

## Moral Shock<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper defends an account of moral shock as an emotional response to intensely bewildering events that are also of moral significance. This theory stands in contrast to the common view that shock is a form of intense surprise. On the standard model of surprise, surprise is an emotional response to events that violated one's expectations. But I show that we can be morally shocked by events that *confirm* our expectations. What makes an event shocking is not that it violated one's expectations, but that the content of the event is intensely bewildering (and bewildering events are often, but not always, contrary to our expectations). What causes moral shock is, I argue, our lack of emotional preparedness for the event. And I show that, despite the relative lack of attention to shock in the philosophical literature, the emotion is significant to moral, social, and political life.

Keywords: shock, surprise, emotion, anger, shame

### 1. Introduction

What I call moral shock is an emotional response to intensely bewildering events that are also of moral significance. It captures the experience of feeling stunned or jolted in the midst of being subjected to, or witnessing, someone's behavior.

Consider my experience of moral shock in a classroom setting. In the middle of teaching, a student raised his hand. I called on him. He asked the question: 'When do you plan to have children?' I was shocked. I could feel my eyes widen and face heat up,

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imagining its redness visible to my students; and I eventually replied, without the ability to look directly at him, ‘that’s an inappropriate question, so I am moving on’. After class, I was disappointed in myself for my non-ideal response. If I were to have considered in advance of the class what I ought to do if a student asked such a question, I would have chosen to act differently. I might have intended to respond by looking at the student, directly in the eyes, and explaining *why* the question is inappropriate. But in the moment, I was incapacitated by moral shock.

One thing that interests me about moral shock is that it challenges us to question to what extent our expectations about how people will behave have a grip on us. In this case, I experienced moral shock despite my expectations about how I will be treated by male students in the classroom. I *expect* that, when I am teaching, I will receive unwanted, sexually suggestive, or challenging remarks from some of my male students at some point throughout the semester; it happens all the time. And I naturally believe, in a Humean way, that the future will resemble the past. This particular student had also made a series of inappropriate comments throughout the semester, so I anticipated more to come. But my expectations about students’ behavior in the classroom, and this student’s behavior in particular, did not prevent my shock at the immoral act. Why might we find ourselves shocked by immoral behavior we fully expected from others?

Another thing that interests me, or more accurately *worries* me, about moral shock is its powerful ability to incapacitate moral action. Not only, on reflection, did I view my response to the student as non-ideal and so can think of actions that would have been morally better responses, I found it difficult to *act at all*. I felt, quite literally, as if producing *any* response was an overwhelming challenge. So I fumbled one together, struggling against my bodily feelings of a racing heart and surge of physical energy; and struggling against feelings of discomfort and disorientation at the unfolding of events. And I called out, awkwardly and less forcefully than was likely warranted, the inappropriateness of the comment and my plan to move on.

I want to understand more deeply the nature of moral shock and its significance to moral life. The emotion is not necessarily a response to agents behaving wrongly but can also be a response to agents behaving *rightly* – such as when a racist family member condemns racism. But I am most interested in cases of moral shock that respond to morally bad actions and events, since these are cases which present some pressing moral dangers. Moral shock in response to morally bad behavior can cause motivational deficiencies in those who experience it; and, as I will argue, it can cause or exacerbate the emotion of shame. For when one is targeted by an immoral act, not only can being the target of the act produce shame in the recipient; the recipient's own failure to respond well in the moment can also make one feel ashamed.

I begin by considering the common view that shock is, by definition, roughly a form of intense *surprise*. On the standard model of surprise, surprise is an emotional response to events which violated one's expectations. Contrary to the standard view, I show that we can be shocked by events not only when our expectations are violated but also when our expectations about how things will go are *confirmed*. We are, for example, often shocked by the actions of others even when we expected them to behave in just the ways that they did. What makes an event shocking, I argue, is not that it violated one's expectations, but that the content of the event is intensely bewildering (and bewildering events are very often, but not always, contrary to our expectations).

Shock is thus an *emotional* experience of actions or events as intensely bewildering. I endorse a perceptual view of emotions according to which emotions are perceptual-like experiences of their objects (e.g., see Goldie 2000; Döring 2003; Roberts 2003; Tappolet 2016; Milona and Stockdale 2018). Shock is thus a *perceptual-like* experience of an action or event as intensely bewildering. We might just say that shock is an experience of 'the shocking', but I use the more specific characterization of 'intensely bewildering' for those who might want a more detailed story about what 'the shocking' is. To anticipate, we find actions and events intensely bewildering that significantly disrupt our sense of

reality: what the world should be like and how people should behave, given our lived experiences and the norms we endorse. When we are *shocked* – that is, when we experience the corresponding affective state – we *feel* intensely bewildered, which involves feeling at a loss for words, understanding, and sense-making in the moment. As we will see, it is sometimes appropriate to experience moral shock. Other times, it seems as though we should work toward minimizing, or eliminating, our shock responses.

