

A Remorseful Criminal: Searching for Guilt in Aristotle

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Abstract

While instances of shame are plenty in Ancient Greek sources, it is notoriously difficult to identify a case of a wrongdoer who exhibits a reaction approximating our modern concept of guilt. Adopting a behavioural criterion for demarcating shame from guilt, I examine the most promising description of a guilt-feeling from Aristotle's *Ethics*. The description stands out from the earlier tradition by reversing the pattern of the behavioural tendencies of a wrongdoer, but fits well with the phenomenon of inner shame. The condition described by Aristotle can thus be conceived as self-shaming, but one that exhibits some of the features that have more in common with guilt.

I. Guilt and Shame

It is a relatively well-known fact that the vocabulary of the ancient Greek language lacked a term that could properly be translated as 'guilt' but had at least two distinct lexemes to designate 'shame.' During the archaic and the classical periods of Greek history, the two terms used to designate shame were 'αἰδώς' and 'αἰσχύνης,' and most authors of the age employed them as close synonyms.¹ An immediate inference suggests itself – shame was a particularly important concept for the ancients, but the Greeks managed to get by successfully without that additional emotion of negative self-appraisal, namely guilt, which the moderns typically consider quite indispensable. This impression is further strengthened by several influential 20th century anthropologists, who promoted a sharp divide between "shame cultures" and "guilt cultures," as well as by those classical scholars and philosophers who would readily place the Homeric

1. See, for instance, Thucydides (1998: 1.84.3) and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (referred as *NE* in subsequent mentions) 1128b32–33.

and much of the post-Homeric world soundly into the former category.² If a society of the archaic period by and large defined an individual's worth exclusively by reference to his or her social image, there would be no need for anything as private, subjective and unobservable as the feeling of guilt – a much later product of a very different social setting. David Konstan aptly describes this approach as “the ‘progressivist’ hypothesis of a great conceptual shift from ancient to modern ethical thought, with its emphasis on guilt” – a hypothesis that enjoys support from some of the most important scholars of the previous century.³ Whereas no historian of ideas will risk pinpointing the exact date when the concept of guilt first appeared, it is apparent to most researchers that guilt, together with its natural companion, the notion of guilty conscience, had already become part of the common ethical repertoire by the time of the Middle and Late Stoa (Philo, Cicero, Seneca) as well as the New Testament writers.⁴ It is likely, then, to have evolved, sometime during the Hellenistic period of Greek philosophy.

As one would expect, the dissenters, arguing for the essential conceptual continuity in moral vocabulary between the ancients and the moderns, are no less outspoken. It may be objected that the lack of a distinct term for a phenomenon in a certain culture does not yet establish the absence of such a phenomenon. It could well turn out to be the case that the Greeks, starting with Homer, used various descriptive expressions to refer to the feeling of guilt, or, what is more likely, employed their common terms for a related emotion, namely shame, in a much broader sense by comparison with present usage. After all, the examples of such cross-cultural terminological mismatches are numerous, and one only has to think of the peculiar denotation of the Greek words εὐδαιμονία, σοφροσύνη, πλεονεξία or ἀνδρεία. As a first approximation, these terms are rendered as ‘happiness,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘greed,’ and ‘courage,’ respectively, but any serious attempt to capture the full meaning of these terms (as they were used, for example, by Plato and Aristotle) by a single English equivalent is inevitably accompanied by a caveat of the following sort: “the term does not quite neatly map onto our concept of. . .”. There is no guarantee, then, that the semantic borders of the Greek words ‘αἰδώς’ or ‘αἰσχύνη’ match exactly the semantic borders of the English word ‘shame.’ Inspired by these

2. The distinction between “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures” was popularized by Ruth Benedict (1946). It was suggested though by Mead a decade earlier. See Mead (1937).

3. Konstan (2003: 1034–1035). For the supporters of the ‘progressivist hypothesis’ see Jaeger (1946); Dodds (1951); Yarkho (1972); Ohly (1992) and, arguably, Cairns (1993).

4. For the function of conscience in Seneca’s ethics and the development of the idea of a guilty conscience in Stoicism, see Colish (2014) and Marietta (1970).

examples, a number of scholars have concluded that our modern narrow concept of shame is too impoverished to capture the full scope of the corresponding Greek notion, which, among other shades of meaning, incorporated the idea of guilt as well. Thus, Bernard Williams, after considering a rather obscure excerpt from *the Odyssey*, argues that Telemachus does appeal to both feelings of shame and guilt when he reproaches the unruly suitors of his mother.⁵ Likewise, after an overview of the Greek tragedians of the fifth century BCE, Sorabji concludes: “Although the Greeks did not [terminologically] distinguish guilt from shame, the situations which provoke shame in the Greek portrayals, in some cases provoke also the attitudes which we distinguish as guilt, even though the Greeks did not make the distinction.”⁶ Similar claims about the ‘broad’ use of the term for shame have been occasionally made about the fourth-century Greek philosophers.⁷

So, perhaps we can still discover genuine guilt among the ancients, even if they never bothered to coin a special word for it. But the question looms: how would we recognize that we had found what we were searching for, even if we accidentally came across the phenomenon of moral guilt in one of the ancient sources? What are the distinguishing marks of guilt proper, as opposed to shame, embarrassment, or a mere sense of frustration? It is clear that the theoretical work of conceptually demarcating guilt from other related moral emotions should be done prior to any further investigation. Formulating the essential differences between guilt and, say, shame, is a prerequisite for any meaningful search for the individual instances of guilty conscience in the Greek texts. Unfortunately, it is precisely this step that is casually skipped over by many a researcher, who simply take it for granted that the difference between these two emotions is self-evident. Richard Sorabji (in an earlier quote) appeals to a distinction between shame and guilt that “we” make, without explaining the exact reference of that pronoun. Konstan simply invokes the opinion of “modern investigators”, as if they were all in agreement on how to differentiate between these two emotions.⁸ This is far from being the case, however. A brief overview of the contemporary literature on the subject reveals a baffling disagreement among philosophers, social psychologists, and cognitive scientists on the distinguishing characteristics of these two affective reactions. Although researchers tend to agree that shame and guilt, despite having much in

