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Though many theorists have argued that interpersonal shaming is typically morally impermissible, there remains much disagreement regarding the underlying explanation for its impermissibility. In this paper, I argue that the existing approaches overlook a key problem that accounts for many moral failures in our actual shaming practices. This is a problem of misalignment: though shaming is inherently character-focused, we tend to perform and respond to the practice as if it is governed by the same standards as act-focused criticisms. However, this is not a principled problem with shaming itself, but with how it is actually practiced by us. I conclude that one significant moral problem with shaming can be resolved or mitigated by improving the moral ecology that supports it, rather than abandoning the practice.

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ARTICLE

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Though many theorists have argued that interpersonal shaming is typically morally impermissible, there remains much disagreement regarding the underlying explanation for its impermissibility. In this paper, I argue that the existing approaches overlook a key problem that accounts for many moral failures in our actual shaming practices. This is a problem of misalignment: though shaming is inherently character-focused, we tend to perform and respond to the practice as if it is governed by the same standards as act-focused criticisms. However, this is not a principled problem with shaming itself, but with how it is actually practiced by us. I conclude that one significant moral problem with shaming can be resolved or mitigated by improving the moral ecology that supports it, rather than abandoning the practice.

I. Introduction

Despite the increasing popularity of the view that *shame* as an emotion can often be fitting and morally valuable,[1] moral philosophers remain heavily critical of interpersonal *shaming* as a practice. A broad consensus among

1. Cheshire Calhoun, "An Apology for Moral Shame," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2004): 127–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2004.00194.x; Andreas Brekke Carlsson, "Shame and Attributability," in *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility Volume 6* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 112–39, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198845539.003.0005; Julien Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199793532.001.0001; Jing Iris Hu, "Shame, Vulnerability, and Change," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8, no. 2 (2022): 373–90, https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.21; Charlie Kurth, "Shames and Selves: On the Origins and Cognitive Foundations of a Moral Emotion," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (forthcoming), https://doi.org/10.1086/735280; Michelle Mason, "On Shamelessness," *Philosophical Papers* 39, no. 3 (2010): 401–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2010.538916; Heidi L. Maibom, "On the Distinction between Shame and Guilt," in *The Moral Psychology of Guilt*, edited by Bradford Cokelet and Corey J. Maley (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 37–51; Krista K. Thomason, *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life* (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190843274.001.0001; David Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2001): 27–52, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2001.00027.x; Shawn Tinghao Wang, "Shame and the Scope of Moral Accountability," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2021): 544–64, https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa059.

theorists is that shaming is morally impermissible except in fairly rare circumstances. Disagreement remains, however, when it comes to the underlying explanations for why shaming is typically impermissible. Existing attempts include approaching the ethics of shaming by examining its effectiveness,[2] moral and non-moral risks,[3] tensions with respect and dignity,[4] and distortions in how we conceptualize our relationships with others.[5] Theorists also disagree about the scope of exception cases where shaming can be morally permissible; the possible views range from those who claim that shaming is never permissible to those who provide limited defenses of its permissibility given fairly stringent constraints.[6] Some of these authors have primarily focused on public shaming, but shaming as a broader phenomenon can occur in both public and private settings.

In this paper, I argue that the existing approaches overlook a key problem that accounts for many moral failures in our actual shaming practices. This problem, I propose, is one of *misalignment*: though shaming is paradigmatically *character-focused*, we tend to perform and respond to the practice as if it is governed by the same standards as *act-focused* criticisms. This misalignment offers a systematic explanation for why shaming in the real world is frequently ineffective and morally risky. It is indeed often, if not typically, morally impermissible. However, this is not a principled problem with shaming itself, but with how it is actually practiced by us. I conclude that

2. Karen Adkins, "When Shaming Is Shameful: Double Standards in Online Shame Backlashes," *Hypatia* 34, no. 1 (2019): 76–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12456; Karen Adkins, "Online Shaming's Invisible Harms," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Media Ethics*, edited by Carl Fox and Joe Saunders (Routledge, 2023), 319–29, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003134749-31; Jennifer Jacquet, *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool* (Pantheon Books, 2015).

3. Harrison Frye, "The Problem of Public Shaming," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (2022): 188–208, https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12252; Thomason, *Naked*; Krista K. Thomason, "The Moral Risks of Online Shaming," in *Oxford Handbook of Digital Ethics*, edited by Carissa Véliz (Oxford University Press, 2021), 145–62, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198857815.013.8.

4. Guy Aitchison and Saladin Meckled-Garcia, "Against Online Public Shaming: Ethical Problems with Mass Social Media," *Social Theory and Practice* 47, no. 1 (2021): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract20201117109; James Fritz, "Online Shaming and the Ethics of Public Disapproval," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2021): 686–701, https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12510.

5. Laura Wildemann Kane, "Accountability and Community on the Internet: A Plea for Restorative Justice," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2020): 594–611, https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12427; Kathryn J. Norlock, "Online Shaming," *Social Philosophy Today* 33 (2017): 187–97, https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday201762343.

6. See, e.g., Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825943; Paul Billingham and Tom Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms: The Morality of Public Shaming," *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (2020): 997–1016, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12543; Paul Billingham and Tom Parr, "Online Public Shaming: Virtues and Vices," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 51, no. 3 (2020): 371–90, https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12308.

one significant moral problem with shaming can be resolved or mitigated by improving the moral ecology that supports it, rather than abandoning the practice.

II. Shaming as Character-Focused Criticism

I understand shaming as a communicative act in which the shamer(s) communicates to an audience a negative message about the shamee(s).[7] The audience may be the shamee, a third party, or a group of individuals including the shamee and third parties. What is distinctive about shaming, I suggest, is that the content of the negative message is paradigmatically *character-focused* and the method of communication is *emotionally charged*. More accurately:

The Character-Focused View of Shaming Paradigmatically, *A* shames *B* when: (i) *A* criticizes *B* by communicating to an audience *C* a negative message about *B*'s relatively global traits or dispositions; (ii) this message is communicated in an emotionally charged manner; and (iii) communicating this character-focused message is one significant aim of *A*'s criticism, not merely a means of criticizing *B*'s past actions.

To elaborate, consider the following three examples:

Flag Thief In an early morning in 2024, a man in Seattle ripped down a pride flag outside the main office of Black Rock Spirits, stole the flag, and drove away. The business owner responded by displaying this man's face on a handmade billboard. The billboard described what the man did and ended with "LOOK OUT FOR THE WEIRD YOGURT-EATING THIEF," referring to the fact that he was walking around eating yogurt before deciding to steal the flag.[8]

Flight Shaming In 2022, Kylie Jenner took her private jet on a short trip that lasted only seventeen minutes. She could have made the same trip in a car in about forty minutes and with much less carbon emission. Jenner received waves of criticism from social media users on Twitter, some of whom wrote that she has "absolute disregard for the planet" and is a "full time climate criminal."[9]

7. The focus will be on *interpersonal* shaming only, so I will put aside cases of shaming that target groups.

8. Lauren Donovan, "'This Guy Stole Our Pride Sign'; Seattle Business Blasts Thief on Billboard," 2024, https://www.fox13seattle.com/news/seattle-business-billboard-yogurt-eating-thief.

9. Oliver Milman, "A 17-Minute Flight? The Super-Rich Who Have 'Absolute Disregard for the Planet,'" 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/21/kylie-jenner-short-private-jet-flights-super-rich-climate-crisis.

