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# Shame, Guilt, and the “Morality System”

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## Abstract

Arguably the differences between guilt and shame are exaggerated in the literature, especially with respect to the relationship of each to morality. Some fresh examples of shame are presented which point in the same direction, but which also indicate a puzzling dualism within the structure of shame. Furthermore, via Williams’s idea of the ‘morality system’, an explanation is offered of survivor guilt which does not compromise its distinctiveness (that is, without resorting to the hypothesis that the survivor has harmed someone by surviving).

**Keywords:** guilt, shame, embarrassment, Bernard Williams, morality, survivor guilt

## 1.

Enemies of the “morality system”<sup>1</sup> have tended to be friends of shame. This was certainly true of Wollheim<sup>2</sup>—though the phrase “the morality system” came later—and with some qualifications it is also true of Williams, who of course introduced the phrase. The phrase notwithstanding, it’s hard to say exactly how the different bits of the morality system are supposed to form a *system*—possibly because they don’t. But whether it is really a system or not, I shall think of this undoubtedly “distinctive formation within the ethical” as giving special significance at least to the ideas of moral obligation; of the internal or non-other-involving as opposed to the other-involving or social; and of autonomy, moral responsibility, and desert. Guilt and the morality system supposedly belong together because, on this way of thinking, guilt is the emotion that goes with one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Williams 1985, esp. ch. 10. The qualification I have in mind is one of Williams’ points: it’s not that Greek ethics was for shame and against guilt, but rather that it didn’t have the distinction. So their “shame” cannot *quite* have been the modern notion, even if the Greek word *aidos* overlaps with our uses of “shame.” By forcing the distinction between shame and guilt, the morality system obscures the possibility of a psychological economy regulated by an emotion that is not clearly one or the other. For the morality system, see also Williams 1993, 5 (“freedom, autonomy, inner responsibility, moral obligation”).

<sup>2</sup> See Wollheim 1983.

own internal judgment that one is responsible for failing to meet a distinctively moral obligation. Shame, by contrast, is said to have a much wider range of intelligible objects, to be more loosely associated with responsibility, less sensitive to one's own judgment and more sensitive to the judgment of others.

I've argued in previous work that the contrasts along these various dimensions between guilt and shame are exaggerated and sometimes ill-grounded, and so do not underwrite a credible normative distinction between the two emotions, distinct though they surely are.<sup>3</sup> The point was not, however, to rehabilitate shame for the morality system but rather to argue that both guilt and shame have a proper place outside of it. In this paper I want to raise two challenges to that ambition, and to try to respond to them. The first challenge is that there is after all a distinctive *form* of shame which belongs especially closely with moral obligation and responsibility and which, while still social, is less thoroughly other-involving than other recognisable forms of the emotion. The second challenge is that there is a distinctive and puzzling form of guilt—survivor guilt—which, while it looks at first glance like more evidence against a tight connection between guilt and morality, is really only intelligible when seen in relation to the morality system.

## 2.

I'll begin, however, by pressing further the point that the differences between guilt and shame are overdone, by taking issue with Williams's view, in *Shame and Necessity*, that shame is connected especially closely—as he says guilt is not—with being seen. “Shame and its motivations always involve in some way or other an idea of the gaze of another” (1993, 82), he says, and again:

The basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. It is straightforwardly connected with nakedness, particularly in sexual connections. (1993, 78)<sup>4</sup>

But this seems mistaken, for two reasons. First of all, consider Wollheim's nice example of his own shame at *overhearing* himself being discussed (and his parents being overheard discussing him) (2004). The case shows at the very least that the connection is between shame and being *observed*, in a range of modalities—not just sight; or more loosely still, between shame and being known about. The newspapers publish some indiscretion of mine and I am ashamed, but they need not have learnt about the indiscretion perceptually, nor is my exposure by way of being perceived (because it's by way of publication).<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, to the extent that shame is connected with being seen, so is guilt. An obvious example is the secret adulterous affair, which gives rise to the evidenceless worry on the part of the guilt-ridden adulterer that he has been seen: is there some CCTV footage of him that he didn't think of? But perhaps, one might think, this connection between guilt and being seen is specific to sexual misdemeanours; sexuality takes us to nakedness, and nakedness takes us to shame. So the connection between guilt and being seen is owed to the fact that

3 See my “Moral Emotions, Autonomy and the ‘Extended Mind’” (2016) and “Guilt, Shame, and the ‘Psychology of Love’” (2007).

