

Shame

Shame is a negative emotion directed at oneself, and can range from the child's shallow embarrassment at being parentally reprimanded, to a heavy self-revulsion for having betrayed one's society's code of behavior. (Were one to speculate an example for that heavy kind of shame, the cases of betraying national secrets come to mind—examples of Snowden or Assange, with of course the reservation that their mindsets have probably redesigned a totally other narrative, by which to account for their behavior.) While there is a fine line between genuine shame and childish embarrassment, there should in either case be a resultant ego deflation.

An important historical enrichment, of the above insights into shame, emerges from a further distinction between shame and guilt. This distinction, which has been activated in the discussion of ancient Greek culture, targets the primal sensibilities of ancient 'heroic' age culture. In its heroic period, that of the Homeric epics, the chief Hellenic power drivers were acutely sensitive to matters of honor and dignity, and far more driven by issues of shame than by issues, say, of guilt. Shame belongs to cultures of honor and normative expectation, while guilt belongs to later cultures, in which the demands of conscience have replaced those of reputation and honor.