Avatar Actor In 2024, Netflix produced a live-action remake of the well-known animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The seventeen-year-old actor Kiawentiio played Katara, a beloved main character in the show. The show received mixed reviews. Many Avatar fans went to Kiawentiio's Instagram page and left negative comments, some of which commented that she "can't act" and is a "bad actress."[10]

All three are clearly examples of shaming, and they satisfy conditions (i)–(iii). First, the shamers all criticize the shamee by communicating to an audience a negative message about the shamee's *character*. I use "character" broadly, to refer to one's *relatively global traits or dispositions*. This includes moral character (e.g., cruelty), prudential character (e.g., short-sightedness), intellectual character (e.g., narrow-mindedness), and traits or dispositions specific to a professional or a social role (e.g., being a bad teacher, being an irresponsible parent). While all three cases of criticism start with one's substandard actions, they all quickly escalate to targeting character in this broad sense. The flag thief is criticized as being "weird" and someone that one ought to "look out for"; Jenner is characterized as a "full time climate criminal" who has "absolute disregard for the planet"; and Kiawentiio is described as a "bad actress."

Second, in all three cases, the character-focused message is communicated in an *emotionally charged* manner. It is accompanied by negative emotions toward the shamee, such as anger, contempt, disgust, or frustration. The fans in *Avatar Actor* are angry and frustrated; the business owner in *Flag Thief* and the Twitter users in *Flight Shaming* are angry and likely to feel disgust and contempt. Imagine that they were to issue similar criticisms but hold no negative emotions at all. It seems that their criticism then would no longer count as interpersonal shaming, but be better characterized as an alternative form of character-focused communication. I will refer to this alternative form as *dispassionate character criticism*.

Third, in all three cases, communicating a character-focused message is one significant aim of the criticism and not merely for the sake of criticizing the shamee's past actions. Though the shamers may happen to have other, also significant, aims and purposes, they have independent interests in issuing character-focused criticisms. The business owner's interest may involve showing solidarity for LGBTQ groups, while the flight shamers' interest may involve raising awareness on reducing carbon footprint. They may also have an independent intrinsic interest in registering a perceived true statement about the shamee's character.

10. Annabel Rackham, "*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Receives Mixed Reviews from Critics," 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68379240.

The character-focused view captures the intuitive thought that shaming is more about a flaw in character than about a particular action. Various authors have understood shaming in a similar vein. For example, Nussbaum writes that shaming makes the statement that the target is "a defective type of person" rather than that she has "committed a bad act."[11] Adkins claims that shaming is "not act-based, but directed at the full self."[12] Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia also identify shaming as a "moral impugning of character" that implies that the shamee is "worthy of social exclusion."[13] Lastly, Allison takes shaming as communicating a negative evaluation "*of a person*" and "not merely of some act of hers."[14] I side with the above theorists in believing that shaming is paradigmatically character-focused and goes beyond criticizing a person's past actions.

It is worth noting that these theorists posit additional conditions beyond those in the character-focused view defined earlier. Some claim that shaming must target a person's full self (Nussbaum, Adkins) or must imply social exclusion (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia). My view is less stringent: shaming only needs to target some *relatively global* trait or disposition, which may neither damage a person's "full self" nor imply social exclusion. Further, some theorists believe that shaming is *exclusively* character-focused; by contrast, I only commit to the view that shaming is *paradigmatically* character-focused and allow that it can, in non-paradigmatic cases, target things other than character (e.g., one's physical appearance). These differences will not affect the main arguments in Section IV, as the misalignment problem can be easily modified to apply to the more stringent versions of the character-focused view.

III. Advantages Over the Act-Focused Views of Shaming

Some authors, however, have provided accounts of shaming exclusively in terms of how it targets one's *substandard acts* themselves. I will refer to their views as the *act-focused views of shaming*. One recent example is Billingham and Parr, who explicitly define shaming as a kind of moral criticism in response to *violations of social norms*. They consistently treat shaming as targeting individuals' "actions" that violate "justified social norms."[15] Frye similarly models shaming as a form of "social norm enforcement" that involves

11. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 230.
12. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 77.
13. Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, "Online Public Shaming," 2, 5.
14. Euan Allison, "Stigma: The Shaming Model," *European Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2024): 865, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12883.
15. Billingham and Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms," 998.

sanctioning a wrongdoer's "norm violation."[16] Lastly, Kane treats shaming as a form of *accountability practice*, in which the norm violators are held accountable for their "transgressions" that constitute "moral violations in our moral community."[17] They all take shaming to be exclusively act-focused, as it is actions rather than character traits that violate norms.

I will argue that there are three reasons for preferring the character-focused view over the act-focused views: (i) the character-focused view preserves a deep connection between shaming and shame; (ii) it offers a theoretically fruitful contrast between shaming and blame; and (iii) it explains why out -of-character shaming is typically infelicitous. Note that these are meant to challenge the view that shaming is *exclusively* act-focused; I do not take issue with the claim that shaming can target actions in non-paradigmatic cases, as it suffices for my purpose that shaming is *paradigmatically* character-focused.

III.A SHAMING AND SHAME

The first reason in favor of the character-focused view is that it preserves the intuition that there is a deep connection between *shaming* and the emotion of *shame*. The act-focused view, by contrast, in effect abandons this intuitive connection.

The view that shame is a character-focused emotion is widely endorsed. On a standard view, the primary object of concern in shame is one's *relatively global character*, whereas the primary object of concern in guilt is one's *local action*. Shame brings the agent to see a shortcoming in her character, to think "if only I weren't . . .," while guilt brings the agent to see a failure in her specific behavior, to think "if only I hadn't . . ."[18] This character-action contrast remains "the currently most dominant basis for distinguishing between shame and guilt" in psychology.[19] Philosophers have also defended character-focused views of shame. For example, Mason proposes that the proper focus of shame concerns the violation of "some legitimate ideal of character";[20] Sinnott-Armstrong identifies the object of shame as "a whole self or a character trait."[21]

16. Frye, "Problem of Public Shaming," 189.

17. Kane, "Accountability and Community," 595.

18. Paula M. Niedenthal, June Price Tangney, and Igor Gavanski, "'If Only I Weren't' Versus 'If Only I Hadn't': Distinguishing Shame and Guilt in Counterfactual Thinking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1994): 585–95, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.4.585.

19. June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, and Debra J. Mashek, "Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2007): 349, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145.

20. Mason, "On Shamelessness," 418.

21. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself (When You Violate an Imperfect Moral Obligation)," *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005): 193–208, https://doi.org/10.1111/

Admittedly, the character-focused view of shame has received various challenges. Some have challenged the reliability of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect, a measure of shame commonly used in psychological studies.[22] And some have argued that the character-focused view cannot account for shame about physical appearance.[23] However, these challenges undermine only the stronger view that shame is *exclusively* character-focused. By contrast, the weaker view that shame *paradigmatically* targets relatively global traits or dispositions remains fairly uncontroversial. To illustrate, even the skeptics of the stronger character-focused view still treat the domain of shame as one's *self* or *identity*;[24] and it remains plausible that self or identity is *paradigmatically* concerned with relatively global traits and dispositions.

As an example, consider Thomason's theory of shame as the feeling that "some feature of our identity eclipses, overshadows, or defines our self-conception."[25] For Thomason, "shame's domain is our identity."[26] It stands to reason that identity—the kind of person that we are—is paradigmatically, but not always, about our relatively global traits and dispositions. Thomason seems to agree; she writes that our concerns with identity are not primarily about actions and behaviors, but rather "what our actions and behaviors say about us."[27] Thomason makes this explicit in the context of moral shame, where she characterizes it as the feeling that "our actions, judgments, or feelings do not match up with the way we represent our *moral character* to ourselves."[28] She also accepts the standard character-action distinction between shame and guilt in psychology, though she is skeptical that "it is a hard and fast rule."[29] I therefore interpret Thomason as agreeing with the weaker version of the character-focused view of shame.[30]

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j.1533-6077.2005.00061.x. The character-focused view is compatible with the possibility of feeling ashamed of others. For example, Chaplin has suggested that other-directed shame manifests the "partial concern we can have for another person's *character*." Rosalind Chaplin, "Being Ashamed of Others: Shame and Partial Concern for Persons," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2026): 880–99, https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqae099.

