

Guilt Feelings: Masters of Our Fate, or Our Servants?

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Adler summed up his attitude toward guilt feelings in one succinct sentence: "Either do wrong—or feel guilty, but don't do both, for it is too much work!"

If we consider the great importance attached to guilt feelings by some schools of psychology, the above statement is almost an act of impiety. Guilt feelings, for some psychologists, occupy a place similar to that taken by Beelzebub in Holy Writ; they are Princes of Darkness at the root of all Evil. Superficially, it is difficult to see how they can be so easily dismissed by Adler when they loom so large in the cosmology of other psychologists. It would be impossible to understand without considering the role assigned by Adler to emotions in general.

Emotions, contends Adler, are the nervous energy that sparks us. They bear the same relation to our movement that steam has to an engine. Emotions do not *cause* us to do things, in spite of the fact that many people believe so. Adler pointed out that we are ruled by our purposes (whether they be recognized or unrecognized by us). The emotion aids our real purpose—it cannot dictate! Emotion does not have an autonomous life of its own with its own goals; it is our own creation and must follow our ultimate purpose.

A good example of this point may be found in the Army. Each man going into battle feels afraid inside—but he controls his behavior just the same. His interest in the welfare of his country, or his unwillingness to be a slacker is such that he moves toward battle in spite of his emotions of fear. When the purpose to move forward is dominant, resistance is overcome sufficiently to make performance possible.

Another example can be found in learning to dive. At first we stand on the end of the diving board, hesitating, in fear. The moment finally comes when we must dive, in spite of our fear, since our purpose is now fortified by a stronger emotion than fear. And only after we have

learned to perform easily are we free of all fear in diving. Yet it returns again if we move to a higher board and remains until we have again fortified our purpose with the stronger emotion and have learned to dive from the new height.

"Feelings are not reasons," said Adler. Nor did he deify guilt feelings as being any more unique than other emotions. Like all others, they impel but do not compel!

Movement (performance) is all that counts in life; we are not enriched by good intentions. There are only two directions of movement possible in life: "movement toward" or "movement away from" confronting situations. And by the same token, there are but two kinds of emotion to "spark" such movement: emotion that helps us forward, or emotion that helps us to avoid. Guilt feelings are the "steam" we use to place a distance between ourselves and distasteful confronting situations.

The word "use" is a most important word in Adlerian psychology. Adler was not so much interested in what abilities or handicaps a person had as in what *use* was being made of such possessions. Adler considered all movement and emotions of an individual as valuable to that individual. His concern was to discover what use the individual was making of a movement or an emotion.

To understand guilt feelings, then, we must see in what ways such emotions could possibly be useful to an individual and in what situations they can be used by him for his personal gain. Only then can we understand why he creates "feelings of guilt" rather than feelings which would seem to us to be more appropriate and constructive. It is not possible to catalogue all the uses to which guilt feelings can be put, but we may be able to consider the most frequent situations in which they are employed.

"Please don't hit me, dad," is the most general use for guilt feelings. They are a plea for exemption from punishment—if we get caught. Each of us has a "conscience," which is made up of all the commands and prohibitions which were shouted at us before the age of eighteen by those in authority. We found that punishment was associated with a refusal or failure to comply with such imperatives. Such commands, however, often ran contrary to our purposes. In such cases, we frequently did as we pleased, but we attached guilt feelings much as we would a life belt at sea. If we got caught, we could plead our alleged good intentions and hope that the punishment would be lightened.

Most of us learned as children that we must say, "I am sorry," if we committed an act of aggression or omission toward others. If we showed the proper attitude of guilt, our parents' stony hearts softened so that we created an easier situation for ourselves; we were not held responsible for our acts. We found that guilt feelings paid good dividends if we were weighed and found wanting by those in authority. And what we have once found useful, we do not discard lightly while it serves our purpose.

The apology is a form of guilt feeling, or at least, an admission of guilt for an unfulfilled responsibility. These are seldom sincerely expressed or even felt at any depth. For the most part, they are thin disguises for ill will directed against another. We may, for example, apologize for coming late to an appointment when we had no real reason for being late in the first place. We "feel guilty" in preference to being on time. It is a trick for having our own way at the expense of others and still maintaining their tolerance for being exploited.

