

## Shame and Moral Formation

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From both the Left and the Right there come strong complaints about the moral state of society. The right laments the loss of “family values” that were instantiated in a consensus on social norms that was at least partly mythical; the Left laments the loss of social commitments that made the Great Society reforms possible. Whether decrying the divorce and illegitimacy rates or the rapidly accelerating abandonment of the poor, social critics want to tell us that we should be ashamed of ourselves, as prophetic voices in societies have done for all of recorded history.

There is an active effort by the political right wing in this country to create a moral high ground by laying claim to a moral vocabulary supporting a conservative political agenda. Tactically, this puts progressives at a serious disadvantage in the public conversation. If one side says that it is wrong to do X, and the response is that, right or wrong, people who want to do X have a right to do so, that is a weak rejoinder.

Further, the conservatives have a point: in a democratic society, character does matter. For democracy to work, the citizens must have a settled predisposition to do the right thing far more often than not. For social order to obtain, either this must be true or the citizenry must be subject to such pervasive surveillance and regulation that their behavior is controlled despite the lack of this predisposition. No society in which supervision is the means of social control can lay legitimate claim to be democratic. Democracy requires citizens who are, literally, self-governing. Therefore, character formation — the fostering of virtue — is the critical role of education in any society, but perhaps never more than in a society that would be democratic.

Taking the question of virtue seriously is not a bad thing, but it is not necessarily a good thing, either. Much depends on properly identifying the virtues that will contribute to membership in a decent society. But that question, while important, is not the topic of this paper. This paper is an effort to understand the educative and formative value of shame, one of what Gabriele Taylor calls “the emotions of self-assessment.”<sup>1</sup> However, throughout this discussion it will be good to keep in mind the danger in this approach; one could be wrong about what virtue is and still retain its power.

A recent spate of books and articles suggests the renewed interest in the question of virtue: William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues*; William Kilpatrick’s *Why Johnnie Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*; Thomas Lickona’s *Educating for Character*; *Newsweek*’s cover story “Shame”; *The New York Times Magazine*’s cover story titled “Who’ll Teach Kids Right From Wrong?” and *The Washington Post* weekly edition’s “For Shame” are all evidence of an interest in this subject among the general public.<sup>2</sup> In more technical literature, Gabriele Taylor’s *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, Nancy Sherman’s *The Fabric of Character*, and Bernard Williams’s *Shame and Necessity* have attempted to apply some philosophical rigor to questions of moral formation and good character.<sup>3</sup>

These very different works share an interest in the questions: (1) What does it mean to be good? and (2) How can we help children become so? The first is a question of moral philosophy, the second a problem in moral education. Though they are related and often conflated, they are quite different.<sup>4</sup> The second question will shape this essay, though it is not about pedagogy. I will consider one small piece of a process by which we become good: the role that shame plays in the process. I will not deal with the very important, but quite different, question of what being “good” means.

A central point of the *Newsweek* piece is that our capacity for shame seems diminished. However, this is inaccurate; shame is common enough. Skinheads are ashamed of being insufficiently anti-Semitic; gang members are ashamed of not being sufficiently ruthless; committed pacifists can feel shame for their own tendencies to violence; devout Catholics will feel shame at having an abortion; in some groups teens are ashamed of their virginity. Each of these is an example of a cohesive group whose norms define membership, and where the violation of those norms causes shame. What we have lost is the kind of intergroup communication that allows for the emergence and reinforcement of group norms strong enough that their violation elicits a sense of shame across social groups.

Becoming a good person, whatever that specifically means, formally involves making accurate judgments about the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions and conforming one’s actions to those judgments. Further, shame is a constituent feature of social membership, and social membership is a necessary, though not sufficient, aspect of becoming moral. Finally, morality is both a social and individual phenomenon: our moral sensibilities are shaped by the society in which we are reared, and we must then make decisions about how to act with respect to those moral sensibilities.<sup>5</sup> The shared moral sensibilities are aspects of our membership within a social group. The concept of “good person” or a “decent society” is not meaningless, though there is strong disagreement about what a “good person” or “decent society” is.<sup>6</sup> Shame is one way society shapes the behaviors and attitudes of its members; it follows from and is a sign of membership in a moral community.<sup>7</sup> This paper is an attempt to understand the meaning and the operation of shame — where does it come from and how does it operate? What elicits it, and what stills its voice? What is its role in education and social membership?

