The Role of Guilt in the Development of Virtue

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Despite its lack of popularity in contemporary Western culture and an association with deontic concepts that has rendered it easily dismissible by virtue theorists, guilt has a vital role to play in the development of virtuous character. While those experiencing guilt sometimes help others merely in order to alleviate their own guilt, and thus out of self-concern rather than other-concern, guilt can also elicit reflection on a wrongful action, perspective-taking with the one injured, and empathy that results in concern for others for their own sake. This contrasts with shame, a negative evaluation of the global self that is associated with rumination, withdrawal, anger, and defensiveness. Second, while moralistic motivations for assisting others strike us as an inappropriate stand-in for direct concern for the other, the desire to do the right thing, and the associated disposition to feel guilty when one does not, are not incompatible with genuinely virtuous motives. While a perfectly virtuous agent would have no occasion to feel guilty, she does find it good that persons be responsive to properly assigned blame. Responsiveness to moral obligations is an integral part of respect for second-personal relationships with others, not something merely impersonal. Finally, we might conclude that while guilt has won the right to remain a part of moral education, shame should be ushered out the door. But negative evaluations of the global self are not always inappropriate, nor is shame easily eliminated. In closing, I will look briefly toward traditional Christian understandings of sin and redemption, in which shame, I will suggest, is given a necessary but dynamic and transformative place. There is wisdom here that can incorporate, while also transcending, the view of shame as maladaptive.