

Guilt: The Debt and the Stain

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Abstract: Contemporary analytic philosophers of the “reactive attitudes” tend to share a simple conception of guilt as “self-directed blame”—roughly, an “unpleasant affect” felt in combination with, or in response to, the thought that one has violated a moral requirement, evinced substandard “quality of will,” or is blameworthy. I believe that this simple conception is inadequate. As an alternative, I offer my own theory of guilt’s logic and its connection to morality. In doing so, I attempt to articulate guilt’s defining thought or proposition through an extended investigation and analysis of guilt’s many competing *metaphors*, which I trace from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament to Shakespeare to contemporary vernacular. My interpretation of this literary genealogy offers a way to understand guilt’s seemingly disparate metaphors in terms of a single master-image that illuminates our self-conceptions and our relationship to morality. I conclude by making a very brief start toward a moral vindication of guilt against the backdrop of Nietzschean and Freudian analyses that explicitly call guilt’s place in a healthy social and personal life into question. I suggest that once guilt’s logic is made explicit, we can see that it makes sense of, honors, and addresses some of our deepest aspirations and needs.

I: Introduction

Contemporary analytic philosophers of the “reactive attitudes” tend to share a simple conception of guilt as “self-directed blame”¹—roughly, an “unpleasant affect” felt in combination with, or in response to, the thought that one has violated a moral requirement, evinced substandard “quality of will,” or is blameworthy.

This simple conception, however, is inadequate. First, it fails to distinguish guilt from neighboring emotions such as disappointment or sadness over one’s wrongful behavior, or shame in response to one’s misdeeds. To reply to this charge, adherents of the simple view may stress that guilt is *self-blame* and thus distinct from the emotions I have just listed. “Blame,” however, both in philosophy and in ordinary life, is an umbrella term that covers a range of more specific emotions. Each of these attitudes—resentment, indignation, contempt, guilt, as well as certain varieties of sadness, disappointment, and shame—has its own conditions of appropriateness and deserves individual analysis to determine what role, if any, it has to play in a good life.

¹ See, for example, McNamara 2020 (p. 461), Clarke 2016 (p. 122), Carlsson 2017 (p. 102), and Darwall 2006 (p. 71), among others.

Interest in a complete and accurate moral psychology gives us reason to pursue such analyses, but in the case of guilt there is added *ethical* pressure stemming from the need to understand and respond to Nietzschean and Freudian analyses of guilt that explicitly call its place in a healthy social and personal life into question. For Nietzsche (1887), guilt is a manifestation of a sadistic drive, repressed and turned inward. It is not primarily a sign of genuine care for others or benign investment in a defensible social order, but, rather, a manifestation of a slavish, masochistic distortion of our will to cruelty and domination. For Freud (1930), precursors to guilt feelings arise first as a kind of fear of punishment or loss of love before later growing into the more fully-developed rebukes of the super-ego that respond to one's own aggressive impulses. Guilt, then, is a kind of ambivalence between loving and aggressive tendencies (95). But because the super-ego sees and responds to antisocial desire and intention as well as antisocial action, it seems that so long as we live in a social order that is odds with our aggression, guilt will be an omnipresent, and potentially oppressive, force of punishment and self-denial (96).

A serious effort to meet these challenges would require a nuanced treatment of guilt's psychology. We cannot vindicate it (nor should we reject it) without a clear picture of what it is. The simple conception, however, according to which guilt is a recognition of "blameworthiness" combined with an "unpleasant affect," is not sufficiently rich to motivate such an ethical project, for it makes the critique seem preposterously overstated if not outright incomprehensible. That a mere "unpleasant affect" implies "repressed sadism" seems absurdly bleak; that "a judgment of one's own blameworthiness" entails "oppressive self-denial" seems almost comically dramatic. The simple conception makes guilt easy to justify by presenting it too abstractly to be fully understood.

This shallowness is at least somewhat surprising given the genuine progress made by the previous generation of analytic philosophers. In the final decades of the 20th century, a more humanistic group of scholars, including Bernard Williams, Richard Wollheim, Gabrielle Taylor, Herbert Morris, Jeffrie Murphy, John Deigh, Martha Nussbaum, Robert C. Roberts, and others handled guilt more carefully. Often seeking to better understand the differences between guilt and shame, these theorists approached with caution, taking the Nietzschean and (sometimes) Freudian challenge seriously. To understand guilt, they sought to trace its genealogy through literature, history, and psychoanalytic theory. Though the contributors' insights do not fit obviously into a single, coherent picture, the result is one of the most rich and fascinating philosophical discussions in recent memory.

This paper is an attempt to revive that conversation. To lay the groundwork for an ethical evaluation of guilt, I will offer a theory of its logic or mode of functioning: what it responds to, what it aims at, the intensity with which it is appropriately felt, how it can be rationally resolved. A successful account of this kind will also explain guilt's connection to morality. Why, for example, does fitting guilt characteristically require wrongdoing but vary in intensity based on luck?² Why and how is it productively addressed through the practices of apology, restitution, and forgiveness?