On the one hand, shame has gotten a bad reputation as harmful to children’s development. On the other hand, when we describe someone as “shameless” it is generally understood to be an indictment of that person’s character.<sup>8</sup> Despite our aversion to shaming children, we still think that under certain circumstances feelings of shame are appropriate. When I call someone a “racist” or “oppressor” or “sexist,” it is in the hope that there is sufficient moral sensibility present that feelings of shame will motivate changes in behavior.

#### SHAME, NORMS, AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

We should differentiate at least two types of shame, which we can call identity shame and moral shame.<sup>9</sup> Identity shame is connected not with what one does, but is a demoralizing judgment imposed on individuals in consequence of their mem-

bership in some disfavored or marginalized group. Thus, it is not uncommon for gays, lesbians, women, and people of color to be shamed by their group membership. Similarly, children of the poor, children of unmarried parents, and children of unfavored ethnic or religious groups all have been stigmatized with a sense of shame about their very selfhood.

There is a very different sort of shame that attaches to me as a consequence of my actions. It is this I call moral shame. Notwithstanding the obvious connection between who I am and what I do, there is a difference between shame attached to my identity, even when my actions are exemplary, and shame attached to me as the doer of shameful deeds. In the first case, there is no redeeming the shame; it is not a consequence of my actions, and it therefore cannot be erased by my actions. I can hide or deny my identity, but I cannot change it in any basic way. Moral shame, however, can be redeemed as my behavior is reformed. If I am shamed by my gender, there is little I can or should do; if I am shamed by my sexism, I can and should change.<sup>10</sup>

Further, if my shame is attached to the fact that I behave badly in some way, then shame itself becomes a motivation to change my behavior. If my shame is connected to my actions, I can rid myself of shame by ceasing my shame-producing acts. Hereafter, when I speak of “shame” I shall mean this specific form of shame, activated by the commission of shameful actions.

Consciousness of three things calls forth shame: (1) my actions are worthy of condemnation; (2) my actions are relevant expressions, at least to some extent, of the sort of person I am; and (3) I recognize that my actions are both blameworthy and a reflection of my self. “Actions” must be broadly understood in this context — my feelings toward others may count as actions even if not acted upon. I may discover that I harbor feelings of racial, gender, or ethnic superiority or that I am repulsed by persons of different sexual orientation. I might then properly be ashamed of this aspect of my character, even if I have never committed an overtly racist, sexist, or homophobic act. In fact, I might (rightly) take pride in my avoidance of such acts while simultaneously (also rightly) feeling shamed by my feelings, which I hide.

There are four points that are relevant to an understanding of shame as a morally educative experience: (1) shame requires a violation of norms, (2) shame requires an audience, (3) shame is a consequence of a judgment I pass on myself, and (4) shame can often be redeemed, and even redemptive.<sup>11</sup>

Shame is aroused in individuals conscious of having violated social norms. To understand this aspect of shame requires that we consider the nature of norms.<sup>12</sup> Norms are connected to our sense of how things should be rather than to our knowledge of how things are. We are less likely to hide our sexuality today, and most people no longer proclaim their racism openly. This is an indication that our norms have changed, but it in no way shows that we are either more sexual or less racist. What has changed is not (necessarily) behavior, but the judgment we collectively pass on the behavior. Norms point us to the expected and to the unacceptable, not the common or the rare.

