



## Guilt and Shame: The Neglected Virtues

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It might seem odd that anyone would want to resurrect guilt and shame as significant virtues in the 21st century. After all, for the past forty years pop psychologists have been exhorting us to “get over our guilt” or tell us to stop being “crippled by shame” and learn how to accept ourselves for who we are. Since the 1960’s the American public has been inundated with a host of self-help books arguing that men and woman should feel good about themselves “no matter what.” Since guilt and shame inevitably cause us to feel bad about ourselves, they must be ruthlessly eliminated from our lives. The problem with such a simplistic analysis of these complex phenomena is that it fails to make a distinction between healthy and unhealthy guilt and shame.

Guilt really is nothing more than an acute awareness that I have caused harm to another person—an awareness that leads, in one form or another, to a denigration of myself. Perhaps I have manipulated a friend or treated someone at my job rudely. Guilt arises when I recognize that I have somehow caused pain to these individuals and that recognition makes me feel bad about myself. Although the pop psychologist might argue that I ought never to feel badly about myself, if, in fact, I didn’t feel any sense of guilt when I have abused or manipulated someone else, there would certainly be something morally defective about me. Imagine an entire society that is guilt-free: nobody would feel any sense of remorse for the harm that they have inflicted upon others. Can we really believe that such a society would be preferable even to the one we have now?

A healthy sense of guilt, on the other hand, compels us to make some sort of restitution towards those whom we have wronged. It might be as simple as expressing remorse for our misdeeds and asking for forgiveness. It also opens up the possibility of being forgiven by those we have wronged, and enables us ultimately to let go of our guilt. There are, of course, unhealthy forms of guilt as well. We might feel guilty about something for which we are not responsible or we might feel an inordinate amount of guilt for an action that was rather insignificant. We might also suffer from a sense of guilt that hangs with us long after we have made restitution to those that we have harmed. In such extreme cases, it may in fact be true that guilt is harmful to the person experiencing it, but this in no way disputes the fact that guilt in general can often serve a helpful and healthy role in a person’s life and for human society in general.

Shame<sup>1</sup> is similar to guilt in so far as it also leads to a denigration of oneself. The object of shame, however, is very different from the object of guilt. Whereas in guilt I feel

badly about some harm that I have caused someone else, in the case of shame, I feel badly about having fallen short of some standard that I regard as important. Shame, even more than guilt, then, is a completely self-referring feeling, since its subject and object are one and the same. It is important to note that the standard in question must be one that I myself have chosen to accept in my life; if it was one that was simply chosen for me, I probably wouldn't feel badly about falling short of it. I might feel shame, then, for allowing my marriage to fall apart, for flunking out of college, for not achieving my goals in life, or for falling short of any standards that I have accepted for myself. On the other hand, the eleven year old girl, who is something of a tomboy, won't necessarily feel shame for failing to meet her mother's expectations of lady-like behavior, since this was never a standard that she accepted for herself.<sup>2</sup>

We must also make a distinction between real shame and that emotion that is often incorrectly confused with same—namely, embarrassment. Shame, as we have seen, includes a diminishment of one's sense of self. The person who is embarrassed may feel a sense of discomfort, but he typically does not experience a diminished sense of self-worth.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, a person might experience embarrassment where guilt would actually be more appropriate. Imagine a particularly shallow student, for example, who is caught cheating on a calculus test by her professor. She will certainly feel embarrassed by the fact that she has gotten caught, particularly in front of so many other students, but she might not feel any shame. She may feel uncomfortable at the stares of the other students in the class, but she may not necessarily feel that there is anything fundamentally wrong with herself for stooping so low as to cheat.

Even more than guilt, shame seems to be self-harming, since the very feeling of inadequacy that it produces might very well cripple our ability to reclaim that standard to which we have fallen short. Treating this possible objection, John Kekes writes,

Shame does not merely alert us to our shortcomings, it makes us feel deficient on account of them. This feeling of deficiency, coming from such an impeccable source, is likely to be self-destructive. It tends to undermine our confidence, verve, and courage to navigate life's treacherous waters. Thus shame threatens to diminish our most important resource. It jeopardizes the possibility of improvement by weakening the only agency capable of effecting it.<sup>4</sup>

Shame in this view is seen as the most crippling of emotions, leading to a debasement of oneself and a sense of impotence in the face of one's own degradation. How can anyone argue, then, that a sense of shame is a good thing?

Once again, we need to make the distinction between unhealthy and healthy forms of shame. A person who suffers from an unhealthy sense of shame might very well indeed become so crippled by shame that he is unable to overcome it. For example, if a person has some unreasonable standard to which he aspires, he may ultimately be setting himself up for a lifetime of shame, because he will never be able to realize that standard. Thus a college student of less than average intelligence, who will not be satisfied until he is admitted to Harvard Medical School, and who clings to this goal no matter how many times he has been rejected, will likely feel deficient about himself until he is able to set his sights more realistically. Unhealthy shame might also occur because a person has been forced to accept a standard that was never his own—one that he may have inherited from his family,

from his culture, or perhaps even from the religion in which he was raised. If I come from a family that has many generations of successful businessmen, I may be pressured to follow in this line of work even though my talents and interests might make me ill-suited for an entrepreneurial lifestyle. When I fail to live up to my family's expectation, I naturally will feel shame. This shame, however, would be inappropriate because it is based upon a standard that probably should never have been accepted by me in the first place.

In a more extreme case, a person might actually feel guilty about something that was either not their fault or about something which most healthy people wouldn't blame themselves for. In the novel *Ordinary People*, for example, Conrad Jarrett feels a crippling sense of guilt over his brother's death in a boating accident. A suicide attempt and the deterioration of his relationship with his mother forces him into therapy, where he slowly comes to realize that it was not his fault that he survived the accident while his brother did not. The novel and the film based upon it both do an outstanding job of demonstrating how destructive guilt can be when we blame ourselves for something over which we have absolutely no control. More troubling still is what I would refer to as existential shame, where a person experiences a sense of shame, not over some standard to which they have fallen short, but over themselves and who they are as a human being. If a person perceives himself to be defective in his very humanity, then he is indeed in a great deal of difficulty, for there is no overcoming such shame short of eliminating its source—namely oneself.

A person with a healthy sense of shame, on the other hand, recognizes that he has fallen short in some standard in his life that he finds important, and that recognition compels him to correct his behavior and ultimately to overcome his shame. As in the case of guilt, healthy shame becomes the condition of triumphing over shame. On the other hand, it seems clear that without such a well-developed sense of shame many men and women would certainly be inclined to act without any restraint, and ultimately to cause immense harm to themselves and their reputations....

## NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of shame see John Kekes, "Shame and Moral Progress," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 282-296; John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," *Ethics* 93 (January 1983): 225-245.

2. But as Kekes points out most people tend to take on the prevailing opinion of those around them, so that they usually will feel shame about that which members of their family or community also regard as shameful (Kekes, 283).

3. Deigh, 225-226.

4. Kekes, 282.

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