



## Shame, Guilt and Morality\*

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### Abstract

The connection between shame, guilt and morality is the topic of many recent debates. A broad tendency consists in attributing a higher moral status and a greater moral relevance to guilt, a claim motivated by arguments that tap into various areas of morality and moral psychology. The Pro-social Argument has it that guilt is, contrary to shame, morally good since it promotes pro-social behaviour. Three other arguments claim that only guilt has the requisite connection to central moral concepts: the Responsibility Argument appeals to the ties between guilt and responsibility, the Autonomy Argument to the heteronomy of shame and the Social Argument to shame's link with reputation. In this paper, we scrutinize these arguments and argue that they cannot support the conclusion that they try to establish. We conclude that a narrow focus on particular criteria and a misconception of shame and guilt have obscured the important roles shame plays in our moral lives.

### Keywords

autonomy, guilt, pro-social behaviour, responsibility, shame

Discussions of shame and guilt often take centre stage in recent debates on the links between particular emotions and morality. This is not surprising in the light of the various intuitions elicited by situations involving these emotions. Consider the following scenarios. Smith, a schoolboy, goes to his new school and is roundly mocked for his foreign appearance and accent. He is mortified, wishes he could disappear, tries to avoid the looks and jeers of his schoolmates,

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\* We would like to thank the members of the *Thumos* research group for many fruitful discussions. We are very grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for helpful comments on a previous version of this paper.

and goes home desperate not to have to face them again. Another schoolboy, Jones, steals a candy bar at the local store to prove his courage, emerging triumphantly to the general applause of his schoolmates. However, he has a sleepless night feeling terrible for what he has done to the poor hardworking shopkeeper and the next day he returns to the shop with trepidation to make amends. For Smith's reaction our standard label is shame, and Jones' a canonical example of guilt.

At first blush, Smith's reaction, in stark contrast to that of Jones, seems neither particularly laudable from a moral perspective nor particularly tied up with the institution of morality nor dependent on any moral understanding. In short, Smith's shame reaction seems less 'moral' in some sense than Jones' guilt feelings. What sorts of criteria underlie such judgments? Some have to do with (i) the action tendencies associated with each emotion (Jones seeks to make amends; Smith does not), others with (ii) the content of the relevant judgment(s) (only Jones reflects on a wrong he has done), others with (iii) the agent's endorsement of this judgment (John agrees he did wrong, whereas Smith need not agree with the schoolmates' criticisms) and still others with (iv) the presence of an audience (only Smith is moved by the attitude of his peers). These criteria respectively have thus to do with (i) action tendencies or motivation, (ii) responsibility, (iii) autonomy and (iv) reputation. On the basis of such criteria, a broad tendency in the literature attributes both a higher moral status and a greater moral relevance to guilt. Is this conclusion warranted? We will argue that a close investigation of the areas covered by these criteria falls short of supporting it and we will develop further considerations suggesting a fundamental role for shame in our moral lives. We hope to convince the reader that so doing allows not only for a better understanding of these important emotions, but also brings to light complex issues that have to be examined before assessing the links between particular emotions and morality.

## **1. The Pro-social Argument**

It is nowadays common to approach the emotions through the typical action tendencies that they are associated with, since emotions typically promote or hinder specific kinds of behaviour. If you fear an approaching dog, then you are more likely to flee than to gently pat its head. Similarly, in the above scenarios and the intuitions they elicit, shame is connected with some specific kinds of behaviour (hiding, etc.), guilt with others (making amends, etc.). These links between emotions, motivation and behaviour are often perceived as providing a scientifically sound way of investigating whether emotions are

morally good or bad: an emotion can be assessed as morally good if it promotes moral behaviour and as morally bad if it hinders this kind of behaviour. We thus need a criterion demarcating moral behaviour. This is by no means an easy task, but the claims we shall discuss rely on a simple criterion: moral behaviour is *pro-social* behaviour, i.e. behaviour that promotes and fosters cooperative interactions between members of a group. Some of these kinds of behaviour – such as helping – directly qualify as cooperative interactions, while others – such as apologizing – help restore endangered bonds of trust. The question that shall occupy us in this section is thus whether shame and guilt differ in this respect, motivating the conclusion that the one is morally good, the other morally bad.

A long-standing tradition in both psychology and philosophy held that shame and guilt both in their own way have a positive role in social regulation as aversive reactions to socially transgressive behaviour.<sup>1</sup> However, more recent empirical psychology has questioned this assumption. According to some psychologists, the empirical evidence shows that guilt is morally good, shame morally bad – a conclusion that may well go beyond the intuitions elicited by our scenarios. It is not only that shame is morally indifferent, as the case of Smith may suggest, but that it is highly correlated with anti-social, i.e. immoral action tendencies,<sup>2</sup> so that any positive moral role it may have in some specific cases is completely outstripped by these nefarious action tendencies. According to J.P. Tangney, a leading researcher in this field, guilt fares better than shame in four morally relevant areas.<sup>3</sup> First, guilt motivates amending, whereas shame motivates hiding.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, shame allegedly leads to “dissociation and

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<sup>1</sup> Three important psychological accounts along these lines are K.C. Barrett, ‘A Functionalist Approach to Shame and Guilt’; T.J. Ferguson & H. Stegge, ‘Emotional States and Traits in Children: The Case of Guilt and Shame’ and C. Zahn-Waxler & J.L. Robinson, ‘Empathy and Guilt: Early Origins of Feelings of Responsibility’, all in J.P. Tangney & K.W. Fischer (eds.), *Self-conscious Emotions: Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). For a philosophical endorsement of this claim, see H. Morris, *On Guilt and Innocence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Here we are operating with a broad notion of ‘moral’ laying aside for the time being distinctions between moral and non-moral forms of social regulation, to be discussed in the next sections.

