

Online Shaming

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Abstract: Online shaming is a subject of import for social philosophy in the Internet age, and not simply because shaming seems generally bad. I argue that social philosophers are well-placed to address the *imaginal relationships* we entertain when we engage in social media; activity in cyberspace results in more relationships than one previously had, entailing new and more responsibilities, and our relational behaviors admit of ethical assessment. I consider the stresses of social media, including the indefinite expansion of our relationships and responsibilities, and the gap between the experiences of those shamed and the shamers' appreciation of the magnitude of what they do when they shame; I connect these to the literature suggesting that some intuitions fail to guide our ethics. I conclude that we each have more power than we believe we do or than we think carefully about exerting in our online imaginal relations. Whether we are the shamers or the shamed, we are unable to control the extent to which intangible words in cyberspace take the form of imaginal relationships that burden or brighten our self-perceptions.

Keywords: mobbing, online shaming, magnitude gap, imaginal relations

These giants were being brought down by people who used to be powerless--- bloggers, anyone with a social media account. And the weapon that was felling them was a new one: online shaming.

Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*

Online shaming gets some exciting scholarly attention, yet searching for the phrase on a leading index for papers in philosophy yields no search results.¹ As is sometimes the case with contemporary issues in social philosophy, when it comes to the applied ethics of online shaming we philosophers seem to be slow to contribute to ongoing and pressing conversations. And they are pressing; journalist Jon Ronson (2015) goes so far as to describe the 2010s as “a great renaissance of public shaming” (10). Noting examples of occasions on which he participated in public pressure brought to bear, via Twitter, on corporations that were moved to change public positions or policies, Ronson points out that “when we deployed shame, we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool. It was coercive, borderless, and increasing in speed and influence” (10).

In this essay, I argue that the Internet age introduces new responsibilities for each of us, and not just a proliferation of old responsibilities; those new responsibilities include sorting out the extent to which we each have more power than we believe we do or than we think carefully about exerting, even as we exert it in online communication. The reaction of many regarding our new public powers is to avoid any online participation or to recommend avoidance to others (consider the popular injunction online, “Never read the comments!”). It is not obviously desirable to withdraw from public spaces and widely shared writing, however. I connect Ronson’s insights, that the magnitude of online shaming exceeds what its authors intend or even believe to be true, with psychologists’ development of the notion that we have *imaginal relationships*, in order to better identify our responsibilities as participants in cyberspace and as potential public shamers or victims of shaming.² Social psychologists of imaginal relationships indicate that we all have relationships that we endow with imaginative content which includes their import, meaning, and membership.³ We can assess the extents to which these reflect reality, including the realities as to who we assume to be our actual and potential readers and whom we take as objects of our online writing.

Before proceeding, however, I consider a possible reason why we have been slow to bring philosophy to bear on the scholarship of online shaming: Isn't the philosophical contribution sufficiently fulfilled with the recommendation, *Don't do that*? Ethical recommendations against shaming and social punishment aren't new, after all. Over 150 years ago, John Stuart Mill eloquently pointed out in *On Liberty* that society "practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" ([1859] 1991, 9). His words seem timely in light of Ronson's examples of those who were shamed online feeling "nervous and depressed," reluctant to appear in public as hate mail and threats of violence arrived in their email and social media accounts (2015, 226). Mill urged some form of "protection . . . against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them . . . a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence" ([1859] 1991, 9).⁴ In light of this passage, consider Ronson's example of Justine Sacco, who published an arguably racist (or at least insensitive) joke on Twitter right before an international flight, then spent hours in the air and offline, unaware that as she traveled, her Tweet went viral, her employers were made aware of the international outrage at her offense, and social media users were alternately gleeful and furious. A Twitter user commented that the subject lost her job and friends while in the air; another user replied, "The Internet has spoken."⁵

In light of experiences like Sacco's, Mill's words ring true today. Some online shaming resembles the sort of social tyranny that he describes. Granted, there is a greater quantity of public shaming possible in cyberspace. The wider participant base in social media is permissive of a quantitative increase in ethically concerning cases. One could argue that quantitative increases in misbehavior and in population don't necessarily call for new philosophical contributions to the cyberethics of online

shaming. Yet I suggest that, among other possibilities, online shaming is also a matter calling for the application of relational ethics. When one enters cyberspace, one enters into more relationships than one previously had. This, too, is perhaps a merely quantitative observation, but it is one yielding new and more responsibilities, and therefore risks.

