Self-Punishment as Guilt Evasion: Theoretical Issues[1]

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Whereas Freud commonly associates guilt with the self-directed aggression of the punitive superego and invariably equates unconscious guilt with the unconscious need for punishment expressed in patterns of self-torment and self-sabotage, Klein views guilt as what Winnicott called "the capacity for concern," the depressive anxiety that our hate may damage or destroy the good object and self. Without calling into question Freud's equation of unconscious guilt with the unconscious need for punishment, writers in the Kleinian tradition have addressed the ways in which self-torment, rather than being a manifestation of guilt, serves as a defence against it. As a guilt-substitute, the unconscious need for punishment should not be conflated with the guilt it evades. As depressive anxiety or concern for the object, guilt is a manifestation of attachment and love (Eros) and motivates the desire to make reparation. In contrast, the unconscious need for punishment involves the persecutory anxiety and shame characterizing the paranoid-schizoid position and is a manifestation of narcissism and hate (Thanatos). The discontent Freud links with civilization is not a manifestation of guilt but of the self-torment resulting from its evasion. The enlarged capacity to experience and bear guilt (i.e., to love and thereby have conscience) that is a mark of civilization reflects the healing, not the deepening, of our cultural malaise.

1. Presented to the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society, September 13, 2006, this paper is a much revised and expanded version of a paper entitled "The Unconscious Need for Punishment: Expression or Evasion of the Sense of Guilt?" first presented at an International Symposium on Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, September 1999) and subsequently published in *Psychoanalytic Studies*, *3*(1), 9–21.

Alors que Freud associe généralement la culpabilité à l'agression d'un surmoi punitif dirigée contre le moi, et assimile invariablement la culpabilité inconsciente à un besoin inconscient de punition qui s'exprime dans des tendances à l'autoflagellation et à l'autosabotage, Klein considère la culpabilité comme ce que Winnicott a appelé « la capacité de s'inquiéter », ou l'anxiété dépressive provoquée par la crainte que notre haine n'endommage ou ne détruise le bon objet et le moi. Sans remettre en question le concept freudien, les auteurs de tradition kleinienne se sont penchés sur diverses manières d'interpréter l'autoflagellation non comme une manifestation de la culpabilité, mais plutôt comme un mécanisme de défense contre celle-ci. Le besoin inconscient de punition, en tant que substitut à la culpabilité, ne doit pas être confondu avec la culpabilité même à laquelle il tente de soustraire le moi. En tant qu'anxiété dépressive ou inquiétude envers l'objet, la culpabilité est une manifestation d'attachement et d'amour (Eros), qui motive le désir de réparation. En revanche, le besoin inconscient de punition renvoie à l'anxiété persécutrice et la honte sous-jacentes à la position paranoïde-schizoïde, et constitue une manifestation de narcissisme et de haine (Thanatos). Le malaise que Freud associe à la civilisation n'est pas une manifestation de culpabilité, mais l'autoflagellation qu'entraîne la fuite devant cette culpabilité. La capacité plus large de vivre et de tolérer la culpabilité (à savoir, d'aimer et par conséquent d'avoir conscience d'exister) est une marque de civilisation qui tend vers la guérison plutôt que vers l'aggravation de notre malaise culturel.

> In the end we come to see that we are dealing with what may be called a "moral" factor . . . which is finding its satisfaction in the illness and refuses to give up the punishment of suffering . . . But as far as the patient is concerned this sense of guilt is dumb; it does not tell him he is guilty; he does not feel guilty, he feels ill.
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> — Sigmund Freud

> A person will spend his whole life writhing in the clutches of the superficial, psychological symptoms of guilt unless he learns to speak its true language.
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> —James Carroll

In the final section (vii) of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930) states that the primary intention of this work is "to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt" (p. 134).

According to Freud, "men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked," but are, on the contrary, "creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness . . . *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?" (p. 111). It follows that if a Hobbesian "war of each against all" in which life is, of necessity, "nasty, brutish and short" is to give way to civilized order, such "cruel aggressiveness," this "primary mutual hostility of human beings" (p. 112), must in some way or another be inhibited.[2]

Freud offers us three options by which this may be achieved: repression, suppression, and sublimation. Since most of us do not possess the strength of character for conscious suppression and self-mastery without self-deception, and lack the talent for much sublimation, the majority will be forced to fall back on repression, with the disguised return of the repressed that this choice inevitably entails. A major manifestation of the disguised return of our repressed aggressiveness is in the operations of the punitive superego that retroflects id aggression away from the object world against the ego. This results in diverse forms of self-punishment, the "moral masochism" Freud (1916) described in "the criminal from a sense of guilt," "those wrecked by success," and other self-sabotaging and self-tormenting character-types.

Freud (1916, 1920, 1923, 1924, 1930) equates the unconscious need for punishment expressed in patterns of self-torment and self-sabotage that result from retroflected aggression with an *unconscious* sense of guilt, which operates in people's lives without any accompanying *consciousness* of guilt. Freud (1930) points out that even where, as in some cases of obsessional neurosis, "the sense of guilt makes itself noisily heard in consciousness . . . in most other cases and forms of neurosis it remains completely unconscious, without on that account producing any less important effects" (p. 135).

