Green Shame: The Next Moral Revolution?[i]

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the phenomenon of what I call 'green shame', the shame one feels when knowingly behaving in ways that have a severe negative impact on the environment, like flying or eating meat, while other options are available at a financially and socially non-debilitating cost. I argue that individual green shame can contribute to the greening of society. I do so by first setting out my understanding of shame and distinguishing it from other significant feelings like guilt or embarrassment. I understand shame as the emotion one feels when one believes to have sunk below the standards of what dignity requires. I then draw out my account of green shame and distinguish it from green guilt. I raise three possible objections: the objection that green shame does not change behaviour, the objection that green shame does change behaviour but does not change it for the better, and the objection that (individual) shame is not the most efficient strategy in pursuing the greening of society. I argue that these objections can be met and show how that can be done. I conclude that green shame can contribute to the greening of society because, apart from its effect on individual choice, the sting of green shame urges people to demand action at an institutional level and creates a support base for much-needed institutional change.

Introduction

In Swedish there is a word for the shame one feels when taking an airplane. The Swedes call it 'flygskam'. In addition to flying shame, Swedes also speak of 'tågskryt' (train bragging) and 'smygflyga' (flying in secret) (Hoikalla and Magnusson 2019). People know that flying produces greater carbon emission than taking the train or even driving. Many care about this fact, yet fly anyway. Behaving in ways that are harmful to the environment when other options are known, studied, and available is increasingly associated with the feeling of shame, at least in highly educated, middle class circles. It won't be long before we coin words like meat shame or carnivore shame, plastic shame, or shopper's shame, to name a few (though probably more catchy versions of them). There are many ways in which we could reduce our carbon emission but choose not to. I call the shame that sometimes accompanies these choices 'green shame'. In this paper, I examine what place shame has in the pursuit of the greening of society. Is *flygskam* useful, and does it actually lead to a better state of the world? Are we moving the world towards a more sustainable state when we feel shame about certain behavior that contributes to rising global temperatures, when there are alternatives available? I argue that we do, but only under specific circumstances, and with a cautious eye for the moral pitfalls of shame.

I start by outlining my understanding of shame and distinguish it from associated feelings like guilt or embarrassment. I define green shame and distinguish it from green guilt. Then, I distinguish between the act of green *shaming* and of *feeling* green *shame*. I argue along with Martha

Nussbaum that shaming is undesirable across the board, and will likely backfire if we want it to contribute to a greener society (Nussbaum 2004). Nussbaum argues that shame should not be used as a punishment or deterrent for morally condemnable behaviour, and that shame is often unreliable. But feeling shame is distinct from urging others to feel it, as Nussbaum acknowledges in her account of constructive shame. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Jennifer Jacquet argue that shame can play a crucial role in engendering moral revolutions (Appiah 2010, Jacquet 2015). On their account, shame is morally useful because it deters people from doing something that is morally condemnable, and it does so with more potency than mere rational conviction through argumentation.

I conclude that green shame can contribute to the pursuit of greening society, if the perils of shame are taken into account, that is, if shame comes from a personal realization that one's behaviour is not merely harmful but *undignified*, and if the standards of what it means to live a dignified life are under constant critical scrutiny. Furthermore, I argue that even though shame is an individual matter, and the greening of society would require institutional and structural change rather than individual change, shame can be helpful to push upon us a sense of urgency and create a broad support base and a demand for drastic institutional revisions.

1. An account of shame

Shame is the emotion we feel when we think we have acted in ways that are contrary to the behaviour of a dignified person. The idea that shame occurs when you fail to reach a certain minimal standard or ideal is common among shame philosophers (Deonna et al 2012, Rawls 1999, Taylor 1985).[ii] My concept of shame takes this minimal standard to be the basic requirements of what a person takes dignity to mean. My idea of shame is intentionally broad, and therefore works well with the phenomenology of shame as an emotion with very diverse objects. People have ideas about what it means to have dignity and live a dignified life. If they fail to live up to the basic requirements of a dignified life, they may feel shame.

