

IS
SHAME
NECESSARY?

NEW USES *for an* OLD TOOL

JENNIFER JACQUET

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Illustrations by Brendan O'Neill Kohl



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Shame. The feeling that will save mankind.

—Screenplay for Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972)

Shame is for sissies.

—BARON EDWARD VON KLOBERG III, American lobbyist (1942–2005)

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Shame Explained

[A man's] moral conscience is the curse he had to accept from the gods in order to gain from them the right to dream.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER, interview in *The Paris Review* (1958)

In 1987, thirty-year-old Sam LaBudde walked into the offices of the Earth Island Institute, San Francisco, looking for a job fighting rainforest destruction. He walked out headed for Mexico, planning to become a spy. In Earth Island's lobby, LaBudde read an article about how the tuna industry was killing millions of dolphins in purse seines—large nets that encircle a school of tuna and are then drawn tight to catch everything in their “purse,” including dolphins, which then drown or are crushed in the gear that pulls in the net. The article was powerful, but there were no visuals. Instead of saving the rainforest, LaBudde convinced Earth Island to send him a video camera (this was the 1980s, before camcorders were common) and he set out to find a job on a tuna boat, as a ruse to collect footage of the dolphin slaughter.

LaBudde succeeded in becoming a deckhand and later a cook on board a Panamanian fishing boat operating out of Ensenada, Mexico. At great personal danger, he filmed several tapes of dead and dying dolphins caught in the tuna-fishing gear. Earth Island used the footage to launch a media campaign on national and local U.S. television. It was written up in newspapers and magazines, including a three-part series by Kenneth Brower in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The campaign was based on shaming, which involved exposing the transgressors to the American public. The target of the shaming was the tuna industry, specifically the three largest tuna companies: StarKist, Bumble Bee, and Chicken of the Sea.

Around this time, I convinced my mom to buy me a book titled *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth* (1990), and on the book's advice I wrote a letter of inquiry to the Earth Island Institute. Weeks later, I found a response from the same group LaBudde had visited in San Francisco in my mailbox on our cul-de-sac in Ohio. The envelope included a haunting black-and-white photograph LaBudde had taken of a dolphin hoisted and dead on a tuna vessel. The campaign materials Earth Island sent me had shamed the tuna industry, but for me they incited guilt. Regardless of what anyone else thought, my conscience told me that what was happening to dolphins was wrong (never mind what was happening to tuna). Guilt is a feeling whose audience and instigator is oneself, and its discomfort leads to self-regulation. Looking at that image was my first time feeling miserable for a creature I had never met—seen only in the pages of wildlife magazines—and my first time, but not last, feeling guilty for something I had eaten.

I needed to do something. At nine years old, I had already learned what the 1980s taught as the new rite of passage: to alleviate my guilt as a consumer. I insisted that our family stop buying canned tuna, and I wasn't alone. The evidence of mangled dolphins saddened and outraged people around the world and incited a large-scale tuna boycott by households and

later, a change of protocol by the major tuna companies. In an interview at that time Anthony O'Reilly, former CEO of Heinz (which owned StarKist), said, "I think it would be a poor CEO that was not attentive to his customers. And because of the affection that children have for Flipper and because of the gross scenes that were shown in the LaBudde film, there was a growing barrage of criticism—well orchestrated—which I think served to convey a growing sentiment among schoolchildren that the previous fishing methods were no longer acceptable."

Those schoolchildren and their parents were among the relieved shoppers when the "dolphin safe" eco-label was introduced. We all felt better and resumed eating tuna. I didn't think about the tuna problem or the dolphin-safe label again for more than a decade. When I finally did, it was because I realized we had been duped.

The dolphin-safe logo, introduced in 1990, was but one of the newly introduced marketing tools to save the world. That same year, the U.S. government established organic food legislation (although the first organic food certification was founded in Santa Cruz, California in 1973). The Forest Stewardship Council, an international scheme, was formed in 1993, after years of discussions about how to certify forestry practices as sustainable. The Marine Stewardship Council, the main program to certify sustainable fisheries, started up in 1996 the same year that Fairtrade International was created. Many more labels followed.

Until this push for certification, the goal of shaming campaigns and boycotts had been to fundamentally change entire companies or industries. Activists like Cesar Chavez, behind the strike and boycott of table grapes in the 1960s, would not have ended their efforts with a label on grapes that read, PICKED BY FARMWORKERS WHO EARNED A MINIMUM WAGE. The aim was not to satisfy the concerns of a few consumers, but to (among other things) change federal rules for the minimum wage and workplace safety for all farmworkers. The exposure of poor sanitation in meatpacking factories in the early twentieth century was not intended to produce a label that would allow concerned consumers to purchase hygienic meat—the goal was to raise sanitation standards everywhere.

But by the 1980s, the notion of directly changing supply was being displaced by the idea of changing demand. At first glance, this strategy seems reasonable, particularly in a laissez-faire economy: if demand changes, supply should respond. The two are balanced on opposite sides of the ledger, as I was often reminded during my six years studying economics. The new platform of engagement, which even environmentalists supported because the Reagan era had ushered in a political climate that had become more and more hostile toward regulation, saw the pocketbook as the most powerful avenue of persuasion. This strategy allowed consumers to retain their "freedom to choose" (the battle cry of libertarian economist and free-market popularizer Milton Friedman) and suggested that guilt-ridden shoppers could avoid their uneasy feelings by simply changing their buying habits.

As the focus shifted from supply to demand, shame on the part of corporations began to be overshadowed by guilt on the part of consumers—as the vehicle for solving social and environmental problems. Certification became more and more popular, and its rise quietly suggested that responsibility should fall more to the individual consumer rather than to political society. The notion of certification also disposed of shame and targeted guilt as the main form of engagement. Guilt could be used to motivate individuals in a way that it could not be used for entire industries or suppliers, but it could also be used *only* on individual

since groups, such as the tuna-fishing industry, lack a conscience and therefore cannot feel guilty. The goal became not to reform entire industries but to alleviate the consciences of certain sector of consumers.

But the problems of pesticide use and worker exploitation and bottom trawling cannot be solved with an individual choice. If pesticides are absent from my food, but they are in everybody else's, they still leach into our shared water supply. If I eat dolphin-safe tuna, but everybody else continues to eat dolphin-unsafe tuna, dolphins remain in trouble. If I stop flying, but nobody else does, carbon dioxide emissions continue to steeply increase.

