

Shame on You: The Virtuous Use of Shame in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*

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ABSTRACT

*Aristotle presents shame as a non-virtue, but through a careful analysis of his definition and discussion of shame the reader can conclude that there is an appropriate type of shame; a prospective as opposed to retrospective feeling of shame. This prospective shame one of the best ways a well-bred youth can be led to the acquisition of virtuous character. This paper will explore Aristotle’s understanding of shame as explained in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in his broader corpus, and will examine who can possess shame, how it can be used to teach virtue, and the impact of polis upon this process.*

“Whilst shame keeps its watch, virtue is not wholly extinguished in the heart[.]”

EDMUND BURKE, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

“Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue.”

SAMUEL JOHNSON, *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*

Introduction

As the above epigraphs note, there is a direct and long recognized connection between virtue and shame.¹ While the paradoxical nature of these concepts have led to an increasing de-emphasis of this connection, eighteenth-century English moral writers recognize that an individual’s possession of a sense of shame presupposes that there is a standard of acceptable action that the community holds to be honorable and consequently a standard of dishonorable action. These epigraphs indicate that the existence of shame presupposes that there is a standard of noble action and that shame is a means by which virtue can be cultivated in the community. These views are rightly reminiscent of teaching in *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Aristotelian presentation of shame is complex; for Aristotle clearly presents shame (*aidos*) as similar to a virtue, but closer to a feeling

than an active state, and thus it is a non-virtue (NE 1108a25). Despite the modern de-emphasis of the relation of shame and virtue, this clear label, scholars have argued that the ancient Greeks generally,² and Aristotle specifically³ present a link between this non-virtue and the moral virtues.

Central to understanding the particular Aristotelian moral virtues is the question of how an individual obtains them. Burnyeat correctly notes that the path to moral virtue is not merely an individualistic path, but where habituation in virtuous action is provided by external guidance, either family or community, to establish a “good upbringing.”⁴ For Aristotle the external guidance must be by a specific type of man, the *spudios* or prudent man, who is able to determine the mean in relation to the individual (1107a1). It is only through the applied pressure from external guidance that someone can walk the path to internalize the virtues as an active condition. The process by which external guidance leads to internalization has been widely discussed among various scholars.

Some interpreters argue that the appropriate use of pleasure is the primary means for guidance down the path of virtue.⁵ Aristotle notes that the life which defines happiness as pleasure is a life “that belongs to fatted cattle” (1095b20). And while Aristotle shows that the life of virtue is “concerned with pleasures and pains” (1104b15) it appears that virtue’s connection with pleasure may only be tenuous and given to provide the audience a reason to listen to the whole treatise. While it is true that Aristotle recognizes that something which may not be pleasant of itself or by its nature, but through habituation, becomes performed with pleasure (*Rhetoric* 1369b15–19 and 1179b35), such position seemingly indicates that the item becoming habit is what makes it pleasurable, not that seeking pleasure established the habit. Further, the utilization of this position is exacerbated because, as Aristotle notes, “in *most people*, a distortion seems to come about by the action of pleasure” (1113b1).⁶ It is critical to realize that those who have not yet obtained virtue have faulty views of pleasure (1099a6) which is immensely difficult to overcome (1105a8). For Aristotle pleasure seems more likely to lead those who do not yet have virtue astray than to assist them in discovering and becoming virtuous (1109a14–17; see also 1104b9–11). It would be unwise to utilize a method to purportedly produce virtue which when practically applied will lead most people away from, rather than towards, virtue.

The difficulty in this interpretation has led other scholars to argue that the path to virtue is not guided by pleasure, but pain.⁷ Yet, it is not any type of pain that leads to virtue; rather, it is a pain which is directly connected with a moral component. For Aristotle, the non-virtue of shame is precisely this painful guide, for “Let shame be understood as a certain pain or agitation over bad deeds” (1383b15). Shame is a critical passion in Aristotelian rhetoric, for it is tied directly to the individual and social conception of the *kalon* or noble.