2. As to whether such hostility is innate or acquired, I have elsewhere (Carveth 1996) advocated an existentialist position that, while acknowledging the influence of both nature and nurture, views aggression as irreducible to either factor or even to their combination. The frustration arising from the birth of a sibling can generate hostility causing intense guilt or guilt-evading self-punishment, yet such hostility can hardly be viewed as a simple drive (however biologically based the aggressive *reaction* to frustration may be), or attributed to environmental failure, although parental behaviour can either mitigate or intensify it.

When the sense of guilt "makes itself noisily heard in consciousness," it often turns out that the ostensible sins of omission or commission with which it is consciously linked bear only the remotest connection to the true, unconscious sources of the guilt feeling—the true crimes, if you will, whether these be acts or merely wishes and phantasies. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923) writes,

> In certain forms of obsessional neurosis the sense of guilt is over-noisy but cannot justify itself to the ego. Consequently the patient's ego rebels against the imputation of guilt and seeks the physician's support in repudiating it. It would be folly to acquiesce in this, for to do so would have no effect. Analysis eventually shows that the super-ego is being influenced by processes that have remained unknown to the ego. It is possible to discover the repressed impulses which are really at the bottom of the sense of guilt. Thus in this case the super-ego knew more than the ego about the unconscious id. (p. 51)

In pointing out that such over-noisy self-reproach often bears little relation to its true unconscious sources, Freud comes close to recognizing the *defensive* nature of such self-reproach, disconnected as it is from its unconscious grounds. He nevertheless continues to consider such self-reproach as guilt, as distinct from a defence against it.

Freud (1930) writes, "Our patients do not believe us when we attribute an 'unconscious sense of guilt' to them" (p. 135). But this does not deter him. "In order to make ourselves at all intelligible to them, we tell them of an unconscious need for punishment, in which the sense of guilt finds expression" (p. 135). The self-damaging or self-tormenting behaviours are observable, and although at first patients may be unconscious of the role they themselves are playing in bringing such suffering on themselves, they can often come to recognize their own unconscious agency in their misfortune when it is pointed out to them. Since Freud assumes that self-punishing behaviour is driven by and a manifestation of guilt, and since conscious guilt is absent, he postulates the existence of unconscious guilt, equating this with the unconscious need for punishment.

Just as the sense of guilt (which Freud most commonly views as fear of the superego) may not be conscious in the moral masochist, so "it is very conceivable," Freud (1930) writes, "that the sense of guilt produced by civilization is not perceived as such either, 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 we are introduced to the important concept of the *guilt-substitute*. Just as the unconscious

operations of the punitive superego (which Freud equates with unconscious guilt) may find expression in the patterns of self-punishment seen in manifold forms of masochism, so they may appear in various forms of *malaise*, dissatisfactions, discontents, and mysterious neurotic afflictions, many of which appear to have little or nothing to do with issues of crime and punishment, but may nevertheless be the work of the unconscious punitive superego.[3]

In *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, Freud (1924) writes,

> Patients do not easily believe us when we tell them about the unconscious sense of guilt. They know well enough by what torments—the pangs of conscience—a conscious sense of guilt, a consciousness of guilt, expresses itself, and they therefore cannot admit that they could harbour exactly analogous impulses in themselves without being in the least aware of them. We may, I think, to some extent meet their objection if we give up the term "unconscious sense of guilt," which is in any case psychologically incorrect, and speak instead of a "need for punishment," which covers the observed state of affairs just as aptly. (p. 166)

In the same essay, writing of the "negative therapeutic reaction," Freud places the adjective *unconscious* in quotation marks in referring to "patients to whom . . . we are obliged to ascribe an 'unconscious' sense of guilt'" (p. 166). He does so because he views as problematic the notion that a feeling or affect, as distinct from its associated ideation, could be unconscious. Only a few years later, in *Civilization*, Freud (1930) is struggling with the same issue. He associates the unconscious sense of guilt with fear of the superego and refers to it as an "unconscious anxiety" and continues, "or, if we want to have a clearer psychological conscience, since anxiety is in the first instance simply a feeling, of possibilities of anxiety" (p. 135). Strachey feels compelled to add a footnote here: "Feelings cannot properly be described as 'unconscious'" (p. 135).

3. Here I would include the states of fragmentation and depletion of the self that Kohut (1971, 1978) described in the "self disorders" of the "Tragic Man" that he claimed has replaced the "Guilty Man" of the Freudian era, as well as the range of "hystero-paranoid" syndromes (Carveth & Hantman Carveth, 2003; Showalter, 1997) that, although widely conceptualized in terms of defect, deficit, failures of mentalization, etc., resulting from parental or "selfobject" failure, are nevertheless experienced as *tormenting* by those who suffer from them and, like more obvious forms of self-punishment, function as substitutes for, and defences against, guilt. In this view, the tragedy of "Tragic Man" has less to do with deficits in psychic structure per se, than with the latent ongoing self-annihilation, the manifest traces of which appear as defects in the ego or the structure of the self.

