that feed such a critique, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

25 Such views appear to have entered the moral philosophy literature through the influence of the classicists E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951) and Adkins (1960). Williams (1993) offers a persuasive rebuttal to

are likely to encounter two replies. First, those inclined to view shame as essentially a reaction to others' evaluations charge that any morality that affords a prominent role to shame necessarily is a heteronomous morality—a morality that thereby conflicts with the picture of the autonomous moral agent that it is contemporary moral theories' concern to promote.²⁶ Others press instead the charge that shame is a peculiarly destructive (because self-denigrating) response to moral failure, a charge they are not inclined to extend to guilt.²⁷ Call the line of thought that stresses the primitive, because heteronomous and/or self-denigrating, conception of shame *The Moral Primitive* critique of shame.

The *No Essential Moral Content* critique attempts to base suspicion about shame's status as a moral attitude—and thus threatens a morally deflationary status for shamelessness—on the claim that shame lacks the relevant connection to essentially moral concepts, such as concepts of wrongdoing or of responsibility.²⁸ On one understanding of what it is for an attitude to be a moral attitude, that is, its conditions of intelligibility must make essential reference to such concepts. The intelligibility conditions for an attitude are those conditions the presence of which is necessary for the attitude to make sense as a response to its object. For example, guilt and resentment are paradigmatic moral attitudes on the view in question because neither guilt nor resentment is intelligible as a response to an action in the absence of some understanding that the action in question is wrong. The intelligibility conditions of guilt and resentment, then, make essential or ineliminable reference to the concept of wrongdoing.²⁹ Guilt also

Dodds' and Adkins' interpretation of the ancient Greeks.

26 Such a view might motivate some contemporary Kantians. For defense of the centrality of others' opinions to shame, see John Deigh, 'Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique,' *Ethics* 93 (1983).

27 See here Kekes (1988).

28 Lamb (1983) wields the claim that one can intelligibly feel shame for something outside one's control (which is not intelligible in cases of guilt, on his view) against the status of shame as an important moral emotion.

29 For endorsement of such intelligibility criteria for moral emotions, see for example, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, 'The Moralistic Fallacy: On the "Appropriateness" of Emotions,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXI, no. No. 1 (July 2000).

is said to enjoy an essential conceptual connection to responsibility, the claim being that included among the intelligibility conditions for guilt is the fact that one is responsible for that for which one feels guilty.³⁰ One who holds this view of the criteria for the status of an attitude as a moral attitude (again, on the descriptive reading of ‘moral’) may then proceed to argue that, insofar as it is intelligible for one to feel shame in response to any number of things for which one is not responsible, shame is not a moral attitude. Critics of shame’s status as a moral attitude often note, for example, that it is intelligible for one to be ashamed of things such as one’s shortness or obesity, one’s ancestors, one’s inaptitude at chess, and so on despite the implausibility of supposing that one is responsible or properly held accountable for them. In this respect, some argue, shame contrasts with guilt; hence, the status of the latter but not the former as a moral attitude.

The Moral Primitive critique of shame is more circumscribed. It limits itself to denying that we properly regard shame as a *modern* moral attitude, a denial that relies on a story of moral progress. One such story allows that ancient societies may well have regarded shame as fitting a person just in case he or she had acted immorally but, the story continues, the ideals the society regarded as moral ideals were not properly so regarded. On this view, one can acknowledge a conceptual tie between shame and a system of norms recognizable as a morality but the context of primitive values in which that tie operates is one that we have, in our own enlightenment, overcome.³¹ A so-called shame morality emerges on this view as a morality that would hold the moral agent captive to the opinions of others, a criticism expressed in calling such a morality heteronomous. In contrast, in giving a central role to guilt as opposed to shame, an enlightened morality respects moral agents’ autonomy by eliciting their unmediated judgment of themselves. On

³⁰ This view is prominent, again, in Lamb (1983).

