THE CONCEPT OF EXISTENTIAL GUILT

A. Levitsky, Ph. D.
St. Louis State Hospital

I

It is the thesis of this paper that there is a type of guilt in human behavior which is analogous to the type of anxiety which the existentialists have called existential anxiety. Existentialists such as Tillich speak about the "anxiety of existence," i.e., anxiety which obtains by virtue of the very fact of the human condition and which, by its very nature, can never be completely dissipated. Roughly speaking, the existential anxiety of the existentialists overlaps considerably with normal anxiety as commonly used in contemporary psychology and psychiatry. According to the existentialist position, this normal anxiety derives from man's finiteness and his awareness thereof, from the ultimate necessity and the ever-present possibility of his death, from the impossibility of avoiding some measure of pain and frustration. As Tillich says in "The Courage To Be" (6), "Courage does not remove anxiety. Since anxiety is existential it cannot be removed." He distinguishes, of course, between existential and pathological anxiety. Pathological or neurotic anxiety can be removed by courage or insight through therapy. Not so existential anxiety.

Tillich takes a parallel though somewhat less explicit position with respect to the phenomenon of guilt where he would likewise distinguish between neurotic and existential guilt. It is the purpose of this paper to explore in somewhat more detail the

concept of existential guilt, to illustrate some of the types of moral ambiguity which must generate existential guilt, and to consider briefly the implications of this concept for the practice of psychotherapy.

Specifically, it is postulated that just as successful psychotherapy may resolve the patients' neurotic anxieties but still leave him to cope with normal or existential anxieties, so in like fashion psychotherapy may resolve the individual's pathological or neurotic guilt but still leave him to cope with existential guilt.

II

It is apparent that wherever one has introjected feelings of "oughtness" and obligation, values, standards of behavior, the conscious or unconscious violation of these standards will generate the affect of guilt. Much of psychoanalytic theory has been devoted to this problem. According to analytic theory, the neurotic continues to harbor early, infantile impulses which are inimical to introjected standards and archaic super-ego formation. Certain impulses are so strongly rejected by the superego that they are repressed and are no longer available to conscious awareness. This is the phenomenon of unconscious guilt. This unconscious guilt may generalize to such an extent that many of the routine activities in living will be associated with guilt and become a source of great apprehension and discomfort.

This type of unconscious guilt is a neurotic problem and subject to the usual analytic or therapeutic procedures. We do not take issue with this formulation.

What we wish to delineate here is not the neurotic guilt caused by an archaic, unconscious, punitive super-ego, but the existential component of guilt. It is contended that sharper awareness of the nature and sources of existential guilt will enable us to refine our perceptions of normal versus neurotic behavior, to delineate more readily the boundaries of the therapeutic problem, to accept with greater equanimity the inevitable remnant of existential guilt, and generally to assist in the understanding of human conflict.

III

Consider the following circumstances as possible sources of conflict within the individual:

1. In an accident you escape but others are killed or injured.
2. You are in comfortable circumstances and become aware of the extreme poverty and suffering of others.
3. In dealing with others, and in order to accomplish some common and acceptable purpose, you find it necessary to tell a "white lie" or to be manipulative.
4. You have suffered some bereavement and though "genuinely" affected by the loss are compelled by protocol to express grief and accept condolences in formalized and ritualized fashion. (Others, likewise, though hardly affected are compelled to express condolences with appropriately gloomy countenances.)

The basic observation on which our argument rests is that people feel some degree of conscious or quasi-conscious guilt in these kinds of circumstances. Neurotics and normal people seem to be

equally susceptible to these particular feelings of guilt. The neurotic, however, bearing as he already does his personal burden of guilt will be more discomforted by what we are calling existential sources of guilt and in fact commonly feels overwhelmed at the awesome proportions of the contradictions that appear to confront him. Countless examples from the works of the great novelists could be advanced to illustrate these situations.

Let us try to categorize the underlying factors which obtain in the four circumstances cited above and to see whether there is not some principle that can characterize all of them. Examples 1 and 2 are obviously closely related and involve reactions to gross inequalities of fortune between one's self and others. Assuming the validity of our observation, namely that everyone experiences some guilt reaction to these stimuli, it would seem that some principle of broad human identification is operative. A good many psychologists and philosophers have given this central importance in their catalogues of human motives. Alfred Adler speaks of "gemeinschaftsgefuhl" as a basic given (1). Henri Bergson (2) refers to the feeling of obligation as an "irreducible, ever-present element" which we find in the depths of our consciousness and "binds us to the other members of society."

