

The Psychology of Guilt Feelings

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The study of feelings, including the feeling of guilt, is one of the most difficult tasks in psychology. This is due not only to the highly varied and complex nature of the subject, but also to the fact that it is extremely difficult to achieve complete objectivity in the description and explanation of feelings.

Each individual knows for himself, in a highly subjective way, what "feeling" is. He constantly experiences his feelings, he is influenced and guided by them, they are a permanent part of his Self. From this point of view, "feeling" may be considered as part of the consciousness of the individual. But, here again, we are faced with a difficulty: just what do we mean by "consciousness"?

Consciousness, regarded from a psychological as distinguished from a physiological viewpoint, appears as the sum-total of all our experiences: those from within our own organism, together with those relating to the outside world. This totality of experience increases, widens, and deepens throughout life and constitutes our ego-consciousness or Self. Various body or organ functions (instincts) and mental functions (desires, wishes, thoughts, ideas) become manifest within the ego-consciousness as feelings. What is the origin of these feelings?

Certain of our feelings, such as hunger, thirst or pain, are related to the body, i.e., to specific organ-functions. We also have feelings of being content or dissatisfied, hopeful or frustrated; these may be thought of as "mental feelings" originating in our mind, in our wishes, ideas, etc. We can say, therefore, that feelings are not independent original qualities or experiences, but related to other qualities as functions of the individual.

Thus, feelings are the manifestation of body-functions, i.e., organ-functions (instincts), together with manifestations of our mental functions within our ego-consciousness. Furthermore, they carry a tone or a quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness, which is the fundamental quality of every experience we can call a "feeling." Only through the criterion of "pleasantness" or "unpleasantness" can we identify an

experience as "feeling." Since earliest times feeling has been classified according to polarity as pleasant or unpleasant (painful), positive or negative, acceptable or unacceptable.

Now let us find out what is the real purpose of our feelings. Since all our functions—the organic-instinctive as well as the mental functions—serve the purpose of adaptation and preservation of Self and the race, our feeling must serve the same purpose. The quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness is especially important as a safeguard within our organization to secure a better and more conscious adaptation and preservation of Self and race. Our feelings will inform us quickly and strongly about disorder and disharmony within our instinctive and mental organization, and stimulate us to correct the disorder and disharmony as effectively as possible.

Kurt Schneider was probably the first to classify feelings into two groups:

- 1) the vital or bodily feelings,
- 2) the mental feelings.

Following Schneider's classification, the writer would suggest the following amplification, in accordance with genetic-dynamic principles:

1) *Vital or Bodily Feelings:*

- a) *pleasant:* comfortable, satisfied, refreshed, rested, strong, etc.
- b) *unpleasant:* uncomfortable, hungry, thirsty, tired, weak, painful, etc.

2) *Mental Feelings:*

I—*Reactive feelings:*

- a) *pleasant:* cheerful, happy, gay, satisfied, contented, elated, etc.
- b) *unpleasant:* sad, unhappy, moody, depressed, disappointed, frustrated, anxious, fearful, worried, angry, jealous, etc.

II—*Orientative feelings:*

1) *orienting towards Self:*

- a) *pleasant:* self-confident, vain, proud, superior, etc.
- b) *unpleasant:* insecure, inadequate, inferior, ashamed, guilty, etc.

2) *orienting towards others:*

- a) *pleasant:* friendly, kind, affectionate, respectful, loving, etc.
- b) *unpleasant:* resentful, hostile, distrusting, hateful, etc.

Sensory perceptions such as smelling, seeing, hearing, etc. are not true feelings unless they carry the fundamental character of pleasant-

ness or unpleasantness. Consequently we will not discuss them further.

We can now examine the "feeling of guilt." The feeling of being guilty, condemnable, reprehensible, blameworthy, is an orientative feeling towards Self. We must think about our Self, evaluate our thoughts, our desires, our wishes, or our actions in order to arrive at an orientative conclusion. We must have been wrong in order to feel guilty.

Man knows what is right and what is wrong. His Self, the total of his instinctive and acquired experiences, is responsible for his adaptation toward life, whether good or bad. Man always knows more or less consciously when he is wrong, when he has failed, when he has sinned against himself, against the laws of nature or the laws of society.

Guilt is therefore the knowledge of our failing, of our wrongdoing. Too often has this guilt-feeling been connected with sex and libido, as if it were related to instinct. Guilt-feeling is a mental feeling, it is a manifestation of our total orientation towards Self; towards that Self which is responsible for all of our wants, desires, strivings, thoughts, ideas and actions. Man's thoughts and acts can not always be right or reasonable, mature or useful. He fails, he neglects, he weakens, he stumbles, he becomes selfish, he blunders; he errs and sins against the different laws.