Not all of us, however, are shocked by intensely bewildering events. We can judge that an action or event is intensely bewildering but fail to experience shock – just like we can judge that a situation is dangerous but fail to experience fear. So what *causes* us to be shocked, if we give up the view that shock can be explained by violated expectations or unexpected events? I show that the extent to which a person will be shocked by an intensely bewildering event depends not on the extent to which it violated their expectations, but rather how prepared they were, emotionally, to be in the midst of it. I then reflect on the broader significance of the emotion to moral, social, and political life.

## 2. The Nature of Moral Shock

I suspect that cases of moral shock are common. They occur at times when agents find themselves struck by someone's action and significantly jolted from one's sense of agency. One might experience moral shock in response to an explicitly sexist, racist, or homophobic remark toward them; a colleague's blatant dismissal of their opinion; being catcalled on the street; a driver's aggressively rushing into a parking spot that one had been patiently waiting for (with signal on, indicating that one had claimed it); being groped at a bar; among many other things. We can be shocked by acts done directly to us and as bystanders to acts directed toward others. But what, exactly, *is* moral shock?

There is very little philosophical or empirical literature on the phenomenon, but 'shock' is typically considered to be, roughly, an intense form of surprise. In his *Gut*

*Reactions*, Jesse Prinz defines shock as an extreme form of surprise (Prinz 2004: 164). The Cambridge Dictionary also defines shock in terms of surprise, as an emotional or physical reaction to ‘a sudden, unexpected, and usually unpleasant event or experience’ (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). For example, ‘Her mother’s death came as a great shock – it was so unexpected’ (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). This characterization of shock as a form of intense surprise also makes sense of our linguistic practices, such as when we say things like ‘I wasn’t just surprised by her death, but *shocked*.’ This sentence signifies that one has experienced a more intense emotional reaction than surprise.

This intensity condition also accounts for the fact that not all surprising events are shocking, since the intensity of our emotional experiences tends to track the perceived intensity of the situations to which they respond (Tappolet 2016: 24). I might be pleasantly surprised when I win \$10 from a scratch and win prize, but pleasantly shocked if I win \$2 million in a lottery. Similarly, I might be unpleasantly surprised by a good student’s failing to hand in an essay on time, but not shocked. If, however, the good student’s late essay was actually a racist manifesto, I would be shocked. What makes an event *shocking* is thus, in part, the perceived intensity of the situation.

Shocking events are also not always about moral matters. If my cat started to speak Spanish, or if a person flew by my window in a jetpack, or if I learned that my childhood home burnt down in a tragic accident, I would be shocked by these events. But I am most interested in cases of *moral* shock, or instances of shock that have what Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson call a ‘moral shape’: that is, instances of the emotion ‘whose evaluative presentation concerns fundamental moral concepts’ (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000: 88). For example, my shock in response to being catcalled on the street is, in part, a response to the perceived wrongness of the action; and my shock in response to my racist aunt condemning racism is, in part, a response to the perceived rightness of the action, in light of my aunt’s moral character. The difference between moral shock in these cases is in both the evaluative presentation and affective tone of the emotion. When our emotions

represent their objects as morally good, their affective tone tends to be pleasant – for example, in our pride, gratitude, and shock. On the other hand, when our emotions represent their objects as morally bad, their affective tone tends to be unpleasant – for example, in our anger, disappointment, and shock. Of course, our emotions sometimes get things wrong; the parking space thief might have actually done the morally *right* thing by stealing your spot, even though you perceived the action as a slight against you – they might have been tasked with bringing life-saving treatment into the building to save a child as quickly as possible, for example. Moral shock is an *immediate* emotional response, one that occurs without all of the data we need to make sophisticated moral judgments.

Notice that shock, in the above scenario, is not a judgment that the parking space thief's action is significantly out of line with the norms that I endorse. Rather, the parking space thief's action strikes me as intensely bewildering, in a way that is similar to how the sun outside strikes me as bright when I visually perceive it. The cognitive component of moral shock is thus best understood as a perceptual-like experience, rather than a judgment, on my view. But shock also involves affective and physiological components. The emotion involves, characteristically, feeling jolted from one's sense of agency, stunned or frozen in the moment, and rendered speechless or struggling to find words. The felt experience of the emotion might also involve a racing heart and sudden surge of physical energy, as well as feelings disorientation (see Harbin 2016). Outwardly, agents who are shocked tend to display the facial expressions characteristic of surprise – raised eyebrows and a dropped jaw, in particular (Ekman and Cordaro 2011; Zhao et al 2017). Although how moral shock is felt and expressed will vary between agents depending on the nature of the shocking event and agents' relationship to what is going on, these affective and physiological dimensions characteristic of moral shock help to capture the felt experience of the emotion; and, as we will see later on, its effects on moral agency.