Dignity is often a container term that obscures rather than helps a discussion move forward. But this openness of the term is useful for my take on shame. Whatever meaning a person gives to dignity, that is what determines when they feel shame. Say someone thinks that to live a dignified life means living up to certain beauty standards, or having a job that is meaningful and stimulating to them. They experience shame when they are confronted with their failure to live up to those standards, or when they get refused for the jobs they apply for time and time again. If someone believes that dignity entails adhering to certain moral standards, then failing to meet them evokes shame.

However, the mere failure to meet standards of personally defined dignity does not necessarily cause shame. It seems important that the failure is perceived to be one's own, or at least meaningfully tied to the self (Kristjánsson 2002: 118, Taylor 1985, Thomason 2018: 88). This is why humiliation might miss its target if the person undergoing it is not convinced that he is sinking below what dignity requires through his own doing. The humiliator's goal is to publicly show an undignified person by making them do things that are shameful, or pointing things out about them that are (rightfully or not) considered shameful, like making them do things that emphasize their animality, or publicly displaying their missteps. But humiliation misses its intended effect if the

humiliated person does not think they have sunken below what dignity requires in any way. The difference between being humiliated and feeling ashamed is whether the blow to dignity is perceived as one's own failure.

But not all failures are shameful. In shame, the failures are specifically tied up with dignity. They encompass the whole being of a person. Guilt also comes up when we feel to have failed somehow, but the failure does not affect our whole sense of self and dignity. Guilt is about breaking a rule that is commonly accepted, with a specific act, but breaking it does not affect self-image in the way that shame does (Morgan 2008: 14, Nussbaum 2016: 128, Taylor 1985: 89, Williams 1993: 84). About the same act, some people might feel shame whereas others only feel guilt. Say someone wants to lose weight. In the first case, the weight loss is a goal a person has set for herself, but failing to meet it will not damage her sense of dignity. Losing some weight is not central to her idea of what dignity requires, it is merely something she wants to do, perhaps because she thinks she will feel more energized, or live longer. Imagine a second case, where someone thinks a dignified person has self-control, and not being slim is perceived as a failure of self-control. Now imagine both of them indulging in a pack of fries. It seems likely that the first person feels guilty, while the second feels shame. In the first case, eating a pack of fries might have been 'breaking' the rules, and sets the person back in achieving her goal, but she is not hit in her dignity, because her sense of dignity does not depend on whether she does or does not lose weight. In the second case, indulging in a pack of fries feels like a failure beyond merely breaking a self-set rule. The failure to her feels like a failure of her whole person, as if she is lacking the self-control a person with dignity would have, in her mind. Whereas the person feeling guilt merely thinks she has failed in an act, the person feeling shame thinks she has failed as a person.

Shame is not the same as embarrassment either. To be embarrassed is to feel socially awkward and out of place (Nussbaum 2004: 203). It is an uneasy feeling in response to small failures, but often these failures are known to not be real failures at all. Think of someone tripping or spilling something, and then quickly looking around with a tomato-red face chuckling nervously. They know that tripping over that loose stone in the pavement could happen to anyone, and it does not say anything about their personal competence to walk the streets. The feeling of embarrassment is confined to a very specific moment in time, and is inevitably tied up with being watched or being seen (Tracy and Robins 2004). What makes the act embarrassing is precisely that it is seen. That is different in the account of shame that I present. Even though shame is often felt as a desire to hide or cover up, the external spectator does not have to be around physically for their eyes to be felt. Shame does not end when no one is watching. The desire to cover up is not a desire not to be seen, but rather one to not exist, to disappear entirely. The one who judges is not the other, but the self. Shame is an inner blush first, before blood actually colours our cheeks red.

Of course, our concept of what it means to live a dignified life is to a large extent socially informed. We determine beliefs about dignity explicitly in discussion about what is good and praiseworthy, and implicitly by following examples around us. Depending on social context, and someone's fundamental cares, however, everyone's concept of dignity is personalized, and there is great variety in concepts of dignity. There is great variety in sources of shame then, too. Who feels shame and in what circumstances has to do with self-image, the level of attempt at moral coherence, and what it means for you to be a flourishing version of yourself. But what that means is under

constant discussion, and fundamental disagreements about the content of a dignified life are at the heart of the most brutal clashes between human beings.