The trouble with collective-action problems is that they are difficult to solve by changing the psychology and therefore the behavior of individuals. These types of problems often require larger, often structural changes. It would not have been sufficient for individuals who understood and felt guilty about ozone-depleting substances to stop buying them, because these people would have been the minority. To solve the problem of the ozone hole, most not all of the production of those substances had to stop.

With so many recent collective-action problems, especially those related to labor and the environment, we have been asked to engage with our guilt about these problems as consumers rather than as citizens or activists—not even as organized groups of consumers which have been responsible for large-scale boycotts, but as individual, household purchasers who make decisions only as individuals. Guilt's power is limited, but it can also be profitable if a niche set of goods and services can capitalize on relieving the ill feeling. Yet when issues reach a moral imperative, it is not sufficient to deal with them at the level of individual choice. It was not enough for people who disagreed with slavery not to own slaves themselves—they saw the need to stop everyone from owning slaves everywhere.

My innocence and the innocence of so many others resulted in our inability to effectively engage with guilt. We schoolchildren didn't just want to save our consciences; we wanted to save dolphins. The dolphin-safe logo alone could not assure the survival of dolphins (the logo very likely helped, but largely as an impetus for regulation, not as a purely market mechanism and certainly not as some panacea of its own), and we should not have been satisfied that the portion of the industry that fed us had changed. Instead we should have found it unacceptable that the bulk of the industry had not. If we had not been pacified by the logos and certifications and enlightened supermarkets, we might have remained upset. For dying dolphins and so many other problems, we might have continued to engage with producers not just as consumers but in the ways that Sam LaBudde had: by using shame.

This book explores the origins and future of shame. It aims to examine how shaming—exposing a transgressor to public disapproval—a tool many of us find discomforting, might be retrofitted to serve us in new ways. We will explore the social nature of shame and of guilt where these strategies sit in the broader panorama of punishment, and what it means for them to work. We will examine why guilt has been asked to perform a function that it is not quite up to—namely, solving large-scale cooperation problems such as overfishing and climate change. We will find that shame is inextricably linked to norms, and that norms are often changing. We will look for examples of shame outperforming guilt and circumstances under which we might see the value of shame and the purpose it serves. We will explore what can make shame more effective and valuable in a world where we are more interconnected and distracted than ever.

What Do We Mean by Shame?

Exposure is the essence of shaming, and a feeling of exposure is also one of shame's (the emotion) most distinct ingredients and intimately links shame to reputation.¹ For our purposes, an audience is a prerequisite for shame, even if that audience is imagined. While there are personal forms of shame that are experienced privately, this book is about not the shame and inner turmoil you would feel if your father brought home an inflatable sofa (true to me), but the shame you would feel if your friend saw it. This book focuses on the shame that is possible because an audience is exposed to a transgression. Moreover, it is most interested in the public act of shaming rather than the emotion of shame.

Shame can lead to increased stress and withdrawal from society. Shame can hurt so badly that it is physically hard on the heart.² But shame can also improve behavior. A 2009 study of 915 U.S. adults found that half could recall at least one meeting with a doctor that left them feeling ashamed, most often for smoking or being overweight. Of those who reported feeling ashamed, nearly half then either avoided or lied to their physician in subsequent meetings to evade any further shame, while the other half said they were grateful to the doctor, and about one-third of the patients said they even initiated improvements in their behavior.³

Some people do not feel shame even over the ghastliest of crimes. (In 2011, Regina Brooks, who twenty-nine years earlier had murdered his three sons while they slept, extended the middle fingers of both hands while strapped to the gurney in an Ohio execution chamber, as his ex-wife and the mother of his children watched through a glass window.) At the other extreme, the sting of shame for some people, even for minor offenses, can be crippling. (Writer Jonathan Franzen blamed shame over his first marriage, sexual inexperience, and general innocence for his decade-long writer's block, when several autobiographical sentences made him "want to take a shower.")⁴ At its most efficient, a sense of shame can regulate personal behavior and reduce the risk of more extreme types of punishment: conform to the expected behavior or suffer the consequences. The threat of shaming often provokes a fear of feeling shame.

Shame Versus Guilt

In contrast to shame, which aims to hold individuals to the group standard, guilt's role is to hold individuals to their own standards. For cultures that champion the individual, guilt is preferable to shame, because shame means worrying about the group. Guilt is advertised as the cornerstone of the conscience. It needs only an internal voice nagging its owner, sending reminders about how awful violence, stealing, or dishonesty can make us feel.

The anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead were the first to draw a distinction between guilt and shame cultures—they claimed that most Western countries fell into the guilt category while Eastern countries relied more on shame. Benedict's 1946 book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, in which she examined Japanese culture without actually going to Japan (the war prevented it), attempted to show that the Japanese used shame as the primary means of social control. China was later filed in the shame category, too, for, among other reasons, the cultural importance of "saving face."

In the West, however, we tell ourselves with a certain amount of smugness that we have

been unshackled from shame's constraints. There are a few reasons that this might be at least partially true, and one has to do with the sense of self. Western cultures are more individualized, leading people to see themselves as independent and autonomous, acting according to one's internal compass, whereas people from Eastern cultures are more likely to describe themselves in relation to others. Western cultures also generally lack the tight-knit hierarchy that probably existed in our prehistoric past and still arguably exists to a great degree in some Eastern cultures, as anthropologists such as Benedict and Dan Fessler have pointed out. (Yet it's also not surprising that shame in the West is frequently associated with poverty—one proxy for low rank in the social hierarchy.) Also, Western societies tend to have a worldview that encourages tolerance of a greater range of certain behaviors, which means we perhaps more often disagree over which behaviors warrant shaming. Many Western countries have also gotten rid of shaming punishments against individuals, especially shaming by the state. It's probably safe to say that we all prefer to live without the fear of dunce caps, whipping poles, or hot-iron branding. It is even tempting to think of shaming as we might wisdom teeth or Puritan doctrine—as a vestigial sign of something that humans needed in tougher times.

However, as novelist Salman Rushdie reminded us, “Shame, dear reader, is not the exclusive property of the East.” When Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States after a series of sexual-abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, he confessed that he was “deeply ashamed.” After pulling off Wall Street's biggest swindle and before receiving his 150-year prison sentence, Bernie Madoff told the court that he was “deeply sorry and ashamed.” After rapper Kanye West stole the microphone at the MTV Video Music Awards from Taylor Swift, the winner of the best female video category, and declared that Beyoncé (whose hit “Single Ladies” came out that year) had made one of the best videos of all time, West said he was “ashamed.” Did these Western icons feel guilty? Hard to say. Did they feel ashamed? Without having measured their stress levels, it's difficult to be sure. What we can say is that, at the very least, they wanted us to think they did.

