

Article

A Confucian Defense of Shame: Morality, Self-Cultivation, and the Dangers of Shamelessness

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Abstract: Many philosophers and scholars in the West have a negative view of shame. In much of post-classical Western ethical thought, shame is compared negatively with guilt, as shame is associated with the “outer”, how one appears before others (and thus is merely a matter of “face”), and guilt is associated with the “inner” realm of the conscience and soul. Anthropologists and philosophers have used this framework to distinguish more morally evolved Western “guilt cultures” from Asian “shame cultures”. Many psychologists also have a negative view of shame, seeing it as damaging to the self and “devastating in its consequences”. In this paper, I argue that the understandings of shame found in these philosophers and psychologists are misguided, and that their flaws can be revealed by looking at the understanding of shame in the classical Confucian tradition. In response to philosophers who see shame as a “lesser” moral emotion than guilt, Confucius (孔子 Kongzi) and Mencius (孟子 Mengzi) will articulate an understanding of shame that has a deeply internal dimension and is more essential in the process of moral cultivation than guilt. In response to the psychologists who warn about the harm of shame, the Confucians will help us distinguish between moral and pathological shame, showing us why the latter is harmful, but the former is something that no moral person can be without. I will show that the Confucian perspective on shame and guilt is profoundly relevant to the historical moment we are living in (particularly the years of the Trump Administration), and that the Confucian view demonstrates that there is something much worse, and far more devastating, than shame in its consequences—shamelessness.



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1. Introduction

Harriet Lerner of the Menninger Clinic wrote, “Shame is the most debilitating emotion, the most devastating in its consequences” (Lerner 2019). Sources ranging from academic psychology journals to popular parenting websites warn about the dangers and harms of shame. Parents are told that it is wrong to make their child feel shame, a view that is consistent with the emphasis on cultivating self-esteem in children. Harvard Medical School’s Health website featured a piece by Dr. Claire McCarthy, who writes that “shaming is a bad idea” (McCarthy 2020). The belief that shame is a destructive emotion goes beyond the context of parenting and children, and many psychologists see shame as uniquely harmful. The Menninger Clinic’s 2019 John M. Oldham National Mental Health Symposium was dedicated entirely to “The Problem of Shame” (Menninger Clinic 2019). At the conference, Peter Fonagy from University College London called shame “the feeling that destroys the self” (Fonagy 2019). Furthermore, in much of post-classical Western ethical thought, shame is compared negatively with guilt, as shame is associated with the “outer,” how one appears before others, rather than the inner, the deeper, the soul (rather than the face). So, shame has been seen negatively by philosophers and theologians for being a lesser moral emotion than guilt, associated with less morally advanced cultures, and by psychologists, who see it as harmful and corrosive to a healthy sense of self.

I believe that both of these beliefs are misguided, and that their flaws can be revealed by looking at the understanding of shame in the Confucian tradition. Powerful insights

into the nature, importance and value of shame can be found in the texts attributed to Confucius himself (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE) and his follower Mencius (Mengzi, 4th century BCE; active 320–310 BCE).

In response to philosophers who see shame as a “lesser” moral emotion than guilt, the Confucians will articulate an understanding of shame that is more essential in the process of moral cultivation than guilt. In response to the psychologists who warn about the harm of shame, the Confucians would argue that there is something much worse, and far more devastating in its consequences—*shamelessness*. Reflecting on the condition of shamelessness reveals something about character, and it brings us into the realm of virtue ethics. I believe that this moment in history (with particular attention paid to American politics) demands a reflection on shame and shamelessness guided by the approach of virtue ethics. The Confucian thinkers of two and a half millennia ago will provide insights profoundly relevant to our current historical moment.

In virtue ethics across religious and philosophical traditions, an important role is played by the “Good Person Criterion”. Because virtues are complex dispositions to act, feel and think in particular ways in certain kinds of situations, one cannot create a simple formula or principle that can capture how virtues are expressed and lived. There is no analogue to the utilitarian calculus or the universalizability principle in the realm of virtue ethics. Rather, a central role is played by good people who serve as exemplars, because virtues can be seen only in the lives of virtuous people (real or fictional), whose examples should inspire us and whom we should try to emulate.

The notion of a Good Person Criterion implies its opposite—the Bad Person Criterion. There are bad people who are used as examples to avoid, people toward whom we should have strongly critical and negative feelings. Texts in virtue ethics highlight the deformations of character and the damage that they do, warning us against vices such as cowardice, dishonesty, and cruelty.

What keeps most people from openly displaying these vices, even when there would not be legal or financial consequences, is a sense of shame. Most people, whatever other vices they have, do have a sense of shame, and that is why most people make an effort to hide their bad behavior, even when it is not illegal (e.g., people who would not want their sexual indiscretions, displays of cowardice, lying, or bigoted emails to become public). It is rare to find a person who is truly shameless, a person who can serve as a “Bad Person Criterion” whose behavior can reveal why the Confucians are right when they argue that shame is essential for moral cultivation and that the good person must possess a sense of shame.

But many political commentators have argued that we are living in a period dominated by a remarkable example of shamelessness—Donald J. Trump. Writers from a variety of disciplines have written about Trump’s character, usually as a reflection on his vices. Compiling these books, columns, and essays results in a discussion of virtually all of the vices highlighted in various traditions (Greek and Chinese virtue traditions, certainly).¹ Some have made the case that the most significant and damaging character trait of Trump—and what makes him so dangerous—is his shamelessness.

David Graham writes in *The Atlantic*, “Trump himself doesn’t demonstrate any sense of shame at all. This politically potent character trait allows the president to do things that would have pricked the conscience of other political leaders . . . Trump is doing things that predecessors would have been ashamed to do. But Trump often doesn’t know his civics well enough to recognize his violations, and he doesn’t have any shame” (Graham 2019). Philip Rotner states, “Trump’s problem isn’t that he doesn’t know right from wrong. It’s that he doesn’t care. Which brings us to shamelessness. Because no matter what you thought you knew about Donald Trump, he is expanding and revising our understanding

¹ Some commentators have pointed out that reviewing the list of the seven deadly sins (also—and more accurately—known as the seven capital vices: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth) and reflecting on Trump’s words and deeds will confirm this. See, for instance, Winters (2019) and Reich (2020).

of the word” (Rotner 2019).² Bret Stephens observed, “Just as ignorance was strength in George Orwell’s 1984, shamelessness became virtue in Trump’s GOP” (Stephens 2020).

We are living in a time that demands reflection on shame, and these writers effectively capture the harm that shamelessness can do. The Confucian thinkers provide a compelling account of why shame is a fundamental element of morality and a key feature of moral development. However, the psychologists who warn against shame have an important point to make. It is essential, therefore, to distinguish between the form of shame that Confucians are describing and the form that the psychologists are warning us about. I would argue that the critique of shame given by the psychologists I quoted earlier would not apply to shame as Confucians conceive it.

In this paper, I will provide a distinction between the Confucian notion of shame, what we might call *moral shame*, and the kind that we should strive to avoid, *pathological shame*. Ultimately, the Confucians show us the value of shame and the danger of shamelessness, and also help us distinguish between two forms of shame, one of which should be avoided, and the other of which no good person can be without. They can also show why the common Western view of shame, articulated in contrast to guilt, is problematic. Ultimately, reflecting on shame and guilt through the lens of the Confucian thinkers will reveal the very characteristics of shame that make it an essential moral emotion.

2. Shame and Guilt: The Conventional Western View

In order to address the notion of moral shame, we must explore the distinction between shame and guilt. Any word referring to a complex moral emotion has a range of meanings, and it is clear that “shame” and “guilt” have a variety of shades and uses. My purpose here is to argue that our moral lives are more clearly understood and enriched when we recognize that there are two distinct but related moral emotions that can be effectively delineated by the words “shame” and “guilt”. I believe that the history, etymology, and usage of the words, along with psychological studies and philosophical reflection, reveal what distinguishes these two moral emotions. Reflection on the differences between these two emotions, and why we sometimes confuse or conflate them, can be a productive way to reveal crucial elements of our moral lives. Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi write, “As widely acknowledged, emotions accomplish both an informative function about our relationship with the environment, by signaling the (prospective or actual) failure or attainment of our goals . . . and a motivational function, by triggering goals aimed at favoring the attainment, or avoiding the failure, of the desired states of affairs. Therefore, it is generally adaptive to understand what the experience of an emotion is ‘telling’ us” (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2018). They argue that attending to our differentiated emotional responses is helpful and adaptive, as the emotions can guide us toward developing more effective responses to negative events. They write, “Thus, it is worthwhile to explore what kind of information is conveyed and what kind of change is fostered by each self-critical emotion” (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2018).³

² Megan McCardle, explaining how Trump can brazenly violate longstanding social norms that have constrained other leaders, writes, “A normal person, possessed of a modicum of empathy and a healthy capacity for shame, wouldn’t have done such things. But if a normal politician had somehow done them, and gotten caught, he likely would have slunk away, withdrawing partly to avoid further public shaming but also to shield innocent bystanders—his family, his party—who would otherwise suffer for his sins. Not Trump, who seems largely indifferent to any suffering except his own and entirely immune to remorse, or its wistful cousin, regret” (McCardle 2019). Karen Tumulty writes, “Finally, journalists should give up thinking that there is anything to be accomplished by confronting Trump on his dissembling or that he will ever admit to making a mistake. ‘Accountability IS a legitimate aim, but *only a politician with a sense of shame can be held accountable* by tough questions,’ press critic Jay Rosen tweeted . . . ” (Tumulty 2020; italics mine).