I have also been building from the common idea that that shock is an intense form of *surprise*. There is a small philosophical literature on the nature of surprise as an emotion

(Feldman 1934; Davidson 1982; Ben Ze'ev 2001; Dennett 2001; Gordon 1987; Morton 2014; Judge 2018). Philosophers interested in surprise tend to argue that surprise is connected to our predictive expectations about how events will unfold (see Judge 2018). R.V. Feldman describes surprise as an immediate emotion 'which is *contrary* to expectation' (Feldman 1934: 209). We form expectations out of necessity, convention, and habit; and these expectations operate in the background of our minds about what the future will hold (Feldman 1934). They structure how we go about the world, and when events violate these expectations, surprise ensues. Similarly, Robert M. Gordon explains: 'If S is surprised (amazed, astonished, disappointed) (about the fact) that *p*, then at the time S came to be certain that *p*, that *p* was contrary to S's expectations' (Gordon 1987: 55). Daniel Dennett writes that surprise 'is a telling betrayal of the subject's *having expected something else....* Surprise is only possible when it upsets belief' (Dennett 2001: 982). Aaron Ben Ze'ev argues that surprise 'is a state of the subject whose intentional content differs from what the subject has expected' (Ben Ze'ev 2001: 119). More recently, Adam Morton discusses surprise as a response to 'unexpected information', where 'the range of situations in which a violated expectation can lead to an emotion of surprise is very wide' (Morton 2014: 137). What all of these views have in common is that they take surprise to be, roughly, an emotional reaction to events which are contrary to our expectations, either tacit expectations formed out of habit, those at the level of conscious belief, or both.

Many cases of moral shock fit the contrary-expectation model of surprise. If my partner promises to meet me at happy hour, and I consciously expect him to be waiting for me at the bar but instead find him kissing another person, I will be shocked by his action. Or, if I have an unconscious expectation that customer service representatives will be courteous to me, but a stylist at a clothing store remarks that I look trashy in the outfit I tried on, I will be shocked by their comment. But this view of shock as a form of intense surprise does not capture all potential cases, since shock can result not only from *contrary* expectations (conscious or unconscious). It is also possible to be shocked when one's

expectations about how things will go are *confirmed*. We are, for example, often shocked by people's sexist and racist behavior even when we know all too well that they are prone to such behavior. In order to make sense of these cases, we need an account of shock that does not define the emotion in terms of the standard model of surprise.

We also need to be clear about the difference between what shock *is* and what causes it. In the above descriptions of surprise, it is not immediately clear whether violated expectations are what cause surprise and shock, or whether violated expectations are part of the content of the emotions. The claim that surprise results from violations of expectations is about the *cause* of surprise (e.g., Feldman, Morton), and the claim that surprise *is* an emotional response to violated expectations is about what constitutes surprise (e.g., Dennett, Ben Ze'ev). Shock might, then, be understood as an emotion that is caused by violated expectations in particularly intense cases, or it might be understood as an emotion that is about intense violations of one's expectations.

This paper rejects both of these readings. In what follows, I argue that shock is an emotional response to actions and events we find intensely *bewildering*. But notice that a person might remark 'that's shocking behavior' even though they are not themselves shocked by it. Thus, the emotion of shock is the *experience* of intense bewilderment about an action or event, rendering one at a loss for words, understanding, and sense-making in the moment (§ 3). What *causes* us to be shocked is not violations of our expectations, on this view, but our emotional unpreparedness to be in the midst of the action or event (§ 4). As we will see, this alternative account is better equipped to make sense of situations in which we are shocked despite our expectations, as well as agent-relative differences in people's shock reactions who share equivalent expectations about how things will go.

### 3. Moral Shock, Expectations, and Bewilderment



Imagine that you find out from multiple trustworthy friends around your apartment complex that one of your neighbors is always watching pornographic videos by the pool at 12pm every day, despite repeated warnings from management that this behavior is wrong and not allowed. You and your partner have taken the day off and are home for lunch, and you realize that it's 12pm. You remark: 'Hey, I bet that man is watching porn by the pool right now!' consciously expecting to witness him in the act. Peering over the balcony, you see the neighbor cross-legged on a pool lounger, streaming porn videos on his iPad. It is conceivable that your mouth might drop as you find yourself completely at a loss for what you are seeing – shocked at the creepy and disrespectful act that you are witnessing. 'What the... seriously?!' you remark to your partner, who appears just as shocked as you are. You are both *shocked* even though your conscious expectation turned out to be true. One might object: but did you really expect it? Well, yes! You *fully believed* your friends' testimony that this neighbor watches porn by the pool at noon each day. And there he is, just as you expected, out there by the pool at noon streaming porn on his iPad. And you are shocked.

