

Guilt and Guilt Feelings

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The problem of guilt and guilt feelings cannot be studied outside of the wider range of responsibility and the fundamental question of conscience.

A few definitions might help to clarify the use of the terms.

Guilt is "the fact of having committed a breach of conduct, especially such as violates law and involves a penalty." To be guilty, then, means: (1) "having one's guilt established, justly chargeable with, or responsible for delinquency, crime or sin," and (2) "conscious of, or suffering from guilt." (Webster)

The same authority defines responsibility as a "state or quality of being responsible"; which, in turn, is to be "able to respond or answer for one's conduct and obligations . . ." and in an ethical sense as "having the character of a free moral agent."

These definitions imply that guilt is incurred by committing an act forbidden by laws of society, laws established to protect individuals from actions of their fellow men. These laws represent the more complex and more detailed code securing and protecting the rights of the individual and establishing the limitations of such rights which, in a more primitive and simple form, have been laid down in the Ten Commandments regulating the essential points of behavior between humans. The "character of a free moral agent," immanent in the concept of responsibility, makes the individual answerable for his choice of conduct; if this choice runs counter to the laws of living together, if it is an anti- or a-social choice, the effect of such actions might lead to making the person guilty of "crime, delinquency, or sin."

The question of guilt as such, and seen only from this standpoint, could be relegated to the legal field, as it involves behavior damaging to an individual or to society as a whole. The underlying assumption in pronouncing the individual guilty is that he was consciously doing wrong, in spite of better knowledge. The *dolus*, the intention to do wrong, is necessary to establish the verdict of guilt.

This consideration, however, would have validity only if the deed alone were of interest, not the doer. In the first case the problem of

guilt is a matter of impersonal law. But to do justice to the doer who became guilty, psychical processes have to be evaluated in order to understand the meaning of the deed.

Feelings of guilt as they are so often expressed by individuals are in a category of their own, and it is more than questionable whether they can be detected at all in those who are found guilty of a breach of conduct or, at least, whether they can be considered as effects of the admission that guilt has been incurred as long as the doer does not understand himself and his outlook on life which led to the incriminating action.

Quite in the contrary, these guilt feelings are missing very largely—or even entirely—in those who have “committed a breach of conduct, especially such as violates law and involves a penalty.” They are at worst substituted by attempts of the perpetrator to justify or rationalize his actions as the result of frustrations inflicted upon him by society; at best they are superseded by acceptance of the responsibility for the deed. But no feeling of guilt can develop and, therefore, be expected in any individual who for that time in which he is guilty of “delinquency, crime, or sin” has no inner law of conscience, or only a very poorly developed one, by which he would feel admonished to do good.

The idea that an individual could suffer from a bad conscience or enjoy a good one originates from the lack of understanding of the concept “conscience.” It is “a sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one’s own conduct, intentions, or character, together with a feeling of obligation to do right or to be good. Hence, a faculty, power, or principle conceived to decide as to the moral quality of one’s own thoughts or acts, enjoining what is good.” (Webster)

The interconnectedness of humans necessitates the development of social consciousness, of an awareness of the relation of the single individual to society as a whole. Conscience is the principle that, psychologically speaking, makes the relation positive, constructive in the direction of common sense; morally speaking it is the principle that leads to doing right, resulting in “being good.”

Conscience is the regulating factor in man’s conduct toward his fellow men; it is a faculty *a priori*, enabling the individual to decide as to the “moral quality of one’s own thoughts or acts,” not a power, *a posteriori*, which in itself would be absurd; that the lack of con-

science before committing an act could lead afterwards to a hurt of the same conscience which proved missing in the first place.

"Good" and "bad conscience" are terms wrongly used. Someone might have developed a well functioning or a badly functioning sense of the "moral goodness, or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions or character," or even have omitted to develop any such sense. In the latter case the violation of proper conduct will register only very poorly or not at all, and for this reason feelings of guilt cannot be expected, nor any "bad conscience" of which these guilt feelings would be the expression.

The question of guilt of all mankind, a collective guilt if one might call it so, is raised in the theological dogma of the "original sin;" it makes human beings guilty without any responsibility, as guilt is assumed for a sin not committed by the individuals themselves, a guilt *ab origine*, although this assumption runs counter to the basic problem of guilt: the violation of a law for which violation the individual would be responsible individually.

Guilt feelings on the other hand play a great role in the psychical structure of many individuals, and some schools of thought have even made them one of the motivating forces in the life of the person. Such ideas have reached their mythical climax in the Oedipus complex, although, like "original sin" the person is burdened with sins for which he would not be responsible, as the existence of a "natural" incestuous desire of girls for their fathers, of boys for their mothers is presupposed, which has to be suppressed, and finds its release in almost inevitable neurotic escape mechanisms.