³ Miriam Greenspan worries about our tendency to think of “negative emotions” exclusively as causes of illness. Rather, she argues that such emotions actually can be teachers and guides if we handle them correctly and avoid their pathological manifestations. She lists a number of “essential capacities” for emotional intelligence, which include sensitivity, the ability to truly feel an emotion (which involves body-awareness); literacy, the ability to distinguish between emotions (which involves reflection, analysis and critical thinking); and mindfulness, the ability to remain aware of the various aspects of an emotion (somatic, cognitive, volitional) without completely identifying with the emotion or getting pulled along or overwhelmed by it. See Greenspan (2004).

Shame, many have argued, has traditionally been observed far more commonly in Asian cultures, whereas “the West” is the province of guilt. This apparent difference—between an America in which people generally come to terms with their transgressions in the confessional booth or on the therapist’s couch, and a nation like Japan in which public shaming is central (the sight of politicians bowing in public contrition is commonplace)—seems to illustrate the distinction that has dominated much thinking on the issue of “guilt cultures” and “shame cultures”. That is, guilt is an “inward” matter of individual conscience, where one confronts the moral law; in theistic terms, guilt is a matter between the individual and God. Shame, on the other hand, occurs in the eyes of the community, where what is central is the notion of being caught (or potentially being caught) and bringing shame upon oneself, one’s “name”, one’s family or nation. Shame is connected with the notion of “losing face”. Often implicit in this understanding is the notion that guilt is “higher”, more morally evolved, than shame.⁴ This is a view that Bernard Williams calls “progressivist”, the view that “shame was later replaced, in its crucial ethical role, by guilt”. On this view, ancient cultures such as the Chinese and Greek were governed by notions of shame rather than “a full notion of moral guilt, with its implications of freedom and autonomy . . . Moral guilt was attained only by the modern consciousness” (Williams 1993, p. 5).

As an example, here is the way Robert Bellah describes the movement from shame to guilt, which he sees as a move from “outer” to “inner”: “The center of the moral life moves from outside to within the individual who becomes sovereign judge of his conduct without having to render account to anyone but himself and God” (Bellah 1970). On this understanding, guilt is connected with notions of autonomy, freedom, the sacrality of the individual, and the individual’s relation to something “higher” than the community (*sittlichkeit*), such as a moral law (*moralität*). An individual stands not before others, but before either God as giver of law or abstract rational principles as foundations of law. In James Knight’s description of guilt, “There is a distinctive experience of ‘I should’ or ‘I ought’, implying a reference to a moral standard in the form of a general moral principle . . . The individual is . . . guided by a firmly organized body of *internalized moral rules* which maintain their own *autonomy*” (Knight 1969). This can also be seen in Lawrence Kohlberg’s picture of morality, in which “moral development culminates in an autonomous, *prior-to-society* perspective where the individual rationally defines his or her own values and principles in a *universalizable* way” (Kohlberg 1984, p. 201; italics mine).

In this essentially Kantian worldview, shame is given a negative valence, for it represents simply “losing face” in front of others; it is, therefore, concerned with appearance, with the “outer” rather than the “inner”. Many Western scholars, therefore, contrast the “shame cultures” of the ancient Greek and Chinese with the “guilt culture” of the Kantian/Christian world. A classic example of this understanding is that of the influential anthropologist, Ruth Benedict. Benedict writes, “A society that inculcates absolute standards of morality and relies on men’s developing a conscience is a guilt culture by definition . . . Shame is a reaction to other people’s criticism . . . It requires an audience or at least a man’s fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not . . . ” (Benedict 1946). She draws the following conclusion about a person in a “shame culture”: “So long as his bad behavior does not get out in the world, he need not be troubled . . . True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin” (Benedict 1946, p. 222). On Benedict’s view, since shame is a reaction to the criticism or judgment of others, an audience is necessary. Certainly, one who is not

⁴ In addition, “guilt” is more pervasive, both in terms of philosophical attention and everyday use, than “shame” in contemporary Western culture. Helen Lynd argues that the concept of guilt pervades Western thought. She observes, “Protestant theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Anglo-Catholics such as T.S. Eliot believe that the attempt to substitute an optimistic humanitarianism for man’s consciousness of guilt is one of the reasons for the present plight of the world. Freudians and some existentialists believe that a sense of guilt pervades life . . . ” She concludes that “experiences of shame are relatively little studied because in our society it is so easily linked with or subsumed under guilt” (Lynd 1999). Susan Miller agrees, pointing out that when she looked under the heading “Shame” in the *Psychological Abstracts* it said only “See Guilt.” (Miller 1996, p. 140). Charles Rycroft writes, “Shame is the Cinderella of unpleasant emotions, having received much less attention than anxiety, guilt and depression” (Rycroft 1968, p. 152).

troubled as long as his “bad behavior does not get out in the world” does not seem like a morally evolved person, but more like someone without a conscience, someone lacking an internalized sense of the good or right (e.g., like a child on the lowest rung of Kohlberg’s developmental moral hierarchy).

This understanding seems to be reflected in mainstream media. During the Clinton presidency, when President Clinton engaged in a series of public mea culpas, a front page article in the *San Jose Mercury News* reflected this widespread understanding. It labeled Clinton’s “public penance” a “return to shame”, tying the notion of shame with the *public* nature of his apology. In fact, the article goes so far as to divorce the notion of shame from the issue of whether or not the person has actually done anything wrong. The article explained, “Technically, guilt is the feeling of self-reproach that comes from one’s own understanding of having done something wrong. Shame, on the other hand, is the feeling that comes from knowing one is regarded *by others* as dishonorable. It sticks to a person—whether or not that person has truly done anything wrong—because of how he or she is perceived” (Scheinin 1998).

In the analysis below, I will show how the Confucian perspective calls into question some fundamental aspects of the conventional view presented above and explains why shame is essential to moral character. A Confucian view will challenge us to see shame not simply as a “negative emotion” (to be cured by building up “self-esteem”), nor, as thinkers like Benedict argue, a “lower” moral response than guilt, but rather as a cognitive, affective and somatic guide necessary to the development of virtue. The Confucian view will lend support to Samuel Johnson’s statement, “Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue” (Johnson 2002).

I hope to show that the distinction between shame and guilt, while always difficult and contestable, is a useful one that does reflect differences in ways we should and often do think and feel morally. These differences, however, contrast in many ways with those presented in the understanding of Benedict and others.⁵ I think the Confucian perspective is a compelling one, and worth our careful thought—both for how it exposes the problems in these influential (mis)characterizations and for how it can help us understand our own moral lives.

Finally, I will demonstrate the shortcomings of certain traditional ways of conceiving of shame and guilt, and critique how such conceptions have supported a way of (1) labelling cultures and (2) understanding and evaluating views of the self and morality within them. We can see how conceptions of shame and guilt often act as lenses through which a culture or tradition is perceived. The popular take on the shame/guilt dichotomy has been a tool for dividing up, and often morally ranking, cultures (always resulting in some version of Western supremacy). Calling it into question can shed some light on possible distortions and perhaps act as a corrective.

3. The Confucian Understanding (Confucius and Mencius)

From our first encounter with classical Confucian texts, we see that shame plays a central role.⁶ In the *Analects* of Confucius, (13.20), Zigong asks, “What must a man be like before he can be said truly to be a gentleman?”⁷ The Master said, “A man who has a sense

⁵ The conventional view of shame as “outer” and guilt is “inner” can also be found in the work of Margaret Mead, Talcott Parsons and E.R. Dodds, among others see Lynd (1999, pp. 21, 262).

⁶ The Chinese characters that are translated as “shame” are *xiu* 羞 and *chi* 恥 which are combined into a binome, *xiuchi* 羞恥 in modern Chinese. Bryan Van Norden has made a convincing case that we can justifiably understand *xiu* and *chi* as corresponding roughly to what we mean by “shame” (Van Norden 2002). I am going to go further and say that the way Confucians use these characters is the way that we *should* use the word “shame,” but often do not.