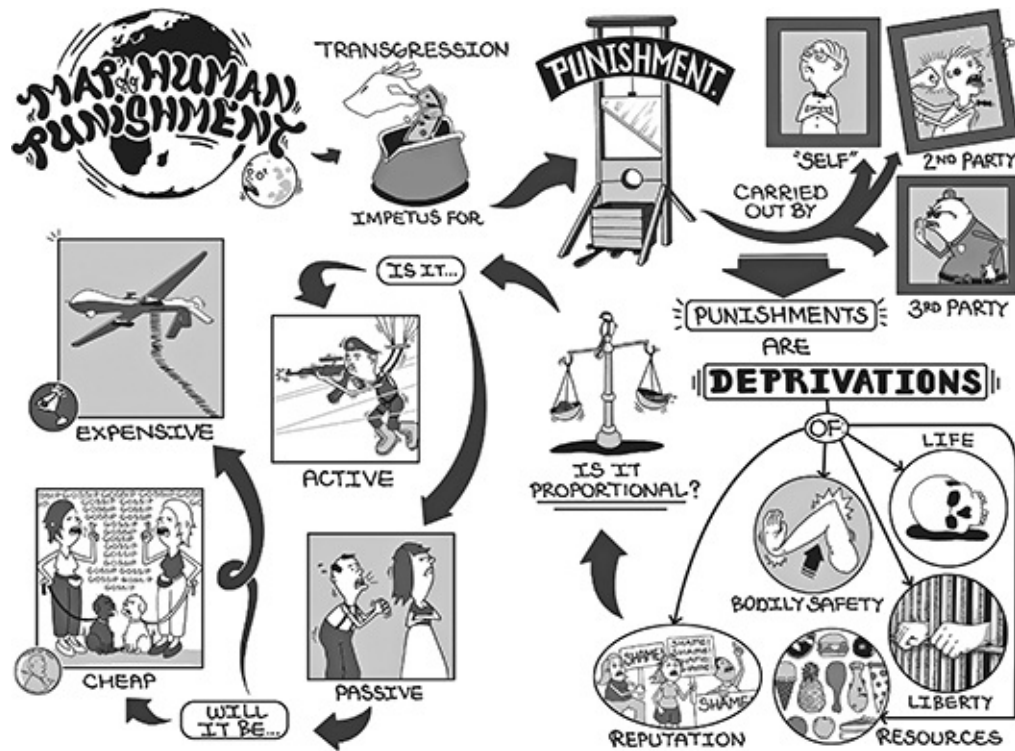
Where Shame and Guilt Fit into Punishment

Shaming, which is separate from feeling ashamed, is a form of punishment, and like a punishment, it is used to enforce norms. Human punishment involves depriving a transgressor of life, liberty, bodily safety, resources, or reputation (or some combination), and reputation is the asset that shaming attacks. These deprivations can be active, in the sense that something is taken away—such as through capital punishment, prison, torture, fines, and pickets—while other deprivations are passive, such as when something is denied, which is the case with ostracism or the silent treatment. (A survey of two thousand Americans showed that two-thirds admitted to using the silent treatment on someone close to them, while three-quarters said they had been the victim of the silent treatment.)

Humans have devised intricate nonviolent punishments. Charles Darwin, for instance, wrote about tribes in South America for whom long hair was “so much valued as a beauty that cutting it off was the severest punishment.” There is solitary confinement, which in American prisons can last for decades. When my brother and I would fight, my mom used a nonviolent punishment of making us sit on the stairs and hug each other for twenty minutes.

Shaming punishments can be violent or, most often today, nonviolent. Again, the definition of *shaming* we are using involves the exposure—threatened or actualized—of a transgressor in front of a crowd. These punishments might be nonviolent, but that does not mean they aren't painful.

Punishment can be inflicted by the person or group against whom the transgressor transgressed, or by a third party, or by oneself (guilt acts as a form of self-punishment). Generally, punishment carries a cost to the punisher, like the energy needed to perform the punishment, as well as some risk of retaliation. Punishments that are extra dangerous or risky are considered costlier. Sometime in our distant past, we realized that mere exposure to public opprobrium could be used where physical, often violent elimination from the group had previously been required. The emergence of shaming as a social option would have reduced the cost of punishment, because mere exposure that served to damage an individual's reputation in front of the group could have negative consequences—for instance, members of the group might choose not to cooperate with the shamed individual in the future. Shaming and ostracism are closely linked, but shaming is less costly. And unlike transparency, which exposes everyone, shaming exposes only a section of the population.



MAP OF HUMAN PUNISHMENT

TRANSGRESSION



IMPETUS FOR

IS IT..

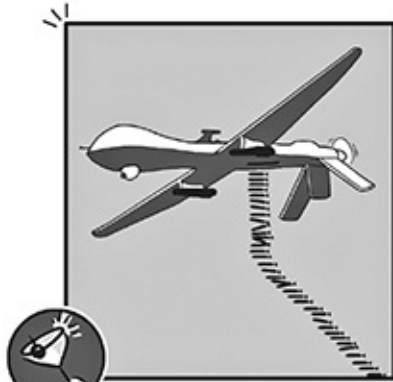


ACTIVE



PASSIVE

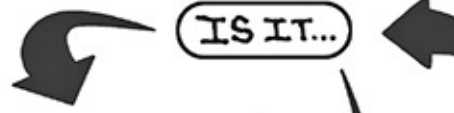
WILL IT BE...

