

# Guilt-Free Morality

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How essential is the complex emotion of guilt to morality? Can we define moral standards, in contrast with other sorts of standards, as those standards it is appropriate to feel guilt for violating? Is it essential to being a moral person to be disposed to feel guilt if one takes oneself to have acted morally wrongly?

## 1. Proposed Connections between Morality and Guilt Feelings

Here are some of the ways in which some philosophers and psychologists have taken the emotion of guilt to be essential to morality.

One relatively central idea is that guilt feelings are *warranted* if an agent knows that he or she has acted morally wrongly. It might be said that in such a case the agent has a strong *reason* to feel guilt, that the agent *ought* to have guilt feelings, that the agent is *justified* in having guilt feelings and *unjustified* in not having guilt feelings. It might be said that it would be *immoral* of an agent not to have feelings of guilt after realizing that he or she has acted morally wrongly or that only an agent with *bad character* would not have such feelings.

Some think that there is a *definitional* connection between morality and guilt feelings. In one version of this idea, moral standards are by definition those standards that a person is warranted in feeling guilty for violating. Or, it might be said that a particular agent's moral principles are by definition those principles the agent *would feel guilty* for violating. Alternatively, an agent's moral principles might be distinguished from other principles as those principles for the violation of which the agent takes guilt *to be warranted*.

Another thought is that all *normal* adults are susceptible to guilt feelings. In this view, children who do not acquire such a susceptibility to guilt feelings will not acquire a moral sense. Psychopaths are adults who, among other things, have no such moral sense and are not susceptible to guilt.

A further thought is that moral motivation is at least in part motivation to avoid guilt feelings for acting immorally. This thought might explain the previous idea, because it would imply that

someone not susceptible to guilt feelings would not be susceptible to moral motivation and would therefore lack a moral sense.

Are guilt feelings central to morality in any of these ways? In order to answer this question, we need to consider what are to count as guilt feelings.

## 2. Guilt Feelings

Consider amoral psychopathic Mary. While she believes that it is morally wrong to steal a book from the library, that consideration does not motivate her at all and she steals a book without regret or concern. She has no guilt feelings about her action even though she *feels that* she is guilty of stealing and so in that respect *feels as if* she is guilty. It appears to Mary that she is guilty of acting wrongly.<sup>1</sup>

If that were enough for Mary to have guilt feelings, many but not all of the views mentioned in the previous section of this paper would be trivially true. Moral principles are trivially principles that one is guilty of violating if one violates them. If one knows one has acted wrongly, one is trivially warranted in feeling that one is guilty of having acted wrongly.

Obviously, psychopaths like Mary would be trivially susceptible to guilt feelings of this sort as long as they were able in this sense to feel that they were guilty of doing something morally wrong.

So, let us assume that guilt feelings are not simply feeling that one is guilty of something, but involve something more. What more?

Nontrivial guilt feelings have to be real feelings—with affect—indeed, with negative affect. To feel guilt is to feel bad.

They may involve agent regret, but that by itself is not enough for guilt. One regrets many things one has done without feeling guilty about them. For example, one may regret having moved one's queen to a particular square in a game of chess.

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<sup>1</sup> Greenspan (1992) identifies guilt feelings with feeling as if one is guilty. Darwall (2007) endorses this identification.

And it is not enough for feeling nontrivial guilt that one regrets having done something morally wrong. Psychopathic Mary can have such regret even though she has no guilt feelings. (I consider nonpsychopathic examples below.)

One conception of guilt feelings identifies them with feelings of remorse, involving deep regret, painful humiliation, distress, self-punishment, and/or self-flagellation. Some theorists suggest that guilt feelings also involve anxiety (e.g. Freud 1962) and perhaps the thought that one deserves punishment (e.g. Kaufmann 1973).

Given this more serious understanding of guilt feelings, the alleged connections between morality and guilt feelings mentioned in the previous section may seem to have some plausibility without being trivial. Perhaps it is true that guilt feelings in this sense are warranted if one acts wrongly; but on the other hand, it might be argued that such feelings are never warranted. Maybe there is a definitional connection between morality and guilt feelings in this sense, but maybe not. It may or may not be true that normal nonpsychopathic adults are susceptible to guilt feelings in this sense and that children who fail to acquire a susceptibility to such feelings will not develop a moral sense. And maybe moral motivation is motivation to avoid such guilt feelings, or maybe not.