³¹ This appears to be the view of those such as Dodds, Adkins, and the moral philosophers that follow them, including Isenberg, Lamb, and Kekes. In general, it is a story that motivates contrasts between so-called shame- versus guilt-moralities.

such a view, shamelessness may well emerge as a sign of modern moral maturity.

At first glance, the example of the Toads might appear to support the No Essential Moral Content critique of shame. Note, for example, the breadth in what may warrant a charge of shamelessness. The example of the Toads suggests that anything from allowing one's fingers to be crushed in the claws of live lobsters, to putting on a bib to eat cold porridge, to remaining silent in the face of an insult may properly give rise to a charge of shamelessness. In this way, the breadth in what may give rise to a charge of shamelessness tracks the often-remarked breadth in the things that may provoke shame and, thus, shame fails to circumscribe any essentially moral domain. This appearance, I suggest misleads. We can see that it does once we have a better sense of the competing accounts of shame themselves.

Suppose we understand attitudes such as shame on a model on which they provide 'evaluative presentations' of their objects.³² On this model, to experience a certain emotion is, among other things, to experience something—the object of the emotion—as possessing a particular property, which property renders the emotion fitting (in an evidentiary sense) the object in question. We can then refer to evidence that supports the ascription of the relevant property to the emotion's object as the emotion's grounds. Applying this model to the standard (s) philosophical account of guilt, we have as intelligibility conditions for guilt:

GUILT_s: To experience guilt is to experience one's action or intention to act (guilt's possible objects) as morally wrong (the property that renders the emotion fitting it's object) on the ground that, for example, the action (intended) was a denial of someone something to which they had an undefeated right.

The philosopher who privileges guilt over shame as a moral emotion may then propose that the proper way of understanding the

³² For such an understanding, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

intelligibility conditions of shame is, on this standard model, the following:

SHAME_S: To experience shame is to experience oneself or anything closely associated with oneself (shame's possible objects) as humiliating (the property that renders the emotion fitting it's object) on the ground that, for example, the object lowers one's status in the opinion of others.³³

It is easy to see how, on this understanding of shame, a connection between shame and *moral* assessment is at best contingent: If the proper objects of shame need have nothing to do with wrongs or that over which we exercise control, and one holds that the proper domain of moral assessment is restricted to what is wrong and/or things over which we exercise control, then shame is not necessarily a moral emotion. These features of the No Essential Moral Content View of shame encourage a corresponding view about shamelessness, namely, that shamelessness is a moral fault only in cases where shame registers something within the agent's control and morally assessable as wrong. The Toads' actions of allowing their fingers to be crushed in the claws of live lobsters as they catch and cook their meal, donning bibs to eat cold porridge, and remaining passive in the face of insult in expectation of gifts meet the control condition, of course. However, on the model of shame under consideration, it's difficult to see how shamelessness in the face of having performed them supports particularly *moral* censure of the Toads. This is not to deny that the No Essential Moral Content critique will be able to accommodate moral censure in less complicated cases, for example, in cases where agents fail to be ashamed of behavior that is clearly immoral in itself (for example, committing a heinous beating on a whim). Even here, however, proponents of the No Moral Content critique of shame do not appear impressed by the thought that such cases may call for shame rather than guilt.

³³ Lamb (1983) suggests such an understanding.