To provide a schema that answers these questions I articulate guilt's defining thought or proposition. That is, I offer language that expresses guilt's logic and distinguishes it from nearby

² Our everyday sense of guilt allows us to hold that people feeling "survivor's guilt" (see Morris 1987) or characters such as Bernard Williams's (1981, chapter 2) famous "lorry driver," who feels "agent-regret" after faultlessly killing a child, should not court indignation, seek punishment, or undertake a misguided project of redemptive suffering. Importantly, however, it also allows us to deny that the drunk driver who unluckily kills someone and the drunk driver who makes it home without incident should feel equally intense guilt or face equal punishment. While a good account of guilt should not pathologize survivor's guilt and agent-regret, it should explain why guilt paradigmatically requires wrongdoing and how guilty it is appropriate for both lucky and unlucky wrongdoers to feel.

emotions. Getting clear on this central thought requires an extended investigation and analysis of guilt's many competing *metaphors*, which I trace from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament to Shakespeare to contemporary vernacular. My interpretation of this literary genealogy offers a way to understand these seemingly disparate metaphors in terms of a single master-image that illuminates our self-conceptions and our relationship to morality. In this light, the Freudian and Nietzschean criticisms of guilt, which seemed fantastically cynical at best and unintelligible at worst against the backdrop of the simple conception, seem not only sane but urgent. A serious reply to these critiques would require another paper (at least), but I conclude by making a very brief start toward a moral vindication of guilt, suggesting that once its logic is made explicit, we can see that it makes sense of, honors, and addresses some of our deepest aspirations and needs.

II: Images of Guilt

Understanding an emotion involves understanding its distinctive way of presenting the world to its subject, or, to use Roberts's term, its "defining proposition." But this linguistic language—"defining proposition"—risks obscuring the fact that many emotions' defining propositions are metaphorical or imagistic. Consider shame, for example. Roughly, a person who feels ashamed construes himself as being exposed as dishonorable, disreputable, or deficient in the eyes of a certain kind of (perhaps internalized) observer. This metaphor (exposure) explains characteristic shame reactions: the urge to hide, cover up, or disappear. It also suggests the means by which shame can be rationally resolved: one must escape the gaze of the critical observer in some way. There is, of course, much more to be said about shame. My point is simply that without reference to the image and idiom of exposure, we could not fully appreciate

shame's logic—what gives rise to it, its distinctive feel and strength, and its modes of rational resolution. Metaphor is indispensable to complete understanding.

I believe that the same is true of guilt; to understand it, we must analyze its metaphors. But unlike shame, the logic of guilt is not so obviously shaped by a single image. Indeed, one of guilt's most striking and fascinating features is the range and number of metaphors that seem to define it. Here are the images of guilt that I see as most incisive and revealing:

Burden: When we wrong another person, we often experience our guilt as burdensome, even “unbearable.” We speak of “carrying” guilt that we have not unloaded, stories of wrongdoing are “heavy,” and the knowledge of guilt “weighs on us.” That weight might prompt us to confess our crimes in an effort to “get them off our chest” or “unburden ourselves.” When we are able to apologize, gain forgiveness, and achieve reconciliation, we feel light and free, as though a weight has been lifted. The classic example is biblical: “His own self [Jesus] *bare our sins in his own body* on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24, emphasis mine). The theme is also prominent in Shakespeare. Thus Bolingbroke (who becomes Henry IV), upon learning that Exton, one of his followers, has murdered Richard II, laments the burden³ of guilt he will now bear in the form of the very crown he must carry on his head as King:

“Exton, I thank thee not, for thou hast wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land”⁴

³ And stain, actually (see 5.6: 50).

⁴ *Richard II* (1595) 5.6: 34-6. In *Henry IV, Part II* (1600), the same character, now king, utters the famous line, “uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (3.1: 31). This line's frequent, though not infelicitous, misquotation as, “heavy is the head that wears the crown” is typically interpreted as a reference to the burdens of responsibility. The end of *Richard II* and multiple speeches in *Henry IV, Part II* (see, for example, 4.3: 347) suggest, however, that at least part of the uneasiness (or heaviness) is due to Henry IV's *guilt* over the bloody truth behind his coronation.

Debt: In the second essay of the *On The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche forcefully argued that our concept of guilt grew out of our concept of debt,⁵ originating in “the oldest and most primitive personal relationship there is, the relationship of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor....” (45). Tracing a “prehistory,” he outlined a basic logic of guilt and punishment according to which we receive benefits of peace and security as members of a community and must discharge certain obligations to the community (or, as the essay goes on to suggest, the community’s gods or God) in return. Guilt develops, under certain conditions, as a response to the recognition of an unpaid debt.