Freud's uneasiness about his concept of unconscious guilt had to do with the question of whether an affect could properly be said to be unconscious, not with his equation of unconscious guilt with the unconscious need for punishment. Today the idea of defences against affects is widely accepted (Modell, 1971; Westen, 1999; Wurmser, 2000). *In the present essay I am not concerned with the question of whether the sense of guilt may be unconscious (I believe it can be), but rather with the misleading equation of guilt, conscious or unconscious, with the need for punishment.*[4] Although Freud suggests that we could "give up the term 'unconscious sense of guilt,' which is in any case psychologically incorrect, and speak instead of a 'need for punishment'" (p. 166), he in fact does not do so. Instead, he continues to use these terms and concepts interchangeably, with the consequence that the role of self-punishment in the evasion of guilt, rather than as an expression of it, has been obscured.[5]

In attempting to distinguish the concept of the unconscious need for punishment from the concept of guilt, I am in no way seeking to cast doubt upon Freud's important discovery of the role of the former in psychopathology. I am merely seeking to draw attention to the fact that equating the need for punishment with guilt obscures the defensive function of self-torment (whatever additional functions it may perform) in the *evasion* of guilt. Freud (1924) writes,

> The satisfaction of this unconscious sense of guilt is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject's (usually composite) gain from illness—in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering entailed by neuroses is

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4. Conceived as depressive anxiety or concern, the cognitive dimension of guilt is more evident than when guilt is conflated with the unconscious need for punishment. Whether it is better to conceive of unconscious guilt as concern that is repressed, or as concern that is prevented from coming to be by defences against cognitive appraisals that would generate it (Erdelyi 1985), is an open question. But if the defence against guilt, or against recognition of circumstances meriting it, is at all extended, this indicates the anticipation that guilt will prove to be unbearable and, hence, the beginning of a regression in which the superego resorts to self-punishment as a substitute for and a defence against guilt.

5. Although in principle it should be possible to punish oneself and simultaneously make reparation to the other, there seems to be a tendency, as described in Freud's (1914) U-tube theory, to invest in either narcissism or object love, to attend to the wounded other or allow him to bleed while self-flagellating instead of bandaging. Perhaps this is another instance of the question of whether paranoid-schizoid and depressive dynamics can operate simultaneously or necessarily oscillate.

> precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend. It is instructive, too, to find, contrary to all theory and expectation, that a neurosis which has defied every therapeutic effort may vanish if the subject becomes involved in the misery of an unhappy marriage, or loses all his money, or develops a dangerous organic disease. In such instances one form of suffering has been replaced by another; and we see that all that mattered was that it should be possible to maintain a certain amount of suffering. (p. 166)

All that matters is the subject's need to suffer; there is no concern for the suffering of the object. This is masochism and narcissism, not guilt.

Although, in theory, Klein (1935/1975a, 1940/1975b, 1948/1975d) follows Freud in his association of guilt with self-punishment, her actual descriptions of the depressive position (Klein 1946/1975c, 1948/1975d) reflect a different conception of guilt as the subject's depressive *anxiety* that his or her hate may have damaged or destroyed the good object (and/or the good self), leading to efforts at reparation. Here guilt is conceived not as self-directed hate, the punitive superego, but as what Winnicott (1963/1965) called "the capacity for concern."

While the theme of regression from the depressive to the paranoid-schizoid position, resulting in persecutory rather than depressive anxiety, has long been a prominent one in the Kleinian literature, more recent writers in this tradition (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999; Eskelinen De Folch, 1988; Safa-Gerard, 1998) have emphasized the ways in which self-punishment or expiation serves as a defence against unbearable guilt—but, notably, without challenging Freud's equation of guilt and self-punishment. Similarly, affirming Grinberg's (1964) distinction between "depressive guilt" (concern on the level of the depressive position) and "persecutory guilt" (self-torment in the paranoid-schizoid position), they refrain from challenging his continuing characterization of the latter as guilt, despite their demonstrations of how self-punishment and persecutory anxiety defend *against* depressive guilt or concern.

Conscience and guilt involve the depressive anxiety and the capacity for concern for the object characterizing the depressive position and motivating the desire to make reparation; they are manifestations of attachment and love (Eros). The unconscious need for punishment reflects the narcissism, shame, and persecutory anxiety of the paranoid-schizoid position; it is a manifestation of aggression and hate (Thanatos). As a *guilt-substitute*, the unconscious need for punishment should not be

conflated with the guilt it evades. Far from representing genuine guilt, concern, and the drive toward reparation, such self-persecution results from fixation in or regression to paranoid-schizoid dynamics: it represents an inability to bear and a defence against depressive anxiety and, therefore, should not be referred to as guilt at all.[6]