All other uses of guilt feelings are, in a sense, variations on the above theme. But for the purpose of greater clarity, we shall mention them in more detail. The "conflict between God and Satan" is probably the second most common use of guilt feelings. In this dramatic presentation, the "good side" of an individual appears to be locked in a struggle-to-the-death with his "bad side," while the person himself (poor man!) lies helpless on the ground as Good and Evil battle across his prostrate body! This is what is known as "being conflicted" by some psychologists, and this conflict is often regarded as quite real. The "conflicted person" is considered quite innocent of instigating the fight between these primordial forces.

Adler maintained that such conflicts are arranged by the individual as a kind of "useless busy-work" so that he may disregard a much more relevant responsibility that he intends to escape! As long as he can keep the apparent conflict alive, he is able to hide from himself and others his failure to tackle the more important problem of his life. Guilt feelings are most useful in maintaining such conflicts. The dynamics of such pseudo fighting can be understood in the following illustration.

A young man of twenty-seven complained of a severe conflict between his sexual urges and his high religious ideals. Soon after he got out of college (when it was time to choose an occupation and go to work), he had a "nervous breakdown." Presumably because of this

conflict he had never fully recovered. He was unable to resist his sexual promptings (which were pictured as irresistible) no matter how violently he fought against them. But neither would he condone the infrequent violations of his rigid "moral code." Nothing less than complete continence would satisfy him. He thought of nothing but Sex and Sin so that he could not keep his mind on his job or anything else in the outside world. He refused to give up his standard of absolute continence even though he had no hope of achieving it in this world. Ergo, there was apparently nothing left for him but to keep on trying to stifle sexual impulses which continued to arise and defeat him.

Adler called such compulsions "Side-show Activities" which are arranged to excuse us from performing under the "Main Tent of Community Life." This young man wanted to look only at his side show. We shall understand his reason if we look at the situation he was trying to avoid under the main tent. He had a very comfortable home with his parents who were moderately wealthy. Such money as he earned on his job was his to spend entirely on his own amusement. Even so, he spent more than he earned and was constantly in debt, for he could not deny himself small luxuries that appealed to him. He did not like his job but was not interested in preparing himself for any kind of work that promised an independent future. As long as he could maintain his "nervous breakdown," he could continue to enjoy financial irresponsibility and still live on the fat of the land.

If this boy were obliged to be self-sufficient and live on what he earned, he would have to accept a standard of living far below what he now enjoys. This he will not contemplate. He is jealous of the success of his siblings and the success of former classmates who have trained themselves to contribute more to life. Morality to him means only sexual abstinence; he feels no guilt at all about the way he exploits his family for food, shelter, and other advantages, without giving them anything in return. He feels no guilt about the poor job-performance he gives his employer in return for the salary he spends going to bars and places where he encounters the "temptations" he pretends to abhor. He feels no guilt at all about owing money for luxuries he did not need. By keeping up the pseudo conflict between sex and "morality," he feels quite moral—just because he feels so guilty when he is "immoral." He considers his self-inflicted "high standards" and his efforts to reach them, sufficient contribution to society and he can hide

his eyes from seeing his exploitation of those who benefit him. At the reality level, he is all but useless to himself and others.

From this we can see that guilt feelings (used to keep a conflict going) are a trick for *standing still* before important life problems which we do not intend to solve in any useful manner. If the boy gave up his guilt feelings, he would have to pay his bills, do an honest day's work for his employer and generally be a more useful fellow man. Who can say, then, that guilt feelings do not pay him good dividends?

Another frequent use of guilt feelings is to hide a strong, aggressive, competitive urge in a seemingly passive and compliant person. A woman of average good appearance and intelligence, for example, harbored for many years a deep sense of shame about the physical appearance of her nose. (It was not remarkable in any way.) Because of it, she avoided social gatherings and did not enjoy meeting people. In her opinion, it had spoiled her chances in life. She chose to imagine people rejected her because of her nose. Not once to anyone had she confessed this guilty secret (that shame about her nose stood in the way of her progress). She had reduced social contact for herself and her family to a minimum "because of her nose."

Examination disclosed an ambitious nature that could not rest if she were in the presence of anyone who had something more or better than she could claim. One neighbor had a better-looking husband, one had more money, one had a better house, etc. She was jealous of each and would have "felt equal" to going out socially only if she had the best that each had—but combined in her own person! Faced by anyone, anywhere, who had an advantage, she "felt guilty" about her nose and retreated from the social contact. Her guilt feelings were useful in hiding from herself her own hostile, competitive attitude toward others. These feelings gave her an acceptable excuse to retire from situations which were fraught with painful jealousy. And "feeling guilty" was more acceptable to her ego-ideal than a recognition of her hostile, ambitious nature. When she understood the real meaning and use she had made of her guilt feelings, she gave them up and became more cooperative with those around her.