The central problem of moral education is that it is easy to teach children what social norms are, but that is terribly insufficient. We want our children not to merely *know* the relevant social norms, but to be motivated by them. We want children to be honest, not just to know that others disapprove of their lies.<sup>13</sup> Knowing the rules without internalizing the norms leads people to conceal those acts that violate the rules; it makes the acts themselves no less likely (barring the sort of potentially constant surveillance Michel Foucault describes, which is destructive of both democracy and social decency).<sup>14</sup> Shame is the sign that norms exist for us; we can feel embarrassment or guilt or humiliation for breaking rules or conventions, but we can only feel shame if we violate norms of a certain sort that we have come to see as our own.

Shame requires an audience, a sense of being observed. To feel shame we must violate the norms of the audience and know this to be the case. Additionally, I must myself be part of the audience that disapproves of what I do. In fact, if I am a member of some normative community there need be no other witness to my action than myself for me to feel shame; that is, the normative community is present in any one of its members, myself included.

This brings us to a third feature of shame: it is a judgment I pass on myself. If I do not see the action as shameful, I do not feel shame. Further, it is more than just a judgment about the deed; shame is finally a judgment about the doer — myself. It is not just that I find I do not approve of what I have done or am doing; I may disapprove of smoking, smoke anyway, and not feel shame. Shame follows when I (1) do not approve of the sort of person who would act in that way, and (2) discover I am that sort of person. This is what it means to internalize a specific set of norms: I find violations of the norms offensive, even if I am the violator.

This may be one difference between shame and guilt. Perhaps I feel guilt when I perform actions of which I do not approve, but which I do not see as defining me.<sup>15</sup> I can feel guilty, for example, if I tell a joke that offends a gay friend. I can even say that “I am ashamed” at what I have done when I realize that he has been hurt. But I feel shame when I discover that I actually am homophobic. That judgment attaches to me if my actions seem to me to be indicative of my character. I feel guilty when I *do* X; I feel shame when I realize that I am the sort of person who *characteristically* does X.

This highlights the educational value of shame: we can redeem our character by changing our actions. Suppose I discover that I am prone to violence, and I further come to realize that this tendency violates norms I have come to share. I find myself shamed by my tendency to violence. It is in this respect that shame is a force for the shaping of good character; it can serve as a powerful motivator to change.<sup>16</sup>

One last point to notice about shame: what I have done must not only be shameful in all the senses described above, it must further be the case that I have violated norms when it was possible to do otherwise. The Greek notion of shame was broader than ours; Oedipus felt shame, though he could not have avoided his “crime.” This suggests that what is deemed shameful is part of a social contract and

can vary in its terms in different times and places. One way to see that doing unavoidable wrong or harm is not today thought to be shameful is to note that it is usually true in such cases that when others know the facts they do not deem the action shameful.<sup>17</sup>

It remains to try to distinguish shame from the related phenomena of humiliation and embarrassment. The analysis here is meant to be tentative and exploratory, not definitive or stipulative. It is offered in the spirit of encouraging further consideration of exactly what shame is, what role it plays in moral formation, and why such an obviously important part of character formation has gotten such a bad name.

Shame is often confused with humiliation. Humiliation is vindictive; shame is not. Whereas the point of humiliation is humiliation, the point of shame is redemption. Whereas humiliation is only public ridicule, the experience of shame must include my own disapproval of my actions; and though humiliation must be a public event, I can be shamed with only myself as my audience, if I am properly a member of a normative community. Now to a child, there may be no immediate difference between these experiences. The difference appears to lie in the motives of the person passing judgment and in the long-term effects of the experience.

This distinction, though difficult to discern, may be a most important one to make out; I suspect that confusion between shame and humiliation may lie at the root of why shame is in such bad repute.

Shame is different from embarrassment. Like humiliation, embarrassment requires a disapproving audience of which I may, but need not, be a member. I can be embarrassed by *gauche* behavior, the violation of norms I do not understand but sense I have broken by the laughter of those around me. Also like humiliation, but not shame, embarrassment is a response to a violation of norms that are not moral in content. I can be embarrassed by an unzipped fly, but I should not feel the shame that would properly be mine if I were a flasher. Finally, like humiliation, embarrassment requires the presence of an audience besides myself — I cannot be embarrassed with only myself for an audience. Like shame, embarrassment can also be educational when it makes visible to us the existence of norms of which we were ignorant.

