

UNITED WISDOM

Shame Imposed Through Humiliation: Why a Feeling Does Not Establish Guilt

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I-09-N04 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Shame Imposed Through Humiliation: Why a Feeling Does Not Establish Guilt

Epigraph

> *“...in the image of God...”*

Genesis 1:27, King James Version, 1611. A short excerpt. This is a religious foundation for human worth within the biblical creation account, not an experimental explanation of shame.

What this article is about

Imagine a meeting where a manager mocks an employee's mistake. There really was a mistake: a date was confused, an email sent to the wrong address. But the discussion changes quickly. Instead of examining consequences, someone says, “You're always like this”; colleagues remain silent, and the person feels their face grow hot and wants to disappear. Later, it is hard to remember what exactly needs correcting. A broader conclusion remains: if I feel this ashamed, something must be fundamentally wrong with me.

This article concerns the gap between experience and evidence. Shame can accompany wrongdoing, vulnerability, exposure, another person's judgment, or humiliation; its intensity is not a procedure for establishing guilt. We will consider how to separate an action from the way a person is treated, acknowledge real responsibility without agreeing to insult, and why dignity need not first be earned through faultlessness. The task is not to determine a diagnosis, the humiliating person's motive, or who is right from one account. It is more limited: restore a specific subject for consideration, and a person's right to safe conditions for considering it.

I. A feeling reports an experience rather than delivering a verdict

The inner “I feel ashamed” and the external “I am guilty of this action” answer different questions. The first describes a person's experience. The second requires establishing an action, circumstances, a breached obligation, and the degree of responsibility. They may be connected, but the connection does not make the feeling sufficient evidence. Someone can feel intense shame without breaking an agreement, or feel none after causing harm. Moral consideration need not wait for the correct emotional reaction.

This distinction matters especially after public humiliation. In a hypothetical example, someone ridicules your pronunciation of a foreign word. A pronunciation mistake may exist, yet it does not give anyone a right to declare you stupid or inferior. You can clarify the word and

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

acknowledge unacceptable treatment at the same time. Mixing these questions creates a false choice: either I made no mistake at all or the humiliation was deserved. Between them lies the ordinary human possibility of making a mistake while retaining dignity.

The intensity of an experience does not measure the size of a wrongdoing. A person may react to another's gaze, the relationship's importance, the event's unexpectedness, or the presence of witnesses. These are possible explanations to clarify, not a diagnosis. The word itself does not reveal the mechanism of this particular shame. “Why do I feel so bad?” can therefore remain open even when it is already clear that the other person's words were insulting.

The article's first turn is to decline an emotional adjudication of guilt. The feeling need neither be denied nor immediately obeyed. You can say, “This is my experience, and it is difficult. Separately, I need to understand what happened.” That formulation does not make the feeling wrong. It limits its authority: experience deserves attention but does not gain the power to decide alone who owes what to whom.

II. The subject disappears into a judgment of the whole person

Humiliation can often be noticed when a discussion loses its verifiable subject. “The figure in the report is wrong” allows checking a number and correcting a document. “You're useless” does not specify what work is required. Even if the speaker begins with a real mistake, moving to a general judgment of the person changes what is happening. Correction can no longer be completed, because the person's very existence is being offered as the thing to correct.

Imagine an employee asks, “Which line is wrong?” The answer is, “Now you're arguing too?” In this scene, a specific question becomes a new reason for attack. This does not establish the manager's hidden motive, but it reveals an observable conversational rule: clarification is not allowed, and the general verdict remains. Describe that rule rather than guessing a personality type. It can be conveyed to another person without a theory about what was happening in the manager's head.

In close relationships, a similar move may be quieter. “It upset me that you were late” differs from “Nobody could live with you.” The first retains an event and another person's concern; the second becomes a sweeping prediction of unfitness. Words spoken in irritation do not establish a lasting system of abuse. Yet the particular sentence can still be humiliating, and the entire relationship's history need not justify it.