<sup>3</sup> J.P. Tangney, J. Stuewig & D.J. Mashek, ‘What is Moral About the Self-conscious Emotions?’, in J.L. Tracy, R.W. Robins & J.P. Tangney (eds.), *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), pp. 21-37.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Lindsay-Hartz, J. De Rivera & M. Mascolo, ‘Differentiating Shame and Guilt and their Effects on Motivation’ in J.P. Tangney & K.W. Fischer (eds.), *Self-conscious Emotions: Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995) and J. MacDonald & I. Morley ‘Shame and Non-Disclosure: A Study of the Emotional Isolation of People referred for

turning away from responsibilities”.<sup>5,6</sup> Second, guilt is associated with other-oriented empathy, whereas shame is associated with self-oriented distress.<sup>7</sup> Third, these emotions fare differently as regards their connection with anger: shame motivates anger at others and aggressive behaviour, and guilt does not.<sup>8</sup> Fourth and finally, shame is distinctively associated with psychological symptoms such as depression, which may further hinder pro-social behaviour.<sup>9</sup> That is, it seems that guilt is more moral than shame for “there are numerous indications that shame may promote less helpful behaviour in many instances (e.g., withdrawal, anger, externalization of blame), at least among adults.”<sup>10</sup> The claim is a strong one: guilt correlates with pro-social behaviour and shame with anti-social behaviour.<sup>11</sup> We shall call this the *Pro-social Argument*. Do the

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Psychotherapy’, *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 74 (2001), pp. 1-21, whose results support the claim that the distinction between shame and guilt corresponds to that between concealment and interaction. The distinctive connection of guilt with reparation after a wrong is further documented in J.P. Tangney & R.L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York, Guilford Press, 2002) and in J.R.J. Fontaine, P. Luyten, P. de Boeck & J.M. Corveleyn, ‘Untying the Gordian Knot of Guilt and Shame: The Structure of Guilt and Shame Reactions’, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37 (2006), pp. 273-292.

<sup>5</sup> P. Gilbert, ‘Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt’, *Social Research* 70.4 (2003), pp. 1205-1230, at p. 1225.

<sup>6</sup> In *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Martha Nussbaum offers an account that integrates these two dispositions – hiding and turning away from responsibility. She sees them as due to a unified tendency towards a narcissistic ideal self-image which, when found under threat, leads to a defensive lashing out (183ff). On her account, this tendency not only underlies ‘primitive shame’ but also “always lurks around the corner of even a rightly motivated shame” (207).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. K.M. Leith & R.F. Baumeister, ‘Empathy, Shame, Guilt, and Narratives of Interpersonal Conflicts’, *Journal of Personality* 66 (1998), pp. 1-37. Recent evolutionary psychology has also connected shame with competition for rank and status, where it allegedly serves as a defence system when the self is under threat (P. Gilbert, ‘Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt’, *Social Research* 70.4 (2003), pp. 1205-1230; D. Fessler, ‘Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches’, *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 4.2 (2004), pp. 207-262). Guilt, by contrast, is associated with regard for the other (Gilbert, ‘Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt’).

<sup>8</sup> J.P. Tangney, R.S. Miller, L. Flicker & D.H. Barlow, ‘Are Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment Distinct Emotions?’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70.6 (1996), pp. 1256-1269; J.P. Tangney & R.L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

<sup>9</sup> P. Gilbert, ‘Evolutionary Approaches to Psychopathology and Cognitive Therapy’, in P. Gilbert (ed.), *Evolutionary Psychology and Cognitive Therapy*, Spec. Issue of *Cognitive Psychotherapy* 16 (2002), pp. 263-294; Tangney & Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

<sup>10</sup> Tangney, Miller, Flicker & Barlow, ‘Are Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment Distinct Emotions?’, p. 1267.

<sup>11</sup> These data about shame’s maladaptive correlates lead psychologists such as Tangney and Gilbert to speculative evolutionary claims along the following lines. “We view shame as a primitive emotion that likely served a more adaptive function in the distant past, among ancestors

above data support its conclusion? In the following, we will argue that this empirically based challenge to the traditional view does not resist scrutiny.

An examination of the methodology used indicates that important distinctions, (i) between shame and other emotions, (ii) between emotional dispositions and emotional episodes, and (iii) between short- and long-term action tendencies are not adequately taken into account. As we will see, airbrushing out these distinctions raises worries about different errors in interpreting the data and suggests that the conclusion of the Pro-Social Argument is unjustified.

With regard to the first issue, psychologists often fail to parse out data concerning shame from those relating to the public events of shaming or humiliation.<sup>12</sup> All three are closely associated with scenarios involving a threat to one's social status (e.g. through demeaning treatment). However, such threats can occasion a diversity of aversive reactions. It will sometimes elicit anger and, through anger, aggressive and uncooperative behaviour. In other cases it will elicit mere submission, depending on a variety of factors, such as one's expectations, abilities, and conception of fairness. In yet other cases, it will elicit feelings of humiliation. While shame feelings may sometimes or often be occasioned by public shaming (as in the case of Smith), they need not: we sometimes feel shame independently of shaming.<sup>13</sup> Think for instance of the situation where you are ashamed of yourself because you realize that you are too lazy. Furthermore, recent empirical advances suggest a clear-cut distinction between the emotions of shame and humiliation, a distinction obscured in Tangney's data.<sup>14</sup> This means that the apparent link between shame

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whose cognitive processes were less sophisticated in the context of a much simpler human society." (Tangney & Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*, p. 126, cf. also Gilbert, 'Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt', p. 1225)

<sup>12</sup> The TOSCA questionnaire used by Tangney tends to produce conflated results concerning shame and humiliation insofar as it is focused on self-attribution of phenomenal attachments such as anguish to the emotions elicited rather than self-attribution of emotion as such. Thus, despite the benefits otherwise accrued by such an approach, it will have the drawback of failing to distinguish between humiliation anguish and shame anguish. Many psychologists appear to confuse shame, shaming and humiliation (e.g. D. Keltner & L. Harker, 'The Forms and Functions of the Non Verbal Signal of Shame', in P. Gilbert & B. Andrews (eds.), *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 78-98), a distinction nicely drawn in R.H. Smith, J.M. Webster, W.G. Parrott & H.L. Eyre, 'The Role of Public Exposure in Moral and Nonmoral Shame and Guilt', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83.1 (2002), pp. 138-159.

<sup>13</sup> We may object to these examples as involving humiliation before an imagined audience. For a discussion of this claim, see section 4 below.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Elison & S. Harter, 'Humiliation: Causes, Correlates, and Consequences', in J.L. Tracy, R.W. Robins & J.P. Tangney (eds.), *The Self-conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*

and anger may well result from what is known as a type I error: one can admit a significant correlation between the anti-social tendencies towards anger and aggression on the one hand and public shaming and humiliation on the other, and yet deny that there is a significant correlation between anger and shame as such. Any firm conclusion requires a clear breakdown of the data by humiliation-shaming induced cases and other cases.<sup>15</sup>

