

Guilt Feelings as an Excuse

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Guilt and social order are inevitably linked together; one is impossible without the other. A social order requires standards and values; any offense, breach, or neglect of accepted social conventions and prescriptions produces guilt. In this sense sin and guilt are synonymous. Sin, however, is applied mainly in the religious approach to the regulation of social behavior as one of many symbols designed to create negative emotional attitudes toward breach of law, order, and convention. Shame, remorse, and regret are the resulting emotions, deliberately evoked by society and its representatives, such as law-makers, priests, courts, educators, and parents, to promote conformity. The threat of punishment is still another device to discourage misbehavior.

While the positive approach of stimulating proper conduct leads to the development of conscience, the negative threat of punishment and ostracism induces the development of fear and a sense of guilt. Every adequately adjusted person has a conscience; he knows what is right and wrong, good and bad, and accepts standard evaluations as correct. Although everyone occasionally acts contrary to his conscience, the average person is uncomfortable in doing so.

Realization of one's guilt does not follow on any particular offense but may arise whenever one does something out of order in any sphere of social living. Since everybody transgresses occasionally, all have the occasion to develop guilt feelings.

Recently, guilt feelings became a focus of scientific, primarily psychiatric, research. Despite intensive preoccupation with guilt feelings, their true significance is still little recognized. Exponents of traditional thought and old-fashioned concepts believe that guilt feelings are necessary to maintain order and proper conduct. They do not realize that the opposite is true, that guilt feelings seem rather to impede social conformity today.

More modern investigators realize that guilt feelings—and the correlated notion of sin—no longer stimulate conformity but express superimposed and ineffective pressure of moral concepts. However, many are inclined to the other extreme in assuming that mere removal of pressure will eliminate such detrimental emotional attitudes, and do not realize that guilt—or sin—will exist as long as social conventions exist, i.e., as long as man lives in a society. Advocates of the past order and those in favor of self-indulgence and license, contribute to great confusion as to the nature, dynamics, and significance of guilt feelings. A clarification of the fundamental issues involved is long overdue.

At the root of the confusion lies a semantic problem. Guilt has little to do with guilt feelings. One may be guilty and not suffer from guilt feelings; conversely, one may feel guilty without being so. We find the same confusion in regard to the correlation of inferiority and inferiority feelings. One is possible without the other, but the extent of one by no means indicates the extent of the other. While guilt is a necessary product of social standards, guilt feelings are not at all necessary for social living. They are merely a product of given cultural conditions in our present society, and can be removed when society permits improved social functioning in each of its members.

Guilt feelings are the expression of a particular social order, one which has prevailed for the last five to six thousand years, based on a human relationship of superiors versus inferiors. This relationship precludes a stable equilibrium, since it is contrary to the "logic of social living" (Alfred Adler). Stable social harmony is possible only among equals; otherwise the inferior one invariably rebels inwardly, and the superior one is obliged to rely on his simple force to keep the other one in line or under control.

The characteristic means for keeping an inferior person or group in place were—and still are—bribe and threat, and reward and punishment. Under these conditions true social adjustment and sincere conformity was and is impossible. Accompanying educational procedure, founded on religious and moral principles, was primarily concerned with development of a conscience to stimulate conformity. Conscience, knowledge of right and wrong, is undoubtedly necessary for proper behavior, but is in itself insufficient to assure it, since it guarantees only a limited, and often superficial, conformity. The prevalence of such time-honored, but inadequate educational procedures may be responsible for the persistent social maladjustment of individuals and groups,

one giving rise to the domestic, national and international frictions and conflicts so characteristic of our civilization, in which even murder is legalized under some conditions.

Since this method of indoctrination, reflecting the unstable structure of the whole society in an autocratic system, fails to induce in its members a willingness to respect social values and demands and to behave in accordance with them, individuals use various means to avoid the moral pressure applied to them. Some refuse altogether to accept social prescriptions; consequently, their consciences remain under-developed. Their utter disregard of moral, ethical, social or legal prescriptions and conventions does not evoke moral pricks or guilt feelings. These are the openly anti-social criminals and psychopathic personalities.

In contrast, the average person has a well developed conscience, which does not prevent him from rebelling against obligations and social demands whenever they conflict with his personal goals, purpose, and interests. We all use innumerable tricks to appease our own consciences or to excuse and rationalize our behavior so that our actions do not contradict our conscience too strongly, thus permitting ourselves to maintain the semblance of good intentions. Children learn to avoid unpleasant consequences for their misdeeds by finding good excuses. This training enables them as adults always to find convincing alibis, to excuse themselves, no longer to their parents, but to their own consciences.

