

CLASS 2: THE EMOTIONS OF HARMS AND WRONGS I: SHAME AND GUILT

Introduction

Our last conversation focused on the distinction between harms and wrongs. Many people find this distinction meaningful. It arguably enables one to separate the specific and discernible nature of harms from the more amorphous, but no less impactful, nature of wrongs.

Harms are more easily identified than wrongs. That is because wrongs refer to the moral injuries we do to one another. We are necessarily in relations with others, and we use our moral code to structure those relations. When we commit a wrong, we violate those codes, and we thereby damage our connections to others.

It can be tricky to understand the nature of wrongs because our moral codes are often unspoken. We rarely itemize all of the behaviors we expect of each other, and thus we can sometimes struggle to identify precisely what went awry. So, wrongs are very often implicit, such that the power of our moral codes is sometimes underappreciated.

Yet one way to recognize the significance of a wrong is to assess the emotions that are aroused when one occurs. Such emotions are often very powerful, even overwhelming.

Some of those emotions are felt by those against whom the wrong occurs. Those individuals can feel a mixture of fear and anger that can lead to desires for revenge. We will explore those emotions during our conversation on Feb. 4.

Our focus now is on how we feel about ourselves when we commit a wrong. If we wish to repair any damage that results from doing something wrong, we need to have a clear understanding of ourselves and our emotions. Our ability to do repair work will be enhanced if we know ourselves well, and can gain some control of our emotions.

Many thinkers in the restorative justice tradition find it useful here to make a distinction between shame and guilt. A feeling of shame, as we will see, is an emotion that many believe we should challenge. Guilt, on the other hand, can be viewed as a more productive emotion. If handled and understood properly, guilt can serve as a springboard for effective repair work.

Let's explore each of these to see whether and how this distinction might be helpful.

On Shame

Many writers see shame as a concept that applies to a *person* rather than to the *acts* that they commit. If I commit a wrong, and I feel shame, it is likely that I am making an assessment of my whole self. By contrast, a feeling of guilt will more commonly be attached to a specific action.

June Tangney and her co-authors (2011, p. 709) make the distinction this way:

“Shame arises from a negative focus on the self – one’s core identity; guilt arises from a negative focus on a specific behavior. This differential emphasis on self (*‘I did that horrible thing’*) vs. behavior (*‘I did that horrible thing’*) sets the stage for different emotional experiences and different patterns of motivation and subsequent behavior.”

This argument suggests that if we feel shame, we are often making an assessment of our entire character. According to Eliza Ahmed (2001), shame is thought to encompass feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, humiliation, dishonor, and a sense of despair and deep suffering. Whereas guilt concerns discrete misdemeanors or transgressions, shame is concerned with the overall tissue of self-identity.

This is a problematic way to understand oneself when one commits a wrong, for two important reasons. First of all, it fails to recognize that none of us is a single, coherent entity. As Braithwaite and Mugford (1994, p. 152) put it, we need to always recognize that “people have a pluralistic self that accounts for their occasional lapse into profane acts.” None of us is purely one thing or another; we are not uniformly good nor uniformly bad. Instead, most of us endeavor consciously to do good, or to at least minimize the degree to which we do harm. If we make a mistake, that means nothing about our essential character. It just means we are human.

So one problem with shame is that it encourages us to misidentify ourselves. A second problem is that feelings of shame often lead to counterproductive responses. Here’s Tangney and her co-authors again (2011, p. 710):

“Shame is typically the more painful, disruptive emotion because the self, not simply one’s behavior, is the object of judgment. When people feel shame about the self, they feel ‘small’, worthless, and powerless. . . In an effort to escape painful feelings of shame, shamed people are inclined to defensively ‘turn the tables’, externalizing blame and anger outward onto a convenient scapegoat. By doing so, the shamed person attempts to regain some sense of control and superiority in their life, but the long-term costs can be steep.”

Indeed, there is evidence that feelings of shame often underlie a host of counterproductive behaviors, including ones that are legally defined as crimes. The sociologist Jack Katz (1988, p. 313) asked this provocative question: “Is crime only the most visible peak of a mountain of shame?”

So, even if shame is a commonly-held emotion, it deserves to be challenged. It allows us to mistakenly make assessments of our entire character that are too totalizing. If afflicted by deep feelings of shame, some individuals can understandably lash out, in ways that can simply compound wrongs.

