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Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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The European Society for Aesthetics



Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: [secretary@eurosa.org](mailto:secretary@eurosa.org)

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## ***Guilt and Shame: Ethics and Aesthetic***

Thorstein Botz-Bornstein<sup>70</sup>

*Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait*

ABSTRACT. While both ethics and aesthetics are “value philosophies,” only ethics concentrates on moral values. Aesthetics takes its name from the ancient Greek αἰσθητικός (*aisthētikós*), which signifies “outer appearance.” I argue that guilt pertains to the realm of ethics whereas shame, though also ethical, pertains more to the realm of aesthetics. While guilt results from accusations of unlawful behavior, shame tends to be produced by pointing out how the transgressing individual “looks” within a certain context. Of course, the limits between shame and guilt are fluid, and in parallel, the limits between ethics and aesthetics are fluid, too. The way one looks to others can have ethical consequences, and shame resulting from this “look” can remain ethical to some extent. Society or “the others” can be an ethical authority. It is even typical for shame to lead to conclusions about the person’s character.

### **Guilt and Shame in Ethics**

The guilt-shame opposition was popularized by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict in her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a book published immediately after World War II, and whose main purpose was to define American culture as a “guilt culture” and Japanese culture as a “shame culture.” Like ethics and aesthetics, guilt and shame can be blended and appear as a compound. However, though there are many overlaps (as especially emotion research has shown), both are distinct experiences that differ in terms of cognition and motivation. Shame concerns the shamed person’s relationship with others or with society as a whole, which means that one feels shame when one is inadequate *in front of others*. Maibom suggests that the subject who feels shame “feels that she falls in the regard of others; she feels watched and exposed. (...) Central to shame is the idea of being observed or watched by others” (2010, p. 569). Since

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<sup>70</sup> E-mail: [thorstenbotz@hotmail.com](mailto:thorstenbotz@hotmail.com)

this “falling” does not need to have anything to do with ethical guilt, it makes sense to attribute shame to aesthetics. Shame experiences are due to “being watched” whereas “being guilty” responds to a more formal deontic system that is less directly (and only more abstractly) linked to society or to “the others.” From this I derive my distinction between aesthetic shame and ethical guilt.

The attacks that aim to make the shamed subject feel embarrassed do not necessarily have an ethical character. They can concern the person’s looks or appearance. One can be ridiculed for wearing the “wrong” clothes or for having an unfavorable body shape, which bears no link to ethics. Even more, since shame is a sanction imposed for not living up to the expectations of others, it can be considered *mostly* aesthetic simply because the others can presumably only see the appearance of my actions and not their moral content (my motivations and reasons). Even the fact of being “shameless” does not necessarily point to a moral mistake: it could merely be a matter of style that the others do not accept. When the “merely aesthetic” character of the shame sanction is denied, shame is ethicized. Though the aesthetically shamed person is guilty of nothing, she will be submitted to an ethical experience that resembles guilt. Often, she will be submitted to a “virtual guilt” based on an “as if.” She *could* have done something wrong because she looks wrong. Having been accused can ruin the “image” and the reputation, which lawyer Alan Dershowitz’s book *Guilt by Accusation* (2019), analyzes by searching for such patterns in #MeToo “trials.” Dershowitz shows how it is possible that though a person has been declared innocent, they can still be “portrayed” as *possibly* guilty. The word “portrayed” is telling because it shows that the accusations have become “aesthetic.”

Generally, shame is seen as an ethical sanction, which is, of course, not erroneous. According to Agnes Heller “the shame-affect [is] a moral feeling par excellence” (Heller, p. 217) and is “inborn in every healthy human being” (p. 219). Philosophers from Aristotle to Max Scheler (1957) as well as psychologists (see Erikson, 1963, Broucek, 1991, Nathanson, 1994) held similar views. Shame depends on a link between the self and others. Williams explains that for the Greeks, shame helped one “rebuild the self”: “Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others” (Williams, p. 94). The feeling of shame is not produced by a fact or a situation but by the interpretation that others give to facts and situations. Shame is not a matter of merely individual judgment, but it is always, even if only indirectly, enabled by society. Even the peculiar case of self-

shaming is dependent on “imagined” others. The self depends on society, and shame establishes a link between both.