It is likely that the psychoanalyst will say that we have merely described a commonplace neurotic reaction in which the guilt over one's aggression makes one feel responsible for the misfortunes of others even where one could not possibly have contributed an iota to those misfortunes. In reply we would suggest that the psychoanalyzed person himself is not entirely free from the guilt-

twinges of these situations. We have here one of the ineradicable moral ambiguities of human interaction. If the analyst insists nevertheless that everyone including himself is the victim of this infantile derivative, then we must recognize that the term "infantile" is being used in such all-encompassing fashion as to leave no room for its conceivable opposite: non-infantile--or adult. He is consequently invoking a hypothesis which is not discriminating and has no logical means of disproof.

The principles underlying examples 3 and 4 are less immediately apparent. In both of these instances, unlike examples 1 and 2, the individual has behaved, whereas in the first two instances, he has simply <u>been</u>. Example 3 is a conflict between two moral principles which simply permits of no perfect solution. In a situation involving two mutually contradictory principles, the sacrifice of the lesser principle--especially if the consequences are not great--is a commonplace act.

In example 4, the individual senses that although he is expressing a "genuine" sentiment, he is not doing so in a "genuine" manner--spontaneously, impulsively, and naturally in the way that he really feels it and at the time that he really feels it. This is not to claim that such learned social behavior is "wrong" because it is obvious that such behavior is an integral and inevitable characteristic of social organization. And this is precisely our central point--that the very phenomenon of consciousness of self, of self-consciousness, of ego intervention in the expression of emotions and feeling, of a certain degree of non-spontaneity leads to a feeling of non-honesty and guilt. Thus the very <u>fact</u>

the very existence of group mores and norms, of maturing and acculturation means that the individual can no longer behave with the beautiful, unreflective innocence of the child (which has such an irresistible appeal for all of us) but of necessity must constantly govern himself and guard himself. Having introjected the images and values of others, he must now act in accordance with these expectations and he is forced to experience what Fromm has called "alienation from the self."

Tillich characterizes Christian doctrine as stating that "... the essential nature of man is good...but man's essential or created goodness has been lost." Certainly the doctrine of the fall and sin wrestles with deep human problems, but obviously we must demand a more tenable scientific formulation. The scientist can hardly take seriously the belief that at a given historical moment the "goodness" of man was lost. Still, must we not acknowledge that the appeal of such a religious doctrine lies in its having appreciated a great conflict in the human psyche, and in its efforts to explain the source of the conflict.

The present formulation emphasizes the role of deep human identifications, responses to perceived inequalities, and conflict over ever-present ambiguities. In particular it invokes the genetic development of the individual, his acquisition of social and moral values and attempts to show how the experience of "lost innocence" or "goodness" is quite consistent with current psychological theory.

To digress a moment, perhaps we may undertake to reinterpret the myth of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man: What is the effect of eating of the Tree of Knowledge? Even more intriguingly, is

there a "rational" reason--in symbolic terms--why eating of the Tree should constitute a sin? If we permit ourselves momentarily the luxury of a poetic ambiguity, we can sense that the acquisition of knowledge <u>is</u> a sin in that it leads to man's intelligence, his complex social structure and his consequent perception of the kinds of moral ambiguities illustrated above. As a result of "knowledge" man is no longer a primitive, unreflective, animal-like being. He organizes himself into social groups; he acquires a code of laws, and in the act of regarding himself through the eyes of others the human tragedy is conceived. He is no longer a unitary self, but a divided self. Man is now necessarily alienated from himself.

It will be seen that although we are employing Fromm's term of "alienation" we are using it differently from Fromm himself. In "The Sane Society" (4), Fromm contends that it is the competitive, market psychology of capitalism which makes honesty and love impossible. Thus he is saying that the attributes and values of a particular society, in this case capitalism, are such that they may alienate man from some hypothetical set of behaviors which--if they were realized--would avoid the sense of alienation. Without denying that particular forms of social organization put more of a premium on self-concern and self-aggradizement than do others, we feel obligated to point out that since the problem of self-alienation is in part an existential problem the roots of the problem go deeper than the self-contradictions of any given society.

The utility of the theory of existential guilt is definitely <u>not</u> to argue the futility of social reform but to force awareness

of the existential givens which characterize social organization, and which any human group needs to face.