5. Williams (1993: 90). The excerpt in Williams’ analysis comes from the *Odyssey* 2.64–65.

6. Sorabji (2014: 17). See Class (1964) for a classical defense of this view.

7. See, for instance, Konstan (2003: 1043) and Greenspan (1994: 58).

8. Konstan (2003: 1044).

common, are distinct emotions, their agreement rarely goes beyond this general affirmation. In fact, a typical article on the issue of the difference between shame and guilt begins by refuting at least half a dozen or so of the various criteria proposed for such a distinction by their predecessors before formulating their own, conclusive definitions.⁹ Needless to that the 'conclusive definitions' will in turn be 'reconsidered' by convincing counterexamples by the next group of researchers within a very short time span. The chaotic state of the field of the study of emotions makes the task of identifying true instances of guilt in Ancient Greece particularly challenging.

Given the bewildering variety of criteria suggested for demarcating guilt from shame, a discretionary decision must be made. The decision, moreover, should be guided by the limitations imposed by the very nature of our study. We will not, for example, be able to utilize criteria that require detailed introspective reports of the subjects experiencing either guilt or shame under certain circumstances. For obvious reasons, the historical or imaginary characters portrayed by the ancient sources are not susceptible to further inquiry into the phenomenal qualities of their emotive reactions. It will likewise be unhelpful to use criteria invoking concepts and distinctions that were non-existent during the time period under consideration. Thus, we will not get very far if we adopt the suggestion that guilt is exclusively elicited by moral transgressions while shame may also include non-moral blunders.¹⁰ A sharp distinction between moral and non-moral domains is the product of a later epoch. For the same reason, formulating the distinction in terms of the Freudian opposition between *ego-ideal* and *superego*, while a potentially helpful strategy when treating the neuroses of real patients, will hardly be applicable to fictional wrongdoers.¹¹ A more promising strategy would focus on the behavioural criteria instead. The behavioural tendencies of both guilt and shame are well-attested in empirical studies of emotions and, despite a significant behavioural overlap in some cases, they do seem to be distinct in at least one important respect. The behavioural definitions may thus provide a helpful practical standard for singling out a particular behavioural reaction of a wrongdoer as a product of retroactive guilt rather than mere shame.

Whatever else might be constitutive of shame, there is a nearly universal consensus among the researchers, corroborated by ordinary

9. For a representative set of authors who take up the task of demarcating guilt from shame, see Piers and Singer (1971); O'Hare (1977); Taylor (1985); Teroni and Deonna (2008); Hacker (2017); Miceli and Castelfranchi (2018).

10. This criterion was suggested by O'Hare (1977) and Sabini and Silver (1997).

11. The Freudian approach is defended by Lynd (1956) and utilized by Lewis (1971).

observations, that feelings of shame typically trigger withdrawal behaviour on the part of the ashamed agent. Aristotle, the first philosopher to give us a theoretical account of shame, aptly defines shame as “a kind of fear of disgrace” and further suggests that it produces “an effect similar to that produced by fear of danger.”¹² In the words of modern researchers like Tangney and Dearing, shame leads to a strong desire “to sink into the floor and disappear.”¹³ But the earliest recorded use of the imagery of ‘sinking through the floor’ in response to shame occurs already in Homer, where Diomedes, envisioning the potential disgrace that will befall him if he runs away from the battlefield, exclaims: “For some day Hector will say openly before the Trojans: ‘The son of Tydeus, running before me, fled to his vessels.’ So he will vaunt; and then let the wide earth open beneath me.”¹⁴ A strong desire to hide, to withdraw, and to disappear from sight is the most conspicuous symptom of shame, and can be potentially used for identification purposes.

Guilt, on the other hand, is not essentially tied to a tendency to hide from others but, on the contrary, found to correlate with prosocial reparative actions. In a typical case, a subjective acknowledgment of one’s responsibility for the harm done produces a standing reparatory motivation, that is, a desire to set things right, to improve one’s own moral standing, or to amend any injury resulting from one’s careless actions.¹⁵ Regrettably, both emotions, once they reach a certain level of intensity, are also found to correlate with mental distress as well as with self-punitive or self-destructive behaviours, which certainly further complicates the task of differentiating between them. Has the wrongdoer committed suicide because of his gnawing feeling of guilt, or because of the unbearable burden of public disgrace? Or, perhaps, both reasons have contributed? No purely behavioural criterion will allow us to settle the question.¹⁶

12. *NE* 1128b11–12. Aristotle also mentions blushing as a typical physiological reaction of an ashamed person (*Ibid.*)

13. Tangney and Dearing (2002: 18). For similar findings about the behavioral manifestation of shame see Lewis (op. cit.) and Tangney (1993).

14. Homer (1967).

15. Watson and Clark (1992); Caprara *et al.* (2001); Teroni and Bruun (2011).

16. An example of such an irresolvable ambivalence comes from the story of Adrastus, preserved for us by Herodotus. After accidentally killing his own brother, Adrastus had to escape to King Croesus. King Croesus pardoned, ritually purified, and accepted the run-away killer on a par with his own son. As bad luck would have it, Adrastus soon killed his benefactor’s son while hunting, again, by pure accident. Even after King Croesus decided not to punish his son’s murderer, the poor exile could not bear his misfortunes any longer and committed suicide. The circumstances of the story and the behaviour of the main character are consistent with both interpretations when it comes to the cause of this suicide (1920: 1.35–45).