22. Maibom, "Shame and Guilt"; Kurth, "Shames and Selves."

23. Thomason, *Naked*.

24. Maibom, "Shame and Guilt," 46; Kurth, "Shames and Selves," 11; Thomason, *Naked*.

25. Thomason, *Naked*, 87.

26. Thomason, *Naked*, 163.

27. Thomason, *Naked*, 163.

28. Thomason, *Naked*, 116; emphasis added.

29. Thomason, *Naked*, 163.

30. Thomason would deny that shame directed at physical appearance is less rational than shame directed at character. This is consistent with my interpretation, however, since I do not assume that non-paradigmatic cases of shaming are less rational than paradigmatic cases.

One reason in support of the character-focused view of shaming, then, is that it explains why we tend to think that shaming is intimately linked with shame: both are paradigmatically character-focused. This does not imply that the shamer always intends to cause shame in her target—a claim that faces serious counterexamples. For example, Allison considers a case where a panelist publicly criticizes Malcolm X for being a "reverse racist," despite knowing that Malcolm X will not be emotionally moved.[31] Allison thinks that the panelist lacks an intention to cause shame, but his criticism still counts as shaming. Considerations like this have led various authors to deny or significantly downplay any special connections between shaming and shame.[32] But this move is too quick, as there can be nuanced ways in which shaming and shame remain deeply connected. One connection is this: it remains plausible that shaming paradigmatically involves communicating the message that *it would be apt for the shamee to feel shame* toward her negative character.[33] Even if the panelist lacks an intention to cause shame, he surely conveys the message that it would be apt for Malcolm X to feel shame.

The connection between shaming and shame can be illustrated by examining the phenomenon of *shaming the guilty*. Suppose that Jenner already feels the appropriate amount of guilt toward her action. The shamers may still believe that their communicative act has not received adequate uptake and expect some further attitudinal change from Jenner. The character-focused view explains why: as guilt is act-focused, it cannot address the character-focused point in shaming. By contrast, the act-focused views imply that, when one shames someone who already feels the appropriate amount of guilt, one calls for no further attitudinal changes from the wrongdoer. This does not seem to match the shamer's psychology. Further, the act-focused view would imply that shaming the guilty is immediately irrational, as it seems irrational to communicate one's criticism to the wrongdoer without expecting any uptake or attitudinal changes. However, this is implausible. Those who shame the guilty may end up being morally criticizable, but they are rational. They have a readily available response when asked why they continue shaming the guilty: they expect something more from the shamee.

31. Euan Allison, "Performative Shaming and the Critique of Shame," *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (2022): 232–40, https://doi.org/10.5840/tht20245228.

32. Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, "Online Public Shaming," 5; Billingham and Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms," 1006; Lucy McDonald, "Shaming, Blaming, and Responsibility," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2020): 131–55, https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-BJA10064; Thomason, "Online Shaming," 147.

33. Allison himself ends up drawing a similar conclusion. Allison, "Performative Shaming," 235.

A proponent of the act-focused views might respond that it can be rational to shame the guilty with the goal of social exclusion or upholding a social norm.[34] This response might make sense when the shamer addresses a third party; however, it is hard to see how it can work when the intended audience is the shamee herself. In the latter kind of cases, the response fails to adequately capture the phenomenology of the shamer. Social exclusion and norm enforcement may be shaming's *functional goals*, but they are too downstream to capture the *intentions* of the shamer. The shamer may intend to, for instance, uphold a norm, but this is more accurately characterized as an intention to uphold a norm *by causing certain attitudinal changes* in the wrongdoer's psychology. The proponents of the act-focused views thus owe us an explanation of how shamers can rationally expect to achieve the goals of social exclusion or norm enforcement without internal changes from the shamee, especially when the shamee is the intended audience.

III.B SHAMING AND BLAME

A second reason for preferring the character-focused view is that it provides a fruitful characterization of the distinction between shaming and blame: shaming is paradigmatically character-focused, whereas blame paradigmatically targets one's specific actions.[35]

One might object that sometimes we blame people for character—for example, can't I directly blame a friend for being a selfish person? In response, I am inclined to think that cases like this are often act-focused blame in disguise. If there were to be genuine, direct character-focused blame, then it would be possible for one to blame another for a character flaw in the absence of any substandard actions. But it seems that any apparent case of blaming one for their character is a case in which one is blameworthy for *some substandard action* that led to the formation of one's character. Such criticism thus still conveys a general act-focused message, though it may not specify which exact action is substandard. If even this general act-focused message is absent—e.g., if a friend criticizes me for being selfish but adds that it is not about any selfish actions I have done—then the criticism either seems infelicitous or appears no longer blame, and is better characterized as shaming or dispassionate character criticism.

34. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

35. For reviews on the different accounts of blame, see D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, "The Nature and Ethics of Blame," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 3 (2012): 197–207, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2012.00477.x.

This picture fits well with the widely endorsed position that blame is a practice of holding people *accountable*; most paradigmatically, we are held accountable for what we do rather than for the kind of people that we are. It is sometimes suggested, however, that blame is not just about accountability. For example, Watson distinguishes "accountability blame" from "aretaic blame," which he takes to be a judgment of people's vicious character.[36] But aretaic blame can take the form of dispassionate judgments and need not be communicated in an emotionally charged manner; it thus remains distinct from shaming according to the character-focused view.

Relatedly, Shoemaker proposes to distinguish three types of moral responsibility: attributability, answerability, and accountability. An agent is responsible in the attributability sense for "any specific attitude" that expresses one's "deep self," which is identified with one's quality of character.[37] Shoemaker also suggests that we can blame people for what they are attributability-responsible for;[38] I will refer to this as *attributability-blame*. Although both attributability-blame and shaming concern character, there remains a key difference in terms of their *direct object of concern*. In attributability-blame, the direct object of concern is still *a person's specific action or attitude* that expresses her bad character. The bad character is instead the background explanation for why we hold her attributability-responsible for the specific action or attitude. This is supported by Shoemaker's own formulation of attributability agency: it involves being "worthy of agential admiration/disdain for attitudes . . . *in virtue of their expressing one's deep self*."[39] Attributability-blame thus communicates a character flaw, but merely as a means of criticizing the target's past actions or attitudes. By contrast, in paradigmatic instances of shaming, the direct object of concern is a person's *character flaw itself*. Their specific actions and attitudes are instead the background explanation for why we shame her for that character flaw. Shaming highlights the negative character itself, whereas attributability-blame highlights one's special connection to the actions and attitudes that can be properly attributed to one in virtue of that character. This difference remains an important one. Specifically, given that attributability-blame inevitably directs our attention to whether a particular action or attitude really expresses one's bad character, it makes sense why people would sometimes appeal to shaming: ideally,

36. Gary Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility," *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 238, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199624222.

37. David Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 59, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198715672.001.0001.

38. Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, 63.

39. Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, 48; emphasis added.

doing so can directly highlight one's character flaw itself as the focal point of the moral discourse.[40]

The character-focused view of shaming thus provides a theoretically fruitful distinction between shaming and blame. On this view, shaming is not just a form of blame and should not be viewed as simply a part of our responsibility practices.[41] By contrast, the act-focused views of shaming collapse the distinction between shaming and blame. If shaming, like blame, primarily targets one's local norm violations, then what makes it a distinct practice? Defenders of the act-focused views of shaming owe us an answer to this question.