Perhaps you think that you would respond with another emotion in this scenario: disgust or disappointment, for example. One might be *disgusted* by the neighbor's behavior, seeing it as gross. Or one might be *disappointed* by the neighbor's behavior, where disappointment tracks the thwarting of a normative hope that we invest in our neighbor to adhere to norms we endorse (see Martin 2014). But notice that all of these emotions – disgust, disappointment, and shock – are possible responses to the event. And each of them tracks a different feature of the situation. Disgust tracks grossness, disappointment tracks the thwarting of a normative hope, and shock tracks the intensely bewildering nature of the event. In other words, 'watching porn videos in public space at 12pm, visible to all who are around' disrupts my sense of reality. It's not behavior I understand because I don't have a clue what the motivation for it would be, and why this person would continue to do it against moral norms and apartment policies. Shock is the

emotion that captures the ‘what the....?’ response to intensely bewildering events, even if those events are also gross and disappointing, among other things.

So we can have different emotional responses to the very same event. And shock is one plausible emotional response to the porn viewer scenario, one that illustrates how we can be shocked even when our conscious expectations about how things will go are confirmed. The same goes for unconscious expectations as well. The case with which we started is one in which I unconsciously expected my male students, including (and especially) that particular one, to behave in sexist ways toward me. This student had persistently made inappropriate comments and seemed immune to my calling them out. Yet, when he came out with another sexist remark, I was shocked by his act.

One might object that we did not (really) expect these events to occur after all. Although I did expect the student to behave in sexist ways toward me at some point, I did *not* expect him to say those exact words at the exact time at which he uttered them; I was expecting him to ask something else in that particular moment. But I think this is an unfair charge, given how expectations work. Except for fictional characters with psychic powers, none of us live our lives forming intricately detailed expectations about how people will behave and how events will unfold. I never think about exactly what, and at what time during class period, particular students will come out with particular remarks. Our expectations are often strong and genuine, but nevertheless *vague* – my student will at some point say something sexist given his past behavior, and (to take another example) my aunt will at some point say something racist, given how she tends to behave. Our vague expectations are often confirmed even though we did not have their details fully worked out ahead of time. If this is right, then there is no expectation that was violated in many cases of moral shock. And for those persuaded by the porn viewer scenario, the details were *exactly* worked out ahead of time; yet witnessing your neighbor streaming porn by the pool was still shocking.

An alternative response for proponents of the expectation model is that, although your very specific expectations were confirmed by the neighbor's behavior, the event still contained 'an element of the unexpected'. If this is right, then even though we *are* shocked by some actions and events which confirm our expectations, the vagueness of our expectations leaves open the possibility that the *way* in which they are confirmed is unexpected. So, it's not that shock is an emotional response to events which violated one's expectations (as the standard model suggests), but that shock is an emotional response to events *that one did not expect*. Call this the revised standard model. The challenge, though, is to explain what about the porn viewer scenario you did not expect after all.

Notice, too, that we do not find all events shocking or even *surprising* when they contain 'an element of the unexpected'. For example, suppose I form the expectation that you will give an excellent talk as the excellent philosopher that you are. If you deliver an excellent talk, I will not be surprised by the unexpected ways in which your talk is excellent (e.g., by your exceptional clarity and effective body language). I will simply be impressed. But I *will* be surprised if you jump up on the table in front of you to illustrate a point about tables. The fact that your table jumping was unexpected is not what explains why I find the act surprising. I am surprised because the *content* of your action is bewildering. As cognitive scientists Meadhbh Foster and Mark Keane explain, surprise 'helps people make sense of a sometimes bewildering and uncertain world' (Foster and Keane 2019: 76). They suggest that Michael Jackson's death was much more surprising than Kurt Cobain's because it was much more difficult to understand and explain; 'it did not fit the early-career, rock-and-roll suicide explanation exemplified by Cobain, Joplin, Hendrix, and others' (Foster and Keane 2019: 76). It is *this* feature of surprise (i.e., the bewildering content of surprising events) and not its relationship to expectation that better tracks the nature of moral shock.

In all of the cases so far, the situations which shock us are ones that we find intensely bewildering: your neighbor watching porn by the pool, the cat's speaking

Spanish, my student's question, etc. – all of these actions and events catch us off guard because they are significantly out of line with our sense of what the world should be like and how people should behave. The 'should' here can be either descriptive or normative. I am shocked when my cat speaks Spanish because cats do not speak Spanish! And I am morally shocked when my racist aunt condemns racism because racist aunts do not, in virtue of their racist characters, condemn racism (even though, morally, they should). But we also find actions and events shocking which are seriously out of line with the moral norms we endorse more generally. Many of us were often shocked by Donald Trump's tweets *because of their content* (before he was suspended from Twitter – another potentially shocking development in the Trump era). For example, when Trump tweeted that women of color in Congress should go back to where they came from, many of us were shocked by the tweet even though we expected no less from the U.S. president. And we were shocked because Trump's tweets were totally out of line with how we think U.S. presidents should (morally) conduct themselves, despite our predictive expectation that Trump would continue sending out offensive tweets on the regular.