The second distinction not given its due is that between affective dispositions and episodes. Tangney's conclusions are not based on results about shame episodes, but about shame-prone individuals. And the data undoubtedly show a positive correlation between this disposition and depression, post-traumatic disorders and rumination about suicide (and thereby an attendant diminishing of pro-social motivation).<sup>16</sup> Yet there is no easy inference to be made about the pro- or anti-social nature of shame *episodes* on the basis of data regarding anti-social consequences of shame *dispositions*. This is because shame-proneness is by definition a pathological disposition: it involves individuals likely to feel recurrent and irrational shame in more circumstances than the average. So the fact that these pathological dispositions are correlated with further anti-social disorders does not support any broader conclusion about such a correlation for shame episodes and the non-pathological cases of this emotion. And without a breakdown of the data by pathological and non-pathological cases, any conclusions about a shame-depression causal link are questionable. Moreover, this is not a mere call for better data; it raises worries about the underlying methodology itself. Tangney herself recognizes that she fails to adequately distinguish shame from maladaptive guilt, thus suggesting that her results simply categorize all maladaptive negative self-evaluation as shame, and adaptive self-evaluation as guilt.<sup>17</sup> Tangney et al. seem to be saying that the maladaptive tendencies towards aggression and depression are due to shame, but a perhaps more plausible story would be that it is the pathological nature of the individual's affective dispositions more generally – be it due to deficient emotional

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(New York: Guilford Press, 2007). According to them, humiliation is more painful, more associated to public exposure, more connected with anger and antagonism than shame, and sometimes negatively correlates with shame. See section 3 below for further discussion of shame and humiliation.

<sup>15</sup> These worries may be due to a more fundamental conceptual dispute rather than quibbles about the quality of the data: Tangney et al. may be ignoring the shame-humiliation distinction because they presuppose a notion of shame where there is no significant distinction to be made.

<sup>16</sup> Tangney & Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*.

<sup>17</sup> J.P. Tangney, 'Shame and Guilt in Interpersonal Relationships', in J.P. Tangney & K.W. Fischer (eds.), *Self-conscious Emotions: Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Tangney & Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*, p. 45.

regulation or otherwise – that explains those maladaptive anti-social tendencies. In short, there are worries about a type III error here.

The third issue regards short- and long-term action tendencies. One feature of the above studies is that they are only concerned with the more immediate action tendencies connected with an emotion. While this restriction is understandable from a practical point of view, a broadening of the relevant time-span may help bring to light more pro-social aspects of shame. Here are some reasons for thinking so. Firstly, the empirical research registers a fundamental difference in the subject's own focus when experiencing these emotions: guilt is associated with wishful thoughts about one's actions ('if only I had done...') whereas shame is associated with wishful thoughts about the qualities of one's person ('if only I were...').<sup>18</sup> And this difference in focus plays an important role in explaining the action tendencies associated with each. In guilt we are moved to undo our *actions* by making the appropriate amends, and by extension we should expect a similar account for shame: we should be moved to reform *ourselves* by altering those qualities seen as occasioning the shame,<sup>19</sup> at least to the extent that some such course of action is seen as possible.<sup>20</sup> For instance, we may quite plausibly add to our above scenario that Smith's shame motivates him to do whatever he can to conform to the standards and expectations of his new schoolmates (altering his appearance and accent). Secondly, this idea is also consistent with the more general uncontroversial claim that painful emotions motivate subjects to do what they can to avoid experiencing them again. In this way, one should expect shame to reinforce aversion towards the kind of transgressive behaviour that elicits it. This function is particularly evident in the motivational aspects of prospective shame, an emotion often overlooked in the empirical research. For instance, an academic anticipating the shame that would be occasioned by a poor reception of her paper may be spurred to redouble her efforts in improving it, in order to avoid that shame. All such action tendencies have more indirect pro-social aspects, as self-improvement by better adherence to commitments and conformity to social norms reinforces the trust necessary for collaborative

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<sup>18</sup> P. Niedenthal, J.P. Tangney & I. Gavinski, "If only I weren't" versus "if only I hadn't": Distinguishing Shame and Guilt in Counterfactual Thinking', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67.4 (1994), pp. 585-95. We shall come back to this important distinction in section 4.

<sup>19</sup> R. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 229-230.

<sup>20</sup> Naturally, it may be the case that those shame-eliciting aspects are difficult or impossible for the subject to alter, thus undermining any relevant self-reforming motivation. But much the same can be said for graver forms of guilt: there are harms that cannot be undone.

association. Yet they constitute more long-term tendencies and do not necessarily immediately follow a shame episode.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Tangney's methodology which focuses on the more immediate emotion-eliciting scenario is not conducive to picking up on them, leading to worries about a type II error regarding the pro-social aspects of shame.

To conclude, the Pro-Social Argument cannot support the claim that shame is morally bad. The current empirical data relevant to assessing the moral status of this emotion fail to warrant any conclusion of this sort.

## 2. The Responsibility Argument

We now turn to the second kind of criterion for labelling an emotion as 'moral'. It does not involve assessing the moral *value* of shame and guilt, but rather it serves to assess some broader conditions for the moral *relevance* of an emotion. As with the first criterion, it has been used to argue that shame does not, as opposed to guilt, qualify. The intuition elicited by our introductory scenarios relevant for this problem has to do with the fact that responsibility plays a role in Jones' guilt that it does not play in Smith's shame. This intuition has been typically developed as follows. Guilt, and not shame, is intimately tied to the recognition of one's moral responsibility for some wrongdoing.<sup>22</sup> The institution of morality is bound up with the notions of responsibility, blame, atonement and punishment. These are in turn grounded in the idea of ourselves as people endowed with free will, our responsibility as tied up with an ability to distinguish right from wrong and hence the ability to act in accordance with that knowledge (or to knowingly, and hence culpably, act against it). The supposed contrast with shame is that shame is commonly elicited by circumstances for which one is not responsible.

So, laying aside the empirical claims discussed above, one may concede that both shame and guilt can play a role in social regulation by motivating pro-social behaviour, yet hold (i) that there is a distinctive kind of social regulation

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<sup>21</sup> These remarks serve to address Gilbert's argument, cited on page 226. Even though shame may well be connected with the *short-term* action tendency of hiding, this does not motivate the conclusion that it is connected with "turning away from responsibilities". This latter connection may appear for shame-prone individuals, but we have already highlighted the methodological worries in extrapolating from pathological conditions to shame episodes in general. Granted the alleged shame-hiding connection is plausible, but this in and of itself is too weak to support a broader anti-social thesis about shame.

<sup>22</sup> A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 297.



achieved through the institution of morality that involves a higher degree of conceptual sophistication on the part of the actors, and (ii) that only guilt speaks essentially to these higher moral concepts of responsibility, free will and understanding of the moral law.<sup>23</sup> Let us call this the *Responsibility Argument*.