The arrangement of logical and ethical excuses for our actions is characteristic of all of us. It is one of the reasons we cannot see ourselves objectively and feel more or less justified in our behavior regardless of the protest and objections we evoke in our fellow men, the more so the closer our contact or the more discrepant our interests. When our actions become too obviously anti-social and conflict openly with our own good intentions or "better knowledge," we may take refuge in the assumption of being sick and develop symptoms to excuse us in avoiding responsibilities and obligations. Only then do we speak in clinical terms, like psychoneurosis, even though actually the entire psychodynamics on which we operate are neurotic.

A neurotic tendency is characteristic of our entire civilization, although it has never been as obvious and general as today. Our city population especially displays this neurotic tendency to an alarming degree, with its ensuing inability to live happily and harmoniously.

The increase in domestic frictions, the almost "usual" marital troubles, the difficulties parents have with children, tensions within the community, national and international conflicts, all are indisputable proofs of the neurotic maladjustment of our contemporaries. We all know how to behave, but do not act accordingly. The factors generating neurotic behavior in all of us are well known through analysis and therapy of individual cases. They are a sense of inadequacy, a doubt of one's own value with a compensatory effort mainly to consider one's own self-elevation, which restricts our social interest and willingness to cooperate unreservedly.

The unsettled and disturbed human and social relationships of our time are the result of increased competition and rapid changes in social, moral, economic and political conditions, characteristic of the present transitory period between two cultural phases of human society. In the past, we had a social order based on superior-inferior relationships; now we move toward a democratic society based on fundamental human equality. The process of equalization intensifies the conflicts between individuals and between groups, because the inferior one no longer is compelled to accept his inferiority but rebels openly, and the superior one feels his power threatened. Mutual antagonism and suspicion result, increasing the neurotic tendency to seek alibis for ensuing anti-social attitudes and actions.

Guilt feelings play an important role in the symptomatology of many neuroses. While the sense of guilt seems to express a desire to be good and to behave properly, it is used as an effective scheme to defy order and obligation without admitting such defiance openly. Sometimes good intentions are all the neurotic has to maintain an appearance of decency, though he obviously acts against his conscience and common sense, shunning obligations, withdrawing from participation, passively or aggressively upsetting his relationships with others, and limiting his functioning within his social setting. With his guilt feelings he can demonstrate to himself and others his good intentions and high moral standards. Moral enhancement through guilt feelings is a frequent experience in childhood. Whatever the child may have committed, he can make a favorable impression by admitting his guilt, preferably with an ostentatious display of regret and remorse. No misdeed is really so bad when the child can convincingly demonstrate how sorry he feels. Accepting one's own guilt becomes, thereby, a sign of high moral standards. Just as he did as a child, the neurotic may rely

on his guilt feelings as testimony to his high standards to offset his vague realization that he is not functioning properly. His frequently exaggerated moral qualms serve in this way to enhance his own moral comfort. By displaying them to others he can offset any possible accusation of being too little concerned with his obligations and the welfare and needs of others. Through an exhibition of his moral concern with his own shortcomings he may even indicate a certain moral superiority over those who do not stress the moral issue, but simply function adequately. By feeling guilty, he is not only better than his actions would indicate, but even better than those who do not share the high moral standards he expresses in his self-accusations.

Another misleading feature of guilt feelings fitting them into the neurotic pattern, is the ensuing confusion between present and past obligations. While guilt feelings always occur when a person is confronted with *present* conflicts in the face of which he feels inadequate, their content is always a misdeed of the *past*. It is possible to *know* that we are doing wrong right now, but what *bothers* us is always what we did yesterday or before. Any intense concern either with the future or the past disguises an antagonistic attitude toward the actual, present situation. We only use past events or future dangers to justify our unwillingness to function today. Nobody wastes much time in thinking about the past or future if he is engrossed in playing his part today. But if present problems appear too difficult, one can minimize their significance and importance by thinking about possible future dangers, or injustices, calamities and mistakes of the past.