4 See also Maibom 2010, 569.

5 In such a situation, I may be inclined to *say*, “It's as if everything I do is open to public view.” This suggests that if there is a special connection between shame and vision, it is because of the special aptness of vision to *symbolise* experiences associated with shame. Compare also our inclination to say we feel as if parts of ourselves have been seen which are not in fact (ordinarily) visible (“My bones are not hid from thee”; Psalm 139:14), though the strength of the link between these locutions and shame is a matter for further discussion. Thanks to James Laing for prompting these thoughts.

shame is implicated somehow after all. But the association between guilt and being seen does not rely on sexual examples. I am due to leave Venice in a couple of hours and my 48-hour Vaporetto pass expires. But I have one more trip to make, in order to check out of my hotel. So I take that last trip without a ticket. My subsequent torment is not driven by the thought of the harms I have caused by what I have done: I certainly *don't* think, “How unfair on the other passengers,” or “Will the Vaporetto company go bust?” Instead, I imagine one person after another getting onto the boat, falsely as it turned out, to be a ticket inspector—is that blue jacket some kind of uniform?—even though I have not once seen a ticket inspector in Venice. That is, my only thought is that I will be exposed for having committed an albeit trivial transgression. Indeed, it is almost as if, having committed the transgression, I am convinced I have *already* been exposed—that is, have already been seen by inspectors, though I am unable to identify them—hence the quasi-paranoid imaginings. But what I feel is guilt, not mere fear of detection, nor fear of shame upon detection.

I want to turn now, however, to the first of my two challenges. In outline, the challenge is that even if we absorb both of the above points, there isn't just *one* connection between shame and being seen (or observed, or known about), so, if the connection between shame and these things is meant to affirm a connection between shame and the social, no *one* connection between shame and the social is thereby affirmed. Indeed, the connections are so different that we may end up wondering whether we have a single emotion here. Because one of the two connections I shall distinguish looks set, *pace* Wollheim and Williams, to rehabilitate the connection between shame and the morality system, this is a challenge to the idea that shame points to a psychological economy which is not dominated by morality.

### 3.

The challenge is best pursued by way of examples. Example 1: A student has inadvertently left a curtain open and, because my room overlooks hers, I accidentally catch sight of her undressing and she sees that I have seen. She is ashamed. Example 2: I catch a student covertly cheating in an exam, and again the student is ashamed. There is a surface similarity between examples 1 and 2: in each case someone feels shame upon being seen, and in each case they are ashamed at something which falls within the wide range of intelligible objects of shame (respectively, nakedness in an inappropriate context, and cheating). But further examination reveals gross differences of structure between the two cases.

In 1, while there is an expectation on the student to cover herself, there is an equally strong or stronger expectation on me to avert my gaze. Moreover, if indeed I do avert my gaze, part of what motivates me to do so is the shame *I* reasonably feel at seeing *her*. Thirdly, the expectation on the student to cover herself stems at least in part from the expectation that she should deliver me from my shame at seeing her, an expectation to which she is subject even if my catching sight of her isn't in any way her fault (in some very weak sense one could say it is her fault if she absent-mindedly forgot to close the curtain, but not if she always has the curtain open at a certain time of day, confident in the expectation that no one will see her, and then for some reason I arrive in my office unexpectedly early). Fourthly, if I—shamelessly—fail to avert my gaze, the student can retreat to the thought that there is nothing wrong with being naked: we were all born naked, all look the same under our clothes, and so on. This thought—though it may take some toughness of mind to think it—can

serve as an effective defence for her against her shame.<sup>6</sup> Finally, and relatedly, if she doesn't see that I have seen her—and assuming that we are not ladies' finishing school fanatics who think it is shameful just to *be* naked<sup>7</sup>—there is no occasion for her to feel shame. I'll come back to this final point later. For now, I simply note that if the student deploys the tough-minded defence, it does not lift the expectation on me to feel shame if I fail to avert my gaze (though if I'm shameless enough, I won't actually feel it).

By contrast, none of this structure of reciprocal expectations is present in case 2. It isn't shameful for me to observe the student cheating, even though her act is shameful. I might feel pained to observe her, for example, if she is a vulnerable or foolish student. But to feel pained on her behalf isn't to feel shame, and there is no expectation on one even to feel pained: one might reasonably feel anger or exasperation at the student instead. There is certainly no expectation on the student to protect me from shame by concealing her behaviour more effectively. Is there anything she can retreat to in order to defend herself against shame? She could protest that there's nothing wrong with cheating—but, other things being equal, that isn't true. Of course, nobody is saying that the student in 2 *actually* will feel shame—she might be shameless and feel nothing at all. All that's being claimed is that cheating is an appropriate object of the student's shame.