There are at least two options for those who want to reject its conclusion. First, one may dispute the claim that guilt is *essentially* linked to responsibility for wrongdoing. We will look at the alleged cases of guilt without responsibility and will argue that they do not motivate rejection of this close conceptual tie. So this option is unavailable. Second, one may dispute the claim that *only* guilt, and not shame, is essentially linked with these moral concepts. We shall defend this option by arguing that some central cases of shame essentially involve a view of ourselves as *moral* agents. Let us examine these two options in this order.

On the first option, one may argue that, although standard cases of guilt like the scenario regarding Jones outlined above may suit accounts tying it to moral judgments of responsibility, many other cases are difficult to account for in such terms.<sup>24</sup> (1) People can feel guilty for their desires and feelings – say, having impure thoughts about their neighbour's spouse or being jealous of a successful sibling; (2) they can feel guilty for actions of others – the present-day German youth's guilt for Nazi atrocities; and (3) they feel guilty for unjustified good fortune – being the sole survivor of a catastrophe. Such cases are quite natural and comprehensible, and yet not easily explained in terms of a judgment or impression of responsibility for wrongdoing. Clearly, in none of these examples has the subject *done* anything, much less done anything wrong. Nor can we plausibly attribute to such people the thought that they actually have done something wrong. So it seems that there are cases that are not accompanied by the relevant moral judgment. These then seem to be cases of non-moral guilt.

For defenders of the Responsibility Argument, there are three possible ways of dealing with such putative cases of non-moral guilt, which consist respectively in (a) broadening the notion of responsibility, (b) appealing to irrational guilt and (c) making reference to new duties.

(a) The first response consists in trying to dissolve the apparent implausibility of attributing a judgment of responsibility to the subject in such cases. Such attribution *seems* implausible only on the view that we hold ourselves

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<sup>23</sup> R.E. Lamb, 'Guilt, Shame and Morality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43.3 (1983), pp. 329-346.

<sup>24</sup> H. Morris, 'Nonmoral Guilt', in F. Shoeman (ed.), *Responsibility, Character and the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 220-240.

responsible only for foreseeable consequences of our intentional actions (or knowing omissions), for in the above cases the object of guilt can hardly be conceived by the subject as flowing from what she herself has done. One could then respond by saying that this view is wrong: our attributions of moral responsibility are not circumscribed in this way.<sup>25</sup> With regard to cases of type (1), we sometimes do formulate obligations concerning feelings – ‘so-and-so should not feel angry (or jealous, covetous, etc.)’, where the obligation is conceived as a moral one. When such obligations are seen as met or flouted, we are subjected to praise and blame accordingly. We attribute responsibility not only for intentional actions, but also for certain feelings of moral value or disvalue. We also sometimes regard ourselves as sharing responsibility for actions of others closely associated with us. So we could make sense of the troubled subjects’ view of the circumstances in case (2) in terms of their ‘feeling responsible for wrongful treatment’ that others have received. Furthermore, we sometimes regard ourselves as having bonds of solidarity of a moral nature with those closely associated with us, bonds that are severed or threatened by a conspicuous divergence of our relative fortune or misfortune. So we could make sense of scenarios such as case (3) in terms of a perceived responsibility for one’s failure to meet the obligations concomitant with such solidarity.

However, as opposed to what Deigh suggests, a response along such lines appears to be in tension with the everyday concept of responsibility by excessively diluting it. There is no doubt that some people *do* attribute responsibility and blame to themselves and others in such a way, but the question here is not whether they do so, but whether such attributions are reasonable. In some instances of type (1), (2) or (3) cases, it may well be reasonable to (self-) attribute responsibility in this way. But it is only reasonable insofar as the subject can be regarded as having some control over the outcome: was there something she could have done to avoid it? And then the object of any such reasonable guilty feelings will be those things she could have done but failed to.<sup>26</sup>

(b) These remarks suggest a second response, which consists in holding that, in the above cases, there is a self-attribution of responsibility, albeit an irrational one. In these putative cases of non-moral guilt, certainly no one ‘in his right mind’ would think that there is something that the subject should have done or should have avoided doing (with the above caveats regarding

<sup>25</sup> J. Deigh, ‘All Kinds of Guilt’, *Law and Philosophy* 18 (1999), pp. 313–325.

<sup>26</sup> The aim here is not to offer conclusive reasons against Deigh. For those readers who agree with him, extending the concept of responsibility beyond what is under our control implies rejecting the premise of the Responsibility Argument according to which guilt is exclusively associated with an enlightened moral conception of free will.

guilt for desires and feelings), but subjects prone to such feelings do think so.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that people disposed to such irrational guilt may not be all the more morally admirable for it. Such a disposition evinces a heightened concern for others' interests and rights; and that is, all things being equal, a moral virtue.

(c) Finally, a third response could consist in arguing that it may be quite natural, and rational, for a subject in such cases to regard the wrongdoing, even if it is not her own, as a reason for her to attribute a greater importance to the wronged party's interests and rights in her practical reasoning. That is, one may reasonably regard it as incumbent upon one to make up for the wrong. One may (case (1)) become particularly focused on one's neighbourly or sisterly duties, one may strengthen one's commitment to fight anti-Semitism (case (2)), or feel a duty to do something for the victims' families (case (3)). In this way, we can understand the putative non-moral guilt feelings as a rational anxiety not directed at some responsibility for the original wrongdoing, but rather directed at new moral commitments and duties created by it. The guilt feelings can be explained as a sense that one should be doing something to make up for the harm done, although one may lack a clear idea of what it is one should be doing. And so conceived, one does see oneself as responsible for a wrongdoing: the failure to fulfil this newly created duty.

One or the other of these two last explanatory strategies will, we believe, adequately cover all alleged cases of non-moral guilt. Some cases are clearly to be classed as pathological guilt and as such they should be laid aside in any attempt to understand the kind of circumstances towards which guilt constitutes a natural response: pathological instances of guilt should not be regarded as counterexamples to the claim that guilt is a response to perceived responsibility for wrongdoing. Other cases that fit the above three cases can be regarded as natural and rational. And in such cases, the subject does not see herself as responsible for the harm done; in particular, she will not see herself as to be blamed for it. However, she may see the harm done as creating new responsibilities, i.e. moral duties, which she may regard as unfulfilled. If so, then guilt cannot be divorced from moral considerations of responsibility for wrongdoing. The first option against the Responsibility Argument fails: guilt is essentially tied to moral concepts.