A reference to the behavioural proneness of shame-driven (as opposed to guilt-driven) agents, might not be decisive when it comes to distinguishing between them, but it can still be useful in some scenarios. A person wilfully eschewing company after being caught doing something that is generally considered disgraceful, experiences shame; if no tendency for self-isolation is detectable but the agent is still visibly distressed after a similar behavioural fault, we should consider other options – where guilt, of course, is just one of the candidates.¹⁷ Yet both shame and guilt, to use Hume’s memorable phrase, are “disagreeable passions,” and, as such, may have a measurable deterrent effect when it comes to undesirable conduct. Appeal to the fear of shame, as a matter of fact, is a standard motivational technique for the characters of the Homeric epics. The invocation, “Put shame into your hearts!”, combined with a threat of a disgraceful likening to women and children, provides a sufficient reason for the warriors in dire straits to abstain from doing anything shameful (such as retreating from enemy).¹⁸ Indeed, fear of public shame proves to be stronger than fear of death under certain conditions, as when Hector ventures on a dangerous mission beyond the safety of the city walls, only to avoid becoming the laughing stock of “the Trojan women with trailing garments.”¹⁹ At the same time, exhortations to abstain from evil even if no person will ever find out about the misdeed, and thus no shame or other forms of punishment are likely to ensue, are non-existent in the literature of the archaic period and start to appear much later in the Greek sources, viz., only towards the end of the fifth century BCE. Whether these relatively more recent cases should best be interpreted as appeals to the fear of guilt, by analogy with the familiar appeals to the fear of shame, will be one of the concerns of the subsequent sections.

II. Inside the Criminal Mind: The Aristotelian Take

In their quest to locate guilt in antiquity, researchers have scrutinized multiple passages, starting with the Homeric texts and continuing with

17. An option that is not usually entertained by the moderns, but which was certainly a live option for the ancients, is the mental disturbance due to the incurred ritual pollution. After killing his mother, Aeschylus’ Orestes does not exhibit any traces of regret, guilt or shame as he boldly acknowledges the crime of matricide during the court hearing in Athens. Yet he is very much concerned with purifying himself from defilement by an appropriate ritual (*Eumenides*, 276–285; 448–453). See Parker (1983) on the importance of the notion of pollution in Greek religion.

18. E.g., *Il.* 5.527–30; 7.92–100; 15.661–63; *Od.* 2.64–65.

19. *Il.* 6.440–46.

the poets, tragedians, and philosophers up to the end of the classical era. Each one of these texts (and their proposed interpretations) deserves a separate discussion. In what follows, I will closely examine a single excerpt that seems to me be the most credible candidate for portraying the guilt-ridden conscience of a wrongdoer in all of the pre-Hellenistic Greek literature. If an unambiguous description of guilt is to be found in classical Greece at all, it is to be found, I maintain, in this most curious paragraph from Book IX of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It will be helpful to set the passage in context first. The virtue of friendship is the main overall topic of Book IX, but in the section that will be the focus of our interest Aristotle ventures on a short but remarkable digression (1166b5–30). He addresses the issue of self-love and the possibility of a friendly relationship between oneself and someone who falls short of the requirements of a virtuous life. His main thesis can be summed up as follows: the inner state of someone who is wicked is characterized by a painful discord and, as a result, such a person can be neither at peace with him- or herself, nor a true friend to another. However, the details of Aristotle's description of a behavioural failure and its drastic psychological and social effects set his understanding sharply aside from anything that had been presented by the earlier tradition.

More specifically, the philosopher's discussion of the wrongdoer's condition consists of two separate claims, which we might label "the traditional" and "the novel", respectively. To begin with, when describing the state of a person who gives in to illicit desires and ignores the advice of reason, Aristotle resorts to the familiar metaphors of inner division and inner strife (στάσις), and to this extent he is not yet departing from the literary and philosophical conventions adopted by earlier thinkers. Although in his own psychology Aristotle apparently finds the well-known Platonic division of the *psyche* into three ontologically distinct parts both unnecessarily complicated and logically problematic, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere he fully endorses the metaphor of continual disorder within an immoral soul.²⁰ The psychic integrity of at least some wicked persons is seriously threatened by their blameworthy behaviour. In particular, Aristotle makes the following three affirmations:

20. In the *De Anima* (2001), Aristotle observes that any view which seeks to divide the soul into distinct parts is vulnerable to the following objection: "What can it be that holds the parts together?" Specifying a particular 'unifying agency' would simply push the question one step further, and the arguer would either have to admit that the soul is one or suffer the consequences of the infinite regress (411b5–13). Thus, Aristotle prefers to speak of different "psychic powers (δύναμις)" rather than distinct elements or parts of the soul (e.g., 413a30; 414a29). For further criticism of the idea of the tripartite soul see also (*De Anima* 432a24–b8).

- (1) “They [wicked persons] are at variance with themselves (διαφέρονται γὰρ ἑαυτοῖς)” (1166b8).
- (2) “Their soul is rent by faction (στασιάζει γὰρ αὐτῶν ἡ ψυχή)” (1166b19).
- (3) “One part pulls them [wicked persons] one way and another the other, as if dragging them asunder (διασπῶντα)” (1166b21–22).

The terminology of strife and division that Aristotle employs in these three statements is recognizably Platonic,²¹ and the basic assumption of the ongoing conflict between reason and desire (or appetite) in any less-than-fully-virtuous person (e.g., in an incontinent person) is likewise adopted from both the mainstream philosophical tradition and the popular convictions.²² Neither is the excerpt quoted unique among other Aristotelian writings. Aristotle mentions the opposing impulses of the elements of the soul elsewhere, but nowhere is this statement made with a greater dramatic effect than in these lines.²³ Whereas the leading (and common) metaphor here is that of civil discord within a community (στάσις; στασιάζω), the other two verbs used in the text suggest, in addition, the ideas of weakening through a split-up (as when a serried military regiment, the phalanx, is broken apart) and the loss of the initial harmony (as when the unity of the whole in a work of poetry is destroyed through separation).²⁴ The wicked persons, thus, do not just endure a bitter faction between opposing faculties of the psyche, but they also forfeit their inner strength and suffer from a general deformity of their souls.

