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Guilt and Balance

Guilt is generally considered a negative emotion. It can be destructive and can damage one's self esteem. Guilt can often be completely useless but certainly not always. We evolved the ability to feel guilt for a reason. It can correct motivate us to make better decisions. Guilt and empathy go hand-in-hand, and without it, humans could not coexist. To the extent that guilt improves our behavior, it is useful. A Streetcar Named Desire and "Barn Burning" illustrate the extremes of too much and too little guilt, while "Babylon Revisited" illustrates the effectiveness of appropriate guilt.

In Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche is dealing with much guilt. She shows signs of guilt when explaining to Stella that she lost Belle Reve. When Stella says "Stop this hysterical outburst and tell me what's happened? What do you mean fought and bled? What kind of--", Blanche responds "I knew you would, Stella. I knew you would take this attitude about it." (Williams 2193). At this point, Stella is mostly wanting Blanche to calm down and give a coherent explanation, yet Blanche is assuming Stella already blames her for what she's not yet properly explained. She acts like she has a guilty conscience. Blanche likely finds it easy to believe Stella blames her because Blanche already blames herself. Blanche's ultimate source of guilt comes from the death of her husband. She tells Mitch that "Suddenly in the

middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later—a shot! ... It was because—on the dance floor—unable to stop myself—I'd suddenly said--'I saw! I know! You disgust me ...'" (Williams 2225-6). Later, she tells Stanley "Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion and it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty" (Williams 2240). Of course, she is lying to Stanley. She knows she was deliberately cruel to her husband. Everyone is guilty of being deliberately cruel at least once in their life, and her statement seems exaggerated. Perhaps she strongly believes deliberate cruelty is unforgivable because she has not forgiven herself.

One can understand why Blanche feels so guilty. It is possible a little good could come from this guilt. Someone in Blanche's position would likely learn to be less judgmental and more careful about how she or he treats others. However, there's no indication in the play that any good comes from Blanche's guilt. In fact, the play seems to be based around the consequences of the self-destructive behavior that comes from her guilt. Her sexual promiscuity is one example of destructive behavior. She confesses to Mitch that "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with" (Williams 2236). Safe and honest non-committal sex is not intrinsically wrong. However, sexual promiscuity often stems from and contributes to low self-esteem and self-destruction. It seems as if Blanche's promiscuity and low self esteem are a result of her guilt over Alan's death. Given the morality of the time, her promiscuity likely compounds her self esteem issues. Stanley reveals that "They kicked her out of that high school before the spring term ended—and I hate to tell you the reason that step was taken! A seventeen-year-old-boy—she'd gotten mixed up with!"

(Williams 2228). Losing her job over a relationship with a seventeen year old clearly shows her promiscuity is destructive. Living with Stanley and Stella is part of the price for her destructive behavior. She thinks poorly of their house and hates being there. Blanche describes Stanley and Stella's home as "...Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be..." (Williams 2213). No doubt, if she has somewhere better to be, she would go. Up to the point she is institutionalized, she must live there because her self-destructive behavior has left her no choice.

Given what she must live with, it is not clear how she can feel less guilty. Without being in her position, it would be unreasonable for anyone to assume they would handle such guilt any better. Still, it is clear that her guilt is quite destructive and greatly outweighs any good that could possibly come from it. Regardless of what she can do about it, her guilt is clearly far beyond what is useful.