Thus, if we wish to minimize the commission of wrongs, and to maximize our ability to repair wrongs when they occur, we should work to resist feelings of shame. By contrast, many suggest, feelings of guilt can be more productive.

On Guilt

If shame focuses on the entirety of the self, guilt is more commonly associated with a specific wrongful act. Because of this, every one of us will feel guilt at one point or another, likely on a near-daily basis.

Yet we are often taught that guilt is a bad thing. Think of the pejorative phrase, “guilt trip”. Think of how we often tell each other – or ourselves -- not to feel guilty about a certain action.

But advocates of restorative justice argue that guilt can often be understood and used productively. From this perspective, the experience of guilt is an emotional recognition that we have done damage. It is an indication that we know that we have hurt the moral code that we need to live together peacefully.

Guilt, in other words, stems from our recognition that we live in interdependent relations with others. To recognize the importance of these relations is to embrace the possibility of our doing damage through our mistakes. Guilt can thus be understood as an unconscious way of telling ourselves that our actions matter to other people. Our guilt is a symbol of our morality.

The philosopher William Neblett (1974, p. 655) captures this idea in this fashion:

“Let us observe that the feeling of guilt is intimately tied to *respect* and to *sympathy*. We ordinarily assume that an individual who unwarrantedly offends another person and experiences no guilt over this behavior has little if any respect or sympathy for that person. We also assume that an individual who never experiences guilt over the offenses he commits against others must be lacking in respect and sympathy for human beings in general. In other words, we believe that *our capacity to feel guilt reveals our humanity*. Our capacity to feel guilt is also intimately tied, not only to respect for others, but also to *self-respect*. Self-respect, in the presence of moral transgression, yields self-disapprobation, which self-disapprobation, as a feeling, is felt as guilt. In other words, the feeling of guilt is genuinely moral to the extent to which it is *self-reflexive*. We morally ‘ought’ to feel guilty over *our* moral misdeeds whether others approve of our behavior or not.”

To feel guilt is thus to embrace the inescapably human capacity to commit a wrong, and to accept the need to assume responsibility for our hurtful actions. Even if it is an emotional reaction, its presence reflects our implicit acceptance of the importance of moral guidelines. Here’s another philosopher, Lydia Radzik (2009, p. 35), on this point:

“The emotion of guilt is not a psychological consequence of wrongdoing as such. However, it might well be a psychological consequence of the following complex of beliefs and attitudes: belief that one has done something wrong according to a particular norm, acknowledgment of the legitimate authority of the norm, personal commitment to that norm such that one cares whether it is respected or violated, and acknowledgment that one has violated the norm under conditions that neither justify nor fully excuse its violation.”

As Radzik further notes (p. 36) when we experience the discomfort of guilt, such pain “is evidence that one is in a proper relationship to morality. Their suffering is not the main point or the core of their obligation; their moral commitments and judgments are.”

So, if guilt is a product of an *action* rather than an essential part of our *person*, and if guilt arises from our (perhaps unconscious) recognition of our moral obligations, then how can it be harnessed productively?

For starters, guilt can be used to uncouple the event from the person. Just because I have done something wrong does not mean I have to succumb to a degree of shame that leaves me feeling powerless and even resentful. Instead, I can recognize, as Braithwaite and Mugford put it (1994, p. 158), that I can enable “the self of the perpetrator to be sustained as sacred rather than profane.” In this view, none of us is a single, uncompromising entity, but we are more multiple and inconsistent. We have better and worse sides, we have better and worse days and moments. We can be fundamentally good people yet still commit unfortunate wrongs.

So, we can use guilt to separate our harmful actions from our basic understanding of ourselves as good and well-intentioned moral actors. From this position, it is much easier to feel empowered to make efforts to atone. We are not debilitated by shame, but motivated by guilt.

June Tangney and her co-authors (2011, p. 709) capture this sense of how guilt can be a positive motivator, unlike shame:

“Guilt, on balance, appears to be less disruptive and more adaptive. Although painful, guilt is less overwhelming, because what is at issue is a specific behavior, somewhat apart from the self. So people stricken with guilt are drawn to consider their *behavior* and its consequences, rather than feeling compelled to defend the self. Feelings of remorse and regret are central to the experience of guilt. When feeling guilt, people are inclined to ruminate over the misdeed, wishing they had behaved differently.”

