The Use of Guilt as a Defense Against Anxiety

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The purpose of this paper is to (1) discuss the utilization of guilt as a defense mechanism in handling some of the anxieties of human existence, and (2) to describe the employment of this type of guilt reaction in certain psychoanalytic, social and religious phenomena.

The term, existential, as it will be used in this paper, refers only to its dictionary meaning, viz., that which pertains to existence. Existential anxieties, then, are those which arise in man by virtue of his existence in the world. They include anxieties regarding death and harm from one's fellow man as well as from overpowering forces of nature. They are the anxieties which man experiences as the result of his relative impotence in controlling these inevitabilities.

The term does not refer to the more specific use given it by the “existentialists,” although some comments made in this work will share much with the thinking of this group.

Although many neurotic and psychotic mechanisms are considered devices to ward off, protect against and handle anxiety, guilt is not usually included. The use of guilt as an alleviator of existential anxiety has been only infrequently noted in the literature. Kierkegaard described a type of guilt which he equated with responsibility. According to him, the concept of fate leaves man impotent to change his environment, but with guilt and its implication of personal responsibility the individual commands a certain degree of control over his milieu. May refers to Kierkegaard and in discussing this type of guilt he mentions chronically ill tubercular patients who become panicky when reassured by well-meaning friends that the disease is due to accidental infection by the tubercle bacillus. “If the disease were an accident, how could they be certain it would
not occur again and again? If, on the other hand, the patient feels that his own pattern of life was at fault … he feels more guilt, to be sure, but at the same time he sees more hopefully what conditions need to be corrected in order to overcome the disease.” Such references are rare. In general psychoanalysts have not given this mechanism the attention it deserves.

This article will be confined to the elaboration of this particular type of guilt mechanism but will not present a comprehensive discussion of the various forms of guilt and their utilization in other ways.

**The Development of Guilt in the Normal Child**

One of the goals of upbringing is to inculcate in the growing child inner controls so that he can be relied upon to deter himself from behavior which may be deleterious to himself and/or society. I consider there to be three stages in the attainment of this goal.

The first, which I refer to as the Pain Stage, is the earliest. During this phase the parent prevents the child from participating in unacceptable behavior by the direct infliction of pain. A two-year-old who runs into the street will not be deterred from so doing by being lectured on the dangers of automobiles. A slap on the backside or strong castigation is much more effective. The child learns to restrain himself because in essence he says to himself, “If I run into the street, my mother or father will hit me—I'd better not.” Living for the moment, as he does, he cannot at that age be expected to say, “I'd better not run into the street because some day I might get hit by a car.”

In the next stage, the Shame Stage, the child's primary deterrent is the fear that should he perform the prohibited act, he will be discovered by significant environmental figures who will reject him. Of importance here is the child's fear of being seen by parents or surrogates, and thereby rejected. This stage coincides with Erikson's second stage in which the primary life conflict to be resolved is that of “Autonomy versus Shame.” Erikson makes reference to the ashamed person's words to his observers, “God damn your eyes.” At this stage, the deterring forces are still externalized; one blushes in front of someone, not alone.

In the final stage, the Self-Blame Stage, or Guilt Stage, the child has incorporated the parental values. Here, the inner rather
than the outer voice deters. This corresponds to Erikson's third stage, “Guilt versus Initiative.” Alone and unobserved, the child suffers the admonition of the voices of the internalized authorities. Once this phase has been reached, the parents can relax their vigil. The child can be trusted to behave for the mechanism is powerful so powerful that it is not only apt to function with exaggerated severity, but lends itself well to the formation of many neurotic and even psychotic mechanisms.

Each stage contains two essential elements: (1) the wrongdoing and (2) the parental punishment. The latter, be it in the form of rejection, withdrawal of love, castigation, chastisement or any of the commonly used disciplinary measures, is the original punitive element in guilt. As the child develops, he encounters an ever-growing horde of figures, each empowered to punish him for his transgressions. Although punitive fear may be repressed or unrealized, it is never completely lost in the guilt reaction.

**Adult Guilt**

The two major components of adult guilt are: (1) ideas and feelings of wrongdoing, and (2) an associated anticipation of punishment.