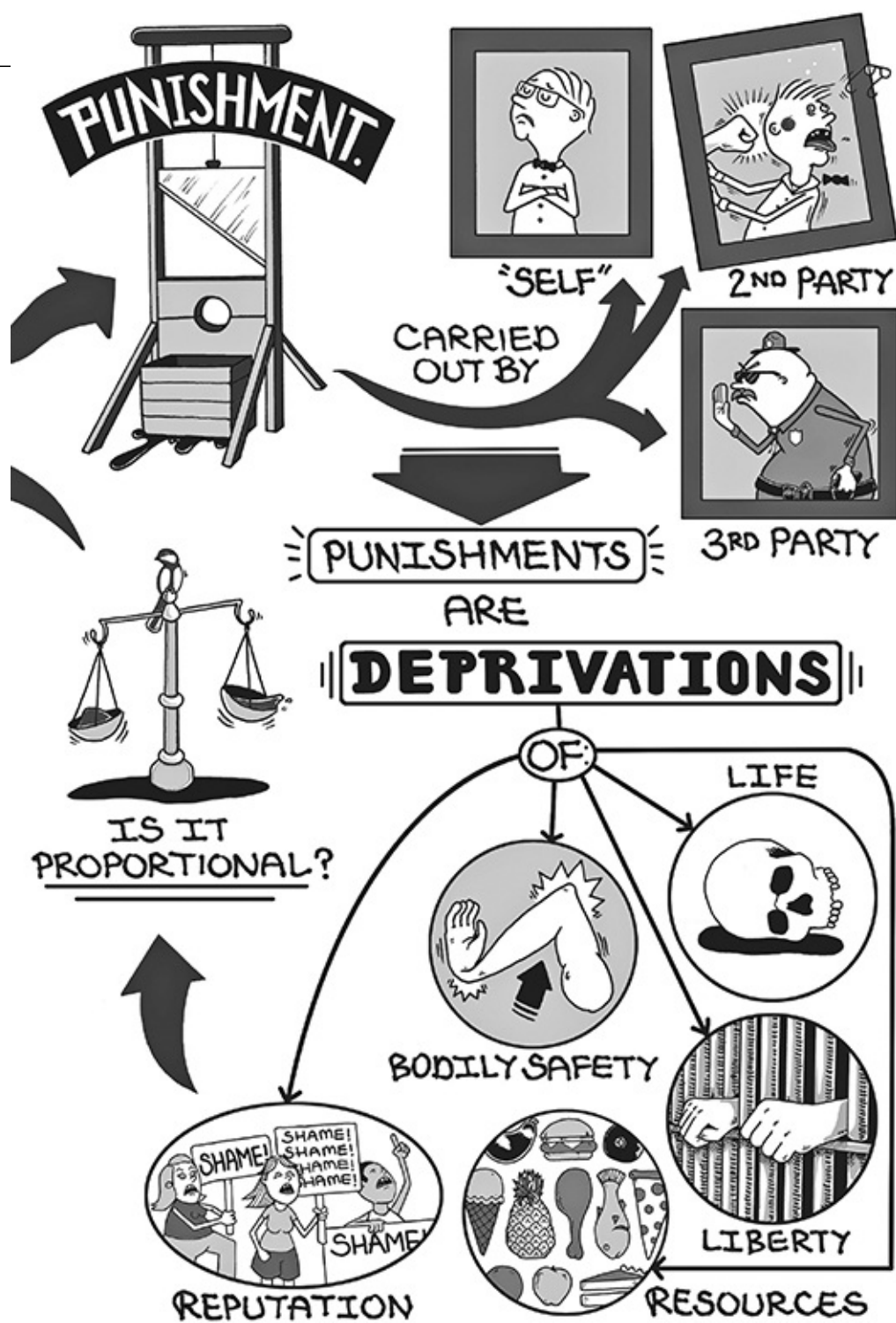


EXPENSIVE



CHEAP





When and how did shaming emerge? The first hominids, like many other social species, could keep track of cooperation and defection only by firsthand observation. As group size got bigger, and ancient humans grappled with issues of cooperation, the human brain became better able to keep track of all the rules and all the people. The need to accommodate the increasing number of social connections and monitor one another could be, according to the social-grooming hypothesis put forward by anthropologist Robin Dunbar, why we learned to speak. With language, we no longer needed to see someone's behavior to learn about it. Language allowed humans to manipulate social status using gossip, which provided further fuel for a system of reputation and shaming. (And this might not be unique to humans—some scientists suspect that parrotlets, for instance, can identify one another as individuals by their calls and can attach a note of approval or disapproval.)⁵ It also meant the crowd concerned with the miscreant's behavior got bigger, because the behavior no longer had to be seen, but

could be heard via gossip. Individuals could be exposed to the crowd for transgressions without being physically present.

Negative gossip—a subcategory of shaming—can be considered one of the first lines of defense against a transgressor and was probably as important in human prehistory as it is today. Anthropologists have shown that two-thirds of human conversation is gossip about other people—Polly Wiessner found this to be true in her studies of the !Kung bushmen in Botswana,⁶ and Robin Dunbar and his colleagues also found the two-thirds rule held for conversations in a British university cafeteria.⁷ Wiessner classified only 10 percent of the conversations she heard as praise; the other 90 percent was criticism, a lot of it in the form of jokes, mockery, and pantomime. The transgressor or one of his close relatives (it was almost always a *he*) was often within earshot, indicating that the gossips expected the verbal shaming would bring him into line. Negative gossip is often employed with the assumption that it will make its way back to the transgressor either directly or indirectly, by influencing others not to be cooperative toward the transgressor.

Spoken language was just the first tool to facilitate gossip. The next communication upheaval occurred with the rise of writing. Since the arrival of writing, there have been, according to Internet scholar Clay Shirky, five major advances in communication technology: movable type and presses, the telegraph and telephone, recorded media, broadcast media, and digital technologies, including the Internet. Each time communication was transformed, shaming was as well. At first we had only gossip among humans that occupied the same physical space; now gossip gets worldwide exposure and can travel via print and digital media, over telephones, television, and cyberspace.

Digital technologies have at once lowered the cost of gossip and exposure and expanded gossip's scope and speed. (No need to call each of your friends; just send one tweet and reach thousands.) Some people even believe the combination of digital technologies will transform culture as much as language did. This could make shame more salient to public life than ever before, especially since the power to use it has been wrested away from opinion leaders and the state and put increasingly in the hands of citizens, which means we should all become cognizant of shame's power and its liabilities.

Take the outpouring of criticism over social media after Susan G. Komen for the Cure, best known for its pink ribbon and its quest to cure breast cancer, announced in 2012 that it was eliminating a \$650,000 provision to Planned Parenthood for breast cancer screenings and education. (Planned Parenthood is a provider of legal abortions, and some interpreted Komen's withdrawal of funding as a political statement.) Over the next three days, the Project for Excellence in Journalism tracked Twitter traffic and found 253,465 messages related to the decision to end funding: 17 percent positive, 19 percent neutral, and 64 percent critical. Three days after the Komen foundation's decision, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran related stories, and the volume of messages on Twitter peaked at 215,380 in a single day (five tweets every two seconds); again, most of the messages were negative. By the end of the day the foundation had reversed its decision. Over the next two days, 60 percent of the messages related to Komen on Twitter continued to be negative, but the quantity of messages fell by 85 percent. Even online, most gossip is critical and serves as a mild form of shaming that attempts to keep people acting in a way that suits the group (whoever the group may be).