Deep protestations of guilt can often be used to serve very trivial purposes at times. They can be used to make the individual the center of attention of his environment. When there is a particularly terrible murder in the newspapers, police departments are often bothered by

individuals who "confess" the crime, although they had nothing to do with it at all. Protestations of guilt are frequently used by some to make themselves the center of attention in religious "revivals"; the individual often proclaims himself the "greatest sinner of them all." In such cases, if the person were actually treated as a guilty person, he would quickly relinquish the glory of his position.

Guilt feelings are often used by an individual as a mild deterrent for his own unsocial impulses. We have numerous temptations to do things that would lead us into wasting time, money, or interest. These beset all of us much of the time. Frequently we give in to such temptation but arrange a certain amount of guilt feeling so that we do not enjoy such "irresponsibility" too much; we do not want to follow that path as a way of life. These are the little escapes we all enjoy from the main path of responsibility when we do not intend to shun it as a major strategy. Such escapes with corresponding guilt can be arranged in the areas of work, sex, or association. We may feel, for example, that we should not take a day off work to go to the beach. We do go, however, and enjoy the experience—but not fully. We mobilize guilt feelings throughout the day, so we avoid meeting anyone who knows our employer, and so we are careful not to take back to work a tell-tale sunburn that would proclaim the fact we had not been ill as reported. By reducing the pleasure of the experience, we are less apt to play truant habitually from our responsibility.

Self-condemnation can also be used to emphasize the excellence of one's own achievements. Many individuals who have just completed an excellent bit of work will quickly find fault with some trifling detail. In this way, guilt feelings become a way of hidden boasting! A woman, noted for the cakes she bakes, never fails to apologize for her carelessness with the one being served. "If I had only had sense enough to take it out of the oven a little sooner . . ." The comment is always accompanied by an air of contrite self-debasement.

Some readers may object that the emotion attached to some of the above instances is not the same as in "true guilt feelings." Who can say what is a real guilt feeling? But that is not important with regard to guilt feelings. The point in common to all is that the individual creates them for a purpose in terms of his own psychic economy. If the danger to his position is very great, he responds with much emotion of guilt; if his prestige is only lightly threatened, he uses lip-service guilt feelings.

It is quite unnecessary to differentiate guilt feelings from anxiety feelings, from inferiority feelings, from hostility feelings, or from any other disjunctive feelings. The new discipline known as "general semantics" helps us greatly to understand why this is so. The Semanticists remind us that "the word is not the thing." In order that humans may discuss "reality-phenomena," we have had to invent verbal symbols. Sometimes we come to believe that the symbol and the thing are identical. Semanticists plead with us to go behind the verbal symbol and look at the non-verbal movement of "event"—the process itself. They ask us to adapt our language to the behavior of the nervous system!

But what is the behavior of the nervous system in contrast to the behavior of language? In language it is easy to invent terms such as "guilt feelings," "anxiety feelings," "inferiority feelings," "hostile feelings." And because the language terms are different, we may believe that there is a difference in response *at the level of the nervous system!* It would then be easy for us to believe that guilt feelings are something quite different from hostility feelings. At the language level, we can make our terms behave "as if" they had an independent life of their own and could drive or bend us to their will.

Adler cut through this semantic nonsense with his statement, "Trust only movement; what a person does is what he means." In short, he enjoins us to read only the language of the nervous systems—the movement that is produced.

The nervous system is not a philologist and cannot distinguish nuances of language terms. The body can respond to only two commands: it can advance, or it can retreat. (In this regard we have nothing over the lowly amoeba which cannot even talk.) Any language terms, then, must be converted, at the level of the nervous system, into either "yes" or "no" before movement can be made; we must join or dis-join the environment.

At the level of the nervous system, then, guilt, anxiety, hate, fear, timidity, inferiority, superiority, hostility, snobbishness, nervousness, irritability, pessimism, anger, rage, jealousy, envy, contentiousness, and countless other similar words are reduced to *disjunctive movement*. These are all "NO" words and one is no more pious than another—in kind. There exists only a difference in degree of the rejection that is implicit, or the swiftness of the rejection.