Williams argues that shame is an emotion and practical experience much thicker than is usually assumed by moral philosophers as well as moralists. Shame can have more ethical value than guilt. However, paradoxically, one reason for this is that shame is aesthetic. Guilt can more easily be shrugged off than shame; it can be played down through revised interpretations and judgments. By contrast, as shame is mostly due to the judgments of others who heard or saw or even – as will be shown below – *imagined* us doing something bad, shame cannot be easily controlled, which can make shame situations more traumatizing. Shame is in the eye of the beholder, which means that the shamed person can remain guilty not because she *is* guilty but because she *looks* guilty.<sup>71</sup>

Shame is more difficult to bear also because it can be much more diffuse and ungraspable than those claims that lead to clear accusations. The social dynamics of shame are more organic and less linear than those of guilt. In online shaming, shame is even more diffuse as one often does not know who the people are who deliver comments. Shame can be *unheimlich* and nightmarish. In contrast, the question of guilt simply asks whether one *is* guilty or not. Though guilt is also imposed by society, it remains a matter of individual conscience: theoretically, the accused person can judge their own guilt on a personal basis, independently of society’s judgments. This is not possible with shame. When we try to shrug off shame, we can be called “shameless,” which might be even more difficult to bear.

In addition, guilt can be atoned for through punishment whereas shame can persist even when the guilt has been “paid off.” Shame is therefore indeed morally deep but, paradoxically, not because of moral concerns but because of aesthetic concerns: because of what is seen and how it is seen. It might even be due to what has been imagined; according to Baumgarten, aesthetics is the science of “what is sensed and imagined.”

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<sup>71</sup> I can try shrug off shame by saying that I do not identify with the community that has imposed the shame upon me. That I do not care what they say. Williams (1994, p. 98) believes that the others’ opinion can matter to me only when it reflects my own. Self-shame definitely depends on such an internalization of the community’s opinion. Rawls (1973) suggests that self-shame is only possible when the individual has accepted and interiorized the shaming audience’s values. These philosophers are only partially right. We can imagine, today with the internet, to be ostracized by the entire world community. Would it be useful to declare that I don’t identify with their opinion? Even if I don’t, I can still be ashamed. The others’ opinions matter, even when they are not my opinions.



Shame can become ethical in the sense of virtue ethics. Though shame is mostly subjective and concerns mainly a person's "surface" or appearance, observations of shame can lead to radical ethical judgments of the person's character. Strangely, more than guilt, shame seems to concern what one "is" and not only what one has done. In Brené Brown's study, 215 American participating women "contrasted shame with guilt, which they defined or described as a feeling that results from behaving in a flawed or bad way rather than a flawed or bad self." Brown concludes that the guilt versus shame distinction is supported by an "I did/said/believed something bad" versus "I am bad" paradigm (Brown, p. 50). Though shame is due to the subjectivity of others and much less to objective moral standards, shame will be related to a person's character. This is peculiar because society at large is perhaps not qualified to judge a person's character. Would guilt, as it responds to more objective standards, not be a more reliable instance when drawing conclusions about a person's character?

### **The Ethicization of Aesthetics**

When a person is put to shame for some sort of failing, this failing is often not the transgression of a rule but, in a more informal fashion, the transgression of what has been expected by others. More typically than guilt, shame concerns the breach of social etiquette, often leading not to shame but to embarrassment. Embarrassment is a sort of "light" shame, and its analysis can illustrate what I mean by aesthetics and ethics in shame contexts. The embarrassed person has not committed a strong ethical mistake, otherwise she would probably be accused in a more formal fashion. Embarrassment is a sort of shame that remains predominantly aesthetic. Zahavi states that shame signifies a global decrease of self-esteem or self-respect and a painful awareness of personal flaws and deficiencies and insists that this is not the case for embarrassment (2015, p. 210). This supports my claim that embarrassment is a "lighter" version of shame. However, sometimes the embarrassed person is supposed to act *as if* s/he is guilty: she should be ashamed. Then we have an ethicization of embarrassment, which marks a shift from embarrassment to shame. The same can apply to humiliation and recalcitrant or unfitting collective experiences that Krista Thomason analyzes in *Naked* (2018). Embarrassment is aesthetic and less ethical. It does not automatically relate to a feeling of guilt (nor does shame), but guilt can be loaded upon the embarrassed person through an ethicization of embarrassment. Then the person can experience "the global decrease of self-esteem or self-

respect” that Zahavi describes.