Returning again to the question raised earlier, we have been led by our observation that in a variety of situations which are inescapably associated with social interaction the individual has an experience of inner moral conflict. Does not some principle suggest itself? The effects of both anxiety and guilt evidently have an important parallel background. In the case of existential anxiety, the background is primarily the biological experience of a finite being with its longing for "perfect security"--obviously unattainable. Similarly, in the case of existential guilt, the background is primarily the human experience of self-awareness and self-evaluation. Thus the fact of existential guilt seems to require that we postulate a longing for another kind of perfection, in this case for a total inner unity or "moral perfection." In this respect also, the quest for total satisfaction is unattainable.

IV

Just as individuals seek ways in which to cope with the ever present phenomenon of anxiety, so do they seek for ways to deal with existential guilt. We may illustrate by reference to two extremes which we observe--the cynic and the saint.

The cynic or amoral person tries to convince himself that others are morally imperfect. As we have tried to show, this is no great feat for "technically" we are all morally imperfect. He thus rationalizes his amorality. The cynic desperately fastens on to our imperfections and he can rest assured that he will always have a plentiful supply.

We note that even this cynical act seems to require a rationalization. For the cynic says, "No one else is really any good. Therefore I don't have to be either." He thus implies the principle: "I 'ought' to repay others in their own coin, i.e., relationships 'ought' to be mutual. The principle of mutuality appears to be an implied moral imperative which is one of the foundations of the obligatory element in relationships.

But simple mutuality as a moral imperative is not satisfactory either. An adult does not expect an infant or a sick person to reciprocate. What does he expect? Rational people "make allowances" for particular conditions of skill, knowledge, health, etc. which condition our expectations of each other. In Bertocci's analysis of moral obligations (3), he concludes that the sense of "oughtness" within us requires that we do our best, and that the other do his best. We expect--as lawyers say--good faith. But rather than mere mutuality, it seems better to speak of conditional mutuality.

The fact of moral imperfection in both an individual and a social sense sometimes gives rise to unconscious cynicism in social theorists. When one has developed a kind of perversely keen ear for the morally imperfect, the sham, the inevitable facading component of all social arrangements, one can be very skillful at debunking almost everything in sight. Just as some individuals get too skillful at totally debunking and rejecting themselves, so do some social theorists succeed in "debunking" society. However, unless the keen ear is tempered by acceptance and attempts to serve in the interests of construction, the net effect can easily be that

of total self-rejection.

Riesman, for instance, in "The Lonely Crowd" (5), cites some parental modes of "manipulating" children. "One might summarize the historical sequence by saying that the tradition-directed child propitiates his parents; the inner-directed child fights or succumbs to them; the other-directed child manipulates them and is in turn manipulated by them." From the point of view of plain empirical description, this may be quite accurate. But with the implied comparison against some totally pure technique, we are left with the distinctly pessimistic feeling that no matter which way we turn, child-raising is a morally hopeless situation.

The saintly person, on the other hand, appears to be plagued with such an exquisite, refined sense of the pain and suffering of others, and with such an inability to tolerate any existential guilt whatsoever within himself that everyone's pain is his pain, everyone's sin is his own. Where anyone is in rags, he must not be clothed. "Jesus died for us." This is the Tolstoyan, ultra-Christian outlook of which it can perhaps be said that it loves not wisely but too well. But if some measure of existential guilt is a normal part of every man's burden, then the saint's subtle foisting of his own unreal standards on to others is hardly a kindly act.

We have here an illustration of the necessity in clinical psychology of having an adequate schema of <u>normal expectancies</u> in behavior. It should be evident that if impossible demands are made upon human beings, e.g., the over-inhibition of sex, or aggression, or a pressure to maintain too high a level of guilt-

lessness--then some disorganization must result.

It is in this respect, in its contribution to the catalogue of normal expectancies that the concept of existential guilt may have relevance for the work of the psychotherapist. In deciding which aspects of the patient's behavior to focus on and attend to the therapist is inevitably guided by his own implicit or explicit frame of reference. The therapist's understanding of normal versus neurotic functioning is necessarily a vital part of this frame of reference. Many therapists--though admittedly not all--accept the position that any elaboration of and improvement in our definition of normal functioning (in the normative not the statistical sense) contributes to our therapeutic effectiveness. For those who take this position the concept of extential guilt is proposed as a possible addition to our understanding and to our conceptual instruments.

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4. Fromm, E., The Sane Society, Rhinehart and Company, 1955.
5. Riesman, D., The Lonely Crowd, Yale University Press, 1953.
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