Finally, we should note that not all shame is connected to what we view as purely moral norms, at least not the narrow sense that “moral” has acquired in this age. Shame is attached to what are seen as significant norms by the actor and her society. So while a neophyte craftsperson might not — and should not — feel shame at a shoddy piece of work, an expert in that craft might properly feel shame at the same piece of work. This goes to the meaning of norms and normation: each craft worthy of the name has norms of practice that are internal to it. In a sense relevant to the individual and her community, violation of those norms is akin to a moral violation.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, we still adhere to the Greek sense that missing the mark in some significant way on some significant matter is a moral failing. “Significance,” of course, is a personal judgment, but one made within the context of some community of practice.

## SHAME AND MEMBERSHIP

This brings us to the connections between education, these emotions of self assessment, and social membership. The question is often asked: Is education properly the indoctrination of children into the cultural normative consensus, or is it the process of each child forming her or his own moral principles as she or he chooses (discovers? clarifies?) her or his own beliefs? This seems to be the wrong question; the two are not exclusive of each other. Since there is not space to develop this part of the argument fully, I will just briefly sketch its outline.

Four premises ground this argument: (1) education should prepare students for social membership; (2) schools should be part of the process; (3) societies require that children develop certain virtues and social capacities; and (4) children are immature. This last premise entails (among other things) that children are in the process of moral formation, which is part of education.

A strong form of the third premise would be that societies not only require that children develop certain virtues and capacities, but that this is the very definition of education. On this view, education is preparation for life within a given society.<sup>19</sup> From the fourth premise it follows that children need guidance in their moral development; their immaturity entails that their development is under the guidance of others. Children are not yet full members of their societies, but members-in-development. What precludes their full participation is their undeveloped moral sense, the sense of their moral community, the sense of what sort of people their “we” are.

Now this raises the obvious danger that if we are morally shaped by our communities of membership, we may develop our moral sensibilities in an immoral society. If we have this sort of bad moral luck, we may become “moral” members of that “immoral” society.<sup>20</sup> However, we are not completely trapped in the dominant morality of our birth society; there are currents of dissent in the most unified societies, and we can therefore criticize both the moral standards and the extent to which our society matches up to those standards.<sup>21</sup>

Education is the process by which children learn what sort of people “we” are, the things that make “us” feel pride and shame, the moral sensibilities by which “we” live “our” lives. It is our social memberships — they are multiple — that give shape to our moral lives. We are beneficiaries or victims of the value of the moral communities in which we are born and raised. There is no escape from that; calls for making societies less normative are really only calls for new norms.

Claims that the norms of our society are too repressive are sometimes put forth as though the solution were to abandon normativity by becoming generally and broadly “tolerant.”<sup>22</sup> This is an empty claim. Tolerance is as much a norm as heterosexual monogamy is; in any such “tolerant” society intolerance would be intolerable. Thus the incongruity of increasing “tolerance” through “hate speech” codes that render offensive speech illegal.

This is not to argue against such laws or codes. It is to note that the grounds on which they are most frequently defended are incoherent. We might indeed want to

pass such laws and ratify such codes, but that is just because hate speech violates our norms and is therefore intolerable. “We” are those who do not act in such ways.

#### CONCLUSION

I have argued that we need to reconsider our aversion to shame. While it is true that there are inappropriate and pernicious senses of shame, those that are not cogently tied to acts at all, or are tied to behaviors that ought not be shame inducing, this does not justify allowing children to avoid feeling shame for what is properly shameful. Children can certainly be taught to feel shame at things they ought not, but it does not follow that they ought not be taught to feel shame at all. This does not resolve the real and formidable problems of how we help children develop the proper sense of shame that is a constituent part of membership in a decent society, but it does suggest that this is a question worth asking.