The Moral Primitive critique of shame focuses its attention not on the object(s) of shame but, on the first version I introduced, on the emotion's legitimating grounds. This version holds that such grounds must always invoke the opinions of people other than the agent. So, for example, the Moral Primitive critique might acknowledge that shame is fitting in the case of the Toads as a response to the regard of others who find their actions improper. Furthermore, proponents of the Moral Primitive critique might be happy to acknowledge such shame as a moral emotion in some sense of 'moral.' What they go on to insist, however, is that any morality that would give a central place to such an emotion invites the criticism of being a *heteronomous* morality. The charge of heteronomy amounts to a criticism on this view because such a morality appears to require of agents a kind of emotional deference to others, calling on agents to emotionally reproach themselves for failing in the eyes of others quite irrespective of whether the agent has failed in her own eyes or whether the others' vision is clouded. Only a primitive morality—one that doesn't share our modern appreciation of autonomy—would give a prominent place to shame as opposed, say, to guilt, as a response to moral failure. The philosophical account of shamelessness this version of the Moral Primitive critique of shame suggests is one where shamelessness consists in a willing disregard of moral values others would impose on one in favor of those one has autonomously endorsed oneself. It is easy to see how, on such a view of shame, shamelessness might emerge as a virtue of authenticity or integrity rather than a vice.

The second version of the Moral Primitive critique, for its part, suggests taking up shamelessness as a strategy for psychic health. The moral maturity we display as compared to the ancients is, in short, psychically better for us.

I believe that the morally deflationary accounts of shamelessness suggested by the No Essential Moral Content and Moral Primitive critiques of shame are mistaken. We go wrong, in my view, in denying that shame can be a properly focused moral emotion (that is, no less significantly 'moral' than guilt), in supposing that it must be mediated in some way by the

opinions of others, and by assuming it must be self-denigrating in a way hostile to a valuable form of self-regard. Once we see this, we can better appreciate the moral importance of not being shameless.

IV. The Moral Importance of Not Being Shameless

Whether the No Essential Moral Content critique of shame poses a strong or weak challenge to the claim that shamelessness is a moral fault depends on how moralized an account of shame one wishes to defend. That is, one way to blunt the force of the No Essential Moral Content critique of shame is to acknowledge that not all proper instances of shame have explicit moral content but demonstrate that, nonetheless, some do. Feeling shame rather than guilt in the face of realizing one is disposed to thievery, for example, might be one such case. Dubbing these the moralized instances of shame, one can then go on to defend the view that shamelessness is morally amiss when the provoking transgressions are immoral in themselves and sufficiently serious to cast the agent's character in an especially bad moral light.

Such a reply, however, is ultimately unsatisfying because false to the phenomenon presented by slavish lovers and Toads. Their example resists concession to an overly narrow conception of the moral domain as the domain of right and wrong, as opposed to the domain of goodness more broadly conceived.

As for the challenge presented by the Moral Primitive critique of shame: on one hand, there is something correct in the thought that the experience of shame involves the perspective of another and the other's evaluative expectations. However, that should not lead us to think that such sensitivity to the evaluative expectations of another is incompatible with the autonomy that shame's detractors view as morally progressive. That the two perspectives are compatible becomes evident in the case of Joel's and Greene's shameless characters if we understand the relevant evaluative expectation to be that—however resilient they may in fact stand in the face of external criticism—they shrink from their *own* views. Expecting this much from slavish lovers and Toads involves, given their

occurrent shamelessness, an appeal that they take a different perspective on themselves. That someone actually distinct from himself or herself occupies the perspective in question thus need not enter into the content of the emotion.

To morally re-inflate, as it were, shame and shamelessness in response to these critiques, consider again the Toads. Greene's example suggests that what is amiss with the Toads—what is morally amiss with them—is not the fact that they fail to experience shame in response to deeds that are wrong in themselves (as the account of shamelessness addressed to the weak challenge from the No Essential Moral Content critique of shame would have it). At least, it would require a stretch to suggest that allowing one's fingers to be crushed in the claws of live lobsters, donning a bib to eat cold porridge, or remaining passive in the face of an insult is morally wrong. Nor does the Toads' apparent moral fault rest in the fact that they fail to experience these things as morally compromising them in the eyes of actual others (as on the account of shamelessness the Moral Primitive critique of shame suggests).