The second option, you will recall, consists in targeting the second part of this argument: that shame lacks the requisite moral relevance because it has no essential link with responsibility. Now, it has to be conceded that many

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to deny that individuals may diverge widely in their preconceptions of what they *could* have done differently, thus affecting their view of what they *should* have done differently.

episodes of shame have no obvious moral relevance at all, as when one feels ashamed for one's physical traits. But, in and of itself, this suggests at most that some cases of shame are not morally relevant, not that shame is, in itself, morally irrelevant. In many cases, shame is motivated by the subject's perception that he has acted against a moral value, as when he feels shame for having behaved dishonestly. And this seems to call for, as Rawls suggests, a distinction between moral and natural shame, which are according to him related to distinct kinds of excellences. Shame is natural when the relevant excellences are themselves non-moral because, like intelligence or beauty, "these attributes are not voluntary, and so they do not render us blameworthy".<sup>28</sup> When the relevant excellences have to do with the "desire to do what is right and just", a failure to act in accordance with this desire will signify a lack of the excellence in question and elicit moral shame.

Independently of the details of Rawls' conception of shame, this is enough to offer a minimal reply to the Responsibility Argument: the mere fact that what elicits shame is sometimes not under our control does not mean that, when it is, shame is morally irrelevant. In central and acute cases of shame, the focus is precisely on defects in our moral agency. It is true that guilt is essentially moral to the extent that it is exclusively calibrated towards the moral sphere. However, it is essential *to an understanding of moral attitudes* to integrate reactions of shame that essentially involve a view of ourselves as moral agents.<sup>29</sup> All in all, then, the Responsibility Argument, much as the Pro-social Argument, appears not to succeed in establishing its conclusion.

### 3. The Autonomy Argument

The next, and arguably the most discussed, of the intuitions elicited by our scenarios may well have been in the reader's mind when we just offered a minimal reply to the Responsibility Argument. According to this intuition, this reply only scratches the surface of the distinction between shame and guilt, which fundamentally has to do with the fact that Smith, in our scenario, feels shame because of the reaction of an audience, while Jones' reaction is not in this way audience-dependent. This is why shame is not morally relevant.

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<sup>28</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 290. See also J. Manion, 'The Moral Relevance of Shame', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39.1 (2002), pp. 73-90.

<sup>29</sup> A distant analogy might help. One cannot understand the functioning of combustion engines without knowing about pistons, but of course pistons are functional parts of many mechanisms besides combustion engines, e.g. steam engines.

This intuition speaks to the rather abstruse contrast between autonomy and heteronomy. To see what is at stake here, we first need definitions of these theoretical notions with respect to the emotions. For present purposes, we will adopt the following necessary condition for heteronomy: an emotion is heteronomous if, in order for it to be elicited and intelligible, the judgment or attitude that triggers it (i) need not be the subject's own and (ii) the subject need not agree with the judgment or what is revealed by the attitude communicated to him. If not, the emotion is autonomous. Naturally, in the ethical literature, broader notions of heteronomy are sometimes in play, but in regard to the debate concerning the moral status of shame and guilt, the claim that shame is heteronomous while guilt is autonomous depends essentially on this more restricted notion of heteronomy. The importance of this distinction for assessing the moral relevance of an emotion is clear enough. Indeed, we may ask in a Kantian vein, what allows us to see an emotion as morally relevant if the affected subject merely reacts to criticisms without agreeing with what motivates the critics?

Now, shame is often perceived as meeting the above definition of heteronomy in that it can be triggered by aversive judgments or expressions of disgust with which one disagrees.<sup>30</sup> The case of Smith in our scenario, or, to take a more directly moral case, of an employee who feels ashamed because his boss judges him to be dishonest, even though he himself believes that he is honest, substantiate this claim. By contrast, guilt is autonomous since it is not elicited by others' opinions with which we disagree; simply being told that one did so and so, when one knows that one did not, has no tendency to elicit guilt. This alleged heteronomy of shame, it is further claimed, disqualifies it from having any moral relevance, or makes it relevant only for more primitive forms of morality than the autonomy-morality of which guilt is a crucial part.<sup>31</sup> That is, it may seem that reacting with shame to aversive judgments by others with whom one disagrees displays at best a kind of socially useful sensibility, which however falls short of a fully moral sensibility. For, as opposed to what we have suggested above following Rawls, the emotion never constitutes a response to the moral aspects of the circumstances – i.e. some wrongdoing, failing or vice exhibited – but rather to the morally irrelevant fact that someone else regards it as such. Call this the *Heteronomy Argument*.

We can resist this argument in either of three ways. The first is to deny that guilt is autonomous. The second consists in rejecting the claim that

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<sup>30</sup> C. Calhoun, 'An Apology for Moral Shame', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12.2 (2004), pp. 127–146; R. Wollheim, *On the Emotions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Lecture 3.

<sup>31</sup> R. Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Reprint New American Library, 1947).

heteronomy disqualifies an emotion as morally irrelevant. The third is to argue that shame is autonomous.

Freud and Nietzsche are leading proponents of the first option. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud distinguishes fear of outer authority from fear of inner authority and argues that guilt is an internal punishment due to one's internalization of figures giving rise to the superego mechanism. The account of guilt Nietzsche offers in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is structurally the same. Guilt is the symptom of bad conscience motivated by a negative stance towards vital values imposed by alien forces and which arises from a progressive internalization and moralization of the fear of punishment attending those who disobey the socially defined moral dictates. For Nietzsche, as for Freud, guilt is not the result of an action or omission the subject autonomously conceives as a moral failing, but a punishment imposed by alien, though internalized, forces. If so, the moral relevance of guilt cannot derive from its being autonomous.

Although Freud's and Nietzsche's accounts differ in important respects, the crucial thesis they share is that moral, guilt-eliciting norms are internalized through fear of punishment. This is the substantial psychological assumption that motivates their criticism of guilt. Independently of the philosophical problems attendant to this view,<sup>32</sup> perhaps it is sufficient to say that recent empirical findings on the issue of internalization as well as on that of the developmental path of shame and guilt demonstrate that it is fundamentally misguided.<sup>33</sup> Kochanska shows for instance that children's eagerness to internalize their caregivers' norms is fostered by 'mutually responsive orientation', a style of interaction that does not rely on fear of punishment. Fear of punishment, she further notes, is not a very successful mechanism of internalization. Within this developmental literature, evidence has also been found for the claim that guilt does not originate from fear of punishment, but from empathic concern with others.<sup>34</sup> If that is correct, then guilt is not heteronomous. The first option provides no sound route for rejecting the conclusion of the Heteronomy Argument.

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<sup>32</sup> See J.D. Velleman, 'Don't Worry, Feel Guilty', in A. Hatzimoyisis (ed.), *Philosophy and the Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 235–248.