In an insightful paper addressing both clinically and theoretically the issue of defences against unbearable guilt, Safa-Gerard (1998) points out that whereas Freud saw fear of the superego as motivating an unconscious need for punishment as expiation, "within the Kleinian framework guilt is a 'marker' of development signaling a capacity for concern for the object" that "typically initiates reparative efforts toward the external as well as the internal object" (p. 352). But because she associates such concern with *conscious* guilt, she conceives of defences against such concern as resulting in *unconscious* guilt: "The person may attempt to restore the object or manically defend against an acknowledgement of his or her attacks on it. When guilt is short-circuited in this defensive way, it remains unconscious and has various consequences" (p. 352). But short-circuited guilt (concern) is not replaced by unconscious guilt (concern)—at least not for long—for unconscious guilt (concern) either becomes conscious and leads to reparation, or it is regressively replaced by the unconscious need for punishment. In other words, object relating (guilt as concern for the object) is replaced by narcissism (shame, self-torment, and self-punishment); and love (conscience, concern, and guilt) is replaced by hate (the attacking superego, moral masochism, hatred turned against the self). Certainly the need for punishment results from the superego appraisal of wrongdoing. But such superego judgment is not itself guilt (concern). It will result either in guilt (concern), conscious or unconscious, or, if such guilt (concern) is found unbearable and evaded, superego judgment will result in an unconscious need for punishment. Safa-Gerard's detailed clinical discussion of the case of David confirms this point. He continually attempts to "cure" himself of guilt, but her "interpretations of the patient's defenses against the experience of guilt provide an *anchor* that prevents or delays a shift back to the paranoid-schizoid position where guilt seems to turn into persecution" (p. 375).

6. When the project of emancipation from the sadistic superego through instinctual liberation is confused with liberation from guilt, as it was by much of the so-called Freudian Left (Robinson, 1969), the inevitable result is some combination of infantile idealism, narcissistic self-indulgence, and ultimate destructiveness, as in the case of the youth counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Safa-Gerard writes,

> How we understand guilt's unbearability will determine the stance we take with our patients, and each stance has its own pitfalls. If we believe that guilt results from an unrealistically harsh superego, our aim will be to help the patient free himself or herself from this excessively demanding superego. An analyst who, in an attempt to help free the patient from excessive guilt, interprets the patient's expressions of guilt as being *merely* the result of the patient's harsh superego, is bypassing an opportunity to help the patient experience guilt, restore his or her objects, and thus replace the internal damaged object with a reconstituted one. An interpretation based on this notion can exacerbate the patient's manic defenses against depressive anxiety and lead to a "flight into health." On the other hand, if we believe that guilt is a necessary response to an awareness of the individual's own destructiveness, our goal will be to help the patient bear the guilt so that reparation for the fantasized or real attacks on his or her objects can take place. (p. 352)

Although Safa-Gerard's point is in the main a valid one, she employs the term *unbearable guilt* to refer both to genuine guilt (concern) found to be unbearable, and the painful, self-punitive superego attacks that are its defensive substitutes.

Those who seek to soothe the patient's superego—to "de-guilt" patients by suggesting they have nothing to feel guilty about—fail to realize that what they are dealing with is usually not guilt at all, but only the pseudo-guilt of self-torment. In addition, they fail to recognize that self-torment always has its real or imagined unconscious grounds that must be brought to consciousness and worked through. Although Freud conflated self-torment with guilt, far from repudiating or negating patients' self-reproaches, he sought to help them recognize the wishes, phantasies, beliefs, and actions that underlay them. In Freudian psychoanalysis and its Kleinian development, far from soothing the psyche or the self and dismissing self-reproach as unfounded, the analyst seeks to make conscious its unconscious, real or imagined, grounds.

Sometimes the apparent unconscious grounds for self-reproach are irrational—such as my patient's phantasy that she had caused the drowning of her sister. But even when the omnipotent phantasy was analytically dispelled and the patient recognized that, in reality, she had nothing to do with her sister's death, the fact that she had *wished* it remained. Until she became able to bear the guilt for her hatred and envy of her sister, she continued to suffer from a wide range of inhibitions, symptoms, and anxieties. Only after she was finally able to recover her love for her

sister and replace the pseudo-guilt of unconscious self-punishment with genuine guilt was she able to free herself from her pathological identification with her dead sibling. In repairing and restoring her damaged internal object, she was able, through identification, to begin to repair and restore herself.[7]

There is little doubt that the unconscious need for punishment and the unconscious operations of the punitive superego occupy a central place in psychopathology. Where an unconscious need for punishment exists, the unconscious superego clearly regards the subject as culpable and, hence, as deserving of punishment. But to refer to this unconscious superego judgment and the self-punitive activity that results from it as guilt, rather than guilt-evading self-torment, obscures the fact that it generally forecloses the experience of depressive anxiety or concern for the object and the resulting drive to make reparation. When Freud (1924) refers to the "torments—the pangs of conscience" by which "a conscious sense of guilt, a consciousness of guilt, expresses itself" (p. 166), one must question whether such pangs represent authentic guilt or the self-torment that so often defends against it. Experiencing the pangs of conscience either initiates reparative efforts that tend to reduce self-torment by restoring some positive self-esteem, or leads to chronic, conscious or unconscious, self-punishment. In my view, bearing guilt does not mean suffering perpetual pangs, but acknowledging and seeking insofar as possible to repair the damage done, in this way restoring one's good objects and one's self-esteem, yet living in the awareness of the badness that inevitably accompanies one's goodness. Quoting Anna Freud's (1936) view that "true morality begins when the internalized criticism, now embodied in the standard exacted by the superego, coincides with the ego's perception of it's own fault" (p. 119), Arlow (1982) writes, "It takes very little to remind us how difficult it is to perceive, much less to acknowledge, one's own fault" (p. 233).

