**Aristotle, Shame and Morality**

Shame is often closely associated with ethical decisions and moral dilemmas: we call an action shameful if we feel that it does not live up to our moral standards, or a person shameless if they act apparently without remorse in a way that goes against our moral standards. Given this, then, it is not surprising that Aristotle explores the issue of the relation of shame and morality in the Nicomachean Ethics. In this essay, I explore Aristotle’s argument on the place of shame in the life of a virtuous person, ultimately concluding that although Aristotle’s argument would hold true for an absolutely virtuous person, it assumes too much about the state of virtue of the moral agent, and the degree to which a virtuous person is in control of their actions. Aristotle further neglects the pivotal role that feelings of shame and the capacity to feel shame play in the moral development of an individual.

We first examine the key aspects of Aristotle’s argument. There are two points that Aristotle makes in the section of the Nicomachean Ethics that deal with shame. Aristotle first argues that shame is not a virtue, but is rather a feeling, and hence should not be considered among the virtues of a truly virtuous person. Aristotle’s second point is that a feeling of disgrace is not appropriate to the person who has undergone full moral development. We begin with an examination of Aristotle’s first point, ultimately leading to a discussion of the second.

Aristotle argues that shame, being defined as a “sort of fear of disrepute” (1128b 10), is not appropriately termed a virtue, and should instead be treated as a feeling. In order to support this point, Aristotle draws an analogy between fear and shame: “a feeling of disgrace makes people blush, and fear of death makes them turn pale” (1128b 15), from which he concludes that both shame and fear are physical reactions rather than states of character that should be developed. However, the extent to which this analogy holds true is somewhat questionable: just because an emotional state is accompanied by a physical reaction does not imply that the emotional state itself does not exist, or is irrelevant. Indeed, we might question the logic behind the argument: surely the existence of a physical reaction to a stimulus does not exclude the possibility of a state of character associated with that reaction?

We additionally note that there is indeed a virtue associated with fear, despite the fact that it is a physical reaction: learning to overcome fear, or bravery, is one of Aristotle’s key virtues. We might therefore extend the analogy further, and suggest that there may be a virtue linked with shame (or the absence of it), just as bravery is linked to a lack of fear. We shall later explore this issue further.

Furthermore, we might take issue with Aristotle’s definition of shame as a fear of disgrace. Firstly, given his definition of shame as a type of fear, we find it hardly surprising that he reaches the conclusion that he does in the latter stages of his argument: if fear is a physical reaction, and shame is a type of fear, it is natural that Aristotle would proceed to conclude that shame is a physical reaction. We might also point out that this definition seems surprisingly narrow: surely shame is more than simply fear of disgrace?

Consider the example of a student who cheats on an exam and is consequently awarded a grade much higher than that which they would have otherwise achieved, without their actions being discovered. Suppose that this student in later reflection feels ashamed of their actions and the unethical way in which they achieved their success. In this case, is it not the case that their shame takes on a deeper, more ethical form? Their shame, in this case, arguably stems not from a fear of being discovered and confronting the disapproval of their peers, but from a sense that they have failed to live up to their own expectations of moral behavior. Shame therefore arises not only from a fear of disgrace, then, but from an additional recognition of one’s personal failings; from this, we might further argue that shame is a reflection of the fact that one has internalized an ethical system, and might hence be interpreted as a virtue. Aristotle’s definition of shame as purely the fear of disgrace, then, seems to neglect this key moral function of shame.

Aristotle does argue that certain types of shame are to be praised in young people, given that young people “live by their feelings” (1128b 20). Shame, in Aristotle’s view, then, is an emotional tool to be used when those who go “astray” (1128b 20) in order to restrain themselves from acting inappropriately. As such, Aristotle argues by extrapolation that “no one would praise an older person for readiness to feel disgrace, since we think it wrong for him to do any action that cases a feeling of disgrace” (1128b 20).

We set out Aristotle’s logical argument below:

P1: Shame is appropriately used and praiseworthy when used to restrain a disgraceful action.

P2: It is wrong for an older person to act in a disgraceful manner.

C: Hence it is inappropriate to praise shame in an older person.

However, we note that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The conclusion would follow if P2 were the statement that older people do not act in a disgraceful manner. P2 instead states an apparent ethical truth about older people: that it is wrong for them to act in a disgraceful manner (the truth of which is questionable – why should it be more wrong for an older person to act disgracefully than a younger person? But we digress.) It does not follow from this normative claim that the old do not in fact act in a manner that would be considered disgraceful: the possibility remains that an old person could be tempted to act wrongly – that is, in a disgraceful manner – but use shame in a praiseworthy manner to restrain themselves. We find, again, though, that this response does not fully account for our argument above: what if shame is not merely fear of disgrace, but a deep-seated moral recognition of one’s own failings? The argument above applies only to shame in this shallower form, as fear of disgrace. In contrast, recognition of one’s own failings, independent of the degree to which these failings exist, is a positive sign about one’s moral development and capacity for self-reflection.