It always seems so strange that the Oedipus legend should have been used for the adoption of the name for a complex involving "bad conscience." In the original legend the hero did not display any conscience, certainly not a bad one, after having committed the crime of killing another man to end an argument with him. Whether this patricide, committed long before he again met his mother and married her (not knowing the identities of either of his victims), can be used—as it is in the Oedipus complex—as a proof that the son desires to do away with his father *in order to* marry his mother, does not stand to discussion here. But it can be safely rejected that Oedipus had any bad conscience at least for the first deed, which he would not have committed had he had a well-functioning conscience at all. His lack of conscience, which made him guilty of a murder for which he was

responsible, makes the validity of his guilt feelings with respect to his marriage more than doubtful, especially as there was no awareness of the family ties.

Guilt is established by moral laws set up by society to assure safety of life and possessions of the individual; the moral censorship of society for the behavior of the single individual is the result of social consciousness, the inherent potentiality of human beings to experience themselves, and to function as individuals within the community of man. Social consciousness represents the "categorical imperative," the striving after achieving of ethical inner laws which only can be accomplished by overcoming the originally absolutely necessary and unavoidable egocentricity of the infant.

Maybe a definite distinction should be made between the terms "egocentricity" and "selfcenteredness" on the one hand; "egotism" and "selfishness" on the other. The very words seem to indicate a difference in dynamics of direction: the one containing the notion that the individual ego is in the center of his own consideration and the rest of the world seen, or desired to be directed toward this center; the value of the ego then originating from the passive acceptance of the effects of social interest on the part of others, of the conscience that the surrounding people would have developed, which would induce them to congregate around this center. The other term allows the assumption that the individual wants his ego to count in this world; it seems to indicate that the ego is making attempts at becoming valuable for someone or something; these attempts would be based on inner law, on conscience, and would contain the responsibility for one's action, in spite of the fallibility of human foresight and insight.

Egocentricity of various degrees, the non- or poorly developed conscience, must lead to breaches of conduct; in some cases to incurring guilt, in others to neurotic and psychotic manifestations in which the individual is unwilling or unprepared to take the responsibility for his actions.

For the individual who wants to make his ego count, the inevitable imperfection of any human endeavor is no deterrent to his striving; but tensions are created, feelings of inadequacy, nervousness. Inner, ethical, and outer moral law, are not in conflict, however, because for this individual, social interest and personal evaluation are an indivisible unit. In this category of cooperative and contributive living, feelings of guilt don't have any place because the knowledge and the

acceptance of one's responsibility prohibit doing wrong on purpose. The individual's conscience, functioning well enough to keep ethical and moral demands in balance, urges him on to improvement and a growing projection of himself into the demands of life.

Where, then, is the place for feelings of guilt? How do they arise, and what do they mean?

Adopting for these considerations the terminology discriminating between egocentricity and egotism, selfcenteredness and selfishness, it seems permissible to search for the conflict between ethical and moral law—the one as the measurement of developed conscience, the other as the field in which conscience is manifesting itself.

Where this development has been very badly neglected no conflict arises, and the individual will become guilty without feeling so, for no feelings of guilt can accompany or follow an action to which the individual feels himself entitled as long as he is caught in the idea that he is the center of the universe. In extreme cases the question of responsibility is not even arbitrary in the individual's mind as this expression of the faculty of conscience is completely rejected if and when the individual succeeds in convincing himself that what would be wrong for others is right for himself.

Where the function of conscience is not quite so poor, a conflict arises between the inner law of the individual and the requirements of living together with others. There is a knowledge of the fact of responsibility—an unformulated and not understood impression that one is not quite a passive recipient of what fate, society, inner or outer forces are meting out; yet the desire to run away from one's responsibility, and push it on to others who ought to make one's position safe, pleasant and easy, blinds the individual with respect to his own doings, and leads to neurotic manifestations, brought about by the existing but not resolved conflict between social interest and egocentricity.

It seems that linguistic confusions make it more difficult for the individual to understand his problems. To be responsible and to have responsibilities often are seen in the relationship of a singular to its plural. But the first is the unavoidable fact originating from conscience put to function, to prove oneself "a free moral agent"; the latter an expression of the obligations the individual takes upon himself in his relation to the outside world by which he can document that character of a free moral agent. While these relationships can be shirked at will

according to the desires, wants and needs of the individual, his responsibility for facing or shirking his responsibilities remains the same.

Responsibility arises in the moment and at the point where a decision is made to do or not to do, and a causal chain started which will bring desired or undesirable effects. The choice of the road to be taken depends upon the good or bad functioning of one's conscience. A good function will prompt the doer to decide on a path leading toward adopting and carrying such responsibilities and obligations toward others as will further common good. A poor function of conscience will seek to avoid such a path, and look for a solution by which others would feel compelled to converge toward the individual in the center. Feelings of guilt, therefore, only can develop in an individual who has a poorly developed conscience, not poorly enough to become guilty, not strong enough to be willing to face responsibility. They are symptoms of a neurotic conflict between social interest and personal evaluation and, like any other neurotic symptom, they allow the individual to retain fictitious self respect without committing himself to actions which would imply risk of failure; without fulfillment of obligations one still could keep an ideal picture of one's own social decency.

