



## Guilt: anthropological and psychoanalytic aspects with reference to Romano Biancoli's work

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### Foreword

Guilt feelings may be considered a subtle form of death. Time passes by slowly, tearing us to pieces. We foresee a sentence already written out and unalterable. The event is unredeemable, almost like an ancient and cursed action. We are waiting for an impending punishment. This is the existential discomfort we find in our patients. The aim of this paper is to analyse the historical and cultural origins of this feeling and its clinical manifestations.

### Introduction

'Guilt' is a polysemous term but, for the sake of this paper, we will simply refer to its meaning of "an action or omission which goes against the ethical or religious law." In psychoanalysis, the stress does not fall on the guilt itself as much as it does on the feeling of guilt, the affect following the violation of a rule. 'Guilt' is strongly linked with 'responsibility'. A person causing an action which could have damaged somebody, even in a broad sense, is automatically labelled as guilty. Being guilty implies being condemnable, reprehensible. And is not condemnation or – even better – a recurring and ruthless self-condemnation what we find in psychopathologies characterized by this feeling? However, it is not universal, it changes from place to place. It is, indeed, typical of Western societies. You rarely find such a feeling in the East or in Africa. When it comes up there – if it comes up at all – its importance is

strongly mitigated and sometimes even replaced by other feelings. The feeling of guilt is a typical aspect of our society and, we might say, of Judeo-Christian culture.

### Guilt in Western man

Evelyne Pewzner, in her book *L'homme coupable: La folie et la faute en Occident* (Guilty Man: Folly and Guilt in Western Culture) claims that the most characteristic pathologies in Western cultures and societies are obsessive neurosis, which consists in worrying about the body's dirtiness and a possible internal contamination – which entails countless purification rituals – and melancholia, whose characteristics are a self-accusatory victimization and the fruitless search for punishment for some inexpiable guilt. According to classical psychoanalytic theory, if in a case of obsessive neurosis the Ego tries to defend itself from the Super-Ego's accusations, which have no grounds since they refer to repressed aggressive impulses (which the subject is not aware of), in a case of depression the Ego falls prey to guilt because the object of the Super-Ego's accusations has become part of the Ego, as a consequence of an identification (Galimberti, 1999). The conflict between Ego and Super-Ego is constant in these two pathologies. The feeling of guilt is very strong and is the basis of these pathologies. However, this does not happen in non-Western cultures, where mental disease takes different forms. Why is that? In order to answer this



question, one needs to look for the common ground between these two pathologies, which can only be found in an anthropological perspective by relating them to the culture they developed in and to the symbols of Christianity. These are original sin, the internalization of guilt, the ideas of sacrifice, expiation and redemption. Guilt is not present at all in Eastern or African religions, neither are melancholia or obsessive neurosis to be found at a psychopathological level. However, a feeling of shame is deeply rooted in the culture, and paranoia is present at a psychopathological level. In Japan, for instance, there is a peculiar mixture of shame and guilt (whose full meaning a single word is still not able to convey), which implies 'feeling guilty towards a person on whom I depend since I made him ashamed of my behaviour.'

The sense of guilt as the basis for our moral life is surely a more Jewish than Christian point of view, although Christianity made it worse afterwards by chastising sexuality (and the flesh in general) more than Judaism ever did. In Judaism, guilt comes from disobeying your Father and not respecting your Brother. It were undoubtedly Christian theologians in the Middle Ages who identified the marital orgasm as the moment in which the original sin is passed on. It is also true that in the Hebrew vision there is no concept similar to Christian sin. Still, the presence of an original sin is purely Jewish (Caruso).

If we look at the foundation of the feeling of guilt in the so-called founding cultures – Greek, Jewish and Christian – we can find the basis of what will become the structure of Western anthropology, whose foundations are Christianity, on the one hand, and progress on the other, derived in turn from Greek and Roman influences. This complex heritage is strongly linked with less universal ideas, such as the supremacy of reason and human control of nature. Some fundamental steps which marked the cultural evolution of Western societies, such as the origin of the concept of personal identity, the internalization of laws and norms, the shift from group to individual, date back to the Greek and Roman age. Religion or, better, its truths, play a prominent role in this evolution,

acting as its basis.