Online exposure led the Komen foundation to continue funding Planned Parenthood, and there are plenty of other examples of gossip's power. According to a 2012 *New York Times* article, "Spring Break Gets Tamer as World Watches Online," college students now report worrying about bad behavior being caught on film and immortalized in cyberspace. According to several colleagues, the rise of social media has also meant a decline in hookups during field courses abroad (because students don't want their significant other back home to see an incriminating photo online and realize they're not so significant). But online forms of shaming are also leading to concerns about trivial uses of shaming, disproportionality, opprobrium for the offender (rather than for the offense), and attacks on human dignity.

How Shame Works

In 2010, three colleagues—mathematical biologists Christoph Hauert and Arne Traulsen and evolutionary biologist Manfred Milinski—and I ran experiments testing whether the threat of shame or the promise of honor would encourage cooperation. Groups of six students from the University of British Columbia played a public goods experiment, a setup designed to capture the tension between group interest and self-interest. Each student received \$12 at the start of the game and could donate \$1 or not to the public pool over the course of twelve rounds. The public pool was then doubled and redistributed evenly to all six players, even those who hadn't donated. This experimental design poses a dilemma familiar to students who are asked to work on group projects in which there is an incentive to free-ride off the generosity of others, yet, if nobody works, everybody gets a bad grade. Everyone in our experiment would gain from public donations, but no one was obligated to give.

In these kinds of experiments, donations generally start out high and then decline over time. Most often, each player walks away with less money than if everyone had cooperated. (In our experiment, every player could have gained \$24, but of the sixty students who participated, only one managed to go home with more than \$24, and the other fifty-nine students each left with less.) These types of experiments have their limitations—students are given money at the start of the game (which they might use differently than if they were asked to use their own money), the money they are given (in our case, \$12) usually isn't that large a sum to put on the line, and the students are drawn from a similar cultural pool. But they also allow us to have a lot of control and ensure that participants have a similar experience so that we can focus on the variables in question—in our case, honor and shame.

In our setup, participants could see a screen where all the donations were listed under a fake name for that participant, so that participants were anonymous to one another and to us. We ran three different treatments: shame, honor, and a control. In the shame condition, we told the students that after ten rounds, the two least generous players would be asked to come forward and write their real names on the board in front of their fellow group members under the heading "I donated least." For honor, the two most cooperative players were called forward and wrote their names under the heading "I donated most." Students knew the setup before the game began and could therefore avoid being the least or most generous if they chose to. We recruited each group of six players from the same class, and the experiment occurred early in the term, so that any reputation effects might last for the remainder of the semester. In the control condition, all players, including the most and least generous ones

remained anonymous for the entire game. (To me, the control tested the guilt condition where participants made decisions based on internal judgments rather than possible reputation and what the group might think.)

After the experiment, we asked participants what their strategy had been when they decided to give or not in each round. Responses included: “My strategy was to donate as little as possible without being exposed as someone who contributed least.” “I did not want to be one of the least generous players, so my only aim was to stay out of the bottom two, other than that I tried to maximize profit.” “Towards the 5th–6th rounds, my trend of thought changed, and I started paying attention to the individual contributions to make sure I was not in the bottom two.” (Not all decisions were sensible, which won’t shock anyone who has spent time watching the Home Shopping Network. Students also reported strategies like “If I pulled out a coin and it was heads, I donated. If it was tails, I wouldn’t donate” or said they had given “only in even rounds, plus the lucky number seven.”)

Other experiments had tested the effects of transparency—when all players are exposed to one another—and showed that it enhanced cooperation, but in our experiment only a minority within the group was exposed. Yet our results showed that most participants responded to the threat of shame and tried to avoid it by being more generous. On average, students were 50 percent more cooperative in both the shame and honor conditions than in the control, where players remained anonymous. People were willing to pay to avoid shame—as well as willing to pay to achieve honor.⁸

But if transparency and honor also work, why write a book focused on shaming? Transparency is more democratic, but in the last chapter we will find some reasons that shaming policies can actually be more protective and effective. Meanwhile, honor is less painful and less awkward, and in our experiment, where giving to the public pool was optional, honor was a decent strategy that increased giving. But one of honor’s shortcomings is precisely its optional nature—not everyone seeks it, while most of us seek to avoid the taint of shame, or losing face. Also, it’s often the least cooperative people who cause us the most concern.

Consider taxes. Everyone benefits from universal social services provided by the tax system, and the vast majority of Americans pay their taxes. Imagine a list that attempted to honor people for paying their taxes—it would be absurd. We simply expect people to pay their taxes. But there is a small minority of high-income people who choose not to pay their taxes, and these people—specifically the ones who owe the greatest amounts in back taxes—are the issue. The State of California’s website describes the cooperative dilemma: “When taxpayers do not pay their fair share it places an unfair burden on those who do. Closing the tax gap is in the best interest of all Californians.” The tax gap is about \$10 billion, which means \$10 billion less in shared state services like schools, roads, and medical care. Everyone in California is a victim of tax transgressions. In the case of the federal government, there is a system of formal punishment to deal with people who do not pay taxes, which includes prison, but at the state level, formal punishment is functionally absent.

Since 2007, the State of California has annually published an online list of the top five hundred individual- and business-tax delinquents whose outstanding taxes for the previous fiscal year exceed \$100,000. Note that because of this requirement, and perhaps contrary to our instincts, this shaming policy is more protective than transparency. A transparency policy

for tax delinquents would expose all people who owe money to the government, no matter how little money they owe, while the shaming policy (which posts only the worst delinquents) is more protective, because it focuses the audience's attention on the people most responsible for the tax gap while at the same time protecting the poorest citizens. Errand taxpayers receive letters in advance of the list's publication (which happens twice per year) with the expectation that the threat of exposure will lead to payment, at least from some debtors. If they pay their back taxes, they can avoid being listed. The State of California has so far retrieved over \$336 million—a sum that dwarfs the program's estimated \$131,000 annual cost. More than twenty U.S. states have implemented similar programs on their sites.

Honor was not the motivation behind tax payments, nor was guilt. The threat of shame was what worked. But just because shaming can encourage cooperation or conformity doesn't mean people should be threatened with exposure at every decision. We also know that bribery can be effective at encouraging certain behaviors, and yet bribery is not encouraged. The threat of shame may be more effective than the actual experience. Like antibiotics, shaming works best when used sparingly. And also as with antibiotics, if shaming is abused, we might all end up as victims.