This response, however, would seem to miss the deeper point that Aristotle makes here: how can it be that feeling shame is morally right if it is a response to wrongdoing? The very fact that wrongdoing must occur before shame is to be felt limits the degree to which shame can be said to be a truly positive moral attribute. Aristotle concurs, emphasizing that “if someone’s state [of character] would make him feel disgrace if he were to do a disgraceful action, and because of this he thinks he is decent, that is absurd. For shame is concerned with what is voluntary, and the decent person will never willingly do base actions” (1128b 25).

Certainly it is true that committing a disgraceful action and then feeling shame about one’s actions, or indeed recognizing one’s moral flaws, does not make one’s disgraceful action then morally right; and indeed it is the case that a decent person will never willingly act in a disgraceful manner. However, I do not argue that feeling shame at a disgraceful action is virtuous; I argue that the virtuous character implied by being able to recognize a moral misstep is part of what makes a decent person.

Imagine, for instance, the decent person who accidentally acts shamefully – perhaps as a result of some unforeseen consequence of an action. One might respond that the decent person should instead be more vigilant: perhaps in future they ought to think more about the consequences of their actions. However, this misses the point. How is it possible that the decent person decides to become more decent (so to speak) without some recognition of their moral failing? It is crucial to the process of moral development that at some point, we gain the capacity for active self-reflection, and by extension, the ability to recognize one’s own faults and hence improve them. Granted, this relies on other virtues, such as the willpower and desire to improve oneself; we might also concede that shame is useless to a fully developed person, as they would in theory never commit any action not in keeping with their absolute decency. It is also true, though, that we as moral agents do not exist in a vacuum. Our actions are deeply affected by our situation, and by events outside of our control. It is hardly reasonable to claim that the decent person will never act, intentionally or unintentionally, in a manner that is indecent.

It is still reasonable, though to speak of striving towards the ideal of eudaimonia, that the perfectly virtuous person lives, as Aristotle describes him. Shame, therefore, has the function of a sort of moral lighthouse, guiding one towards this higher ideal of pure virtue by illuminating one’s failings and weaknesses. Perhaps, though, Aristotle is right, in claiming that shame is not a lasting virtuous state; and indeed we might create the case of the hypothetical person with no need of the feeling of shame itself because, due to some happy accident, every one of their actions turns out the way they intend it to. Indeed, in this case the feeling of shame might be seen to be extraneous. However, aside from the issue that this is a situation that no person would realistically find themselves in, we also note that if something shameful were to happen as a result of this person’s actions, whether deliberate or accidental, if the decent person were to feel no shame at this action, they would no longer be considered decent.

This situation points to a deeper truth about our argument thus far. In this essay, we have so far argued that shame is a necessary part of moral development. Returning to the point I made earlier, however, that shame is associated with a virtue, just as anger is associated with the virtue of temperance and fear with the virtue of bravery, we can concretely argue as to the nature of this virtue. The fact that we expect the decent person to be able to react to a disgraceful situation with shame and a recognition of their moral flaws suggests indeed that it is not the shame itself that is of moral worth, but rather that the capacity to feel shame (in both the sense of fear of disgrace and the recognition of one’s failings) is virtuous.

Furthermore, the capacity to feel shame is a virtue not only due to the fact that it is expected of a decent person, but also because of the fact that the capacity for shame, as the ability to recognize one’s own moral failings, is part of the ultimate fulfillment of the human function (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle argues in an earlier part of the Nichomachean Ethics that the human function is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (1098a 5). The ability to reflexively examine one’s own actions, and then to recognize one’s moral failings, can therefore be seen as a deeply rational activity, indeed one in which reason is necessary. The capacity to feel shame, then, can be seen to be virtuous in the sense that it is necessary in order to reach eudaimonia.

In conclusion, then, we have found that Aristotle’s argument applies only to the emotion of shame in itself, and within that, the subset of shame defined only as fear of disgrace. However, when we consider that shame can also be seen as a recognition of moral failure, we begin to see how Aristotle’s account of the virtues could be expanded to account for the positive nature of this kind of reflection. Furthermore, in considering the ability to feel shame rather than any single instance of the feeling of shame, we recognize the deeply moral nature of shame, and indeed conclude that the capacity to feel shame is a necessary attribute of the eudaimon person.

We have not considered here the deeper implications of this argument: for instance, if the ability to feel shame is viewed as the root of ethical systems, we might reasonably expect there to be an impact on the criminal justice and educative systems. Should we instead focus on fostering a sense of shame in those who have done wrong, rather than using punishment as a deterrent? Indeed, the internalization of ethical norms in the form of shame or the capacity to feel shame could lead to some interesting meta-ethical questions – does this then imply that moral judgment is a sort of emotional judgment? Does it then make sense to conceive of a set of pre-existing ethical norms? These form interesting topics for further exploration.

**Works Cited**

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics.* Trans. Terence Irwin. Hackett, 2000.