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1. Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985).

2. William Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of the World's Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnnie Can't Tell Right From Wrong: Overcoming Moral Illiteracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Thomas Lickona, *Educating For Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1991); Jonathan Alter and Pat Wingert, “The Return of Shame,” *Newsweek*, 6 February 1995, 20; Roger Rosenblatt, “Teaching Johnny to Be Good,” *New York Times Magazine*, 30 August 1995, 36; and Henry Allen, “For Shame,” *Washington Post* weekly edition, 22-28 April, 1996, 6.

3. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989); and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

4. Thomas F. Green, personal conversation.

5. Lawrence A. Blum, “Virtue and Community,” in *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 144. Though it is not Blum's point, this argument amounts to the claim that societies can be more or less moral.

6. Joan Burstyn, *Educating Tomorrow's Valuable Citizen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

7. We should note that “moral community” here means that the community is formed (in part) around commitments that we take to belong to the moral domain; but those commitments may be wrong and even pernicious. It is possible, in other words, for a “moral community” to be deeply immoral.

8. True shamelessness is rare. When we say that “X is shameless,” we usually mean something like “X is not ashamed of the things that she should be ashamed of.” We might colloquially speak of the shamelessness of racist Skinheads, but that formulation is imprecise. In fact, a properly socialized skinhead would feel shame at being caught treating a person of color with kindness. All except the true sociopath feel shame, and our membership tells us what we should feel shame for. Those who are seen to be “shameless” are most often those who belong to different moral communities than we.

9. John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Health Communications, Inc, 1988).

10. This claim needs to be understood as being an “in general” claim. It is certainly true that I can change my gender through surgery or my skin color with chemical treatment. However, for most of us such things as race, height, or gender are experienced as and, for all practical purposes, are given and fixed rather than chosen and flexible. Sexual orientation is regarded as belonging to this category by many, though this is more controversial. I do not choose to be male or female, black or white, in quite the same way that I choose to be honest or to steal.

11. The discussion of shame that follows draws heavily from Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*; see also Williams, *Shame and Necessity*.



12. The following discussion of norms has been greatly influenced by personal conversations with Tom Green.

13. John F. Covaleskie, "Discipline and Morality: Beyond Rules and Consequences," *The Educational Forum* 56, no. 2 (1992): 173-83.

14. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: A History of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

15. This may help us gain some insight into the fact that we do not often discuss shame anymore: in this postmodern age, it is often presumed that there is no self for me to be ashamed of.

16. It does not matter whether we view character from the cognitivist belief that we change our behaviors after we change our beliefs or the Aristotelian view that good character is formed through practicing right action. The result is the same: shame can motivate me to improve my character by changing whichever needs changing first.

17. Of course, there may be times when my judgment is the correct one, when others do not know the facts of my internal state that justify my feeling shame. Perhaps I did have alternatives; perhaps I did not have alternatives, but in acting as I did I discovered that I enjoyed doing that which I should not have been enjoying. In these cases, my shame is justified.

18. Thomas F. Green, "The Formation of Conscience in an Age of Technology," *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 1 (1985): 1-32.

19. See Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education* (1973; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1925), John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), William Galston, "Civic Education in the Liberal State," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Amy Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society*, ed. Robert Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), for different examples of this argument.

20. This line of argument assumes that there is at least a weak non-relativist sense in which it makes sense to say that *this* society is morally superior to *that* one. While this position cannot be defended in philosophical argument against the skeptic or the relativist, it nonetheless seems right. Of course, that is because I have been normed to a moral community and so use those norms to judge that, for example, Sweden in 1968 was a morally superior society to Germany in 1938. It may not be possible for a "moral" member of German society to agree to this proposition, but that does not make it false.

21. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

22. Dennis Carlson, "Gayness, Multicultural Education, and Community," *Educational Foundations* 8, no. 4 (1994): 5-25.