⁷ The title usually translated “gentleman,” *junzi* 君子 is high moral praise, a moral rather than hereditary term for the Confucians (prior to Confucius, it had hereditary connotations); it is a judgment of the excellent character of the individual. Despite its gendered reference in the traditional Confucian vocabulary, the term can be understood in a gender-neutral way (e.g., “noble person,” “excellent person”) without any loss of essential meaning.

of shame (*you chi* 有恥) in the way he conducts himself and, when sent abroad, does not disgrace the commission of his lord can be said to be a Gentleman”.⁸

In the ethical vision of Mencius, one of the most well-known and influential interpreters and defenders of Confucius, shame occupies a central role. For Mencius, each human being possesses a moral heart-mind (*xin* 心), a notion which has its analogue in the Kantian picture. But unlike Kant, for whom our endowment is moral because of its capacity to recognize a binding rational law, for Mencius it is moral because it possesses incipient moral feelings and ways of thinking that, if cultivated, develop into powerful moral guides that lead to spontaneously ethical behavior.⁹ Mencius says that the heart-mind is composed of four nascent moral tendencies, responses to the world that are possessed by all human beings. Each of these, if cultivated, becomes a full-blown virtue. One of these four “moral sprouts” is shame, which, when cultivated, becomes the virtue of *Yi* 義, often translated as “righteousness”.¹⁰ Just a few passages will indicate the importance of shame to Mencius: In 7A6, Mencius states, “A man must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed . . . ”¹¹ The next passage (7A7) reads, “Great is the use of shame to a man . . . If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other people, how will he ever become their equal?” Mencius later describes what a cultivated person delights in: “Above, he is not ashamed to face Heaven; below, he is not ashamed to face humanity”. (7A20)

3.1. Inwardness and Self-Cultivation in Confucian Thought

There are some scholars who not only apply the interpretation of shame as “outer” to the Confucians, but go beyond this to essentially deny any inwardness to the Confucians at all. One prominent example is Herbert Fingarette, an often sensitive interpreter of Confucian thought. In *Confucius-The Secular as Sacred*, he echoes the view of Benedict, “*Chi* (shame) looks ‘outward, not inward . . . It is not, as is guilt, a matter of the inward state, of the sense that one is as a person and independently of one’s public status and repute, mean or reprehensible” (Fingarette 1972, p. 30). As notions of shame and guilt are connected with different notions of the self, we see how such understanding can lead to mischaracterizations of Confucians. In fact, Fingarette goes so far as to claim that the entire notion of an “inner psychic life . . . never entered (Confucius’) head . . . For Confucius, the spiritual is public, ‘outer’ . . . ” (Fingarette 1972, pp. 45–46). I will show that not only is internality crucial to the Confucian notion of shame, but that we might come to the exact opposite interpretation as Benedict and Fingarette—namely, that shame is more “inner directed” and guilt more “outer directed”.

Before we establish the “internality” of shame and the centrality of “inwardness” in Confucian thought, we can take a look at some of the passages in *The Analects* that Fingarette himself lists when coming to his conclusion about shame’s outwardness:

1. “There is no point in seeking the views of a “gentleman” who, though he sets his heart on the Way, is ashamed of poor food and poor clothes”. (4.9)
2. “(Kong Wenzhi) was not ashamed to seek the advice of those who were beneath him in station. That is why he was called *wen* (cultured)”. (5.15)

⁸ All passages from the *Analecets* are taken from the D.C. Lau translation (Confucius 1979). The Chinese text used is from Lunyu (Confucius 1991).

⁹ Mencius’ understanding of the heart-mind must be understood in relation to his understanding of Tian 天, usually translated “Heaven.” For Confucius and Mencius, there is a sense that Tian is a moral force and that the structure of the cosmos is a deeply moral one. For Mencius, Tian endows us with morality and moves us in the direction of goodness and harmony if we pay attention to the natural dispositions of the heart. So Confucian virtue ethics, especially as articulated by Mencius, is connected with a metaphysical reality. For Mencius, when we listen to the moral guidance within, we are attending to the call of Heaven. He explains, “To fully apply one’s heart is to understand one’s nature. If one understands one’s nature, one understands Heaven. To preserve one’s mind and to nourish one’s nature is the means to serve Heaven” (7A1). Therefore, when one acts unethically, one is going against one’s true nature, the heart that is one’s heavenly endowment, and thus is acting in opposition to Heaven itself.

¹⁰ See the discussion of *Yi*, below.

¹¹ All passages from the *Mencius* are taken from the D.C. Lau translation (Mencius 1970). The Chinese text used is from Mengzi (Mencius 1991).

3. “If anyone can, while dressed in a worn-out gown . . . stand beside a man wearing fox fur . . . without feeling ashamed, it is, I suppose, Yu . . . How can he be anything but good?” (9.27)
4. “The Master said, “It is shameful to make salary your sole object, irrespective of whether the Way prevails in the state or not”. (14.1)

Fingarette argues that shame for Confucius “is associated with specific external possessions, conduct or status; it is a moral sentiment focused upon one’s status and conduct in relation to the world rather than an inward charge against one’s stained, corrupt self” (Fingarette 1972, p. 30). However, when we look at the set of passages given above, we see that they are concerned with “external possessions” and “status” only in order to argue that these are *not* the proper province for shame. Confucius is saying that shame is *not* the proper response for those who are poorly paid, fed or dressed, or those who cross the boundaries of status for the sake of learning. Rather, as we shall see, shame must be reserved for issues of character and whether or not one is following the Way. The “external” is not at all fundamental; rather, the focus is on character cultivation, which, I will show, has a decidedly “inward” orientation.

In the Confucian tradition, the heart of ethics is the notion of the cultivation of the individual, the formation of character, in particular the cultivation of certain virtues, or excellences of character. While Confucians emphasize the role of the teacher and the tradition (e.g., classic texts and thinkers, rituals), they also emphasize the importance of *self-cultivation*, of the individual’s continuous task of shaping his or her own character, a process which involves self-reflection (*fan xing* 反省) and a conscious attempt to change and improve. A well-known *Analects* passage (1.4) reads, “Every day, I *examine myself* on three counts. In what I have undertaken on another’s behalf, have I failed to do my best? In my dealings with my friends have I failed to be trustworthy in what I say? Have I passed on to others anything that I have not tried out myself?” Elsewhere, Confucius says, “If, on *examining himself*, a man finds nothing to reproach himself for, what worries and fears can he have?” (12.4, italics mine)¹²

So, we see a type of inward self-reflection, a surveying of one’s actions and attitudes. One judges oneself not against any particular moral law (“Have I transgressed?”), but rather through questions like “Have I done my best?” In other words, the question is not “Have I violated some norm, rule or law”, but “Have I fallen short?” We can see that there is *no* sense of “Will I be caught?” or “How would it be if they found out?” It is simply, “Have I fallen short of an ideal?”

One difference, then, between guilt and shame, suggested here and developed more fully below, concerns the understanding of what constitutes moral failure. In the case of guilt, the failure is generally conceived as the *violation* of a law or norm; with shame, it is the *falling short* of an ideal. We must go beyond this to see what is to be done when a failure is discovered or perceived in both cases. We see a revealing difference that can shed light on the shame/guilt distinction by looking at what we do in response to these violations. In much of the philosophical and religious treatment of guilt, we see that guilt can be cleansed with repentance or atonement. One can confess, pay restitution, be punished with a certain severity or certain amount of time to achieve some proportionality with the act. A particular *act*, therefore, helps cleanse a wrong; there is an act-act correspondence and proportionality between the violation and the “cleansing”.

Things are different with the notion of shame in the Confucian texts. One does not find confession or atonement. Nor is there a notion of somehow appearing publicly to suffer the open judgment of others. Rather, the proper response, beyond the feeling of shame itself (which recognizes the instance of falling short), is to rectify oneself, to intensify one’s

¹² This act of inner reflection is captured by the character *xing* or the combination *fan xing*. *Xing* is defined in the *Ci Hai* with the words *cha kan* 查看 to inspect, examine or look carefully at. To emphasize the inward orientation, the character is found in combinations such as *nei xing* 内省 (*nei* meaning inward), which is found in 12.4, and *zi xing* 自省 (reflecting on oneself, self-reflection). When paired with *fan*, “to turn back on,” we have the notion of “introspection,” “self-examination.” In 1.4, the object of reflection is *wu shen* 吾身, “myself.”

efforts at improvement and cultivation. Rather than atoning, Confucians tell us, mend your ways; take yourself to task inwardly and reform yourself so that you cultivate the virtues that will help avoid such behavior in the future. In dispensing advice, Confucius says (1.8), “When you make a mistake, do not be afraid of mending your ways”. Similarly, “Not to mend one’s ways when one has erred is to err indeed” (15.30). Later, he says, “I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who, on seeing his own errors, is able to take himself to task inwardly” (5.27). Elsewhere, he says, “It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate (*xiu* 修) virtue . . . inability, when I am told what is right, to move to where it is, and inability to reform (*gai* 改) myself when I have defects” (7.3).¹³

In guilt, I would argue, there is a focus on individual action, the violation or transgression (this focus on the act at a point in time is connected with the emphasis on the free, decision-making will). This failure of the will requires atonement, confession, or cleansing, acts that will lead to a removing of the stain. With shame, the act is an indication of the character defect. Because the moral failure points back to the state of your character, the proper response is to work on the self. In a representative passage, Confucius says, “I can do nothing with the man who gives assent (to exemplary words) but does not rectify himself or the man who is pleased (with tactful words) but does not reform himself” (9.24).

Mencius’ interpretation of this process of self-examination and rectification emphasizes the act of *si* 思 reflection, an attention to the operations of the moral heart-mind. Such inward attention should help keep one true to the deepest part of oneself, allowing its always present but often quiet voice to be heard. The notion of being true to yourself, respecting yourself, means reverence for this inner moral capacity. Mencius says, “Every person has in him that which is exalted” (6A17), and “It is not worth the trouble to talk to a man who has no respect for himself (4A10)”. He continuously praises the “person who is true to himself” (4A12). This understanding does not require one to be judged in the eyes of the community to feel shame, but rather emphasizes failing to live up to who you essentially *are*.

In Confucian thought, then, the feeling of shame is not directed towards who you fundamentally are, but at the gap between who you are now and who you could be. **The tension between the present state of your character and the ideal state of character produces shame.** For this reason, shame is a continuous motivating force, one of the four sacralized responses to the world—we must listen to it and nurture it. This reflects the positive view Mencius had of human nature, whereby a human being is not stained with sin (for which they might, for example, need grace). Rather, human beings are perfectible; shame only shows them how far they are from the ideal. For this reason, it is a guide that leads us in the direction of virtue cultivation.