We ought to attend to those new relationships precisely because, as Ronson illustrates in detail, the magnitude of online shaming exceeds what its authors intend or even believe to be true. This is important observational data that illustrates the value of the philosophical scholarship showing that intuitions are not always a reliable guide to ethical behavior.⁶ Especially when one's own implicit biases operate in one's favor, the intuition is alluring that one's use of Twitter to make jokes at the expense of a stranger cannot really be anything all that harmful. The happy assumption that one has a deep self that is good and true can result in remarkably exonerating judgments of subsequent deeds (Newman et al 2015). One's internal and individualized intuitions are that one is a good person and not a bad person, so surely, one might feel when one's fingers twitch toward one's cell phone, one isn't a contributor to distant harms or collective acts of wrongdoing. As Peter Unger argues, however, in a work tellingly subtitled, "Our Illusion of Innocence" (1996), psychological phenomena, such as the sense of distance from victims or uncertainty regarding the indefinite nature of targets, may ameliorate our individual feelings of responsibility without telling against our actual responsibilities. More recently, studies of moral self-licensing suggest that if one primes oneself to hold a positive conception of oneself, then one experiences less inhibition or guilt at subsequently norm-violating behavior (Merritt et al 2010). In short, our intuitions are not always the best guide to ethical behavior, and when our intuitions are the spontaneous products of biases, they may even include the comforting notion that a joke or tweet or comment in cyberspace is no big deal, harmless, just for fun among friends, at times when it is foreseeable that it is instead a contributor to bad consequences for others.

The insights of philosophers and psychologists regarding our biases and the evidence that intuition is a misleading guide to ethics combine with new stresses for participants in cyberspace, including the stresses of the indefinite expansion of our relationships and responsibilities, and the gap in shamers' appreciation of the effects of their shaming as compared to the experiences of those shamed. Taken together, the studies of individual susceptibility to bias and the relational nature of cyberspace ethics indicate that we each have more power than we believe we do or than we think carefully about exerting in a world-wide web of relations. As I explain later, the inattention to the vast quantity of our new relationships and the ease with which we can privately ignore the effects of our online participation leads to our cultivating imaginal relationships with some of those with whom we enter relationships online, at the expense of others.

It is especially concerning to me that the magnitude gap is so stark in Ronson's exploration; that is, there is some distance between the shamers' perceptions of their objects' great deservingness of harm and light suffering as a result of shaming, and the shamed persons' experiences with actual harm and the deep and lingering effects of online shaming. Consistently, Ronson reports that those who took to Twitter and other social media to shame someone expressed the conviction that the shamed are undoubtedly fine and suffered no lasting effects, while he also reports the experiences by the shamed of their longer-term losses of jobs and incomes, personal security, feelings of safety or trust, and reputations. Ronson himself does not refer to the gaping difference between shamers' and targets' perspectives as a magnitude gap. In using the term, I employ Roy Baumeister's (1997) account of "the magnitude gap" (19), which occurs in a book on evil, but which he grants is at work in lesser wrongs, as well. Baumeister says, "The importance of what takes place is always much greater for the victim than the perpetrator" (18). He later adds, regarding what he calls cases of "instrumental evil," that "the relationship is much more casual for the perpetrator than for the victim," and "the perpetrator's ability to hurt the victim is the central aspect of their relationship from the victim's perspective" (124).

Baumeister contends that the perpetrator of instrumental evil wants something to which victims' pains are merely means; building on his insight, I suggest that the wide audience of social media provides that which shamers really seek, that is, the social recognition on the part of other fellow shamers. After all, those who take to cyberspace to indulge in public shaming are doing something rather different than does a hacker determined to interfere stealthily with a target's credit card or documents; the latter seems to have the actual harm of the target's interests as the aim, but Ronson's perpetrators seem either indifferent to their targets' current states or in disbelief that they did anything with lasting ill effects. In other words, they seem remarkably disinterested both in the well-being *and* even in the presumably deserved suffering of the targets of online shaming. Perhaps the magnitude gap is so evident here because online shaming is a form of, if not Baumeister's instrumental evil, then at least a relative, an Internet-age variety of instrumental cyber-mobbing for the further end of enjoying imaginal relations with fellow mobbers. While I appreciate the insights of Christopher Parsons (2012) that online shaming materially harms its targets, I do not find it to be true across cases that "the intent of shame justice . . . is to punish and exclude specific individuals" (3). In many cases, the intent of shame justice seems to be to enjoy the company one has in cyberspace with so many approving others.