Thus, I am suggesting that shocking events are intensely bewildering events that disrupt our sense of reality – how neighbors, cats, students, racist aunts, and American presidents should behave. Very often, what is intensely bewildering is also contrary to our expectations (as the standard model of surprise suggests) or is at least unexpected (as the revised model suggests). In other words, what is bewildering is often what is *abnormal*, inconsistent with our conscious expectations or the unconscious expectation that the future will resemble the past. But the relationship between expectation and shock is coincidental and not essential. When an unexpected morally bad event is not bewildering, there is nothing even surprising about it – like when I receive an email warning from my institution about an active phishing scam. And when an expected morally bad event *is* intensely bewildering, we are often shocked.

True, some people are not shocked by all morally bad events that they find intensely bewildering. Many of us are no longer shocked by Trump's behavior, and for others, only the most intense of Trump's words and actions will shock them. So there seem to be agent-relative differences in what *causes* people to be shocked. Obviously, those who endorse Trump's behavior and consider it in line with how U.S. presidents should (morally) behave will not typically be shocked. The kinds of things that Trump says and does are not intensely bewildering to agents who share his sense of reality – to those who believe his claims and conspiracy theories, and who endorse the norms that Trump lives by. But notice that two agents might equally disapprove of a Trump action, such as a tweet, and find it equally bewildering. Yet one agent will be shocked by the tweet and the other will not. So, what explains the difference between these agents?

#### **4. The Cause of Moral Shock**

I suggest that what tracks the extent to which we are shocked by events we find intensely bewildering is a function of our felt readiness to experience them – what I call emotional preparation. But let's first turn to how the standard model explains what causes our shock reactions. The expectation theorist offers the following explanation:

Agent A will be surprised/shocked by event E to the extent that A's expectations were violated by E, or A's set of expectations did not include E.

On this view, whether a person is shocked by an intensely bewildering event depends on whether they expected the event to occur. This is because shock is both defined in terms of violated expectations or unexpected events *and/or* caused by them. But we have already seen that the expectation theorist cannot explain scenarios in which we are shocked despite the fact that our expectations are confirmed. The expectation theorist also cannot make sense of differences in *degrees* of shock, even if they continue to insist that all

shocking events contain ‘an element of the unexpected’. On this view, the intensity of our shock responses must be a function of the degrees of our expectation: if I fully expect Trump to tweet something offensive, I will not be surprised at all when he does so; if I expect (but harbor some doubt) that Trump will tweet something offensive, then I will be unpleasantly surprised when he does so; and if I expect Trump to tweet something nice and he tweets something offensive, I will be shocked if he does so.

But this view doesn’t quite work. Imagine two people, John and Mia, who both equally expect Trump to tweet something offensive. They agree that Trump will very often do so and it’s just a matter of time before it happens again. But when Trump tweets that women of color in Congress should go back to where they came from, John experiences shock but Mia does not. John remarks, ‘I mean, I know Trump is going to do it again and again. But I just can’t wrap my head around how he can say that!’ Mia, replies, ‘yeah, but I’m numb to it at this point’. The difference between John’s and Mia’s reactions is *not in their expectations*. So, what’s the difference?

I want to suggest that what causes John’s shock, and what prevents Mia’s shock, is that John is not emotionally prepared for that which both he and Mia expected to occur, whereas Mia has become emotionally resilient. On this view:

Agent A will be shocked by intensely bewildering event E to the extent that A is not emotionally prepared to experience E.

The problem, as I see it, is that the philosophical literature has over-intellectualized surprise, failing to adequately account for the ways in which surprise is bound up with our physiological and affective responses to the world: how we *feel* when we find ourselves in bewildering situations. And such responses are, I will argue, the key to understanding why we might be morally shocked by that which we expected to occur.

In the expectation-confirmation cases, it makes sense to say things like, ‘I’m shocked... I mean, I *expected* that to happen, but I was really not prepared for it’. Searching

for an expectation that was violated or searching for an element of the unexpected in how the event unfolded will not explain what causes our shock reactions. In other words, when we say that we are not prepared to be in the midst of a shocking event, we are not talking about our expectations. We are talking about the ways in which intensely bewildering actions and events *catch us off guard*, physically and emotionally.