Styling the conflict as a strife between rational and irrational aspects of the soul might work as a first approximation, but it certainly simplifies the situation and fails to explain all the relevant phenomena. In particular, while accurately describing the state of hesitation the agent experiences *prior* to a decision, it fails to explain the persistence of the ‘divided self’ condition after the (wrong) choice has already been made. What are these opposing psychic powers within a wrongdoer’s soul fighting about now, when the action cannot be undone? Aristotle suggests an answer to this

21. See Plato *Phaedrus* 237d–e; *Lysis* 214c–d; *Republic* 352a, 440b, 464c, 587e and *The Laws* 975d.

22. Earlier in the *NE* Aristotle admits that the belief that “one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle” is commonly recognized “even in the discussions outside our school” (1102a26–29). He is careful, though, not to commit himself to the thesis of the *ontological* distinctness of these two elements.

23. Cf. a much more neutral claim made earlier in the *NE*: “The impulses of incontinent people move in contrary directions” (1102b21), or the one from the *De Anima*: “There had been two sources of movement [in a living being] – mind and appetite – [...] but appetite can originate movement contrary to calculation, for desire is a form of appetite” (433a22–26). But see a parallel place from the *Eudemian Ethics*, where a wicked one is described as “his own enemy” (1240b14–16).

24. Cf. Aristotle *Politics*, 1303b13; *Poetics*, 1451a34.

question in a single sentence (1166b 23–24), which I am inclined to interpret as follows. The wrongdoer suffers from the force of two desires, which cannot be reconciled with each other. First, there is a standing first-order desire to indulge in (illicit) pleasures that proves to be stronger than any other first-order desire or fear (such as fear of punishment). These counter-desires might be briefly entertained by the agent but are eventually suppressed (or overpowered) prior to a decision. Yet the story does not end there. Despite being unable to resist his first-order desire for pleasures, the agent has an equally strong second-order desire never to have acquired a taste for such indulgences. He wishes not to wish such pleasures, or at least not to wish them with such passion. It may well be the case that the second-order desire is the product of his ‘rational part,’ while the initial direct yearning for pleasures comes from the less than noble depths of his soul. But the conflict between these two desires may linger even after the commission of the deed, since the second-order desire is not in any way suppressed by the strength of the first-order wish. It is precisely in this sense that the wrongdoer’s soul, according to Aristotle, keeps being “dragged asunder” even after the moment of choice has passed.²⁵

What is much less familiar, though, is Aristotle’s subsequent description of the wrongdoer’s behaviour and of his (allegedly) characteristic attempts to quell the ongoing psychological discomfort. It is this second part of his analysis that we may, with good reason, label “the novel one.” Unlike the standard examples of shame-driven agents who naturally seek to alleviate their inner distress by withdrawing or hiding from others, Aristotle’s wrongdoer does exactly the opposite. Thus, reversing the familiar paradigm, Aristotle affirms the following:

The depraved (οἱ μοχθηροί) seek others with whom to spend their days, but are in flight (φεύγουσιν) from themselves; for when on their own they are reminded (ἀναμνησκονται) of many odious things in the past, and look forward to more of the same in the future, but in company with others, they can forget (1166b14–17).²⁶

25. A twelfth century commentator, Michael of Ephesus, takes a more traditional view when he describes the result of this inner conflict in terms of the tragic fragmentation of the personality: “Reason and the irrational pull the wretched man, the one this way, the other that, [thus] tearing him apart and making him many instead of one” (2001: 163). The resulting disunity accounts for the fact that “an evil man goes wretchedly and altogether miserably” (*Ibid.*), and that, in many cases, leads to suicide.

26. Broadie and Rowe (2002: 231). Broadie and Rowe’s translation of this excerpt is cited here primarily because of their choice to translate the *medii-passivi* form of ἀναμνησκω (‘to remember’) as “they [the wicked people] are reminded” rather than “they recall” or “they remember” (as preferred by Rackham, Irwin and Ross). While both readings are possible, the passive construction fits better with the metaphor of a ‘divided self’ explored in this context.

This most intriguing passage deserves a closer look. The traditional metaphor of a divided self undergoes a major development in Aristotle. Whereas the ‘Homeric’ picture, inherited by most subsequent writers, suggests an inner struggle between the forces of, roughly, human ‘reason’ and ‘the passions’ prior to a decision, Aristotle implies that the inner conflict (at least for some agents) not only continues but indeed intensifies after the choice is already taken. We have already seen that this conflict can be understood in Aristotle as a tension between two desires of different orders. The described conflict, moreover, looks very much like that between an unrelenting judge and the accused suspect in a courtroom, so that the ‘criminal’ feels strongly inclined to run away from the heavy gaze of the accuser. Although the famous metaphor of a remorseful criminal being convicted “by a judge within the soul” will, for the first time, be explicitly spelled out by Philo several centuries later, it is already clearly latent in Aristotle.²⁷ However, unlike the case of public shaming, where preserving the secrecy of the deed or simply disappearing from view is a genuine option, one cannot keep one’s shameful behaviour secret from oneself or truly run away from oneself. In a very telling line, Sophocles’ character Deianeira nicely expresses what seems like a commonly accepted Greek platitude about shame: “Shameful (αἰσχρὰ) deeds, when done in darkness, never bring disgrace (αἰσχύνῃ).”²⁸ This kind of consolation, however, is of no help to the Aristotelian evildoer, whose accuser comes from within. The situation, we learn, is further aggravated by one’s fearful anticipation of similar crimes in the future.²⁹ The only escape, then, is to look for a mental diversion by immersing oneself in continuous preoccupation with external stimuli, which suitably appear in the form of an agreeable company of friends. The forgetting of past deeds, of course, is not a permanent memory erasure but merely a temporary relief, which lasts only as long as one’s mental focus is thoroughly diffused elsewhere.³⁰

27. See Philo (1929: 128). For the modern use of the courtroom imagery see Kant (1996: 189).

28. Sophocles 1994 (*Trachiniae* 596).

29. The puzzling affirmation of the wrongdoer expecting “more of the same [crimes] in the future” is likely to be Aristotle’s opaque reference to a conventional wisdom, as expressed, for instance, by Aeschylus: “The evil deed begets more iniquity like its own breed” (*Agamemnon* 759–760). Alternatively, it could be Aristotle’s way of saying that the evildoer recognizes the incorrigibility of his motivational priorities, which, of course, would suggest that the misdeed in question was not an uncharacteristic moral lapse.