#### 4.

What, then, are we to do with the contrasts between 1 and 2? One common response is that, while both kinds of case surely exist, this does not show the existence of two forms of shame with different structures. That's because, so the response goes, while case 2 is a case of shame, case 1—the case with the complicated structure of reciprocal expectations—is merely a case of embarrassment. Now, without for the moment commenting further on this response, it seems to me that there is a plausible, though not decisive, argument that the shame in case 1 is indeed what we may call embarrassment, and that this is not true of the shame in case 2. The test is to think through cases 1 and 2, and ask whether shame and embarrassment can be co-present but with distinct objects.

In case 2, it appears that shame as already described in that case and embarrassment can be co-present, at least in the following ways.<sup>8</sup> First, it is conceivable that the student might feel embarrassment (that it's her familiar teacher who has caught her, rather than an anonymous official) alongside shame as already described (that she has done something wrong). Secondly, one of the many emotions I might feel on detecting her cheating, besides anger, disappointment, and pain on her behalf is, of course, embarrassment (“I wish it hadn't been me to notice that she was cheating”). Call this imagined variation on the case 2a. So, in 2a, is the thing that runs alongside shame, as already described, the emotion (whatever it's called) that we discerned in case 1, or something else? Here are two apparent reasons for thinking it's something else. In case 1, it is the student's emotion that triggers my experience of the same emotion at observing her, whereas in 2a my embarrassment may be triggered whether she feels it or not. And in 2a there is no expectation that she should protect me from my embarrassment at observing her. But there are replies to both thoughts. If she really isn't embarrassed—because it's a matter of indifference to her that she's been caught by me in particular—my own embarrassment

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6 It's worth saying, parenthetically, that this structure of mutual expectations is changed significantly if I see the student because I somehow deliberately intrude upon her, and also that sex difference may play a role here. But the fact that one can upset the example by varying the details is irrelevant—I only need one example of shame with this structure to make my point.

7 Compare with the nuns who keep their clothes on in the bath (Russell 1927). See also Williams 1993, 82, n. 20.

8 Thanks to Tom Sinclair for pressing me on the implications of this and related variations on the case.

ought to lapse, just as my emotion might lapse in case 1 if I discover that the naked student is in fact taking part in some convoluted art piece in which people are intended to see her, in a context in which this would normally happen by accident. Secondly, while in 2a it's not in the student's power to prevent me from being embarrassed, it would make sense for her to *apologise* to me for having caused me embarrassment, a ground for apology that floats free of whatever apology she might make for cheating. The fact that apology would make sense in this context could be argued precisely to reflect the (unfulfillable) expectation on her to protect me from embarrassment. Can we do something similar for case 1, that is, reimagine case 1 with the co-presence of both shame—that is, shame as already described in *that* case, the thing with the complicated structure of reciprocal expectations—and embarrassment? But what *else* is there in case 1 aside from the student's being seen naked, my seeing the student naked, etc., to be embarrassed about? Surely the imaginative exercise is impossible.

These replies, to the extent that they are effective, make it look as if what in 2a we're calling embarrassment is what we called shame when describing case 1. It's important to recognise, however, how little is accomplished by this classificatory move. The key question is whether embarrassment is or is not a sub-variety of shame. If it is, then if what we began by calling shame in case 1 is embarrassment, the differences between cases 1 and 2 confirm the existence of two forms of shame with different structures, rather than providing a way to avoid that conclusion. But the classificatory move leaves that key question open, for the fact that cases 1 and 2 attract different verbal labels, if indeed they do, is very weak evidence that they exemplify different emotions (compare "hate" and "loathing"). Thus invoking the idea of embarrassment provides no refuge from the puzzle that shame seemingly can have two distinct structures. I shall therefore pursue the challenge presented by the contrast between cases 1 and 2, leaving the notion of embarrassment to one side.

One might conclude that the real difference between 1 and 2 is this: what's shameful in 2 is not *being seen cheating* but simply cheating. By contrast, what's shameful in 1 isn't being naked, but *being seen naked*. In 1, the object of shame is two-place: the person of the observer is partly constitutive of the object of the emotion. In 2, it's one-place.<sup>9</sup> We will have occasion to revisit this provisional conclusion below.