To view the unconscious superego activity resulting in self-punishment as guilt is to blur the crucial difference between the *subject's* self-

7. I am in no way implying my patient's envious hatred of her sister was "primary" or a pure product of a death instinct or an aggressive drive. Her father always transferred his affection to the youngest child. Having enjoyed this position for five years (at the expense of her two older brothers), my patient was displaced by her sister, who drowned three years later.

torment and the capacity for concern for the *object*. Unconscious self-punitive activity is narcissistic. Authentic guilt moves beyond narcissism toward object love. It only leads to theoretical confusion when we employ the same term to refer to such different realities as the narcissistic, paranoid-schizoid phenomena of self-torment and shame on the one hand, and the object-oriented, depressive-position phenomena of guilt and concern on the other. I see no valid reason to confine the concept of the superego to the former and to refer to the latter by some other name, such as conscience or the ego-ideal; the distinction between the archaic, paranoid-schizoid superego (or superego precursors) fuelled by hatred expressed in self-attack, and the mature, depressive-position superego fuelled by object love, guilt, and concern is sufficient to cover the facts. *What needs more attention, however, are the ways in which archaic superego function (self-punishment) defends against mature superego function (guilt, repentance, and reparation).* It is as if in the face of real or imagined transgression (sins of commission or omission) the subject must suffer mental pain: if the depressive position is unattainable and guilt unbearable, there appears to be no alternative to regression to schizo-paranoid self-torment.

Part of our difficulty here arises from an ambiguity contained in the single word *guilt*, which can refer both to the ontological state of *being* or being judged to *be* guilty, and the psychological or experiential state of *feeling* guilty. Someone who does not *feel* guilty may be judged by his own or another's superego to *be* guilty; sometimes someone judged to *be* guilty also *feels* guilty; occasionally someone who *feels* guilty turns out not to *be* guilty (though, more often, while not guilty of the charges of which she accuses herself, she turns out to be quite guilty of other crimes that are the real but hidden source of the guilt feeling). Hence, when we encounter the term *unconscious guilt* we cannot, apart from context and often not even then, determine whether what is being referred to is a state of *being* guilty of which the subject is unaware, or a state of *feeling* guilty of which the subject is unconscious.

Unlike Freud and Strachey, I do not find the notion of unconscious or repressed feelings or affects, such as guilt, problematic. One may *be* guilty but unconscious of the fact that one's superego considers one so. One may *be* guilty and *feel* guilty but remain unconscious of the fact that one has such feelings of guilt. But frequently, instead of coming to consciously or unconsciously *feel* guilty (whether such guilt is justified or not is another matter), the subject often unconsciously seeks pun-

ishment. Such self-punishment, I submit, usually serves as a defence against the process of coming to feel genuine guilt, even unconsciously. Ironically, one of the best defences against genuine guilt (concern) is the mobilization of painful "guilt" feelings, the pseudo-guilt in which *pangs* of "conscience" replace *acts* of conscience—that is, acts of reparation as distinct from orgies of self-tormenting, pseudo-guilt feeling. Painful pangs of conscience will either lead to constructive reparative activity or be revealed as the self-tormenting pseudo-guilt that substitutes for genuine concern. I am defining guilt in terms of its consequences. By its fruits you shall know it. If it results in reparation toward the object, it is guilt. If it results in self-torment, it is not.

PATIENT: I feel *terrible*! I feel *so guilty* about what I said to X the other day!

ANALYST: You're feeling awful, I understand, but is there more to it?

PATIENT: Like what?

ANALYST: Well, do you have a plan for dealing with it?

PATIENT: Well . . . no . . . not really . . . that's just the way I talk . . . the way I am.

ANALYST: Oh, so you just feel badly.

PATIENT: Isn't that what I said?

ANALYST: Well, no . . . you said you felt guilty.

PATIENT: Isn't that the same thing?

ANALYST: Doesn't guilt usually involve more than that?

PATIENT: Like what?

ANALYST: (silence)

PATIENT: You mean, like, for example, apologizing? Deciding not to do it again?

ANALYST: (silence)

PATIENT: I'm not sure I can do that . . . it's just . . . me.

ANALYST: Problem is, we know what happens, you feel terrible and then . . .

PATIENT: The headaches.

ANALYST: . . . a migraine starts, or suddenly you're into a squabble with your husband and then it starts.

PATIENT: That's true.

ANALYST: Guilt is so unbearable and change is so frightening you'd rather escape them through punishing yourself instead?

Where shame, persecutory anxiety, and unconscious self-punishment fail to entirely prevent guilt (concern) from arising, the repression of such guilt feeling prevents it from becoming conscious. The feeling of guilt that might accompany the state of being or being judged to be guilty is absent, either because, being found unbearable, its development has been short-circuited through mechanisms of self-torment, the pain of which is somehow preferable to unbearable guilt feeling, or because guilt feeling has been mobilized but repressed. In the latter case, continued repression would appear to promote an eventual defensive regression in which unconscious guilt feeling comes to be replaced by self-punishment.