Even among those who have knowledge about the climate crisis, understand the arguments, are explicitly concerned about the future, and for whom a change of behaviour is among the possible options without too many financial and social repercussions, real change in behaviour happens rather seldom. People keep flying, keep eating meat, keep buying goods wrapped in tons of plastic, myself included. A major reason for this is governmental policymaking. How are we expected to choose alternatives to airplanes if the train costs an arm and a leg? How do we expect people to reduce their plastic use if there are no rules on how companies are allowed to pack their product? But another reason, I propose, is that people do not see it as a failure of dignity to keep up destructive behaviour.

People feel 'green guilt', as Jennifer Jacquet puts it (Jacquet 2015: 45). But guilt, as she argues, often fails to bring about real change, because as guilt focuses on one act, it is easily bought off. In the commercialized world of 'green gadgets' like bamboo toothbrushes, void eco logos, and reusable straws, a clean conscience is for sale. When booking a flight or bus, there is now often the option to pay an extra, voluntary fee to supposedly make the trip carbon neutral. "Just as the rich could buy their way out of penance, the rich can now presume to buy their way out of environmental destruction and its associated guilt," Jacquet writes. But many of these financial transactions only give the buyer an *impression* of green living. "Not that guilt isn't motivating," Jacquet continues, "it can, in some ways, be a healthy response to many of our problems. The flaw comes when guilt is misguided and we find relief in shopping rather than activism, or when guilt over collective problems is used to improve oneself rather than to strategically consider the collective whole" (Jacquet 2015: 57).

What we need for people to change their behaviour (and what they demand from policymakers) is not mere guilt, but shame. I am not arguing for shaming policies, or encouraging people to shame one another or calling each other out. These policies have counterproductive effects and are morally questionable, for reasons I will explain later. But people will not change their behaviour towards the environment as long as they do not believe that their behaviour is below what a dignified person would do. As Nussbaum puts it: about some things in society, "it is too easy to say, "Let's not do A again." We need to say, "Let's not be this way any longer"" (Nussbaum 2004: 212)." Let's not be greedy to the extent that other living organisms must suffer for our wants. Let's not let our desire for instant gratification do irreversible damage to the planet. Let's not be weak-willed about sustainable action. Let's educate ourselves to the best of our abilities to resist ignorance about the accelerating temperature rise and how to counter it. Let's not be indifferent to the suffering of future generations. Let's not be selfish. Let's not live and think "après nous, le déluge." All these aspirations are matters of the whole self, and therefore failing to meet them brings shame rather than the feeling of specific guilt.

2. Green shame and the greening of society

2.1 Does green shame change behaviour?

A common argument against shame's moral value is that shame is not a motivator for behavioural change at all, but rather a paralyzing emotion. Shame is counterproductive in this sense. The person who feels shame is not motivated to change or improve, but rather to avoid the confrontation. Shame causes the person to focus on the self, rather than the situation she is in, making her blind to possible positive actions. Shame thwarts action rather than encourages it. The psychologist James Gilligan has shown that people who are made to feel shame often struggle with feelings of alienation (Gilligan 1996). The shame adds insult upon injury, rather than steering the ashamed person in a progressive direction. Nussbaum suggests that shame and fragile egos are not only the consequences of moral transgressions, but just as often the sources of misconduct. Shaming the trespasser would then be "like using gasoline to put out a fire" (Nussbaum 2004: 236). Julia Annas argues in a similar vein that shame is likely to be linked to a "broken spirit," and the loss of self-respect (Nussbaum 2004: 231). This loss, in turn, seems more likely to trigger morally condemnable behaviour than if self-respect was intact. Entitled shame, as Kate Manne calls it, can give rise to anger, violence, and feelings of resentment (Manne 2018: 121).