## 5.

One reason the contrasts are challenging is the following: in cases like 2 the observed act is shameful—that is, deserving of shame—whether or not the person observed actually feels shame (and they often don't). And of course something like this also works in the opposite direction: many people will feel shame in a case like 2—even if they are not actually observed. So we need to ask whether there is anything left in cases like 2 of the supposed connection between shame and being seen, even once this is commuted into a connection with being perceived (in whatsoever modality) or simply being known. Is the difference between 1 and 2 really a difference in the *kind* of connection between shame and knowing/being known, or is it in fact *only* in cases like 1 that any such connection obtains? That difficulty matters, because it was supposedly via the link to sight (etc.) that the social or other-regarding character of the emotion was established.

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<sup>9</sup> The difference between 1 and 2 survives if we swap out vision for some other sense-modality or none. In Wollheim's example, an audience is seemingly built in to the object of shame, and built in because there is an implicit audience restriction built in to the conversation: it's not that there is anything *per se* shameful in parents discussing their child, but their discussion is not "for his ears," and so being overheard—and overhearing—is shameful. So Wollheim's example has the same structure as 1, though it's about hearing and not seeing. Similarly, in a parallel variation on 2, I might catch a student cheating by overhearing something or reading an email exchange.

To this let me add a second and more important reason. There's an argument to be made that cases like 1 are somehow dependent—"merely dependent," perhaps—on the opinion of others. That's why they can be magicked out of existence by the tough-minded defence that there's nothing wrong with being naked. The same argument says that cases like 2, by contrast, are about wrongs that are independent of the opinion of others, indeed dependent on norms that the opinion of others ought to track (and is at fault if it doesn't). So, the thought continues, what really unifies cases of the kind of shame that can't be magicked away by the tough-minded defence is that they are cases of *moral* shame. A. W. H. Adkins, who in Williams's writing exemplifies allegiance to the "morality system" (1993, 81), declared his opposition to shame on the grounds that it is *merely* social, and so superficial, in contrast to the properly moral emotion of guilt. That is surely a mistake. But one effect of distinguishing cases 1 and 2 might be that we carve off one class of cases—let's call these type 1—as thoroughly social (whether or not that makes them of lesser significance), but in so doing rescue a second class of cases—call these type 2—that meet all of Adkins's standards of supposed moral maturity. That's a more troubling reason, because a central part of the defence of shame as an emotion characteristic of a mature practical consciousness, and the attack on the morality system that follows, was precisely the breadth of its proper objects. Distinctively moral objects, on that account, have no special status, whereas on the account now being envisaged, for type 2 cases they do.

So, to deal with the first problem first: what, if anything, is left of the connection between shame and being seen (or observed, or known) in type 2 cases? In brief, my answer is: nothing, but the social character of shame doesn't depend on it.

In type 2 cases, shame is a social emotion because it's essentially other-involving in the following sense:<sup>10</sup> where it is regulating a well-functioning practical consciousness, its operation depends on a community of values between the subject of the emotion and others around them.<sup>11</sup> So I will feel ashamed of something in your presence only if you and I share values in the light of which it's shameful. If you despise cheating and I don't, your presence won't make any difference to whether I experience shame or not. But if we are on the same page about these things, your presence will make a big difference—amplifying the emotion, even if it would be triggered without you there. Since shame helps to regulate our behaviour, the disposition to feel shame is thus one example of the way in which we rely in self-regulation on other people.

What about the fact that I can feel type 2 shame on my own? The best analogy for this phenomenon is the division of linguistic labour (Putnam 1973, 699–711): we use technical words in ordinary conversation (for body parts, chemicals, meteorological phenomena, and so on), conveying knowledge thereby, but also without opening a dictionary or consulting an expert. But still, the practice of using such words—whose full explanation lies beyond most speakers' ability—depends on there being dictionaries and experts we can track back to if we get stuck. The experts are implicit in the practice of using such words—the practice depends on

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<sup>10</sup> See Williams 1993, 83: "The bonding, interactive effects of shame" connect with the fact that "an agent will be motivated by prospective shame in the face of people who would be angered by conduct that, in turn they would avoid for the same reason." For other sources that make the same point, see Maibom 2010, 570. And see also my 2016. I also argue that the same can be said of guilt, but never mind that here.