In more recent years, Herbert Morris (1979), whose views share at least some affinities with this basic picture observed that,

In central cases of intentionally committing an act known to be wrong, it is not merely that something has been done that one was not entitled to do, but more significantly, one is seen as taking what does not belong to one. The domain of what is not eligible to one is the domain of goods that one has no right to possess. With central cases of wrongdoing one is seen as possessing, then, what one has no right to possess (95).

Earlier in the same paper, in a survey of anti-guilt arguments, Morris imagines critics alleging that, “Guilt operates within an essentially mercantilistic framework. Its logic is that of ‘tit for tat’; it requires acts that ‘square accounts,’ or ‘even the score’ or ‘pay off the debt’” (91). All of these remarks are insightful. When we feel guilty, we feel that that we owe something, either to our victims, the broader community, or both. Attempts at apology and atonement that do not involve the return of our ill-gotten gains cannot succeed. Rather, when seeking reconciliation, we must think about how we can “make it up to” our victims, and pay our “debt to society.” We care so much about our moral ledgers being balanced, in fact, that if a victim strikes back at us in an

⁵ He also noted the linguistic connection between the German “shuld” (guilt) and “shulden” (debts) (39).

effort to “get even,” we might even concede that we “got what we deserved” or that we “had it coming.”

Nietzsche’s genealogical study culminates in a critique of a distinctively Christian notion of debt before God, and he is right to note that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament explicitly connect sin and debt. Consider, for example, God’s declaration in the Old Testament, first in Numbers and then repeated for emphasis in Leviticus, that “Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged” (Numbers 5:5-10).⁶ In the New Testament, we find Jesus’s lengthy discourse in the Gospel of Matthew likening the forgiveness of sin to the forgiveness of debt (Matthew 18:21-35), and the ominous warning that “the *wages* of sin is death” (Romans 6:23; emphasis mine), along with a number of passages similar to Colossians 2:13-14 that suggest a legal and economic logic by which sins give rise to debts that can be paid, collected, or forgiven:

And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;
Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances⁷ that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross

Haunting: In guilt, we sometimes feel haunted by what we have done. We imagine that our crimes, and especially our victims, follow us, and those whom we have hurt may visit us in our nightmares. Again, examples from literature and culture abound: In Shakespeare, Macbeth

⁶ I use the King James Version (KJV) (1611) for all biblical translations.

⁷ According to *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (1896), the Greek word χειρόγραφον, which the KJV translates as “handwriting of ordinances,” has the sense of “a handwriting...in which one acknowledges that money has either been deposited with him or lent to him by another, to be returned at an appointed time...; metaphorically, applied in Colossians 2:14... ,which shews men to be chargeable with offences for which they must pay the penalty” (668).

(1623) is haunted by Banquo's Ghost (3.4), and in *Richard III* (1597), both King Richard (see 5.3) and his brother the Duke of Clarence (see 1.4) are haunted in their dreams by the ghosts of their victims.⁸ Haunting by guilt is also a central theme of Toni Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, Edgar Allan Poe's (1843) *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and countless horror movies.

Stain: As Taylor and Roberts have emphasized, feelings of guilt are not simply about the wrongdoer's *action*. Rather, sin seems to stain or disfigure the wrongdoer himself, and guilt is a response to this stain. In trying to avoid guilt, we may shy away from "getting our hands dirty," or attempt, like Pontius Pilate, to "wash our hands" of wrongdoing. When we do transgress, we might acknowledge that "blood is on our hands"⁹ and wish to be cleansed and purified. *Macbeth*, the most brilliant modern reflection and exploration of the guilt-stain connection, provides arguably its most classic expression with Lady Macbeth's anguished plea, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!"¹⁰ but the Bible is not short on examples, either. The basic logic arguably appears as early as Genesis 4, when the guilty Cain is "cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive" Abel's blood (4:11). For a more straightforward New Testament example, consider 1 John 1:7: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Illness and Death: A guilty person might feel weak, "sick to his stomach," or otherwise physically ill, paralyzed, or incomplete. Guilt can "eat at" us and be "consuming," suggesting a cancer or parasite. "They're a-eatin on me," Uncle John says of his sins in *The Grapes of*

⁸ And see Miller (2006, chapter 7) for a discussion of ghostly haunting in *Hamlet* (1603). There, the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father haunts the ramparts of the castle and admonishes Hamlet to "remember" him, an injunction that Miller, and Hamlet, rightly interpret as a guilt-tripping call to vengeance (1.5: 91).

⁹ Indeed, this is how the mob responds to Pilate's hand-washing in the Gospel of Matthew: "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, *His blood be on us, and on our children*" (Matthew 27: 24-25; emphasis mine).

¹⁰ 5.1: 31. I discuss this famous scene in more detail later.

Wrath (1939). ““I wisht I could run it down.... But I can’t. She’s a-bitin’ in my guts”” (495). In *Crime and Punishment* (1866) illness tends to be Raskolnikov’s guilt metaphor of choice, and, as I noted above, Christianity explicitly associates sin and death.