We are caught off guard in such cases because we are not emotionally prepared for being in the midst of the intensely bewildering action or event – the porn viewer’s behavior, Trump’s tweet, the student’s question, etc. Consider how one might prepare for giving a talk. On the one hand, a speaker might prepare by anticipating and forming responses to all potential questions one might reasonably be asked during Q & A. This form of preparation involves forming the expectation that one will have to deal with difficult questions, including a range of potential ones. We do this (with varying efficacy) so that we can prevent being caught off guard in the face of a difficult question and unable to respond. But there is another way in which the speaker might prepare for a talk – that is, emotional preparation. To feel ready for surviving a difficult Q & A, the speaker might practice how he will manage his emotions in response to a tough question when it arises – by breathing through the anxiety, displaying confident body language to counter-act self-doubt, etc. He might even *practice* (e.g., in front of a mirror, to his partner) these strategies, inhabiting his future agency as much as he can so that the experience, when it occurs, is much less physically and emotionally difficult to endure. However prepared a speaker might be to give a talk in terms of practicing the talk itself, and anticipating potential questions and objections, if the speaker is not emotionally prepared for surviving a difficult Q & A, he might find himself caught off guard and unable to respond to difficult questions – even those that he expected to be articulated.

Now, we are not always *shocked* when we are caught off guard – as when one is not emotionally prepared for, yet receives, a difficult question during a Q & A. There is nothing intensely bewildering about a difficult question (unless the question is of my

student's sort). One might instead experience *embarrassment* in response to a difficult question (if the question indicates a serious flaw in one's argument), or *pride* (if the question is framed in the context of praise). But to be not merely caught off guard but caught off guard in *shock*, one must be emotionally unprepared for being in the midst of an intensely bewildering action or event. Suppose that the speaker expects a particular audience member, Steve, to ask an offensive question (because he has been warned about Steve's tendency to do so). Suppose, too, that the speaker shrugs off the warning, doing nothing in terms of thinking through how he will emotionally manage that situation. When Steve raises his hand and asks, 'how could you ever think this awful talk was ready to present?', the speaker might find himself shocked and unable to respond. Similarly, you might have fully believed your friends' testimony and expected to see your neighbor streaming porn by the pool, but you were not emotionally prepared to witness his action. And though my student's question was not contrary to my expectations about how he would behave, I was not emotionally prepared to be asked when I will have children.

Emotional preparation can thus guard against being caught in the grip of moral shock in response to morally bad actions and events. By thinking through what being the recipient of or witness to the action will be like, and by planning out (even practicing) how we will emotionally manage it, we are less likely to be shocked when it occurs and more capable of an effective response. Consider how a woman might prepare for teaching similarly to how the speaker prepared for his talk. She might form the expectation that some students will make sexist remarks and think through a range of potential sexist remarks that might come out in class. She might do this (with varying efficacy) to prevent being caught off guard by inappropriate comments and unable to respond. But like the speaker, the woman might also *emotionally* prepare for teaching. She might attend workshops designed to help professors cope with difficult students. She might adopt strategies for practicing self-confidence, minimizing anxiety, and thinking on her feet during stressful scenarios. If the woman is emotionally prepared for dealing with such



students – that is, if she feels ready for a situation in which a student behaves in a sexist way toward her – she is less likely to be shocked by sexist behavior in the classroom.

Beyond these active strategies for emotional preparation, there is another way in which we can come to be emotionally prepared for being the recipient of or witness to immoral behavior: that is, through *experience*. Sometimes, we are emotionally prepared for someone's bad behavior because we have become immune to it, as is the case for many of us in response to Trump's behavior. When we experience an event *all the time* that is out of line with our sense of what the world should be like and how people should behave, some of us are no longer caught off guard when it occurs – however bewildering the event continues to be. Mia, despite still not being able to wrap her head around Trump's tweets, is no longer shocked by them because she has become emotionally resilient. John, in contrast, still does not feel ready for yet another offensive tweet and so found himself shocked by Trump's tweet about women of color in Congress. Similarly, I imagine that my more experienced, senior women colleagues might have been less shocked by my student's question in the classroom than I was.

Introducing the notion of emotional preparation into the discussion helps us to make sense of our feelings of being caught off guard, physically and emotionally, when we find ourselves shocked by the immoral actions we fully expect from others. It also helps to make sense of differences in our shock responses even when we share equivalent expectations about how events will unfold. The question of *why* it is that Mia and John differ in their emotional preparedness and responses to bewildering events is, largely, an empirical one; and their social identities might also make a difference. For example, if Mia is a Latina immigrant and John is a white man born in the United States, sheltered from interacting with Latinx folks, these differences in John's and Mia's lived experiences will likely affect their emotional responses to Trump's tweet that they equally judge to be morally wrong. So there is much more to say about differences in our emotional reactions to shocking events, and what might cause us to become resilient to them. But getting

clearer about what moral shock is and what causes it enables a richer understanding of our emotional responses to flagrant moral norm violations, and to intensely bewildering events more generally. It might also help us understand to what extent immoral behavior, such as Trump's, has become *normalized* in society (Tirrell 2019).

