

## ***Guilt***

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### *Abstract*

Guilt entails the idea of a *debt* one is obliged to *repay*. Legal or metaphysical guilt and psychological or experiential guilt need not correspond. One can *be* guilty but not *feel* it; one can *feel* it, but not *be* it. Guilt may be conscious or unconscious. Two fundamentally different types of guilt, persecutory and reparative, are distinguished. The former may defend against the latter. A range of additional types are identified: justified and unjustified; borrowed; defensive; existential; induced; and collective.

Defined legally, guilt is the state of having violated a law; defined morally, it is the state of having transgressed a moral norm. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (Second Essay, “Guilt, Bad Conscience, and Related Matters”), Nietzsche (1887) writes: “Have these genealogists of morality up to now allowed themselves to dream, even remotely, that, for instance, that major moral principle ‘guilt’ [*Schuld*] derived its origin from the very materialistic idea ‘debt’ [*Schulden*]? Or that punishment developed as a *repayment* ... ?” Former prisoners who have completed their sentences are said to have “paid their debt” to society.

Legal or metaphysical guilt and psychological or experiential guilt need not correspond. It is not rare for people judged to *be* guilty not to *feel* guilty. And sometimes people *feel* guilty though no one (other than themselves, on some level of consciousness) has so judged them. There is no necessary coincidence between legal or moral guilt and psychological guilt. Such

discrepancies may arise from varying circumstances. For example, I have been judged guilty, but I believe myself to be innocent and therefore do not feel guilty. Alternatively, I have been judged guilty, but I believe the laws or moral norms that have been applied are invalid or unjust. Commonly, psychopathic people are thought to have no capacity to feel guilt, but I have argued (Carveth, 2007) they are merely skilled in the arts of silencing their conscience.

Sometimes I may judge myself guilty and feel guilty even though no one else has so judged me. This may be due to my feeling that the laws or norms by which others judge me are too lax, or because they are not aware of my sins or crimes. When people feel guilty despite being unaware of having committed any crimes or sins, psychoanalysts posit the operation of an unconscious judge (the Freudian superego) that is aware of the real or imagined transgressions and is punishing them with guilt (Freud, 1923, 1930).

Sometimes people are conscious of feeling guilt but unaware of its grounds. At other times, they are unaware that they are feeling guilty, feeling something else instead. Freud (1930) writes, “it is very conceivable that the sense of guilt ... is not perceived as such ... and remains to a large extent unconscious, or appears as a sort of *malaise*, a dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations” (pp. 135-136). Here Freud introduces us to the idea of the *guilt-substitute* (Carveth, 2006, p. 179). From a psychoanalytic perspective, unconscious guilt may take the form of a wide range of such substitutes: anxiety states, hysterical and psychosomatic symptoms, depression, masochism, patterns of self-defeat and self-harm, and

so on—conditions that, on the surface, often appear to have nothing whatever to do with issues of morality and guilt (Carveth & Carveth, 2004).

Regrettably, as I have argued (Carveth, 2006), “Freud ... equates the unconscious need for punishment expressed in patterns of self-torment and self-sabotage ... with an *unconscious* sense of guilt, which operates in people's lives without any accompanying *consciousness* of guilt” (p. 178). By equating guilt and self-punishment, Freud misses the opportunity to discriminate the two fundamentally different types of guilt that were subsequently distinguished by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1948) and her followers: namely, *persecutory guilt* on the one hand, and *depressive* or *reparative* guilt on the other (Grinberg, 1964). If I injure someone and while he bleeds I self-flagellate, that is useless persecutory guilt; but if I put down my cat-o’-nine-tails and get busy bandaging, that is *reparative* guilt. It is commonly heard today that guilt is a useless and harmful emotion that we should get rid of. But that applies only to persecutory guilt which is utterly narcissistic, self-involved, and irrelevant to the needs of the injured party. In reparative guilt we manage to get our minds off ourselves long enough to take note of the needs of the injured other and to make reparation.

