GUILT VERSUS RESPONSIBILITY

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During the course of psychotherapy with a young female patient, the subject turned to the matter of her extreme guilt and self-rejection. The patient was very resistive and very little progress had been made for some time in this area. The therapist decided to introduce a new line of thinking. He pointed out to the patient that he was involved with several of his colleagues in some speculative work in the area of guilt theory. During the course of this work the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and the fall of man had come under discussion. The question was raised as to what was man's original sin which led to the expulsion from paradise? After some consideration the answer was suggested that in the eyes of God the ultimate sin that man could commit would be an utter refusal to ever consider himself a sinner. For if man were to refuse to be burdened

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by any sense of guilt, would he—in a most important respect—be beyond God's control? The patient had been listening raptly and said with much feeling: "My God, you'd be free! If you refused to feel guilty before God or before other people, you'd be free and people couldn't hurt or control you! The therapist agreed with her.

The patient continued: "Think of how many people would hate you!"

"Who would hate you?"

"All the people who still had their guilt and who needed to control you through your guilt!"

The above, in capsule form, is the thesis of this paper which is that, although the sense of self-responsibility and of social responsibility is vital for the mature human being and for effective social organization, the sense of guilt is of no value whatsoever and in actual fact interferes with the full assumption of self-responsibility.

The theory of superego functioning and the problem of guilt has received increasing attention in recent years in psychiatric circles. This has been reflected in the recent publication of popular articles designed to convey the current thinking of leading workers in the field. Certainly a large part of the recent growth in interest is attributable to the rapid development of the fields of theology and psychiatry. It is likely, however, that deeper social forces are at work which impel us to bring our psychological skills to bear on the crucial area of moral relationships. The profound social upheaval and dislocation which characterize life in this century, the seeming conflict between the desire for freedom and full self-expression on the one hand; and on the other hand the place of the individual in a complex social organization, lead us to raise questions about the responsibility of the individual to his fellow men. More important still, the sense of failure and helplessness in the face of seemingly insoluble social and political problems seems to generate a growing mood of discouragement and self-criticism. Perhaps these questions help explain the increasingly important role of guilt and guilt feelings in current theoretical orientations.

Our position has been strongly influenced by the work of

Albert Ellis and has been aptly phrased in the title of one of his papers, *There Is No Room For The Concept Of Sin In Psychotherapy*. [2] This paper can be read as an extension and a deeper elaboration of his thesis.

In presenting our ideas at a series of seminars, we have found that many people have great difficulty in grasping the idea that a social and moral outlook is possible without having a sense of guilt. We would hope to make as clear a distinction as possible between these two effects. If the problem is partially a semantic one, then we would like to minimize the semantic confusion.

The problem hinges on the question of whether it is possible to have a self-evaluative or self critical attitude which is quite free of self-punishment and self-rejection. If it is possible to have such an attitude—and the writers vigorously insist that it is—then this kind of "guilt" will entail a radically different emotional experience than is generally connoted by the term "guilt". Suppose that an action of ours has caused pain or trouble to an associate. He complains to us and is critical of our behavior. We see his point and grant the justice of his criticism. As a result we feel ourselves to h in the wrong. The central point being made in this paper is that is completely possible for us to say very genuinely: "I am sorry; it was a mistake on my part", without having to generate any self-belittling or self-punitive sentiments. The "genuineness" of our apology and self-criticism will be manifested by self-corrective behavior on subsequent occasions. It need not at all be manifested by the usual self-castigating routines of shame, embarrassment, stammering, etc. The term "guilt" has come to be so inextricably associated with the attitude of self-punishment that we prefer to use the terms responsible and self-responsible to denote an orientation of concern with moral standards.