Such rumination can be extremely productive. Indeed, one can argue that everyone’s maturation depends upon reflecting upon our mistakes and committing to different courses of action in the future. This is how guilt can be positive. Gabrielle Taylor (1996, p 104) captures this idea well:

“Guilt need not be wholly destructive; it will be constructive on those occasions when the person feeling guilty believes that repairing the damage is the form her repayment should take. But she will not regard her repair work as an end in itself. She will see it rather as a means toward self-rehabilitation.”

If we feel motivated by guilt to repair damage, that motivation stems from our ability to identify with those who have been wronged. We feel guilt because we have violated a moral code that we recognize as necessary to enable peaceful relations with others. We recognize our need for others, we recognize the reality that we exist in interdependent relations with them. Because we care about those others, to violate the moral code means we will commonly feel guilt.

The emotion of guilt is thus a byproduct of our need for others. As Pamla Gobodo-Madikizela (2008, p. 334) puts it: “Remorse can be understood to develop in a relational, intersubjective context. It is the recognition of the victim’s pain that awakens remorse in the perpetrator. Remorse lays the ground for the empathic movement towards the other.”

Such an empathic movement toward another person will likely include some offer of repair. Although we will discuss options for repair in future weeks, one commonly-used strategy is to offer an apology. An apology is an opportunity for us to allow our more responsible self to dissociate itself from our less-responsible self. Erving Goffman (1971, p. 84) captures this idea this way: “An apology is a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that disassociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule.”

Restorative justice practitioners hope to achieve such a disassociation. The goal is to recognize poor behavior *and* to respect the actor. The behavior is uncoupled from the self. Guilt can help accomplish this, by motivating the actor to reaffirm their obligation to treat others fairly, to abide by the moral code that we require to exist together as peaceably as possible.

Indeed, to feel guilt and to respond to it is an important message to communicate to ourselves. Guilt means that we see ourselves as important. Linda Radzik (2009, p. 35) makes this plain: “Guilt is a sign that we regard ourselves as agents who are responsible for our choices. It is also a sign that this responsibility matters to us.”

Concluding Thoughts

Emotions often emerge from the commission of wrongs. Although we commonly focus our attention on the emotions experienced by people who are on the receiving end of a wrong – and we will discuss this next time – it is also important to consider the emotions of the one who commits the wrong. This is especially important if we are interested in working constructively to make amends.

If that is our goal, then feelings of shame are best challenged. If shame is something we attribute to our entire selves, then we will feel debilitated and even resentful. We will be less capable of responding appropriately when we commit a wrong. Shame can lead us to see ourselves as uniformly bad. This is not an empowering stance.

Guilt, on the other hand, can be viewed as a motivator. It serves to remind us that we care about others, and that we feel bothered when we do harm to them. Guilt, as William Neblett (1974, p. 656) argues, is a moral emotion:

“Guilt is a *moral matter*. Morality makes it incumbent upon us to feel guilt, and morality provides warranted ways for our feelings of guilt to be ‘discharged’, i.e., provides for and permits us to *redeem* ourselves. Moreover, it not only *provides* for redemption, it *demand*s it: It is expected of us to deal with the wrongs we have done, however uncomfortable to us that might be. Once we have redeemed ourselves, of course, we are justified (in most instances at least), in leaving the guilt we feel over the wrong we have done behind.”

Just how we can use guilt to pursue redemption is a topic for another day. For now, our goal is to understand how some make a distinction between shame and guilt, and why that distinction matters.

In preparation for our class discussion, please consider and reflect upon the following questions:

- Does the shame-guilt distinction seem meaningful to you? Why or why not?
- Can you remember instances when you felt shame? If so, why do you believe you felt that way? What, if anything, did shame motivate you to do?
- Can you remember the most recent time you felt guilty? Why do you think you felt guilty? What, if anything, did your guilt motivate you to do?
- Do you accept the idea that guilt can be a productive emotion? If so, why? If not, why not? Can it sometimes be productive and sometimes not? Why or why not?
- What, in particular, can guilt motivate you to do? Why that action as opposed to others?

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