Obviously not all shame or shaming is good. Everyone agrees that it's wrong to steal, but we would not support the resurrection of tarring and feathering or a pillory in which a cabbage thief had to stand with cabbages on his head. Likewise, William F. Buckley's proposal in the 1980s that all people diagnosed with AIDS should be required to get a standard tattoo on their upper forearm and buttocks to prevent the spread of the disease was unacceptable. Even today, some judges require criminals to wear a T-shirt announcing their crime, and many people disagree with this punishment. In addition to shaming, these punishments each contain an aspect of humiliation, going beyond mere exposure to include a form of stigmatization. Scholars have argued that shaming that takes this form is dehumanizing and strips transgressors of their personal dignity.

While ideally the best way to avoid shame is to avoid being its subject to begin with, sometimes conforming to the group's desires is just too expensive, and sometimes it's just too late. Sometimes people just don't want to become the person the group wants them to be, and other times they cannot. The volatility and variability in how people react to social disapproval is part of shaming's liability. The threat of shame also isn't going to deter everyone—some people are shameless. But that's why we have forms of punishment that extend beyond reputation. If shaming were a perfect regulator of human behavior, we wouldn't have a long history of using ostracism, physical abuse, prisons, and even (in some countries) capital punishment. (Note, however, that at the state level none of these punishments are available for tax delinquents.)

The Stakes

Around the year 1800, with the Industrial Revolution under way, humans became something unprecedented: a globally transformative force. This new era has been called the Anthropocene, and it has many alarming features, most of which are expressed in the form of line graphs that look like Mount Everest sliced in half vertically: human population, biodiversity loss, atmospheric carbon dioxide emissions, water use, number of McDonalds

restaurants—all steeply increasing. In several cases, like climate change, we have exceeded boundaries of pollution that are safe for humanity and are likely causing dangerous environmental change.

Midcentury fantasies that humanity would have by now colonized the deep sea and outer space seem quaintly delusional. By 2050, an estimated ten billion people will be eking out life on earth. Despite the promises, not one of us lives in outer space or the deep sea. As the lone survivor of the *Homo* genus, we have a unique and occasionally overconfident view of ourselves. Not that our species isn't special: we have complex language, we often cooperate with individuals to whom we are not related, and we have colonized or had some impact on almost all of the planet. We might also be the only organism to reflect on our own mortality. We alone as a species are faced with determining the fate of much of the world's nonhuman life.

We need new rules in this new era, and for those, we are going to need a lot of help from shame. We have traded in crude forms of shaming for more sophisticated, less offensive forms. When we're all in it together—as we are with the destruction of the ozone layer, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, or the spread of infectious diseases—and when it comes to dilemmas in which a few bad apples can spoil things for everyone else, shaming might become more acceptable as a means of social enforcement, because the audience is also a victim of the transgression and because we have very few other options of punishment.

Shame is not only a feeling. It's also a tool—a delicate and sometimes dangerous one—that we can put to use to help solve serious problems. Shaming is a nonviolent form of resistance that anyone can use, and, unlike guilt, it can be used to influence the way groups behave—shame can scale. But shaming requires the attention of the audience, and attention is a zero-sum game. So shaming must be used shrewdly to maximize effectiveness, and this book helps to define what “shrewdly” in this case means.

The right amount of shame has helped us to get along, to the extent that we have, and has coordinated social life to make it a little less painful, a little more dignified. It has reminded us that we are, in fact, in this together. If used wisely, the same attention to one another that promoted our own evolutionary success can perhaps keep us from failing the other species of life's fabric and, in the end, ourselves. But for good reasons, shaming has acquired a controversial reputation, and it is important to understand why.

Guilt's Ascendancy

A healthy dose of guilt never hurt anybody. It's what civilization was built on, guilt. A highly underrated emotion.

—BARACK OBAMA (remembering what his mother told him), *Dreams from My Father* (1995)

Edward Kloberg III was born in New York City in 1942, when cars still mingled with the occasional horse-drawn cart. He flunked out of Princeton University, eventually graduated from a small college in New Jersey, and then got his graduate degree in history at American University, in Washington D.C., where afterward he had a lackluster job in fund-raising. But like many Americans, Kloberg believed he deserved more than lackluster. Being a III might sound grand, but it wasn't grand enough.

While still in his twenties, Kloberg changed his name to Edward van Kloberg. He later modified the Dutch “van” to a German “von” and then adopted the title of baron. At age forty, the self-styled Baron Edward von Kloberg III started a public relations firm, and ten years later he had built up such a controversial list of clients that *Spy* magazine referred to him as “Washington's most shameless lobbyist.”

Von Kloberg's motto was “Shame is for sissies.” And von Kloberg was no sissy. He represented Saddam Hussein, Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, and the Myanmar regime. He defended the Honduran Apparel Manufacturers Association against charges of sexual abuse and child labor, even though he knew they had transgressed, reasoning that if lawyers could defend such clients, so could a public relations firm. If shame was for sissies, then the question remains: Why were von Kloberg's reputation-management services sought by so many powerful people?

Shame might have been important in our evolutionary history, but people like von Kloberg make us wonder if shame is still relevant today. Psychologists June Tangney and Ronald Dearing view shame as “a primitive emotion that likely served a more adaptive function in the distant past, among ancestors whose cognitive processes were less sophisticated in the context of a much simpler human society.”¹ Is shame really a phenomenon that belongs only to the distant past?

The Rise of Guilt

Some of the first anthropologists to study shame, like Ruth Benedict, claimed it was more important to collectivist cultures, like those in Japan but also in China, Brazil, Greece, Iraq, Russia, and South Korea, and less important to individualistic cultures in the West, where shame was supplanted by the self-punishment of guilt. Anthropologist Dan Fessler designed an experiment to test whether shame was less important in the West.² He asked a focus group in collectivist-minded Bengkulu, Indonesia, to make a list of the fifty-two most common discussed emotions and did the same with a focus group from individualistic Southern

California. Then he asked eighty Indonesians and seventy-five Californians to rank the frequency of those fifty-two emotions in each of their societies. *Shame* was second on the Indonesian list, but it didn't make the top ten for Californians, not even close: it was listed as the forty-ninth most frequently discussed emotion in California, preceded by *grief* and followed by *contempt*. Another interesting difference was that Indonesians listed *afraid* in the top ten, while Californians included *bored* and *frustrated*, which I attribute at least partly to Los Angeles traffic. Meanwhile, Californians ranked *guilt* thirty-second, between *offended* and *disgusted*, while none of the top fifty emotions translated directly to *guilt* in Indonesia. In fact, in many Asian cultures, there is no word for guilt at all.