Perhaps it can be seen at this point that the crucial distinctions between guilt and responsibility lie in the roles played by anxiety and compulsion. For those individuals who are capable of a "responsible attitude" towards others—that is, have concern, empathy, and interest in others—anxiety and compulsion do not play a major role. On the contrary, their

social interest is manifested freely, willingly,, and out of a sense of fullness within one's self. Individuals who have had their own human needs truly gratified will be capable of this attitude. Guilt feelings, on the other hand, are accompanied by anxiety and self-directed aggression. A psychological force within the individual compels him—on pain of punishment—to observe moral standards. This ever-present internalized threat of punishment can only generate strong ambivalent feelings towards the entire realm of moral "shoulds".

Let us try, then, to sum up a bit more systematically the distinctions between the effect of guilt on the one hand and, on the other hand, such ideas as moral standards, social instincts, self-discipline, and self-responsibility.

The effects of guilt mean the individual necessarily rejects himself in some important ways:

1. He loses caste or status in his own and others' eyes.
2. He feels for the moment that his rights are diminished.
3. He may feel it necessary to atone by undergoing some "appropriate" pain or punishment.
4. He experiences great emotional discomfort.

What is the inner experience where the individual accepts the *need* for social and moral standards and accepts the principle of responsibility but is at the same time not plagued by any feelings of guilt?

1. He recognizes the right of others to criticize him and will sincerely evaluate the criticism.
2. He might well take a critical view of himself and decide that there is a need to change his behavior *or his attitudes.*
3. But while doing this he will *refuse* to reject himself—refuse to compel himself consciously or unconsciously to undergo any pain or deprivation.

In other words, he will distinguish between mistaken or undesirable behavior and *bad behavior.* He will accept the need for change within himself without rejecting himself. The decision to change in some given direction will, thus, be made in a context of freedom and self-acceptance and not out of an anxiety-driven compulsion.

This difference in attitude towards self-change will have

profound implications for the very process by which the change is affected. In the very act of self-acceptance he acknowledges within himself that, although he has undertaken to change in some way, his ability to achieve his goal might well be limited. It may be necessary to reach it by successive stages. He recognizes that he can only do as well as he can do. He tries as hard as he can, accepting his performance at each step, even though he may perceive clearly that further improvement is called for. He maintains a desire to change and improve and this is completely consistent with the underlying self-approval. Failure, great or small, at any step in the process need not at all be accompanied by anguish and guilt. One might be "impatient" with one's self without self-rejection. The tendency, however, is to become more patient with one's self. The individual thus will be capable of feeling *towards himself* what the accepting therapist feels towards his patient. That is, he will be capable of a self-accepting kind of self-awareness and, where necessary, self-criticism.

We shall reserve for a later paper the consideration of a question which has basic relevance for our thesis; i.e., since the socialization of the child requires that he necessarily accept limitations on his behavior and since inevitably he will be subjected to some form of correction and discipline, is it humanly possible for him to sustain the manifold corrections and disciplinary experiences without developing some degree of self-punitive behavior? At this point we would only venture to suggest that there is much more room for optimism than is granted in most contemporary psychological thinking. Particularly the revolutionary work of A. S. Neill[5] in his forty years of educational experience with children at Summerhill suggests that we are only at the dawn of discovery in this crucial area of human behavior.

When the problems of guilt, sin, conscience, and moral standards are examined, the notions of responsibility, accountability, and self-responsibility are inevitably encountered. For many the very idea of accountability implies the need for concepts of sin, guilt, and atonement.[4] Since the emphasis in this paper is on the vital role of the attitude of self-responsibility, it will pay us to examine the difficulties involved in achieving

this attitude.

The term 'responsibility' comes from the Latin meaning to respond, to answer. The person or group to whom one responds or answers, exercises some authority over one. They judge, evaluate and determine one's fate, and welfare—sometimes according to the competence of one's acts and sometimes according to one's moral status. If an organization has financial discrepancies it is to the treasurer that one turns for answers. If he replies in terms of his own acts and behaviors he is acting responsibly. If he always blames things on the corresponding secretary he is refusing responsibility. It is clear that organizations involve patterns of accountability of various types. But what of the awesome matter of responsibility for one's entire life and life pattern? When we leave the job and step out of the organization, the firm, the club, there are no longer any clear rules of responsibility. To whom shall we look for validation of our acts? How shall we judge the moral stature of our lives? How "explain" any unhappiness or pain?