Caution in the other direction matters too. Not every unpleasant criticism is humiliation. Another person may name harm, refuse, express anger, or end cooperation. The distinction concerns manner and subject: what facts are offered, whether clarification is possible, what can be corrected, and whether responsibility for an action or admission of one's worthlessness

is demanded. Respectful wording does not automatically make a grievance correct, and disrespectful wording does not erase facts. Each layer needs its own consideration.

Another criterion is whether the conversation can end. A specific grievance has conditions for a response: clarify the fact, examine the consequence, choose the next step. A verdict on the whole person can continue indefinitely because every response becomes another defect. In a hypothetical scene, an apology is called hypocrisy, silence admission, and clarification insolence. This closed framework does not become fair because no successful answer was found. The impossibility of answering acceptably can itself be noticed.

III. Vulnerability is not wrongdoing

A person may be humiliated for something that is not a moral breach: body, age, accent, illness, need, origin, or a missing skill. “What guilt must I put right?” then accepts the wrong framework from the outset. Skills can be developed, support sought, and accommodations discussed without granting another person the right to turn vulnerability into inferior human status. A difference does not create guilt.

In a hypothetical scene, an adult asks for an unfamiliar program to be explained. The reply is, “Normal people already know.” Asking for information becomes a test of belonging among the “normal.” Such a remark may make someone want to conceal ignorance rather than learn. We do not claim this necessarily happens to everyone. In this example, however, learning changes: first it becomes necessary to find conditions where questions can be asked without punishment for asking.

It is particularly important not to interpret your own reaction as agreement with the judgment. Falling silent, blushing, or finding no answer does not confirm an accusation's truth. These actions report what happened in the moment; they are not a signature beneath someone else's description. Likewise, the absence of tears does not establish the absence of harm. This article proposes no compulsory outward behaviour through which someone must show that dignity survived.

The question of help can be posed without making vulnerability a shameful secret: what information, conditions, accessibility, or support are needed? The answer differs for illness, a language barrier, and a new professional skill. That difference is valuable. The more precise the task, the less space remains for a sweeping verdict. Instead of “I'm impossible to deal with,” specific conditions for interaction appear that can be discussed, checked, and changed if necessary.

IV. Dignity and faultlessness have different foundations

In section II of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant formulates a requirement to treat humanity in oneself and another also as an end, never merely as a means. This philosophical foundation for respect involves rational nature and autonomy. It is not research into why someone blushes, nor permission to diagnose trauma. Its role here is to place a limit on treating a person instrumentally.

If an employee is publicly humiliated to frighten everyone else, they may become a means of managing the group. This is our interpretation of a hypothetical scene, not an established fact about a particular manager. The Kantian question is whether the person retains a place as a subject whose position and capacity to respond need consideration. Correction of a document can be required without using the destruction of dignity to improve discipline. The distinction does not depend on how effective fear proved.

In Genesis 1:26–27, human worth receives a different language: humanity is created in God's image. This text matters to Jewish and Christian traditions; one passage does not represent the full variety of their interpretations. A refusal to reduce a person to their usefulness can be compared with Kant. But belief in creation is not autonomy of practical reason. Their resemblance does not establish one doctrine.

A limited shared consequence matters for our subject: respect should not become a reward issued only after impeccable behaviour. Wrongdoing may require responsibility, restricted access, compensation, or the ending of a relationship. It does not make humiliation an acceptable currency of repayment. Invoking dignity does not remove responsibility; it separates responsibility from a right to treat a person as an object.

These foundations of worth should not be used to argue with one's own body: “If I deserve respect, I mustn't tremble.” Neither a religious image nor a moral argument requires a particular physiological reaction. Respect concerns how someone may be treated, including when they are confused. This boundary of comparison matters especially: a source about dignity does not become an instruction to control every visible sign of experience.

V. Acknowledge the mistake without accepting someone else's verdict

After humiliation, complete denial can seem protective: nothing happened, I did everything right, the grievance was invented. This is understandable as a possible effort to preserve oneself, but it may close access to real facts. In the hypothetical case, the email really went to the wrong address. Correction is needed regardless of how unacceptably you were spoken to. Dignity does not require a story of personal faultlessness.