Not only can shame bring about negative behaviour, it can lead one to decide to end one's behaviour once and for all. Shame is often given as an explanatory reason for suicide (Lester 1997). Kate Manne argues that shame for one's own failure in some extreme cases even brings about desire to kill the onlooker. A common explanation for 'family annihilation', the rare phenomenon where (mostly) men mass-murder their closest family, is that the idea of a loss of respect from one's family was so unbearable for the family annihilator that it seemed easier to simply kill those whose respect could be lost (Manne 2018: 121). Shame is destructive in all these senses. Guilt seems more productive here, because the negative feeling is not aimed towards the whole self but rather at a specific act of rule breaking.

In the case of green shame, these warnings should also be taken to heart. But we should distinguish between shame as a tool that can be used to enforce behavioural change upon others, by actively shaming them for certain behaviour, or shame as the personal feeling of failure to reach a standard of dignified behaviour. Shaming can take on the form of invitations to shame, holding up flaws for public viewing, and stigmatization, Krista Thomason writes (Thomason 2018: 177). But the feeling of shame itself need not be connected with these acts of collective attention. The shaming that Thomason describes is problematic for all the arguments given above that emphasize the risk of paralysis and broken spirit. But the feeling of shame as an internal blush even in the absence of external judgment does not face the same risks necessarily. Nussbaum is clear about this point: her book presents arguments about shame as a tool for punishment, to deter future malignant behaviour. She talks about the act of sham*ing* others: about having shoplifters parade around with a sign marked "thief" in front of the store they stole from, about publicly indicating drivers with a history of DUI's through signage on their vehicles (Nussbaum 2004: 228). Such shaming has proved not to deter future criminal behaviour (Nussbaum 2004: 235), and if it does, it comes at the great cost of harming the person's self-respect - a price we should not be willing to pay (Nussbaum 2004: 227).

Do these claims entail that there is no place in morality for the feeling of green shame whatsoever? Nussbaum leaves open the possibility for something like 'constructive shame' to exist. Crucially, however, that constructivity is not found in the act of shaming. She does not condemn the feeling of shame itself as a moral motivator. "Some forms of shame indeed have a positive

ethical value," Nussbaum writes. Shame "goads us onward with regard to many different types of goals and ideals, some of them valuable. (…) It often tells us the truth: certain goals are valuable and we have failed to live up to them. And it often expresses a desire to be a type of being that one can be: a good human being doing fine things" (Nussbaum 2004: 176). Nussbaum writes about constructive shame, the kind of shame that results from critical and careful self-examination.

Hans Maes' idea of asymmetry can be helpful to understand the difference between shaming and feeling shame (Maes 2005). He argues that there is an asymmetry between what you can say about yourself, and what others can say about you. Maes writes about the appropriateness of pride, and claims there is a morally relevant difference between ascribing yourself a certain trait, and having others ascribe it to you. The same asymmetry goes for shame, but in the opposite direction. The fact that a person feels shame, does not make it legitimate for others to call them out or actively shame them. Nussbaum convincingly argues that it is morally problematic to publicly call other people out on their undignified behaviour, because this would be in violation of their dignity. But we *can* say to ourselves that we have behaved in undignified ways, without violating our own dignity. Even stronger, the fact that we take our dignity seriously is why we feel so strongly when we go against it by acting in certain ways. Shame can make us retrospectively evaluate our choices, but the aim to avoid shame can equally prevent us from engaging in future behaviour that would infringe upon our idea of a dignified life. Shame is us protecting our own dignity in ways that others can't without thereby also violating our dignity.

Nussbaum's argument is focused on the state's complicity in the shaming. That involvement is highly problematic. Institutionalizing shaming makes the prime protector of the social conditions for self-respect and dignity at once a threat to those very conditions. She writes: "The fact that the state is complicit in the shaming makes a large difference. People will continue to stigmatize other people, and criminals are bound to be among those stigmatized. For the state to participate in this humiliation, however, is profoundly subversive of the ideas of equality and dignity on which liberal society is based" (Nussbaum 2004: 232). Shaming others is harmful because it poses a threat to dignity. We have a duty to respect dignity in others, and shaming another is in direct opposition with this duty. But if that threat is absent, shame is not morally negative per se, and can even be a great tool of resistance.