For this reason (among others), I believe that philosophers of relational ethics ought to draw attention to the imaginal relationships that a perpetrator of online shaming may enjoy with fellow shamers. The notion of imaginal relations is not new; it relies at least in part on Mary Watkins' (1986) detailed account of *imaginal dialogues* as entailing imaginative development. Watkins argues that the imagination is derivative of and helpful to the real (1986, 32), and imaginal dialogues are constitutive of self-awareness, including a robust appreciation of how actual others see us (18). Drawing on Watkins' conception of the imaginal dialogue, psychologists including Mary Gergen (2001) have developed arguments for imaginal relationships with absent and even deceased loved ones as continued bonds maintained by the living or the left-behind, especially through imaginal content. Maintaining

relationships with deceased others, on Gergen's view, can include imaginal dialogues, considering what they would think of one's behavior, identifying with the absent other. "To talk, laugh, and wonder, to be surprised, upset, hurt, angry, and amused, and to engage in other physical acts could all be a part of imaginal interactions," Gergen adds (125). The shared outrage and shared enjoyment of Twitter users engaged in piling on to a target of online shaming bears out Gergen's account of imaginal relations. A Twitter user may identify with indefinite others, and consider what they will think of one's character-limited tweets.

Yet as media researcher Eden Litt has noted (2012), regarding the *imagined audience*, it is impossible to know the membership of social media audiences lacking privacy controls; she adds, "without being able to know the actual audience, social media users create and attend to an imagined audience for their everyday interactions" (333). Like Watkins and Gergen, she appreciates the deep-seated impulse to connect imaginatively even with cyber-relationships, noting, "the imagined audience," that is, "the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating . . . is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human" (331). Therefore, it is not her view (or mine) that reliance on an imagined audience is bad; in some contexts it may be inevitable, a necessary substitute for one's knowledge of, for example, actual future job interviewers, or absent students, or current fellow citizens. Yet as Litt indicates, social media presents new challenges to the navigation of inevitably imagined audiences, many of which we were already navigating pre-Internet. Urging readers to attend better to the imagined audience in social media, Litt says, "The less an actual audience is visible or known, the more individuals become dependent on their imaginations" (331). And our imaginations will not extend equally to our relationships with everyone in cyberspace; in the case of online shaming, it seems that individuals who pile on to an opportunity to shame someone became vigorously engaged with their connections to fellow shamers, rather than to the object of their attentions.

This is more evident when considering the content of much online shaming. In one study comparing trends in the rhetoric of online shaming across three examples (including that of Justine Sacco), researchers found that three types of interaction predominated, categorized as “sarcasm or joke,” “passing judgment,” and “abuses” (Basak et al 2016, 12). The researchers add that their work may reveal “possible motives like one-upmanship, showing off righteousness,” and other social rewards, and they suggest that enlightening measurements of shamers’ motives could include “number of followers and tendency to retweet” (12). This is instructive, as one’s number of Twitter followers and one’s tendency to amplify the posts of others are measures that reflect engagement in relationships with other Twitter users robustly, and seem to have little or nothing to do with the target of the jokes, judgments, and abuses. Further, in the first three days of a viral Twitter mobbing, those early and key days when participation by the wider user base is at its highest volume, researchers “observed that *sarcasm or joke* is the most popular form of shaming in Twitter, followed by passing judgment” (Basak et al 2016, 11).

A joke is a social thing. In the case of online shaming, the extent to which Twitter users affirm each other at the expense of one target is a startling variation on Nancy Potter’s (2001) observation that “funniness is socially constituted and simultaneously constitutive of power relations” (106). After all, you’re not funny unless someone laughs. On Twitter, you know that your joke has landed or your sarcasm is acknowledged when it is liked, retweeted, and spread to other platforms of social media. In Potter’s work on humor (in the pages of this publication pre-Twitter), her efforts were dedicated to “a backdrop by which we can understand the role of humor among the disempowered when society and subjectivity are constituted by unequal power relations” (106). In this context, I have a different (and oddly related) worry; I’m concerned that the urge to pass judgment and the desire for connection and one’s own humor-appreciation provide the sense to online shamers that they are taking down, as Ronson said, “giants,” in a web of happy imaginal relationships with fellow non-giants, because the