Guilt is believed, by and large, to be an emotional construct of the West. Guilt not only appears to be more widespread in the West, but it seems more prevalent today than it was in the past. The word for *guilt* does not appear in the Hebrew Old Testament. Shakespeare used the word *guilt* only 33 times, while he used *shame* 344 times.³ We do not even know what *guilt* looks like: in a study of Wisconsin undergraduates who were given photos of people expressing different emotions, they could not recognize expressions of guilt, the way they could anger, disgust, fear, and even shame.

Yet Westerners report frequent feelings of guilt. In a study conducted in the Netherlands, people reported feeling guilt for about two hours out of each day.⁴ Why has guilt ascended to the moral stage? Perhaps it became more important as we began to have more opportunities to be physically isolated from the group, since some argue that guilt is experienced in solitude, without reference to an audience. It would be difficult to feel a private emotion without the privacy in which to feel it. Compare the median amount of time spent alone (zero) for a member of the hunter-gatherer Yanomami tribe in the Amazon to current living arrangements in the United States, where 28 percent of households consist of just one person. Herant Katchadourian, an emeritus professor of psychiatry and human biology, believes that *guilt* (which he described as a more self-conscious form of shame) appeared alongside the human capacity to produce symbolic objects, like cave paintings (the oldest of which are from forty thousand years ago), which imply the existence of abstract thought and the beginnings of new belief systems.⁵

In addition to physical privacy and symbolic objects, the rise of Christianity and, later, philosophies of individualism are also credited with *guilt's* ascendancy in the spectrum of Western emotions. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion of the individual was boosted to cultural prominence with phenomena like Romantic literature, which emphasized self-growth and self-expression, the American and French revolutions, and the understanding of individuals as agents of political change. Individualism gained a foothold as a moral position and a political philosophy—perhaps nowhere as much as in America, which is consistently ranked among the most individualistic of all countries. “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string,” wrote Bostonian Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance.” Yet one of the many paradoxes of American culture is that it purports to believe in the individual, while it is simultaneously obsessed with greatness—and what is greatness if not a judgment bestowed by, and a status relative to, one's peers?

Today, American culture also champions corporations, which, operating mainly from the motive of profit and growth, seem a distant cry from the complexities of an individual and concepts of self-reliance. The axiom of libertarianism—a limited role for the state—grew out

of a sincere belief in the individual (and yet some of the most self-professing libertarians, the league from Silicon Valley and the tech industry at large, are tethered to large companies, technologies, and investments that are profitable only because of their social nature).

The point is simply that the paradigm of the individual, whether real or imagined, elbows out shame, which is an inherently social phenomenon and, in our culture of self-reliance, can seem quaint or anachronistic. A hyper-individualist and privacy-loving society is left, at least allegorically, with guilt as its primary hope for social control.

Another, more practical reason guilt has gained power is that guilt promises to make punishment less expensive. If an individual can use guilt to police himself, the group or the state doesn't have to. Guilt is the cheapest form of social enforcement, because the norm has been internalized and is self-enforcing. Evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers put it this way: "The emotion of guilt has been selected for in humans partly in order to motivate the cheater to compensate his misdeed and to behave reciprocally in the future, and thus to prevent the rupture of reciprocal relationships."⁶

This leads to another and more contentious reason for guilt's ascendancy. Some people suppose that guilt is not just cheaper, but morally better. Guilt, unlike shame, takes an action rather than the whole person, as its primary object. Since at least the eighteenth century, philosophers have also argued that guilt is a beneficial emotion that motivates people to admit responsibility for their wrong actions, to make amends and repair damaged relationships, unlike shame, which makes us want to hide or disappear. Some argue that guilt is less painful than shame, and more refined, although it's clear that some people can be painfully afflicted with guilt.

The State's Role in the Decline of Shaming

With the rise of church and state as powerful and pervasive institutions, human groups relinquished certain powers, such as physical punishment, to these authorities. Before the invention of prisons, many punishments had a particularly ugly and public history. Gruesome punishments like quartering, in which a man was chained to four horses and had his limbs torn off, were carried out for all to see. Human branding dates from at least the twelfth century, and slitting of the ear or nose were also permanent physical stigmas. The Greeks invented the very word *stigma* to refer to the symbols burned or cut into a transgressor to show he was a slave, criminal, or traitor. According to anthropologist Gustav Peebles, who studies monetary history, branding a debtor was the earliest form of a credit rating. In the town square, there were whippings, ducking stools, and the stocks. A dishonest baker might be sent to the pillory with dough on his head.

Then a lot of shaming punishments in the West disappeared. Philosopher Michel Foucault described the state's role in the disappearance of shaming punishments in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). The pillory was put to an end in France in 1789 and in England in 1837. Branding was abolished in France and England in the nineteenth century, as was the public exhibition of prisoners in France. New York was the first state to end public hangings, in 1835, and the other states eventually followed.⁷ Prisons helped make punishment a more private affair.

Despite the widespread use of prison sentences, which themselves come with a certain

amount of shame, and the decline in shaming punishments, shaming by the state continues in milder forms. In the United States, judges in some states require convicted thieves to publicly carry signs that broadcast their crime. In November 2012, a woman in Ohio who had been caught driving on the sidewalk to go around a morning school bus full of children was sentenced to standing for two hours on the sidewalk with a sign that read: ONLY AN IDIOT WOULD DRIVE ON THE SIDEWALK TO AVOID A SCHOOL BUS. In China, it is common for criminals to be paraded around wearing signs describing their offenses.

There are many strong arguments why the state should not use shame against criminals. Martha Nussbaum, political philosopher and one of the most ardent opponents of shaming punishments, argued against state shaming because she believes that a primary responsibility of the state is to protect human dignity, and shaming punishments run counter to this aim. One might counter that the transgressions themselves also undermine human dignity, but Nussbaum the difference is the involvement of the public system of law. “The fact that the state is complicit in the shaming makes a large difference. People will continue to stigmatize other people, and criminals are bound to be among those stigmatized. For the state to participate in this humiliation, however, is profoundly subversive of the ideas of equality and dignity on which liberal society is based.”⁸ Other legal scholars argue that shaming cannot be effective in the mobile, anonymous, urban societies of today.

Law professor James Q. Whitman argued against shaming because it transfers the responsibility to punish from the state to the public. His objections to state shaming are grounded in the idea that the state is supposed to alleviate citizens of their impulses and obligations to punish, not to invite them to partake in more of it. “Shame sanctions are wrong in our society for the same reason that we feel they are wrong in China, or in the Afghanistan of the Taliban: They represent an unacceptable style of governance through their play on public psychology ... Shame sanctions would be wrong even if they had no impact on the offender at all, for, no matter what, they would represent an improper partnership between the state and the crowd.”⁹ In contrast to Nussbaum’s argument, Whitman discourages shaming for the sake of the audience, not the transgressor.