<sup>11</sup> The qualification about a well-functioning practical consciousness is important, because there are also cases of shame where my liability to the emotion does not depend on values in common—e.g. where, attending a family occasion, I am made to feel ashamed by my failure to conform to family norms which I have long since sincerely rejected. There are several different explanations of cases like this: habit takes a while to catch up with practical reason; my detachment from the family is only partial because while I reject some values of theirs I also still want to be accepted by them, and so on. But I take it these are all in some sense cases where practical consciousness is *not* functioning well. Thanks to Charlie Kurth for pressing this point.

them—even if they are not *actually* consulted, in every (or indeed most) exchanges. Something similar, I would argue, goes for shame: it doesn't detract from the social character of the emotion that the relevant audience for shame—i.e., those with whom we hold values in common—need not actually be present when the emotion is experienced.<sup>12</sup>

This observation works as a defence of the claim that shame is essentially social despite the fact that it can be experienced alone. However, the idea of the sociality of shame in play here seems very different from the idea that shame is specially connected with being seen or indeed with being observed. Indeed, the latter idea may in type 2 cases just be an obscure way of registering an important but importantly different fact about shame, namely its sociality or other-involvingness in the sense I've explained.

## 6.

I'll move on to the second problem—whether the difference between type 1 and type 2 shame rehabilitates, for a sub-class of cases, the link between shame and the morality system—in the course of this section. But, to introduce it, I want to pause first on Williams in *Shame and Necessity*, and in particular on his discussion of Sophocles' *Ajax*.

Williams is, in my view, quite right when he insists on the “bonding, interactive effects of shame,” which he connects with the fact that “an agent will be motivated by prospective shame in the face of people who would be angered by conduct that, in turn, they would avoid for the same reason” (1993, 83).<sup>13</sup> That's just the point already made that the successful operation of shame depends on a community of values between the subject of the emotion and others around them. But, as if continuing exactly the same point, Williams then turns to *Ajax*. *Ajax*, it will be recalled, kills himself, having made himself absurd slaughtering a flock of sheep under the illusion that he was avenging a slight inflicted on him by his fellow warriors (Sophocles 2008). *Ajax* laments:

What countenance can I show my father Telamon?  
How will he bear the sight of me  
If I come before him naked, without any glory?

Williams rightly points to “the interlocked expectations between [*Ajax*] and the world,” but as if they exemplified no more than the community of values between *Ajax* and his warrior peers (most saliently, his father) that we've already mentioned. That community of values is already present, of course, in case 2. But *Ajax*'s situation is ostensibly much more complicated than that. His concern is not just that he will rightly feel shame before his father (which depends on their holding values in common), but that his father will feel shame to see him in a shameful condition (“How will he bear the sight of me?”), and that it's a requirement upon him—which he fulfils by his suicide—to protect his father from the shame of seeing him. That looks

12 In my 2016 “Moral Emotion, Autonomy and the Extended Mind,” I argued for the further point that there's no inference from the thought that shame is social, or other-involving, to the conclusion that it is heteronomous or otherwise immature: on the contrary, on a proper conception of autonomy, autonomy involves getting other-dependence right, not doing without it.

13 In fact I am not so sure about motivation by *prospective* shame—unless the point is very carefully expressed, it can look as if what's motivating is the prospective unpleasantness of shame, when what really motivates is the prospective shamefulness of the act, to which that shame would be a response. See my 2013, “Happenings outside one's Moral Self: Reflections on Utilitarianism and Moral Emotion,” 239–258. However, I think this is merely an incautious formulation on Williams's part as the inside/outside distinction in “Happenings” is due to him.

very like the expectation on the student in case 1 to protect me from the shame of seeing her naked. How, in terms of our distinction between case 1 and case 2, is Ajax's case to be understood?

The fourth feature of case 1 is a good starting point, namely the availability of the “tough-minded defence” that there's nothing really wrong with being naked. Ajax was surely not capable of the thought that there is nothing really wrong with looking utterly foolish. But let's nonetheless explore the idea that Ajax's case too is a case of type 1 shame. An obstacle to this view is my earlier thought that the object of shame in 1 is not being naked, but being seen naked. For it is surely wrong to say Ajax is ashamed just of *being seen* to have done something foolish—though he is ashamed of that, he's ashamed of it because he is more basically ashamed of his folly. So, revisiting that earlier thought, should we by analogy after all say that the object of shame in 1 is—thanks, perhaps, to the context—nakedness itself?