The neurotic feels himself unable, and therefore unwilling to do his duty today; therein lies his guilt. But he is unwilling to recognize his present attitudes and shirking of responsibility, because recognition would prevent him from maintaining his moral integrity. Instead of reconsidering his present antagonistic attitude and anti-social intentions, *which* he could change if he wanted to do so, he refers to some past transgressions that cannot be changed. Such concern with past sins impedes him from functioning adequately in the present. Guilt feelings, consequently, are a clever scheme emphasizing actual or imagined past faulty actions for the purpose of justifying present mistaken attitudes. Anyone suffering from guilt feelings can easily realize that the same feeling of guilt does not prevail all the time. What makes them come and go? If he were willing to look, he could easily recognize that there are always some acute calamities which make him look back

and feel ashamed of himself. It is always a present discouragement seeking proof in the past to justify a feeling of worthlessness or inadequacy.

Guilt feelings must, therefore, be deceptive, by the very nature of their functions. If we were to admit to ourselves their true meanings, they would become useless. Consequently, we should not be surprised to find a great variety of deceptive qualities in the structure of guilt feelings. One is the belief that one is really sorry for what one did, since one sincerely regrets one's actions or behavior. In most cases the fallacy of such an assumption is obvious. Realization of wrongdoing is not at all necessarily associated with deep regret. Everyone recognizes many of his transgressions, without being overly concerned with them. Those who feel sorry for what they have done do not necessarily refrain from misbehaving in the same way again. A person who is sincere in his regret does not develop guilt feelings, but tries to correct and to amend what he has done.

Contrary to the subjective impression, guilt feelings appear only if one is *unwilling* to amend, and is still trying to maintain the assumption of his good intentions. As soon as sincere efforts are made to atone or amend, guilt feelings disappear. Instead of the "feeling of guilt" which prevents constructive action, a new interest in remedial efforts expresses the now "active remorse." As soon as guilt feelings appear, one can be reasonably sure that one has not the slightest intention to improve or amend. A person who "feels guilty" does not believe in himself or his courage to do something about his deficiency.

Guilt feelings, therefore, are not primarily concerned with a misdeed. One does not feel sorry for what he has done, but rather for what must be *endured* right now. One is not concerned with the moral issue being stressed, but with his own prestige and assumed lowered value. Actually one does not feel "guilty" at such moments, but "inferior." One is concerned not with the others, their rights and requirements, but only with himself, his status, prestige, and value. The "misdeed" is only used to reinforce and justify his disbelief in himself, of course without renouncing his good intentions. On the contrary, guilt feelings and good resolutions which express an increase of good intentions belong together. Underneath lies doubt in one's "ability" to carry them out.

Sometimes, we find a semblance of "self-punishment" connected with guilt feelings, a mechanism greatly stressed by many investigators,

which is equally deceptive and fallacious, as are all the other rational aspects of guilt feelings. To understand this mechanism we must recognize first that the sequence "guilt-punishment" is not as definite as we assume. Such assumption is based on an erroneous evaluation of educational, moral, and legal procedures. It is almost "wishful thinking" to assume that punishment can actually "enforce" law. A misdemeanor or transgression is more frequently *not* followed by any punishment or the unpleasant consequences, than we in our self-righteousness are ready to admit.

Punishment, as a sequence of guilt, depends on two restrictive prerequisites: first, the culprit must be caught; and second, there must be somebody superior, stronger, or more forceful to impose the punishment. Despite all the fears we have instilled in children and adults alike for thousands of years, most people think that they can misbehave and get by with it, at least with the majority of their violations of rules and order. This attitude is so prevalent that it can be considered to be normal. There is no reason to assume that the knowledge of having committed a sin or misdeed leads automatically to expectation of punishment, and that punishment absolves the guilt. Only superficially it appears that a child who is punished for a misbehavior or an adult who is sentenced for a crime has paid in full. Actually, the completion of the punishment does not absolve the crime, since the person is not restored to his good social status and does not reassume his previous good relationships. All that punishment eliminates is the immediate threat of an aggression by an offended authority. The "culprit" is not actually concerned with his misdeed, but with the antagonistic and dangerous power confronting him.

This combination of fear and defiance is characteristic of all our present human relationships in a society of superiors and inferiors. A peculiarly vicious circle develops in which sin and violations, which cause fear, are actually caused by fear of the authority opposed and defied by the misdemeanor. Punishment ends one cycle of contested authority and begins a new one. The conflict with authority, order, society, or whatever the symbol of the opposing force may be for the "sinner," continues after one round has been finished by punishment. The subjugated rebel then tries in a new round to see how far he can get by.