I propose, then, that we reserve the term *guilt* for pangs of conscience that lead to reparation, as distinct from pangs that substitute for reparation, and stop confusing it with the unconscious patterns of self-torment and self-sabotage that Freud described. Although they do not challenge Freud's association of such behaviours with unconscious guilt, Reisenberg-Malcolm (1980) and Safa-Gerard (1998) have shown how unconscious self-punishment or expiation serves to evade and defend against the experience of guilt and concern. Freud's equation of the unconscious need for punishment with unconscious guilt has obscured the defensive function of unconscious self-torment and its role in the chronic evasion of the mental suffering, depressive anxiety, guilt, and remorse that must be confronted and contained in working-through the depressive position. Frequently, when the unconscious superego judges us guilty, we evade *feeling* guilty by going directly to self-punishment. Unfortunately, evading guilt feeling in this way precludes the rational evaluation of such guilt that would enable us to decide whether to accept and make reparation for it, or reject it as irrational and ungrounded.

Although Freud (1914, 1921) was well aware of the role of libido in the development of the ego ideal and the identifications with loved—as well as hated—objects that contribute to formation of the superego, his increasing emphasis upon the punitive aspect of the latter resulting from id aggression turned back against the ego, together with his decision to subsume the ego ideal under the concept of the superego (Freud 1923), seems to have resulted in the widespread tendency to associate the superego with self-reproach and self-punishment more than with a conscience motivated by love and ideals. This is what led Schafer (1960) to recognize a need to remind the psychoanalytic community of the "loving and beloved superego of Freud's structural theory," and Furer (1967) of

its role as a comforter. It is in this context that we must understand the widespread tendency to conceive of guilt as self-punishment rather than anxiety regarding the effects of one's real or imagined destructiveness upon the good objects (and the good self) one loves. In the same way as the superego has been one-sidedly viewed as punishing, so guilt has been equated with self-punishment rather than anxious concern and remorse. Just as there has been a tendency to forget the loving and comforting superego, so we have tended to lose sight of the grounding of conscience, and therefore guilt, in attachment, love, and care.

It follows from the distinction I have been elaborating that our discontent in civilization arises not through heightening of the sense of guilt, but through heightening of the unconscious need for punishment that defends *against* the sense of guilt. An advance in civilization through a heightening of the capacity to confront and bear guilt leads to a decrease, not an increase, in the persecutory anxiety that is at the core of our discontent. Our unhappiness in civilization is a product of our hatred turned against ourselves in the form of a persecutory superego. Genuine guilt, understood as depressive anxiety or concern, is not a product of the punitive superego but of the "loving and beloved superego" fuelled not by hatred but by love.

At the conclusion of his meditation on human destructiveness, on the last page of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930) writes, "And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary" (p. 145). Despite his tendency to associate guilt with the punitive more than with the loving superego, Freud understood that against a superego that sometimes represents a "pure culture of the death instinct" (Freud, 1923, p. 53) only the power of love could hope to prevail. Conscience, concern, and guilt are functions of Eros, not Thanatos. The enlarged capacity to experience and bear guilt (i.e., to love and thereby have conscience) that is a mark of civilization reflects the healing, not the deepening, of our cultural malaise. As Freud (1930) himself suggests, this "dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations" (pp. 135–6) is a *guilt-substitute* and one, I submit, that is rendered unnecessary when the guilt it replaces is confronted and accepted. For with genuine contrition, repentance, and reparation, forgiveness and healing become possible.

Ury (1998) has recently drawn attention to the contradiction in Freudian theory between its developmental affirmation of superego formation

as a sign of maturity and its clinical recognition of the role of the superego in psychopathology. She writes,

> There is a tendency in psychoanalytic literature to view the nature of guilt in two contradictory ways. The first is often found in the theoretically derived developmental premise of the tripartite structural model of intrapsychic differentiation, which states that unconscious guilt emerges from an internalized superego, which presupposes a structured and mature ego. An assumption follows that the "capacity for guilt" is a higher and more adaptive form of mental functioning: it is healthy, civilized, and mature, and equated with notions of repair and concern. It is also often interchanged with the concept of conscience. The second view of guilt is to be found in clinical formulations of pathology where the destructiveness of guilt in psychic functioning is highlighted, especially in relation to the sadism of the superego. Despite the observation that guilt is usually, if not always, associated with destructive pathology, the developmental framework that positions guilt as a mature affect is left intact. This contradiction begins with Freud, who suggested that guilt is not only the height of civilization, but also a deep-seated, intractable form of aggression. (p. 51)

Ury proposes to resolve this contradiction by distinguishing between *guilt*, as a superego function observed in pathological states of self-torment, and *conscience*, as an ego function involving thought and anticipation of the consequences of our actions for others and ourselves. In this she follows Alexander (1925) and Ferenczi (1928/1955), both of whom went so far as to argue that, as conscience is an ego function, the aim of psychoanalysis is to eliminate the superego.