One potential answer would involve appealing to the *social* or *public* characteristic of interpersonal shaming. Both McDonald and Thomason have defined shaming primarily in terms of its public-oriented feature. Thomason suggests that the unique feature of shaming is the "marshalling of communal attention"[42]; and McDonald claims that shaming is an "ostensive" speech act: it involves "ostending, or pointing, towards an entity and calling upon other agents to observe, acknowledge, and respond to that entity."[43] That is, shaming involves both evaluating someone negatively and ostensively *inviting someone else to join in this evaluation*. A defender of act-focused views of shaming may then argue that this social and public feature differentiates shaming from blame.

This approach faces serious difficulties, however, when it comes to *private shaming*: I can privately shame my friend without marshaling any communal attention or inviting anyone else to join in my criticism.[44] McDonald

40. One may object that Shoemaker should be interpreted as endorsing the view that we are directly attributability-responsible for our character. However, this interpretation does not fit Shoemaker's definition of attributability-blame as targeting specific attitudes that express and "causally depend on" one's quality of character. Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, 48. It also does not fit his theoretical goal of identifying the same structure across three types of responsibility. Similarly to how accountability-blame targets specific actions/attitudes in virtue of one's quality of regard, attributability-blame should target specific actions/attitudes in virtue of one's quality of character. Further, this alternative view about attributability-blame would end up downplaying an important distinction between (i) character-focused criticism and (ii) act/attitude-focused criticism in virtue of one's character; I think this would be a serious theoretical disadvantage.

41. I do not mean to suggest that shaming entirely falls outside the domain of responsibility either. If Shoemaker is right that attributability is a domain of responsibility, then shaming is clearly relevant to our attributability-responsibility practices due to its connections to attributability-blame. Further, the domains of shaming and accountability also overlap in interesting ways. Imagine someone who commits *repeated wrongdoings of the same kind* and does not show any sign of learning from her past mistakes. In such cases, shaming can help support our accountability practices by criticizing one's character.

42. Thomason, *Naked*, 181.

43. McDonald, "Shaming," 139.

44. This differs from the debate about the importance of an audience to the *emotion* of shame. See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, 1993), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520915282.

recognizes this difficulty and considers a case where a mother privately period-shames her daughter. Her response is to clarify that shaming does not always invite an actual third-party audience, but it needs to *invoke* the judgment of a hypothetical third party. She writes that the mother is likely to suggest that the daughter's periods "should be hidden from others," and for this reason her criticism still "invokes the hypothetical negative evaluation of the other."[45] However, the problem is that the public-oriented feature of shaming is now so much weakened that it would not be sufficient to distinguish shaming from act-focused blame anymore. Blame also seems to frequently *invoke* judgments of a hypothetical audience. For example, in justifying the legitimacy of their blame, the blamer may say, "everyone would agree with me that your action is wrong!" This is blame, not shaming. The publicity-focused feature alone thus seems insufficient to distinguish shaming from blame, unless one also endorses a character-focused view of shaming.[46]

III.C SHAMING AND OUT-OF-CHARACTER ACTIONS

Another reason for favoring the character-focused view of shaming involves cases about out-of-character actions. Consider the following example:

Tennis Coach Edward, a tennis player, participated in a two-day regional tournament. He performed poorly and lost every game in the tournament. Janice, Edward's tennis coach, is really mad at him and criticizes him in private: "You sucked so much. How could you not even win one game? You are so much better a player than all your opponents."

Janice's criticism appears specifically targeted at Edward's errors of performance, rather than his general competence as a tennis player. It might be suggested that this is an instance of shaming without character criticism. However, it seems to me that Janice is still criticizing *something substandard in Edward's character* that accounts for his losses, despite being a good player. For instance, perhaps he is bad at handling the pressure in high-stakes games, or perhaps he tends to be overconfident and underestimate his opponents. That is, Janice still seems to convey a general message about Edward's substandard character, though she doesn't identify which exact

45. McDonald, "Shaming," 142.

46. Another version of the public-oriented view is that the *function* of shaming is always public-oriented, even when the shamers do not *intend* so. However, this still cannot distinguish shaming from blame, as blame likely has a public, communicative function as well. See Coleen Macnamara, "Reactive Attitudes as Communicative Entities," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90, no. 3 (2015): 546–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12075.

aspect is substandard. If even the general character-focused message were absent, then I believe that there are reasons to think that Janice's criticism would *not be shaming anymore*. To illustrate this, imagine that Janice knows that Edward's poor performance has nothing to do with his character; he lost all games simply because of bad luck. She may still issue a speech act that involves criticizing Edward, which targets his errors of performance exclusively. For example, she may say, quite angrily, "You performed so poorly! I don't care that this is just bad luck!" This may not even be a felicitous speech act, as it seems inconsistent to *both* believe that Edward's failure is simply due to bad luck *and* criticize Edward for it. But even if it is felicitous, Janice's criticism now appears more like an instance of blame than shaming.

More generally, whenever a speaker criticizes a target but then further qualifies her criticism by explicitly stating that it does not concern any character flaw of the target, then her criticism almost always will appear to be more like blame than shaming. We can run this test on the examples earlier. Suppose that the business owner in *Flag Thief* adds to the billboard a further sentence clarifying that the thief's action does not indicate any character flaw, or that the fans in *Avatar Actor* modify their comments by claiming that Kiawentiio is a great actor who just happens to perform poorly. It seems to me that these qualifications, if sincerely made and communicated, would alter the nature of the criticisms so that they do not count as shaming anymore. Instead, they would be better characterized as publicly expressed blame. The upshot is that the character-focused view of shaming does a better job of explaining cases involving out-of-character actions than the act-focused views.

My opponent may disagree and have the intuition that Janice's criticism in *Tennis Coach* remains a felicitous instance of shaming, even if she believes that Edward's poor performance does not indicate any character flaw at all. I have two responses. The first response is to maintain that, even if some cases like this constitute genuine instances of shaming, they are not the paradigmatic examples and thus compatible with the character-focused view. The second response is to expand what a "negative message about character" means. While I have mostly focused on messages about one's *actual* substandard character, it is possible that shaming can sometimes convey messages about a *potential substandard character represented in one's action*. Janice may shame Edward by communicating that his performance in the tournament makes him come across to others as a potentially bad player. According to this response, to the extent that we shame people for out-of-character actions, we are communicating that their actions represent them as potentially possessing bad character. By doing so, we warn the shamee against actually

becoming the kind of people represented in their actions.[47] Both responses are compatible with the character-focused view of shaming, and I am neutral between them. It is also possible to combine the two responses. One may think that the most paradigmatic cases of shaming involve communicating actual character flaws, but, in less paradigmatic cases, shaming can also communicate potential character flaws represented in one's actions.[48]

I have presented three reasons in support of the character-focused view of shaming. At this stage, one might wonder if the character-centeredness of the practice is overstated; after all, most of the shaming examples discussed so far start from a substandard action. Indeed, shaming might appear to require some problematic action to be appropriate. Suppose that a person is rather cowardly but never performs any cowardly actions; it seems hardly appropriate to shame her for the lack of bravery. Can a character-focused view of shaming explain this? I believe so. Shaming in the absence of bad actions almost always has dubious epistemic support, which is why it seems inappropriate. It is hard to see how, without examining the shamee's actions, the shamer can ever gain sufficient evidence about the shamee's relatively global traits or dispositions. One might infer a character trait based on statistical evidence about the shamee's demographic or professional identity, but this kind of inference seems both epistemically and morally questionable. The character-focused view can therefore explain why shaming without bad actions is often inappropriate but still counts as shaming.