30. We should keep in mind that Aristotle’s description of the state of mind of a wicked person in that chapter is offered as a correlate to his earlier extensive description of the mental state of an ideally good person (1166a10–30), who, among other things, “wishes to spend time with himself” (1166a23).

Spending time in the company of friends does not yet radically solve the wrongdoer's problem, in the same way in which, for example, the ritual of purification could permanently solve the defilement problem (μίαισμα) of Aeschylus' Orestes, the mother-killer.³¹ Sooner or later, Aristotle implies, the evildoer's past will catch up with him, but not necessarily in the form of legal punishment or post-mortem retribution. The punisher, just like the accuser, comes from within, and the following remark should alert us to the fact that the mental discord of the inveterate criminal is much more serious than a minor psychological discomfort: "Those who have done many terrible actions hate and shun life because of their vice, and destroy themselves" (1166b11–12).³² Suicidal thoughts of Aristotle's criminal, however, remind us that there is an important overlap in at least this respect in the behavioural tendencies of both the ashamed and those who experience other forms of extreme self-loathing, including guilt. After all, the Greek sources, both literary and historical, offer multiple examples of shame-induced suicides.³³ Luckily, and despite Aristotle's silence on this matter, we may safely assume that the actual number of such tragic outcomes is relatively small, and so, in most circumstances, won't threaten the effectiveness of the behavioural criterion when it comes to demarcating shame from guilt.

Finally, we should address a question that was naturally looming in the background throughout the discussion above: who, exactly, are these overly sensitive offenders who lose sleep over their past crimes, are thoroughly unhappy when they remain by themselves, and are willing to commit suicide only to escape the pain of a split soul and the nagging voice of the inner chastiser? Does Aristotle single out a small subset from all the transgressors (as common sense would suggest), or does he describe a condition of all or most of the wrongdoers (which seems quite counterintuitive)? Towards the end of the same section Aristotle makes a rather astonishing and seemingly unqualified generalization about the "bad ones": "The bad ones (οἱ φαῦλοι) are full of regret (μεταμελείας γὰρ γέμουσιν)" (1116b24–25). The claim does draw an understandable criticism from the commentators, who lament that the philosopher "gives no reason for holding that 'a rift in a soul' characterizes *all* bad people."³⁴ Indeed, when taken at face value, the claim flies in

31. Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 276–285; 448–453.

32. I am siding here with Irwin's emendation of the manuscript, reading "διὰ τὴν μοχθηρίαν μισοῦσι" ("on account of the vice [the evil ones] hate [their lives]") rather than "διὰ τὴν μοχθηρίαν μισοῦνται" ("on account of the vice, [the evil ones] are hated [by others]"). Whether their crimes are or are not known to others is a secondary issue for Aristotle in this context, who seeks to reveal their psychological disturbance. See Irwin (1999: 143; 292).

33. See Sophocles, *Ajax*; *Hippolytus*. Herodotus (op. cit., 1.82; 1.213; 7.232); Xenophon (2007: 9.6).

34. Broadie and Rowe (2002: 420).

the face of ordinary observations, and so the scope of Aristotle's subjects under analysis requires a clarification.

The idea that a morally deficient person is necessarily an unhappy one as a result of his wickedness is appealing to any defender of morality, and it is passionately affirmed by Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias* (470e10; 473b5). That paradoxical affirmation provokes an immediate sneer from Polus, who claims that "even a child" could prove Socrates wrong, and further cites a historical case of the cruel Macedonian tyrant, Archelaus (ruled 413–399 BCE). After reading through a long list of Archelaus' murders and betrayals, Polus remarks sarcastically: "And these crimes he committed without realizing that he was the most wretched of men, and felt no regrets (οὐ μετεμέλησεν αὐτῷ)" (471b9). While Socrates saves the day by telling "a very fine story" of everlasting post-mortem tortures prepared for the tyrant Archelaus (525c–e), this option is not open to Aristotle for obvious reasons. How should we then treat the Aristotelian attempt to link immorality with misery?

I suggest that we may interpret Aristotle's claim about the intended scope of "the bad ones" in the context of his earlier gradation of the levels of moral depravity. The most perverted kind of agents ("the brutes") "in whom nature is the cause of such a [wicked] state" (1148b32) and whose wickedness goes "beyond the human level" (1149a16–17) should clearly be excluded from the denotation of 'οἱ φῶλοι' mentioned in the quote above. Moving one step higher up the moral ladder, we find those thoroughly vicious individuals, who sincerely adopt a wicked maxim as a guiding principle of their behaviour (1152a23–24). We may safely exclude these characters from consideration as well, since Aristotle uses precisely the absence of regret as a distinguishing feature of a vicious character (such as a self-indulgent person) (1150a22–23; 1150b30–31).³⁵ What remains now is a rather diverse group of morally vacillating individuals which includes the incontinent, the soft, the impetuous, and the so-called 'men of endurance'.³⁶ There is no need to get into the fine Aristotelian distinctions between these types of wrongdoers, or into their moral ranking relative to each other, but it seems that the remorseful agents of Book IX are drawn from their ranks and not from the ranks of vicious individuals. Nonetheless, since "the

35. My suggestion to limit the denotation of 'the bad ones' in *NE* 1116b24–25 to a subset of all non-virtuous individuals evades the charge of incoherence often brought against Aristotle in connection with his claims in 1150a22–23 and in 1150b30–31, where he univocally affirms that the vicious (e.g., intemperate agents) are incurable and *feel no regrets*. It is worth noting that another category of agents with no regrets is the group of 'the good ones' (1166a29) but, of course, their absence of regret is explained by the fact that they have done nothing regrettable.