Separation: Separation seems to have struck some philosophers as the most palatable guilt metaphor. T.M. Scanlon (2008), for example, writes that “Feeling guilty for something one has done is plausibly understood as feeling that it has impaired one’s relationship with certain people” (157). Morris, who, as we have seen, admirably highlights guilt’s connection to debt and unlawful possession, also makes much of the ways in which guilt reflects perceived disunity between oneself and others. Morris notes that the word “atonement” comes from the combining of “at”-“one”-“ment,” (100) and writes,

When we possess the concept of wrongdoing, I want to suggest that it is connected for us with the concept of ‘being joined together’ with another or others, the idea of union, the idea, too, that in this union one is complete, one is whole, in a way that one would not be without it.... When one is guilty of wrongdoing, one separates oneself from another or others with whom one was joined (96).¹¹

This is clearly an insight, but it cannot explain the psychology of guilt on its own. Many actions and events can lead to a separation from others. Someone else could wrong *me*, after all, and while such behavior would give rise to a painful sense of disunity and a desire for reconciliation, it would not lead to guilt.

To summarize: At first pass, it seems as though guilt, unlike shame (exposure to a certain kind of gaze), contempt (looking downward), and some other emotions, has no single, dominant image or idiom. Moreover, the various idioms seem to compete, in the sense that they suggest not only different ways of understanding and feeling guilt, but also different characteristic modes of resolving it. Burdens must be thrown off, debts paid, haunting demons exorcised, stains

¹¹ Similarly, Robert Adams (1999) writes that a “pervasive feature of guilt is alienation from other people, or (at a minimum) a strain on one’s relations with others. If I am guilty, I am out of harmony with other people” (239).

washed, illnesses treated or cured, and interpersonal bonds reconstituted. The competing images also suggest different explanations of the varying intensities of our guilty feelings: does a stronger feeling of guilt imply a darker (or more permanent) stain, a heavier burden, a scarier ghost, a greater debt, a deadlier illness, a more frayed interpersonal connection, or some combination of all of these?

One might respond by wondering whether these various images simply characterize different kinds of guilt, or guilt over different kinds of wrongdoing. The suggestion is appealing because it promises to make things simpler, but it would do so only at the price of distorting the facts. In truth, we employ combinations of these seemingly competing idioms to characterize single instances of guilt. Thus, one may feel sick, burdened, *and* haunted by guilt. One may feel that he owes a debt to society, has blood on his hands, and is painfully separated from others.

Moreover, it is striking that despite this range of guilt imagery, we have a relatively stable and reliable social script for rationally resolving guilt, the apology ritual, that seems to work no matter the metaphor one employs to characterize one's guilt in a particular instance. In an ideal case, the guilty person will confess, apologize, atone, earn forgiveness, and, ultimately, achieve reconciliation with others. Somehow these steps unburden, exorcise, balance books, cleanse, heal, and unify. How do they do this?

In attempting to answer these questions, I will show how these seemingly disparate metaphors can only be fully understood in the context of a single, common image. In making this case, I do not mean to crudely fuse guilt's metaphors in the name of some abstract concern for philosophical coherence or systematicity. Rather, I believe that uncovering the relationships between these various images illuminates and explains guilt's logic, moving us beyond the standard view that guilt is a "judgment of blameworthiness plus an unpleasant affect." Listing

guilt's images is a start, but to make real progress on the ethics of guilt—to determine whether or not it has a place in good personal and social lives, and, if so, when and how strongly we should feel it—we must understand its full psychological richness. If guilt is a burden, for example, exactly what kind of burden is it? Is it burdensome in the same way that grief—with its image of the “heavy heart”—is burdensome, or is it different? If guilt is a stain, why would paying a debt erase it? If it is a debt, why should it stain? If it is an illness, why would discharging a burden cure it?

III: Burdensome and Haunting Debts

To begin to answer these questions, I will argue that some of guilt's images are more fundamental than others. Let us start with burdening and haunting, which I believe are best understood in the idiom of debt. Most burdens are not debts, but we often experience debts as burdens. A debt “weighs one down” and “hangs over one's head,” especially when one owes a “hefty” sum. When a debt is paid or forgiven, one feels light and free. Thus, Psalm 32: 1-4 explicitly presents the balance of one's moral ledger as a burdensome weight:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord *imputeth*¹² *not iniquity*, and in whose spirit there is no guile.
When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long.
For day and night *thy hand was heavy upon me...*” (emphasis mine).

Conceiving of the burden of guilt as the burden of debt also furnishes an illuminating explanation of guilt's propensity to haunt. I submit that in guilt, we are characteristically, though perhaps not necessarily, haunted by visions of our *creditors*—unsettling and sometimes angry

¹² “Impute” is ledger language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) “impute” derived from the fourteenth-century Old French *imputer*, *emputer*, and directly from the Latin *imputare*, meaning “to reckon, make account of, charge, ascribe.” The word is a composite of “in” (into) and *putare*, meaning “to trim, prune; reckon, clear up, settle (as in an account).”

and vengeful ghosts seeking to “get even,” or “settle scores,” by reclaiming, confiscating, or “making us pay” for what we have wrongfully taken.¹³ This is certainly how Macbeth interprets the murdered Banquo’s ghostly presence: “It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood” (3.5: 124). It also explains why the ghosts that haunt Richard III’s dreams hope to “sit heavy on [his] soul” (5.3) and why his brother the Duke of Clarence reports that his “soul is heavy” (1.4: 67) as he recounts being visited in his dreams by creditor-ghosts who implore the Furies—vengeful spirits who repay blood with blood—to “seize on him” and “take him to [their] torments” (1.4: 54).