By the same token, our language has many terms such as "love,"

“like,” “admire,” “appreciate,” “enjoy,” “pleasant,” “encouraged,” etc., that reduce themselves at the level of the nervous system to *forward movement*.

In the light of the above, it would not be possible to regard guilt feelings as uniquely dangerous devils that lurk in the hypothetical unconscious waiting to fight the God-in-man while the man bleeds in impotence as the fight is waged. On the contrary, guilt feelings are only one of the many ways in which man can say “No” when he wants to avoid participation in the common life around him. Man is never the victim; he is the creator—even of his guilt feelings. And what we create, we create for a personal profit!

At this point, it would be helpful to mention Adler’s therapy for “guilt feelings.” He approached such feelings in the same way he handled any other protestations of superiority-inferiority. His prime injunction to the therapist was, “Talk about something else.” First, he stopped self-condemnation with his famous dictum, “Either do wrong—or feel guilty, but don’t do both for it is too much work.” Then he began to “talk about something else.” He directed the attention of the individual toward his total relationships with the world of other people.

The individual who is suffering from guilt feelings is intent on proving to himself and others that he *cannot* participate in the common life of mankind as an equal member, and (for our information) *we must not expect him to do so!* If we become impressed by his guilt feelings and try to assuage them at this point, he will catch us in his water-tight logic, along with himself. In that position, we can be of no help to him.

Adler’s aim was to disclose to the individual that his “I cannot cooperate” is a device to hide a deep but silent “I will not cooperate” with others on an equal footing. He maintained that the only way to influence a person is to increase his social awareness by disclosing his “I will not,” in the hope that the individual will be willing to become a better fellow man. Adler called the process “spitting in the soup” or “smirching a clean escutcheon.”

The young man with the moral-versus-sexual conflict mentioned earlier is a good illustration of the point. While he “peeked through a keyhole at life,” he could see morality only as a sexual affair. He felt quite moral about his creditors, his employer, and his father, all of whom he cheated by returning short measure or nothing, in return

for what he got from them. His total behavior had to be projected before his eyes in order to smirch the self-righteousness hidden behind his striving for complete sexual abstinence.

We may well ask whether there is any place in normal life for guilt feelings since all of us experience them so frequently. Like all feelings of inferiority, the answer lies in what use we make of them. How much shall we tip the waiter at the night club? Shall we give him what *we* think he deserves and feel guilty because it is so little? Or shall we give him what we think *he* expects and feel angry because it is too much? Or shall we give him ten percent of the bill and not care whether he is angry or happy about it, or shall we complain about his services at the end of the evening and give him nothing at all—and feel guilty afterward? Each will answer such problems for himself according to his own inner purpose.

An inferiority or infirmity that cannot be compensated must be endured. We should not use it as a basis for demanding special privilege or special exemptions from society; it need not be a basis for feelings of guilt. But if a feeling of guilt exists, we should do something useful as a compensation. As Adler said, there is no value in doing wrong and feeling guilty at the same time.

SUMMARY

Guilt feelings, then, are creations of the individual that serve the personal goal of their creator. They are not things that can be removed as if they were a bullet in the head! The question should not be asked as to their "cause"—we must discover what *use* an individual is making of them. Guilt feelings, like all other emotions, pay dividends to their creator, even though he may not be consciously aware of their value to him. We cannot hope to see them disappear as long as the individual needs to generate such "steam" for the accomplishment of his purpose. We should, rather, be interested in discovering the morbid gains achieved by such feelings and the direction in which the person is moving in life.

All movements and feelings are directed toward achieving security for the individual. We cannot quarrel with the means he develops to arrive at his goal of security; all we can do is to improve his conception of what a legitimate or adequate security goal should be. Exaggerated guilt feelings are not necessary for achieving socially

acceptable goals in life. If then, a person is protesting guilt or feeling guilt in a way that burdens him or those around him, the difficulty lies in the kind of security he is trying to build rather than in the feelings he experiences.

Guilt feelings, therefore, are of no more significance than any other socially disjunctive feelings; all of them place one at a distance from social participation. At the non-verbal level of the nervous system, they all mean "no useful participation." Adler demonstrated that human beings can only solve life problems when they participate freely with their fellow men. Whatever leads one away from equal participation, threatens the security of the individual and his group.

Relief from guilt feelings, then, depends on "talking about something else." We disregard them and discuss the relationships the person is making with his society. If we can interest him in being an equal, useful member of his group, all of his disjunctive feelings will diminish to a point where they will not interfere with his useful contribution to those around him.