Qeios

Peer Review

Review of: "Guilt is Ethical, Shame is Aesthetic"

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There's a lot to like about this paper. It draws on a wide variety of relevant sources and explores the application of the ethical-aesthetic distinction to shame from many angles. My comments below perforce reflect that expository structure.

The paper's thesis is that the differences between shame and guilt map onto the distinction between aesthetics and ethics. Rather than offer a linear argument to establish this conclusion, the author lays it out and goes on to explore its social, normative, and cognitive ramifications. The discussion is indisputably rich, but I feel there is a tradeoff: although practically all these reflections are interesting and worth discussing, not all of them are well explained and defended. There is too much to discuss it all in detail, but I will go over enough examples to hopefully justify my recommendation to tighten up the argument.

The essay introduces the notion of aesthetics by saying it "takes its name from the ancient Greek αἰσθητικός (aisthetikós), which signifies 'outer appearance'" and noting that Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten used the term to refer to "the science of 'what is sensed and imagined.'" If this is supposed to be the distinctive character of shame, it probably needs to be sharpened, since an agent can appear or be perceived in many different ways, not all of which elicit shame. I can, for example, appear graceful, banal, tired, exalted, or—crucially for the contrast under discussion—guilty. It might be rejoined that the conditions for guilt, unlike the conditions for shame, can be theorized without reference to any observer—including the first person. (After all, there is a substantive difference between *feeling* guilty and *being* guilty which has no counterpart in shame—to feel ashamed *is* to be ashamed.) However, that abstraction doesn't fit well with what the paper purports to be doing, viz., "not so much address[ing] the feelings of guilt and shame but rather the fact of being declared guilty (being accused) and the act of being shamed." It seems safe to say that in the standard case, what prompts the accusation is the perception

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that the accused is guilty. At this point, the rejoinder might be that accusations of guilt at least purport to go beyond appearances and get at the fact of the matter, while shaming does not. But on second thought, it's not hard to think of cases where correcting a misperception will bring shaming, not just accusations, to a halt. In light of all this, I maintain that appearance or perception's relation to shame needs to be rendered in more detail in order to contrast it with guilt.

(As a side note, it's not obvious that the article actually proceeds as advertised, focusing on charges and shaming rather than the experience of guilt and shame, on the second-personal rather than the first. For example, we later get the claim that feeling guilty responds to a more formal system of ethics than shame does, or that the feeling of shame arises from other persons' interpretations of situations. In fact, it's not obvious that we can conceive of an act of shaming in isolation from the response it elicits. Have I really carried out shaming if my addressee doesn't feel ashamed?)

Early on, the paper claims that "kitsch has often been associated with ethical flaws: having a 'kitsch taste' has been described as 'unethical.'" Its ethical flaw, apparently, lies in its "confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category." It offers this diagnosis of kitsch to instantiate the claim that "[b]ecause shame is regarded as an ethical sanction, the person can be

submitted to ethical judgments as if s/he is guilty of something though in reality s/he is not." But it's not obvious how kitsch incurs these faults. Let's say for argument's sake that it really does conflate the ethical with the aesthetic. Is this a *practical* flaw, a moral wrong? Or is it an intellectual one? If it's the first, who is wronged by it? Has anyone been chastised or punished for creating or consuming kitsch? If so, knowing the terms of the reproof might help the reader appreciate the moral wrong being attributed to the kitscher. If it's the second, the confusion may be grounds for embarrassment (which the paper distinguishes from shame), but is it actually cause for *shame*? And if it is, do theoretical slips and category mistakes in general elicit shame? Or is this particular confusion wrong and/or shameful because of the subject matter, because of what is being conflated?