*When Christianity focused on the stoical theme of the 'descent in oneself' or, in other words, the inner dimension, the circle of guilt and personal sense of guilt closed on the concept of original sin. One can therefore think that the agonizing self-accusations of the melancholiac and the incessant compulsion to repair and prevent of the obsessive are nothing but a pathetic echo of the themes of corrupted nature and of the indelible sin of the soul. (Pewzner, 2000)*

But man as such, as 'conscious man', starts from a rebellion to his God (Fromm). An act of disobedience is therefore the foundation of man as a conscious being. We can already find here a sign of guilt. This is followed by the 'fall' into the world with its chores, suffering and pain - the inevitable consequences of that act. In order to put an end to the suffering and create the basis for redemption we need a God who makes himself human. This God will be crucified by mankind. Can anything be more guilty? Man is born a sinner. His sin can only be purified by God. In short, man is doomed to evil even before coming into the world only because of his direct descent from Adam, the first man and sinner. Only an external intervention – by the same God who was laughed at, insulted and killed – can redeem us and save us. All this has been deeply internalized by Western man. When he becomes a person and an individual he internalizes both the sinner and the judge - laws, rules and norms. There is an analogy between Christian and Oedipal guilt, linked to the killing of the father in the primal horde (as described by Freud). Non-Western cultures – and therefore religions – do not contemplate all this. In Africa paranoia replaces guilt. Evil is considered to be *outside*, not inside, the person, which makes it more identifiable and recognizable. In Kleinian terms, one could also put forward the idea of a schizo-paranoid position which does not evolve into a depressive one.

Western mankind is divided between absolute evil and the absolute value of progress and reason. Only in the perspective of radical



evil can we understand the central place of guilt for Western man. Melancholic depression and obsessive neurosis are the consequences. An obsessional or melancholic person is tormented by the overwhelming sense of sin. They incessantly try to punish themselves for their intentions. The most significant role of the melancholiac is that of the sacrificial victim. The obsessive person, instead, aims at a purifying asceticism, in order to separate the pure and the impure, spirit and body. The obsessive considers the body the seat of evil. While the depressed person has to atone for his guilt, the obsessive tries to avoid it.

However, from a merely psychodynamic point of view, why are obsessive neurosis and melancholia so common in the West and so rare elsewhere? Pewzner gives us a very interesting explanation.

*In the perspective of a small family, feelings take on a particular intensity. Tensions and conflicts become more and more bitter every day. Emotions, expectations and disappointments are linked to a small group of people. Fathers and mothers are usually those who cause frustration and provide satisfaction. Interpersonal relationships are therefore marked by an ambivalence of feelings. In a society full of models, 'compensations' are always possible. The exclusive character of affects becomes exceptional and aggressive reactions are considerably mitigated.*

Therefore, in the small nuclear Western family, the exclusiveness of affects involves a strong ambivalence in feelings, which can be considered as the first step towards a melancholic or obsessive psychopathology. Such an ambivalence is completely absent, if not very reduced, in extended families, where more identifications are possible and, thus, more compensatory feelings.

#### **Guilt vs. Shame**

Guilt and shame are easily confused. Sentences like 'We're not equal, so I feel guilty. That is why I try not to show it', usually are to be read as 'I am ashamed of not being as good as he is and I'm afraid he might notice it.' Shame has to do with unmasking, revealing, while guilt is

linked to a self-accusation originated by the inner Super-Ego. Shame has to do with external laws and rules, derived from the expectations of the social group. Guilt instead is internal, primary, ontological. It refers to an ancient sin which needs to be expiated. Bill Clinton's sexual affairs may have made him ashamed when he was found out, but he probably never felt guilty for what he did, either before or after his affair. In Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, the main character, is an attractive woman of Boston accused of adultery by the Puritans of the village she lives in. At first she is imprisoned, in order to make her confess her guilt, but she is then released and sentenced to carry a flaming (scarlet) 'A' on her chest, for 'adulteress'. The aim is to make her feel ashamed in front of other people hoping that she, being humiliated, will confess the name of the man who impregnated her, turning her child into the symbol of her shame and guilt. But she is a very proud woman, and she feels neither guilt nor shame for what she has done. Loving someone fully cannot lead to guilt or shame, and this is exactly what she feels. She feels honest with herself and with the world. Apparently, the hard and repressive Puritan ethics did not succeed in moulding her.

#### **Medical practice: some clarifications with reference to Romano Biancoli's work**

The expression 'guilt feeling' is often found in medical practice. Many patients say those words, probably with reference to different situations and interpersonal relationships. However, we need to make a distinction. The expression 'guilt feeling' is generally used in a whole series of situations which have nothing to do with guilt in the strict sense of the word. Such a misinterpretation is usually found in the sphere of sentimental relationships.