This paper, through a careful analysis of Aristotle’s discussion of shame, argues that the best method to guide well-bred youths, or gentlemen, to the point where they acquire a virtuous character is through the appropriate use of prospective shame. This paper will explore Aristotle’s

understanding of shame as explained in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in his broader corpus, and will examine who can possess shame, how it can be used to teach virtue, and the impact of *polis* upon this process.

1. Shame as a Semi-Virtue

Aristotle's first mention of shame in *Nicomachean Ethics* arises in the concluding remarks of his brief introduction of the moral virtues. He states that individuals who possess a sense of shame are praised because shame is a "mean condition [...] involving the feelings" (1108a32). While this introduction is brief, it is indicative of the paradoxical nature of shame. In establishing shame as a feeling (*pathos*), Aristotle removes it from the realm of active condition (*hexis*) (1105b20) and places it in the lower part of the soul, distinct from true virtue (1107a1). Later, Aristotle explicates that "it is not appropriate to speak about a sense of shame as if it were a virtue, for it seems more like a feeling than an active condition" (1128b10). It is important to notice that the subsequent discussion hedges, for shame "seems" to be "more" like a feeling. Aristotle recognizes that while shame is a feeling, it plays a crucial role as a bridge between *pathos* and *hexis*, and thus there is an ambiguity to its precise role.

Shame appears ambiguous because it shares a critical characteristic with virtue because it is a "mean condition" (1108b32). It is in this subtle similarity that the reader can see Aristotle's foreshadowing a more complete understanding of the connection between shame and virtue presented later in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Presenting shame as a mean not only indicates it has an excess and deficiency, but primarily it is indicative that there is an appropriate feeling of shame. Subsequent statements help recognize precisely what that mean state of shame is, for it arises in "a certain kind of fear of a bad reputation" (1128b12). While this definition does provide some new information, i.e., that shame is related to fear and one's reputation which is derived from the opinion of others, this definition is still not Aristotle's fullest explanation of shame. For the most complete definition, the reader must turn to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where in a discussion of the emotions he devotes a chapter to shame. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle defines shame as "a certain pain or agitation over bad deeds, present, past, or future that appear to bring one into disrepute" (1383b15). This description of shame is both consistent with and more complete than his discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

This definition exhibits three major components which are important to highlight in order to understand Aristotelian shame. The first is that shame is a pain or disturbance. While the definition given in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1128b12) presents shame as a fear, the *Rhetoric* definition emphasizes that that fear is related to pain. Shame is a mean (1108a32) of the appropriate feeling of pain.⁸ Second, Aristotle notes precisely what type of pain shame deals with: "evils that appear to pertain to disrepute" (1383b20). In this sense, shame is very much a socio-psychological feeling, for the pain happens not to one's physical body, but to one's standing in the eyes of others. Shame

is a feeling derived from man's political nature (1253a2) and affects his standing in the eyes of others. This change in others' opinion of the actor arises from two sources: either by engaging in evil acts of commission or by failing to do the virtuous acts through omission. But, the actual change in opinion can only happen after the ignoble act is done. This then presents the third, and perhaps oddest component of the definition, the time in which shame is felt. Shame is not exclusively an emotion arising after the fact; rather, Aristotle clearly notes that someone can feel shame immediately, retrospectively, or prospectively. Given that the previous part of the definition would seem to indicate merely a post-hoc feeling of shame, it is necessary to realize that the prospective component of feeling shame that is most crucial to a moral education.

This is perhaps the most critical point in understanding Aristotle's view of shame, for the path to virtue is one in which the individual is guided through external constraints to internalize the appropriate active states of virtue. Shame itself moves through these steps. Retrospective shame is purely derived from external constraints; it is imposed upon the individual by other members of the polis (1383b16; see also 1128b12). In this case the individual had no hesitation in committing the ignoble act or omitting the virtuous one. Yet, the feeling of shame now teaches the individual that the future situations which involve the same action will lead to the same form of disrepute. Perhaps the individual does not keep that at the forefront of his mind, and in a similar situation again does a similar act, but now, even before the event is made aware publically, the individual feels shame. This is derived from previous experience and knowledge of societal norms.⁹ Yet, the most effective type of shame for the guiding of action is the type that occurs before the action rather than after.