Are there are good reasons to believe in any or all of the suggested connections between morality and guilt feelings, so understood?

### 3. Are There Good Reasons to Think Nontrivial Guilt Feelings Are Central to Morality?

Two sorts of reasons have been offered for thinking guilt feelings are central to morality: empirical psychological reasons and more speculative conceptual reasons.

#### **Empirical Psychological Reasons**

Relevant empirical psychological research includes studies of psychopaths and studies of certain aspects of moral development in children. There are also studies indicating that sometimes guilt can be a better motivator of other-regarding action than empathy.

To begin our discussion of allegedly relevant psychological research, consider that lack of susceptibility to nontrivial guilt feelings is standardly taken to be one of the defining criteria of

psychopathy (Hare 1993). It would of course be rash to conclude that all normal nonpsychopathic adults are susceptible to guilt feelings. From the fact that *all* psychopaths lack susceptibility to guilt feelings, it does not follow that *only* psychopaths lack guilt feelings. By itself, the point about psychopaths is compatible with the existence of moral adults who are not susceptible to guilt feelings.

Similarly, children born with certain brain deficits, or who suffer certain brain injuries, lack susceptibility to guilt and are unable to acquire morality. It would be a mistake to conclude from this that normal children without such deficits who do acquire morality must be susceptible to guilt feelings. By itself, the relevant evidence about brain deficits or injuries in children is obviously compatible with the existence of children who acquire morality without becoming susceptible to guilt feelings. Such abnormalities or injuries affect other emotions and capacities in addition to guilt that are needed for acquiring morality (Damasio, 2003, pp. 152-155). Indeed there appears to be no evidence at all for the claim that children cannot become moral beings without being susceptible to guilt.

In the following section of this paper, we will consider anecdotal evidence that there are normal moral adults who are not and perhaps never have been susceptible to guilt. But before we get to that, let us consider also an example from psychological research that indicates a respect in which guilt is a better motivator of other-regarding action than empathy or sympathy.<sup>2</sup>

(Carlsmith and Gross 1969) studied subject's motivation to help

- (1) someone to whom they have caused distress,
- (2) someone to whom they have seen someone else cause distress, and
- (3) someone who has witnessed them cause someone else distress.

The very interesting result was that subjects tended to be more inclined to help in case (3) than in the other cases!

Notice however that this experiment does not address the question whether moral acts are motivated by the goal of avoiding guilt feelings. It is concerned with the question whether feel-

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Starkey called this research to my attention.

ing guilt can make people more likely to be helpful to others whom they have not treated wrongly.

Furthermore, the sense in which subjects “feel guilt” in this experiment is the first quite weak sense considered above: *feeling that one is guilty*. People who are thinking that they have just been guilty of causing distress to someone *X* are more likely than otherwise to help someone else *Y*.

So, this sort of experiment is actually irrelevant to the concerns of the present paper.

### **Relatively Speculative More Philosophical and Conceptual Reasons**

Philosophers often suppose that a connection to guilt feelings is obviously definitive of or essential to morality, without the need for any evidence or argument.

For example, Brandt (1967) takes the following to be definitive of a person’s thinking sincerely that any action of kind *F* is wrong:

If he thinks he has just performed an *F*-action, he feels guilty or remorseful or uncomfortable about it, unless he thinks he has some excuse—unless, for instance, he knows that at the time of action he did not think his action would be an *F*-action. “Guilt” (etc.) is not to be understood as implying some special origin such as interiorization of parental prohibitions, or as being a vestige of anxiety about punishment. It is left open that it might be an unlearned emotional response to the thought of being the cause of the suffering of another person. Any feeling that must be viewed simply as anxiety about anticipated consequences, for one’s self or a person to whom one is attached, is not however, to count as a “guilt” feeling.

