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THE FAILURE OF GUILT: DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

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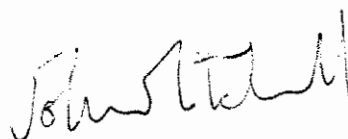
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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the
degree of Master of Clinical
Psychology at the Department of
Psychology, Australian National
University, December, 1989.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis reports my original work, that no part of it has been previously accepted or presented for the award of any degree or diploma by any university. To the best of my knowledge no material previously published or written by another person is included, except where due acknowledgement is given.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Stetson", is written over the end of the declaration text.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr Mark Dickerson for his interest, his encouragement, and his gentle chiding during the writing of this work.

ABSTRACT

Guilt is the intrapsychic manifestation of the tension which necessarily exists between the individual and society. Its centrality to human functioning is reflected in both this conceptual definition and the multitude of contexts in which it is found. Given the significance of guilt to the human condition, the absence of a coherent theoretical framework for understanding guilt is alarming.

The primary difficulty in defining and conceptualising guilt is found in its inherent logical inconsistency. Guilt involves an intrapsychic conflict wherein both sides of the conflict are the self. For example, both the desire to do a specific act and the distaste for doing that act are representative of self. But which one is truly the self? This is a long standing logical problem which can be formulated in the question, "how can a disunity exist within a unity?" Any coherent account of guilt must be able to overcome the problem inherent to a unity of disunity.

Given that the conflict occurs within the self, the account of guilt must begin with a system of self which provides for the apparent existence of a disunity within a unity. One such system of self views the self as as a function of the process of self-regulation. The process of self-regulation can be understood in terms of a negative feedback loop wherein an input (perception) is compared with a standard to produce an output (behaviour, cognition, and/or emotion).

In essence the output of the system serves to reduce discrepancy between the input and the standard. The self is an emergent property of this process and thus is reflective of the standard at any one time. Two component parts of the standard can be identified which represent the two sides of the guilt conflict, (viz., being-for-self and being-for-others).

A conflict within the standard leads to a situation wherein any input will be discrepant with at least one part of the standard. That

discrepancy will produce a discrepancy reducing output. However, if such an output is discrepancy reducing with respect to one part of the standard, then it will concomitantly be discrepancy producing with respect to a conflicting part of the standard. This process of maintaining discrepancy with respect to one part of the standard can be thought of as self-damaging inasmuch as both parts of the standard are representative of self.

The system outlined above overcomes the problem of a disunity within a unity by locating the disunity as existing between unities over time.

All the displays of guilt such as feeling guilty and doing self-damaging things are reflections of guilt in the same that military attacks are reflective of war. That is to say, the feelings and acts of guilt are not all there is to guilt but rather, are manifestations of guilt. Guilt itself is the disunity of self.

Escaping guilt involves the establishment of unity where there was previously disunity. This can be achieved either by denying one part of the self (self disintegration) which is the dynamic behind rationalisation, or by unifying the previously disunited parts of self (self-integration) which is the process of responsibility.

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PREFACE

Before embarking on this thesis, it is important to make clear its unique structure and style of presentation. Reading in the area of guilt can rapidly produce a sense of confusion because studies of guilt are to be found in so many different contexts. Guilt is to be found as a theme of literature, as a sociological construct, as a legal term, and as a topic for psychological study.

Having read material from all of these contexts, it seemed rather vacuous to then conduct psychological research into some specific aspect of guilt. Every beginning point seemed to neglect the depth and breadth of writing about the subject and in so doing made a mockery of it.

It was precisely this difficulty which inspired the work presented here. Guilt was almost undefinable. It was outside of the psychologist's reach and yet was to be found in humanity's every pursuit. The work here attempts to give some understanding to guilt by locating it in a system of self. That is to say, the self is used as a reference point for the explication of guilt.

As a consequence of discussing guilt in terms of systems,

I have sacrificed much of the detail of guilt. This work does not intend to operationalise guilt at anything but a systems level. The nature of the thesis also prevents full discussion of issues related to guilt such as shame. Nor is there scope for the therapeutic issues of overcoming guilt although this does receive some attention in the final chapter.

In sacrificing the minutia, the possibility of adopting the typical format of empirical psychology is also foregone. A tightly controlled empirical study is not available to the theorist who focuses on systems.

As an alternative, I have made use of case study material to support the hypothesis which is presented. The cases are designed to illustrate the fundamental points which have been made as part of the hypothesis, viz., the process of discrepancy reduction; the internal conflict between opposing parts of the self which is inherent to guilt; the use of rationalisation as a means of denying guilt; and the role of responsibility as a way to overcome guilt.