It is this prospective characteristic of shame that is perhaps the most important because it is rooted in knowledge of what is honorable and dishonorable, as well as the saliency of that knowledge to an as yet undone act. It is, if not prudence, the application of wise foresight. The individual knows what is right, knows that what is right is important to an upcoming action, and can rightly judge the wider impact of the action upon members of society. This distinction between post-hoc feelings of shame and prospective feelings of shame are central to understanding Aristotle's use of, and distinction between, the two Greek words translated as "shame" in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: *aidos* and *aischune*.

2. *Aidos* and *Aischune*

In his most lengthy discussion of shame in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses both terms, though the dominant word throughout the whole work is *aidos*. In the *Rhetoric* he uses the more prosaic word *aischune*.¹⁰ In order to understand these words, it is worthwhile to examine Aristotle's discussion in 1128b10–35 with the transliteration of the Greek distinction between his use of the

two terms. Cairns's translation, which preserves the distinction between the Greek words, is most helpful:¹¹

It is wrong to speak of *aidos* as virtue; it is more like a feeling than an active condition. It is defined, at any rate, as a sort of fear of ill-repute, and its effects are similar to those who fear danger; for those who are *hoi aischunomenoi* [ashamed] go red, and those who fear death turn pale. Both, then, appear to be in a way somatic, which seems to be a feature of a feeling rather than of an active condition. The feeling, moreover, is not suitable for every age-group, but for youth. For we think that people of that age should be *aidemon* [sense of shame], because, since they live by their emotions, they often err, but are prevented by *aidos* [shame]. And we praise young men who are *aidemon* [display shame], but no one would say appreciatively of an older man that he is *aischuntelos* [full of shame]; for we think that he should do nothing that is attended by *aischune* [shame]. For *aischune* [shame] is not a mark of a decent man, since it occurs at base actions—such things are not to be done. Whether some actions are really *aischra* [shameful] and others only in belief does not matter; neither sort should be done, so that one should not feel *aischune* [shame]. It is the mark of a base person to be such as to do something *aischron* [shameful]—to be so disposed as to be *aischunesthai* [shameful] were one to do some such thing, and to consider oneself decent on this account, would be absurd; for *aidos* [shame] occurs at voluntary actions, but the decent man will never willingly commit base acts. *Aidos* [shame] would be a decent thing on a hypothesis: if he were to do it, he would be *aischunesthai* [shameful]; but this does not apply to the virtues. For if *anaishuntia* [shamelessness] and not feeling *aidos* [shame] at the prospect of doing what is *aischron* [shameful] are base, this does not mean that to feel *aischune* [shame] when one does such things is decent.¹²

As this passage elucidates, and as scholars have noted, the words *aidos* and *aischune* “are by no means entirely synonymous.”¹³ Yet, if one is to understand the role of shame in the scheme of Aristotle's ethics, one must closely disentangle the meaning between these terms.

Aristotle states that “shame [*aishcune*] does not belong to decent people, if it comes about for base acts” (1128b23), yet later writes that “a sense of shame [*aidos*] could be something decent only hypothetically” (1128b30). If one were to read those statements in English, seeing no difference in the term “shame,” one might think Aristotle presents a contradiction in his work. However, through a careful reading one can glean insight into the distinction between *aischune* and *aidos*, and can more precisely understand what Aristotle teaches about shame. The difference in these terms is perhaps made most clear when Aristotle says “*aidos* could be something decent

only hypothetically, since if one were to do those things, one would be *aischunesthai*" (1128b29). Since both words are used in one sentence, an examination of their meanings is necessary. While some readers may assume that Aristotle uses these words synonymously, and exchanges the use of one for the other in this discussion, a careful examination will show that Aristotle clearly attempts to distinguish them in the reader's understanding. In this sentence Aristotle uses a conditional "if/then" clause. If someone were to engage in an action that is base, that actor would feel *aischunesthai*, or shameful. Such linguistic construction indicates that the word *aischune* is related to the consequence of acting in a base way, or specifically the retrospective feeling of shame within the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It must be remembered that the definition of shame provided in the *Rhetoric*, which uses the term *aischune*, encompasses the feeling of shame both before and after the commission or omission of human action which would be deemed base. Thus, it would seem that in Aristotle's corpus the term *aischune* refers to the full and broadest category of shame, representing any and all forms of shame. Within the *Nicomachean Ethics* particularly, Aristotle uses this broad form to indicate the retrospective feeling of shame which arises after the action. Such interpretation is echoed by others, for Cairns notes that "in the present passage (1158b10–35) *aischune* is used in an exclusively retrospective sense."¹⁴