Brandt later (1979, pp. 164-170) develops the same point, saying for example that a person’s “moral code is evidenced by his autonomous guilt feelings—those arising from failure to act in accord with his own moral motivation” (p. 167). When I objected to this in a review of Brandt’s book (Harman 1982), he wrote to me, “I think a moral system does need guilt-feelings” (letter of December 18, 1983). And Brandt (1992) continues to insist that “a person’s morality consists of intrinsic aversions to some types of actions and corresponding dispositions to feel guilty and to disapprove of others and to think these attitudes are justified in some way” (p. 7).

Similarly, Williams (1985) says as if the point is obvious, needing no further evidence or argument, perhaps as definitive of morality or of being a moral agent: “if an agent never felt [re-

morse or self-reproach or guilt], he would not belong to the morality system or be a full moral agent in its terms (p. 177).”

According to Gibbard (1992) it is definitive of moral standards that, “if an agent violates [them] because of inadequate motivation to abide by them, guilt is warranted on his part, and resentment on the part of others” (202), where the relevant sort of guilt consists in “agonized” feelings of “self blame” (201).

And Greenspan (1995) offers a subtle account of the teaching of “ought” in terms of anticipatory guilt, by getting a child to feel guilt for acting in certain ways. In her view, the distinctive motivational force of moral considerations arises from this connection with anticipatory guilt.

As far as I can tell, however, the proposed necessary connections between morality and guilt are arrived at through introspection and are accepted merely because they seem plausible to the authors, presumably, because of their own experiences of guilt. The authors may expect their proposed necessary connections to seem plausible to their readers also, but that is just speculation on their part and they offer no evidence that it is so. In fact the suggestion that such connections are necessary will not seem plausible to *all* their readers. They do not seem plausible to me, for example, presumably because my own experience has been different. In any event, the issue is not whether such necessary connections seem plausible but whether they are in fact necessary aspects of morality.

#### 4. Reasons to Think Guilt Feelings Are Not Central to Morality

It cannot be an *a priori* definitional truth that an agent can have moral principles only if the person is susceptible to nontrivial guilt feelings, nor can it be an *a priori* definitional truth that all moral agents are susceptible to such guilt feelings. It is easy at least to *imagine* a moral person with moral principles who is not susceptible to the relevant sort of guilt feelings. Choose someone *A* you take to be a highly moral person. Then imagine another person *B* who acts and reacts in the same way as *A*, with the (possible) exception of not being susceptible to guilt for doing something wrong. *B* regrets wrong actions and is determined to do better, but does not suffer remorse, feel agony, or engage in self-punishment. Clearly, this imagined agent can nevertheless be quite moral and can have moral principles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s (1985) fully virtuous person and Nietzsche’s (1966) overman are also possible examples.

Furthermore, there seem actually to be many moral people with moral principles but no susceptibility to nontrivial guilt feelings. To mention one example, as far as I can tell, I am not susceptible to nontrivial guilt feelings, yet I have moral principles and seem (at least to myself) to be a relatively moral person. When I have discussed this topic with various colleagues, many of them say they too do not feel nontrivial guilt. Some say that they, like me, have never experienced guilt. Others say that they used to feel guilt but have in one or another way been able to get over being susceptible to guilt.

I do not find that the moral quality of people I know varies with their susceptibility to nontrivial guilt. Some of those who seem capable of great guilt feelings seem to me to be not very moral at all and some who seem not to be susceptible to nontrivial guilt seem very moral.

### **Moral Motivation**

How can one acquire morality and moral motivation if not by developing a susceptibility to feel guilt for doing something wrong?

To some extent one picks up the local morality from the people around. This is not necessarily by instruction. Exposure to others may be enough.

One does not always come to accept exactly the moral standards one has been exposed to. Adam Smith (1976) and others observe that one tends to pick up an idealized version of the morality one is exposed to when young. One may start out more idealistic than other people and even end up with a very personal morality that one does not take oneself to share with other people.

How do people tell what is right or wrong in particular cases? Sometimes they react emotionally. For some, thinking of a particular course of action produces an anticipatory feeling of guilt. This tells them that such a course of action would be wrong. But other emotional reactions can play an important role, for example, empathy with others and concern for moral principle.