Two statements can be separated. “I sent the email incorrectly and will clarify the consequences.” “Calling me useless is unrelated to correcting this mistake.” The second does not cancel the first; the first does not confirm the second. In a safe conversation, they can be spoken aloud. In an unsafe one, it may be enough to retain the distinction privately and seek another way of addressing the specific issue. This article does not demand an immediate answer to a powerful person as proof of independence.

Responsibility becomes more concrete when bounded: for which action, which outcome, and within which capacities? Not every consequence was controlled by one person. Instructions may have been unclear, deadlines conflicting, or the process collectively mistaken. This does not automatically transfer all responsibility to the system. It calls for examining its distribution before accepting “You ruined everything.” Specific consideration permits several participants and several causes.

Someone harmed by humiliation may later harm another person too. What they experienced does not create a general exemption from responsibility. If they lash out at a child or colleague, that episode requires separate consideration. Earlier treatment can be acknowledged as cruel without justifying the subsequent act. Such precision is harder than dividing everyone into good and bad, but it preserves dignity without erasing consequences.

VI. Another person's voice does not become true through repetition

A repeated judgment may become familiar. That does not make it correct. After hearing “You ruin everything” many times, a person may encounter the sentence before checking a new case. This article treats that as a possible life scenario, not a universal model of memory. The important logical limit is that repetition alone does not replace evidence about a particular action.

Imagine still expecting exposure after successful work. The old word sounds in your mind. Instead of requiring immediate belief in its opposite, ask what fact the verdict refers to now. Was there a mistaken step, is there an external grievance, and what remains unknown? Sometimes a fact is found. Sometimes only a familiar formulation remains. Both results are more useful than arguing about whether you should already feel confident.

You need not replace “I'm bad” with “I'm wonderful” and repeat the new formula until the feeling disappears. A positive overall verdict can also bypass specificity. A more stable sentence for our reasoning is modest: “This judgment is not established now.” It promises no pleasant experience. It simply stops a familiar voice becoming an automatic assessment of character and restores the right to consider circumstances.

Retaining the sentence's origin helps when known. “That person said this in that conversation” is more accurate than the impersonal “This is true of me.” When the origin is unknown, there is no need to invent a memory or seek a culprit from the article's suggestion. The unknown can remain. Our task is not to reconstruct the experience's entire biography but notice when today's conclusion rests on a judgment with no present subject.

Sometimes the other person's description contains a partly accurate observation: you were late several times. But “several late arrivals” is not “You cannot care for anyone.” The sequence, reasons, and consequences can be checked without accepting the added generalisation. Partial accuracy makes a verdict persuasive but does not automatically extend its scope. The task is not to find only falsehood but separate the established fragment from an unproved overall story.

VII. A witness can restore the subject of the conversation

After public humiliation, another person's presence does not always provide support. They may remain silent, laugh, or fail to understand what happened. This article therefore does not propose treating every witness as safe. A suitable listener can sometimes help distinguish facts: what was said, how the subject changed, whether responding was possible, and what relates to the error or the humiliation. Their role is to consider the episode together, not deliver a final verdict for you.

In a hypothetical scene, you tell a colleague, “Maybe I exaggerated everything.” Instead of simply saying “You're right,” they clarify: “The mistake was named, then they moved to your character; the question about the line wasn't accepted.” This account preserves what was observable without inventing the manager's motive. A practical task can then be considered: whom to inform, what to correct, whether a mediator is needed, and what risks a further conversation contains.

Support should not require details a person does not wish to disclose. You can name one episode or ask for general information without explaining the entire history. If a listener turns the discussion into interrogation, suggests immediate forgiveness, or demands a dramatic break, those conditions may not be suitable. Help retains room for decision. What matters is being able to clarify the account, pause, and disagree with an offered interpretation.

A witness can also be mistaken. Their confidence is no guarantee, especially if they heard only part of the conversation. It helps to mark the limit: saw it directly, heard it from you, or is making an assumption. This is not replacing sympathy with a cold trial. It avoids adding another story to the humiliation that takes over the right to define your life. Precision and warmth can coexist when agreement is not the price of attention.