Jacquet argues that precisely for this reason shame can be effective as a tool used against institutions and organizations (Jacquet 2015), if at least we beware to distinguish real policy changes as a response to shame from mere 'greenwashing.'[iii] In the case of Greenpeace shaming large whaling companies, for instance, there is no dignity harmed as long as the act is directed at the abstract institution rather than at an individual. The same goes for calling shame on Primark for underpaying their workers. It might be appropriate to shame companies where it would not be appropriate in the same situation to shame individuals. In my account of shame, which focuses on dignity as the linchpin for feeling shame, it might seem quite hard for a company to experience shame, as a company is not the kind of thing that does or does not have dignity. But we might imagine the people in charge having some sort of image of what is means for a company to be good. Then we can also imagine them experiencing emotions about the company when the company fails to live up to what it means to be a good company. In shaming a company, then, there is no dignity of an individual harmed, but rather the question of what a good company should

be is invoked, and the company is urged to reconsider whether they live up to that idea by being called out on malpractices.

Feeling shame can be constructive, and perhaps more so than guilt. As Jacquet argues, guilt entails the risk of being bought off or misled. As shame concerns the whole person, the change that needs to come about to soothe shame cannot be captured in one act, or a (financial) transaction that relieves one's conscience, like buying bamboo toothbrushes or paying an extra fee on an otherwise extremely polluting low-cost flight. Shame is relieved only when a person consistently acts in ways that do not reflect undignified character traits, but virtuous ones instead. The change that shame can potentially bring about is a sustainable change in character. The person feeling shame is ashamed about her greed, her selfishness, or carelessness for instance, and wishes she did not have these traits. She will look for ways to act that reflect generousness, modesty, concern, and empathy instead. An investment in a bamboo toothbrush does not ease such an uncomfortable feeling.

2.2 Does green shame change behaviour for the better?

The second claim one could doubt is whether the consequences of shame really are good. Even if shame does motivate us to change our ways, it is not a given that it actually compels us to change our behaviour *for the better*. The objects of shame have often been the most natural and unproblematic or morally irrelevant human traits. The female period, for instance, or body hair, are to this day the locus of taboo and shame (though periods are more talked about than before, and there are models with hairy armpits who proudly grow their body hair, we still have a long way to go). That we feel shame about our sexual desires, for instance, does not mean it is right for us to suppress or deny them. People, women disproportionately, are often ashamed about having a high number of bed partners, because having a smaller number is (wrongly) connected with values like trust, piety, cleanliness and purity.[iv] People living in poverty often experience shame about their financial status, even if they are victims of intergenerational poverty where there is no link between the actions and capabilities of a person and their financial status (Walker et al 2013). This kind of shame is not a good guide for our behaviour and should be questioned and revised. If shame can be aimed at the wrong objects, shouldn't we be sceptical about its role as a moral indicator?

Nussbaum argues that shame is an unreliable ground for law-making, since shame is typically distorted. Just like disgust is often projected at harmless and non-contagious objects, like the human body or entire human communities, shame is often normatively unreliable too. She argues against one particular kind of shame that is harmful. Primitive shame is the shame we feel because we are limited, dependent and vulnerable beings who are not entirely at ease with this status. We wish to be autonomous and in control, and are ashamed of anything that allows vulnerability to seep through. Specifically, Nussbaum argues, anything that reminds us of our mortality is considered shameful and even disgusting. Our decaying bodies, our excrements, and anything that is reminiscent of our animal nature is the object of deep, but morally unreliable shame stemming from a narcissistic preoccupation with our own completeness and a desire for control (Nussbaum 2004).

People still feel shame about their natural bodies. Women are hushed about their period and trim away their body hair. Masturbation remains a tabooed topic. We feel shame about trying

and failing at our ambitions. All this does not seem productive at all. And yet, sometimes shame can be at the heart of the most important moral revolutions. Anthony Kwame Appiah shows how the adherence to an honour code plays a fundamental role when it comes to making moral revolutions happen (Appiah 2010). Using several historical examples like slavery, duelling, and Chinese foot-binding, Appiah argues that real change did not come about until the general code of honour had changed. For moral revolutions to happen, it is not enough to know that one thing or the other is the right thing to do. The wrong thing to do needs to become the dishonourable thing to do.