To my mind, there are two main problems with this proffered solution. First, it requires us to abandon our everyday association of guilt with normal and healthy experiences of the voice and pangs of conscience—that is, for what Grinberg (1964) calls *depressive* as distinct from *persecutory* guilt. Second, in excluding the operations of mature conscience from the experience of guilt and identifying the latter with the pathological states of self-torment that Grinberg calls persecutory guilt, Ury, like Grinberg, confirms Freud's association of such self-punishment with guilt when, in my view, it frequently functions as a defence against it—that is, as a *guilt-substitute*. I do not wish to surrender to the widespread inclination in our "culture of narcissism" (Lasch 1979) to derogate guilt as pathology instead of recognizing it as an essential component of maturity and mental and spiritual health, nor to confine the concept of the superego to the operation of archaic superego precursors while naming mature super-

ego functioning by some other name, such as conscience or ego-ideal. As Schafer (1960) and Furer (1967), among others, have reminded us, in addition to the persecutory superego that inflicts self-torment, there is the loving and beloved superego that offers praise when we succeed in acting conscientiously and both generates guilt and mediates comfort and forgiveness when, having inevitably fallen and failed, we own up to our guilt, repent, and attempt to make reparation.

Why is guilt at times so unbearable that it must be short-circuited through unconscious self-punishment? One answer is that the subject, caught up in paranoid-schizoid splitting or polarization, feels it cannot admit any wrongdoing or badness without being revealed as a poisonously all-bad object. In other words, there is a difficulty in the area of self and object constancy, in holding both bad and good simultaneously, in being able to acknowledge the badness without forgetting the goodness and so achieving ambivalence. In the pre-ambivalent, paranoid-schizoid position, to admit any imperfection is to reveal oneself as hopelessly defective.[8] It is for this reason that Safa-Gerard (1998) recommends a technique in which analysts remind patients of their goodness whenever they seek to confront or interpret their badness. She suggests two additional reasons for patients' inability to bear the guilt for aggression toward good objects in the present. One is the unconscious linking of such attacks with similar attacks on other objects and with "omnipotent unconscious attacks on the primary object and their fantasized devastating effects"—effects imagined to be beyond repair. Another has to do with the fact that *guilt is evidence of love*: the awareness of such love threatens narcissistic, schizoid, and pseudo-psychopathic patients by bringing to their attention their separateness, love, and consequent dependency and vulnerability (p. 355).

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8. This inability to be bad while at the same time being good—not needing to be all-good as the only alternative to being all-bad—interferes with the subject's enjoyment of the pleasures of playful transgression and leads to a flattening, an impoverishment, in the domain of sexual and other forms of play and creativity. As Stoller (1974) and Kernberg (1991) have both emphasized, "sadomasochism, an ingredient of infantile sexuality, is an essential part of normal sexual functioning and love relations, and of the very nature of sexual excitement"—as are "bisexual identifications, the desire to transgress oedipal prohibitions and the secretiveness of the primal scene, and to violate the boundaries of a teasing and withholding object" (Kernberg, 1991, p. 333).

In the paranoid-schizoid position, the archaic, sadistic superego reigns. Whatever the surface effectiveness of the defensive denial, displacement, or projection of blame, the archaic superego demands its pound of flesh in the form of the unconscious need for punishment (for the full range of real and imagined, sexual and aggressive, sins of commission and omission toward objects and part-objects) that Freud equated with unconscious guilt but that, in reality, is a consequence of guilt evasion. Unlike therapies that collude with such evasion, psychoanalysis works against it, both by making unconscious guilt conscious, and by reawakening conscience through analysis of the self-tormenting unconscious superego activities by means of which guilt is evaded. Because the need for punishment substitutes for and defends against genuine guilt, learning in analysis how to face and bear one's guilt (i.e., working though the depressive position) is the road to freedom from the grip of the unconscious need for punishment, as well as the need for soothing the pain arising from self-torment. For, however effective on the surface, such soothing (whether derived from substances, "selfobjects," or other sources) cannot eradicate the savage god, the archaic superego and its punitive operations. By blocking development of the mature superego functions of guilt as concern and reparation, such soothing sets up a vicious cycle in which the subject is left at the mercy of an archaic superego inflicting self-torment, resulting only in an increased need for soothing.

While it is true that no one can feel guilt about the damage one has done or wished to do to others without simultaneously feeling ashamed of the fact that one is the sort of person who has done or wished to do such damage, the reverse does not follow. It is possible to experience shame without guilt—that is, to be so self-obsessed that one loses sight of the object altogether except as a mirror or audience or resource for the self. In this sense, while it may be incorrect to say that guilt is a more mature emotion than shame—in that mature people continue to experience both—it is certainly true that the person who can experience guilt is more mature than the person who can experience only shame. In such a mature person, despite shame for the self, concern for the object (i.e., guilt) is maintained. On the more primitive level of the paranoid-schizoid position one may experience predominantly shame—one can be suffused with shame without having to cease one's self-obsession long enough to feel any concern for the object. If, as the old saying has it, the (mature) superego is soluble in alcohol, then in narcissism it may be

liquidated altogether. On the other hand, one may mature to the point of becoming ashamed of one's narcissism and incapacity to experience guilt. This is perhaps a turning point initiating an advance to a level of object-relating, the depressive position, at which the capacity for concern is finally achieved.[9]