In Adam Smith's version, one acquires morality by developing a habit of imagining how an impartial sympathetic spectator would react to one's actions. One does this by pretending to be such a spectator and seeing how one reacts. As this pretense becomes habitual, one acquires the

sympathetic emotional responses of such a spectator and so comes to care more or less directly about other people and about following moral principles.<sup>4</sup>

Even without any prospect of agonized guilt for failing to do what is right, one might do the right thing anyway out of concern for the people affected, or for other reasons such as concern for principle, not because one would feel bad for not doing what is right.

There is of course an issue here about how motivation works. Some theorists take psychological hedonism (Moore 2004) seriously. That is the view that motivation is simply a matter of aiming at things one expects will give one “positive affect,” and avoiding things that will give one “negative affect.” Psychological hedonism implies that people do not care directly about others, that they care about others only to the extent that they think it is likely they themselves will probably benefit from what happens. But it seems to me that I do care directly about many people, including my wife and children, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and many others. I have trouble believing that the reason I want to do something for my children, for example, is that I will feel good for doing that, since it seems to me that I do not care as much about my feeling good as I care about their feeling good.<sup>5</sup>

### **Desirability of Guilt?**

Of course, the fact that there are moral agents with moral standards who are not susceptible to guilt (if this is a fact), does not establish that it is not reasonable or desirable or warranted to be subject to guilt. Indeed, one might argue as follows.

When somebody violates the moral code, others may get angry at them and that anger is sometimes warranted or reasonable. So, isn't one reasonable and warranted in getting angry with oneself for violating the moral code? And isn't that to have the relevant sort of guilt?<sup>6</sup>

Now, on the one hand, it can be useful for people to have a disposition to get angry at wrongdoers. Such a disposition can serve as a useful deterrent of wrongful behavior. It does not follow that it is equally useful to be susceptible to guilt. If there are people who have adequate motivation to act morally without being susceptible to nontrivial guilt feelings, which there seem to be,

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<sup>4</sup> For more about this see Harman (1986).

<sup>5</sup> See Feinberg (1984).

<sup>6</sup> Here I am indebted to Philip Johnson-Laird.

guilt does not have to be reasonable for them even if having a disposition to outrage and anger at others for their wrongful acts is reasonable.

### **Appropriate or Warranted Guilt?**

Gibbard (2006), says,

Here is something we may perhaps accept as truistic, as not in need of debate and discussion: Guilt over something one has done is warranted just in case outrage over it is warranted on the part of impartial observers.

I say, on the contrary, that we cannot accept this “as truistic and not in need of debate and discussion.”

Of course, an attitude is sometimes appropriate or warranted even if, all things considered, it would be undesirable to have that attitude. A certain belief might be warranted by one’s evidence even though it would be better, all things considered, not to have that belief and to believe the opposite. So, the fact that feeling guilt would not be useful on a given occasion cannot by itself establish that one is not warranted in feeling guilt on that occasion.<sup>7</sup> Whether one is *warranted* in feeling guilt for doing something wrong is of course a normative issue and my normative view is that guilt is not reasonable, appropriate, or warranted for people who have adequate motivation to act morally without being susceptible to guilt feelings.

### **Social Function of Guilt and Fairness**

A possible worry about a morally good person who is not susceptible to nontrivial guilt feelings is that other people often expect one to feel guilt for doing something wrong. If one does not, they may get even angrier at one than they would otherwise. One’s showing guilt can allow others to be less angry with one, because one takes on some of the anger oneself. This is connected with what is sometimes referred to as “the social function of guilt” (Baumeister, et al. 1994).

The admirable people I have in mind feel regret about moral mistakes, but not guilt. In order not to incur the wrath of others, they can apologize, say that they are sorry for what they have done, try to make amends, and sincerely promise not to do it again. Furthermore, as moral peo-

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am indebted to Nicholas Sturgeon and Elizabeth Harman.

ple, they will not pretend to feel guilt and pretend to beat themselves up about it, since that would involve wrongfully misrepresenting themselves.

### **Guilt and Fairness**

A possibly related further worry<sup>8</sup> is that it can be unfair for someone to go unpunished for a wrongful act. So, it might be argued that, in the absence of external punishment, it is fairer for the wrongful agent to feel punishing guilt than not and certainly not enough for the wrongful agent just to pretend to feel guilt!