IV. The Misalignment Problem

According to the character-focused view, the paradigmatic aim of shaming is to communicate negative information about the shamee's character. One may expect that such a practice can bring about various desirable moral effects, such as causing character improvements. However, as many have pointed out, shaming in real life typically fails to achieve any morally positive effects; quite the opposite, it often seems destructive, counterproductive to character development, and detrimental to the aims of moral co-deliberation.[49] What explains shaming's failures like this?

47. This may be characterized as a "proleptic" form of shaming; for relevant discussion see Allan Hazlett, "From Doxastic Blame to Doxastic Shame," *Ergo* 11, no. 38 (2024): 1036, https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.6915.

48. This view also seems to match well with what shame, as an emotion, is like: although we most paradigmatically feel ashamed of our actual negative traits, we may also feel shame when our actions represent us as having negative traits that we do not possess.

49. For examples on the social costs of shaming, see Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (Riverhead Books, 2015). For evidence about the negative effects of public shaming on

One common approach in answering this question directs our attention to some inherent quality of the shaming practice itself. For example, Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia argue that shaming violates "a form of respect we owe to all persons."[50] And Thomason suggests that shaming requires the "marshalling of communal attention" in a way that risks undermining the process of moral co-deliberation.[51] Another approach more narrowly focuses on online shaming and how it is inherently morally problematic. For example, Billingham and Parr point out that online shaming is especially likely to be disproportionate and abusive; one important reason is that online shamers systematically lack control over the cumulative effects of their actions.[52]

I find these approaches insightful in explaining why shaming fails to achieve desirable moral effects in particular cases. However, I also think that they are incomplete and miss one key explanation behind shaming's failure. My proposal is that many of shaming's failures can be explained by a kind of *misalignment*: our tendency to treat shaming, a paradigmatically character-focused practice, *as if it is act-focused*. More specifically, we frequently treat shaming as if it is governed by the same epistemic, communicative, and normative standards as act-focused criticisms. This misaligned tendency can be seen both when we are shamers ourselves and when we are the targeted audiences of shaming. The contention is not that all failures of shaming practices can be attributed to this misalignment problem; rather, I argue that it can systematically account for enough of shaming's failures so that the problem merits more theoretical attention in the discussion about shaming's permissibility.

In what follows, I will elaborate on three common kinds of shaming failures that the act-character misalignment can account for: (i) epistemic failures, (ii) communicative failures, and (iii) normative failures.

IV.A EPISTEMIC FAILURES

The first kind of failures concerns the *epistemic justification* behind the judgment implied in one's shaming. As shaming is paradigmatically character-focused, it matters whether the shamer has good evidence or reasons in

mental health, see Marit F. Svindseth and Paul Crawford, *Humiliation: Mental Health and Public Shame* (Emerald Group Publishing, 2019). For the costs of public shaming, see James Edgar Lim, "Public Shaming as Moral Self-Defence," *Social Theory and Practice* 51, no. 3 (2025): 437–60, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract2025915246.

50. Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, "Online Public Shaming," 2.

51. Thomason, "Online Shaming," 148.

52. Billingham and Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms," 1008. For a related discussion on disproportionate blame, see Marta Johansson Werkmäster and Jakob Werkmäster, "Blame and Proportionality," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 28, no. 2 (2025): 235–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-024-10454-z.

support of her belief that the shamee in fact has a certain character flaw. If she lacks proper epistemic justification, then it would be unsurprising that her shaming does not receive any uptake and fails to achieve any desirable moral effects.

One common mistake that we make as shamers is to *infer too fast* from a substandard action to a substandard aspect of one's character. This can be seen in *Avatar Actor*, where the fans are quick to infer from (what they perceive as) poor performance in a single TV show to one's general incompetence as an actor. But the inference is not sound, as even great actors have occasional bad performances. Poorly made inferences from act to character can also account for shaming's failure in the well-known case of Justine Sacco. Before boarding a plane to South Africa in 2013, Sacco tweeted, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" She was very soon subject to online public shaming from social media users. I take it that her particular action of posting the "I'm white!" tweet is, if not racist, at least highly racially insensitive; Sacco deserves to be blamed for her morally substandard action. But the retweet crowd does not have sufficient evidence that would license a further inference to her substandard character. There is evidence easily accessible to them, such as Sacco's previous tweets where she had been making a series of sarcastic jokes; one makes fun of a "weird German dude," and another makes fun of British people's "bad teeth."[53] Perhaps by examining these tweets together, one can reasonably believe that Sacco does have some character flaw of lacking racial sensitivity in making jokes online. But there is not strong enough evidence to conclude that she is a horrible and racist person, as the retweeting crowd takes her to be.

Cases like this occur quite frequently in actual cases of shaming. That is, the shamers tend to start from a substandard action and quickly escalate to character-focused criticism, without attending to whether their evidence licenses this further escalation. This can be explained by the misalignment described earlier. Given that we tend to perform shaming as if it is governed by the same epistemic standards as act-focused criticisms, we make the mistake of thinking that we are in the same epistemic situation regarding the two. Note that the misalignment problem does not entail that we *consistently* treat shaming as an act-focused practice. Instead, actual shaming practices frequently involve an *ambiguity* in whether it really targets one's action or one's character, and the critics tend to move back and forth between act and

53. Ronson, *Publicly Shamed*, 25.

character criticism, treating the two as if they are equally well justified. But this is quite often an illusion, as character criticism typically requires much more evidence than observing one's substandard actions.[54]

The following is a common epistemic situation that renders shaming particularly risky: the shamer has strong evidence for a transgressor's norm violation but lacks evidence for the transgressor's character flaw. If we are oscillating between act- and character-focused criticism in such cases, then we can easily mistake our strong epistemic grounds for blaming the transgressor's action with those for shaming the transgressor. This can also lead to another common epistemic failure of shaming: a tendency for the shamer to be *over-confident* in the certainty of one's character-relevant belief. In reality, however, evidence or reasons regarding one's character traits are often hard to come by. They often—though perhaps not always—require examining a person's pattern of behaviors, motivations, and reasons for action, but such information is not often easily accessible by the potential shamer. We can therefore be said to be in an especially *epistemically deprived situation* when making inferences about people's character flaws. The consequence is not that we can never justifiably make such inferences, but that when we do so, the evidence is likely to be defeasible and relatively weak, at least when compared to the quality of evidence that we can gain about people's individual moral transgressions.

One might wonder if the discussion thus far underestimates how decisively some actions can speak to people's character. It might be argued that, for example, we can be rationally confident that anyone who makes a public post like Sacco's lacks proper racial sensitivity; and choosing to take a flight like Jenner's simply cannot be reconciled with authentic environmental concern.[55] One reason to be skeptical about inferences like this, however, can be found in the debate about the reliability of ordinary character judgments. Westra has argued that, based on recent empirical research, our ordinary judgments of people's character can be fairly reliable, but only when they are made under "the appropriate informational conditions."[56] Specifically,

54. Note that, if shaming is paradigmatically but not exclusively character-focused, then there is an even stronger potential for ambiguity: a non-paradigmatic case of shaming can easily risk being treated as a paradigmatic case, thus being interpreted as character criticism. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

55. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

56. Evan Westra, "Getting to Know You: Accuracy and Error in Judgments of Character," *Mind & Language* 35, no. 5 (2020): 583, https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12258; also see Evan Westra, "In Defense of Ordinary Moral Character Judgment," *Erkenntnis* 87, no. 4 (2022): 1461–79, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-020-00257-w.