<sup>33</sup> See in particular N. Eisenberg, 'Emotion, Regulation, and Moral Development', *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2000), pp. 665–697; G. Kochanska, 'Mutually responsive Orientation Between Mothers and Their Young Children: A Context for the Early Development of Conscience', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11.6 (2002), pp. 191–195; N. Aksan & G. Kochanska, 'Conscience in Childhood: Old Questions, New Answers', *Developmental Psychology* 41.3 (2005), pp. 506–516; G. Nunner-Winkler & B. Sodian, 'Children's Understanding of Moral Emotions', *Child Development* 59 (1988), pp. 1323–1338.

<sup>34</sup> Eisenberg, 'Emotion, Regulation, and Moral Development'.

This leads us to the second option, which has it that heteronomy does not constitute a disqualifying trait in an emotion. In its strongest form, the claim is that heteronomy is precisely what allows shame to play crucial roles within morality. This is the anti-Kantian path recently taken by Williams and, in a very different form, by Calhoun.

Williams argues that shame, qua sensitivity towards the opinions of others that we may not share, plays a useful role in our moral reasoning: it may lead us to question our own assumptions and intuitions on moral issues.<sup>35</sup> But, even if we grant Williams that much, there are two distinct reasons to claim that this will not suffice to reject the conclusion of the Heteronomy Argument. First, shame is at most one among many possible ways of overcoming the weaknesses of a solitary use of our reasoning powers as regards moral matters. And if its moral relevance hangs on that, it is quite peripheral. Second, it is less than clear that heteronomous shame more often than not serves to sharpen our moral insights. Pressure to conform is hardly a sound route to moral improvement.

Calhoun offers other reasons for claiming that heteronomy does not constitute a disqualifying trait in an emotion.<sup>36</sup> According to her, the moral status of our character and actions is nothing above and beyond what others judge them to be; others' beliefs about us define who we morally are, to the extent that these others occupy a representative viewpoint. Shame is morally relevant because its heteronomy allows us to be sensitive to these opinions. But this directly leads to a dilemma. Either we agree with Calhoun that these opinions *define* who we morally are, but then the distinction between morally appearing so and so and morally being so and so disappears. This moral relativism will likely be perceived as too high a price to pay for conceiving shame as morally relevant. Or we maintain this appearance-reality distinction, shame thereby becoming a reaction to mere moral appearances, and not to moral status as such. But then it is confined to a very superficial role within morality, and so the Heteronomy Argument stands.

This leaves us with the third option against this argument, which consists in arguing that shame is autonomous. This is arguably the central issue with respect to the Heteronomy Argument. For it has emerged that its advocates may easily argue that even if shame is apt to play epistemological (Williams) and social (Calhoun) roles, its heteronomy is enough to deprive it and the actions it motivates of moral relevance. That is, something enters the moral realm only if it displays endorsement of morally relevant considerations; since

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<sup>35</sup> B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Calhoun, 'An Apology for Moral Shame'.

the above strategies agree that shame does not display such an endorsement, it is morally irrelevant.

We now have to confront this line of thought head on. To this end, we will take a closer look at what is required to explain the elicitation of shame in the Smith example. We see only three possible accounts and argue that in none of them does shame come out as heteronomous. Clearly, mere reference to an adverse judgment in the Smith case will not be sufficient to account for a shame reaction. Adverse judgments of our person with which we disagree or demeaning treatment at the hands of others do not by themselves explain its occurrence, and may easily make one react with anger directed at those who make these judgments or treat us this way, insofar as one regards their behaviour as unjustified.<sup>37</sup> So, what do we need to add to Smith's perspective on the situation to fully account for his shame reaction?

First, Smith may lack a definitive view on the appropriate sartorial standards, and simply be ready to accept the negative judgment of his new schoolmates, coming to see his appearance as shameful. And there is nothing heteronomous in deferring in this way to the judgments of others we regard as experts.

Second, Smith may not have a definite viewpoint on the matter and disagree with his schoolmates' attitude, seeing nothing ridiculous or vulgar about his appearance or accent, while nevertheless having a strong negative affective reaction. The appearance of heteronomous shame is due here to a confusion between this emotion and humiliation, two emotions many see no reason to distinguish. However, one of the rare empirical studies devoted to explore the relations between others' attitudes and negative emotions convincingly shows that while there are positive correlations between (seemingly) unjustified demeaning treatment by others and humiliation, there are negative correlations between such treatment and shame.<sup>38</sup> The process of shaming actually blocks the elicitation of shame when the subject perceives it as inappropriate or as deliberately brought about.<sup>39</sup> So, not only is there no shame in these circumstances, but humiliation is not heteronomous either. To feel humiliated, it is not enough to be subjected to a negative external opinion; one has to regard that opinion as manifesting an unjustified slighting attitude.

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<sup>37</sup> Wolheim, *On the Emotions*, Lecture 3.

<sup>38</sup> Elison & Harter, 'Humiliation: Causes, Correlates, and Consequences'.

<sup>39</sup> Beyond empirical studies, if we look at ordinary language and in particular usages of the cognate qualifiers 'humiliating' and 'shameful', some clear differences emerge. In particular, when one learns that a situation was deeply humiliating, one is hardly tempted to infer that one's informant felt shame, and even less tempted to conclude that the situation was shameful.



So, what has to be added to explain the occurrence of shame instead of humiliation in such circumstances?

This leads us to the third account of the Smith example. Demeaning treatment may well cause shame, but this can only be explained through the fact that it impinges on one's concerns. If Smith feels shame in these circumstances, this is because he perceives the attitude of his schoolmates as threatening something he does value, quite plausibly his reputation or public image. It is here because these judgments or attitudes are perceived as threatening values that are truly ours that shame ensues – Smith feels shame because he perceives his reputation among his new schoolmates, something he values, as threatened. The actual content of the others' judgments is not relevant, only the consequences for his reputation matter.<sup>40</sup>

Against the Heteronomy Argument, we can thus conclude that shame is autonomous. Its alleged heteronomy is traceable (i) to social factors entering into the formation of our autonomous judgments (deference to experts), (ii) to a confusion between shame and humiliation and (iii) is obscured by the fact that the values which, when threatened, elicit it may well be partly or wholly constituted by others' attitude towards us.