shamers see themselves as the disempowered. The target of the shame is the one that needs to be “taken down,” a phrase that implicitly indicates the comforting narrative that the target of shame is up high, in a position of power that deserves to be brought down a peg. The metaphor is especially remarkable in light of the glee with which Twitter users reflected that Sacco, aboard her international flight, was literally up in the air while they mobbed her; tweets rapidly spread further narratives that supported the view that Sacco was of a high status, including the story that she was a rich “heiress to a \$4.8 billion fortune, as people assumed her father was the South African mining tycoon Desmond Sacco,” which Ronson himself believed until he interviewed Sacco and learned that this was an error (2015, 67). The perception of Sacco as having high status might suggest that the target’s demise is the point of shaming, after all, but I suggest that the reduction of the target’s imagined high status is a necessary condition without being the purpose of the cyber-gathering. The purpose, often, is for shamers to feel that they are in league with each other. There must be a high-status target for the many to be in concert with each other, tilting at giants and enjoying the solidarity born of their successes.

The imaginal relationships that provide a Twitter user with so much value are those a user has with the fellows who like the joke, who retweet the sarcasm, who affirm oneself. Considering Litt’s insight that the numbers of potential viewers of one’s words are so vast that one must rely on one’s imagination even more than if one’s readers were knowable, I find that the ethical assessment of users’ cultivation of these imaginal relations is complicated by questions as to whether a Twitter user can entirely help the cultivation of recognition, once received. Some imaginal relations are more voluntarily cultivated than others. We all have imaginal relations that we do not cultivate deliberately. For example, relationships with parents or parenting figures to an extent are simply imposed upon our consciousness early in life. Parents can live in our memories in ways that direct our conduct when absent, even call on ongoing responses in our heads or give us pause when we consider what they would think. We also have imaginal relations that we cultivate quite deliberately, such as when a teacher designs an assignment for

students (who are in the teacher's mind but not present during design), or when a salesperson prepares a pitch to previously met clients. And we have imaginal relations that are mixed, at some times voluntarily and at others involuntarily built up in our heads, such as my relationships to "my fellow Americans," or to future readers, or to my coworkers, regarding whom I may unavoidably bear hopes or fears, and regarding whom, on other occasions, I consciously form narratives and to whom I think about how to dispose my attitudes and future conduct.

Online interactions seem to belong to the category of mixed, partly voluntary and partly involuntary interactions. The mixed nature of online relationships presents the risk of unmanageable problems; in contrast to early criticisms of social media that the relationships born in cyberspace must be transient or shallow things, I have the concern that the imaginal relationships partly sought and further reproduced on Twitter are produced when we cannot help thinking about and caring about the strong and positive reactions to our words online. One can make a joke on Twitter or a sarcastic judgment of another that no one notices. If a joke falls in cyberspace, it doesn't make a sound. But the reactions that one gets if one's joke or sarcasm gets viral uptake can outrun what one would expect, and then the powerful pull of social affirmation, of sudden solidarity, of agreement and even fellow fury can proliferate relationships that live in one's mind with, as Benedict Anderson says, "the image of their communion" (1983, 5). The target of shame ceases to be the point when one is inundated with the responses of so many to something that seems so minor, a joke, a witticism at the expense of someone to whom one has no connection. I hope it is clear that I am not simply sketching a Twitter version of mob mentality. I do not much believe in such a thing. But I do believe evidence like that which Litt points to, indicating that we are constituted to mentally conceptualize those with whom we communicate, and I suggest that cyberspace presents possibly insurmountable challenges to our capacities to control those conceptualizations. The speed and volume of online affirmation outmatches what the human mind evolved to manage. Note that the inundation of affirmations is not always expected, yet it is foreseeable

given the nature of mass communication, so the imposition of the new imaginal relationships on one's consciousness is an easily ignored moral risk.

In all the social recognition that online shamers provide each other, unfortunately, the well-being of the target is overlooked or reduced. Recipients of shaming, like Justine Sacco, are also living in the web of imaginal relationships. And imaginal relationship literature suggests that her shamers also live in her head, as she too may be forced to rely on her imagination and mentally conceptualize her detractors. In such situations, advising a victim of shaming to "ignore the trolls" is beyond pointless. Cheshire Calhoun (2016) argues that shame is rational even when we disagree with the assessment, and indicative of belonging in a human, moral community, a scheme of social cooperation (42). The advice to ignore the social community as it lives in one's head is more than ineffective --- it's missing the force. We are unable to control the extent to which intangible words in cyberspace take the form of imaginal relationships that burden or brighten our self-perceptions.