Guilt-feeling is the alarm signal when we fail, when the harmony is disturbed. Guilt arouses and alarms the whole personality profoundly. It serves to initiate action leading to the correction of the faults or the wrong-doings. Guilt-feeling regulates, brings Man back to his equilibrium within himself and within society. Guilt-feeling is the reminder to Man of his responsibilities to do better, to make good, to adjust, and to fulfill his destiny.

It is not Life that is concerned with guilt or with punishment. Life always will be concerned with readjustment, with correction, improvement, with amending and with harmony. The ultimate significance of the feeling of guilt is that it serves to restore the individual to this harmony.

But what is going on within the human being who carries the guilt like a cross, who cannot forget, who cannot forgive himself, who cannot carry on any longer, who cannot enjoy life any more, who feels like an outcast and who punishes himself again and again?

He is the creature who has not learned to adjust, to adapt. He is the one who never really has been a part of this world, who did not know and understand his fellow men. He is the one who was different

because he wanted to be different: wanted to be better, bigger, more sensitive; wanted to be perfect, superior, and infallible. Like all others, he too must fail, stumble, fall, make mistakes, sin against the laws. But unlike others, he cannot understand himself being so weak, so humanly weak as we all are. He cannot take it, he cannot admit to himself that he has failed.

There are so many others who thought they never could make a mistake, who never expected to fail, who never wanted to be like the rest of us, human, weak, trying and erring, forgetful, neglectful, thoughtless and failing—but trying again and again. They have not learned that this is our lot, our task, our responsibility. If they fail they feel lost, disgraced, dishonored, and defeated.

With such a feeling of guilt, the individual cannot carry on any longer, he cannot enjoy life any more, he cannot think clearly, cannot concentrate or work efficiently; the guilt becomes more and more paralyzing, and may finally break him down. There would still be a chance for him to do better, to make good, but his guilt-feeling holds him back, prevents him from doing so.

From a psycho-dynamic viewpoint the neurotic feeling of guilt is a manifestation of a man's painful or unpleasant memories, of those desires, thoughts, ideas or actions which he realizes as being wrong, as being harmful to himself or to others. In its complexity it often carries a strong amount of fear of consequences, a fear of punishment and very often symptoms and manifestations of self-punishment. Furthermore, through the feeling of guilt, the person who has been so righteous and so big before, continues to experience in his smallness and martyrdom the satisfaction of being different, of being better in paying a price others would not pay. Besides he can gain sympathy, leniency, forgiveness. As long as he suffers, as long as he remains in the guilt-situation, he is protected from the possibility of failing and sinning again, and finally he will be excused from responsibility, from making good, from starting all over again.

We must recognize, therefore, that the feeling of guilt enables the individual to be excused from his responsibilities and to retreat. While Life is concerned with adaptation, with making good, the neurotic person is not so much concerned with his guilt, as he is subconsciously—as we can say—much more concerned with the use of his guilt-feeling for the purpose of retreat.

There are many causes, many experiences responsible for the feeling of guilt. These include not only legally recognized crime but also, and more often, wrong-doing against ourselves and against others. This wrong-doing may be any act against others which impairs their welfare, their security or safety, their future, their reputation and honor.

There are many varieties of guilt-feelings; consequently each person has to be observed and studied in his own individuality. We must see and understand clearly how a person performs, how he responds, how he acts after he has failed.

In regard to therapy, our sympathy is not enough. We have to help the suffering person to see what he is doing, how he is behaving. We must help him to understand that it is not the guilt-feeling, but that it is his retreat from the obligation to adapt to Life which makes him suffer and makes him neurotic. He must learn that he is as human and as fallible as we all are. Then he can be shown that there is always another way out, a way to do better, to make good. It is not his failing that is the "sin," but rather his unwillingness to try again and his preference for carrying the sense of guilt.

The complete study of guilt-feeling must include investigation of factors responsible for its absence in certain individuals. The absence of guilt-feeling has important implications for disorders within our social structure. Such a study is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. To sum up:

- a) Feelings are experiences within the ego-consciousness.
- b) Feelings are never independent qualities, they stem from somewhere, are bound up with something, are the manifestations of our instinctive and mental functions, mirrored in the ego-consciousness.
- c) Pleasantness or unpleasantness is the fundamental quality of feelings.
- d) Feelings serve the same purpose of adaptation and preservation of Self and race as thinking and willing.
- e) Guilt-feeling is a mental feeling, orientative towards Self and stems from our realization of wrong in regard to wants, desires, strivings, thoughts, ideas or actions, and serves the purpose of correction, of betterment.
- f) The neurotic guilt-feeling serves to excuse the individual from struggling, from correction, and is a retreat.