In previous moral revolutions, Appiah writes, what happened was this: "what transpired was not so much a change in moral beliefs as a revolution – in which honour was central – in practices. It wasn't the moral arguments that were new; it was the willingness to live by them" (Appiah 2010: 161). This last sentence brings us back to the puzzle about the climate crisis: why is there a dissonance between what people believe should happen, and what people actually do? Why do people keep making these exceptions for themselves? And what will it take to get people to start applying the rules to themselves in the same way they do to others? Appiah argues that it is essential to understand the mechanisms of codes of honour and dishonour, of pride and shame, to change the behaviour of large groups of people. He does not say that the sensitivity to honour is a good thing per se, but it is an inevitable human psychological mechanism, and we may as well use it in service of human achievement.

In these moral revolutions, shame functions as the counterpart of honour. The honour code you adhere to consists of certain standards of goodness. "If you yourself meet the standards, you'll have self-respect; and if you yourself fall short, you will have contempt for yourself, which is shame. If someone doesn't feel shame when they fail (or, at least, when they fail badly) that shows they don't adhere to the code. We say they are shameless," Appiah writes (Appiah 2010: 177). Shame is the emotional testimony that someone adheres to an honour code in theory yet deviates from it in practice. As Appiah emphasizes though, that does not mean this honour code is also a moral code. Some honour codes have historically turned out to stand directly in opposition to morality, think of slavery, or honour killings still happening today.

It is true that shame is often misdirected and should not be trusted at face value. Shame is a bad indicator of moral truth because of its history of taking the 'wrong' objects to be shameful, like menstruation or the healthy sexual appetite of women. But every emotion, or any motivation for that matter, can lead us astray without proper examination. Shame is a reflection of what we believe a person with dignity should (or rather shouldn't) do. But of course, this idea of a dignified life and what constitutes it can take better or worse forms and is open for criticism. The problem here does not lie with shame itself, but with the concept of dignity that precedes it. Shame is merely the mechanism that helps us live up to our concept of a dignified life. But what that life entails is open for revision and critical reflection.

Turning back to green shame then, the question is: is green shame the result of an adherence to an honour code that is morally righteous? What is the concept of a dignified life that brings about green shame? It can be one of two things: either the person who feels green shame thinks caring for the environment is part of what a dignified human should do, or they think a dignified person is regarded well by their peers and living sustainably is a way to do so. That second source of green shame that comes from an external pressure rather than from an internal preoccupation

with the environment seems less noble than the first. But, if it comes to making society greener, we might not care about motivation, as long as those acting from a desire to be well-thought off behave in the exact same ways as those motivated by an idea that living with respect for the planet is part of a dignified life.

To debate about whether sustainability should be part of our concept of a dignified life, we need to discuss with each other and give well-informed arguments as to why we should care about preserving life on this planet, and why this is something we should take as part of what it means to live a dignified life. Such arguments have been convincingly made, from multiple angles: some point at harms for us personally (EC 2019). Others point to the disadvantages for humans in general and argue that we have a global responsibility for matters like distributive justice and consideration for specifically vulnerable groups and future generations (Allison 2017, De-Shalit 1995, Mazor 2010, Nawrotzki 2014). Yet others refer to the inherent value of the environment and of life, human or otherwise (Beckerman and Pasek 2001: 127). Those arguments make a convincing case that living with respect for life and the planet is a good element to include in one's idea of a dignified life.

2.3 Is green shame really the most efficient option?

A third objection one could give concerns the efficiency of shame in bringing about behavioural change. Even if shame can cause behavioural change, and even if it can do so for the better, is this really the most efficient way to bring about the greening of society? The urgent issues of the climate breakdown need to be addressed on a large scale, and having large companies change their ways by implementing quota or norms has a significantly more drastic effect than making individual changes in behaviour. 71% of all greenhouse gasses are emitted by 100 compagnies (Griffin 2017). The most effective way to bring these large-scale polluters to cut back on carbon emission is either to offer them a juridical framework in which they are simply not allowed to get away with their current practices, or to give them economic incentives to do so. Shouldn't we be focused on these policy measures instead of focusing on shame in the individual? *Flygskam* might deter some from flying as often as they would otherwise have. But having governments subsidize train traffic and tax flights would be an immediate incentive for *all* individuals to change their travel choices, whether they care about the environmental reasoning or not.