Aristotle later states that "for shamelessness and not feeling shame [*aidos*] at the prospect of doing what is shameful [*aischron*] are base" (1128b33). This indicates that the deficiency of shame has two forms. The first is not feeling *aidos* at the prospect of doing a shameful act. The second is not feeling shame as a consequence of that act. This distinction also plays into the important understanding of *aidos*, for here Aristotle states clearly that *aidos* is related to "the *prospect* of doing what is shameful."¹⁵ Since we know that Aristotle links *aidos* to decency in thought or theory, one should realize that the emphasis on feeling *aidos* is in its future understanding of action. This indicates that *aidos* arises in the mind as one contemplates the consequences of future action, and if that future action is deemed to be shameful, i.e., *aischune*, and therefore someone feels shame at that outcome, he expresses *aidos*.¹⁶ Thus, *aidos* is most closely associated with the appropriate mean feeling of dishonor, which is why when discussing the mean of shame, Aristotle uses the word *aidos* (1108a33 and 1221a1).

3. Who Feels Shame

In addressing the issue of who feels shame, Aristotle argues that the feeling of *aidos* is "not fitting for every time of life, but only in the young" and *aischune* is never praised when it is felt among the old (1128b18–21). It is important to note that the creation of a distinction between the age groups of those who feel shame also distinguishes between the types of shame. The aged should never feel *aischune*, the consequence of committing base actions, because they are less likely to follow their feelings and are expected to know what is shameful and thus avoid it. On the other

hand, it is appropriate for the youth to feel prospective shame, because they are, or should be, in the process of learning and developing the virtues.¹⁷ Similarly, training wheels are appropriate for a child's bike, but if an adult were to ride a bike with training wheels, it would be inappropriate. The dominance of shame in the action of a youth arises because "they live by feeling, they err in many ways, but are held back by shame [*aidos*]" (1128b20). It is important to note that Aristotle recognizes that while in the youth the feelings rule, they are prevented from acting basely, or failing to act honorably, through shame.

Aristotle indicates that youth do feel shame (*aidos*) and this is good, because it will train them in the habits that lead to virtue. Aristotle's discussion of shame recognizes that shame must become a habituated action, for he distinguishes it from "self-restraint [which] is not a virtue either" (1128b35). Self-restraint, or incontinence, is that "each temptation requires a new effort of resistance."¹⁸ By creating this distinction, Aristotle exhibits that shame is not a feeling that needs to arise on each individual action and necessitates that each action be reassessed as to whether it should be done; rather, a sense of *aidos* infects one's outlook and begins the habituation towards virtue. It causes one to cease to be tempted to do the base act, and provides the guide to assess a type of action as shameful. Thus, as long as the youth have *aidos* and assess actions as base, they will not act ignobly.

4. How Shame Guides

This understanding of *aidos* plays a critical component in understanding the role of shame in teaching and molding citizens. The ability to mold citizens, particularly the youth, towards virtue is only possible if a sense of shame prevents a base action from occurring. In Aristotle's discussion in the *Rhetoric*, he notes that the proper type of shame is "an imagination connected with disrepute, and felt for its own sake and not for its consequences" (1384a14). By denoting the proper sense of shame as an imagination, Aristotle argues that it is something that someone foresees in his or her mind to be in the future and is the result of a possible, but not yet occurring action. Thus, the proper feeling of shame exists before the occurrence of the shameful action ever becomes a physical reality. Yet one must also understand that shame does not teach him or her that an action is wrong; it must already be recognized that the act is wrong in order to feel shame. As Aristotle states, "so it is necessary for a character to be present in advance that is in some way appropriate for virtue, loving what is beautiful and scorning what is shameful" (1179b30). It is important to understand that Aristotle intends the audience of this discourse to be those gentlemen who, as Tessitore states, are "characterized by an attraction to goodness."¹⁹ As Aristotle indicates, once someone knows and loves what is beautiful, he will have the desire to follow it. Thus, through seeing the beautiful, he will scorn what is shameful and it is this person who will be more likely to develop the habits of virtue through appropriately knowing the prospective feeling of shame and seek to act as the