In favour of this way of viewing things, it may help to observe that, like the female student's reactions in 1, Ajax's reactions are structured by a conception of a social role—in his case, that of the aristocratic warrior.<sup>14</sup> One reason for the seemingly readier availability of the tough-minded defence in the student's case is that, in our world, social roles are more easily taken up and vacated than in Sophocles', because we can make more sense of a distinction between the self and the various social roles we can occupy. So, while the student may very well structure her behaviour around what she sees as appropriate for a woman (or a young woman, a Western woman, etc.), she can also in a moment of crisis think “to hell with that role and its demands” in a way Ajax cannot. Conversely, one doesn't have to think very far back in our own history to find women for whom that defence might not have been possible, and for whom an episode of the kind I've envisaged might have been life-changing, if not life-ending, in a way Ajax's folly was for Ajax. If one did even in such times offer the defence, it would have been on pain of a kind of social obliteration, exiting forever a social role (“lady,” perhaps) without having any clear alternative to it.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, even if Ajax couldn't think of himself outside the warrior role at that moment, one can imagine an alternative (and not much happier) outcome for an Ajax-like character, namely that he offers the defence—“anyone can suffer a delusion!”—and exits forever his warrior role to continue a life of role-less obscurity. Where roles are tighter and fewer in number than they are for us, exiting one makes one a “poor bare forked animal”:<sup>16</sup> there is not the dignity of what we might call the “human role” to default to, which the student invokes, perhaps characteristic of more modern times.<sup>17</sup> On this account, the readier availability of the defence in the student's case but not in Ajax's does not mark a deep difference between them. The complex structure of reciprocal expectations in Ajax's case would thus speak in favour of classifying Ajax's as type 1 shame.

One lesson from Ajax's case, on that view, would be that the distinction between type 1 and type 2 cases does not mark a difference between the trivial and the important: the object of shame in type 1 cases *can* be something trivial, but it can also be as important and all-consuming as these things get.<sup>18</sup> Another lesson is that the availability of the tough-minded defence belongs with a society in which people are less tightly bound to social roles than they were in Sophocles' day or, otherwise put, that the student can, while Ajax cannot, retreat to the “human role” without bringing meaningful life to a close. That defence also brings the elaborate structure of shame in type 1 cases crashing to the ground. But now, to take up again the question whether the

14 For more on shame and social roles, see Deigh 1983, 224–45.

15 Perhaps Aubrey's story of Elizabeth I and the Earl of Oxford gives some idea: see Aubrey 1957.

16 Shakespeare 1608/1997, III.4.

17 Cf. Korsgaard 1996, 101: “You are a human being, a woman or a man, a member of a certain ethnic group,” etc. It's at least the “human being” part that the student does, but Ajax does not, have the opportunity to default to.

18 That, incidentally, is another reason why the word “embarrassment” might not be a fit for type 1 cases, at least not for all of them.

difference between type 1 and type 2 shame rehabilitates the link between shame and the morality system, isn't the very concept of the moral coeval not just with the availability but with the occupancy of the "human role"—as of course saliently in post-Kantian thinking? So—the thought continues—while type 1 cases need not be trivial (and indeed can be hugely important), they *cannot* be moral, because the moral comes on the scene only once the elaborate structure of role-dependent expectations is, as in the student's self-defence, left behind. While this wouldn't yet show the worrisome conclusion—that the distinction between type 2 and type 1 cases aligns with the distinction between the moral and the non-moral, thus affirming a connection between shame and the morality system, albeit for a restricted class of cases—it would get us halfway there, because it would force us to isolate a form of essentially non-moral shame. All that's needed to complete the argument is that—as case 2 seems to be—the other side of the distinction is occupied solely by moral cases.

But notwithstanding its complex structure of reciprocal expectations, is Ajax's case really—like the naked student's—a case of type 1 shame? There is a certain strain in saying that the object of the student's shame in case 1 is nakedness rather than being seen naked: though there are no doubt finishing-school fanatics around, imagining her to be one is quite unnecessary to imagining the complex structure. Moreover, the structure of reciprocal expectations in Ajax's case can be explained in another way, via his and his father's mutual identifications. On that account, Ajax's case would not resemble case 1, but another variation on case 2—call it 2b—in which our student is caught cheating in the exam and cannot face her parents afterwards, partly because she is ashamed of what she has done but partly because she knows they will be ashamed of her. This should not surprise us: to the extent that the norm against cheating has a grip on people, there will be some who take pride in observing it and feel shame at failing to do so, and this pride and shame extends to those, such as their children, with whom they are closely identified.