And what, one might ask, is the broader significance of the emotion to moral, social, and political life? Given the lack of philosophical and empirical literature on the emotion, it might be tempting to set it aside, seeing more philosophically popular emotions as more interesting in moral psychology. I want to argue that understanding moral shock is important for enriching our understanding of some of those commonly discussed emotions, including anger and shame. It also has implications for understanding moral agency, responsibility, and memory.

## **5. The Significance of Shock to Moral, Social, and Political Life**

The emotion of moral shock may be significant in a number of ways. I offer four hypotheses: (1) The emotion may influence the experience and onset of anger, (2) give rise to or exacerbate the emotion of shame; (3) cause motivational deficiencies in those who experience it, and (4) lead to vivid memories which figure prominently in our narratives about moral life. As we will see, drawing out these sources of potential moral importance opens up space for seeing the social and political significance of shock as well.

First, the experience of moral shock may prevent or delay the onset of anger. Although both moral shock and anger are distinct emotional responses to a perceived wrong, injustice, or offense, the intense and immediate experience of moral shock may overpower one's emotional experience toward that object, preventing or delaying the onset of anger. Returning to the student scenario, my shock in the moment overtook the entirety of my emotional experience. It was only upon walking to my car and recounting the experience to my partner that I started to feel angry about the perceived wrong. Had

I responded from anger instead, and had I channelled my anger productively (and perhaps compassionately, in a classroom setting), I might have responded confidently and directly, in a morally better way. There is a vast body of literature on the role of anger in moving agents to stand up for their self-respect and to act against injustice (e.g., Murphy 1982.; Frye 1983; Hieronymi 2001; Tessman 2005; Cherry 2017; Srinivasan 2018; Stockdale forthcoming) But if moral shock prevents or delays the onset of anger, then understanding the emotion is important for explaining agents' failures to stand up for themselves in moments where their self-respect is challenged.

On the other hand, an emotion which delays the onset of anger might be beneficial in some cases. If, for example, a woman is shocked by a man's groping her at a bar, or a person of color is shocked by a white person's racist act toward them, their shock may prevent them from experiencing anger or even outrage, emotions which might move them to act against the wrong (e.g., yelling at the man, calling out the racist act). And however justified it might be to act out of anger in these situations, doing so may put these agents at risk of further harm – more sexual harassment, racist violence, etc. Moral shock might thus be harmful in some cases and beneficial in others, where its value will depend on the context in question and who the agents experiencing the emotion are.

Second, the experience of moral shock may cause, or exacerbate, the emotion of shame. Being the recipient of an immoral act can already cause one to feel ashamed, even if one rationally knows that one should not take seriously the message communicated in the act – that one should not feel ashamed. For example, *shock* tracked my experience of feeling caught off guard by my student's question that I found intensely bewildering, given the resistant norms I endorse (e.g., norms of respectful treatment and women's right to choose whether they will have children). Yet *shame* tracked my experience of feeling, at the same time, exposed in front of others who might hold dominant norms (e.g., that women should become mothers at a certain age). As Sara Ahmed explains, 'shame can be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative

existence' (Ahmed 2004: 107). The experience of the two emotions together signifies a *normative conflict*, occurring in the agent, between the resistant norms they endorse and the dominant norms they are resistant to: norms they *reject* but that still affect and grip them in feeling. When moral shock and shame occur simultaneously, agents might feel stunned and frozen as well as exposed and the urge to withdraw (Bartky 1990; Ahmed 2004). And these feelings may undermine an agent's ability to act, or to act in morally appropriate/ideal ways. One *does not do anything*, so people move on as if nothing seriously immoral has occurred. And when agents do not act in these moments, and when they trace their failures to act to weaknesses in their characters, shame might ensue.

Third, and relatedly, moral shock may be highly connected to failures to act even when it is not accompanied by shame. The emotion is powerfully passive, producing physiological and psychological barriers in us that make it extremely difficult to do much of anything let alone the *right* thing. It is very difficult to form intentions and to produce actions in the midst of feeling stunned and thrown from whatever one was doing prior to the shocking event. In the student case, I felt jolted from my sense of agency and rendered speechless, unable to form an effective response to my student's question. Similarly, shock in response to a family member's racist comment may prevent one from directly and effectively challenging it in the moment. And it is all-too common for well-intentioned white people to wonder how they should have responded to their racist grandfather's, parent's, or aunt's racist remark after their shock response diminishes and they begin searching for what would have been the right reaction.

An analysis of moral shock thus raises questions about moral responsibility. The emotion might sometimes mitigate moral responsibility (in the backward-looking sense of attributing blame) inasmuch as it makes sense to excuse people for not performing the morally right action when they are in the grip of moral shock. On the other hand, agents might sometimes have a forward-looking responsibility to emotionally prepare for the morally bad events which are likely to occur in the non-ideal world in which we live.

