

These Feelings of Guilt

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"Guilt" was a leading topic of the International Conference on Medical Psychotherapy which met in London in August, 1948. M. Angelo Hesnard, M.D., in treating in some detail the subject "*Genèse de la Culpabilité*," mentioned Adler's conception. (1)

According to Hesnard, Adler considers guilt feelings, like other neurotic reactions, as being produced by the inferiority feeling which is a consequence of a difficult and painful childhood. The power instinct leads the neurotic to play the hero of suffering; to accuse, to humiliate, and to punish himself.

Let us contrast the Parisian psychiatrist's summary with what Adler himself said on guilt feelings (*The Neurotic Constitution*, (2) Part II, ch. 3), as follows:

(i) Abstract guilt feeling is an anticipatory exaggeration of the conscience.

(ii) Conscience is an intermediate guiding fiction in our striving to compensate inferiority feelings.

(iii) This intermediate guiding fiction is established by the striving for self-protection (*Leberungstreben*) without the understanding of which one cannot solve humanity's old enigma of guilt feelings.

(iv) The striving for self-protection softens the individual's direct aggressive lines towards godlikeness, for

(v) The personality ideal of greatness and power comes in danger, when the community is absolutely disregarded. So our conscience and our guilt feelings influence all our preparations and our actions themselves, in such a way that neither our will to dominate or to shine, nor our self respect are weakened. One can also say:

(vi) The guilt feeling, as a counterpart of the original inferiority feeling, represents the compensation of a feeling of insecurity, expressed in a moral manner.

Applied to a given individual, these Adlerian theses mean:

(a) Guilt feeling is a neurotic's attempt to admit his moral obligation so that he is relieved of the necessity for acting on the "useful side of life." Nietzsche had guessed this when he declared: "*Gewissensbisse sind unanständig.*"*

(b) Guilt feeling gives the neurotic an easy "superiority" on account of his insight into moral relations, which he believes to be clearer than that of others.

In the years preceding the above mentioned Conference, guilt had been a primary subject for discussion amongst psychoanalysts, and some authors have suggested modifications of Freud's original teaching. We do not know if this has contributed toward bringing about a growing awareness among people of their personal responsibility for all the very real horrors that have been and are committed around us, and toward making people more active in changing this world of wars.

Since the Adlerian system of reference—Man: social life—is realistic and rational, we cannot usefully argue with theologians who declare that "to discuss guilt without religion would be like Hamlet without the ghost—or perhaps the ghost without Hamlet." Nor with psychoanalysts who say with Freud that guilt feeling has a general sexual origin and goes back to the primitive human tendency of masochism. Nor with those who hold that inner guilt is conditioned by a desexualization of the Oedipus complex, brought about by the super ego, or who think that its formation, in conjunction with that of the primitive super ego, is contemporary not with the phallic, but with the sadic-anal phase; or that its auto-punitive function is destined to protect the individual against the risk of outside punishments (cf. Hesnard's paper) (1). But when a Dutch psychiatrist defines guilt as a "non-satisfaction, a deficiency in the value-realization aimed at," (3) we might reasonably point out that this concept of guilt is synonymous with Adler's notion of inferiority.

Many observations, a few of which will be outlined, have confirmed the writer in his conviction that Adler's conception of guilt feelings, untouched by varying fashions in psychology, is the most profound of all. It is as useful as it is scientific, when we wish to understand, to teach, and to change beings whose guilt feelings are neurotically exaggerated, or absent when we should expect them. A socially justified feeling of guilt would be *responsibility*, which would tend to

*English translation: "Qualms of conscience are indecent."

become a striving for social compensation, and would finally bring about the constitution of a unified humanity.

