

“Norms for Guilt and Moral Concepts”

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In my 1990 book “Wise Choices, Apt Feelings”, I considered the sorts of recurrent but varying bargaining situations that would have arisen in the course of human evolution, which would make for the kind of mutually advantageous coordination described by Schelling. The psychic mechanisms that achieved this coordination might include social emotions such as resentment and guilt, and mechanisms for governing these emotions in response to discussion. Language, then, might figure crucially in coordinating emotions and their consequent action tendencies. The states of the individual that are involved in this process I labeled “accepting a norm”; these states are responsive to discussion and govern feelings like guilt and resentment. This, I speculated, might explain such moral judgments as that an action is reprehensible: to make such a judgment is to accept a norm that says to resent the person for the action, or in case one is the agent, to feel guilty over it. This would explain the meanings of moral terms such as “reprehensible”.

The talk will examine some aspects of this account and some worries about it. I proposed that guilt and shame might be separate adaptive syndromes, but there are indications that guilt might not be culturally universal. An alternative to my picture of normative governance of emotions is that we respond to emotions in much the way we respond to visual impressions, as fallible detectors of properties. The talk will explore how the speculative account might most plausibly be revised in light of these worries.