prudent man would. Shame, then, is the guide to actions of virtue to those who know and desire the beautiful but are not yet possessing the character to be truly virtuous.

However, for shame to actually produce virtue, it must guide individual actions so that it will produce a truly virtuous character. While it is possible for someone who obeys a proper sense of shame to act as a virtuous man would, this does not mean that that person is truly virtuous. Sachs notes "A mere habit of acting contrary to our inclinations cannot be a virtue."²⁰ Aristotle argues that for someone to act truly virtuously, he must do the proper action through a virtuous character. Knowing that shame is not a virtue, the reader can see how shame, in guiding individual acts, ensures that each action is done as a prudent man, or a man of virtue, would. This develops the character necessary for that person to become truly virtuous not only in appearance. As Aristotle states:

In a word, active states [(*hexis*)] come into being from being at work [(*energia*)] in similar ways. Hence it is necessary to make our ways of being at work be of certain sorts, for our active states [(*hexis*)] follow in accordance with [...] these. It makes no small difference, then, to be habituated in this way or in that straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather all the difference. (1103b20–25)

Aristotle indicates that true virtue can only be found in those who possess proper virtuous character, and such character can only arise through the habituation of constantly acting in the way a virtuous man would (1111b6). What is stunning about this prescription for virtue is that one must act virtuously before ever having a virtuous character. The proper virtuous education finds a way to habituate people in the proper action even before their character is formed. Further, it makes "all the difference" that this is begun in childhood (1103b25). It is from this description of the means to attain virtue that Aristotle presents one method to achieve such prescription. Since shame "is not fitting at every time of life, but only in the young," one must teach them through establishing the "imagination connected with disrepute [making sure shame is] felt for its own sake and not for its consequences" (1128b12; 1384a20). This is why Aristotle notes that society "praises those among the young who display shame" because they are being moderate, temperate, and finding the mean in their actions (1128b20). Though the individual youth's actions are not true virtue because they do not possess the character of virtue, they are engaging in the habituation which is a necessary practice for them if they will possess the character. As Sachs states, "the characteristic human way of being-at-work [(habit)] is the three fold activity of seeing an end, thinking about means to it, and choosing an action."²¹ Shame directs and guides each of these three steps, and thus is fundamental to shaping habit.

It is important to understand that though shame "seems more like a feeling than an active condition" (1128b10) it is closer to virtue than pure feelings. Aristotle places it and its excesses in

his list of virtues in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1220b37–1221a15). Further, when Aristotle is first introducing the virtues he notes that “while the sense of shame is not a virtue, the person with a sense of shame is also praised” (1108a32). Though shame is a feeling, it is an appropriate feeling, not one which is by definition excessive. Shame, like the virtues, is a mean between excesses (1108b32 and 1221a1). Also, just as virtues are “chosen for their own sake” (1105a35) so “Shame [...] is felt for its own sake and not for its consequences” (1384a14). In light of these similarities, one cannot view shame as just any other feeling, but rather it should be raised to the level of demi-virtue. The characteristics it possesses resemble key characteristics of true virtue, and shame is also used to achieve true virtue.

“Therefore, good judgment goes along with the way each one is educated” (1095a) and “some people think one becomes good by nature, others think it is by habit, and still others think it is by teaching” (1179b24). Aristotle notes that virtue cannot arise from nature (1103a20). This means only habit and teaching are able to guide people to become good, but as Aristotle notes teaching alone is not strong enough to teach virtue because it is “not powerful in all people” (1179b23–6). Thus, for teaching and arguments to actually educate the populace, “it is necessary for the soul of the listener to have been worked on beforehand by the means of habits” and through this necessary precondition virtue may arise (1179b26). Shame is one way that the habits can be instilled.