Directives that when online, we ought to ignore or decline to engage with others are well-intentioned, but they concern only a part of the online experience which we can control. My interest in this essay has been with the moral and psychological aspects of online life that exceed our control, as our mixed imaginal relationships do.⁷ If I am right that our self-concepts are influenced by imaginal relationships that outrun our capacities to manage their effects, then philosophical contributions to the literature on online shaming could include ethical recommendations grounded in the value and import of our imaginal relations. We can urge attention to the extent to which victims of shaming may not be able to simply ignore abusive words. We can argue for restraint in one's own impulses to post sarcasm or jokes on popular topics for the reason that one should ask oneself whose approval one seeks in so joking. And we can base prescriptions to reduce forms of one's participation in social media on the evidence that the mental conceptualizations one enjoys of one's imagined audience are far outstripped by the potential community waiting to move into one's consciousness.

The latter prescription is not intended to suggest that we should get out of cyberspace after all. Forms of social media continue to evolve and expand in importance, and there is some truth in Ronson's observation that in the early days of Twitter, "it felt as if hierarchies were being dismantled, as if justice were being democratized," especially when they targeted "powerful institutions and public figures" rather than "anyone perceived to have done something offensive" (2015a). Public speaking should not and will not be kept only in the hands of those with power in the foreseeable future. We can neither wish away the Internet, nor ignore all of the effects of cyberspace speech. And we can sometimes use the less hierarchical and more democratized forms of mass communication for good. But we should do so with concerted attention to the uncontrollable aspects of the tool we employ, and the effects that, though we may not intend them, we are complicit in inducing in others or entirely responsible for bringing about. Reasonably foreseeable harms are only foreseeable if we take the time to look.

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¹ Plugging into Google Scholar terms such as 'online shaming, mobbing' yielded 325 results on December 03, 2016, none of which seemed to be sources in philosophy. See, for comparison, PhilPapers, where searching for the phrase within quotes yields only, "Nothing found." URL: <http://philpapers.org/s/%22online%20shaming%22>

² I identify *imaginal relations* at more length later in the paper, but I wish to note briefly that Mary Watkins (1986) is credited with “early use of the word *imaginal* in preference to *imagined* or *imaginary*,” according to Mary Gergen (see Gergen 2001, 144n3). As Gergen says, “Whereas [*imagined* or *imaginary*] suggest something fictional or frivolous, *imaginal* suggests other, more consequential possibilities” (ibid). Watkins stressed the role of *imaginal dialogue*; Gergen draws on her account to develop a fuller conception of imaginal relations as maintained relationships with absent and even deceased (but nonfictional, real) others.

³ See Dannenbaum and Kinnier 2009, 100–113; see also Ratcliffe 2016, Norlock 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The comment on Twitter ran under a photo taken of Justine Sacco; a user with the name, “ryan mktg,” wrote, “the Internet has spoken,” 20 Dec 2013. <https://twitter.com/ZacSpeaks/status/414266460656369664>.

⁶ The literature on different senses of intuition is vast, and this short note will not do it justice. My interest here is in the sorts of moral judgment calls that tend to self-exonerate or to self-justify, as demonstrated in literature on the magnitude gap. See, for example, empirical evidence of moral self-licensing when it comes to fundamental attribution errors regarding one’s beliefs about one’s self-concepts (of oneself as good, of course!) and subsequent justifications for norm-violating acts (Merritt et al 2010), conflation of what is fair with what benefits oneself (Newey 2016), and evidence that self-serving biases motivate one to privilege one norm over another in situations where norms conflict (Bicchieri and Mercier 2013). For further reading on the discussions surrounding the unreliability of intuitions more broadly conceived, and the role of intuitions in moral philosophy generally, see especially where the 21st century concentration on new work in the discussion of unreliable intuitions really took off, with Singer 2005 reflecting on the moral implications of the work of Greene et al 2001, and more centrally for my purposes, see Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; more recently, see Weijers 2013 and Brownstein and Saul 2016.

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make this point even more explicitly than I originally did.