Not all hauntings are so bloody and dramatic, of course, but the general point remains. Insofar as we care about our victims, or about the rules and expectations that shape our social interactions, we will feel ill at ease in possession of that which is not rightfully ours. When our books are out of balance, we will wish to put them in order and may even anxiously conjure images of aggrieved victims or their repo men coming to collect.

¹³ As Miller (1998) emphasizes in a characteristically brilliant discussion, they also “dole out payback,” buying back their honor by “returning the favors” wrongdoers did them. Miller’s piece focuses on Hollywood revenge stories, but *Hamlet* reflects the logic as well: Claudius’s “offence is rank.” He has accrued status he should not have. He has done so by pouring poison in his brother’s ear—a significant literary choice. As Marcel Mauss noted in *The Gift*, the word “gift” in ancient Germanic languages had a double meaning: both gift and *poison*, and is etymologically related to the Greek “dosis”—a dose, either of medicine or of poison (see p. 81 and p. 186, fn. 122). Claudius, then, has made gains in honor by a method well-known from ancient cultures to our contemporary society: giving “gifts.” Hamlet’s honor, accordingly, depends on his ability to reciprocate (on honor and requiting unwanted gifts and “gifts,” see Miller 1993, chapter 1). Hamlet is a debtor whose effort to dole out payback organizes the play’s action. In the end, he gives Claudius not just a dose but also a taste of his own “medicine,” first stabbing him with the poisoned-tip sword and then making him drink from the poison cup (5.2). As Miller argues, conceiving of the victim as the debtor rather than the creditor puts the victim’s honor and agency at the center of the narrative, emphasizing his “right and obligation to repay the wrong” (167) as opposed to the offender’s obligation to compensate. *Hamlet* works the way it works because it is Hamlet who must act. In this paper, I argue, as Nietzsche does, that feelings of guilt tend to be associated more with owing than being owed, although I acknowledge that we employ both idioms in ordinary speech. As Miller correctly observes, “the two competing paradigms, which seem utterly antithetical regarding who stands in the debtor’s shoes, are not mutually exclusive. Paying back does not, for instance, preclude seeing the wrongdoer as having paid for his wrong once he has been paid back.... In some respects the two models march quite well in tandem. One model sees events from the avenger’s perspective, the other from the wrongdoer’s” (168). If *Hamlet* is the classic example of the victim-centered model in Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth* is the paradigmatic example of the wrongdoer-centered model. There, the *offender*, Lady Macbeth, is the debtor who takes center stage. I discuss Claudius and Lady Macbeth at greater length in §5 and §6, respectively.

This way of uniting the metaphors of burden and haunting suggests a characteristic method of rationally resolving guilt. By paying our debts, either to our victims, society, or both, we unburden ourselves and exorcise our spectral creditors. It also begins to shed light on the relationship between guilt and luck. The size of the debts we incur varies according to the actual damage done. Ghostly debt collectors (and, of course, the wrongdoers who conjure them) know the logic of “You break it, you buy it” as well as Pottery Barn shoppers. Banquo’s ghost haunts Macbeth because the murderer whom Macbeth sent to kill him succeeded. Banquo’s son, Fleance, on the other hand, who had also been on Macbeth’s hitlist, escaped the murderer’s blade. Though Macbeth is, in some abstract sense, “equally blameworthy” for ordering both killings (he evinces equally poor “quality of will” toward Fleance and Banquo), the debt (of blood) that he incurs, and thus the nature of his haunting, depend entirely on the fact that Banquo was actually murdered. What Macbeth illegitimately took was not only the liberty of releasing himself from the shared burdens of self-restraint that allow society to function smoothly, but, also, and most importantly, Banquo’s *life*. His account is out of balance and Banquo’s ghost is coming to get even.

IV: Sickness and Stain

Unlike burden and haunting, the metaphors of illness and stain cannot so easily be understood in terms of the more fundamental logic of debt. They do, however, share much in common with each other. I want to suggest that the sickness and the stain are both reflections of a kind of corruption or contamination that results from transgression. When we act wrongly, we are tainted: stained, sickened, disfigured. Sometimes, we are disgusted with ourselves.

The metaphor rings true to me, and, like the image of debt, it offers a natural explanation of guilt's variation according to luck: More blood spilled means a larger, redder, and more indelible stain.