Contrary to guilt, shame does not only occur as a result of transgressions: it can even be seen as a natural condition. This topic is clearly related to aesthetics: it becomes obvious in the phenomenon of modesty. The veiling of women in Islam is typically cited as being “that which covers sexual shame” (Abu-Lughod, 1986, p. 159), which suggests that being ashamed is construed as an inborn instinct.<sup>72</sup> The primarily aesthetic act of covering oneself is ethicized by linking it to ethical conditions. These conditions are anchored in nature. Women are often supposed to have more of this inborn instinct. Though modesty is an aesthetic action, it is supposed to be an ethical instinct. Sarah Kofman lengthily explains that Rousseau considers, in his *Emile or on Education*, that a “veil of shame” (Kofman, p. 103) has been created by nature and that shame is a natural phenomenon. One must live up not only to *social* expectations, but also to natural ones – or perhaps rather to those that society deems natural. To enforce this, vestimentary codes or codes of behavior and appearance that are purely aesthetic, are enforced. Since aesthetics finds itself based on nature, it becomes a matter of ethics. However, we can argue that in the end, shame remains more aesthetic than ever: a woman is expected to *look* ashamed. Who cares what she is really doing? The modest appearance is sufficient.

Shame is a behavior code and thus very much linked to aesthetics. But when it is virtuous to be ashamed, then aesthetics has been ethicized; and even more so when it is virtuous to be ashamed *just for the sake of being ashamed*. For guilt, this same requirement would be found irrational.

Shame can *appear* real even when no real guilt exists. Reason identifies guilt in the form of necessary, abstract concepts whereas shame is perceived in the form of concrete appearances that can be contingent. One can be “reasonably” guilty, but as long as this guilt is hidden, one can still be recognized as honorable by the community because the community judges “only” the surface. Vice versa, one can be dishonored even though one is innocent.

The inverse case is also possible: there is the aestheticization of ethics. Abstract guilt is often not found sufficient, and a guilty individual must then also be shamed. One desires the

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<sup>72</sup> In Arab cultures, the identification of femininity with shame and masculinity with honor is common and revolves around the generic Arab term *ird*, which is connected with “female chastity and continence” (Abu-Zeid, 1965, p. 65). The link with shame is provided by the fact that *ird* is always linked to sexuality and the codes of its repression (cf. Patai, 1973, pp. 120–125). Patai presents the entire Arab world as a shame culture.

aesthetic event of shaming. Underperformers or bad students can be seen as inadequate or ridiculous. From a purely ethical point of view, it would be enough to give them bad grades, but when the ethical problem becomes aestheticized, one depicts them as lazy and undisciplined. Punishment, which should only be functional, acquires concrete aesthetic dimensions. When the ethical mistake is retold by using concrete descriptions, it becomes aesthetic. The strong mediatization of public and private events in modern societies leads to more such aesthetizations. The media constantly needs stories containing concrete characters. A guilty person cannot simply be “abstractly” guilty but must also be declared inadequate or ridiculous. It is true that this procedure can sometimes instill the right behavior just because it is aesthetic, as Thomason (2018, p. 181) argues. But in other cases, the aestheticization serves no purpose other than that of shaming for the sake of shaming.

“Aesthetic” shame can have an entirely autonomous existence: one can be put to shame for something for which one has had very limited or no responsibility, or even for something one has not done at all. People can be put to shame for the coincidence of being born into poverty or into illegitimacy. The latter are indeed classical reasons why individuals have been submitted to shame. We can feel ashamed because of the acts of others, of close relatives, most typically. Though there is no logical link between, for example, a father’s virtue and his son’s shameful deed, a blemish can darken the father’s existence. Heller speaks of liability instead of responsibility (Heller, p. 218), but in many cases there is not even liability. Why is this aesthetic? I call it aesthetic because it concerns the person’s appearance in society, an appearance that is independent of ethical acts. Shame is more like virtual guilt: it is potential and can be *seen* as a potentiality, but not more. It is “in force” (which is the original meaning of virtual). When I am ashamed of the immoral actions of my country or of my employer, it is clear that I neither support these actions nor am I responsible nor liable for them; but others can *imagine* that I *could* identify with these actions. Society draws a certain picture of me within social contexts. I am neither responsible nor liable for the actions that others performed before I was born; but these actions can stick to my reputation in the form of a fault that is aesthetic. I must “aesthetically” – and not necessarily ethically – identify with my country. My country’s bad actions are supposed to make me feel embarrassed. This is related to honor, which is an ethical notion that very much stretches into the realm of aesthetics. In the case of the country, it becomes very clear how easily aesthetic shame can be transformed into ethical

guilt: “All Germans are *guilty* of the holocaust,” is an opinion that is often seriously held. However, contemporary Germans can only be ashamed or embarrassed because of the historical image that have inherited; they cannot feel guilty. Nor does the shame that they feel denote their character. Ethicization of shame means here that their guilt can more easily be imagined.