Since, for Mencius, the moral guide is within, inward self-reflection becomes even more central to his picture than it was for Confucius. In 7A4, Mencius says, “All the ten thousand things are within me. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination (*fan shen* 反身), that I am true to myself”. Passage 4A4 powerfully illustrates this inward orientation: “If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom . . . In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose”. For Mencius, self-examination, the process of *si* (better translated as inner “reflection” or “attention” rather than, as is often done, “thinking”) is one of the

¹³ This picture suggests that shame never “sticks” to one as fundamentally as, say, the notion of “original sin,” for it can always be met with a response, with one’s own effort at self-cultivation and transformation. The one time in the *Analects* that a person seems irredeemable, it is not because he is in any way essentially stained by sin or guilt. In fact, Confucius refuses to condemn him. Rather, it is because the person is lazy to the point where further cultivation has become impossible. “Zai Yu was in bed in the daytime. The Master said, ‘A piece of rotten wood cannot be carved, nor can a wall of dried dung be trowelled. As far as Yu is concerned, what is the use of condemning him?’” (5.10). Zai Yu is hopeless not because there is anything irredeemably evil or shameful about him, but because he will not work on himself. A teacher can only help someone who is motivated to change in the first place. (Here lies the “paradox of virtue.” For both Confucius and Aristotle, the course of cultivation is only open to those who see the reason for undertaking the path in the first place. This means that those who *most* need transformation will not avail themselves of it.)

most important parts of his ethical picture. *Si* allows us to feel our moral responses, it attunes us to them, which in turn strengthens them as guides to behavior.¹⁴

Thus, guilt requires forgiveness, grace or atonement; shame calls for self-cultivation, continuous work on one's own character. Such self-cultivation requires self-reflection, an inner survey of one's actions, feelings and intentions. We can now see the problem with the picture of "shame" as lacking internality. We can also understand why the Confucians were so concerned with the distinction between inner states and outer appearances. There has been a stubborn tendency, in the study of both ancient Greek and Chinese texts, to see people as lacking an internal dimension, concerned simply with outer appearances rather than with the genuine "moral" realm of will, of binding law, etc. But the Chinese were concerned with far more than community approval, recognition, and outward shows. In fact, excessive concern with outer appearance is *itself* cause for shame. Confucius states, "Do not worry because no one appreciates your abilities. Seek to be worthy of appreciation" (4.14; See also 7.16). Elsewhere, he warns against those who put on an outward show: "Cunning words, an ingratiating face and utter servility . . . I find them shameful" (5.25).

In an important sense, the Confucians are far more worried about the person who merely *appears* virtuous than the truly vicious person. While the vicious person might do harm, everyone recognizes what he is. But what is worse than the *opposite* of a virtue is the *semblance* of a virtue, which has the appearance of the real thing but lacks the essence. Confucius and Mencius describe such a person, called the *xiang yuan* 鄉愿, the "village honest person", as the "thief" or "enemy" of virtue. Mencius speaks of their praising of "the ancients", which is done just for show. He provides this description: "He tries in this way cringingly to please the world . . . If you want to censure him, you cannot find anything . . . He shares with others the practices of the day . . . He is liked by the multitude and is self-righteous . . ." Confucius states, "I dislike what is specious. I dislike weeds for fear they might be confused with the rice plant . . . I dislike the village honest man for fear he might be confused with the virtuous (7B37)". The *xiang yuan* is the greatest threat because, like a good counterfeit bill, he is so hard to spot and likely to be taken for the real thing. Clearly, the inner state of one's character—not outward appearance, not the approval of or fear of censure by others—is the primary Confucian concern.¹⁵

3.2. The Good Person Criterion

Now, we must look for the reason that the counterfeit virtue of the *xiang yuan* is the worst kind of problem for the Confucian thinkers. We have already established, *contra* Benedict and Fingarette, an internality to reflection that is essential to shame, along with a sense of falling short of an ideal and the desire to rectify oneself. But what is the ideal from which one falls short? With "guilt", what we have done is transgressed a law, principle or norm. Such a thing can be codified, written or verbalized. With shame, however, what the individual falls short of, that which she measures herself against, is a type of *person*, the accomplished person that you yourself could be and that others, those we model ourselves after and take as our guides, actually are. They are actualized people, with more fully developed, ethically evolved characters. In the virtue theory tradition, this is known as the "Good Person Criterion", where we find out what is good by looking at (measuring ourselves against) the "good person", the "cultivated person" or "sage". It is for this reason that the *xiang yuan* is so dangerous, for he is most likely to lead us astray. Exemplars are

¹⁴ This can be understood as a kind of Confucian "moral mindfulness" practice. One can see why this form of moral reflection gets combined with Buddhist meditation practices in the thought of later Neo-Confucians.

¹⁵ Jane Geaney undertakes a thoughtful analysis of metaphors of shame in early Confucian texts and argues that the early Confucian notion of shame was connected not with being seen or exposed, but rather with the experience of "boundary-blurring," namely the blurring of boundaries of the self. Because of this, Geaney questions the very distinction between the "internal" and "external" motivations in the case of shame. Geaney argues that "the shamed person in early China seems to be one whose personal boundaries have been blurred" (Geaney 2004, p. 120). I would argue that Geaney's analysis is largely compatible with mine, because in many cases of "boundary crossing," the problem is that one is acting in a way that is inappropriate, or falls short of the ideal, for the situation. In some cases of shame, shame concerns "the failure to have one's actions match one's speech," examples that seem more compatible with the metaphor of "falling short of an ideal" rather than "boundary blurring" (Geaney 2004, p. 120).

crucial here, and Confucians exhort students of the Way to surround themselves with excellent people, to live in the “neighborhood of virtue”.

Cultivated people have developed their virtue (*de* 德) to the point where it is a moral force and transforming influence on others. Numerous passages point to the influence of the ruler’s character on the people. But equally important to the effect that the person with *de* has on those around her (by virtue of her moral power), is the need for those around such a person to take her as a model and strive to cultivate themselves in her image. It is a sign of moral progress that one takes the right people as exemplars. Confucius says, “When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming their equal” (4.17). *Analects* 1.7 states, “I would grant that a person has received instruction who appreciates excellent people where others appreciate beautiful people”.¹⁶ In 16.8, Confucius says that the noble person stands in awe of great people whereas the small person treats such people with insolence. The *Analects* itself presents Confucius as a personal example to be followed; it is filled with detailed accounts of the master’s behavior, from how he sat and walked, to what he ate and what kind of music he enjoyed.¹⁷

This provides the answer to the question: “Against what does the individual fall short or fail to measure up?” It is not the community; no actual group of people is necessary. It is not an issue of, as Benedict would have it, “getting found out”. In fact, there is nothing wrong with receiving the disapproval of others if those others are the kind of people whose approval you would never want.¹⁸ The problem is not being seen by others, but being seen by certain kinds of people—excellent people. This is the position of Aristotle, who states, “The people before whom we feel shame are those whose opinion matters to us” (Aristotle 1984, II.6). So shame does, in a way, involve standing before a (real or imaginary) “other”, but “other” in this case representing the excellent person—the one we want to become like. Such a person, therefore, is not entirely “other”, for the exemplar is the kind of person that we ourselves *can* be.¹⁹ It is not a matter of imagining the eyes of the community on you; you need only be concerned with the good people, those you respect. (In other words—you must act in a way that people you respect would respect.) One is not just aiming for admiration; in fact, one can be ashamed if admired by the wrong people (imagine the horror of a political candidate receiving the endorsement of someone she finds repugnant).

On this understanding, it is clear that because shame involves a judgment about the self as having fallen short, it always refers to others as well. One is falling short of the example set by the Good Person we should aspire to be (and that we see in people we take as moral exemplars). Moreover, since the self in Confucianism is relationally constituted (we are parents, children, friends, spouses, siblings, citizens, etc., all of which imply relations with others), our falling short always occurs in a social context. This is an argument made by Nathaniel Barrett, who writes, “Shame is inherently relational. That is, while shame tends to focus on the self, it is not something we feel about ourselves in isolation, even if we are alone. Rather, it is always felt vis-à-vis someone or something, perhaps even ‘the world.’ . . . Shame is feeling bad about who we are vis-à-vis some other or otherness in relation to which some limitation of our self is defined” (Barrett 2014, p. 150).

¹⁶ I have taken the liberty of doing Confucian thought the favor of eliminating its obvious sexism and patriarchy by altering the original gendered language in passages such as these.

¹⁷ In particular, see Book 10.

¹⁸ We see numerous accounts of Chinese literature of exemplars who are publicly whipped or exiled (e.g., Wang Yangming), but who remain defiant and morally sure of themselves rather than ashamed. Xunzi explicitly distinguishes between “moral disgrace,” which “comes from within” (baseness, arrogance, greed) and “conventional disgrace,” which “comes from without” (being scolded, insulted, flogged). While a noble person can suffer the latter, he cannot suffer the former. See Van Norden (2002, p. 27).