The following cases may illustrate Adler's concept of guilt:

Case 1. N.N., when about twenty years old, was working as a bank clerk at the same time that he was reading for a degree. During this period he acted as agent between a friend who wanted to sell a motor bicycle and a colleague who wished to buy one. He received a commission from both sides. Shortly afterwards, the new owner of the vehicle had a traffic accident and both he and the accompanying friend were injured, whereupon N.N. had strong feelings of guilt. Ten years later, an individual analysis revealed the following meaning of this guilt feeling:

N.N. had not only resented his inferior position as a bank clerk, but he was also aware of being inferior in comparison with those colleagues who were able to make money by speculation in stock exchange values. He obtained a strong compensatory feeling of superiority by earning an exceptional (or double) commission. To boast of this fact would surely have been in agreement with his vanity, but not with his placated hatred of capitalistic money-making. So when he could tell the motor bicycle story and especially his feeling of guilt for the subsequent accident, he meant to get a supplementary admiration for his ever so keen moral sense. Of course there was neither guilt nor real moral superiority in him. In speaking abundantly about his guilt feelings he could gain only a very private and fictitious superiority, useless for anybody else.

Understanding thus with Adler a subjective feeling of guilt in relation to the total dynamism of a unique individual, we see no reason for exaggerating its importance or for seeing in it something mysterious.

Case 2. Considering an example from world literature, we shall also easily understand Schiller's Don Carlos. (4) This prince felt guilty of having murdered his mother who had died at his birth! This phantasy, which he tells his friend Posa with much self pity, makes sense when we see the guiding line of this person, leading to the goal of strange uniqueness, and the aim which brought him to a complete failure of his existence.

It happens from time to time that people come to the police and declare themselves guilty of a crime, the real author of which has not

yet been discovered. We cannot say much about the quality of their subjective feeling of guilt; we can say, however, that such behavior is an easy means for a discouraged, unimportant person, to stand at least temporarily in the limelight of public attention.

Case 3. X.X., seventeen years old, with a psychiatric diagnosis of "schizophrenic with multiple obsessions," has an I.Q. of 121, reads much but, on account of his isolation, his extreme slowness and his lack of practical attitudes, is a nuisance to nearly everybody at the special boarding school which has accepted him. He had been treated for less than three months, when his counsellor left for a short holiday. The day after his return, X.X. came to see the counsellor at an unusual hour, reporting that he was very much worried, so that he could not do the housework assigned to him. Hesitatingly, he related that he feared having committed a sin, for he had sharpened his pencil with a used razor blade, which is forbidden by a school rule. This confession of guilt may mean in particular that having been away for ten days the counsellor had now better quickly start again to care for him. In general, it is the classical case of guilt feelings being used as an alibi for not doing useful work and for getting a feeling of imaginary moral superiority—other boys who break this rule do not care a straw!

X.X. is the eldest of seven children and has been very much discouraged by his father, who preferred the girls born after him. (He has wished to be a girl himself!) Considered as inferior, he gave up training himself in socially valuable activity which might have given him a real superiority; rather, he escaped into a world of mere words and dreams, where he feels great.

All his obsessions with accompanying guilt feelings are non-understood but "useful" artifices to get away from social obligations. For some time it was a kind of barking; then, hesitations in movement and speech, worries about sin, eating soap, and drinking quantities of hot water from the bath. (He pretends to be hungry continually and is chronically constipated, which, understood as an "organ-dialect," tells us of his general derangement of the take-and-give process.)

In the course of his analysis, these errors had been explained to him many times, so that when the boy came with his latest worries about sin, the counsellor could risk laughing, explaining that "the sinner" had found a new, clever trick to avoid sweeping the stairs, and concluding, "Now laugh that whim away yourself and get on with

the job!" X.X. did go to work, if not smilingly, at least without hesitation.

In the next analytical session the counsellor asked him about his earliest recollections of having met with sin. He gave these three instances:

When about nine, he had unwittingly touched the Host during Holy Communion at church. The priest had declared this to be a great sin and the teachers of his school scolded him.

When four or five, he had soiled his trousers and his mother showed them to him afterwards, reproachingly.

When about nine, a nun teacher had taught him about sin, listing temper as such.

The boy has by now perfectly understood his error and has accepted the suggestion that "sin," a religious term, translated into the scientific language used in the counselling, is a-social or anti-social behavior. A few days after this interview, he wrote an allegory, in which Egoism fought against Altruism, who was nearly killed. Then Courage came, saying something in Altruism's ear, whereupon Altruism succeeded in killing Egoism. Altruism married Modesty and they had two children: Self Content and Cheerfulness.