our character judgments are likely to be reliable when they are "about people with whom we are well acquainted."[57] This is because, as we develop an intimate relationship with a person, we get to understand the motivations behind their behavior in a "much more detailed, mentalistic fashion."[58] But real-life examples of shaming are often made without personal acquaintance or intimate relationships with the shamee. This provides an additional reason to be skeptical about the reliability of our judgments in cases like Sacco and *Flight Shaming*. If Westra's observations are correct, however, then shaming's epistemic failures are less likely to occur when our target is someone with whom we are well acquainted, such as a close friend or a family member.[59] Nonetheless, they can explain a substantial number of cases involving the shaming of strangers and shaming on online platforms, especially when the character judgment is based on a single action.[60]

IV.B COMMUNICATIVE FAILURES

Epistemic failures are common in shaming, but sometimes the shamers do in fact have sufficient evidence or reasons to make a judgment about the shamee's character. However, shaming can still fail to achieve any desirable moral effects due to what I will call the *communicative failures*. This can be either because the *shamer* fails to communicate well her evidence or reasons behind epistemically justified criticism, or because the *audience* fails to be properly responsive to character-relevant evidence or reasons. Either is sufficient to cause shaming to not receive proper uptake in its audience; in such cases, even epistemically justified shaming is unlikely to achieve any positive effects.

Consider *Flag Thief*. One important detail of the case is that the business owner observed a series of actions from the flag thief: he checked out the pride flag, stared at it for a while, and returned on another trip to rip it down.

57. Westra, "Getting to Know," 583.

58. Westra, "Getting to Know," 594. Note that Westra's position is weaker compared to situationism, the view that we do not possess global traits at all. He argues, I think quite convincingly, that highly skeptical views like situationism lack adequate empirical support. Westra, "Getting to Know," 585.

59. Alfano has suggested that there are some "high-fidelity" virtues, such as honesty, that "require near-perfect consistency." Mark Alfano, "Identifying and Defending the Hard Core of Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 38 (2013): 241, https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr20133812. If this is correct, then high-fidelity virtues may be exception cases where one-off behavior can provide some evidence about character.

60. I am neutral about the extent to which blame is subject to epistemic failures. For a related view in the context of blame, see Jessica Isserow, "Situational Dependence and Blame's Arrow," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 124, no. 2 (2024): 167–90, https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoae006.

Another relevant context is the social meaning of pride-flag stealing; it is typically not an isolated event but part of a national trend of hate crimes. The planned and deliberate nature of the flag thief's actions, plus the broader social context regarding the social meaning of similar actions, may together convincingly support the existence of some negative character (e.g., being a bigot). If so, then the business owner may have good epistemic justification behind the character judgment in his shaming. However, I am inclined to think that the homemade billboard does not adequately communicate these reasons. This is because it only represents a *snapshot* of what happened and fails to draw enough attention to the deliberate nature of the action or the broader social context. I do not deny that some audiences may be able to infer that the business owner must have pretty good reasons to put up a billboard like that; for these people, the communication succeeds. Nonetheless, many other audiences can easily find the business owner's shaming epistemically unwarranted, as the billboard fails to communicate the broader social context behind the thief's actions. Communicative failures like this are common, especially when shaming is communicated in a snapshot-style medium. This includes posters, billboards, slogans, and also the short snapshot posts on many social media platforms. The shamers can thus commit communicative failures by choosing the wrong medium of communication in their shaming, even when they try to be as careful as they can when using that medium. For example, even when a shamer cautiously crafts a tweet, the short word limit still makes it very unlikely for her to properly communicate her reasons. Similarly, even though the business owner tried to describe the details of the case in the billboard, this may still not be able to counteract its snapshot effects.[61]

Such communicative failures can again be explained by the misalignment problem. Because the shamers tend to treat shaming as if it is governed by the same communicative standards as act-focused criticisms, they can frequently underestimate the difficulty of communicating their reasons. Even when they are epistemically justified in inferring a person's negative character traits, they still need to communicate that inference—not just the existence of a particular bad action—in order for their shaming to receive proper uptake. But the significance of this can be overlooked when we have a strong tendency to treat shaming as if it is act focused.

61. Blame can also suffer from similar communicative failures. However, I am inclined to think that this problem is less serious in the case of blame, since it is generally easier to communicate one's reason for criticizing an individual action than for criticizing a character flaw.

The analysis so far concerns the communicative failures of the shamers, but this is only half of the story. The audience's role is also crucial for the communicative success of shaming. Though the shamer can tailor her style of communication to the tendencies and knowledge of her audience, there is a limit to this, and there is at least some responsibility on the end of the audience to charitably interpret the shamer's message. What usually happens, however, is that the audience of shaming also has a tendency to respond to and evaluate shaming as if it is governed by the same communicative standards as an act-focused criticism. The consequence of this is that they are not adequately sensitive to the evidence or reasons related to the shamee's character, thus ignoring or quickly dismissing them even when the shamer presents them perfectly well. In cases where the audience is simply *insensitive* to character-related reasons, the cause of the communicative failures of shaming should be attributed to their insensitivity rather than the shamer's strategy.

My claim is that both the shamer and the audience have a strong tendency to treat shaming as if it is act focused. Now, one might worry that, if they manifest this tendency consistently and in the same contexts, then they should be united in their perspectives, and no communicative failures will occur.[62] However, as mentioned earlier, the misalignment problem does not entail that we *consistently* treat shaming in an act-focused way. Instead, we have a strong tendency to frequently shift into the mode of viewing shaming using an act-focused lens. And when only one side of the communication shifts into this mode, communicative failures will occur.

Here is a further implication. Because of the inconsistency mentioned above, one possibility is that a person is more likely to shift into the act-focused mode when she, perhaps non-consciously, perceives that doing so is beneficial to her own self-interest. For example, those audiences with an independent interest in defending the shamee may be more likely to shift into the act-focused mode if this makes it easier to dismiss the force of the criticism. The misalignment problem thus can potentially enable morally dubious incentives to affect shaming discourses.

The misalignment problem can also help supplement Adkins' insightful discussion of shaming backlashes. Consider her example of Connie St. Louis, a woman of color who criticized Tim Hunt as being sexist. Hunt, a Nobel winner, made a joke demeaning the status of women working in science during his toast at the World Conference of Science Journalists.[63] Though St. Louis also directed her criticism toward the broader field of science jour-

62. Thanks to Colin Marshall and an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this worry.
63. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 80.

nalism, her criticism was initially meant to convey a negative message about Hunt's character. St. Louis's judgment about Hunt's substandard character seems epistemically justified, and she communicated her reasons relatively well. However, her shaming still failed to receive proper uptake and caused serious backlash instead. She became the object of "sustained, public, and shaming scrutiny."[64]

Adkins argues that shaming backlashes can be attributed to two factors: (a) the fact that the shamer is in a socially disadvantaged status compared to the shamee;[65] and (b) the fact that shaming often depends on "soft" or invisible norms.[66] The misalignment problem adds another important factor. Many audiences in shaming backlashes have a strong tendency to treat shaming as if it is act-focused; when they manifest this tendency, they will be insensitive to the character-focused points in the shamer's criticism. Further, when they observe that the shamer frequently makes character-focused criticisms, they may mistakenly think that she is an *incompetent actor in norm-evaluating activities*, exactly because she fails to exclusively focus on the shamee's past actions. This is an important part of why they, instead of giving the proper uptake, choose to redirect moral scrutiny toward the shamer herself. For example, if the audiences in St. Louis's shaming treat it as an exclusively act-focused criticism, then this in part explains why they find it puzzling why she calls out Hunt as being a sexist person, instead of focusing on the moral quality of his joke. Relatedly, they may wonder why St. Louis does not focus on demanding that Hunt apologize for his individual action. The common lines of shaming backlashes reflect exactly these concerns—some audiences criticized St. Louis because she failed to "confront him directly at the time" and "made too much out of" a joke.[67]