Sympathy need not require the listener first to declare you entirely innocent of everything. They can acknowledge the difficulty of the treatment and help identify a real mistake. This does not betray support when the distinction is made without insult or pressure. Good conditions allow two facts to be held together. The conversation then does not reproduce a trial where dignity depends on how convincing an account is; it helps clarify the situation and choose a manageable next step.

VIII. When safety matters more than explanation

Where threats and control exist, the task changes. Clarifying the relationship or announcing a precise boundary is not always useful. NHS guidance on domestic abuse includes belittling, blaming the person harmed, isolation, and control among possible signs of emotional abuse. It also emphasises that help can be sought before an emergency. This is official information for the British context, not a diagnosis of every conflict in this article.

If these conditions feel familiar, seeking a safe channel of support may be more useful than proving to the perpetrator that humiliation is unacceptable. Immediate danger calls for local emergency assistance; numbers and availability vary by country. For leaving, NHS recommends prior support and care in disclosing plans. We do not transfer British numbers to international readers. Specific action should be chosen with an appropriate local service and actual risks in mind.

Not every humiliating conversation means this danger exists. Yet the absence of a physical blow does not establish safety. In a hypothetical example, someone knows that objecting will lead to their phone being taken or money withheld. This article does not suggest testing that again for certainty. Information about earlier consequences matters even without a complete explanation of what is happening.

Philosophical reading has a limit here. It may provide language distinguishing dignity from judgment, but it does not supply housing, protection, care, or medical assistance. Severe consequences need the corresponding kind of external support. A reader need not formulate the problem perfectly before having the right to seek help. Nor should they take this article's reflection as proof that coping must be accomplished exclusively through inner work.

IX. Do not turn recovery into another examination

After humiliation, another obligation is easily invented: stop feeling ashamed quickly, answer confidently, never doubt again. The former verdict then changes form. Earlier, “Something is wrong with me” came from someone else's remark; now it comes from the feeling not yet disappearing. This article sets no deadline for an experience to pass. Established innocence and emotional relief need not arise simultaneously.

You may understand that humiliation was unacceptable and still avoid remembering it. You may know a fact accurately and not be ready to speak about it. You may retain a relationship for reasons invisible from outside. None automatically proves agreement to bad treatment. Before judging your next step, consider available resources, risk, and your own decision rather than an image of an ideal person harmed.

In a hypothetical case, someone starts writing facts down, but after two lines it becomes difficult. Stopping, shortening the task, or choosing conversation instead is allowed. This article does not suggest entering the scene again to overcome it. Even a useful clarification method must fit present capacities. If it worsens your condition, continuing is not required to prove the seriousness of your work on yourself.

Forgiveness is a separate question. It is not a compulsory ending to our argument and does not substitute for safety, responsibility, or compensation. Religious and philosophical schools understand it differently; we derive no general command from the epigraph. You can reject revenge, keep distance, and have no conciliatory story yet. The possibility of choosing a relationship to what happened does not become a duty to feel a particular noble emotion.

You also have the right not to make what happened the central subject of all future life. Returning to an ordinary activity, interest, or meeting need not prove the episode was insignificant. Attention to other parts of life is not denial of harm. Conversely, wanting to keep talking about it does not necessarily mean being stuck. This article sets no correct amount of attention; it can be chosen with regard to one's condition, circumstances, and available support.

X. The mistake regains its size

Return to the meeting where we began. A date in a document was confused. Humiliation expanded the error into a question of the person's general fitness. Specific consideration restores its size: which date, which recipient, which consequence, who can help correct it? At the same time, the treatment receives its own name and boundaries. Nothing needs erasing: the mistake, the humiliation, or the difficulty of the experience.

This return is not always possible during the meeting itself. Sometimes leaving the situation, finding a safe listener, or simply giving oneself time is needed first. A person need not defend dignity through one impressive reply. The right to respect does not disappear because they fell silent. Once the immediate response ceases to be an examination, events can be considered later and in parts.

The article's main distinction contains three questions: what do I feel, what did I do, and how was I treated? Answers may intersect, but none replaces the others. Harm caused by you needs recognising. Being humiliated does not become right because you made a mistake. If

the feeling stays strong, it can be considered without becoming evidence for a global accusation.