What, then, *is* morally amiss with the Toads? An adequate account of their shamelessness as a moral fault proceeds, on my view, from understanding their shamelessness as a form of moral evasion. To be shameless in the manner of the Toads is, in large part, to regard oneself as beyond the reach of any ideals of character appraisal. For the shameless, moral appraisal is very narrow in its scope—extending at most to the appraisal of one's actions while leaving one's character untouched. Because those moral standards to which the shameless do subscribe are narrow in this sense, behavior for which one might hold oneself accountable in a way that bears on the esteem one regards as one's due is, for the shameless, at most an occasion for guilt or regret.

This conception of shamelessness corresponds to an alternative conception of shame as a form of self-censure:

SHAME_A: To experience shame is to experience oneself (shame_A's object) as diminished in merited esteem (the property that

renders the emotion fitting its object) on the ground that one has violated some legitimate ideal of character.³⁴

Among the conditions of shame_A's proper focus, then, are the following:³⁵

1. It is directed at oneself as a response to one's violation of an ideal of the person,
2. the violation is one for which one appropriately holds oneself responsible, for example,
 - a) one was not on the initiating occasion acting with nonculpable ignorance, compelled, or forced,
 - b) one is not psychologically abnormal or morally undeveloped,
3. there is a legitimate expectation or demand that one approximate the personal ideal.

This account of shame is most at home with existing philosophical accounts that understand shame as an emotion of self-assessment. On such accounts, the agent's self—or, as I put it, the agent's character—is a target of shame and the grounds on which shame is fitting one's character are grounds that in fact speak to the esteem such a character merits from oneself and others. Shame thus presents one's character as meriting some degree of withdrawal of esteem in virtue of one's failure

34 Prominent proponents of this type of view include Nussbaum, John Rawls, Gabriele Taylor, and Velleman. See Nussbaum (2004); Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), especially pp. 442-446; Taylor *Pride, Shame, and Guilt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Velleman (2001). Not all these authors would agree with the way I construe the relevant form of self-assessment, however.

35 Each of these conditions deserves more detailed treatment. With regard to condition 3, in particular, I note my optimism that the details can accommodate the perhaps peculiarly modern concern that we exercise control over those aspects of ourselves and our behavior that are the targets of evaluative expectations, if those expectations are to be justified. Zadie Smith gives voice to such concern when she reports 'I find it impossible to experience either pride or shame over accidents of genetics in which I had no active part.' Zadie Smith, 'Speaking in Tongues,' *New York Review of Books* 56:3 (February 26, 2009).

to approximate a legitimate character ideal. The noted conditions of proper focus concern the accuracy of shame's evaluative presentation of oneself as diminished in esteem-worthiness. Corresponding to this conception of shame, shamelessness emerges as an attitude of indifference to such ideals of character and to the evaluation of one's esteem-worthiness that they support.

In contrast to such shamelessness, a healthy sense of (properly focused) shame signals a susceptibility to more comprehensive moral appraisal of oneself in light of certain character ideals.³⁶ This feature of shame becomes more salient, perhaps, when contrasting shame and guilt. Consider the following example.³⁷ If I feel guilty upon pocketing the piece of chocolate while out of sight of the clerk, it is because I recognize that I have done something wrong. There is some prohibition that I endorse as a standard for my behavior and my having flouted that standard provokes the negative feeling we call guilt. Such feelings are not idle. Prompted by my feeling of guilt to reflect on what I have done, I decide to make reparation. Thus, before my companion in crime and I exit the store, I carefully slip the candy back into its bin. Upon exiting the store, my incredulous companion asks why I returned the treat and I respond, sincerely, that, having taken it, I felt guilty. However trivial one might find this particular moral failing, the example is, in its structure, fairly typical of guilt.

Suppose that all the circumstances of the candy case are the same but that I sincerely report that I feel not only guilty but that I feel shame, or am ashamed of myself.³⁸ How could I be so petty? So deceptive? So low?