This necessary presupposition leads Aristotle to recognize in his ethical discourse that the teaching of the role of shame as a guide or encourager of virtue cannot be for everyone because “discourses [...] are unable to encourage most people toward what is beautiful and good” (1179b10). The reason most people cannot learn through discourses is that the impact of discourses requires the agreement upon the *telos* of the good and beautiful. In light of this, only those who begin with such an understanding of what is truly good and beautiful are able to be properly habituated through shame. As Aristotle says, “most people [...] are naturally obedient not to respect but to fear, and refrain from base actions not on account of shame but on account of penalties” (1179b13). While the education through shame may not be able to be applied to the majority of citizens, it nonetheless can be taught publicly to all whose soul is furrowed.

Some may argue whether virtue, which is supposed to be inherently linked to the pleasant, can be taught by shame, which is allied with feeling pain. In understanding this it is important to note that Aristotle does not seem to fully agree that all virtuous actions are always pleasant, for the height of a courage is death. Aristotle states, “hence courage too is painful, and justly praised, since it is more difficult to endure painful things than to refrain from pleasant ones” (1117a35). This is evidenced in other virtues, for temperate people feel pain “moderately” in avoiding certain pleasures of the body (1119a14), great-souled men are pained to hear of their debts (1124b13), and even in “the certain kind of virtue” (1155a1) of friendship, pain is involved when “seeing the friend pained at one’s own misfortunes is something painful” (1171b5). Thus, Aristotle states, “so being at work pleasantly is not present within all the virtues, except to the extent that one fixes one’s

attention upon the end" (1117b15). This important admission provides two key points in understanding how shame can promote the virtues. Since not all virtuous action is pleasant, actions which are the result of shame are not contradictory with virtue. Further, Aristotle clearly notes that education can be done through the proper setting of what is pleasant or painful before men. For "people educate the young steering them by means of pleasure and pain; and it seems that what is most conducive to virtue of character is to enjoy what one ought and hate what one ought" (1172a21). Most people choose things that are pleasant and avoid the painful. Thus it is the feelings which encourage people to enjoy what they should and hate what they should which have "in them a weight and a power that tend toward virtue and toward a happy life" (1172a22). The role of shame is the feeling which directs people to act, habitually, in a way that has them find pleasure in what they ought and pain in what they ought.

5. The Polis as guiding Shame

It is important to remember that Aristotle argues that shame only arises "before those whom one holds in regard" (1384a35). Those whom one should hold in regard include the prudent, older, educated men of society, and those who are constantly before one's eyes (1384a29–35). Also, since man is a political animal who lives in society, and those societies are generally governed by the prudent, educated, and older citizens, one can conclude that the laws of society reflect the opinions of these men (1252a2; 1277b25; 1282b10). While the laws of a society are proclaimed and affect all, shame specifically and with better success will guide those whose souls are primed by a love of the beautiful. Just as the majority of the public can view beautiful pieces of art, it is those who know beauty and skill who can learn by studying the masters. This group of gentleman, through obedience to the laws, is able to cease to care for punishments because of penalties, and rather desires to be viewed honorably by the community. Thus, they are guided by shame and cease to live "in accord with feeling and following every impulse" (1095a8). Therefore, shame is capable of promoting and teaching men to act truly virtuously since "virtue is an active condition [(*hexis*)] that makes one apt at choosing [...] [as] a person with practical judgment would determine it" (1107a3).

It is this education towards virtue that lays the necessary foundation for the political. As Aristotle states at the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "So having made a beginning, let us discuss [...] what sorts of things preserve and destroy cities" (1181b25 and 19). Specifically, Aristotle argues that since cities exist, not for the sake of mere living but for living well, "it is thus evident that virtue must be the care of every city" (1280b7). This statement argues that the political regime has not only the desire, but the necessity, of fomenting virtue through the appropriate enactment of laws. Clearly this is done through the laws of a city, for "What happens in cities gives evidence of this for Lawmakers make the citizens good by habituating them, and since this is the

intention of every lawmaker [...] one regime differs from another in this respect as a good one from a worthless one” (1103b6–8). Thus, the political systems which succeed in habituating their citizens by establishing laws which will have the gentlemen of society refrain from base acts through the appropriate prospective shame, are to be recognized as better regimes than those who fail or do not try.