Shame and self-torment are narcissistic states, asocial, even at times anti-social; whereas reparative guilt is prosocial. Because of his failure to discriminate the two types of guilt, when Freud (1930) regretted the growing burden of guilt imposed on humanity by civilization, he had only persecutory guilt in mind. Consequently, he was unable to see that while society certainly needs less persecutory guilt, it needs much more reparative guilt. Furthermore, his failure to distinguish the two types prevented him

from recognizing how persecutory guilt (self-punishment) serves as a defense against or an evasion of the depressive guilt leading to reparation. People seem to prefer to indulge for years in orgies of self-punishment (brought about in a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle ways) rather than consciously own up to their faults, wrongdoings, sins and crimes, confess, and repent through genuine contrition and reparation.

As much psychopathology is grounded in unconscious guilt and self-punishment, the path of contrition is the way to mental and spiritual health. Although over a century and a half ago, this was understood by Kierkegaard (1849), it is still a truth rejected by mainstream psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis which have been and still are committed to the demoralization and medicalization of emotional disturbance. Though many of those who recognized the root of mental suffering in sin were, like Kierkegaard, religious, there is no need for religion in order to re-moralize mental suffering by understanding and coming to grips psychotherapeutically with its origins in guilt. For today it is widely understood that ethics require no religious foundation. We do not need god in order to know right from wrong. At the heart of emotional suffering is guilt stemming not merely from wrongful acts, but also from antisocial wishes and emotions of hate, envy, greed and lust. When repressed such guilt generates the torments of the damned. When it becomes conscious it can be worked through in such a way that through repentance and reparation mental peace and well-being can ultimately be restored.

While reparative guilt leading to reparation is conscious, the self-punishment resulting from refusal to acknowledge guilt may be no more consciously

recognized as such than its grounds. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Carveth, 2010), in addition to the distinction between persecutory and reparative, and conscious and unconscious, there are many different types of guilt. Since value judgment lies outside the means-end calculations that are the province of rationality, one cannot properly speak of rational or irrational moral judgment or guilt, we need instead to distinguish guilt that is justified or valid from the standpoint of mature conscience from guilt inflicted by the superego that may not be justified at all in this sense.

Only by being brought to consciousness can guilt be critically evaluated and found to be justified or unjustified. A patient for years unconsciously punished herself for her sister's death. On becoming conscious of this she realized she was not responsible for the death, but only for wishing it and being both gratified and devastated by it. Therapeutic reality-testing can be applied to guilt when it becomes conscious. Some guilt is entirely justified, some is not.

Some guilt is not properly one's own, but is "borrowed" from another (Freud, 1923, p. 50, fn.) who, as Fernando (2000) explains, is usually a narcissistic parent who contrives to have a child carry the burden of guilt the parent refuses to bear. Some guilt is entirely defensive: the unloved child protects against seeing the defectiveness of the unloving parents by seeing itself as unlovable. In survival guilt I feel, more or less unconsciously, that my survival is a crime against those who died, simply because a part of me is glad it was them and not me, or perhaps I had harbored death wishes toward them, or perhaps to survive I did things I'm not proud of.

Kierkegaard (1849) drew our attention to an unavoidable type of *existential* guilt: if I fail to actualize my potentials and grow as a human being I fail myself; but if I change and develop I may grow “beyond” others to whom I am attached and I may even have to leave them behind. Because my duties toward myself and toward others may conflict, I may find myself faced with a Catch-22 in which I encounter guilt no matter what I do.

Nietzsche (1887) taught us about induced guilt: in direct battle with the strong the weak will lose, but if they create an ethic in which strength is evil (“the meek shall inherit the earth”), the strong will fall on their own swords. The “will to power of the weak” is expressed through guilt induction. Sometimes people suffering from unconscious guilt use the defense Melanie Klein (1946) called projective identification to induce their unbearable guilt in others (as in the case of borrowed guilt).

Karl Jaspers (1947), among others, taught us about collective guilt. Above and beyond the guilt due to our personal wrongdoings and failures of responsibility is that arising from the misdeeds of our communities and nations. I believe that we in the West suffer from a kind of free-floating guilt, more or less unconscious, that we tend to attribute to our failings as individuals, but that really arises from the fact that our relative affluence rests on the unconscionable exploitation of the poor, both at home and abroad.

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See also Kaufmann, W. (1967) (Ed. & trans.). *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Vintage, pp. 62-3. I find Kaufman's translation less felicitous than the *etext* version prepared by Ian Johnston.