Besides, focusing on shame in the individual assumes that people have a choice to behave otherwise. But, as is often rightly pointed out, to have these options is a privilege of the relatively well-off. Assuming that everyone has the option to behave otherwise and should be held accountable if they fail to do so, is rightfully called socially unjust and exclusive. *Gilets jaunes* stand opposite to – so the *gilets* argue – middle-class, intellectual circles that have the means and luxury to live sustainably. In some circles, words like *flygskam* are coined to name a prominent feeling, while in other circles, the climate emergency is not even on the radar of concerns, let alone there is a need to name a feeling of shame for acting unsustainably.

It is right to object that great change must be institutional and governmental. But that does not mean we cannot make efforts on the scale of the individual as well, if at least these efforts do not pose debilitating financial or social repercussions for us. For a democratic government to charter laws and regulations focused on climate justice, these implementations need to be carried

widely throughout the population, or even be demanded from (large groups of) the people. The idea that caring about the climate is part of a dignified life, and the shame that goes with that, helps speed up this process of demand. The more people feel uncomfortable with *flygskam*, the louder their voices pressuring the policy makers to take steps concerning these issues will be. The more they will come to the streets to ask for subsidized train traffic. It is up to the government to facilitate the people in the choices they want to make, but the people need to feel the urgency of making a certain choice first. Shame makes these matters urgent.

In Belgium, the shame felt about a blackface figure that traditionally accompanied the local version of Santa Claus led to the widely carried "pete-pact,"[v] in which public companies, schools, and broadcasting networks pledge not to use the blackface caricature anymore. Many Belgian and Dutch adults, including myself, felt the hard pinch of shame for having enjoyed this tradition that made black fellow-citizens uncomfortable and that sustained racist stereotypes. The shame hits especially hard in admitting that many people downplayed and defended the tradition when it first came under fire. The annual protests that are now slowly leading to policy-change are partly fed by these flares of shame for past ignorance and indulgence.

All this being said, why should we turn to shame to achieve this? Would it not be more efficient to focus on positive reinforcement mechanisms, like feelings of pride or accomplishment, the Swedish 'tågskryt', for instance, than the punishing, uncomfortable emotion of shame? Again, such an approach does seem vital as well, and it holds up with regards to external reinforcement or punishment (where *shaming* was shown to be unconstructive). Yet mechanisms of positive reinforcement do not exclude the possible work *feeling shame* can do. On the contrary, the positive and negative mechanisms are both sides of the same coin. And of that coin, I would argue along with other philosophers that the uncomfortable side makes matters more urgent than the comfortable one.[vi] Having a velvet-patted chair in front of us that is kind of hard to reach might not convince us to leave our chair if our current one is actually quite comfortable. But being uncomfortable on our current chair urges us to get up and endeavour to reach the velvet-patted chair, even if it does prove quite a challenge.

Returning to the Belgian Black Pete example, my intuition is that it was not mere guilt that ignited the protests, and guilt would not have caused the same cry for change. Shame about the past ignorance and condonement or even active defence of a racist tradition, rather than mere guilt, made the protests urgent and the demanded repairs drastic. Feeling shame about once having condoned such a tradition means that one takes oneself seriously, as a person who was wrong in the past, and can be held accountable for that. You do not exempt yourself from responsibility, even if individual responsibility is only a small part of the puzzle. It also means that you see improvement possible, and that you engage in a discussion with yourself about how that can be done and what it means to live a good life.

3. Conclusion

Words like *flygskam* can indicate feelings that help us in the pursuit of greening our society. Green shame can be a motivator to change stubborn behaviour, and it can give rise to a public outcry for the large-scale governmental policies that could tackle climate injustice most efficiently. I proposed that we understand shame as a mechanism that polices our sense of dignity. Green shame can be

just this: the uncomfortable inner blush that alarms us when we are crossing certain lines that we have set in the hopes of living a dignified life.