Now, although in 2b the student's seeing her parents will make things far worse, she knows full well that they will be ashamed of her (and that she has failed them in making them ashamed of her) even if she doesn't see them. Moreover, as in the simple case 2, retreating to the "human role" is no defence because, as she knows and knows her parents know, cheating is wrong. It's tempting to conclude that what disarms the tough-minded defence in 2b is that the wrongness of cheating is role-independently—or, as one might say, morally—wrong.

If Ajax's case is relevantly like 2b rather than like 1, two conclusions follow. First, *pace* Williams, the relationship of shame to being seen or observed or simply known dwindles in that case almost to zero. The only thing sustaining the structure of reciprocal expectations in Ajax's case is the set of values held in common between the subject of shame and its audience—as in the simple case 2—plus identification. The similarity with case 1, where being seen (etc.) really *does* have a constitutive role, is an appearance only. More importantly for the worry about the morality system, just as case 1 looks as if it helps us to identify a form of essentially non-moral shame, case 2 makes it look as if we might be forced to identify an essentially moral form. But now we have a reply to that problem. No tough-minded defence is available to Ajax, but neither is it to the student in 2b (or 2). But for all that, insofar as we understand the distinction between moral and non-moral at all,<sup>19</sup> neither suffering a delusion nor making a fool of oneself are moral failings, any more than competitive failures (such as losing a race or a piano competition), suffering other indignities for which one bears no responsibility, or standing features of oneself for which, again, one is not responsible (a birthmark, a stammer, etc.).

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19 Of course, there is a degree of discomfort for the critic of the morality system to assume, for the purposes of argument, that the distinction between moral and non-moral is well understood (is type 2 shame distinctively *what?*). But it seems unavoidable at this stage in the dialectic.

In case the unavailability of the tough-minded defence is thought to be local to the ancient context, consider a child's poor performance in a race of a kind in which they normally do well. Some families nowadays may think of these occasions in an Ajax-like way: the poor performance has disgraced the family, the child knows this so not only feels ashamed but an obligation to protect the parents from the shame of witnessing (or otherwise finding out) about the performance, and so on. But even if the family doesn't think this way, as in the cheating case, it won't help to tell the child that athletics is unimportant and so it is *not really shameful*: either the child will detect the insincerity or, if it is sincere, will make things worse (that is, by discovering that their most important audience doesn't care how well they do). That's just the "community of values" point over again. If "it's not really shameful" expresses anything coherent at all, it is simply registering that the failure is not one's fault. But the fact that that is, while true, so unhelpful underscores the point that type 2 shame has intelligible non-moral objects. So type 2 shame is not an essentially moral form of the emotion.

In sum, our original puzzle—that there appear to be two forms of shame with different structures, as exemplified by cases 1 and 2—remains, and the sense in which shame is a social emotion is very different in cases of the two types. The link between shame and seeing/being seen is weaker in either type 1 or type 2 cases than is often said. But while in type 1 cases some connection to others' observation or knowledge is essential to characterising the object of shame, in type 2 cases the alleged connection to being seen (etc.) dwindles almost to nothing. However, while it is arguable that type 1 cases can't be moral, type 2 cases—the first challenge presented by this structural dualism within shame—need not be. Exactly what, if anything, unifies shame of types 1 and 2 remains obscure. But clarifying the distinction between the two types does not on its own offer any comfort to the would-be defender of the morality system who claims to have discovered a form of distinctively moral shame.

## 7.

The indeterminate boundaries of the morality system bring me, finally, back to guilt. Survivor guilt might be thought to be a problem for any theory of guilt. If guilt is—as I think it often is—a victim-focused emotion, who is the survivor's victim supposed to have been? If guilt is—as is also often said—all about transgression, or disobeying the internal figure of the "enforcer," superego, etc.,<sup>20</sup> the same problem arises in a different form: since it is not apparent what if anything the survivor has *done*, it's not clear what transgression the enforcer or superego is supposed to be latching on to. All this might be thought to play well for enemies of the morality system: friends of morality have tended to say that guilt is a more purely moral emotion than shame, and survivor guilt is thus an embarrassment for the relationship between guilt and morality, because of the obscurity of its relationship to intentional action and thence to responsibility.