White people, for example, might learn to take responsibility to prepare themselves emotionally for how they will react to the all-too-likely shocking, racist remarks of their family members. There is a worry that those of us who occupy positions of relative privilege are often more likely to be shocked by immoral actions than those who are oppressed. For example, whereas many people of color might be in some sense resilient to the racist actions of others (through experience, and through a lot of active emotional preparatory work), white people might find themselves shocked by racist behavior that they hear about or witness. In 'Photos of Trudeau in Blackface don't surprise Black people; we live this racist reality', Canadian poet and activist El Jones explained that Justin Trudeau's behavior is 'surprising only in a country that erases and evacuates histories of racism, to be shocked anew every time the ugliness – and the reality – of racism is revealed, again and again and again' (Halifax Examiner 2019).

I take Jones to be suggesting that it was largely *white* people who were surprised or shocked by Trudeau's actions, those for whom racism has been erased from their understanding of what Canada is like. This case is similar to the differences between John's and Mia's emotional responses above; and further examples are not hard to come by. When Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court of the United States, one male student in my feminist philosophy class described his experience of shock/bewilderment ('but how could this happen?'), while many women students were not at all shocked, replying that 'we are used to this; women aren't taken seriously'. But the tendency of members of privileged groups to be shocked by these events should not relieve them of their responsibility to challenge racism, sexism, etc. in many moments – a responsibility that is arguably weightier for them than for those who are oppressed.

Fourth, experiences of moral shock seem to be *memorable*. As Foster and Keane explain, surprising events prompt us to explain the anomalies we experience, which produce 'richer memory encodings' than non-surprising events (Foster and Keane 2019: 78). They are experiences we remember vividly, mull over, and recount to others.

Similarly, events about which we experience moral shock are likely to figure prominently in our narratives about moral life. In her memoir, *When they Call You a Terrorist*, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Patrisse Khan-Cullors recounts her experience of moral shock in a courtroom where her severely mentally ill brother, Monte, was sentenced to life in prison. Monte was charged with terrorism after a fender bender with a white woman (in which no one was hurt), placed in solitary confinement, denied his psychiatric medication and refused the right to see his family on scheduled visitation days (Khan-Cullors 2018: 116-119). Police officers brought Monte in strapped down to a gurney, behind a face mask, and in a psychotic break – yelling and talking to himself (as three white men laughed). Khan-Cullors explains how she felt in that moment. She says:

We leave the courtroom, silent in our procession. We are in shock. We are aliens traversing a strange and hostile planet... I am still breathing and after a short time, the stunned sensation that took hold of my body, my soul, begins to erode, transform. I am angry, so angry. (Khan-Cullors 2018: 123)

Perhaps most philosophers writing on the emotions would focus on Khan-Cullors' experience of anger and its role in her pursuit of racial justice. But the experience of *shock* notably comes first: an emotion that makes her feel stunned, speechless, and alien in her surroundings. This is a significant part of her emotional experience, affecting how Khan-Cullors acted in the moments that followed and how she remembered the event. Unlike many instances of moral wrongdoing that we witness but that fade away in our memories over time, shocking experiences stay with us. In Khan-Cullors' case, her experience of moral shock figured into her powerful memoir, shaping her own and her readers' understandings of what it means to be Black in America.

These connections between moral shock and other moral emotions, as well as our agency, responsibility, and memory, are by no means meant to be exhaustive or complete. But they illustrate how taking moral shock seriously can help us get a better grasp of our own and others' reactions to intensely bewildering events in everyday life.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that moral shock is an emotional response to intensely bewildering events that are also of moral significance. Although shock is typically considered to be an intense form of surprise, where surprise is an emotional response to events which violate our expectations are at least unexpected, I have argued that the contrary-expectation model is left wanting. For it seems that we are sometimes shocked by the immoral actions of others even when we expected them to behave in just the ways that they did. What is shocking is what is intensely bewildering – and the bewildering often, but not always, tracks the unexpected. The extent to which such events shock us is, I have argued, a function of our felt readiness to experience them. When we are not emotionally prepared for that which we expect to occur, we might find ourselves in the grip of moral shock.

There is much more to be said about the emotion of moral shock and its significance to moral, social, and political life. This paper is meant to be a starting point, rather than a decisive take, on an undertheorized emotion. But by understanding more deeply the nature and effects of moral shock, we can gain richer insight into a common response to immoral actions; what prevents us from responding well in the moment; and how the brief and fleeting, yet intense events in our lives affect agency, responsibility, and memory. We might also be able to make better sense of the bewildering social and political events that shock us, and those to which we have become emotionally resilient.

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