The misalignment problem, when combined with the earlier point that it can potentially enable morally dubious incentives to affect shaming discourses, can predict why the audiences of St. Louis's shaming are likely to shift into the act-focused mode. Many intended audiences in this case are members of socially privileged groups; they may thus have an independent, morally dubious interest in defending the privileged shamee. If so, then they are more likely to shift into the act-focused mode when they, perhaps non-consciously, perceive that doing so is beneficial to themselves. It is relatively easy to downplay the moral wrongness of Hunt's individual action

64. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 83.
65. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 87.
66. Adkins, "Invisible Harms," 322.
67. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 84.

by emphasizing that it is "just a joke" or that he only needs to apologize for it. But it is not as easy to dismiss St. Louis's concerns with Hunt's moral or professional character. More generally, when a socially advantaged shamee has already apologized for her individual action, it can become very difficult for a socially disadvantaged shamer to continue shaming without receiving backlash. She may frequently feel like talking to a brick wall; no matter how carefully she communicates her character-focused criticism, the audience tends to respond in a way as if the only relevant considerations are about the person's past actions.

IV.C NORMATIVE FAILURES

There is a further category of shaming failures that deserves our attention. In such cases, the shamer is epistemically justified in judging that the shamee has a character flaw; she communicates relatively well the reasons behind her judgment to the audience; and the audience is not unresponsive to character-related reasons, thus can be brought to see that the shamee in fact has a character flaw. Yet, shaming may still fail to achieve its positive moral effects if either the audience or the shamer holds *overly demanding normative standards about the propriety of shaming*. I will refer to such cases as *normative failures*.

Let me explain. Shaming is not merely a *judgment* about one's substandard character; it involves a private or public *communicative act* that expresses such a judgment to an audience. This allows the possibility where an audience may acknowledge the epistemic justification behind one's judgment but at the same time deny the *moral propriety* of the communicative act. The audience may then divert their evaluative attention away from the content of the character criticism and toward scrutinizing the moral propriety of the shamer's act itself.[68] When this occurs, even epistemically justified and well-communicated shaming will still fail to receive proper uptake from one's audience, falling short of bringing about any positive moral effects. Normative failures can also occur if the shamer herself holds an overly demanding normative standard about the moral propriety of shaming. She may refrain from continuing to shame her target or make efforts to take back her shaming act, even when it is well justified. Relatedly, a *potential* shamer may refrain from shaming in the first place—even when shaming would be appropriate—due to her endorsing an overly demanding standard. They may

68. This is another factor underlying the phenomenon of shaming backlashes discussed in Section IV.B. The shamers receive backlashes in part because they are viewed as not just *incompetent*, but also *morally criticizable* actors in their norm-evaluating activities.

then inappropriately excuse people from being shamed or cause missed opportunities for potentially morally valuable shaming. This is another reason why shaming practices do not tend to achieve desirable moral effects.

The particular example that I will focus on involves the relevance of the *control* standard to morally appropriate shaming. Many people seem to assume a *fairly strong control condition* for appropriate shaming. It is not uncommon to hear an audience defending a shamee by claiming that they could not be reasonably expected to do otherwise; that this is what everyone else does; or that this is just the kind of person they are. An often-implicit assumption is thus that the shamer cannot appropriately criticize the shamee without adequate evidence that the shamee in fact has proper control over what they are criticized for. Some philosophers also seem to endorse this view. Billingham and Parr, for example, write that the shamee can be appropriately shamed "only if she has *culpably* violated" a norm; culpability requires control so that "her conduct breached that norm in a way that she could have reasonably foreseen."[69] This culpability requirement makes sense if shaming is simply a form of act-focused blame. Though the exact conditions for appropriate blame remain highly contentious, many accounts do require the blamee to have proper control over her actions. One may then think that appropriate shaming should similarly require its target to satisfy a control standard.

However, if my arguments for shaming's character-centeredness are on the right track, then it is not at all clear why a similar control condition must apply to shaming. One may easily think that character-focused criticism has its own norms and standards that have little to do with control.[70] If this is correct, then the common tendency among shaming's audience to appeal to control-related excuses can again be explained in terms of the misalignment problem. As many people tend to treat character-focused criticism as if it is governed by the same normative standards as act-based criticisms, they end up imposing an *overly demanding norm* on the practice of shaming.[71] An alternative view is that there remains some control condition for shaming, but it involves a *weaker form of control* compared to the control condition for

69. Billingham and Parr, "Online Public Shaming," 379.

70. For another defense of the view that appropriate shaming does not require control, see Hazlett, "Doxastic Shame." For relevant discussion on control and shame, see Carlsson, "Shame and Attributability"; Douglas W. Portmore, "Desert, Control, and Moral Responsibility," *Acta Analytica* 34, no. 4 (2019): 407–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-019-00395-z.

71. Note that, if shaming is paradigmatically but not exclusively character-focused, then this can provide a ready explanation for why individuals commit normative failures: they, perhaps implicitly, import the norm of a non-paradigmatic form of shaming into its paradigmatic form. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

blame. For example, one may think that shaming still cannot be appropriate if the shamee does not exert some partial but important and continuing effects on the formation and development of her relevant character. I am open to this possibility as well. It still follows from this possibility that it would be overly demanding to impose the same kind of control condition as for act-focused blame onto the practice of shaming, as doing so would lead to a very similar kind of normative failure as identified above.

The control condition is only one example; treating shaming as if it is an act-focused practice can lead to uncritically using whatever normative requirements that one endorses for act-focused criticism to evaluate the normativity of shaming. For example, we sometimes respond to and evaluate shaming by examining whether the shamer has the "standing" to criticize her target;[72] whether shaming allows a "due process";[73] whether shaming allows the shamee "a right of reply;"[74] and whether the shamee has already made a sincere apology.[75] Suppose that appropriate act-focused blame requires the blamer to have the standing to blame, to allow a due process, to give the blamee a right of reply, and to dissipate once the blamee has made a sincere apology; it is still not obvious that these same normative standards must apply to shaming. And even if they do, it is also far from obvious that they apply to shaming *the same way as they apply to act-focused blame*. Failing to differentiate these two kinds of normative standards is thus another reason why shaming can fail to achieve positive moral effects.

To sum up, the misalignment problem can account for three kinds of failures in actual shaming practices: epistemic failures, communicative failures, and normative failures. My contention is not that misalignment is the only reason why shaming can fail to achieve positive moral effects, but that it can systematically account for enough of shaming's failures so that it deserves more of our theoretical attention. I also think that it leads to important implications for how we should rethink issues about shaming's permissibility, which I shall turn to now.

V. Implications for Shaming's Moral Permissibility

What does my approach imply about the moral permissibility of shaming? First, consider epistemic failures. When the shamer criticizes the shamee but lacks proper evidence or reasons for judging that the shamee has a substan-

72. Adkins, "Shaming Is Shameful," 84.
73. Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, "Online Public Shaming," 2.
74. Billingham and Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms," 1011.
75. Billingham and Parr, "Online Public Shaming," 372.

dard character, it stands to reason that her shaming cannot be morally permissible. This is analogous to the case of blaming someone for an action that the blamer has no good reason to believe is morally substandard.