36 Lamb (1983), D. A. J. Richards, *A Theory of Reasons for Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Herbert Morris, *On Guilt and Innocence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), and Nussbaum (2004) likewise appeal to ideals and 'model identities' in distinguishing shame from guilt. For defense of the continuity of shame and guilt, see Patricia Greenspan, 'Guilt and Virtue,' *Journal of Philosophy* 94; 91(2): 57-70.

37 Rawls offers a similar example at *A Theory of Justice*, p. 445. I take my example from an actual case.

38 I here adopt the colloquial 'I was ashamed of' to express what we might express more awkwardly as 'I felt shame.' The former, however, lends itself to confusion, in my view, by encouraging conflation of the emotion's object and its grounds.

Thus motivated by the sting of shame, not only do I slip the piece of candy back into its bin, I vow a course of self-improvement.

I suggest that the language of shame in the latter scenario introduces something further into the case and that this something further concerns the manner in which shame, as opposed to guilt, involves a more comprehensive assessment of the self. My suggestion is that my deed provokes shame just in case I fear or worry that what I have done (palmed the candy) reflects back on myself in a way that threatens to challenge the esteem that I or others reasonably can maintain for myself in the light of some ideal of character I myself endorse. Whereas my guilt takes as its relatively narrow focus what I have done, my shame takes a comparatively broader focus on what, in so doing, I have revealed myself to be.³⁹ Whereas guilt is primarily a response to what one has failed to do, shame is a response to what one fails to be. Of course, insofar as the doer of the wrongdoing that prompts guilt is oneself, guilt presents oneself as a wrongdoer. Nonetheless, the distinction remains that whereas guilt is an emotion that constitutes what we might call a *narrow liability evaluation of self*; shame is an emotion that constitutes a *wide esteem evaluation of self*.⁴⁰

The introduction of talk of liability here is meant to mark guilt's features as an emotion that enjoys a quasi-legalistic restriction of focus on *what is done* and an essentially reparative motivational force, one that looks outward toward making amends to a 'victim' of our deed.⁴¹ In contrast, by an esteem evaluation of self, I have in mind the features of shame as involving a deeper assessment of the merit of one's character in light of an ideal of such and as possessing an essentially reformative motivational force, one that looks inward toward reforming those aspects of one's character that fall short of the ideal in question.

39 Here, I echo Williams (1993), who writes: '*What I have done* points in one direction towards what has happened to others, in another direction to what I am' (p. 92).

40 In linking shame with esteem, I agree with Lamb, Morris, Nussbaum, Rawls, and Richards. For an opposing view, see Deigh (1983).

41 The relevant sense of liability here contrasts with strict liability in the legal sense, which does not require the presence of responsibility or negligence.

To be sure, whether a case of properly focused shame is morally justified—and, so, whether a case of shamelessness is morally objectionable—is a further question. That question is answered by determining whether there are overriding moral reasons to forego it. In the absence of such overriding moral reasons, however, properly focused shame earns no less privileged a role in the moral psychology of the mature moral agent than the philosopher is willing to grant to guilt; shamelessness emerges as no less a moral pathology than guiltlessness.

The differences between shame and guilt suggest that an attempt to offer an alternative account of what I have suggested is morally amiss with the shameless in terms of guiltlessness is not promising. Consider, for another example, the CEO who is prepared to countenance a certain degree of fraud and cheating in her subordinates in the interests of the company.⁴² Suppose, further, that she not only acknowledges that she is guilty of wrongdoing but feels guilty about what is done on her watch. Her self-evaluation is fully compatible with retaining her conviction that she hasn't a bad character. Indeed, the cohabitation of this conviction with her feeling guilt is evident in the fact that her conscience is assuaged when the authorities fine her company for its unfair dealing. For those who are shameless in such matters, guilt and financial penalty are simply some costs of doing business—costs they view as leaving no lasting residue on their characters. Or consider, again, the candy thief. Not only is her feeling guilty for palming the candy compatible with a conviction that she hasn't a bad character, it is fully compatible with her thinking quite well of herself for being so daring. In contrast, the latter thought does not so easily cohabit with feeling shame, precisely because shame here signals a reevaluation of what one's tendency toward such antics says about oneself—it now presents itself as a reason to think less of oneself, not more highly.