¹⁹ Despite its obvious hierarchical aspects, Confucian thought is far more egalitarian in certain fundamental ways than Greek thought. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, all of the classical Confucians believed that *anyone* can become a sage, although Confucian thought, like Greek, is unfortunately marred by the kind of patriarchy and sexism that places such locutions in almost exclusively male terms. Confucian feminists like Li Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee are doing important work in rectifying this, which enables Confucianism to live up to its highest ideals. She writes, “The goal of making Confucian feminism, of course, is more than simply keeping Confucianism alive in the contemporary world. It is an affirmation of the dynamic nature of Confucianism, so that one can be a Confucian and a feminist without apology” (Rosenlee 2011).

Barrett ultimately argues that shame is essentially the “experience of disharmony” in a social context. He writes, “More precisely, disharmony is felt as shameful whenever it indicates the presence of some distinct and worthy value that the subject cannot harmonize, that is, fully realize through the coordinated realization of her own person” (Barrett 2014, p. 155). I would argue that the being unable to fully realize a “worthy value” is another way of saying “falling short of an ideal”.

4. A Confucian Contribution to the Understanding of Shame and Guilt

I would like to now present what I consider to be a Confucian contribution to the understanding of shame and guilt. First, I think there is a useful distinction to be made between two ways of thinking and feeling that can be captured by the notions of “guilt” and “shame”, so long as these understandings are modified somewhat from the conventional point of view. As I have shown, the guilt/shame distinction does not map onto the internal/external distinction in the Confucian case. Confucian shame involves careful inward reflection. There need not be an audience or even the threat of one. That against which the person stands is not an abstract law, God or rational principle, but an excellent person, the kind represented by real people in the world, sages and *junzi*, and also by the person that we can always become, and in Mencius’ case, in essence truly *are*. **What is internalized is not an audience, but an ideal person.**

The distinction that I think most accurately captures the difference between guilt and shame is as follows: **guilt is concerned with acts and their consequences while shame is concerned with character.**²⁰ Looking first at some common examples of philosophical understandings of guilt, we see a typical position in Roy Baumeister’s definition, “By guilt we refer to an individual’s unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances or intentions” (Baumeister 1994, p. 257). These objects of judgment are associated with individual acts; in virtually all definitions and analyses of guilt, the word “character” is not mentioned. This emphasis on act rather than character is why guilt can be met alleviated by reparation, absolution, confession and forgiveness. Monica Pivetti et al. argued that guilt “is a communal-oriented emotion, leading to the reparation of the harm done and to the restoration of the balance in interpersonal relationships” (Pivetti et al. 2015). In the studies that Pivetti et al. conducted, subjects were aware of having “violated a norm or having hurt someone”. The response was a desire to “make amends and to apologize in order to restore a positive social relationship . . . ” (Pivetti et al. 2015).

Annette Kammerer writes, “Ridding oneself of guilt is often easier than overcoming shame, in part because our society offers many ways to expiate guilt-inducing offenses, including apologizing, paying fines, and serving jail time. Certain religious rituals, such as confession, may also help us deal with guilt” (Kammerer 2019). The value of guilt is that it arises from our awareness of the violation and the consequences of our actions, including the harm done to others. Kammerer concludes that guilt “results from a concrete action for which we accept responsibility. Guilt causes us to focus our attention on the feelings of others” (Kammerer 2019).

The stain left by the act is removed by another act, such as confession; the wrong or harm is erased or canceled out by reparation. Shame, as we see in the Confucian case, requires the recognition of the need to transform oneself. While confession or forgiveness may ease guilt, it does not help with shame. Shame demands change. You realize not merely that you have done something bad, but that you are the kind of person who would *do* that sort of thing. In her survey of Western literature and philosophy, Helen Lynd arrives at the same conclusion as the Confucian thinkers: “An experience of shame can be altered or transcended only in so far as there is some change in the whole self. No single,

²⁰ In Chinese, as we have seen, the character corresponding to “shame” is *chi* (in modern Chinese *xiuchi*). For “guilt”, the generally used term is *you zui* 有罪—where *you* means to “have or possess” and *zui* is a criminal act, a transgression. One “has guilt” for a particular act, but one “knows” (or “does not know”) shame (e.g., *Ta buzhi xiuchi* 他不知羞耻).

specific thing we can do can rectify or mitigate such an experience” (Lynd 1999, p. 50). Miceli and Castelfranchi conclude from their studies, “whereas guilt is likely to motivate either reparative or self-punitive behavior, shame is likely to motivate either withdrawal or increased efforts in building one’s aspired-to identity” (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2018). Confucianism’s emphasis on moral self-cultivation emphasizes the latter, of course.

In the *Analects*, Confucius does not believe that rules, law and punishment are effective in getting people to transform their character; they are only effective in getting them to avoid certain acts (for fear of being caught, punished, etc.). In a revealing passage, Confucius says, “Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves” (2.3). We see key Confucian themes articulated here. Shame, for Confucius, is a moral response—a point further developed by Mencius. It is crucial that people have this sense of shame, which can be developed only in a society ruled by virtue and ritual, not law and punishment. While punishment can act as a deterrent, it cannot cultivate character; for that, ritual and education are necessary. We also see that having a sense of shame enables people to reform themselves. In effect, the sense of shame becomes our own check on ourselves; it gives us a sense of what kind of people we are and what kinds of things we simply will not do.

For Mencius, the response of shame, when fully cultivated, becomes the virtue of *Yi* 義, often translated as “righteousness” or “dutifulness”.²¹ While there is much debate over the meaning of this character, the general sense involves notions of what is proper for one to do given who one is (e.g., one’s relations to the others involved) and the situation one faces. It is the awareness and manifestation of appropriate action, feeling and relationship. The classical Chinese text, *Zhong Yong, Doctrine of the Mean*, defines *Yi* as “what is appropriate” (20.5). For Mencius, we begin with a natural aversion to doing certain things. There are certain actions we simply will not do because they would violate our inner moral sense. When this is nurtured and developed, the sense becomes a guide to what we *should* do (it is often expressed in Western scholarship as what we “ought” to do, a sense of obligation, hence “dutifulness” as a translation of *yi*). For example, Mencius says, “Only when a man will not do some things is he capable of doing great things” (4B8). Elsewhere, we read, “For every man there are things he is not willing to do. To extend this to what he is willing to do is *Yi*” (7B31).

The argument about *chi/yi* involving one’s character is supported by the conclusions of Eric Hutton. He writes, “One’s *yi* dictates what kind of person one ought to be, rather than specifying particular actions to do . . .” (Hutton 1996, p. 18) *Yi* is proper feeling and behavior given one’s “role”. I hesitate to use “role” here because of the implication of externality such a word has in much of Western thought, i.e., we “play” roles, but our “true self”, our “essence”, is independent of all such roles. Such an idea is alien to Confucians, for whom “role” means who we are in relation to others in the various aspects of our lives. The self is developed through and realized in such relationships; it does not exist independently of them.²² From a Confucian point of view, when I think about how to be a better “person”, I do not ultimately think in such general terms (although for simplicity’s sake I use such a locution in this paper). Rather, I think about how to be a better husband, father, teacher, son and friend. The question is, what is *yi* for each aspect of who I am, each constituent of my identity? For Confucians, the actual content of *yi*, the proper behavior, is

²¹ For a treatment of shame and righteousness in Mencius, see Van Norden (2002). For an extensive treatment of the character *Yi*, see Hutton (1996).

²² We assume that, in the modern West, we have an emphasis on the individual, whereas in China the focus is on the community (this is another manifestation of the inner/outer, guilt/shame dichotomies). However, what we actually see is an emphasis on the individual in both cases, but an individual differently conceived. In the modern Western case, the individual is generally seen, as described in the definitions of “guilt” above (by Bellah, Benedict, etc.), as autonomous, separate, standing alone before God. In China, the individual, the locus of self-cultivation, is constituted by relationships. True selfhood is achieved only in and through family, community, tradition. Thus, while shame has “internality,” it intimately involves the community, since one cultivates and realizes oneself only with others. When we measure ourselves against the Good Person Criterion, we measure ourselves against a picture of excellence sustained and transmitted by the family, community and tradition.

given by the *li*, or rituals. We can see the connection with shame here: As a good husband (father, son, friend, teacher), I would simply *not* do X; such an act would be the cause of great shame to me. This sense of what I would not do is a guide on the path to cultivation, a path which leads to spontaneously ethical feelings and behavior in all situations and relationships.

Therefore, in the classical Confucian context, shame is an essential moral faculty that is necessary for one's character development. Looking at this understanding of shame, along with the general conception of guilt discussed above, I would argue that both are useful and necessary, and both can be applied inappropriately (as when "shame" is connected with notions of prudishness and linked with nudity or sexual feelings.). Both have their pathologies. But here I want to look at why they are an important part of our moral lives.

Guilt points at my action, its consequences and victims. It points toward what I have *done*. Shame focuses my attention on who I *am* and how I fall short of what I hope for myself. In the Confucian tradition, shame's recoil is not against who I am *essentially* (there is no Confucian sense of "original sin"), but who I am now and how far I am from an attainable ideal. This is why the idea of exposure is important—but not exposure before others, necessarily, but standing "naked" before yourself. The shameless person, we might say, refuses to see themselves as they really are. Helen Lynd puts it well, "The exposure to oneself is the heart of shame" (Lynd 1999).