Unlike Blanche, Abner Snopes, a character from William Faulkner's "Barn Burning", seems to be entirely remorseless. After burning one barn, a Justice of the Peace, unable to find him guilty, tells him "Take your wagon and get out of this country" (Faulkner 1957). It seems clear that Snopes has a long history of burning barns out of vengeance. The story says "He did not know where they were going. None of them ever did or ever asked, because it was always somewhere, always a house of sorts waiting for them a day or two days or even three days away. Likely his father had already arranged to make a crop on another farm before he . . . Again he had to stop himself. He (the father) always did" (Faulkner 1958). It seems that the family has been through this same scenario so many times that they know the routine. There is no indication that Snopes feels the slightest remorse for his behavior. Perhaps if he did, he would stop burning

barns, his family could settle down, and his kids could have a proper childhood. Perhaps he and his sons would not be at risk of being shot and killed by de Spain. If Snopes were remorseful for his bad behavior, he and his family would no doubt benefit.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited", Charlie Wales is not proud of his past. He and his wife had been quite wealthy and lived a life of constant partying. Considering one incident of his past, the story says

His first feeling was one of awe that he had actually, in his mature years, stolen a tricycle and pedaled Lorraine all over the Étoile between the small hours and dawn. In retrospect it was a nightmare. Locking out Helen didn't fit in with any other act of his life, but the tricycle incident did—it was one of many. How many weeks or months of dissipation to arrive at that condition of utter irresponsibility? (Fitzgerald 1850).

He recognizes the way he was living was wrong. His past has cost him his wife, custody of his daughter, and much money. Unlike Abner Snopes, Charlie realizes his past errors.

But unlike Blanche, Charlie is not overcome with guilt. While he and Blanche have both made bad mistakes, he maintains a reasonable self esteem. In fact, when discussing regaining custody of his daughter with his sister-in-law, who feels much bitterness towards him, he fights the urge to defend himself. The story says "Keep your temper, he told himself. You don't want to be justified. You want Honoria" (Fitzgerald 1846). Rather than simply accept the idea that he is worthless, he has taken steps to correct his behavior. He limits himself to one drink a day and has recovered financially to a degree that would easily allow him to care for his daughter. While he

does not regain custody by the end of the story, it looks as if he eventually will. His disdain for his past behavior has not only helped him turn his life around, but helps him maintain his current path. Because it leads to positive changes, Charlie's guilt is useful.

Like these literary examples, religion provides real world examples of destructive guilt, lack of remorse, and effective guilt. Many, because of their religion, believe that a god intentionally created us as imperfect beings predisposed to acts regarded as sins while holding us responsible for not measuring up to a perfect standard. They believe that as a result of not measuring up, we are worthy of Hell. Many gay Christians are taught that they deserve to go to Hell for being gay. Fish may as well be damned for liking water. Some feel guilty and scared simply for daring to question their religious beliefs. Like Blanche, many religious people have self esteem issues. Many feel they constantly need their god's forgiveness for even the pettiest of supposed offenses.

Religion can also cause people to commit atrocities for which they feel no remorse. It can cause people to persecute those they judge according to their morals. And, of course, religion can lead to much worse behavior. Eric Robert Rudolph likely never felt remorse for any of his bombings. If he ever did, it was not sufficient for him to change his behavior. Osama Bin Laden no doubt was remorseless for the atrocities committed under his leadership. Unlike Snopes, religious people often are empathetic towards others. But for those whose religious ideas not only excuse but even demand acts that substantially damage the well-being of others, it is natural that they feel no guilt and as a result take no corrective measures.

Like Charlie Wales, many religious people have levels of guilt that lead to positive changes. Appropriate levels of empathy do not require religion, and there are better ways of improving one's life, but religion often does encourage people to act better towards others. Even many atheists can think of examples of people who have changed for the better after a religious conversion. Like Charlie Wales, such individuals can use their guilt in a positive way.

Like so many other things, balance is the key to making guilt useful. When feeling guilty we should consider if guilt is even appropriate. If so, we should focus on correcting our behavior. With guilt, damage to one's self esteem is often unavoidable. With too much guilt, we might simply accept that we are worthless and act accordingly. With too little, we lack the motivation to correct our behavior. By understanding that we are imperfect by nature (at least according to our ideals) and holding ourselves to realistic standards, we can learn to not repeat our mistakes and forgive ourselves for making them. To whatever extent possible, we should only feel guilt to the degree that it is useful.

Works Cited

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