Finally, let us return to the *Toads*. Greene's novel gives us no reason to believe that the *Toads* are insensitive to feelings of guilt. Were they

42 I thank Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for the example.

without even this moral scruple, they could have stayed home and easily evaded the tax laws, for example, rather than have moved outside the laws' jurisdiction. Moreover, consider again the emotion most fitting our own third-person response to the Toads. The emotion reciprocal to guilt, namely resentment, has no place here. The Toads, after all, neither wrong each other, Dr. Fischer, or anyone else in the novel, so far as we can tell. The emotion that the Toads properly evoke, Greene's novel suggests, is (recall) contempt.

To the extent that one is shameless, on my proposed view, one lacks constraint on what one will allow oneself to be. In the case of the Toads, the extent of the shamelessness on display is extreme. Such cases help bring out not only the sense in which shame is an emotion of self-assessment but also its role as an emotion of self-protection.⁴³ It is noteworthy in this regard that the Toads' moral evasion of responsibility for their characters is so thorough that it is difficult to get a grasp on them as individual characters at all. The difficulty makes it tempting to say that the Toads' shamelessness consists in their failing to esteem themselves with reference to any character ideal. Perhaps there are actual cases of such extreme forms of *strict shamelessness*, where one's self-esteem is impervious to threat because one values *no* ideals of character.⁴⁴ If so, I suggest that they are better regarded as pathologies, rather than moral failures.⁴⁵

An alternative understanding of the Toads as moral failures interprets them as evaluatively subjugating any morally worthy character ideal to a single unworthy ideal: that of being a materially rich man or woman. Understood thus, the Toads are not strictly shameless; they might feel shame, for example, were they to find themselves in dire financial straits. What they lack is a proper appreciation of the other,

43 See here Taylor (1985).

44 Strict shamelessness corresponds to how Dillon (1992) understands wantonness.

45 Perhaps someone in the midst of a clinical depression exhibits an incapacity to esteem himself or herself with reference to any ideal at all. I have a much harder time imagining an agent who might, without pathology, lead an entire life thus incapacitated.

morally worthwhile, character ideals whose flouting renders them truly ‘donkey-like.’

It appears, then, that standard attributions of shamelessness pick out not those who have no character ideals at all—which would appear to be a pathological condition—but those whose ideals of character lack connection with a good human life.⁴⁶ When we say that such people must have no pride or that they lack self-esteem, we do not thereby ignore whatever pride or self-esteem they may have despite (indeed, in light of) their unworthy ideals. Rather, the thought is that, insofar as their ideals are unworthy, pride or esteem has in their case no proper place. As Dr. Fischer himself aptly remarks of the Toads: ‘The rich have no pride except in their possessions. You only have to be careful about the poor.’⁴⁷

Consider, finally, Dr. Fischer himself. He, no less than the Toads, is shameless. Like the Toads, he has a character ideal that regulates his self-esteem: apparently he aspires to be a god among mere men. Were Dr. Fischer to betray any weakness, we can imagine, he would be ashamed of himself. Indeed, Greene’s one example of Dr. Fischer feeling shame comes upon his discovery that his wife has been spending time with an impoverished music lover. He regains his pride only after having the poor man abruptly fired from his job and proceeding to abuse his own distraught wife. Dr. Fischer knows first hand why one must be careful about poor folk like the music lover—they cannot, as can the shameless Toads, be bought.

