

UNIVERSAL GUILT:
FROM PSYCHOANALYSIS TO KING BENJAMIN

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The sense of guilt [is] the most important problem in the evolution of culture
—Sigmund Freud

Scientists, theologians, and philosophers have long debated the origin of conscience and the nature of guilt. Freud's trifurcated concept of human nature—id, ego, and superego—offered some explanations. However, it was one of his followers, Theodor Reik, who expounded the notions of “universal guilt feelings of humanity” and the pervasive historical role that such feelings might play (Seligman). Others broadened the argument, not only asserting the reality of universal guilt but attempting to explain its how's and why's. Recently I happened upon Reik's book and began to wonder about the idea of a universal sense of guilt. Particularly, I wondered if the restoration supported its existence. In what follows, I will synthesize some of the major ideas advanced by philosophers regarding universal guilt, and then turn to the scriptures, particularly those brought to light by Joseph Smith, to see what they suggest about universal guilt.

THE NATURE OF GUILT

Of all emotions, perhaps it is the sense of guilt which is most distinctively human. Humans appear to share various emotional states with much of the rest of the mammalian world, such as sadness or hopelessness, fear (Seligman 105, 3-46), surprise, rage, even happiness and contentment (inferred by a dog's “smile” or its wagging tail, a cat's purr). Guilt, however, is another matter. Guilt is a uniquely human emotion precisely because in comparison to other emotional states such as sadness, anger, or fear, guilt is more complex, requiring a highly differentiated and powerful brain. In order to experience guilt, an organism must not only be self-aware—that is, cognizant of its uniqueness and separateness—but it must also be capable of self-appraisal in the context of a relationship. In essence, guilt is a social emotion which requires the perception of culpability.

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human emotion.**

In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche made this point rather ingeniously by defining human beings as “animals that can promise”: because we remember our pasts, it is our unique ability to make promises, and thus bind our future to our past. It is promising which gives humans the power to calculate and be calculable, to owe and to pay. It is promising which makes humans responsible and accountable—to themselves, and to one another. This understanding helps us clearly see why human

beings are uniquely suited for the experience of guilt, and it also gives insight into the role guilt plays in the over-arching scheme of human relationships. Using Nietzsche's rationale, we could perhaps say that human beings "make promises" in many ways, in many contexts, and on many different levels in their lives. Though not always explicitly stated, promises take many forms, such as inner resolves or resolutions, agreements and contracts with others, personally held values, opinions, intentions, and the like. Thus, any breach of such "promises" may lead to the subjective experience of guilt.

But this understanding of guilt is only partially adequate for the purposes of comprehending the type of guilt Reik asserts exists within the whole of the human species. Human beings have likely always struggled with "keeping promises"; thus, guilt would be the common experience of the species. Fair enough. However, Reik, like Freud, asserts a more pervasive, underlying, generalized guilt than this—a guilt which is separate from the more specific feelings of culpability which underlie our daily lapses. Both Reik and Freud assert guilt to be a leitmotif common to all members of the species *a priori* to, and separate from, the more focused guilt regarding specific behaviors.

IS THERE A WORLD-WIDE SENSE OF GUILT?

Are we justified in speaking of a world sense of guilt?

Before launching into differing views about the origin and nature of universal guilt feelings, it seems necessary to in some way provide evidence that such a phenomenon exists in the first place. Certainly keen, perceptive observers would attest to such a ubiquitous, pervasive experience, both historically and in the present day. Do such commentaries exist? Reik asks, "Are we justified in speaking of a world sense of guilt?... Is it conceivable that there is a free-floating guilt feeling in all men beyond the frontiers of races and nations, a collective sense of guilt of mankind that only occasionally reaches the threshold of conscious feeling? Is it possible that beneath the self-assurance, complacency, and smugness of our civilization an unconscious sense of guilt is operating, shared by all?" (Reik 39) He goes to some lengths to show that, yes, an ongoing record attests to just that.