36. See *NE* 1150a–1152a.

brutes” and those who are wilfully and wholeheartedly given to vice are relatively rare characters in a well-organized community, we can safely conclude that Aristotle describes the kind of experience that the majority of ordinary people may easily relate to. Needless to say, not all cases of deep regret over one’s misdeeds would lead to ultimate “quietus”, as there might be a less dramatic way of dealing with that nagging inner voice. But, surely, such tragic outcomes of intense remorse for the crimes committed are attested in clinical records, and, in that sense, Aristotle is not going beyond common experience, either.³⁷

Being torn apart by conflicting desires and finding nothing lovable within, the evildoer cannot be a friend to himself. Nor can he become a true friend to another person, despite all attempts to mingle with other people as much as possible. It is likely that these drastic social and psychological consequences of vice are what prompts Aristotle to suddenly change the tone of voice at the end of the section – from an expository to an exhortatory one –, and to use an imperative mood that is so rare in his works: “If then such a state of mind is utterly miserable, we should do our utmost to shun wickedness and [we should] try to be virtuous” (1166b27–29). It is almost as if the philosopher touches on a subject particularly important to him personally, and for a brief moment cannot resist the posture of a motivational speaker: let us not forget that no pleasures in the world are worth the mental sufferings incurred by a person through his own vice. It remains now to inquire whether Aristotle’s attitude towards the effects of crime on the wrongdoer have precedents in earlier authors, and, ultimately, whether we should interpret it as a genuine description of the feeling of guilt.

III. External and Internal Shame

It was shown in the previous section that, except for the occasional suicidal motives, the behaviour and attitudes of the Aristotelian wrongdoer in Book IX do not fit the traditional behavioural pattern of an ashamed agent. Shame is a conditioned yet unpleasant emotive reaction to the fact of social disapproval of one’s behaviour or the outsider’s contempt for one’s personality, and it can thus be avoided by any evildoer in possession of the magical Ring of Gyges, which would make both one’s

37. Curiously, Plato’s Athenian in the *Laws* recommends suicide as the best way out for a person who is unable to resist his morbid inclinations and “who is driven by the voice of some unhappy passion that besets him by day and wakes him from his sleep at night to go temple robbing” (854a-c). Yet, Plato says nothing about whether the temple-robbler *himself* would be inclined to commit an act of self-destruction, which, of course, is an all-important detail.

identity and one's crimes undetectable.³⁸ If the ring is unavailable, though, the second-best option is to withdraw from the presence of the would-be judges as soon as possible. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades testifies that Socrates' words convict him of being preoccupied with worthless activities and ignoring the ones that really matter, and he further admits that the philosopher is the only person who has ever made him feel ashamed. Since changing his lifestyle is not an option for Alcibiades, he resorts to the only possible way of escaping the discomforting feeling of shame: "I dash out like a runaway slave and keep out of [Socrates'] way as long as I can" (216b). Staying out of Socrates' sight effectively mitigates the unpleasant feeling and restores Alcibiades' peace of mind, even though nothing changes about Alcibiades himself. We should also observe that the mere fact of the observers' presence is not yet sufficient for triggering shame. The observers, as the case of Alcibiades shows, must be of a certain kind, viz., people whose opinion matters to the agent.³⁹

In the course of his extensive analysis of the emotion of shame in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle cites the historical case of the companions of Antiphon the poet, who were sentenced to death by Dionysius and, being ashamed of their crime, were covering their faces as they were escorted towards the place of execution (1385a9–12).⁴⁰ The philosopher characteristically mentions this behaviour to illustrate the general truth that one may to some extent alleviate the psychological pangs caused by the recognition of one's moral inadequacy by minimizing the visual contact with others: "We feel *more* shame when we are likely to be continually seen, and go about under the eyes of, those who know of our disgrace" (1385a7–9).⁴¹ Only a thoroughly depraved agent, in Aristotle's view, viz., one characterized, among other things, by the vice of shamelessness, would be willing to publicly expose the ugliness and unseemliness of his actions.⁴²

Aristotle's wrongdoer from Book IX is not disposed to shun company (on the contrary, he seeks it), and yet he can hardly be accused of moral callousness. He must then be experiencing a distinct emotive reaction to his behavioural faults and the feeling of guilt offers itself as a verisimilar option. The suggestion is further strengthened by Williams' reminder

38. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 360b–d.

39. Cf. also Plato, *Symposium* 194c and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1384a22–32; 1384b22–26.

40. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1325–1454.

41. My emphasis.

42. The Greek term for 'shame,' αἰσχύνη, is etymologically related to αἰσχρός with the original meaning of 'ugly' and 'deformed' (cf. *Il.* 2.216). Likewise, the second common word for shame, αἰδώς, is a derivation from αἰδοῖα (genitals, 'private parts') and was still used in that 'physiological' sense by Homer (*Il.* 22.75). The etymology suggests an additional aspect of meaning: a 'shame-covered' agent is not only disposed to hide from others, but he himself is hardly a pleasant sight for the onlookers. See Beeks (2010: 34).

that “the most primitive experiences of shame are connected with sight and being seen,” whereas “guilt is rooted in hearing, the sound in oneself of the voice of judgement.”⁴³ I argued above that the experience of “remembering past crimes” in Aristotle’s example should be seen as an experience of being constantly reminded of these by a “nagging inner voice,” as it were, which, of course, fits well with the metaphor of hearing.⁴⁴ We could have stopped here, perhaps: genuine guilt has been successfully identified. But there is, as always, “just one little thing” left. What if, an objector might wonder, the philosopher never intended to introduce a qualitatively different moral emotion in that passage, but simply describes the good old feeling of shame, yet internalized within the agent? This option must be seriously considered.