Evidently self-responsibility must take over at this point and the mature adult undertakes this challenging task and it is a task which terrifies most people. For in self-responsibility we assume both roles of the doer and of the judge. In seeking for validation essentially we look to ourselves.

The reluctance to do so we shall call, in this paper, responsibility-anxiety. Is there any cause for wonder that the individual burdened by feelings of guilt, self-rejection and insufficiency will flee from what seems to be the intolerable load of self-responsibility? In any judgement, for instance, a court judgment, we would prefer a judge who is fair. If we are to be our own judge and if we know ourselves to be harsh and punitive, it is understandable that we shrink from self-judgment, from self-responsibility. For we have not developed a concept of *friendly judging, of accepting judging.*

The sequence involved here can be roughly outlined:

1. The individual in early life has not experienced enough healthy acceptance.
2. He then learns to reject himself, feeling that he is unacceptable.

3. Having become a harsh, punitive self-judge, the prospect of answering to himself, or self-responsibility is far from pleasant.

4. Having developed responsibility-anxiety, he finds it more tolerable to relegate this function to some external authority who, presumably, is better equipped to play this role. This might be God, king, leader, father, teacher, society or any entity which represents the "other" or "they".

5. He looks to this external source for validation and judgment and it is that source which is given ultimate responsibility. Thus, when he feels himself to be not good enough, the impulse is to say: "It is not my decision or my opinion, or my mistake. The responsibility lies 'out there'." Feeling always the voice of insufficiency and self-accusation, he does not ever wish to prove or test himself for he knows beforehand that he cannot pass this test. And it is not that he will *really* fail, but that being so self-punitive, he will consider himself to have failed. Caught in this snare 'eels the push to externalize this painful business ai i force others into the same self-rejecting intrapsychic conflict; that is, to make others feel guilty too.

In this connection it is natural to examine Tillich's concept of the "courage to accept acceptance". According to Tillich[6], since man is unacceptable, it requires great courage to accept acceptance. Some great effort of will, an act of faith which gives man the courage to make this leap through emptiness, is required to accept acceptance although one is unacceptable. Inevitably, it is to a deity that one turns in such a delemma certainly not to one's self.

Tillich's is an excellent example of the sequence of self-rejection leading to responsibility-anxiety and the need for external authority. We would, of course, challenge the doctrine of unacceptability and the desperate concept of courage which this entails. We would claim that the very notion that we require *courage to be* or *courage to accept acceptance* implies profound social disorganization.

In analysing the dynamics of guilt feelings the psychiatric literature tends to focus on the intra-individual experience It is well to consider also the enormously important role of guilt mechanisms as an interpersonal and as a social phenomenon. We wish to highlight particularly the way in which most individuals (and much of society at large) need to control the behavior of others. This control and the need to control is largely unconscious. Most people would be inclined either to deny or rationalize their behavior in this respect.

Let us say "A" has done something or failed to do something or expressed an opinion of which others disapprove. The need of our society would be not only to *express* or to *experience* the disapproval and disagreement but also to have the individual express guilt, self-rejection and a punitive type of self-criticism. Here we can make a distinction which is central to our thesis. Two steps are involved.

1. Others disapprove.
2. By word or by glance or by demeanor others need to force one to feel guilty, that is, to disapprove of himself. It is of great interest that merely *expressing* the disapproval and feeling that one has the right to disapprove is rarely felt to be completely satisfying. The neurotic pattern requires that "A" chastise himself and start to get himself in line.