I suggest that morally good people with no disposition to feel guilt will not want to benefit from any wrongful acts and so will try to make amends in some other way than by feeling or pretending to feel guilt.

### **5. Why It Is Better Not to Be Susceptible to Guilt**

Non-trivial guilt is of course a negative experience that can make people miserable. It might be worth paying this price if susceptibility to guilt made people act better. But there is no evidence that susceptibility to nontrivial guilt is needed to make people act morally.

As noted above, some psychological studies (Carlsmith and Gross, 1969) can be described as showing that guilt better motivates moral behavior than mere altruism. But as already noted, these studies did not explicitly discuss nontrivial guilt. They showed certain effects of feeling that one is guilty of a moral infraction. Furthermore, as discussed, the studies were not concerned with motivation to avoid an act for which an agent might feel guilt. They were concerned with how feeling that one is guilty of acting wrongly toward *A* can lead one to help someone else *B*.

Furthermore, consider the question whether those otherwise normal nonpsychopathic people who not subject to nontrivial guilt feelings act more wrongly than other people who are subject to nontrivial guilt feelings. I see no reason to think the otherwise normal people not subject to guilt are as a group less moral than those who are subject to guilt.

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<sup>8</sup> Here I am indebted to Eldar Shafir.

## Punishment versus Reward

How can children be brought up to be morally good without being susceptible to guilt? Perhaps it is enough for loving parents to refrain from punishment while helping children to develop sympathy and empathy with others. The thought is that children will internalize punishment only as a way of anticipating and avoiding external punishment.

It may seem hard to believe that setting a good example for one's children and praising their morally good actions would be sufficient for them to develop into good moral agents rather than spoiled brats. Clearly, when children are punished for acting wrongly, they tend not to repeat the wrong act the next time. On the other hand, children who are praised for doing the right thing, tend not to act so well in the future.

But it is a fallacy to treat this observation as an argument that punishment is needed and praise is ineffective, the fallacy of ignoring the statistical phenomenon of *regression toward the mean*. Quite apart from the actual merits of punishment and reward, exceptionally bad actions are likely to be followed by less bad actions and exceptionally good actions are likely to be followed by less good actions.

Unfortunately, people tend not to understand the purely statistical explanation of the fact that extreme behaviors tend to be followed by less extreme behaviors.<sup>9</sup>

### Gotcha!

Consider the plight of those morally good people I am addressing who are susceptible to feelings of guilt when they perceive that they have transgressed against the moral code. Having absorbed my argument here, the next time they violate the moral code, they feel guilty about it and then, remembering my arguments, they feel guilty for feeling guilty!<sup>10</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that guilt is not essential to morality. There are morally excellent people who are not subject to guilt. I am inclined to think that it is even within the realm of possibility that anyone could be brought up without such a disposition to feel guilt.

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<sup>9</sup> The point has been famously discussed by Kahneman and Tversky (1973, pp. 250-251).

<sup>10</sup> Philip Johnson-Laird noted this possibility.

I agree of course that many moral people are susceptible to guilt. While I think that is a defect in them, I agree that they may be in other respects morally good.

It is widely believed that susceptibility to guilt is necessary for moral motivation. While I agree that susceptibility to guilt can serve in this way as a moral motivation, I say it is possible and better not to need that motivation.

I have been objecting to the sort of guilt that involves internalized self-punishment, the sort of guilt that many take to provide an important motive for moral actions. I find that there are morally good people not susceptible to such guilt. I conclude that susceptibility to such guilt is not needed for moral motivation, that it is incorrect to define moral standards as those standards it is appropriate to feel guilt for violating, that people can lack susceptibility to guilt without being psychopaths, that it would be a good thing to try to bring up children in such a way that they are not susceptible to such guilt, and that it would be a good thing for those moral people who feel guilt to try to eliminate it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to my colleagues Philip Johnson-Laird and Eldar Shafir and students in our course, PSY 237/PHI 237, "The Psychology and Philosophy of Rationality." I have benefitted from discussion with David Velleman and from comments by Charles Starkey, Elizabeth Harman, and two anonymous readers.

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