Yet, if political regimes are judged through their success or failure in properly habituating and teaching their citizens virtue, one must recognize that the political community has the ability to impact virtue through deeming what actions are punished and shameful within that community. This indicates that the training necessary to produce virtue requires laws which guide people toward true virtue, for “It is difficult to hit upon a right training toward virtue from youth when one has not been brought up under laws of that sort” (1179b32). Aristotle indicates that variations in citizens’ virtue can arise because of the type of laws in these regimes: “the city’s being excellent is no longer the work of fortune but of knowledge and intentional choice” (1332a33). Further, “a city is excellent, at any rate, by its citizens’—those sharing in the regime—being excellent” (1332a34). This, then, is the role of the laws. The laws are the result of the intentional choice of the rulers and educate towards the regime’s understanding of the beautiful and ignoble (1287a25). One major way to do this is through the institution of punishments, which teach the citizenry which actions are to be regarded as shameful, and thus encourage the citizens towards virtue.

The connection between shame and politics is also made clear in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, as he notes “the object of rhetoric is judgment” and “men give judgment on political issues” and “emotion[s] are those things by the alteration of which men differ with regard to those judgments which pain and pleasure accompany”(1378a25). One must remember the definition of shame given in the *Rhetoric*, that it is “a kind of pain or disturbance in connection with those evils that appear to pertain to disrepute, whether present, past, or future” (1383b20) The significance of this is that shame, though it is a mean condition of feelings (1108a32) is not about the feeling of pleasure, but is about the appropriate level of feeling pain. Since both politics and virtue deal with pleasures and pains (1105a10), the reader can see that shame is somehow related to both the political structure and to attaining virtue. Secondly, Aristotle notes precisely what type of pain shame deals with, namely, “evils that appear to pertain to disrepute.” This indicates that shame is felt when someone does not appear honorable. Importantly, this attaches shame to both virtue and the political, for Aristotle argues that “refined and active people choose honor, for this is pretty much the goal of political life” (1095b22). The feeling of shame is closely related to the ends that each political regime establishes as fundamental for its existence.²² Yet, the proper form of shame is further qualified, for it is not merely a result of public dishonor of anyone, or the *hoi polloi*, rather the honor one seeks, and consequently the group whose opinion of ill-repute will cause shame, “honor[] by the wise and by those who know them, and for virtue; it is clear then [...] one might perhaps assume that this, rather than honor, is the end of the political life” (1095b29–32).

Aristotle recognizes that since shame is connected to reputation (1384a20), the individual who feels shame feels it in regards to the opinions of others, but one should not judge actions by just anyone's opinions; rather, it should be "prudent people as truth-tellers, and such are those who are older and educated. And things more before men's eyes and in the open [...] for this reason men feel more shame before those who will always be present and those who pay heed to them" (1384a30–33). Since shame is derived from the external source of the opinions of others, and these opinions are codified in society through laws, the laws of society are also "before men's eyes" and therefore "one needs to feel shame before those whom one holds in regard," i.e., the laws (1384a20 and 35). Further, as Aristotle states, "we assert that the excellent ruler is good and prudent" (1277a15). Shame is externally imposed, which is why it cannot be a virtue. Though it is externally imposed by law, the laws in a good regime, are like the *spudious* man and therefore control action.²³ While the laws can impose shame, one must recognize that the laws and rulers are only images of virtue; as such, there may be flaws in the way that they teach virtue based upon the accuracy that they reflect true virtue. Additionally, perhaps Aristotle recognizes that such images will never show true virtue, and as such it is only a non-virtuous feeling, which as a semi-virtue is the best that that these images can establish.