If the act or thought is considered “wrong” in the opinion of the majority of significant individuals in the guilty person's environment, then the guilt is considered appropriate and its absence abnormal in the psychological and statistical sense. If the consensus of such significant persons is that the act is not blameworthy, then the guilt is inappropriate. Another form of inappropriate guilt is fantasied self-blame, i.e., the individual fancies himself to be responsible for an event for which he is in no way responsible, but if he were, then he would indeed be justified in feeling appropriate guilt. Associated with the ideas of wrongdoing are feelings of worthlessness—“How terrible a person I am for what I have done.”

The anticipation of punishment may not be clearly realized but it is vital to the development of the guilt reaction and is an intrinsic part of it. Anxiety may become a concomitant of this aspect of the guilt reaction when the punishment is vague or if it is not known whether and/or when it will be administered. The individual then finds himself under a sword of Damocles, never knowing when or if it will fall.
The relationship between the application of punishment and the assuaging of the feeling of wrongdoing is complex. For the child, punishment, even in the form of a period of parental displeasure, can be effective in alleviating guilt. The crime has been committed, punishment suffered and the slate is clean. There are children who will ask for the punishment to alleviate the guilt feeling and become distraught if it is not forthcoming.

Things are more complex in the adult. If one feels appropriately guilty, the remorse and self-denigration usually provide sufficient punishment. For the psychopath, punishment is used as a deterrent but not as an assuager of guilt for there is little or none. The masochist may need punishment and the depressive invites it. But in both the alleviation is shortlived and the guilt, arising from neurotic elements having little or nothing to do with an actual transgression, recurs. The guilt which alleviates existential anxiety does not respond to punitive measures.

In general, one can say that for the adult, punishment—even if it be self-denigration-assuages appropriate guilt but not inappropriate guilt because with the latter the individual's feelings of wrongdoing have little or nothing to do with a real transgression but stem from other sources.

The two essential elements in the guilt reaction can be subdivided further according to the person who is considered to have performed the transgression and the one who is to receive the punishment. The four possibilities are: (1) I did it, I will get punished; (2) I did it, he will get punished; (3) He did it, I will get punished; (4) He did it, he will get punished.

The discussion of the inappropiate guilt reaction in the service of handling existential anxiety will be divided into these four categories, according to which of the above paradigms is being utilized.*

I. I Did It, I Will Get Punished.

The role of guilt in the origin of religious belief

Primitive man, working his fields, must have suffered intensely from the frustration and deprivation associated with the capricious destruction of his crops, animals and other possessions by natural phenomena. Helpless as he was in the face of these overwhelming forces

* Unless otherwise specified, the terms “guilt” and “guilt reaction” will henceforth refer to inappropriate guilt.
but armed with a mental capacity greater than any creature that preceded him on the evolutionary scale, he began to think of ways to control these elements. The limitations of his perceptual apparatus, as well as his narrow range of experience, were certainly factors in his anthropomorphizing these forces. His belief that these elements acted as he did, according to laws with which he was familiar, made them more understandable. This was a step toward dealing with them. Now having “visualized” them, the next step was control. Flattery and bribery seem to have been the devices chosen. Elaborate systems of communication and mutual agreements were set up. The essence of these contracts was: I, man, will offer such and such prayers, rituals, sacrifices, etc., to you, God (the word I will use henceforth to refer to the controller of these forces, be he anthropomorphized or not), if you will in return protect me from the devastating effects of natural forces over which you have complete control.

When the particular ritual was followed by respite from devastation, the two sequential events were considered to be related as cause and effect, and the individual assumed that he had correctly divined his particular role in the bargain. When the destruction inevitably recurred, he was left with the choice of giving up the whole scheme as unreasonable or trying to improve upon the method, ferreting out flaws in his behavior, errors of omission, etc. If the need to maintain “control” was great, he would say to himself, “What did I do that was wrong?” Inevitably something would be found, some oversight or some sin (as these omissions became labelled). This omission would be rectified and if such reparations coincided with further abeyance (which the cyclic nature of natural phenomena often permits), then belief in the covenant with God was strengthened. The guilt or feeling of wrongdoing here clearly serves to give impotent man an impression that he can control omnipotent nature through an intermediary with whom he has made a fantasied contract. The punitive element enters when the recurring, devastating natural phenomena are perceived as punishment for man's failure to live up to the terms. Punishment then serves further to strengthen the idea that such a contract exists.

Though many other needs are served by religious belief, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them. Nevertheless, it is clear that the use of religion as a tool to control the uncontrollable is a central one.
Guilt in the Involutional Depression Reaction

guilt has traditionally been related to the unconscious hostility of the deprecated patient. such a relationship is well founded. its subtleties and ramifications have been elaborated upon by freud, abraham and many of their followers.

guilt as a mechanism to alleviate existential anxiety in these depressed patients has not usually been considered. the involutional patient is coming to terms with the painful realization that he is growing older, his life is ebbing away, his opportunities are diminishing; hopes for the future can no longer be realized; his children may no longer need him, and he may soon die. he must attempt to adjust to the inevitability of death.

the involutional depressive reaction must be understood not only as a response to these confrontations but also as a mode of adapting to and dealing with the death problem in a way that is least painful, even when the patient must utilize psychotic mechanisms in order to derive such solace.

one such adaptation (and it is the only aspect of this complex reaction that will be focused upon here) is the delusion of sin that is often seen in these patients. typically, the patient feels guilty about minor transgressions of years past. usually these indiscretions have previously been of no concern. now, suddenly, the patient is obsessed with his worthlessness for having committed what he now considers heinous crimes: “i’m worthless, doctor. i once kissed another man after i was engaged. now i’m being punished for my sin.” “it's that masturbation when i was an adolescent. if i hadn't done that, i know i wouldn't be sick right now.” “god is punishing me and i deserve it. my liver and stomach are rotting and it's probably due to syphilis.”

the obsession with peccadillos of youth and their magnification into abominable iniquities serve the purpose of enabling the patient to account for his aging condition in a way that gives him control. for the implication is-and the patient will often explicitly state-that had he not indulged in these transgressions, he would not now be suffering and deteriorating. the concern is displaced from death to youthful “sins.” the body deterioration is not looked upon as natural, the result of the inevitable, uncontrollable aging process, but as punishment for acts that could have been avoided by the person himself.
the guilt thus serves to alleviate existential anxiety. in treating such patients, to attribute this aspect of depression to hostility that has been redirected from loved ones to oneself may not only be in error but may produce further feelings of guilt, worthlessness and depression. the therapist should aid the patient to become more accepting of the aging process, assist him in finding gratification and new sources of satisfaction and, most important, help him tolerate his existential anxieties.

**Guilt in the Catatonic Schizophrenic Reaction**

Catatonic schizophrenic patients frequently use guilt in the service of gaining control over their uncontrollable milieu.

The schizophrenic is, in fact, most often less capable of coping with harsh reality than healthier people. His feelings of existential impotency are therefore greater. If persecutory paranoid features are present, he feels even more threatened for he is surrounded by his tormentors from whom he is helpless to escape.

The patient in catatonic stupor withdraws, in part, out of fear that his hostile thoughts will be magically realized. To protect himself from such consequences, he dare not talk or even think. Typical utterances include: “Hydrogen bombs have destroyed the country, and it's all my fault.” “That noisy patient in the next room is trying to kill himself, and it's my fault. I wished he would shut up (die) when he was making so much noise last night.” Unable to handle the anxiety associated with death and hydrogen bombs as well as the average person does, the psychotic may adapt by taking control through delusional guilt. He holds the button that sets off the bomb; he maintains control over life and death. But, gratifying as this may be in terms of diminishing existential anxiety, the patient's ego is too weak to assume such weighty obligations and he panics at the awful responsibilities he has assumed. Furthermore, he suffers the superimposed guilt appropriate to the heinous crimes he fancies he has committed. Thus, his attempt to decrease his anxieties results in an increase. Similarly, to the burden of his anxiety-alleviating guilt is added the guilt associated with his delusional atrocities.

As the schizophrenic patient is helped to cope with reality more adequately, he will have less need to gain control through delusional guilt mechanisms.
The Guilt Reaction of Parents of Children with Severe Illnesses

The author has observed that most parents of children with severe illnesses, such as leukemia, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, brain injury, etc., at one time or another exhibit an inappropriate guilt reaction concerning their child's illness. Typical comments include: “It's my fault he got measles encephalitis. I shouldn't have sent him to camp.” “We had sexual relations during the last month of my pregnancy. Maybe that did it.” “God punished me for not going to church.”

Freudian psychoanalytic theory holds that this inappropriate guilt reaction is related to unconscious hostility toward the stricken child and that the illness represents the magic fulfillment of these unconscious hostile wishes—therefore the guilt. Freud\textsuperscript{3,4} considered there to be a constant association between repressed hostility and guilt. This relationship has become so deeply ingrained that many analysts cannot conceive of exaggerated or inappropriate guilt due to any other cause. The fact that one can almost always elicit some hostility toward the person over whose misfortune the patient is guilty has further served to strengthen this connection.

So ubiquitous is this guilt reaction that the author has wondered whether in some of these parents other processes might not be operative. If the classical hypothesis were the only correct one, one would have to assume that most parents are secretly (unconsciously) so hostile that they wish their child to have suffered the catastrophic illness. One plausible alternative explanation is that the guilt might be an attempt to gain some control over this calamity, for personal control is strongly implied in the idea: “It's my fault.” With such guilt the individual is convinced that he had the power to prevent the illness. Also implied is the ability to avert its recurrence in the sick child, its appearance in siblings, and possibly even in the parent himself. The inappropriate guilt may stem then not from hostility but from love and affection, from the desire to see the illness undone and/or prevent it in the future. A study of such parents was conducted by the author.\textsuperscript{5} The results confirmed his thesis that this mechanism was operative.
The Utilization of the Inappropriate Guilt Reaction in Other Psychopathological Symptoms

Following the suicide of a patient in a hospital where the author is affiliated, a few of the suicidal girl's fellow patients became preoccupied with thoughts that her death was their fault. They said: “I realize now that just before she did it she had that certain look in her eyes. I should have realized then what she was going to do and should have told the doctor. If I had done that, she'd be alive today.” “The day before she killed herself, we had an argument and I insulted her. I feel that maybe if I hadn't said those terrible things to her, she'd still be here.” Further inquiry revealed that their guilt was a futile attempt to undo what was irreparably done. It stemmed from affection for the deceased girl rather than the unconscious desire that she be dead.

The patient who reacts to the death of a close one with the obsession that it was his fault may indeed be responding to unconscious hostility. However, the therapist should consider the possibility that the obsession arises out of love, affection, exaggerated dependency or other mechanisms related to the desire that the deceased still be alive.

In summary, it behooves the therapist to consider that although guilt may be hostility, it may also be power!

II. I Did It, He will Get Punished.

Once the individual assumes inappropriate guilt, he must deal with the associated anticipated punishment. When the penalty is vague or the time of its application questionable, additional anxiety appears. When “punishment” is clearly present, as in the case of children suffering severe illnesses, such anxiety is usually absent.

One way of handling the pain or punishment and/or the associated anxiety is to find someone who will accept it in lieu of one's self. Young princes and noblemen of bygone days were provided with whipping boys to serve this purpose. The division of labor was clear-cut. It was the princeling's job to be mischievous and the whipping boy's job to get the punishment. Since few human beings will voluntarily involve themselves in such arrangements man has had to look for other ways to enjoy the benefits of this convenient maneuver. Animals seem to have been more cooperative. The early Jews placed
the sins of the people upon a goat who, on the Day of Atonement, was sent into the wilderness. This scapegoat is still with us—if not in fact, at least in word. Imaginary scapegoats have been the most cooperative and malleable and, therefore, have enjoyed the widest popularity.

One element in the appeal of Christianity to the Jews of two millennia ago was the fact that Christ was purported to have died for all men's sins. Judaism was and still is in many respects a very here-and-now-oriented religion. Little is said about the hereafter. Practical solutions to the problems of living are preferred to future resolutions in the hereafter. The Jew must assume responsibility for his acts and live with his guilt.

Christianity offered a method of alleviating guilt through confession and absolution. In addition, for those who needed tangible evidence of punishment, regardless of where, when and for whom, Christ, dying on the Cross for all men's sins was provided. One of the great attractions of this belief was that one could experience the guilt, i.e. control the elements of the world, and thereby alleviate existential anxiety without suffering the punishment which, one has learned in childhood, will follow wrongdoing.

Religions were the conveyors of appropriate ethical and moral values which, when transgressed, would be associated with appropriate guilt. The Jew had little alternative but to suffer this guilt and attempt to alleviate it through arduous maneuvers. Sometimes there was no way to assuage the guilt. Christianity offered a ready means of absolution and this was, without question, one of the important factors in the great Jewish conversion of two thousand years ago.

It is clear that many other complex factors are involved in the origins of Christianity; the author wishes merely to describe one element which he considers significant and pertinent to the subject under discussion.

The same mechanism is implied in the guilty reactions of some of the parents whose children had severe illnesses. The paradigm would go: I have sinned, therefore my child is suffering. One parent stated, “Because I didn't go to church when I was pregnant, God made my child brain damaged.” Another said, “I'm Catholic and I'm divorced. That's why my child has this (congenital) heart disease.”
III. He Did It, I will Get Punished.

When one uses guilt to diminish existential anxiety, one suffers low self-esteem and self-blame for having committed the unacceptable act, and also punishment together with its associated pain and possible anxiety. One way of lessening such low self-esteem is to project the blame upon another. To say, “He did it,” still puts control into the hands of mankind. Thus, not only are feelings of existential helplessness decreased but the feelings of unworthiness associated with personal guilt are obviated.

The concept of “original sin” is an example of this mechanism. Because Adam disobeyed God and tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, all men must suffer. Christ assumed some of the burden for mankind by accepting punishment for all men's sins. Yet, the taint is said to be deep. Baptism helps in washing away this guilt but the propensity to evil is alleged to be strong because of the “original sin” that in some way is inherited by everyone. This myth, for all its drawbacks, provides an explanation for man's existential pains that is comprehensible to man in terms of his own experiences. The calamities that befall one in life are the result of an act performed by a man (Adam) and the implication is that they could have been prevented by man in ways understandable to man. So great is the need to diminish existential anxiety that one may resort to an explanation that, in effect, makes one man suffer for another man's crimes.

The mother of a child with multiple congenital anomalies stated: “Soon after the baby was born, while I was still on the delivery table, I heard the doctor say to the nurse that the baby was deformed. I must then have fallen asleep or something because I heard God's voice. It was booming with thunder and lightning, just like that picture, The Ten Commandments, when God gave Christ (sic) the Ten Commandments on Top of Mount Sinai. He said, ‘Because of what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, every hundredth child will be deformed.’” Another mother, whose adopted child developed leukemia, blamed it on the natural mother: “Because she was a slut. That's why they took the baby away from her and that's why God gave him leukemia.”

The paranoid psychotic may handle his existential anxieties by making his next door neighbor a Communist spy who is planning to use bacteriological warfare or give hydrogen bomb secrets to the
Chinese. He then feels that he has greater control over these threats than if they were in the hands of people on the other side of the earth. The hospitalized psychotic, complaining that everyone on the ward is part of a Russian plot, also places danger close by and with this displacement greater control is implied.

IV. He Did It. He will Get Punished.

This mechanism still keeps the anxiety-reducing act in the hands of mankind but requires the greatest degree of distortion and projection. One must find the person in the environment (and he cannot be too far away) who is responsible for many of one's own misfortunes, punish him for his deeds and thereby remove the source of one's woe. The essential elements are: Someone must be responsible. He must be stopped from hurting me. It was not just the natural forces of the world or one's own inadequacies that caused the adversities. The explanation is understandable, implies control, and the path to action and solution is defined.

This mechanism is operative in prejudice and reaches its extreme in genocide. The Crusades, the Salem witch trials, the Soviet massacres in the 1930's, Hitler's extermination of the Jews, the Indonesian purges of 1965, and countless other episodes of mass murder and atrocity are complex phenomena with multiple etiological factors. However, they all arose, in part, in response to the concept: “They are responsible for my misfortunes. If they are exterminated, my life will be a much better one.” Whatever realities may be involved in waging war, each belligerent is convinced that his opponent is the cause of many, if not most, of his misfortunes and that his removal will ensure a better life. Although history has repeatedly shown that such is most often not the case, the allure of this simple and most attractive of the four guilt paradigms is profound. Its utilization leaves the individual free of feelings of humiliation and worthlessness associated with guilt and free of the pains and anxieties associated with punishment.

Summary

This paper discusses the utilization of guilt as a defense mechanism in handling the anxieties of existence, specifically the role of guilt as a method of achieving control over the uncontrollable. The use of this type of guilt reaction is demonstrated in a discussion of the
origin of religious beliefs. Its further employment in the involutional depressive reaction and in certain types of schizophrenic reactions is also described. The concept lends greater understanding to the inappropriate guilt reaction of parents of children with severe physical illness. The value of this concept to the understanding of “original sin” and certain other religious phenomena, scapegoatism, prejudice and many neurotic and psychotic symptoms is elaborated upon.

This particular type of guilt reaction is considered to be only one of a multiplicity of factors that are of psychological significance in the above phenomena. Furthermore, the type of guilt focused upon is considered to be only one of many types, but one that has not received the attention it deserves in the psychoanalytic literature.

References