Still, the image of the corrupting stain cannot fully explain the logic of guilt without supplementation. This is because it offers no clear path to understanding the emotion's rational resolution without invoking the language of debt. When we feel guilty, we feel both indebted and corrupted. When the books are rebalanced, through atonement, amends and restitution, the debt's forcible extraction through punishment, or through forgiveness, we seem to be cleansed. But why should this be? Why should the payment or forgiveness of a debt be purifying? While we do not yet have an explanation for the mixed metaphor, it is worth noting at this stage that the logic of payment and cleansing seems to move in only one direction. Paying our debt, settling accounts, and getting even is decontaminating; this is what we need to explain, and what the mixed metaphor makes puzzling. It is *not* the case, however, that cleansing ourselves settles our debts. Without being forgiven or making restitution, our debts—and fitting feelings of guilt—remain, no matter how much we have improved ourselves. Indeed, even this understates the case, for in fact we *cannot* cleanse ourselves when our books are out of balance. Payment or forgiveness is essential for purification.

V: The Debt and the Stain

Let us consider the possible relationships between the debt and the stain more carefully. One possibility, of course, is that stain and debt have no relationship at all. According to this view, debt and stain are fundamentally different ways of understanding guilt that cannot be reconciled. This seems doubtful to me in light of what I have just noted. There is strong evidence

that the concepts travel together and follow a reliable pattern. Restitution cleanses; an unbalanced account precludes purity.

Two of our greatest stories, the Passion of Jesus and *Hamlet*, illustrate the world-shaping power of this logic. I will begin with Jesus.¹⁴ One of Christianity's most famous taglines is that Jesus "died for our sins," but this statement somewhat obscures the bloody economic substance of the transaction. Christianity teaches that as a result of original sin, we are fallen and tainted. We have taken something that was not ours to take, and restitution to God must be made. Jesus *pays* for our sin with his holy blood. Cleanliness costs, and Christ the *Redeemer* graciously *buys back* our purity.¹⁵ We are "washed in the soul-cleansing blood of the lamb," in the words of the well-known Christian hymn—"sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

As a result of Jesus's slate-cleaning atonement, we are given the opportunity to live *in* Christ—to be cleansed by baptism, take communion, and be *at one* with God. Here, we can begin to see the relationship between the metaphors of debt and stain and the image of separation that Morris and others emphasized. As debtors, we remain stained by our sins, rendering us impure and unfit to commune with God. Jesus's bloody payment removes the obstacle to unity.

Impurity and debt separate us from one another in secular life, too. In feeling guilty, we may see our stained selves as unworthy to be with or "at one" with wronged others, or with society more generally. Alternatively, or additionally, our debts themselves may impede communion. Having taken what was not rightfully ours, we may be ashamed, anxious, or afraid

¹⁴ I feel compelled to note here that I am not a Christian. Nevertheless, I believe that fully understanding our concept of guilt requires close attention to its Judeo-Christian provenance.

¹⁵ This view is controversial, but it has a formidable Christian pedigree that predates Nietzsche's critical remarks in the second essay of his *Genealogy* (63). For a good discussion, see Kerrigan (1996, chapter 5), who focuses on Milton's development of the idea that "the fall and its legacy of sin had left a 'debt' due to an angry God, and that 'satisfaction' was rendered on the cross. Christ was man's substitute in paying for disobedience, since only his divine sacrifice could be large enough to meet the bill" (121).

to face our creditors.¹⁶ Our victims, in turn, have valid claims against us, and will be unable to maintain their self-respect without holding us to account, and then either making us pay or offering us forgiveness.¹⁷

Now let us turn to *Hamlet* 3.3, where we find King Claudius explicitly invoking the debt-stain pattern I have been highlighting as he tries and fails to pray:

Oh, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't—
A brother's murder. Pray can I not:
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. *What if this cursèd hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood—
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force:
To be forestalled ere we come to fall
Or pardoned, being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past, but, oh, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th'offense?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offense's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law, but 'tis not so above.
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can—what can it not?*

¹⁶ As the images of haunting attest to.

¹⁷ Moral philosophers of responsibility and blame have tended, in their efforts to launder our so-called “responsibility practices” by casting them as “moral conversations” (McKenna 2011) that aim at “moral alignment,” (Fricker 2016) to deemphasize the possibility of “making the wrongdoer pay” as an option for settling accounts precisely because it involves action rather than conversation. The extraction of debt has a social meaning, of course, but its importance is not fully captured in terms of its expressive effects alone. Its more significant feature is that it balances the scales of justice. For a discussion of the scales of justice, see Miller (2006), chapter 1.