Reik begins by making a confession which amounts to the "trump card" of psychoanalysis: "guilt feelings of a group, of a nation, or of all nations need not be conscious to unfold tremendous effects" (Reik 41). In other words, even if people denied having an awareness of such guilt, this cannot be considered evidence that such a phenomenon doesn't exist. Reik then cites numerous sources in support of his argument. In the field of criminology, Franz von Liszt acknowledges a "collective guilt of society." In the field of social organization, many voices since that of Rousseau have claimed that some sense of injustice exists within civilization. Socialistic

writers frequently appeal to a universal sense of guilt. Philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger often focus on the insurmountable abyss between the drives and desires of the individual as opposed to the supra-individual demands of society. A second common feature of these writers is the fundamentally tragic sense of their philosophy. More specifically, Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals*, speaks of an “attack of mankind against itself.” Numerous other passages in his writing show that he recognizes a sense of guilt operating in men for many millennia. Kierkegaard rejects the conventional perceptions of guilt as “banknotes without any value of their own,” and searches for the original source of guilt. Freud was the first to acknowledge guilt as the “fatal flaw” inherent within our civilization itself.

Finally, Reik reminds us we should not forget the flashes of recognition of that universal sense of guilt which emerge in the works of our great writers such as Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, Kafka, O’Neill, Sartre, Faulkner, and others. Dostoevski’s Grand Inquisitor, for example, remarks to Christ, “men can never be free because they are weak, corrupt, worthless, and restless... How can heavenly bread compete against earthly bread in dealing with the weak, ungrateful, permanently corrupt human species?” (*The Brothers Karamazov*). Shakespeare’s Isabella, a young woman as wise as she is devout, counsels the corrupt Angelo, “Go to your bosom; knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know... If it confess a natural guiltiness.” Angelo’s response, aside, is “She speaks, and ‘tis such sense that my sense breeds with it” (*Measure for Measure*).

However, the real clincher in Reik’s mind is within the realm of religion, where Reik sees shared guilt feeling masquerading under the guise of “sin.” As such, guilt permeates every form of religion, from early Babylonian hymns and Egyptian prayers to the present day. Many hundreds of years before the Lord walked upon the earth, prophets and religious leaders proclaimed the doctrine that we are altogether sinners. This, in Reik’s mind, leaves no doubt that on some level, we have to believe in a universal guilt of humanity. The fact that religious doctrines trace this common guilt to a transgression of God’s laws does not dissuade Reik. Where Reik begins to differ from orthodox religion, however, is in his views on the origins of such guilt feelings.

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Having summarized the idea of universal guilt, I will now turn to various potential sources of guilt.

PRIMAL PATRICIDE: THE FREUDIAN/REIKIAN HYPOTHESIS

Reik explains of the origins of universal human guilt as follows:

When we assume that there is a common sense of guilt, a collective guilt feeling of mankind, our investigation has to start from an obvious premise. It is

the following: that guilt feeling must refer to a misdeed, sin, or crime that was committed (or was supposed to have been committed) by all men... What a crime to investigate! It is not only the first one mankind committed, but also one for which all men feel guilty (Reik 56-57).

Reik acknowledges that the story of the Fall of Adam is significant in many respects; he does not doubt it tells of the first crime, but he asserts that the story as presently constituted in the Bible is a recent production (between 1000 and 8000 BC) from a much older oral tradition. He disavows the possibility of a literal interpretation of the Genesis Fall narrative for a variety of reasons. As a result of his own exegetic efforts, studies in comparative mythology, and utilization of psychoanalytic methods, Reik asserts that the Fall story is a highly distorted, veiled retelling of a much older crime—a crime Freud first postulated in his landmark book, *Totem and Taboo*.

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The main features of Freud's hypothesis include the following: in primeval times, people lived in small, unorganized hordes, under the domination of a strong and despotic father. The expelled sons, living together in small groups themselves, were all consumed with the passionate wish to overcome the father, to take his place, and to possess the women. Ultimately, they killed the tyrant and ate his body, which according to primeval belief gave them a part of his superior force and power. Freud assumes that this great crime in which the sons got rid of the tyrant was not a single act, but one committed in all the hordes and repeated through the centuries. This succession of parricides had tremendous direct effects and repercussions which determined the whole development of mankind. The impact of these events surpasses and eclipses that of events that history records. Reactions to this atrocious deed led to the first social ties, to basic moral inhibitions, and to the oldest forms of primitive religion, totemism. It is this first primeval crime to which Reik attributes the universal guilt feelings of humanity.