Guilt, on the other hand, directs my attention to what I have done—to the effect of my action and the need to repair. The focus is on the action as wrong and a wish to rectify the harm. It makes sense that guilt dominates in a culture of law, whether that is Kantian law, Divine law or constitutional law. The focus is on the autonomous, rational will, the human being as a locus of decision making. The problem here is the tendency to neglect a focus on character in this philosophical approach—something which is often seen in deontological or utilitarian ethical schemes, or those ways of thinking dominated by "quandary ethics". A "shame" approach focuses on the person's character. On this view, reason and will are not enough to explain ethical action and to guide us morally. Action is largely a product of character, which is cultivated over long periods of time; it is this process that the Confucians emphasize.

For this reason, shame may be better at giving us a conception of ethical identity, against which guilt can be more fully understood. Shame, on this way of looking at it, is a more comprehensive phenomenon. Whereas modern Western philosophy has often emphasized individual actions (problems like "freedom of the will"), Confucian thought understands one's actions at any time as making sense only against the ongoing narrative of one's moral development, against the backdrop of one's life as one moves forward (or falls back on) a path toward fully developing oneself.

If the Confucian notion of shame focuses more on the agent than the act or its victims (which I have placed largely in the province of guilt), then what takes the place of guilt in Chinese thought in playing the crucial role of directing our attention towards the victims? In Mencian Confucianism, the primary virtues are themselves emotions and dispositions that are other directed. The highest virtue, *ren* 仁 (benevolence or co-humanity) requires *shu* 恕, reciprocity that takes into account the other. The famous example of the baby teetering on the well in 2A6 shows that *ren* is based on a type of concern that is triggered by the real or potential suffering of another. The king in 1A7 is called upon to cultivate the kind of compassionate response that would respond to the suffering of his subjects just as it responds to the suffering of an ox being led to slaughter. While some critics label virtue theory "egoistic" because of its focus on the agent and the virtues she should cultivate, it is clear that the virtues themselves are other directed and that their cultivation leads to more, rather than less, focus on others, particularly those who are suffering and need our help.

5. Examples: Isolating Guilt and Shame

It is often difficult to establish a direct correlation between words and feeling states. Susan Miller, who draws on psychological studies that attempt to distinguish between

shame and guilt, states that most people have trouble distinguishing between the two emotions (Miller 1996). Feelings of guilt and shame are not only very close and difficult to disentangle, but they often accompany each other and are felt together simultaneously. But with some thought, perhaps, we can isolate one from the other so as to highlight the distinguishing features of each. Through looking at a number of everyday examples, I hope to show how this Confucian picture can make sense of our ethical intuitions about guilt and shame seen in isolation. Although the picture I have been developing here is contrary to the dominant philosophical understanding of shame and guilt in the West, I would argue that it actually captures much that is implied in ways that we feel and think in our everyday lives.

Because guilt is connected more with the act, its consequences and victims rather than the person, it makes sense that one can feel guilt over an unintentional act. For example, imagine that you are driving safely, doing everything you should, and a person runs out from between two parked cars and you hit him. You might say that you feel very guilty over this—guilty over the act of striking the person and causing him harm.²³ But it is unlikely that you would say you feel shame. The act does not say anything about you as a person. However, if you were negligent in some way or had a bit too much to drink, or if you panicked and fled the scene, deep shame (along with guilt) would be involved. Guilt does not require intent; as Gabrielle Taylor points out, Oedipus feels guilty despite his ignorance. She concludes, “Causal responsibility is the type that is sufficient for guilt” (Taylor 1985, p. 91).

We can also imagine cases of shame without guilt. Imagine that you dramatically overreact to something your friend says and send off an acidic retort in an e-mail or voicemail. As you gain more perspective and look at things from a more settled point of view, you come to see your reaction as totally unnecessary and disproportionate. Now, contemplating how it will look or sound when your friend receives it, I would argue that you would feel shame but not guilt. You have broken no law, violated no rule. You know that you can quickly ameliorate the situation so that your friend will suffer no lasting harm. But you look at the kind of person you are—short tempered, volatile, and judgmental—and feel ashamed. Helen Lynd writes, “One may transgress no code, commit no proscribed act . . . and yet feel an inadequacy which violates the core of oneself” (Lynd 1999). Reflection on this should bring about not only a desire to apologize, but, for the good Confucian, a commitment to change.

Another example of shame without guilt, taken from an account in a magazine article, was given by someone who hid his illiteracy for years. When others finally found out, he said, he was “filled with shame”. Here, shame seems to be tied to the public exposure, but the real cause of shame, as he went on to explain, was his failure to learn to read; as he explained, he had “blown off school” throughout his youth. The exposure merely forced the issue, for he had to confront his illiteracy after being exposed before others. He could no longer hide from himself. The episode led not only to shame, but also to the proper Confucian response—it was a catalyst to self-cultivation. He went back to school and learned to read. Shame, therefore, requires no sense of violation or actual harm done, only a sense of diminishment of the self.²⁴

We can also see the difference reflected in language itself. Looking at the Old English roots from which both derive, Lynd explains that “the root meaning of shame is to cover up, to envelop” whereas guilt is linked to the notion of “debt . . . of the committing of a specific offense, the state of being justifiably liable to penalty” (Lynd 1999, p. 23).

The connection of shame with character and guilt with action is also reflected in the way that we speak: Saying that someone is “guiltless” is positive—they have committed no *act* for which they are or should feel guilty. But calling someone “shameless” is, as we have

²³ Baumeister discusses the notions of “empathic distress” linked to “causal responsibility.” See Baumeister (1994, p. 246).

²⁴ For a collection of stories in this vein, see “The Shame Felt by People Who Struggle to Read and Write.” *BBC News*, April 29. <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-43866380>.

seen, a way to criticize them for lacking the feeling and faculty which is essential if they are to be a good person. We also speak of someone being guilty of, or feeling guilty about, *something*. But when we speak of shame, we say “You should be ashamed of *yourself*”, or “shame on you”. We point at the person, not the act.

Pivetti, Camodeca and Rapino (Pivetti et al. 2015) argue that there are five components of emotions: cognitive, neurophysiological, motivational, motor expression (e.g., facial and vocal expressions), and subjective feeling. In this essay, I have focused on the cognitive and motivational (i.e., how emotions shape and reflect how we think, judge, and act). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the neurophysiological dimension in depth, it is worth briefly reflecting on this because it can illuminate the philosophical distinctions made here.

Shame and guilt, like all emotions, are felt embodied sensations; we experience them in our bodies as much as cognitively. Some psychological studies suggest that shame is generally felt from the chest up, focusing on the face, head and chest. One who is feeling shame often wants to hide one’s face (or hide entirely), or lower one’s body and avert one’s gaze. “When experiencing shame, individuals feel physically small and inferior to others. As a result, they might feel great pressure to hide . . . They also wish they had acted differently, and, as a consequence, avoid direct gazes, hunch their shoulders, lower their head, cover their face, or stay still” (Pivetti et al. 2015). The hunching and lowering actions correspond to Mencius’ notion of the “small person” (*xiao ren* 小人). One of the most prominent characteristics of shame is gaze aversion (see Smith et al. 2002; Bafunno and Camodeca 2013). Annette Kammerer, psychologist at the Institute of Psychology at Heidelberg University writes that shame makes us feel “exposed and small and are unable to look another person straight in the eye. We want to sink into the ground and disappear” (Kammerer 2019). As opposed to shame, guilt was not associated with gaze aversion.

A team of researchers created a “bodily map of emotions” which involved “monitoring the topography of emotion-triggered bodily sensations” (Nummenmaa et al. 2014, p. 646). In their map, the strongest sensations associated with shame occurred in the face and head. Guilt was felt lower in the body, largely in the heart, chest and stomach. That shame is felt higher in the body would correspond to this picture of shame as involving one’s identity, one’s sense of self, for that is often physically identified with one’s face.

In two studies, guilt was associated with the feeling of a “weight” burdening one, which is consistent with the notion that one carries the burden of transgression or causing harm to another. The authors concluded, “unethical acts led to more subjective body weight compared to control conditions” (Day and Bobocel 2013). The second study concluded that “the physical experience of weight is associated with the emotional experience of guilt” (Kouchaki et al. 2014). Psychologist Thomas Fuchs, in his work on the phenomenology of guilt, writes of the guilty person, “A heavy weight lies oppression on his chest” (Fuchs 2002, p. 9). Fuchs quotes one of his patients describing the physical sensation of guilt: “It comes from below, from the belly, like a terrible oppression mounting up to the chest . . . I feel it like a wound here on my chest, that is my tortured conscience . . . ” (Fuchs 2002, p. 15).

The “weight” of the guilty person is carried around until the burden is lifted through expiation, confession, reparation, etc. (this is why we speak of “unburdening ourselves”). Pivetti et al. concluded that “Participants who reported an episode about guilt . . . seemed well aware of having violated a norm or hurt someone”. These subjects indicated “a yearning for repairing and apologizing” (Pivetti et al. 2015, p. 697).