Next, consider those communicative failures primarily due to the shamer's failing to communicate her reasons well. Given the poorly communicated reasons, such shaming is typically unable to cause the shamee to feel shame or to recognize her character flaw; therefore, it also cannot help improve the shamee's character. It thus has little instrumental benefit. However, it can still impose serious costs and harms on both its targets and the shamer herself.[76] The balance of reasons thus seems to speak against this kind of shaming. Now, some may think that it is an *intrinsically good* state of affairs for one to shame the right target, even without any instrumental benefits. But it also seems equally plausible that it is an *intrinsically bad* state of affairs for one to *shame the right target without communicating the right reasons*. The intrinsic goodness of such shaming is thus unlikely to outweigh the reasons against it, which are now based on both intrinsically and instrumentally bad states of affairs. I am thus inclined to think that this kind of shaming is typically morally impermissible.

Next, consider those communicative failures primarily due to the audience's lack of responsiveness to character-related reasons. This is analogous to cases where blame is apt but ineffective due to the blamee's or the audience's insensitivity to the relevant reasons.[77] Like the last category, this kind of shaming confers little instrumental benefit but has potentially negative consequences. Again, some may argue that such shaming is intrinsically valuable: it is both (i) intrinsically good to shame the right target, and (ii) intrinsically good to do so while communicating the right reasons. And one might think that (i) and (ii) can sometimes outweigh the instrumental badness of shaming; it will be analogous to how apt-but-ineffective blame may be all-things-considered permissible as a form of moral protest. I will leave open this possibility, but there are two reasons to be skeptical. First, it seems to me that the intuition for the intrinsic value of shaming is grounded in cases where shaming actually causes one to feel shame about one's character flaw. But the kind of shaming considered here typically fails to cause emotional shame. Thus, I am inclined to think that the reason-giving force of (i) and (ii) is significantly weakened, because they are not accompanied

76. Adkins, "Shame Backlashes"; Adkins, "Invisible Harms"; Billingham and Parr, "Enforcing Social Norms"; Billingham and Parr, "Online Public Shaming"; Thomason, *Naked*; Thomason, "Online Shaming."

77. See Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 123–44, https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12130.

by the intrinsic goodness for the right target to feel shame. Second, while apt-but-ineffective blame may be intrinsically valuable as a form of moral protest against people's actions, it is unclear whether we have intrinsic reasons to *protest people's substandard character*. Character may simply not be the right object to protest against. For these reasons, I am inclined to think that the kind of shaming considered here is still typically morally impermissible; but there can be exception cases, such as cases of shaming one's oppressor that are subject to communicative failures due to the oppressor.

Lastly, consider normative failures due to individuals having overly demanding normative standards about the propriety of shaming. The implication here is structurally the same as communicative failures. We can similarly classify normative failures into two categories: those primarily due to the *shamer's* mistaken normative assumptions and those primarily due to the *audience's* mistaken normative assumptions. For the same reasons as above, I'm inclined to think that both will be typically morally impermissible. Again, I allow that there are exception cases, especially for normative failures due to the audience. Also note that some communicative and normative failures will be *in part due to* the shamer and *in part due to* the audience; such cases will fall in the middle between the two categories discussed above.

The upshot is that I am inclined to agree with the existing theories that real-world shaming is more likely than not to be particularly ineffective and morally risky. It is indeed often, if not typically, morally impermissible. But the important thing to note—and here is where I part ways with many existing accounts—is that the misalignment problem attributes the many failures of shaming not to the practice itself, but rather to *how we actually perform it*. It demonstrates that many obstacles to the moral efficacy of shaming are due to our misaligned tendencies to treat a paradigmatically character-focused practice as if it were act-focused. But this does not mean that we cannot improve the practice of shaming in ways more aligned with its goals.

Analyzing the ethics of shaming via the misalignment thesis thus raises an important but under-discussed question: What efforts should we make in order to better support the moral efficacy of character criticisms? An obvious answer is that it would involve changes in the tendencies of both the shamer and the potential audience. Both sides should treat shaming as a paradigmatically character-focused criticism instead of being exclusively act-focused. They should be more aware of which kind of criticism they are issuing or responding to. The shamers should be more careful about their evidence or reasons that license an inference from a substandard act to a substandard character, and they should seek better ways of communicating their evidence or reasons to the target audience. The audience should improve their dispo-

sition of responsiveness to character-related reasons involved in shaming. And we all should be more careful in distinguishing between the normative standards for appropriate blame and those for appropriate shaming.

A less obvious answer would go beyond the above individual efforts and involve *collective* efforts that aim to improve our broader *moral ecology*. By a "moral ecology," I simply mean the *societal and cultural circumstances* that may or may not support exercises of a type of moral practice to fulfill its social-functional role.[78] I suspect that the misalignment phenomenon is not simply because of some accidental psychological tendencies of the individual agents. It is partly due to a broader action-focused moral ecology in many modern societies, where character-focused criticism is frequently portrayed by many as an ancient idea in tension with the values of respecting each other as free and equal beings. The efforts to improve our existing moral ecology thus in part require challenging over-simplified assumptions like this that are commonly made in our societal and cultural circumstances.

I have argued that the misalignment problem is one significant problem that explains why shaming is typically morally impermissible, and this problem can be resolved or mitigated by improving our individual efforts and the broader moral ecology. However, I do not mean to suggest that misalignment is the *only* moral problem with shaming. As mentioned earlier in Section IV, some theorists have argued that the practice is *inherently problematic* because it is disrespectful or because it marshals communal attention. If these stronger critiques are correct, then there would be deeper problems with the practice that cannot be resolved by simply improving our moral ecology. But the misalignment problem remains a significant problem for at least two reasons. First, many are not convinced by the stronger critiques regarding shaming's inherent moral deficiency. This is partly because these critiques often require endorsing a fairly narrow definition of shaming (e.g., it entails social exclusion or marshaling social attention). By contrast, my analysis of shaming requires a fairly minimal definition, and it can go through as long as one assumes that shaming is paradigmatically character focused. The misalignment problem will thus prove dialectically forceful for those who do not find the stronger critiques particularly convincing. Second, I believe that the stronger critiques of shaming will turn out to be less convincing once we clearly distinguish between the *actual* shaming practices in a non-ideal moral ecology and shaming as a practice *in general*. I am inclined to think that the stronger critiques of shaming are often based on observations about actual shaming practices, and they cannot be extended to support a whole-

78. Manuel Vargas, *Building Better Beings* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 246, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199697540.001.0001.

sale skepticism of the practice. A full defense of this worry would involve carefully examining the existing critiques of shaming and has to be left for another occasion. The bottom line is this: at least *one significant moral problem* with shaming can be resolved or mitigated by improving our moral ecology, even if there may be other deeper problems.

Here is one important objection to consider. One may claim that there are simply *better alternatives to shaming*, and their existence is already sufficient to establish a general skepticism about shaming's permissibility. For example, one may think that what I have referred to as dispassionate character criticism is strictly a better alternative than shaming. And we can surely imagine many scenarios where emotionally charged shaming causes cognitive biases that could be avoided by calm and dispassionate character criticism. However, we can just as easily imagine scenarios where an emotionally charged moral criticism is more likely to signal that the speaker cares about the relevant norms and values, and therefore more likely to receive an uptake. Dispassionate criticisms are only sometimes, but not always, better than passionate ones. Further, we can expect the misalignment problem to also negatively impact the moral efficacy of dispassionate character criticism. After all, the three kinds of failures identified in Section IV are due to our general tendencies to view character-focused criticism through an act-focused lens. Thus, our misaligned tendencies are likely to prevent whatever alternative format of character-focused criticism from bringing about positive moral results just as well.

VI. Conclusions

I defended the view that shaming is paradigmatically character focused. I argued that many failures in actual shaming practices are due to a misaligned tendency to treat shaming as if it is governed by the same epistemic, communicative, and normative standards as act-focused criticisms. I conclude that one significant moral problem with shaming can be resolved or mitigated by improving the moral ecology that supports it, rather than abandoning the practice.

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