In other words, people have chosen a government to represent them, even in times of punishment. When the government invites the public to take part in the punishment—by requiring convicted thieves to publicly carry signs that detail their crime, for instance—it is delegating part of its duty to a populace that can, in Whitman’s words, be “fickle and uncontrolled.” But as we’ll see later, there might be instances in which shaming, even by the state, can be used for the benefit of the crowd in ways that the crowd also finds acceptable.

Is There Something like True Shamelessness?

Not only does shame rank low on the American emotional frequency, but its opposite—shamelessness—is often prominent (prompting books like Aaron James’s *Assholes*). Ruth Benedict found that the Japanese, for example, had not expected Americans captured during World War II to show no shame in being prisoners of war, since that was unthinkable in their culture. In our experiments testing shame’s effect on cooperation, many students wanted to avoid being singled out, but some students were not deterred. I was surprised by some of the brazen faces of the players who were singled out to stand in front of their peers for

contributing nothing to the game. It would be easy to attribute the lack of shame shown in these cases to an individual's general state of shamelessness, but it's probably more complicated than that.

Shame is calibrated to social norms, which is why it is so dynamic and differs so much across cultures. In central Brazil, Bakairí Indians find eating in public incredibly shameful while they find no shame in their nakedness. You might be ashamed if you hear your date do not tip the waiter at a nice restaurant in the United States, but you would not feel the same way in France, where tipping is not customary. In many cases, shame and shaming have gotten a bad rap, when in fact the shame might not be as problematic as the norm to which that shaming is calibrated. When doctors feel too ashamed to admit or to share their mistakes, the real culprit is not shame, but the norm that dictates that doctors cannot and do not make errors (driven largely, I imagine, by threats of litigation).

Part of shame's potency is due to our negativity bias—the asymmetry in how our brain processes negative versus positive information. The negative stuff sticks better. People sometimes believe negative gossip even if it's clearly inaccurate. Negative opinions are also more contagious than positive ones,¹⁰ and losing something (including, perhaps, one's reputation) feels particularly bad—worse than gaining that same something feels good.¹¹ For these reasons, parents repeat proverbs like “One falsehood spoils a thousand truths” or Ben Franklin's “It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.”

Shame is more conspicuous in collectivist cultures in part because the norms are more commonly shared and widely enforced. In societies that value individualism and outliers, shame might be less apparent. But shame still exists everywhere. Many people believe that violent gang members are shameless, and certain gang members might be. But gangs, like any group, have their own brand of shame, calibrated to their own set of norms—often related to loyalty and snitching—and their own forms of punishment. Even among thieves, there is honor and there is shame—they are just provoked by a different set of standards.

Even Edward von Kloberg III felt shame. In 1998, he fell in love with a man who did not love him as much in return. His business started losing money, and there is nothing more shameful for a rich American than becoming poor. On top of that, von Kloberg got diabetes, skin cancer, and an inner-ear disease. Yet he refused to accept charity from his friends, or what he referred to as “welfare” treatment from hospitals. The same man who infamously declared that shame was for sissies became literally mortified with shame. In 2005, in a final performance consistent with his affinity for melodrama, sixty-three-year-old von Kloberg jumped to his death from a Roman castle.

Differences Between Guilt, Shame, and Embarrassment

Many psychologists agree that guilt is a private emotion, while embarrassment and shame are more public emotions, most often felt in the presence of other people. (Here we can also recognize that what makes us feel guilty is still informed by our community.) But exposure isn't the entire story; otherwise there would be no difference between shame and embarrassment.

As part of an experiment, students at UCLA were asked to give a five-minute speech, and

well as complete a five-minute mental arithmetic test while annoying music played. A loud alarm went off if the student did not answer in time. One group completed the tasks alone and the other, less fortunate group gave the speech and took the math test in front of two stony-faced peers. Subjects were asked afterward how they felt about themselves and also gave saliva samples four times during the experiment so that researchers could measure the stress hormone cortisol. Compared with the students who performed alone, the students who were observed by their peers reported more anxiety and had twice as much cortisol in the bloodstream.¹²

How do we know that the stressed-out students in this experiment were feeling shame and not another emotion, like fear, humiliation, embarrassment, or guilt? One way to tell the difference between emotions is by looking at emotional displays. We can watch just the face for the earliest emotions in life, like joy, sadness, fear, and anger, but for self-conscious emotions like shame, we must also watch the body.¹³ In shame, the corners of the mouth are down-turned (sometimes the lower lip is tucked between the teeth), the eyes are lowered, the body collapses and tilts forward, and the shoulders fold in what seems like an attempt to hide. In some cultures, people cover their face with their hands. In Southeast Asia, sometimes people show shame by biting their tongue.¹⁴ Embarrassment, on the other hand, often involves smiling, rubbing the face or other nervous touching, and the eyes wandering from side to side.

A display of shame is a reaction to exposure. It's not about what's going on inside, exactly, but about visible changes outside. These signals, like most others, are prone to deception—it's easy to fake a smile. The exception seems to be the blush. Other than by painting or powdering it on, a blush cannot be faked, which is why scientists refer to the blush as an honest signal. The blush is uniquely human and is one of our most nonthreatening displays.

A blush can be triggered by shame or embarrassment and interpreted as a sign of fault, submission, appeasement, or even arousal, depending on the circumstance. Undergraduates at the Netherlands read to themselves a series of vignettes and found that when the situation was morally ambiguous, such as running into someone who had said they were going to be somewhere else, they took that person's blushing as a sign of culpability. However, in instances where there was a clear-cut transgression, such as coming upon someone damaging your bicycle as they tried to remove their own from the rack, a blush from the transgressor was pacifying.¹⁵

"The blind do not escape," Darwin wrote in *The Expressions of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). A reverend who had visited an asylum had informed Darwin that three children who were blind from birth were "great blushers."¹⁶ Darwin's curiosity about blushing led him to speculate on the innateness of shame. It was already known that some behaviors, like smiling, were innate, while others, like the handshake, were learned. And Darwin's intuition was that emotional expressions that were innate were elevated in terms of evolutionary importance.

Darwin had the anecdote about the blind, but not the experiment to test it. At the 2000 Olympic Games, psychologists Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto analyzed photographs of 111 judo athletes from around the world immediately after their matches. Winners tended to tilt their heads back, raise their arms, or expand their chests. Losers—the ones more likely to experience shame—tilted their heads down, hid their faces with their hands, slumped the

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