6. Philosophical Distinctions

Warranted/Unwarranted and Conventional (Nonmoral)/Moral Shame

We have already looked explicitly at the question, “*Before whom* should one feel shame?” We must now address another: “*For what should* one feel shame?” In an insightful paper on shame in Mencius, Bryan Van Norden looks at John Rawls’ account of shame (Van Norden 2002). Rawls describes shame as “the feeling that someone has when he expe-

periences an injury to his self-respect or suffers a blow to his self-esteem". The requirements of self-respect for Rawls are a "secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out", and "confidence in one's ability . . . to fulfill one's intentions". Martha Nussbaum objects that such an account is too subjectivist and offers the following argument involving an assembly-line worker for General Motors:

All day long he performs a single repetitive task. The things he helps to make are not under his control. And yet he feels good. He is proud to be part of the bustling capitalist economy; he may even be convinced that the capability to perform simple, repetitive tasks is the only capability he possesses, that he could not handle a larger demand. Does his inner sense of worth count as genuine self-respect . . . ? (Van Norden 2002, p. 55)

The key word here is "genuine". The distinctions that are being made here are between our subjective experience of self-respect or shame, and what van Norden calls the "objective warrant" for feeling these things. Rawls' definition of shame is subjective and descriptive—it tells us when people do in fact tend to feel shame. He is also describing when people feel self-respect. But we can accept his descriptions and still object that there are times people may feel shame or self-respect when they should not (or vice versa). Van Norden argues of the assembly worker that while he meets Rawls's criteria for self-respect, "his way of life is shamefully narrow . . . because it is limited to labor that is uncreative and unchallenging. Such a worker may not feel shame, but he ought to" (Van Norden 2002).

I would argue that we do not know enough to make any such judgment of the worker. Our Confucian analysis shows that warranted shame has an ethical dimension. What if our assembly line worker is an ethical person, treats his friends and family well, exhibits the virtues of honesty, humility, compassion, etc., and is basically content with his life? Should we, based merely on the "narrowness" of his job, conclude that he "ought to" feel shame? Looking back at Nussbaum's description, we see that the worker "may even be convinced that the capability to perform simple, repetitive tasks is the only capability he possesses . . ." It is important to know whether the belief is true and how he came to have this belief. One might justifiably feel shame for not living up to his capacities, for falling short of the person he could be, of the contribution he might make. But should he feel shame if in fact his capacities are limited and he is making the best of them? Or if he has good reason to believe his capacities are limited (perhaps throughout his life his parents told him that this is all he ever could be)? I would argue that there is no reason for such a person (provided he exhibits the ethical virtues described) to feel shame merely for being content with limited capacities. This is a misapplication of the notion of shame.

However, Van Norden does provide a very useful distinction that can be helpful in discussing shame—"conventional shame" (e.g., over a faux pas or gaffe—one might think of the professor discovering his zipper is open only after finishing a lecture before a packed hall) and "moral shame" (Van Norden's example is of someone having an affair and deceiving her spouse about it). Van Norden persuasively argues that there is a deep connection between the two, that they are closely related because "caring about how one appears to others is required by the virtue of humility . . . One who is completely indifferent to the moral opinions of others is a dangerous fanatic" (Van Norden 2002). While only the example given of "moral shame" involves harm done to another (which means that guilt also may be involved in this case, though not in the case of conventional shame), both examples say something about the character of the person involved. In the case of the exposed professor, he might justifiably feel shame not merely because he was seen in that state, but because walking out in front of the class like that shows a certain lack of attention, a kind of carelessness.²⁵ Both examples show the person aspects of their character that fall short of the ideal, though in the case of deception these are far more

²⁵ I do not feel shame is warranted for a person whose naked body is exposed if, for example, someone accidentally walks in on them while they are undressed. Only the person who walked in without knocking might reasonably feel shame. While the naked person might feel embarrassed, shame is not warranted.

damaging and need to be addressed more urgently. On our analysis, guilt will often accompany moral shame (because there is usually a victim we have harmed), while it will not accompany conventional shame. Both, however, will lead us to reflect on and try to change our behavior.

7. The Psychology of Shame: Freud and Wollheim

Thus far, I have provided a way of demarcating shame and guilt, and shown why both are necessary, for each points us toward something important, something we need to pay attention to and care about—in the case of guilt, our actions and their consequences and victims, in the case of shame, our character.

I have already argued that both shame and guilt are necessary, for each addresses a different, essential realm of our moral lives. I would like to go further and, in response to Benedict and others, play devil's advocate here and suggest that perhaps shame, in its full Confucian sense, represents a more “developed” notion. To do this, I will look at the influential picture of guilt given to us by Freud.

On the Freudian understanding, it is the harsh, judging superego that produces guilt feelings. When we look at Freud's language describing the superego, we see “tyrannical master”; the superego “observes, threatens, attacks”; punishes with distressing reproaches; it gives us “prohibitions”. It undertakes a “judging activity” that possesses “strictness and severity” (Freud 1961, 1963). The superego, the observer and judge of actions, is seen as a repressing force. Freud writes, “the helpless ego is as its mercy”. He concludes, “The moral sense of guilt is the tension between the ego and the superego” (Freud 1961).

Thus, guilt is associated with the judgment of the *superego*. Shame, however, can be seen as falling short of an *ego-ideal*. Richard Wollheim sees the movement of moral development as going from *fear of the superego* to *identification with the ego-ideal* (Wollheim 1984). We begin with a denial of selfish gratification; we are confronted by others who proscribe certain activities (we have ambivalent relationships with these figures) and reward us for acting a certain way. Freud often puts the superego (and God) in this place as the ultimate “in loco parentis”. They are seen as judges, as continuous (later on, internalized) observers. But, on the Confucian/Wollheimian picture, there is a movement beyond this way of looking at the moral life.

For Freud, the individual is seen existing over and against society, alienated, never fully at home, just as the ego is seen as existing over and against the judging, punishing superego. Freud, as Erik Erikson points out, did not deeply explore the notion of a self-ideal and tended to subsume “self-ideal” under “superego” (Erikson 1946, p. 363). When Freud does use the notion of an “ideal ego”, it is associated with narcissism. The formation of the ideal ego is the “condition for repression” (which is why it is linked with the superego); the ideal ego becomes the object of self-love, taking the place of the infantile ego as “the possessor of all perfections”. Freud concludes, “That which he projects ahead of him as his ideal is merely his substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood” (Freud 1963, p. 74). Because civilization demands instinct suppression, Freud argues that “the sense of guilt is the most important problem in the development of culture . . . The price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt” (Freud 1961, p. 97).

In Wollheim's thought, moral development can be seen as the move from the fear and guilt induced by the superego to the notion of identification with an ego-ideal. We no longer see these other figures as merely judging and punishing; we recognize that the type of people they are, the values they hold and the lives they lead, are admirable, worthy of cultivating in ourselves.²⁶ My failure to live up to them produces shame. This move from guilt to shame would seem to show that one has a sense of oneself as having potential

²⁶ This is why having the right kind of parents, teachers and exemplars is crucial in Confucian thought. The dark side of this picture is the potential abuse that exists in such an imbalanced relationship. Every ethical system generates a set of problems that it must cope with.

beyond what one is now, a sense of possibility. It requires that we see ourselves as more than just our current behavior and desires.

This understanding reminds us that truly moral people are motivated by much more than avoidance of fear and the guilt brought on by the tyrannical superego. Good people, like good athletes and musicians, are motivated by a picture of excellence that has intrinsic value. Wollheim describes this transformation: “What makes identification possible are the following—diminution of persecutory anxiety, the narrowing of the gap between the internal figure and its external counterpoint; and the increasing acceptability of the attitudes, judgments and reactions of the internal figure” (Wollheim 1984, p. 219).

The Confucians understand that identification and modeling, taking another as an exemplar (Xunzi uses the notion of *fa* 法 or “model”) is a crucial part of moral development. In psychological terms: Shame arises not from the tension between the ego and superego, but the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal. Unlike guilt, what is internalized is not a judge, but an exemplar; the agent *identifies* with the “good person”, seeing such a way of being as actualized in others and as a potentiality in oneself.

My picture can be summarized this way: **Guilt is concerned with what one should and should not do. Shame is concerned with who one should and should not be.** Shame, in its full Confucian sense, may give us a more complete sense of who we are. Rather than emphasizing a discrete decision-making point in our lives, it helps us see ourselves on the course of moral development and point out what it is we should actually work on, what dispositions we need to cultivate. Confession and reparation only go so far if the problem in one’s character is not worked on. Confucians emphasize this process of self-cultivation in their ethical theory and practice, rather than abstract definitions, principles, laws or the problem of the will.

This is why classical Confucian thinkers did not ask abstract questions about the right or good and look for answers; they looked to exemplary people, they held up sages and their character as worthy of emulation. We do not see articulations like: “Do the right thing, where “right” is defined as . . . ” Instead we see “Be like Yao, Shun or the Duke of Zhou, for they are sages, fully realized people”. This is why Mencius said, “Great is the use of shame to people . . . If a person is not ashamed of being inferior to other people, how will they ever become their equal?” (7A20).

8. Moral and Pathological Shame

The Confucian perspective helps clarify the difference between moral shame and pathological shame. The Confucian conception of shame, what I call “moral shame”, is different from the kind of shame that the psychologists warned us about in a crucial way—Whereas the Confucian notion of shame arises from the gap between the current state of one’s character and one’s essence (in Mencius’ terms, one’s heart-mind, one’s true nature), pathological shame is directed at one’s very self, one’s essence.

This notion of pathological shame is what leads one organization of psychologists and scholars to say of shame, “Few things so undermine human well-being as the sickness of shame” (School of Life 2020). One can see how pathological shame is directed at the core identity of the person, as it is characterized by the following statements made by their patients describing the state of feeling shame: “I don’t deserve to exist”. “I am defective”. “I am unworthy of being known and loved”. “I’ll never amount to anything”.