The tenacity of the association between guilt and morality comes out in an explanation sometimes offered for survivor guilt: as a psychoanalyst colleague once said to me, "There must be a fantasy of harm."<sup>21</sup> To the extent that there is only a *fantasy* of harm, of course survivor guilt is irrational. But at least a *fantasy of harm* successfully recruits guilt to the familiar model: guilt goes with responsibility for intentional wrongs. However, the "fantasy of harm" explanation is unsatisfactory. To stand a chance of being true, the fantasy has

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<sup>20</sup> See perhaps unexpectedly Williams 1993, and psychoanalysis *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> For what it's worth, the same explanation finds its way in the Wikipedia article on survivor guilt (Wikipedia 2023): "A mental condition that occurs when a person believes *they have done something wrong* by surviving a traumatic or tragic event when others could not" (my italics). For a different psychoanalytic perspective on survivor guilt not dissimilar to my own, see Modell et al. 1983.

to be unconscious, because in many cases of survivor guilt there is certainly no *consciousness* or indeed outward record of harm anywhere to be seen. But that makes it notoriously difficult to evidence: the main evidence for the fantasy seems to be the prior conviction that guilt always has to go with responsibility for intentional wrongs. If there's an alternative explanation of survivor guilt, that conviction should lapse.

Here, then, is an easy case of survivor guilt: I am sitting in the back seat of a car beside a friend when our driver, who unbeknownst to us is drunk, goes off the road. Just thanks to the angle at which we leave the road, the obstacles that happen to be in the way, etc., my friend dies and I survive. I feel guilty. Something similar is also becoming apparent as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, where vulnerable people who survived hospitalisation feel guilty knowing that others, seemingly no unhealthier than themselves, did not. It's important to this example that the survivors and the non-survivors both received the same level of hospital care. There are of course other examples where one might think—and possibly truly—that one's receiving hospital care had deprived someone else of it, as could be the case even if hospital beds were assigned by lottery, and still more so if by sharp-elbowed competition. To be sure, in either case there would be no *intended* harm, but to relate guilt to causing harm unintentionally—as in Williams' (1981) case of the bus driver who runs over someone who strays into the path of the bus—would be to aim a blow against the morality system at a different point.<sup>22</sup>

I want to suggest that there is an alternative explanation of survivor guilt that has nothing to do with harm, intentional or otherwise. On this view, the roots of survivor guilt connect with the idea of desert, in particular with discomfort at any unequal distribution of outcomes which is not grounded in desert, where grounding them in desert requires them to be grounded not in (for example) undeserved contingencies such as physical strength, but in the “purely moral capacity” (Williams 1973, 234) of effort. Moreover, survivor guilt is not a *sui generis* kind of guilt, but rather a species of a wider genus, namely guilt at the undeserved. Another—arguably commoner—member of the same genus is guilt at being richer or having a bigger garden than other people (and so not about surviving anything); this is betrayed by the fact that this guilt is typically allayed by remarks such as “I worked hard for it,” i.e., those which try to connect the outcome with effort and thus with desert after all. And we find an echo of the same priorities in the converse thought, that in an ideal world order *nothing* would be undeserved—as in the on and off modern discomfort with competitive sport or competitive examinations, which of course do reward effort but also reward merely natural and therefore unearned differences in talent or physique.

The proffered explanation abandons any attempt to connect survivor guilt with responsibility for intentional harms. All the same, it comes not from outside the morality system but from a different corner of it, and so to that extent the association between guilt and the morality system is reinforced—though we should also perhaps conclude, as I suggested earlier, that the morality system is not much of a system. Nonetheless, sceptics about the association should not worry: there is reason enough from other quarters to think that the distinctive association between guilt and morality has been exaggerated.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This thought supplies a reason to steer well clear in this investigation of one very well documented case of what's called survivor guilt, namely the guilt experienced by survivors of Nazi concentration camps. The reason is that in such environments—as in any where survival depends in part on competition for scarce resources—it may be very hard to tell to what extent one's own survival was or was not at another's expense, or therefore whether even inadvertent harms to others were caused. This is not to offer any opinion on whether any given concentration camp survivor did or did not inadvertently harm others, but simply to say that, to focus the present puzzle posed by survivor guilt, it is better to look at cases where this difficult empirical question clearly doesn't arise.

<sup>23</sup> See for example my 2007.

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