This structure of various phases in the fight with a dominant authority is essential for an understanding of the mechanics involved

in the process of punishment. It would be a grave mistake to assume—as many do—that children, or anyone else, want to be punished, notwithstanding the fact that they obviously drive to this point. Closer analysis reveals the purpose of such an apparently paradoxical and nonsensical procedure involving pain and discomfort. Two elements are outstanding in the private logic which these children follow. They are both parts of the contest for power in which such children and their parents are involved. One element is the child's desire to excite his parents, as part of his demonstration of his own power. He is willing to give in only when the defied authority goes to the extreme effort to end the battle.

The second factor is the child's effort "to have it out." He does not particularly cherish the tortures and uncomfortably violent phase of a power contest and wants to bring it to an end. Once he is severely punished, he is satisfied and willing to start all over again. He knows that there are many victories yet in store for him before the final showdown comes again. He knows that in the end he will lose out, since the opposing powers are too strong for him. But, in the meantime, he can retaliate, provoke, and defeat. For any point the parents may score by their punishment there are a hundred points on which the child scores. The same is true for a criminal who disregards the law. He knows that eventually he may be caught. In the meantime, he can score all his victories, and after he is caught—if he ever is—and gets his punishment over with, he can start his cycle again.

This clarification is necessary to understand the mechanism so frequently described in present psychiatric literature as "self-punishment." It is assumed that the guilt feelings lead to a kind of "expiation," particularly since, as these authors maintain, the guilt feeling refers to sexually sinful desires for which the neurotic tries to punish himself. We have found no evidence of such dynamics in our patients. But we do frequently find an obvious effort to provoke unpleasant consequences, an effort which may easily be misconstrued as "seeking punishment."

Actually, the dynamics for such behavior is in line with the interpersonal conflicts just described existing between a child and his domineering and punitive parents, or between a criminal and the law. The patient, involved in a warfare with society, may feel cornered. He then may want "to get it over with" so that no further efforts on his part to solve his problems may be necessary. We can hear such

desires openly expressed by patients who act in such a way, although they are vague as to what they expect will happen after "they get through with it." All they want is to get out of their present predicament, whatever may come of it. It is a declaration of bankruptcy, an acknowledgment of inevitable defeat which they expect anyhow. They are ready to admit they just are no good; now, let others take on responsibility for their lives.

Another factor should not be overlooked: after the opposing force, be it parent, law, or society, has meted out its punishment and inflicted the inevitable humiliation, the child, the criminal—or the neurotic—is more convinced than ever of the correctness of their hostile and punitive attitude and feels more justified in maintaining it.

The guilt feeling is an acknowledgment of his "badness," of the power of society, of the dangerous and precarious position in which the neurotic finds himself. His guilt feelings express his antagonism against the society where he does not expect to find understanding and acceptance. But he does not say so openly, because his conscience and his common sense do not permit him to do so. Thus, he pretends to agree with the authority which he defies. His feeling of guilt indicates merely that he is confronted with an unpleasant situation, with dangers of humiliation, loss of prestige, or unfavorable treatment by others. He may then attribute his predicament, his mistaken evaluation of his social position, to actual or imagined past transgressions. If he is dissatisfied with himself in his present functioning, he may also attribute his deficiency to previously committed sins. It is misleading, therefore, to take his rationalizations at their face value, instead of recognizing the dynamics in his present situation. The neurotic with no confidence in his ability to solve his problems, may develop imaginary guilt feelings to rationalize his failure, and seek an escape into bankruptcy, since his approaches to remedy the situation are inadequate.

SUMMARY

Guilt is unavoidable in a social order, but guilt feelings are not directly related to guilt. They are supposed to preserve conformity, but are mostly used to conceal defiance. The development of guilt feelings depends less on past transgressions than on present antagonistic intentions. They serve mainly as a proof of good intentions. They can be used to gain moral superiority. Their deceptive dynamics make them

fit into the neurotic pattern. They are primarily a neurotic mechanism for maintaining good intentions in contrast to actual anti-social attitudes. They permit a shift of emphasis from the important present situation to the past, thereby providing relief from responsibility for present attitudes. They provoke unpleasant experiences which a discouraged individual anticipates. They prevent constructive action under the disguise of remorse. "The tendency to atonement and remorse betrays often a strongly antagonistic, intractable, and inimical note" (Alfred Adler).