This is not to say that guilt may not seem at times to be a defence against shame, as Fairbairn (1952) recognized in describing "the moral defence" in which the unloved child attempts to escape traumatic helplessness through the illusion of control afforded by blaming the self for the parental failure to love. In order to escape intolerable shame in the face of one's unmet needs and one's helpless dependence on others who cannot be controlled, one resorts to an illusion of guilt, which at least moves the trauma into the field of one's own (defensive) omnipotence. There is no doubt that this mechanism exists and is important in psychopathology. But, far from constituting an argument for reducing guilt to an underlying shame, it merely points to a spurious or false guilt., for such "guilt" that exists to escape a painful state of shame is entirely narcissistic: it reflects no genuine sense of concern for the object; its function is purely defensive. The very idea that the phenomenon of human guilt could be reduced to such pseudo-guilt and in this way made subordinate to shame is itself a symptom of a widespread desperation to somehow find a way to sidestep the real guilt that is an inevitable part of mature object-relations. The motive for this wish to reduce guilt to shame is simply the wish to forget the superego and continue to live in a culture of narcissism with a psychology that evades the developmental demand that we move beyond issues of shame and the self and take up the cross of object-relating and the inevitable struggles with guilt that such relating entails.

Towards the end of his perceptive essay on shame, Karen (1992) writes of a patient who he says wants to know "the real me" but is afraid to find out. She is afraid to face "the shameful fact that she is a shrew to her husband and children . . . [and suffers from] the desperate fear that she will be found in the wrong" (p. 69). He points out, "To stop running and experience the shame is to give herself a chance to recognize that being in the wrong for acting like a shrew does not mean that her husband

9. While my analysis differs in emphasis from that of Wurmser (1981), his distinction between shame and guilt is congruent with that elaborated here: "Shame protects an integral image of the self; guilt protects the integrity of an object" (p. 67). He associates shame with "primary process thought—the language of the self" and guilt with "secondary process thought—the language of object relations" (p. 67).

isn't also in the wrong in his way, nor does it make her into a poisonously deformed and unlovable thing" (p. 69). Beyond this, it is necessary to add that only if she faces and learns to bear her guilt, repents, and ceases to be a shrew will she be able to overcome the self-tormenting shame that is her guilt-substitute.

This is not the place to discuss the complex technical issues involved in the clinical handling of these problems. Suffice it to say that persons suffering from a persecutory superego are all too ready to hear its confrontation and interpretation as accusation or attack and to flee from or, alternately, submit to and even be gratified in being, as they imagine, attacked in this way. But the fact that the sadistic superego can turn interpretations of the sadistic superego to its own purposes does not mean that the sadistic superego does not exist or need, eventually, to be interpreted. It merely means that it must be approached tactfully, skilfully, and strategically. It is here that respect for patients' resistances is most important. Patients suffering from the severe neuroses have good reasons for evading guilt by resorting automatically to self-torment: fixed in the paranoid-schizoid position as they are, any admission of fault appears to confront them with a traumatic and unbearable sense of badness, inadequacy, and shame.

Safa-Gerard (1998) offers a number of technical suggestions in this regard that can help the analyst attempting to confront guilt-evasion avoid being caught in an enactment of blaming that only enables the patient to project the critical superego into the analyst, to thereby feel confirmed in victim-hood, and further avoid responsibility. In this connection, Wurmser (2000), informed by the work of Paul Gray (2005) on defence analysis, advises us "to avoid, as much as is possible, falling into the role of a judging authority, to avoid fulfilling in reality, much less creating, the transference of superego functions, and rather, . . . to analyze them" (p. ix). While much of his critique of the use of direct drive interpretation by the early Kleinians, and Kernberg's use of confrontation focused especially on splitting, may be valid to a degree, for such techniques can intensify resistance to the point of impasse, Wurmser (2000) fails to note that "the contemporary Kleinians of London," whom Schafer (1997) calls "Kleinian Freudians" precisely to emphasize the continuity of their work with mainstream Freudian psychoanalysis, long ago replaced such techniques in favour of their own very subtle forms of defence, resistance, transference, and superego analysis. As a consequence of his rejection of contemporary Kleinian themes, Wur-

mser's (1987, 2000) work on the dynamics of "flight from conscience" is hampered by his insufficient differentiation between paranoid-schizoid and depressive phenomena. He employs the term *conscience* to describe both the archaic, persecutory superego and the mature, loving superego and fails to distinguish conscience, guilt, concern, and depressive anxiety from persecutory anxiety and the unconscious need for punishment.

"A person will spend his whole life writhing in the clutches of the superficial, psychological symptoms of guilt unless he learns to speak its true language" (Carroll, 1985, p. 15). The challenge facing the guilt-evading subject is that of facing and bearing its guilt, integrating as a part of the tragic dimension of human existence the reality of our primordial ambivalence, and accepting as an aspect of "common human unhappiness" the need to shoulder the burden of responsibility to make reparation, and to change, which genuinely facing our guilt entails. Facing and bearing guilt opens the path toward restoration of a sense of inner goodness through reparative processes mediating identification with resurrected, surviving, comforting, forgiving, good internal objects. If advance in civilization entails an increased capacity to confront and bear guilt, then a first step may be to learn to speak its true language, not least by ceasing to confuse it with the self-torment that represents its evasion.

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