To begin with, what does ‘internalized shame’ mean? We may define it as a mental condition in which the agent who *does* the shaming becomes identical with the agent who is *ashamed*. The familiar dichotomy between the (real or envisioned) judgmental audience on the one side, and the person at fault on the other, is subjectivized as a conflict occurring within the very same person. Moreover, such a scenario was evidently thought possible, even morally desirable, by the authors preceding Aristotle by several decades. The earliest unambiguous evidence of this tendency comes from the several extant fragments of Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BCE).⁴⁵ In one of these, Democritus advocates a radical paradigm change, urging a shift of focus from the fear of public disgrace to the agent’s own evaluation of his behaviour:

A man should not feel shame before other men rather than himself,
nor be more disposed to do evil, whether no one will know or all

43. Williams (1993: 89). Cf. a Greek proverb quoted by Aristotle: “Shame dwells in the eyes” (*Rhetoric* 1384a36).

44. An opaque reference to what can be interpreted as a precursor of an “inner voice” occurs already in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. As the Chorus sings praises to Zeus as a source of all wisdom, it stresses that, as a matter of the divine law, such a wisdom comes to humans through hard experiences only. The painful lessons, however, leave a lasting mental scar, which makes itself felt especially at nighttime: “And before the heart (πρὸ καρδίας), instead of sleep, there drips the misery of pain recalled (μνησιπήμων)” (179–180). As observed by Sommerstein, the verb ‘drips’ (στᾶζει) that Aeschylus uses on this occasion “evokes the irritating noise of dripping water (e.g., from a leaky roof), which may keep one awake at night” (2008: 21).

45. The word “unambiguous” is important here. It was observed earlier that Williams (1993: 83) argues that the evidence for an “internalized other” can be found already in the *Odyssey*. Yet the lines he quotes (*Od.* 2.64–65) are open to a variety of alternative interpretations. Segal suggests that Phaedra’s famous distinction between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ shame in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (lines 383–87) corresponds to a distinction between “externalized meaning of *aidos* common in Homer” and “her inward sense of shame” (Segal 1970: 283–84). But Segal himself is quoting from Democritus, as the most obvious source, to show that the discussions of the two aspects of shame were current during Euripides’ time (1970: 285).

men; but he should feel shame before himself (ἑωυτόν αἰδεῖσθαι) most of all, and establish this as a law for his soul, so that he does nothing unseemly.⁴⁶

The same idea is reiterated in two other shorter passages by Democritus, which we may quote here as well: [1] “Do not, even when you are alone, say or do anything base. Learn to feel shame (αἰσχύνεσθαι) before yourself much rather than before others;” [2] “One who does shameful deeds (αἰσχρά) must first shame (αἰσχύνεσθαι) himself.”⁴⁷ The acquired capacity to internalize shame is apparently conceived by Democritus as a moral stance that is superior to the familiar fear of external shaming. We may also infer that the main reason why an agent “should learn” to be ashamed of oneself, according to Democritus, is because such a habit would be a much better guard against doing anything shameful: public exposure of one’s misdeeds is, after all, a less than assured scenario, and thus many a criminal may escape the punishment of public ignominy. Indeed, it could be the earliest example of a sound practical recommendation of how to strengthen the bonds of moral motivation, something that will grow to the level of educational and psychological platitude in the centuries to come. For this reason, Kahn rightly views the surviving fragments from Democritus as the earliest documents in the field of moral psychology.⁴⁸

A younger contemporary of Democritus, the Athenian rhetorician Isocrates (436–338 BCE), echoes the same idea in one of his letters, written to a young aristocrat, Demonicus (composed between 403 and 393 BCE).⁴⁹ Styled as a fatherly admonition, Isocrates forewarns his addressee: “Never hope to conceal any shameful thing which you have done (αἰσχρὸν ποιήσας); for even if you do conceal it from others, your own heart will know (σεαυτῷ συνειδήσεις).”⁵⁰ The passage implies that being self-conscious of one’s faults is no less painful than being exposed to a communal shaming, and thus the mere thought of it should steer the young man away from vice. The excerpt is particularly interesting for its use of the verb σύννοια (‘to share knowledge with’), which in its various substantive and participial forms (e.g., σύννεσις, συνειδήσις, συνειδώς) will eventually serve as a Greek source for the Latin calque-word *conscientia*, and its later English descendant, ‘conscience.’ While purposefully avoiding the century-old debate about

46. Graham (2010: 641) = DK B264.

47. Graham (2010: 642; 644) = DK B244; B84.

48. Kahn (1985: 2).

49. Sandys (2011). Mirhady argues for a later date for the letter, placing it between 374 and 370 BCE. See *Isocrates I* (2000: 19). In either case, the letter would have been composed several decades before the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

50. Isocrates (1980: 1.16).

whether or not the fifth and fourth century Greeks had an idea of moral conscience, it must nonetheless be observed that a tendency to mentally torment and 'accuse' the transgressor 'from within' is an essential element in the folk-psychological understanding of 'bad' conscience.

It is only natural that we should expect to find Socrates among those who would take to heart these novel ethical tendencies of severing shame from its essential dependence on the presence of onlookers. Surprisingly, Plato's *Dialogues* offer fewer references to the phenomenon of internalized shame than we might have expected. Although Plato never mentions Democritus by name, it is unlikely that he was unfamiliar with Democritus' ethical views, which, in Kahn's words, "faithfully reflect the climate of opinion within which Plato's ideas took shape."⁵¹ Only in the *Greater Hippias* do we see Socrates casually admitting that the person whose shaming he truly fears is "the son of Sophroniscus," that is, Socrates himself (298b10). Yet, the reason for the feared self-shaming in that context was not Socrates' behavioural blunder but rather his alleged inability to say anything meaningful about the nature of the beautiful. In addition, we find a brief remark in the *Cratylus*, where Socrates seems to be referring to the phenomenon of an inner judge, albeit without any further elaboration: "There is nothing worse than self-deception – when the deceiver is always at home and always with you – it is quite terrible" (428d). Yet again, the context of the remark makes it clear that Socrates is more concerned about not committing a sin against the requirements of logical consistency than he is about any moral failure.⁵²