Yet what can it when one cannot repent?
Oh, wretched state; oh, bosom black as death;
Oh, limèd soul that struggling to be free
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay—
Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe.
All may be well. [Emphasis mine]

Claudius attempts to pray in order to purify himself—to rid himself of the corrupting (“rank,” “foul,” “cursed”) offense that puts him in a “wretched state” and stains him (“bosom black as death”). He imagines his “cursed hand, thicker than itself with brother’s blood” being “wash[ed]...white as snow” by a heavenly rain. He finds, however, that his “stronger guilt defeats [his] strong intent” precisely because he understands the logic of guilt. He is still a debtor, possessing what is not rightfully his: his crown, his power, his queen. With an unbalanced ledger, he cannot be purified. Claudius is unrepentant even in his thoughts (as he later says, “words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3: 98)), but the soliloquy argues that genuine repentance goes beyond one’s mental states or “quality of will.” Even a genuine change of heart would be insufficient to wash the stain without a forfeiture of, and payment for, the tangible results of the crime. And it can be just as true that the “gilded hand” may not “shove by justice” or the “wicked hand...[buy] out the law” in our own guilty consciences as it is in the heavens Claudius imagines “above.” In order to rationally resolve our guilt—to unburden ourselves, heal, exorcise our demons, reconcile with others, and wash away our stains—we must settle our accounts. This task cannot be accomplished by improving our attitudes, or even by privately feeling the pain of contrition. Debts must be settled *materially*. Without concrete restitution or forgiveness, purification and relief are impossible.

We see the same logic in the Gospel of Matthew's portrayal of Judas's suicide by hanging (Matthew 27: 3-8). Judas, who betrayed Christ in exchange for thirty pieces of silver, now desperately longs to make amends:

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that.

And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.

And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day.

Again, an internal change of heart is clearly insufficient to relieve Judas of his guilt. He knows that he must (at least) forfeit his ill-gotten gains. But what he has wrongfully taken in addition to the silver, Jesus's life, is more than he could ever pay back. His suicide could be interpreted as an expression of shame (how could he live with having to see himself as the man who had betrayed Christ?), of guilt (how could he bear the burden of his betrayal, knowing that he could never make amends?), and as a forlorn effort to approximate restitution by sacrificing his own life. As we are later told in Hebrews 9:22, and as Judas would have known from studying its Old Testament precursors,¹⁸ "Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

VI: "In the Red"

So far, I have argued that we can fruitfully explain the guilt-images of burden and haunting in terms of the more fundamental metaphor of debts that must either be paid, extracted,

¹⁸ See, most famously, the articulation of *lex talionis* in Exodus 21.

or forgiven. I also suggested a consolidation of the images of sickness and stain under the broader umbrella of corruption or pollution. Further, I showed how both stains and debts can separate us from others. Finally, I highlighted the close relationship between these two seemingly irreconcilable images: Only by settling accounts through forgiveness or payment can our stains of guilt be cleansed. Internal purification through a “change of heart” is insufficient; material restitution must be made.

This is progress, but it raises a crucial question: *why* does paying a debt of guilt cleanse us? Most debts, after all, do not stain us, and most payments do not purify. Why, then, in the case of guilt, does the logic of debt and payment bleed into the logic of pollution and ablution?

I believe that the stains we incur in guilt are to be understood as *marks on our moral ledgers*. In other words, they are symbols of *debts* that can only be removed through appropriate moves in the logic of accounting: restitution and forgiveness. When we are guilty, we must either buy back our purity or hope for a gracious forgiveness that “wipes the slate clean.”

Again, the pattern runs deep in the Western psyche. Let us begin with the Hebrew Bible, where the Hebrew verb for “blot out,” which suggests being crossed out of God’s book in ink, occurs 23 times.¹⁹ In six of those instances, it refers specifically to the blotting out of transgression or sin. Consider, for example, Isaiah 43:25: God expresses frustration with the sins of the people, and after referring to himself as the “sole redeemer” of Israel, announces that, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” This is a paradigmatic example of gracious forgiveness. Israel does not “come clean,” but God offers a “clean slate” nevertheless, blotting out the offending stain on the ledger.

¹⁹ Whitaker and Goehring (1990), p. 109.

This usage also appears in Nehemiah, Jeremiah, and multiple times in Psalms. So long as a transgression is not “blotted out” or paid for, it continues to mar the transgressor’s balance sheet, and therefore the transgressor. It remains a liability, as we can see in the prophet Jeremiah’s plea to God to “deal with” his enemies: “Yet, Lord, thou knowest all their counsel against me to slay me: forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight, but let them be overthrown before thee; deal thus with them in the time of thine anger” (Jeremiah 18:23). Intimations that sin is fundamentally a mark in a book continue in the New Testament. Consider, for example, Acts 3:19: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.” Here, once again, purification of the person means the cleansing of his *record*.