However, even if such an act actually occurred millennia ago (we have no recorded history of the deed), how has its memory or residue survived to the extent that it alone could be responsible for the universal guilt feelings of humankind? Both Freud and Carl Jung provide a general response: they refer to a phylogenetic inheritance (i.e., "collective unconscious") which holds memory traces of past experiences of the race (Jung). The assumption is that the masses, as well as the individual, retain impressions of the past in unconscious memory that are inaccessible to conscious recollection, but reveal themselves in myths, folklore, art, religious traditions, customs, and habits. Thus, Reik asserts the vague sense of unconscious guilt universally experienced by humanity first reached consciousness in the realm of religion, and that the Fall narrative as contained in Genesis has markers

which betray the older, more basic, yet more threatening and unacceptable primeval crime of humanity.

GIFTS AS EXPIATION OF GUILT:
THE BROWN/BECKER HYPOTHESIS

Man... is implacably driven to work beyond animal needs because he is not a secure animal. The origin of human drivenness is religious. The original sacrifice is always food because this is what one wants from the gods as the basis of life (Becker 29, 31).

Two scholars who seem to share very similar views with respect to understanding history are Norman O. Brown and Ernest Becker. Both are heavily influenced by the work of Freud, but both are willing to extrapolate outward and look for other explanations for human tendencies and events in history, including the notion of universal guilt.

In his *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Understanding of History*, Brown attempts a psychoanalytic understanding of money. In so doing, he discusses at some length the historically religious or sacred roots of money (e.g., sacred markets, temple/banks, priest/accountants, the rate of interest, etc.), ultimately making the point that humankind's drive to produce a surplus of goods is completely irrational (the idea of "storing things away for a rainy day" is much more recent) and belongs to the realm of the sacred. Here, Brown borrows from French anthropologist Marcel Mauss the idea that the bedrock of primitive society is the giving and receiving of gifts: primitive peoples created an economic surplus in order to have more to give to each other, and to the gods. Brown discusses the psychology of this need to give which, in essence, is that giving gifts is inherently self-sacrificial, and that self-sacrifice is self-punishment. "Work is still for most men a punishment and a scourge—the derivation of work as a punishment for Adam's sin expresses a psychological truth. In the archaic institution of the gift, what the giver wants to lose is his guilt" (266). Brown goes on to note that reciprocal giving does not in reality solve the problem of guilt, but it represents primitive peoples' first attempts at a solution. He also points out that we mitigate our guilt by sharing it with others, that people first entered into social organizations in order to share guilt (*à la* Freud), and that any social organization is, in essence, a symbolic mutual confession of guilt. Brown also asserts that primitive peoples created the gods in order to support the illusion that the debt of mutual guilt is payable. However, Brown offers no explanation as to the origin of this guilt.

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This is where Ernest Becker steps in. In his short yet remarkable book, *Escape from Evil*, Becker pays homage to Brown's work and extends it by offering an explanation regarding the guilt which drives

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primitive peoples to exchange gifts. He asserts that the ceremonial destruction of mountains of precious food, the painstaking fabrication of charms, or the dangerous hunting down of rare objects like shark's or whale's teeth represented the sweat of one's brow for the most vital motive humankind knew: to keep the cycle of power moving from the invisible to the visible world. Primitive life was openly immersed in the reality of debt, in obligation to the invisible powers. Primitive peoples knew the truth, perhaps much more consciously than we do today, of humankind's relation to nature: nature gives freely of its bounty unto us; this was the miracle for which to be grateful, and beholden to give gifts and to make sacrifices to the gods of nature in return. Whatever one received was already a gift. Thus, in an attempt to expiate this guilt, this constant debt, to keep things in balance, one had to give in return.