Finally, it is important to understand that shame requires a form of like-mindedness that can arise either through the laws or through friendship. Aristotle notes that "like-mindedness seems to be friendship in a political sense" (1167b4) and further that "such like-mindedness is present among decent people [...] [who aim at] things that are just and advantageous, and aim at these in common" (1167b5). Lawmakers are able to establish the standard because they "aim at [like-mindedness] most of all and banish faction most of all for being hostile to it" (1155a25). Through creating a like-minded regime, the political system can establish the standard by which people may prospectively determine which actions are shameful. Through constant habituation in these actions, then, the good regime can guide those citizens who are capable to virtue. Thus, as Burnyeat summarizes well, "shame is the semi-virtue of the learner."²⁴

Endnotes

1. For an introduction to the concept of shame in a variety of psychological and educational literature, see Kristjánsson 2014.
2. Williams 1993.
3. Burnyeat 1980; Curzer 2012; Cairns 1993; Kristjánsson 2014.
4. Burnyeat 1980, 73.

5. Burnyeat 1980; Reeve 1992, 51–54.
6. Emphasis added.
7. Curzer 2002; Curzer 2012, 336–339.
8. While Aristotle presents the connection between pain, pleasure, and virtue, we find that the *spudious* man (the standard of determining the virtuous mean (1107a2)) is not interested in pleasure at all; rather, “a person with practical judgment pursues the absence of pain, not what is pleasant” (1152b17). This indicates that the *spudious* man will avoid shame and, as this paper argues, use such an experience to teach others how to become prudent.
9. It is not necessary for an individual to proceed through each of these steps of shame; rather, it is only necessary for a non-virtuous person to have prospective shame. If, in rare occurrences, someone is so well-versed in the laws and values of a society that he never commits a shameful act, but does so to prospectively prevent shame, that individual is closer to attaining virtue than the individual who commits shameful acts or omissions.
10. As Cairns, the author of perhaps the most definitive work on *Aidos*, states, “*Aidos* is the older and more poetic term [...]. *Aischune*, on the other hand, is the regular prosaic word of Aristotle’s own day” (1993, 415). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle primarily uses *aischune*, with only two uses of *aidos*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* both terms are incorporated, but, as this paper argues, he does not use them interchangeably; rather, each term has a distinct meaning.
11. Cairns also transliterates other key Greek words (*arête*, *pathos*, *hexis*); however, for my purposes here, they have been replaced with Sachs’s translation, so that the emphasis will be solely upon the Greek words for shame.
12. Cairns 1993, 414.
13. Konstan 2003, 1034.
14. While Cairns notes the distinction in this passage between *aischune* as retrospective and *aidos* as prospective, he still seems to be unwilling to argue that Aristotle’s distinction in these terms is indicative of one being the proper form of the other (415). It would seem that Cairns’s conclusion, which is opposed to the one presented in this paper, arises from not examining Aristotle’s use, but in seeking to understand Aristotle’s usage in light of the historical development and usage of *aidos* and *aischune*. This is why his examination of Aristotle provides keen insights, yet he reaches a different conclusion because he appeals to the linguistic roots and poetic use of these terms, not to Aristotle’s specific use.

15. Emphasis added.
16. This position is echoed by Cairns, who states, “Thus the *aidos* that is disparaged as appropriate for youth but not for adults is prospective” (1993, 416).
17. It is true that Aristotle does not forbid the aged to feel *aidos* and it is possible that they may feel it. However, it seems that Aristotle would not condone the feeling of *aidos* among the aged, not because it is an inappropriate feeling in itself, but because it is inappropriate for that stage of life. *Aidos* is for the time of training and growth, but by the time one is older, one should have already received that appropriate training. However, *because* this training should have already taken place, the error of *aischune* is even more blatant, for it shows not only base action but also bad habituation and a continuation of living by feelings (1128b20).
18. Sachs 2002, 79n97.
19. Tessitore 1996, 15.
20. Sachs 2002, xv.
21. Sachs 2002, xvii.
22. Bernard Williams's work *Shame and Necessity* fully recognizes that the individual feeling of shame is reflective of “real social expectation” rooted in the community's norms (84).
23. See note 3 for an examination of the *spudious* man.
24. Burnyeat 1980, 78.

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