Some very important problems in unconscious and neurotic self-validation are involved here. Let us refer to our two hypothetical protagonists as Critic and Target. When Critic has a shaky sense of self, he is badly threatened if Target refuses to experience guilt. He feels somehow damaged or smaller. Conversely, if Target has been dented and has introjected the guilt, Critic feels much relieved and—in a most spurious way—achieves self-validation. He says to himself: "I am adequate. I have managed to have this effect on him." Then, for Critic self-validation comes not from within but from the perception of social influence. It is quite plain that he is highly vulnerable in this respect for if this criticism bounces off he must doubt himself.

The latent infantile conflicts of Target also are likely to be involved. He senses the urgency of Critic's instability.

To the extent that his own problems of omnipotence continue to plague him, to that extent is he likely to feel: "What I now do and feel is terribly important. If I conform and/or feel guilty, Critic will be relieved. If I go my way, I'll 'cause' him to be upset." On the other hand, if Target has a firm sense of his own and of others' ego boundaries, he will take his own council and feel no guilty concern whatsoever for Critic's anxious feelings.

Other facets of this interaction also should be mentioned. When Critic notes that his demand for a guilt reaction is succesful, he may well be reinforced in his unconscious needs for omnipotence. When Target notes how much anxious concern his behavior has generated, he may feel unconsciously that he must be loved if he merits this much concern. It must be quite plain, however, that although in a conventional social sense these attitudes give the appearance of "concern" with the welfare of others, the essential underlying concern is with one's own feelings of insufficiency. Much of the time each party acts as if he must be responsible not only for himself but for "the other".

The attitude we are developing in this p.... criticizes a particular kind of distortion of the Judeo-Christian ethic of "brotherly love" and the injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself". Now it does in fact seem a fine thing to love all men as brothers. But just how should one love one's brother? Our protagonist Critic may well be proud of his "concern" over Target's deviations. But in expressing his particular kind of love or concern, he evidently makes the assumption that he must take the role of Target's punitive conscience and of his ego controls.

If Critic were to *limit* himself to the expression of his opinion and then not follow up with a punitive *moral* attitude, he probably would criticize himself for being *unconcerned* with Target's welfare and moral salvation. He is inhibited, therefore, in allowing Target genuine freedom of choice. This is because he cannot really trust and respect Target's judgment.

With his characteristic attitude of omnipotence Critic would have to feel that if Target goes astray, it is his—Critic's—fault. The writers claim that this sort of unreal interpenetration

of self-responsibility constitutes a most serious contemporary disease. Often it will be found parading under the guise of brotherly love and social conscience. It is a bogus love, however, and one which betrays lack of respect for *both* one's self and the other. Only a love which clearly acknowledges one's own finiteness as an individual and the separateness of the other is worthy of the name. It appears then that only those who are quite willing to accept self-responsibility will be capable of granting it to others. When they perceive their fellow man following a path which is certain to be painful and self-defeating, they do feel and express concern. They offer to lend a helping hand. But they do not insist on its acceptance and they do not condemn. They hope that the offer of assistance will be attractive enough to be freely accepted.

This paper has concerned itself with the distinction between an outlook of constructive responsibility on the one hand, and on the other hand, what we feel to be the abnormal, destructive and self-defeating sense of guilt. We clearly do not wish to imply that the distinctions we are making are easily acquired by patients in psychotherapy or by anyone else for that matter. On the contrary, experience has shown that although the ideas do not present the greatest difficulties on a verbal-intellectual level, the true assimilation of this attitude commonly requires enormous emotional struggle and effort. The tyranny of the archaic super-ego has been all too well documented.[1] Even after momentary insights have been gained, they must be continually re-established through repeated effort.

Ellis[3] has even speculated recently that the tendency to develop self-punitive guilt is a biological human attribute which can be unlearned only with great difficulty.

It nevertheless seems highly worthwhile to develop an awareness that the vitally human quality of responsibility need not invariably be entwined with the painful affect of guilt. All too often this has been the grim assumption. It is our hope that challenging this assumption will have deeply liberating consequences.

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