Mary Lamia, Ph.D., in her article “Shame: A Concealed, Contagious, and Dangerous Emotion”, writes that “shame informs us of an internal state of inadequacy, unworthiness, dishonor, regret, or disconnection” (Lamia 2011). Carrie Wilkins, Co-founder and director of Center for Motivation and Change in New York, writes of shame:

(I)ntead of differentiating the behavior from the person, it makes the whole person bad, it sends the message that “you are bad” and all that comes along with that . . . “you aren’t worth helping”, “you can’t be helped”, “you are a lost cause”, and “we need to be rid of you” (Wilkins 2020).

Great damage can be done when a person is told that they should be ashamed of who they are at the core. Mengzi's understanding of shame requires that a person recognizes their essential goodness, their inner moral endowment and potential for excellence. From a Confucian perspective, shame indicates that we are falling short of our moral potential and not acting in accordance with our true nature, which is endowed with everything we need to become moral sages. Miceli and Castelfranchi explain that, in the case of shame, "It is sufficient that people focus on *the discrepancy between a negative self-evaluation and the positive one they would like to have*. Of course, a further attributional search can be performed: If one's fault is traced back to uncontrollable and stable causes, shame will be associated with helplessness and hopelessness" (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2018).

For this reason, pathological shame is inimical to virtue cultivation, as it would serve as an obstacle to cultivation ("I am not worthy") rather than an incentive and motivation for it ("I am much better than this"). In the Confucian tradition, the path of cultivation depends on one's believing in one's capacity for sagehood. All Confucian thinkers believe that anyone can become a morally cultivated person. Mencius uses many techniques to convince people that they have all that they need to become morally developed human beings, including thought experiments and "give-away actions" that aim to develop awareness of one's innate moral impulses.²⁷

Despite its pathological forms, shame can also be what Helen Lynd calls a "positive experience of revelation", when I discover that "I don't want to be the kind of person who does or wants X" (Lynd 1999). *Pathological* shame is directed against one's "essence". Confucian *moral* shame, on the other hand, requires an awareness of and reverence for one's potentialities. This is why Mencius says, "It is not worth the trouble to talk to a man who has no respect for himself" (4A10). Moral shame, in its Confucian sense, *requires* self-respect.

9. Conclusions

Although it is often phenomenologically and philosophically difficult to differentiate guilt and shame, it is useful to maintain a distinction between the two, for we can see them as pointing to two very important, closely related but distinct realms of human moral experience and psychology. The distinction is cognitive (different judgments are involved), volitional (they lead us to do, or want to do, different things) and somatic (they feel different, although we are in murkier water here). Although in our everyday use of the terms, we may not distinguish them so unambiguously, reflecting carefully on the difference is a useful exercise because it reveals different aspects of our moral lives.

While I do believe there are significant differences between guilt and shame, I see as quite flawed the distinction made by Benedict and Fingarette of internal vs. external, the autonomous individual (before himself or God) vs. the one who is exposed before others. Such a view has contributed to misleading conceptions of East Asian culture in general, and Confucianism in particular, as "outer directed" and concerned with superficial issues of "face". Perhaps a better way to understand it is the picture developed here—whereas guilt is concerned with actions, with what one should and should not do, shame is concerned with character, with who one should and should not be. As guilt points toward our acts and shame towards ourselves, one can argue that we should *reverse* the common understanding of shame as "outer" and guilt as "inner".

Ultimately, we must see both shame and guilt as important, and understand that neither is reducible to the other, for they point to two different aspects of the moral life, both of which are essential. Guilt's value lies in the way it directs our attention to the victims of our acts and motivates us to work toward restitution, whereas shame's value lies in the way it sheds light on our character and motivates us to further self-cultivation.

²⁷ Two of the most famous examples are 1A7 and 2A6. See Ivanhoe (2000) for a discussion of Mencius' techniques for revealing our true nature and motivating us on the path of self-cultivation.

At the very least, we should see as flawed those accounts that treat shame as no more than a way station on the road to higher, guilt-based morality.

Contrasting shame with guilt enables us to see the features of shame that make it an essential component of moral cultivation—The focus on character, development and cultivation over time, and the gap between our current state and our potential. It has an interior component, and it does not need an actual audience. The internalized “audience” is the good person, the person one aspires to be—the person that one essentially *is*. This is the opposite of pathological shame, which is aimed at an individual’s essence.

Moral shame is key to becoming a good person because it involves (1) the recognition that one has fallen short; (2) the awareness that the character or conduct of which one has fallen short is, in fact, admirable and worthy of attaining; (3) the negative feelings that ought to accompany that recognition; and (4) the commitment to improve. Shame provides a crucial check on our unbridled selfishness, which is why shamelessness is so dangerous in a person with power. Annette Kammerer, drawing on the work of philosopher Hilge Landweer (in a way that provides an explanation for why a person like Donald Trump does not feel shame), writes that in order for one to feel shame, they must not only be aware that they have failed to live up to a norm, but also that “*He or she must also view the norm as desirable and binding* because only then can the transgression make one feel truly uncomfortable. It is not even always necessary for a disapproving person to be present; we need only imagine another’s judgment” (Kammerer 2019, italics mine).

While there are pathological forms of guilt and shame that we should avoid, the feelings of guilt or shame that arise when we act unethically are essential elements of ethics, as these moral emotions enable us to participate in genuine communities. Pivetti et al. write, “Shame and guilt are generally considered to be the most important adaptive moral, or social, emotions, because they tend to assure the adherence to social norms through their internalization, without requiring the use of external sanctions” (Pivetti et al. 2015). This is why Confucius advised against using “edicts” and “punishments” to create harmonious communities, instead advocating, “Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves” (2.3). Barrett highlights the importance of shame for both the individual and the larger community, writing “Ideally, a properly cultivated sense of shame marks the way toward better versions of ourselves and society” (Barrett 157; this is a point also made in (Van Norden 2002)).

The Confucian tradition recognizes the profound importance of character in a leader. People who possess exemplary character, truly good people, are good leaders not only because they make good decisions and are effective politically, but also because their character and the power of their virtue make everyone around them, and the entire realm, better.²⁸ But the opposite is also true, and the political commentators who are sounding the alarm about Donald Trump’s shamelessness are doing it because they understand the harm that a powerful shameless leader can do. Jonathan Freedland wrote a column in the *Guardian* that articulates the harm a shameless president can do to a democracy:

Donald Trump is giving America and the world a lesson in the value of shame—and the power of shamelessness. Through his actions . . . Trump has taught us that shame performs a vital democratic function—and how dangerous is the man who feels none of it. Even the most ancient and beautiful documents cannot protect us. Only the respect of the powerful for those documents can do that.

²⁸ Columbia Law Professor Tim Wu writes that the key element in defending American democracy during the attacks on the 2020 election has been the virtue of individuals rather than structural protections, which have shown troubling weaknesses and vulnerabilities. His statement echoes the views of Confucian philosophers: “Structural checks can be overrated. The survival of our Republic depends as much, if not more, on the virtue of those in government, particularly the upholding of norms by civil servants, prosecutors and military officials. We have grown too jaded about things like professionalism and institutions, and the idea of men and women who take their duties seriously. But as every major moral tradition teaches, no external constraint can fully substitute for the personal compulsion to do what is right . . . It is called civic virtue, and at the end of the day, there is no real alternative” (Wu 2020).

When that is gone, when they feel no shame, democracy stands naked—and vulnerable (Freedland 2017).²⁹

Freedland wrote his article before the sustained and unprecedented assault on the 2020 election undertaken by Trump and his allies following Joe Biden's victory, an assault that constituted a threat to American democracy that demonstrates Freedland's prescience. The shamelessness of Trump, which has infected most Republicans in Congress, ultimately culminated in an attempt to overturn an American election, an effort that some scholars have labeled a coup attempt. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Thomas Friedman addressed the Republican enablers of Trump's assault on democracy this way: "Shame on all these people . . . And 'shame' is the right word for these people, because a sense of shame was lost these past four years and it needs to be re-established. Otherwise, what Trump and all his sycophants did gets normalized and permanently erodes confidence in our elections. That is how democracies die" (Friedman 2020).³⁰

Reflecting on shame in dialogue with the Confucian thinkers provides an important corrective to the view that contrasts Western, "inner", guilt-based cultures—which are seen as morally superior—and Asian "outer", shame-based cultures—which are seen as lower. The Confucian tradition shows us why moral shame is at least as important and morally "advanced" as guilt, and Confucian insights reveal why moral shame, which is essential for moral development, differs from pathological shame, which does so much damage. The Confucian thinkers also warn us of the dangers of shamelessness to any person's character and to those around them, dangers that are magnified when that person has power. In contrast to the statement about the dangers of shame that opened this paper, it is ultimately shamelessness that is most devastating in its consequences.

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²⁹ Jon Allsop explained the threat that a shameless president poses to the very notion of truth: "When it comes to Trump and his media supporters, shamelessness and misinformation are two sides of the same coin. The more shameless Trump is, the less we can see the boundaries between right and wrong, between believable and unbelievable. If you'll say anything, nothing is implausible, which, in turn, makes a wild conspiracy sound just as plausible as the truth" (Allsop 2019).

³⁰ The attack on the election led columnist Paul Waldman to write, "None of us knows for sure what the future of the Republican Party looks like. Perhaps it will reform itself. But in its present, it is nothing less than a cancer on our democracy. I'd say that every Republican should be ashamed, were it not so abundantly clear that almost none of them have any shame at all" (Waldman 2020).

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