Several commentators on an earlier draft of this paper immediately pointed out that I had omitted the most obvious Platonic instance of apparent self-shaming, introduced in a context that may plausibly be interpreted as a moral one. In the *Republic* Socrates brings up the story of a certain Leontius, who happened to be passing by the corpses of executed criminals. At that moment, Leontius is described as experiencing a painful estrangement from a part of himself when his desire to gaze at the dead bodies comes into conflict with one of the nobler dispositions of the soul. Unable to resist, and yet clearly realizing the wrongness of his visceral tastes, Leontius exclaims in frustration, addressing (oddly) his own eyes: "There, ye wretches, take your fill of the fine spectacle!" (440a2). This passage is interesting for a number of reasons, but there are two considerations why I am inclined to downplay its relevance for the

51. Kahn (1985: 1).

52. Cf. a similar expression of preoccupation with logical consistency in the *Gorgias*: "I think it better that my lyre should be discordant and out of tune, and any chorus I might train, and that the majority of mankind should disagree with and oppose me, rather than that I, who am but one man, should be out of tune with (ἄσύνφωνον) and contradict myself" (482b-c).

topic under discussion. First, in the context of the dialogue, the story is mentioned by Socrates primarily to support his claim that *thumos* ('spirit') is an ontologically distinct element of the soul, in addition to reason and appetite. It is not meant to illustrate anything more. Secondly, the feeling Leontius experiences when struggling with morally questionable desires has very little to do with shame, self-shaming, or regret. It is rather pure anger, evoked by the spirited part of his soul, that manifests itself in his bitter words.⁵³ But there is yet a considerable distance between being angry about one's shortcomings or failures and being ashamed of oneself, let alone feeling guilty about one's actions.⁵⁴

In my estimation, Plato's main contribution to the Aristotelian picture of the wrongdoer's mindset in Book IX of *NE* lies in the thorough development of the metaphor of an unbalanced soul, combined with the claim of causal dependency of such a psychic discord on the deteriorating moral condition of a person. Already in one of the early Platonic dialogues, the *Lysis*, Socrates suggestively remarks that wicked people are not identical with their own selves, but are rather ill-balanced and at variance with themselves (214c-d). Unfortunately, no further justification of the claim that wicked individuals are lacking in psychic integrity is provided in that dialogue, except for an opaque reference either to a common opinion or, perhaps, a lost poetic verse: "...as is also said of them [of the wicked ones]" (214c8). The grand (and influential) picture in the *Republic* of a just soul as consisting of three basic and hierarchically structured elements, crowns Plato's efforts to explain moral depravity in terms of a lack of proper psychic harmony. No matter how much Aristotle would disagree with Plato about the exact number and the ontological status of the constitutive elements of the human soul, he ultimately resorts to the Platonic language of inner strife and division within the soul when it comes to explaining the immoral condition. As so often with Aristotle, he brings a healthy dose of commonsense realism to the Platonic metaphors: whereas the soul of Plato's cruel tyrant could be genuinely "out of joint" without the tyrant himself realizing his pitiful condition, Aristotle is more interested in cases where the mental discord of the wrongdoer has tangible social and psychological effects. If today we are inured to the idea that, in addition to the prospects of legal punishment or social censure, immoral behaviour has damaging psychological consequences for the offender, it is the result of a lengthy

53. This is precisely the morale that Socrates draws from this story: "Yet, surely, this anecdote signifies that the principle of anger sometimes fights against desires as an alien thing against an alien" (440a7).

54. This is not to deny that, for Plato, the spirited part is dependent on the operation of shame as an ally of reason, but in its traditional form of fear of external shaming.

conceptual and moral evolution that started in the depths of the Archaic period and had many pivotal stops along the way. The Aristotelian passage analysed in the previous section is certainly among the most significant landmarks on this long path.

IV. Conclusion

I am inclined to conclude as follows. Whereas the behavioural criterion may help us to demarcate traditional forms of shame from other emotions of negative self-appraisal (including guilt), it proves helpless when we encounter the phenomenon of internalized shame. An evildoer seeking to suppress the memory of his crimes in the company of other people is still, in a sense, running away from the accuser, except that the accuser is now internalized as an autonomous power within one's own soul. A transformation from being concerned with what others would think about me (fear of external shame) to a concern about what I, the agent, would think of myself if I should behave in such and such a way, represents a qualitative leap in the evolution of the human moral condition. The appeal to self-shaming is traceable to late fifth century BCE sources, but it is only in Aristotle that we find a first, convincing description of the psychological disturbance of a remorseful offender. Granted, Aristotle's account would not be applicable to hardened and principled wrongdoers, yet he strikes a familiar note with most of us, who have experienced the pangs of remorse and the utter discomfort of looking straight in the eyes of a person reflected in the mirror.

Unfortunately, Aristotle does not give us enough details about other behavioural tendencies of the wrongdoer that would allow us to categorize his feelings with greater precision. It would be helpful, for instance, to learn whether the regretful agent from Book IX has a tendency to redress the harm or compensate for the losses caused by his actions, that is, a tendency that was found to correlate with the feeling of guilt. In the absence of these additional details, we are not in a position to pronounce a final judgment, especially in the presence of a viable alternative of a re-conceptualized shame. But while guilt, as a distinctly identifiable emotion, has so far escaped us, the result is far from disappointing. In fact, it demonstrates that the conceptualization of the wrongdoer's mental condition as either the feeling of guilt or the feeling of shame before one's better self is largely a matter of terminological preference. The question should rather be whether Aristotle's complex view of shame exhibits some of the features we might want to associate more readily with guilt, at least as these are conceived by modern researchers of

emotions. Given the reasoning above, I am motivated to answer in the affirmative. The *Ethics* documents the crucial evolution from the primeval fear of something outside the agent, such as fear of physical punishment or fear of public dishonour, to the genuine apprehension of the prospect of negative self-assessment. But whether we call this latter experience ‘guilt,’ ‘pangs of conscience’, or ‘internalized shame’, it does not seem to be overly important for the analysis of one’s moral condition. Aristotle did not coin a new term to refer to such a feeling, but he certainly captured descriptively the results of the previous stages of moral development, and the significance of his contribution to the field of what we call moral psychology today should certainly be acknowledged.⁵⁵

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