#### 4. The Social Argument

While the third option appears to adequately deal with the Heteronomy Argument, a slight modification will easily take the above considerations into account. According to this line of thought, shame is not morally irrelevant by virtue of its heteronomy, but by virtue of its distinctive link with reputation, i.e. its social character. In our scenario, even if Smith does not merely react to judgments he disagrees with, threats to his reputation are what explain his shame. Since this connection with reputation is always present in shame, it is now argued, then moral considerations enter into the explanation of why one feels shame and is motivated to act by virtue of shame very indirectly: one reacts with shame to a morally relevant situation and is motivated to act morally only because one perceives one's reputation as threatened and wants to restore it. How one appears to others is one's only motive for feeling shame. If so, we may safely grant, shame and the behaviour it motivates are not morally relevant. This we shall call the *Social Argument*. It is of special relevance in the

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<sup>40</sup> Could you imagine cases where none of these three accounts apply? Of course, but then, we submit, we are talking about cases of irrational shame.

light of the prevalence of social theories about shame. Should we accept it? There are two reasons for doubt.

First, adopting the idea that shame is a social emotion does not *eo ipso* deprive it of moral relevance. For the reputation that one should appeal to in order to explain shame is quite often construed in moral terms. That is, shame might be motivated by moral considerations and lead one to act morally because the reputation one perceives as threatened is one's moral reputation. If so, even if we concede the claim that shame is rooted in threats to reputation, this provides no direct route for concluding that it is morally irrelevant. Concern about moral reputation involves the deployment of moral concepts.

Second, and more importantly, it is by no means clear that we should concede that much. True enough, usual cases trotted out as paradigmatic in a discussion of shame (such as the Smith scenario) involve an audience of some sort, often one demeaning or taking a dim view of the subject. Views according to which this is not only frequent but necessary for shame hold that shame essentially involves an *interpersonal* evaluation: in shame you are fundamentally concerned with how *others* evaluate you and the consequences for the kind of treatment you can expect from them. Its proponents point to the prevalence of social contexts for the elicitation of shame: the greater intensity of shame occasioned by the presence of an audience (feeling shame at one's crime and feeling it more intensely during the public 'perp walk') and the other-regarding nature of the desire to hide or disappear that is characteristic of shame feelings.

But does shame always pertain to reputation? Think for instance of an ex-smoker who breaks his commitment not to have another cigarette and feels ashamed of himself as he lights up alone at home. Has this anything to do with loss of reputation? Cases where shame has no immediately apparent link with reputation seem perfectly intelligible. And so, opposed to the Social view, others claim that shame essentially involves an *intrapersonal* evaluation.<sup>41</sup> The prevalence of social cases, and the way in which social contexts intensify shame, are accounted for by regarding social values – values involving one's inter-personal relationships (such as being respected and honoured by others) – as just some among other values in terms of which we take the measure of ourselves; we can feel doubly ashamed when we both consider ourselves ugly and consider ourselves undesired because of it. By the same token the desire to

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<sup>41</sup> See in particular L. Boonin, 'Guilt, Shame and Morality', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 40 (1983), pp. 295–304 and G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford University Press, 1984). This claim is defended in details in J.A. Deonna, R. Rodogno and F. Teroni, *In Defense of Shame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

hide can be regarded as a coping mechanism specific to cases of shame elicited by failures in regard to social values.

Now, both conceptions agree in an important respect: shame features some form of self-assessment. They differ in that, against the first, the second does not conceive this self-assessment to be interpersonal. Rather, it devotes another role to interpersonal assessments in shame. Let us develop these two important points.

As regards the first, note that shame always involves two kinds of assessment and a relation between these. First, the subject evaluates negatively some trait, behaviour or situation in which he is somehow implicated. For instance, he evaluates his nose as ugly, his action as stupid or dishonest, etc. Second, this negative assessment motivates a distinctive, negative self-assessment. One is ashamed *of oneself* because of the first negative assessment. The claim shared by both conceptions is that shame involves this kind of *global* self-assessment. This claim has a lot to be said in its favour. It has regularly been drawn from empirical data and offered as an important criterion for distinguishing shame from guilt.<sup>42</sup> For the evaluation characteristic of guilt appears not to be global: in guilt, it is rather a particular action or omission that is negatively assessed. This distinction can be conveyed by means of an example. In our scenario, schoolboy Jones has stolen a candy bar. He may as a result feel either shame or guilt. According to the criterion under discussion, he is ashamed if his action leads him to a global self-assessment: he has to construe his misdeed as having a negative import *on himself as a whole*. By contrast, if he feels guilt, he apprehends *his action* in a negative light. He may of course feel both and one could imagine that in most morally significant cases both are warranted. If it is along the right tracks, as we believe, the distinction is very fruitful for assessing the moral relevance of these two emotions.<sup>43</sup> However, the implications one may draw from it depend on the kind of self-assessment characteristic of shame.

This is precisely the fundamental issue on which the two conceptions differ. The first conception claims that, to constitute shame, the global self-evaluation has to be interpersonal. That is, the fact that one perceives, say,

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<sup>42</sup> For empirical evidence, see in particular K.C. Barrett, P.M. Cole & C. Zahn-Waxler, 'Avoiders versus Amenders: Implications for the Investigation of Guilt and Shame during Toddlerhood?', *Cognition and Emotion* 7 (1993), pp. 481-505, Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera & Mascolo, 'Differentiating Shame and Guilt and their Effects on Motivation' and J.P. Tangney, 'Situational Determinants of Shame and Guilt in Young Adulthood', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18 (1992), pp. 199-206. For a recent defence of this distinction, see J. Deonna & F. Teroni, 'Differentiating Shame from Guilt', *Consciousness and Cognition* 17.3 (2008), pp. 725-740.

<sup>43</sup> For further discussion and analysis of the global self-assessment involved in shame, see Deonna, Rodogno & Teroni, *In Defense of Shame*.

one's act as dishonest must motivate a real or imagined negative interpersonal self-assessment, this negative self-assessment being shame. This conception of shame seems wrong for two reasons. The first arises from consideration of the quite natural cases of so-called 'solitary' shame, such as the above case of the ex-smoker, which cannot be dealt with within this conception.<sup>44</sup> The connection between shame and loss of reputation at the core of the Social Argument appears to focus on too narrow a set of 'typical' shame scenarios; it fails to take account of cases where the emotion is elicited without any concern for the view of a real or imagined audience. The second problem is due to the fact that it must treat as identical two kinds of cases that appear quite different. Indeed, it seems that to be ashamed of oneself because one is dishonest is one thing, to be ashamed of oneself because others perceive us as such another. The first conception, however, treats them as identical.