"Remorse is indecent," said Nietzsche, because it only serves the one who suffers from it to continue in his ways, and feel "good" in spite of it. A phrase often heard gives insight into the use made of guilt feelings: "I feel so terribly guilty for having done, or omitted, or hurt someone, etc., etc., yet so many others do the same, and don't feel guilty." Such guilt feelings are used as a proof of being better than, and superior to others, but the individual who expresses them mostly is not inclined to go beyond having them, without attempting to do better another time. The unfortunate idea that feelings can take the place of action, and that to profess guilt frees one from the responsibility for the deed, is very prevalent in neurotic individuals who are satisfied with appearing "good," without having to go to the trouble to act rightly.

Guilt feelings are also a means to feel important, to stress the influence of one's self-centered position. Psychotically exaggerated aggressiveness, as in melancholia, shows this purpose of self elevation very clearly: the patient enhances his grandeur by adopting responsibility for anything he did not do, yet never makes mention of any delinquent or criminal act he might be guilty of in reality.

In many cases, too, guilt feelings take the place of actions which

might be committed were the function of conscience poorer yet. Under circumstances for which the individual does not feel responsible, as in dreams, many persons dispose of their enemies, killing them or having them killed by others; phantasies and daydreams, sometimes of extremely cruel character, which leave the person with severe guilt feelings, are to be considered as wish fulfilments, also as warnings to the dreamer not to relax his controls.

Here also belong the guilt feelings of children who dislike a parent—or for that matter, of a parent who dislikes a child—although the object of the dislike might well deserve it; but culture puts “the family” on a pedestal without teaching the members first to be community positive, and culture does not approve of such dislike, and so it has to be suppressed. Most guilt feelings are answers to social requirements and requests which one does not want to accept, but does not dare to reject openly because it might mean loss of love, approval or prestige.

The child who has a bad conscience and feelings of guilt because of masturbation, the drunk who beats his wife and is very contrite when sobered up, the individual with the “uncontrollable temper” who yells and hits, the person who is unfaithful in his friendships or love, all have their guilt feelings, not because of conscience but because of the social setup in which they live. Yet, these guilt feelings alone will not entice them to stop masturbating, or getting drunk, or being hot tempered, or unfaithful; and no threats, punishments or appeals will change the picture unless the conflict within the individual is resolved, and his selfcenteredness changed into cooperation.

No doubt the same problems also arise for individuals with a well-functioning conscience. They too may dislike, drink, have a temper, be unfaithful. If one should add: *once*, it would be untrue as it would almost mean perfection. The fundamental difference between the two groups, however, does not only show in the presence of guilt feelings in the neurotic, and the absence of such feelings in the group of nervous individuals. Not only will a better functioning conscience prevent too bad behavior towards one's fellowmen, but will not allow such attitudes to become prevalent, and will be a challenge to work harder on oneself, to make amends for one's shortcomings, to attempt to do better another time. The road of progressing lies open before the individuals of this group whose conviction of their responsibility helps to overcome and correct the mistakes made without losing self respect and without

retreat behind the screen of appearing good where bad had been done.

The other group, on the contrary, is using guilt feelings like any other neurotic symptom as an excuse, or as an appeal at being approved of in spite of one's actions. The symptom is to take the place of a change in attitude: nothing happens, but face is saved. "Look at me, how contrite I am! No one could be more so, or have a more delicate conscience than I." Greatness by symptom is to supplant adequacy in deed. As Adler put it, the "dung heap" of their asocial attitudes is shoved from one side to another and the individual is kept busy with showing it back and forth, hiding behind it, and enjoying for himself a "good" conscience just because of having a "bad" one. And nothing happens, nothing changes.

Guilt feelings have no value from a psychological point of view, any more than any other neurotic symptom. The repentant sinner is in no way better than the one who does not repent as long as repenting is done in words alone, and not followed by deeds. Both are doing the same: continuing to do wrong with a good conscience.

How deeply embedded in the social pattern are these confused ideas about the values of guilt feelings shows in everyday life. Many a parent insists that the child ask for forgiveness for some misbehavior and feel sorry for it. For the child it does not mean change of attitude, it only makes it feel "good" again. The grownup complaining about another who never professes to feel sorry for what he did, considering this a lack or weakness of character, often misses the point. Both are likely to be satisfied with the expression of contriteness as if it were a sign that the misbehavior had been duly regretted, and the doer were duly remorseful. And they are too inclined to accept an expression of a neurotic style of life as a symbol of social consciousness and a hope for non-repetition.

The person who really regrets what he has done, because of his lack of understanding of himself and the situation, will not be satisfied with a "bad" conscience and feeling of guilt, but he will shoulder the responsibility for his deed and learn from it to do better. He will not hide behind guilt feelings for things past, but attempt to create an improved present.

Only this progress on the road to common sense has value for the individual as well as for society. Only the balance between ethical and moral law gives the individual the possibility to achieve self-fulfilment within society.