Brown states that the experience of shame is often painful because we believe we are “unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, p. 47). Being unworthy has an ethical foundation. However, one needs to distinguish between feeling unworthy and feeling that one *looks* unworthy. Only the aesthetic experience of being aware of how one looks leads to shame.

## Shame and Art

Aesthetics deals with images while ethics deals with facts. Furthermore, aesthetics deals with contingencies whereas ethics mostly deals with necessary systems. Reckoning with contingent constellations instead of with necessary ethical structures brings the shame business closer to an aesthetic activity. Artists too, must deal with contingencies. A work of art cannot be produced along the necessary rules of science or ethics, but the process of artistic creation is always playful to some extent. It deals with unpredictable constellations. Nor can the value of a work of art be established along necessary lines.

Both the act of shaming somebody and the overcoming or preventing of shame resemble therefore “artistic” processes. One deals neither with hard facts nor with rules but with allusions and possibilities. Further, being submitted to shame generally works through derision, sarcasm, ridicule, mockery, and laughter, expressions that are also used when reacting negatively to art. In contrast, “mockery and laughter are not allowed in the courtroom” (Lamb, 1983, p. 243).<sup>73</sup> Sussman calls derision, of which shaming mainly consists, “quasi-aesthetic” responses to human action (Sussman, 2008, p. 300).

## Conclusion

In principle, when shaming somebody, one uses aesthetic features for ethical purposes; but

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<sup>73</sup> One might argue that guilt can be followed by derision, sarcasm, ridicule, mockery, and laughter, too. However, it is then not meant to establish or reinforce guilt but to aestheticize guilt and transform it into shame: ‘You are not only guilty but also ridiculous.’

paradoxically, as has been shown, as an aesthetic phenomenon, shame can have a stronger and more enduring impact than ethical guilt, which can lead to the false conclusion that shame is not aesthetic but predominantly ethical. The power and persistence of shame in ethical matters is surprising because, though the good and the beautiful share, in the Platonic canon, the same essence or “forms,” aesthetics is concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty. Though moral ideals can have a resemblance to aesthetic ideals, the purpose of aesthetics is not to talk about ethics, but rather about how phenomena appear within various contexts. Normally, one would expect ethics to have a stronger impact on moral conduct than aesthetics. Nonetheless, when it comes to shame, aesthetics is often more “ethically important” than ethics. The feeling of guilt is something one carries within; it can be individual and independent of others. In contrast, shame is submitted to the above intricacies of aesthetic philosophies.

Intellectual history shows that with regard to guilt and shame, ethics and aesthetics tended to be confused instead of being clearly distinguished. Though they will always remain linked, a more consistent identification of ethical and aesthetical procedures in shame/guilt questions is useful, especially in mediatized contemporary societies. I hope to have shown that in shame/guilt problems, aesthetics can be detached from ethics. One mistake is to ethicize shame. Further, it happens that an infraction that should induce only guilt is aestheticized in order to induce shame. This can happen for educational reasons or for mischievous reasons. Both procedures become problematic when we find it difficult to consider a person’s potentially “shameful” behavior irrespective of ethical questions; or a person’s unethical behavior irrespective of aesthetic questions. Sometimes, when mistakes are merely aesthetic, ethical judgments should be suspended, much as the ancient skeptics suspended judgments. Sometimes we need, with regard to shame, a phenomenological reduction. Many rules that need to be followed in cultures are not necessarily ethical. Often, they are linked to traditions and customs and merely guarantee the smooth functioning of society. Punishment for infractions is necessary, but it can be done without turning the rules into ethical ones. For example, somebody who violates traffic regulations interrupts the reasonable flow of traffic and must be sanctioned. But it is not necessary to employ ethical arguments. Traffic can metaphorically stand for culture, customs, and traditions. Many traffic regulations might have been based on ethical values to begin with, but constantly reminding oneself of these ethical origins and implications represents an ethicization of aesthetics. Eventually, viewing society

through ethics can lead to a culture in which even imagined acts will be judged ethically. The disentanglement of ethics and aesthetics prevents such mistakes.

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