For these reasons, the second conception allocates a different role to interpersonal negative self-assessment in shame. These should not be understood as the self-assessments shame is identified with, but as a salient subset of the many reasons for which the subject assesses himself in a specific intrapersonal way. To clarify both the nature of this self-assessment and the fact that various reasons may motivate it, a brief look at contempt, a global negative evaluative attitude one may have towards other people, will prove fruitful. Indeed, shame is strikingly similar to a form of self-directed contempt. Furthermore, the fact that someone is criticized or ridiculed by a given audience often motivates contempt. The same is true of shame, since being aware of a negative interpersonal self-assessment is one salient motive for feeling this emotion. However, there are no clear boundaries as to what may motivate contempt or shame, since many factors will likely depend on personal and cultural contingencies. To take the most obvious example, in hierarchical societies, an individual's class membership will be an important determinant. But other factors may explain their occurrence. To come back to our present purpose, the cases of solitary shame suggest that the relevant factors do not have to pertain to reputation. Only in this way can we systematically distinguish the two kinds of cases we introduced above. In one case, a moral value directly motivates shame; in the other this moral value indirectly motivates it, via a link with reputation. Indeed, any restriction one may want to put on these factors seems

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<sup>44</sup> Defenders of the 'reputation' type theory of shame may posit unconscious thoughts about an audience. But that is really just to turn on its head the relationship between the theoretical conclusion and the empirical evidence for that conclusion. For empirical data that throw doubt on the necessary presence of an audience in shame, see Tangney, Miller, Flicker & Barlow, 'Are Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment Distinct Emotions?' and Smith, Webster, Parrot & Eyre, 'The Role of Public Exposure in Moral and Nonmoral Shame and Guilt'.

more likely to be a questionable normative claim about how people *should* form such evaluative attitudes rather than a descriptive claim about how they *do* form such evaluative attitudes. The second conception thus suggests that our social nature is not reflected in the nature of shame, but only in the fact that threats to reputation are powerful motives for a negative intrapersonal self-assessment.

If the second conception is along the right tracks, we can then reply to the Social Argument as follows. True enough, social status or reputation is often a relevant determinant for explaining shame. This may deprive some cases of shame of moral relevance, and especially those that have to do with in-group pressure to blind conformity. However, what is distinctive of shame is not an interpersonal self-assessment, but rather a specific intrapersonal self-assessment, which need not be motivated by threats to our reputation. For we quite often react with shame to a moral misdeed independently of what others might think about us, responding in this way only by virtue of the deed being morally wrong. In these cases, one feels shame because one perceives oneself as having behaved immorally, something that makes sense only if acting morally is something one values. And this implies that shame cannot easily be deprived of moral relevance. Note that we are not arguing that shame has greater moral relevance than guilt, but merely that both are equally central to morality. One may object that since shame is morally relevant only when guilt is equally warranted, guilt retains its moral primacy. But, as already noted, the narrower scope of guilt constitutes no reason for giving it pride of place.<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This then brings us back to the question of shame's relative status as a moral emotion as compared to guilt. We have discussed the main criteria used in the philosophical and psychological literature for attributing or denying this label to the two emotions, and we have argued that there is no ground for regarding guilt as more 'moral' in any of these senses. In the case of all criteria, the label has a certain honorific tinge to it: saying that guilt is the more moral of the two is to say that it (i) is the morally better emotion in that it leads to morally

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<sup>45</sup> That shame is morally relevant only when guilt is also warranted is an assumption that may be questioned. One can easily envisage morally relevant cases of shame that are not elicited by culpable action. This is not the place to offer a detailed account, but think of shame episodes elicited by omissions in the supererogatory sphere, by shameful responses to fictions (sympathy for the villain) and by one's racist father.

good action, (ii) manifests a deeper awareness of moral facts, (iii) is expressive of our essential freedom or ‘autonomy’ as moral agents and (iv) is not tied to reputation. In our discussion we have focused primarily on puncturing the case for the primacy of guilt rather than taking the further step of making the case in favour of shame. However, much of what we have said lays out the groundwork for making this case. The following remarks sketch how, in our opinion, we should build this case on the basis of the previous conclusions.

In relation to the moral quality of the action tendencies related to the two emotions, guilt may well be more closely correlated with a tendency to make up for wrongdoing. However, this is only a very narrow part of what can be considered morally valuable behaviour. Shame in its prospective form helps avoid wrongdoing in the first place, and the self-regarding aspects of shame imply motivation to improve oneself that suggest a greater moral value for shame. In a word, guilt, as it were, only treats the symptoms of one’s moral defects; it is only concerned with the defects in our actions. The self-reforming tendencies associated with shame treat the cause; in shame we often focus on the faults in our character that dispose us to perform the misdeeds.

In relation to the depth of moral understanding manifested by each emotion, once again, a narrow focus on the moral concepts of responsibility and blame will skew the argument in favour of guilt. Notwithstanding its undeniable intimate relation to these concepts, the class of important moral notions is much wider. Responsibility and blame are concepts relating to the moral norms governing our actions. Other, arguably more central, concepts relate to our moral values – and these are potential foci of shame. Shame is often occasioned by our moral faults, our lack of moral virtues such as justice, righteousness, as well as generosity, magnanimity, strength of will, wisdom and courage. In short, whereas guilt is associated with awareness of the limits of morally permissible action, shame can be associated with shortcomings that are hardly captured in terms of right or wrong action and that require a deeper self-awareness. Granted, this self-awareness goes beyond the ambit of peculiarly moral concerns, but that does not undermine its importance for morality. On the contrary it serves to place our moral concerns within the broader context of our general interests and values.

In relation to the way these emotions constitute an expression of our free and autonomous agency, we have argued against the widespread conception of shame as essentially a subversion of our autonomy. Shame cannot be understood as merely a reaction to others’ judgments or attitudes that we do not share. Rather, when these judgments and attitudes are relevant, it has to be understood in terms of the values one adheres to and which explain the negative self-assessment that these judgments and attitudes elicit. Yet again,

a blinkered focus on social contexts for shame will suggest that it involves succumbing to external social pressures, undermining any independence of thought and action on matters of value, and right and wrong. Against this conception of shame, we have argued that threats to reputation are merely one type of reason for which one may feel shame. Undeniably, guilt is an expression of our autonomy where this is conceived as a recognition of the authority of moral norms and our freedom as agents to adhere to or stray from them. One can concede that guilt is a more essentially moral emotion only to the extent that its evaluative focus is circumscribed to the field of morality unlike shame whose focus spans a broader array of cares and concerns. But one lesson of the preceding pages is that the self-assessment involved in shame has an importance for our moral lives, not despite its more diffuse focus, but by virtue of it.

These concluding remarks illustrate how the debate about the moral status and relevance of different emotions has to some extent been ill-served by the way this debate has been structured. A narrow focus on particular criteria and a misconception about the nature of the relevant emotions has obscured other ways in which an emotion such as shame has importance in our moral lives.

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