Dignity here is not a consoling medal. It is a limit on treatment that preserves a person's participation in conversation and their own life. Kant's philosophical argument, the biblical language of creation, and official information on help have different tasks. None fully explains a particular experience. Together, with those boundaries retained, they help keep a simple right open: answer for an actual action without accepting guilt because someone else's humiliation succeeded in causing pain.

“Whose judgment is this?” helps in another way too: it can prevent passing the judgment on as a rule for treating others. If you were taught that lacking a skill invites mockery, you might notice the same beginning in your own conversation with a newcomer. This does not establish that humiliation is inevitably transmitted. It is an available moral choice in a particular scene: correct the subject rather than use another person's confusion as convenient power.

What this means in practice

If it is safe and manageable, choose one small episode without needing to recount the whole history. Separately write or speak three lines: what was said and done, what feeling arose, and what action is being attributed to you. Keep the first line observable; do not determine the other person's motives or overall character yet. If remembering becomes too difficult, stopping is allowed. This is voluntary clarification, not treatment or obligatory reliving.

Then ask what the verifiable grievance consists of. What promise, rule, or interest was breached? Is there a fact that can be confirmed? If a specific mistake is found, consider correction separately from insult. If “You're always like this” remains instead of a subject, there is no need to seek endless proof of your own unfitness. You can record that the general judgment does not explain which action and consequence require consideration.

If you wish, choose suitable support: a safe listener, a clear organisational procedure, a professional, or an appropriate local service. One kind of assistance does not replace every other. In dangerous relationships, do not disclose plans automatically or stage a confrontation to test boundaries. Immediate threat requires available local emergency help. Choosing a safe way to seek assistance matters more than waiting for every doubt to disappear.

The observable result of clarification may be modest: you named a mistake more precisely, stopped mixing it with an overall judgment, or decided not to continue the conversation yet. This is not a promise of relief from shame. The feeling may remain while no longer being the sole judge. Correcting an action, protecting conditions of communication, and leaving the unknown unknown are three different possibilities; none needs proving at the cost of your safety.

If a specific discussion lies ahead, its scope can be chosen beforehand: one mistake and a way to correct it, without a general examination of your character. This boundary does not guarantee the other person's agreement. If the subject changes again, you can notice it and decide whether another participant or channel is needed. Choosing a method does not admit an inability to answer independently.

Key quotation

> *"...in every case as an end withal, never as means only."*

Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, section II; Thomas Kingsmill Abbott's translation, Project Gutenberg no. 5682. An excerpt from the formula of humanity. The argument concerns moral relations to a rational being; it is not used here to blame someone for an involuntary reaction or a severe condition.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Intersection and boundary
Kant's formula of humanity ↔ Genesis 1:27	A person is not reduced to usefulness to another; rational autonomy and belief in creation have different foundations.
Kant's dignity ↔ specific correction	Moral status is not a market price; distinguishing error from humiliation is an editorial application, not a psychological experiment.
NHS support ↔ philosophical respect	Recognition of bad treatment may accompany support; health information does not establish philosophical metaphysics.
Genesis 1:26–27 ↔ vulnerability and guilt	The creation account offers a worldview language of worth; particular moral and social situations need their own consideration.
Kant's end ↔ the right not to tell everything	Considering subjecthood can be compared with voluntary participation; our practice does not follow from the treatise as a universal clinical method.

Sources

• Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, section II, Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, Gutenberg no. 5682. The formula of humanity, its context, and passages on dignity were read. Other positions in the treatise are not turned into mental health recommendations.

• Genesis 1:26–27, King James Version, 1611. The entire specified passage was read; a short epigraph and religious perspective, without claiming to represent every interpretation.

• NHS, *Domestic violence and abuse*, page reviewed 23 June 2026. The substantive page was read: signs, assistance, care when leaving, and helping a friend. British context; international contacts are not invented.

Tags

shame, humiliation, guilt, dignity, responsibility, feeling, evidence, judgment, error, action, vulnerability, subjecthood, criticism, insult, safety, support, witness, voluntary participation, unknown, facts, boundaries, Kant, formula of humanity, autonomy, Genesis, image of God, NHS, emotional abuse, right to seek help, conditions of communication

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki