

WHY GUILT?

ITS ROLE IN MORAL LIVING

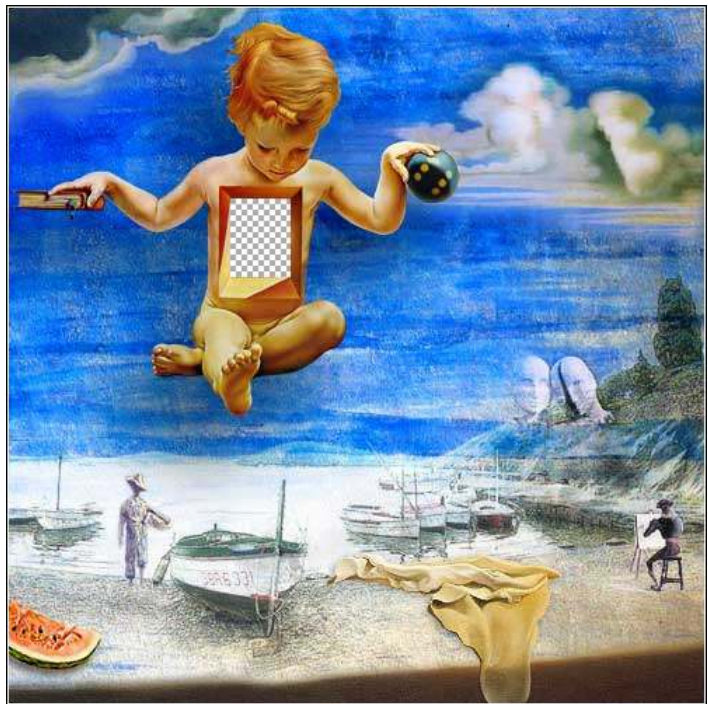
Brian Lewis*

Writer, Piers Paul Read, laments the disappearance of guilt among people today.¹ “I am often left with the feeling”, he says, “that few people feel guilty about anything anymore. Guilt itself seems to have gone out of fashion. It is now considered a bad thing, a hangover from an earlier, judgmental era”. Evidence of this he sees in the fact that certain words no longer feature in our everyday language. “A whore is no longer a whore, or even a prostitute: today’s sex worker must not be made to feel guilty about hiring out his or her body for sex”.

We commonly identify guilt as an unpleasant, perhaps very disturbing, feeling following upon our doing something wrong. Guilt is something associated with conscience. It results from a “bad conscience”. Most people would agree with that, but it is important to distinguish further between a superficial or false guilt, arising from childhood experiences, and authentic guilt, which belongs when maturity is reached.

Early Moral Development

The goal of moral development is the formation of character and an important ingredient of this is the growth of an authentic conscience. Parents especially have an indispensable role in this process in teaching their child to obey them, even though the child may not see why some things are to be done and others avoided. Commands and prohibitions are re-enforced by the promise of reward or threat of punishment. Children may obey out of fear of punishment but most of all they want to be loved and approved and they do not want to jeopardise this. They come to absorb the rules and standards of their parents, and anyone else who has control of them such as teachers, school counsellors and chaplains; they



Courtesy "jef safi", flickr CC

conform to these rules and standards lest love and approval be withdrawn. The source and guide of our behaviour as children is thus from outside ourselves, from some external authority. We behave the way we do, not because at this stage we value the rules and prohibitions in themselves, but because they are imposed upon us by authority figures.

If a child is naughty he/she feels guilty. This feeling of guilt together with the shame thus experienced is not unhealthy. It has its due place in the child's moral development,

* Brian Lewis holds a doctorate in theology and spent most of his work-life teaching moral theology. Since retirement he has devoted himself to writing on ethical issues.

¹ Piers Paul Read, “Has Guilt Gone out of Fashion?”, *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (August 28-29 2010), p.18-19.

because in this manner the external voice of authority moves in the direction of becoming internalised in the child's mind and heart. This process is likely to go on at least over the first ten or more years of the child's life. Gradually moral values begin to be appreciated for their own sake and the stage is set for the development of good moral habits or virtues. The child's character thus begins to be shaped and formed and the child is empowered in due course to make conscience decisions based on his/her own personal values and convictions and not just because they emanate from external authority. Emphasis has thus shifted from parental and social control to personal responsibility for what one does or does not do. Many "musts" remain in adulthood but now they arise from a sense of obligation to grow as a person in oneself and to think of others and the common good.

Transition to Adulthood

In the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, notably in the teenage years, the young person faces other external pressures to conform from peers and more and more



Photo: '5150fantast', CC flickr

from the broader society. In the process of refining their own personal convictions and seeking to make their own decisions, teenagers often tend to reject the regulations and standards set by parents and other earlier authority figures and to replace them at least in part with rules and standards proposed by their peer group. They may accept these and conform to them simply for fear of being excluded from the group. Psychologists of the Freudian school refer to this phenomenon as the *superego*, by which they mean the repository of all the "shoulds" and "must do's" coming from parents, teachers, police, ministers of religion and so on throughout the process of growing up. These authoritative commands act as a sort of censor sitting in judgment upon a young person's actions by using the feeling of guilt for non-compliance as a powerful tool.

The superego cannot, I think, be a unified voice. It is rather a conglomeration of conflicting voices, vying for a hearing and varying in power at different periods of growing up. Recalling his school days at a private boarding school, Read says that he was more fearful of ruffling the feathers of the boys of the senior form than he was of the threat of hell and punishment taught by the monks. The strongest among the voices of the superego tend to prevail. It is not surprising that the teenage years are tumultuous for many and often highlighted by rebelliousness. The key point is that in the transition between the child and the adult it is the strongest voice in the superego that tells us we are good when we conform to its injunctions and that we are bad when we flout its authority over us. The fear of feeling the pain of guilt helps us to conform rather than disobey. This guilt would still seem to be rather superficial and could be unhealthy if it proves an

obstacle to further development towards maturity as a person. The quality of the feeling of guilt here would depend on the morality of the conduct commanded by the superego and the likelihood of this being interiorised by the person concerned.

Moral Maturity

It is a matter of experience that physical, mental and moral maturity do not always coincide. We may say that moral maturity has been reached when the person is able to make moral choices that arise from personal conviction of the inner value of the course of action to be followed or shunned. As we approach moral maturity the emphasis gradually

istock photo.

shifts from the power of authority figures in our lives to personal responsibility for our moral decisions. The directives and rules of conduct we have absorbed from others are either rejected or now become part of our own inner attitudes and convictions. Internalised values, beliefs and convictions, together with the good moral habits we have formed, lead to right decisions of a mature conscience.



Although some psychologists have made the grave mistake of identifying the superego with moral conscience, they are by no means the same thing. Neither is superego guilt to be confused with genuine guilt. John Glaser deals with the distinction succinctly and clearly.² He says: “The superego is *static*: does not grow, does not learn; cannot function creatively in a new situation – merely repeats a basic command. It is *past* oriented: primarily concerned with cleaning up the record with regard to past acts.” Moral conscience is “*dynamic*: an awareness and sensitivity to value which develops and grows; a mind-set which can precisely function in a new situation. It is *future*-oriented: creative; sees the past as having a future and helping to structure this future as a better future.”³ He adds that the superego often involves a *great disproportion* between feelings of guilt and the value at issue, because the amount of guilt depends more on the authority “disobeyed” rather than on the weight of the moral value at stake. In regard to conscience the experience of *guilt is proportionate* to the degree of knowledge and freedom one has as well as the weight of the value in question.

It must be admitted that the transition from the dominance of the superego in one’s life to the functioning of a mature and authentic conscience is not always successfully achieved. Genetic make-up, misguided parental training, the inculcation of false moral values, may inhibit moral development and the growth of a mature conscience. Some remain all their lives under the domination of a strong superego. Their moral life is necessarily stunted. Their moral conduct appears forced, lived in a blind adherence to principle without warmth or joy. If the proportion between the guilt experienced and the value at issue is excessive, neurosis or worse can result.

² John W. Glaser, “Conscience and Superego: A Key Distinction”, *Theological Studies* 32(1971)

³ “Conscience and Superego”, p.38

However, despite the negative associations it has, the superego can still have a positive role in moral living. In mature adults it functions positively when it is integrated into an authentic conscience to relieve us from making a fresh decision in situations of common occurrence on which we have already judged what we ought to do. As Richard Gula points out⁴, “the difference between how the superego functions in the child and in the mature adult is one of degree rather than kind. In concrete cases the superego and the moral conscience do not exist as pure alternatives in undiluted form. We experience a mixture of these in our deliberations”. An important aspect of moral education is to assist the child to grow out of dependence on the superego and in its place to foster a truly personal manner of decision making. For to live a moral life we have to be able to judge and to decide freely and responsibly *for* ourselves (not of course *by* ourselves).

Indeed it is precisely in the acts of personal moral decision making that morality strictly speaking is located. Although a mature conscience is prepared to take advice and seek counsel in complex cases, in the last analysis it accepts responsibility for the decision. Martin Buber's tale of Rabbi Zusya illustrates that the integrity of conscience ultimately lies in being true to oneself. The Rabbi said as he was approaching death, “In the world to come, I shall not be asked: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ Instead I shall be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

The Role of Guilt in Adult Moral Life

The superego automatically induces guilt feelings whenever its injunctions are violated, and to the extent that it continues into adult life it may still cause feelings of guilt. This guilt shows itself in a sense of anxiety at feeling threatened by something unexplained (the remnant of parental threats of punishment).⁵ One feels helpless, alone and somehow diminished by a loss of self-esteem. There follows the instinctive need to escape retribution, perhaps by looking to some quasi-magical rites, like compulsively wiping off door knobs or whatever one has touched, or formulae to placate the authority, perhaps by making a confession of wrongdoing to some authority figure, perhaps by self-punishment in some form. Guilt feelings of this nature are irrational. It is a false guilt, which can in severe cases appear in the form of masochism (hatred of self) or sadism (hatred of others).

Genuine guilt on the other hand arises from the violation of a mature and authentic conscience. Gordon Allport regards it as beyond doubt that from the psychological point of view conscience is a genuine sense of self-esteem and appropriate striving. “Indeed”, he says, “we may safely say that, except for a few ‘psychopathic personalities’, conscience is a normal development within every human being. It is an indicator - something like a fever thermometer - that tells us some activity on our part is disrupting or has disrupted an important aspect of our self-image.”⁶ Summing up a long moral tradition, Aquinas attributes three functions to the judgment of conscience: to testify, to bind or instigate, and also to accuse or reprehend.⁷ He states:

In the first place, according as we recognise that we have done or not done something (and he cites Eccles 7:23), conscience is said to *render testimony*. In the second place, insofar as we judge that something should or should not be done, conscience is said to *instigate* or *bind*. In the third place, according as we judge that something done is well or badly done, conscience is said to *excuse* or *accuse*, or to *reprehend*.

4 See Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (Paulist Press: New York, 1989), p.128-129

5 See George V. Lobo, *Christian Living according to Vatican II* (Theological Publications of India: Bangalore, 1980), p.319-21

6 Gordon Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1963), p.134

7 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 13

Conscience, based on the sense of moral value that is innate in us, calls us to account when we have done wrong: when we have acted against persons and ultimately against our better self, and, in a religious sense, when we have sinned against the love of God. For this reason conscience is said to accuse or chastise us, like a temperature gauge indicating the disruption we have brought about. We feel bad, we experience a sense of guilt that leads us to remedy the situation, to seek not retribution but reconciliation with others we have hurt, with ourselves whose self-image we have smudged and so with the God who is love. We are summoned by our conscience to genuine sorrow, which both heals and inspires to make a better fist of things henceforward. Genuine guilt is rational, it is healthy and renewing, it looks to the future because it learns from the past.

Courtesy "jef safi", flickr CC



Conscience develops from within ourselves; it is not, as Freud and Nietzsche wanted it to be, an artificial product of our environment. The words of the Second Vatican Council are worth recalling: “Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.16). But conscience is not entirely independent from outside influences. In conscience we decide *for* ourselves but not *by* ourselves. In complex matters we need the help of others wiser and more experienced than ourselves.

We all have a general sense of moral values but in regard to particular issues we may be quite ignorant. A mature conscience must be an *informed* conscience in the sense, not only of a conscience with a grasp of fundamental ethical principles, but also of a conscience informed about the application of moral principles to particular situations, about which there may be a great difference of opinion in the community. Past generations argued strongly about the morality of the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima or more recently the war in Iraq. Today the morality of euthanasia, the Afghanistan war and how we should address climate change are more likely to be the fillip for intense discussion.

Society may often provide sound guidance in matters of morality, but it would be a mistake to rely unduly on what is commonly accepted by the permissive society in which we live. Society is not always a reliable guide in ethics. Gen Y may perhaps not see living together before marriage as ethically questionable, whatever their parents may think or the Gospel teach, because all their peers are doing it. We are no doubt well rid of the repressive strictures of Victorian society and the crippling guilt, especially in sexual matters, that tormented many Christians of an earlier generation, but some contemporary social standards may well be excessively permissive.

As Read says: “An evening watching television will show how the old seven deadly sins of pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth have been nullified by the ‘because you’re worth it’, ‘go for it’, celebrity chef, *Sex and the City*, couch potato culture of our

times". And he goes on to suggest that our society substitutes "a new list of seven deadly sins: racism, misogyny, homophobia, elitism, smoking, obesity and religious belief... So guilt is still with us".⁸

It remains true that because of social pressure conscience is sometimes dulled, distorted or even made to vanish altogether, and then little or no guilt is experienced. This would seem to be the case with the many paedophiles who display no evidence of guilt over their crimes, whatever may be the root cause of their apparent suppression of conscience over their aberrant behaviour in the first place.

There are many stages in the development of a mature conscience and few reach perfection in the delicacy of moral judgment. The presence of guilt is a reality even in modern life. Guilt has not gone out of fashion. It is important for the health of our moral life that we recognise that undue anxiety and depression can result from a false sense of guilt and perhaps seek counselling to rid ourselves of it. Genuine guilt does not provoke fear and should make a positive contribution to our human flourishing if it is taken seriously and leads to improvement in our relationships. The inference from the claim that guilt seems to have vanished from contemporary society, could only be that many today have lost the sense of sin, have no apparent consciousness of wrongdoing and so must have consciences that are darkened, distorted or even suppressed. It is possible for conscience to become dulled in regard to some, perhaps many, moral issues, but not, it seems to me, in regard to the whole gamut of morality. There are relatively few people, if indeed any, who can be judged to be completely and utterly amoral. ♦

⁸ Read, "Has Guilt Gone out of Fashion?" p.19