Here is an example from my work. A young girl who has recently left her boyfriend told me she felt guilty for leaving him, because she was sorry for him now that he was alone, and she was worried he might not make it without her. After a short silence, the girl finally confessed her real feelings. She said she missed him, and she was afraid she might have made a mistake in leaving him, because she wished they



were still together. This is a complete distortion of the first sentences she said. The patient uttered things which were completely wrong only because she was ruled by a defence mechanism. Romano Biancoli used to tell me that a psychoanalytic intervention aims at making a patient understand what he really feels and not what he thinks he feels.

Another example: A young man told me he felt guilty towards his partner because he thought he was not able to satisfy her needs and give her what she wanted. He felt guilty because he was not the way she wanted him to be. After a couple of my interpretations, he managed to admit he was not sure she was the right partner for him, because maybe she would not make him happy and give him what he needed. Here too, a complete distortion of the first sentence is quite evident. A patient is brought to say these things by a defensive strategy.

Then, how often patients who look worried, sad and disheartened talk about a sense of guilt towards dear ones they had to leave? For instance, when children leave their parents and move to a place of their own. They often develop psycho-pathological symptoms and talk about them in terms of guilt for having left their parents alone, not being able to help them anymore if they need them, etc. I remember having brought such cases to Romano for a second opinion and he told me this was not guilt, but separation anxiety. It is clear that, in these cases, the patient ascribes his own experiences to others. He says others worry about him and need him because they are alone, instead of saying he misses them and needs them to be close.

At other times, guilt feelings appear more clearly (to us analysts) when the patient does not talk about them but manifests them in an unconscious, indirect and non-verbal way, although with obvious pain. Here are some examples of patients I am currently following.

A pretty young girl reports experiencing a latent but deep sadness, a lack of vitality – or, better, a vitality which needs to be stimulated by others – a lack of energy and trust in others. At the same time, she desperately needs the approval of others. She always feels inadequate.

She fears she was born that way. She cannot help her mother, who has been suffering from depression for a long time, sometimes with paranoid traits. After I had seen her for three months, twice a week, she told me she probably felt guilty for having been born. I linked this statement with all her previous ones and considered it reliable. All her feelings, her not feeling adequate, could be linked to something irredeemable, some kind of original guilt, which probably was due to what she referred to. I think her relationship with her mother – always depressed, unpredictable, sometimes even rejecting her daughter – might have shaped the girl's psychopathology. I also think she blames herself for the disease of her mother who blamed her for being a burden to look after. The child who does not feel loved considers himself a burden.

Some years ago, a middle-aged woman came to me on account of a severe depression, which began after a brief paranoid episode. She got over the acute phase with drugs and psychotherapy, then started working again and leading a normal life. The patient, however, was shy and introverted. She always feared that others could blame her, accuse her or attack her. She felt like a person accused of a crime in a trial where the sentence had already been passed. One of her most striking non-verbal characteristics was the look in her eyes, which sometimes showed anguish, horror, terror, as if she were living in a nightmare. She was hypochondriacal and dependent and she had a need to constantly please her mother. The mother was dysthymic, pestering and self-pitying. Thanks to the work we did together, after some years she managed to gain some freedom from this oppressive maternal figure, but the real cause of her condition remained a mystery. Then one day she told me that when she was born her mother entered a coma for three days, and everybody kept on repeating her mother risked death to give birth to her. This was the likely origin of her psychopathology. Her constant feeling of guilt derived from her considering herself the cause of her mother's illness. How could she had lived peacefully knowing that her mother risked death because of her? Moreover, her relatives had



always reminded her of this event ever since she was small. A powerful feeling of guilt was the basis of her personality. (More reading on initial rejection: Ferenczi S., *The unwelcome child and his death instinct* (1929); Bacciagaluppi M., *The last case of Romano Biancoli*, this meeting).

### Conclusion

Guilt seems to be an axiom of psychoanalysis (Goldberg, 1988). Freud did not write any essay on this topic, but he always had it in mind, confronting it throughout his whole written production. One could also think that it is universal and ingrained in human nature (as stated by Theodor Reik). However, viewed historically, it is a 'product' of Western societies. If religion and civilization were born together, as stated by Durkheim, then guilt was born with them. And even though religious practices in the West are becoming merely formal, it is also true that the Jewish and Christian religions had this

feature since the very beginning, making it the basis of personality and, consequently, of our culture's psychopathology.

As Romano Biancoli never tired of saying, quoting Benedetto Croce: "We're all Catholics, we're all Christians!"

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