In a separate vein, Becker attempts to shed additional light on universal human guilt by elaborating on what he calls "the many different binds in life" (33). In his usual pithy fashion, Becker elaborates on some of the basic conflicts of life which lead to the experience of guilt feelings. For example, the child in her boundless desires for gratification can't help feeling love for those who respond to her; at the same time, when she is inevitably frustrated by those same adults not meeting her needs (even for her own good), she can't help feeling hate and destructive impulses towards them, which puts her in a considerable bind. Another bind is referred to as the "bind of one's own body," or in other words, the feeling of being at the mercy of, or a slave to, one's own body parts, urges, and so forth. One can also be in a bind in relation to one's own development, feeling that one has not achieved all that one could or should have. Guilt can also be experienced because we take up space and have unintended effects upon others—for example, when we hurt others without intending to, just by being what we are or by following our natural desires and appetites, not to mention when we hurt others by accident or thoughtlessness. To use the words of Otto Rank, this is the guilt we feel for being a "fate-creating" object (87): that we can, within a span of mere seconds, change the course of not only our own lives, but others' lives as well. We can also feel in a bind when we perceive we have developed too much; guilt is an age-old reaction to hubris, to making oneself too prominent, conspicuous, or arrogant. Becker concludes by saying that humankind has so many conflicts that put it into a bind that it simply cannot stand the guilt unless it is expiated in some way.

While the assumptions outlined to this point have all attempted to explain the notion of universal guilt through naturalistic channels, the two remaining will attempt explanations from a theistic point of view.

ORIGINAL SIN:
THE UNIVERSAL GUILT OF TERTULLIAN AND ST. AUGUSTINE

An original something, fair maid, you would win me
To write—but how shall I begin?
For I fear I have nothing original in me—
Excepting Original Sin.

—*Thomas Campbell, Scottish poet*

In the late 4th century, St. Augustine and the British monk Pelagius engaged in what was perhaps the first major controversy within the Christian church over sin and grace. Pelagius was an optimist who believed in the moral perfectibility of humanity. He asserted that the apparent corruption of the human race was not inborn, but was rather due to bad example and habit, and that the natural faculties of humanity were not adversely affected by Adam's Fall. Moreover, Pelagius believed human beings could lead lives of righteousness and thereby merit heaven by their own efforts. Pelagius asserted that the grace of God lies in the natural gifts of humanity, including free will, reason, and conscience. In contrast, Augustine appealed to and argued a little-known idea of one his predecessors, Tertullian: the notion that humankind is perpetually tainted, universally sinful *a priori* to the commission of any willful sin. The origin of this inherent defect or tragic flaw is ascribed to the first transgression committed by Adam and Eve. Because of their sin, a fallen nature is transmitted from generation to generation. Augustine explained this transmission process through an appeal to another of Tertullian's doctrines, "traducianism": the idea that parents beget both the bodies and the souls of their children. Thus, if the parents are fallen and sinful, then the act of procreation alone ensures that the children are likewise tainted.

Ultimately, Augustine triumphed in his debate with Pelagius, and his notion of "original sin" later became formulated into the official canon of the Catholic Church. Why did Augustine triumph? What made his pessimistic assertions more acceptable and desirable to the church? What biases, conscious or unconscious, were operative? Whatever the answers to these questions, the adoption of the doctrine of original sin had a number of effects. First, it gave a name and official Church sanction and recognition to a doctrine asserting the universal guilt of humanity. Second, the adoption of this doctrine made the role of the church essential in the lives of its adherents. If all humankind was in a guilty, depraved, tainted state irrespective of their behavior, absolution could only be received through the sacraments of the church. Third, the adoption of the doctrine of original sin led to the formulation of additional doctrines in order to correct problems stemming from the assumption

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of universal human guilt (e.g., the doctrine of infant baptism; the doctrine of Mary’s “immaculate conception”).

KING BENJAMIN AND MORMONISM:
THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I had never supposed (Moses 1:10).

It is the second article of faith which speaks directly to the notion of original guilt or the inherent sinfulness of humankind: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression.” Perhaps it is no accident that just after an affirmation of such foundational principles as the reality of God, his Son, and the Holy Ghost (the first Article of Faith) came a statement refuting original guilt, instead placing emphasis squarely upon “specific guilt”: guilt resulting from individual sins. And yet, in other scripture revealed through Joseph Smith, it appears Tertullian and Augustine weren’t so far afield with their ideas:

And our father Adam spake unto the Lord, and said: Why is it that men must repent and be baptized in water? And the Lord said unto Adam: Behold, I have forgiven thee of thy transgression in the Garden of Eden. Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for *original guilt*, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world. (Moses 6:53-54; emphasis added)

Although the atonement was indeed an act-in-time, its effects are in fact timeless or “infinite.”