Since the paper also claims that ethics and aesthetics are interwoven, I wish its stance on their intersection were clearer. Its most perspicuous argument for segregating them is that "[b]ecause shame is regarded as an ethical sanction, the person can be

submitted to ethical judgments as if s/he is guilty of something though in reality s/he is not; or the person can feel guilty though she has committed no ethical fault." Does it make a difference that this argument is squarely ethical (possibly suggesting the priority of the ethical)? Much the same could be asked about the argument quoted from Broch that "only a clear distinction

between the two will make people realize the unethical status of kitsch." The worry, it seems, is that kitsch's ethical flaws might be mistaken for aesthetic ones. In the context of the parallels the paper argues for, this implies that the kitscher might feel shame when s/he should instead experience guilt—the counterpart to the worry about the ethically innocent person feeling guilt, not only shame. Both are driven by concern over inappropriate responses, although in one case that inappropriate response is a burden and in the other, an evasion. Can the amalgamation or separation of ethics and aesthetics only be defended in ethical or aesthetic terms? Or would it be desirable to have some third standpoint, such as epistemology, from which to evaluate the relation? When the author affirms that "Ethical conclusions can be derived from aesthetic phenomena," I take it he doesn't mean that these conclusions are derived legitimately, but it would be useful to make that explicit and explain where the inference goes wrong.

The argument for the interpenetration of aesthetics and ethics is also questionable. The author affirms that "Peoples' personal visions

of themselves and of others represent a mix of the ethical and the aesthetic as they can contain symbols or 'personal myths' and can be arranged in an aesthetically pleasing fashion by emphasizing coherence

and rhetoric effectiveness. In other words, morality is not only a matter of rules and values but also of 'looks.' " This doesn't follow. First, it could well be argued that symbols, personal myths, coherence, and rhetorical effectiveness are all aesthetic elements and criteria, offering no evidence that personal visions include an ethical component. Second, even if we grant for argument's sake that some of them are ethical, it needs to be shown that they can't be assimilated to rules and values. For example, I find it quite plausible that coherence is rule-governed. Finally, what licenses inferences from claims about personal visions to claims about the constitution of morality? People's visions of themselves and others probably include elements apart from the ethical and aesthetic, such as the economic value of individuals. Does that mean that such assessments are part of morality?

The author addresses the concern that "[o]ne might find the notion of aesthetics that I apply too broad because 'watching' and 'seeing' can concern many things." This is a legitimate concern, but I think it might also be worth addressing the converse, viz., that shame concerns some things that are left out by the notions of watching or aesthetics. Can I be ashamed of my nation's past, of my squeaky voice, or my misapplication of a mathematical theorem, for example? If so, it's not obvious that said notions are what best capture my susceptibility to shame over those issues.

The paper proposes something like an eidetic reduction to analyse shame, saying "[i]t must be possible to strip away ethical connotations and assumptions made about an object and see shame as an

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aesthetic phenomenon."

Contrasting guilt and shame through the idea of "saving face," the author writes: "Once the surface is clean, the person can emerge more or less successfully from a potentially embarrassing situation. However, they do not necessarily emerge as ethical winners." If the point of the contrast is that guilt cannot be similarly escaped by avoiding charges or prosecution, that seems very plausible in itself. However, I wonder how well this meshes with the claim in the preceding paragraph that "'feeling guilty' responds to a more formal ethics than the one that emerges from being merely 'watched.'" If formalities, formal proceedings, are so inessential to guilt, then it is worth spelling out in what sense it is more "formal" than shame and experiences that underlie it.

I could go on in this vein, but hopefully, the point I want to make is clear from the passages discussed: this paper would be better if it balanced its breadth and richness with a more careful, detailed exposition and defence of its points. At one point, it attributes to Aquinas the view that "shame refers to the future because it is the apprehension of a future accusation or future reproach (*convitium vel opprobrium futurum*) whereas fear refers to the past." This is such an unorthodox view, but the commentary just puts it out without making an effort to assess it! On every view I know of, fear is forward-looking. Greater care in presenting and developing the arguments should tighten up what is already an interesting and substantive paper.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.