It would seem that in many cases, the selection of guilt feelings for a neurotic symptom is due to religious suggestions.

Looking beyond the subjectivity of the individual, which should never be considered without his social embeddedness, it may be found that guilt is an important objective fact in a society which declares, rightly or wrongly, certain acts as criminal or as transgressing a moral code. Hence certain persons, guided by a neurotic personality-ideal, may declare themselves guilty without being so objectively, while others may commit what is an offense or a crime according to the established law or moral, without having the least feeling of guilt. Did any of the executed Nazi leaders really feel guilty before mankind? On the other hand, Goethe expressed in his *Faust* that "*Es erben sich Gesetz und Rechte eine ewige Krankheit fort . . . Verstand wird Unsinn, Wohltat Plage.*"*

And elsewhere he said to the "good Society":

*English translation: "Law and Rights are continued as an external disease. . . . Reason becomes Nonsense, Charity a plague."

*"Ihr lasst den Armen schuldig werden,
Dann überlasst Ihr ihn der Pein . . ."**

These problems and their educational consequences have been carefully studied since as far back as 1925, when Erwin Wexberg edited the *Handbuch der Individual Psychologie*. (5) To illustrate:

Case 4. N.N. (see Case 1, p. 34) remembers that when he was about seven, an older cousin who lived in another town had come on a visit and N.N.'s father paid more attention to the nephew than he usually did to his son. One evening as the father played with the visitor at the table of the sitting room, N.N., who had already been asked to go to bed, was still standing by their side, tense, and with his soul full of envy and pain for being neglected. He had the thin lid of a wooden play box in his hand, and this suddenly broke into two parts. Little N.N. blushed and tried to hide the lid as long as possible. However, the father noticed it soon and asked: "Who has broken the lid?" Young N.N. answered, "I do not know!" The father repeated the question and the son persisted that he did not know. The father then called the son a liar and gave him a thrashing, which was interrupted by the repeated question already mentioned and by the unchanged answer.

At thirty, N.N. could not remember if finally he had admitted breaking the lid and being a liar—but was he guilty as the adult interpreted it? The educationally shortsighted father had put the unprepared boy into such a position of inferiority that the latter could not compensate usefully; so, with his whole body under strain, his hand got tense and broke the lid.

As an adult, N.N., who often remembered this scene (it was one of the two times when his father had beaten him), had developed amongst other neurotic symptoms, fanaticism for truth, and compulsion-blushing. He felt greatly relieved when the memory was discussed analytically with him, and he came to like Romain Rolland's formulation: "Love truth more than yourself, but love your neighbor more than truth."

In 1919, Adler published a little-known pamphlet on the guilt of people for war. (6) This is a very delicate question. There is guilt,

*English translation: "You permit the poor to become guilty, and then you leave him to his pains."

because, and when, there is selfish activity against fellow men. Punishment is inadequate as a means to meet it. Guilt may be considered as the error of a discouraged individual. When his error and its origin are explained to him, he will be encouraged to work for the community of all men. This is the most radical cure and prophylaxis for neurotically exaggerated guilt feelings as well as for their pathological absence.

The more all social institutions are permeated with these principles, the better it will be for the individual and the society.

REFERENCES

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- (2) Alfred Adler, *The Neurotic Constitution*.
- (3) E. Krijgers-Jansen, "Collective Guilt," paper read at the above conference, August 13, 1948.
- (4) Paul Plottke, "*Individualpsychologische Betrachtung von Schillers Don Carlos*," *Revue de la Société des Etudes Germaniques, Paris, avril-juin, 1947, et pass.*
- (5) Erwin Wexberg, *Handbuch der Individualpsychologie, München* 1926, especially: Otto Naegele, "*Jugendlicher und Justiz*"; Eugen Schmidt, "*Verbrecher und Strafe*."
- (6) Alfred Adler, "*Die andere Seite, eine massenpsychologische studie über die Schuld des Volkes*," Wien, 1919.