In this remarkable passage, we read of both the personal forgiveness Adam and Eve received for their own transgression and the absolution the rest of the human race received for Adam’s fall from grace. Apparently Joseph Smith’s Catholic predecessors were in some sense accurate in their assumptions regarding the existence of the universal guilt of humanity; however, they missed the mark as a result of their unawareness that original guilt was effectively absolved early on by an atonement which would occur thousands of years later. This is the concept of “infinite atonement” unique to Mormonism: that although the atonement was indeed an act-in-time, its effects are in fact timeless or “infinite” (Alma 34:10), meaning that they extend forever back into the past and forward into the future. Not only is Christ’s atonement timeless, but his identity and status are as well (Moses 4:2). Nowhere are all three—Christ’s atonement, his identity, and his status—so beautifully depicted as in the Book of Ether’s third chapter in which Moroni suggests that the Brother of Jared not only sees the finger of the Lord, but that he also sees and handles Christ’s post-crucifixion body thousands of years before the event actually occurs:

Behold, this body which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit... And now, as I, Moroni, said, I could not make a full account of these things which are written, therefore it sufficeth me to say that Jesus showed himself unto this man in the spirit, even after the manner and in the same likeness of the same body even as he showed himself unto the Nephites. And he ministered unto him as he ministered unto the Nephites; and all this that this man might know that he was God. (Ether 3: 16-18)

As a result of his timeless nature, God could speak to Adam of an atonement not yet wrought in-time, but use its timeless effects to absolve Adam's personal sins and the original guilt of humanity as a free gift to all. And yet, free gifts tend not to be received easily. Recipients tend to feel a sense of debt when they "get something for nothing." Guilt is a highly relative, personal, phenomenological (i.e., individualized) emotion; so much of its experience depends upon one's perceptions, as already mentioned. People can both perceive themselves culpable for something they had no control over and perceive themselves blameless for things which really were their fault. It makes a great deal of difference whether one believes the original sin has been absolved or not. This is the whole point of God sending prophets to a particular group of people, either to those who have suppressed their guilt, or to those who are unaware of their guilt: to "stir them up in the ways of remembrance" (Enos 1:23; *Doctrine & Covenants* 18:6) and to "make it known unto man concerning the things where unto God had appointed them" (Alma 12:28). Without this, people tend to forget their promises, as Nietzsche would say.

But perceptions of guilt aside, do revealed scriptures support any other potential sources of universal guilt feeling? It seems they do. If King Benjamin's sermon teaches anything, it teaches about the universality of the human condition. Here we learn that humans everywhere, no matter how exotic a particular culture or wealthy an individual, are basically standard vintage *Homo sapiens*, interchangeable in predicament, nature, and motives with any other human being. It is predicament at which King Benjamin hammers away, tries to drive home to his hearers, much in the spirit of Ernest Becker when he said of primitive peoples,

Unlike us, primitives knew the truth of man's relation to nature: nature gives freely of its bounty to man—this was the miracle for which to be grateful and beholden and give to the gods of nature in return. Whatever one received was already a gift (28).

King Benjamin asserts an identical dependent relationship necessitating sacrifice:

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for

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gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind?... I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace with one another—I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants... therefore, of what have ye to boast?... can ye say aught of yourselves?... Ye cannot even say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth. (Mosiah 4:19; 2:20-21; 24-25)

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“Can ye say aught of yourselves?” captures the essence of the universal human condition of complete and total reliance upon God. If we cannot draw breaths from one moment to the next without divine assistance, who among us has cause to boast or brag about anything? Not only does King Benjamin preach a gospel of ultimate humility, but he preaches a gospel of perpetual, unpayable debt, and thus, universal guilt.

As our primitive ancestors hoped to expiate their guilt by offering to the gods of nature sacrifices of rare and precious items, so we are admonished to make offerings to appease God and thus assuage our own consciences: “all he requires of you is to keep his commandments” (Mosiah 2:22); “offer your whole souls as offerings unto Christ (Omni 1:26); “offer for a sacrifice a broken heart and a contrite spirit (3 Nephi 9:20). In other words, as an acknowledgment of awareness of our perpetual reliance upon him, God requires of us our hearts—not on an altar, but within ourselves, freely given to him. According to King Benjamin, all human beings are indeed guilty, regardless of individual behavior; but are humans connected to the guilt which comes from this “universal source”? Perhaps only as they are made aware of the true predicament of unrepayable indebtedness to God.

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