As with the case of his Toads, then, Dr. Fischer’s shamelessness consists in a failure to value any character ideals recognizable as worthy of a well-lived human life. Although he apparently escapes the greed that characterizes the Toads, he neither aspires to be, for example, a true lover nor to cultivate a true friend. The sole aim with reference to which he

46 When we speak of a person’s shamelessness, then, we take an objective view of worthwhile character ideals. We neither imply that the person in question has no ideals of character nor that they would on no occasion feel shame (as they might were they to flout those ideals, whatever they are, that they themselves endorse).

47 Greene, p. 42.

attempts to give meaning to his life is that of being a godlike figure capable of manipulating people according to his whim. Not even an appreciation of the entrepreneurial spirit that one might have thought responsible for the success of his toothpaste empire redeems his case. He exits Greene's novel, perhaps unsurprisingly, having put a gun to his head.

In what sense, ultimately, does such shamelessness constitute a moral fault? As Philippa Foot has noted, some virtues have to do not with the observance of rules but, rather, with the adoption of certain worthwhile ends.⁴⁸ Understood thus, some vices correspondingly concern the failure to adopt worthwhile ends. In those who suffer from shamelessness as I have described it, this failure manifests itself as a failure to hold themselves accountable to worthwhile ideals of character. There is no intuitively worthwhile ideal of character such that the failure to honor it is regarded by the Toads as impugning the esteem they are due, that is, no corresponding failure for which one is appropriately ashamed. Dr. Fischer and those in his circle thus suffer from a vice that prohibits their access to a special normative compass to direct them toward worthy character ideals. In the absence of such a compass, the end that Greene deals Fischer suggests, one is as good as dead.

Conclusion

If I am correct, then we can now see that the Common Assumption—and, so, the status of shamelessness as a moral fault—survives philosophers' suspicions about shame. Against threats to that status that the *No Moral Content* critique of shame suggests, we note that the critique turns on an overly narrow understanding of what it is for a concern to be a moral concern. Against doubts arising from the *Moral Primitive* critique of shame, we can now respond that no commitment to outmoded values is implied by an endorsement of the moral significance of shamelessness. It is the kind of self- or character-assessment that is prompted by one's transgressions, not the type of transgressed value that does the

48 See Philippa Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues,' *Mind* 94 (1985).

prompting, that marks shame and shamelessness from guilt and guiltlessness. Neither have we found reason to believe shame destructively self-denigrating. On the contrary, it has emerged as a necessary bulwark against the lack of a valuable form of self-regard.

Both the No Essential Moral Content and Moral Primitive critiques of shame also lend support to a position concerning moral theory: namely, that the absence of a prominent role for shame in contemporary moral theory is a mark of our modern moral enlightenment, a circumstance that demonstrates how far we have progressed from the ancient ethics in which shame had a central place.⁴⁹ However, if Dr. Fischer and his Toads are, in respect of their shamelessness, morally deficient, deficient too is a moral theory that banishes shame from its conceptual core. It is so because it thereby neglects the fact that persons can go morally astray in virtue of failures other than those that guilt is properly taken to mark. Although the Toads are not, I have argued, guiltless, they are moral failures nonetheless—and the contempt that Greene's narrator reports feeling for them is well placed. To be prepared, as Dr. Fischer suggests Deane is, to 'play Mr. Darling in *Peter Pan* shut up in a dog kennel if the cheque was large enough' is not (or not merely) to violate a moral rule or obligation, even less to wrong another; it is thus forced to suppose that Deane thereby reveals himself guilt worthy. No—the lives that Deane and his fellows lead are shameful because they fail to hold themselves to the measure of any ideal of character worthy of a good human life. It is just such a failing, I have argued, that calls in their case for shame. Their incapacity to answer that call—their shamelessness—blinds them to morally significant goods. In denying shame its place in the moral domain, a shame-less moral theory likewise obscures an important form of moral failure.

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49 Especially noteworthy is Adkins' (1960) quaint pronouncement that 'We are all Kantians now' (p. 2). That prominent 20th century Kantian, Rawls, was not then in Adkins's sense a Kantian.