But to advocate for shame is not without danger. Shame has a bad reputation, and for good reasons. Shaming others harms the dignity and integrity of that person. Shame can be paralyzing and detrimental to one's self-conception. Many natural and harmless things have been the object of shame, like 'quirky' bodies, sexual orientation, or loss of material status. But these harms are not inherent to the emotion of shame. They come about because we were worried about the wrong things, or because we forced the shame upon someone else. It then comes down to examining our own concept of a dignified life, and constantly reassess it in discussion with others. If shame springs from a worry about dignity that is well-thought about, if it is an inner blush rather than a tool to use upon others, and if it concerns changes that are within reach and will not pose debilitating financial or social threats to us, shame can help us on our way to make moral revolutions happen. It does so by its effect on individual behaviour, but even more so by making change urgent and thus encouraging people to demand radical action from policymakers and companies, while creating a broad support-base for these changes.

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[ii] This concept of shame is not uncontested. Krista Thomason argues that, instead of the failure to meet an ideal, shame is caused by the tension between one's self-concept and one's identity. When experiencing shame, we feel "overshadowed by some aspect of our identities that we do not necessarily see as part of who we are," Thomason, K. K. (2018) *Naked : the dark side of shame and moral life,* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.. Though I am highly sympathetic to large parts of her view, in the case of green shame, I think some version of the ideal view of shame is recommended. A person experiencing green shame is ashamed precisely because they *realize* that their choices *do* reflect something about who they are, and exactly this is what causes their shame.

[iii] Greenwashing is the name for a marketing strategy that companies use to deceptively spin their image to a more environmental-friendly one than is actually the case.

[iv] In popular media, this topic is often phrased as the 'stud' vs. 'slut' debate. There is some interesting literature about the internalization of these gendered sexual norms Armstrong, H., Armstrong & Seeley (2014) '"Good Girls": Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus.', *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 77(2): 100-22, Fjær, P. S. (2015) '"I'm not one of those girls": Boundary-Work and the Sexual Double Standard in a Liberal Hookup Context.', *Gender and Society,* 29(6): 960-81, Staff, K. (2009) 'The sexual double standard and adolescent peer acceptance', *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 72(2): 143-64.

[v] The "pete pact" was put forward in 2016 by the Flemish-Dutch culture house De Buren. It was signed by several children's television channels and toy stores, and the catholic as well as public school networks, among others, see Decker, M. d. (2016), Vaarwel Zwarte Piet, Leve Roetpiet. *De Standaard*, Mediahuis.

[vi] For an argument made in favor of this point, see for instance Elpidorou, A. (2018) 'The good of boredom', *Philosophical Psychology,* 31(3): 323-51., who argues in favor of the discomforts of boredom specifically, and compares it to pain, which "is a mechanism that both signals the presence of harm and motivates us to change our behavior in order to protect ourselves" (p. 326). Specifically regarding shame, philosophers have often argued in its favor by pointing to its discomfort as an incentive for change, see Morgan, M. L. (2008) *On shame,* New York: Routledge. on shame, or Kristjánsson, K. (2002) *Justifying Emotions: Pride and Jealousy,* London - New York: Routledge., who writes that "shame is as important a warning sign in the moral realm as fever is in the realm of physical health" (p. 114), or Krista Thomason who describes that we can use the painful feelings of shame as "a warning and reminder" Thomason, K. K. (2018) *Naked : the dark side of shame and moral life,* New York, NY: Oxford University Press. p. 1. In popular discourse, it is telling that Al Gore urged viewers of his documentary about the climate crisis to recognize an *inconvenient* truth, see Gore, A.andGuggenheim, D. (2006), An Inconvenient Truth. Paramount Classics p. 96 min., or that Greta Thunberg spoke to the attendants of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January 2019 and told them "I don't want you to be hopeful, I want you to *panic*. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act," Thunberg, G. (2019) *Our House is on Fire,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U72xkMz6Pxk.