

Shame and Pride in Moral Self-Improvement

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Abstract : Moral development requires learning from one's failures, but that turns out to be especially challenging when dealing with moral failures. The distress prompted by moral failure can cause responses of defensiveness or disengagement rather than attempts to make amends and work on self-change. The most potentially distressing response to moral failure is a shame. However, there appears to be two different senses of "shame" that are conflated in the literature, depending on whether the failure is appraised as the result of a global and unalterable self-defect, or a local and alterable self-defect. One of these forms of shame does prompt self-improvement in response to moral failure. This occurs if one views the failure as indicating only a specific (local) defect in one's identity, where that's something repairable, rather than an overall (or global) defect in your identity that can't be fixed. So, if the whole of one's identity as a morally good person isn't being called into question, but only a part, then that is something one could work on to improve. Shame, in this sense, provides motivation for self-improvement to fix this part of the self in the long run, and this would be important for moral development. One factor that looks to affect these different self-attributions in the wake of moral failure can be found in mindset theory, as reactions to moral failure in these two forms of shame are similar to how those with a fixed or growth mindset of their own abilities, such as intelligence, react to failure. People fall along a continuum with respect to how they view abilities - it is more of a fixed entity that you cannot do much to change, or it is malleable such that you can train to improve it. These two mindsets, 'fixed' versus 'growth', have different consequences for how we react to failure - a fixed mindset leads to maladaptive responses because of feelings of helplessness to do better; whereas a growth mindset leads to adaptive responses where a person puts forth effort to learn how to act better the next time. Here we can see the parallels between a fixed mindset of one's own (im)morality, as the way people respond to shame when viewed as indicating a global and unalterable self-defect parallels the reactions people have to failure when they have a fixed mindset. In addition, it looks like there may be a similar structure to pride. Pride is, like shame, a self-conscious emotion that arises from internal attributions about the self as being the cause of some event. There are also paradoxical results from research on pride, where pride was found to motivate pro-social behavior in some cases but aggression in other cases. Research suggests that there may be two forms of pride, authentic and hubristic, that are also connected to different self-attributions, depending on whether one is feeling proud about a particular (local) aspect of the self versus feeling proud about the whole of oneself (global).

Keywords : emotion, mindset, moral development, moral psychology, pride, shame, self-regulation

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