But the best expression of the idea that the stain of guilt is a stain on one’s balance sheet comes, once again, from Shakespeare. In one of the most well-known dramatizations of guilt in the Western canon, Lady Macbeth walks and talks in her sleep, trying desperately to wash her victims’ blood from her hands:

Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two, why,
then, ’tis time to do’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a sol-
dier and afeard? What need we fear? Who knows it when
none can call our power to account? Yet who would have
thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?²⁰

This speech and lines that follow dazzlingly weave our images of guilt together. On the one hand, Lady Macbeth tries to convince herself that what she and Macbeth have done should not haunt them. Banquo, she goes on to say, “cannot come out on ’s grave” (5.1: 57) and “call [their] power to account” (5.1: 34) by extracting payment of the bloody debts. On the other hand, the spot will not wash out. “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1: 38), she asks. “Here’s the

²⁰ 5.1: 31-35.

smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (5.1: 44-45). In direct response to this last lament, the doctor who has been summoned to watch the display brilliantly remarks, “What a sigh is there! Her heart is sorely *charged*” (5.1: 46-47; emphasis mine). “Charge” comes from the Old French “charge” meaning “load, burden; imposition.” By Shakespeare’s time, it had also acquired its contemporary sense of “accusation,” as in being charged with a crime, as well as its economic sense of the cost one must pay in exchange for something.²¹ The indelible stain, then, is not just abstractly *explained by* the existence of the unpaid debt. Rather, it is the very *mark and evidence of the debt*. As long as Lady Macbeth’s heart is “charged”—as long as her account is out of balance—the spot will remain. In her guilty madness, she wears her ledger on her person. She is literally “in the red.”²²

In this brief but iconic scene, Shakespeare employs all of the guilt metaphors we have surveyed and reveals the specific nature of their connections. The corrupting stain that troubles “infected minds” such as Lady Macbeth’s is the mark of a “charged” heart, heavy with the burden of debt. Unable to make restitution, she is haunted by her creditors and distant from God (thus the reference to the impotence of “all the perfumes of Arabia”—frankincense and myrrh—which have obvious religious significance).²³ She is thus indebted, sick, stained, burdened, and

²¹ OED at “charge.” Compare *Richard III* 1.4: 83-89, in which Brakenbury, Lieutenant of the Tower in London, allows two murderers to kill the Duke of Clarence (his “charge”) in prison but seeks to remain free of guilt (and therefore debt) by, in effect, “charging” the murderers:

“I will not reason what is meant hereby,
Because I will be guiltless of the meaning.
Here are the keys, there sits the Duke asleep.
I’ll to his majesty, and certify his grace

That thus I have *resigned my charge to you*” [emphasis mine]

²² According to the OED, the first use of the phrase “in the red” dates to 1907. That 1907 use, however, references the “customary” accounting practice of entering losses in red ink (OED at “red”). When that custom began is less clear. Preston E. Curry’s 1920 *History of Bookkeeping and Accounting* implies that the practice may trace back to ancient Egypt, where scribes using red and black pens tracked “receipts and disbursements of the state” (4).

²³ See <https://myshakespeare.com/Macbeth/act-5-scene-1>

isolated. Like Judas, she sees suicide as her only option; “What’s done cannot be undone” (5.1: 60-61).

VII: Charged hearts and the ethics of guilt

I have argued that the corrupting stain of guilt is best understood as a mark on the guilty party’s moral balance sheet. This conceptualization provides illuminating responses to two challenges we have been considering. First, it explains the distinctive ways in which guilt is painful (the sickness, the burden, the separation from others) and the fact that we feel these pains more intensely when the consequences of our misdeeds are graver. Earlier, I noted the ability of both debt and stain imagery to accomplish this latter task on their own. The idiom of debt could succeed because what one owes is a function of what one has illegitimately come to possess, and what one has come to possess cannot be understood except in social, concrete terms. The idiom of stain could succeed when we could imagine that the corrupting substance was blood. The bloodier the deed, the bigger and more intransigent the stain. My remarks in the last section drew these two thoughts together while introducing the possibility of another staining substance: ink. The polluting stain, then, is to be understood as a mark, in ink or in blood, on the guilty party’s balance sheet. Bigger, darker stains signify greater debts to be balanced, blotted out, or wiped clean. These images, of balancing, “blotting out,” and “wiping the slate clean,” provide an answer to our second question: *Why* is paying one’s debts purifying? The answer is that what stands in need of purification is the ledger itself. When the stains of guilt are blotted out or wiped clean through payment or forgiveness, we are cleansed and relieved.

Guilt’s defining proposition, then, is something along the following lines: “As a result of my wrongdoing, I have incurred a staining mark of debt on my moral ledger, which is an

important part of who I am. I must pay back my creditors or seek their forgiveness so that I can be purified and eligible for reunification with them.”²⁴

This picture implies that, in our guilt, we identify ourselves with our moral balance sheets. Thus, it is Lady Macbeth’s very *heart* that is “charged.”²⁵ We feel stained to our cores when our books are imbalanced: we are our moral records. I believe that this is an accurate characterization of the psychology of guilt, but it may raise ethical alarms for some readers. What does this self-ledger identity tell us about the way we see ourselves and morality? Is it a self-conception that we can endorse, or even tolerate?

Those who are familiar with so-called “ledger views” of blameworthiness in the literature on free will and responsibility²⁶ may be especially concerned. According to those views, only controlled expression of the quality of one’s will can affect one’s balance sheet, and one’s balance sheet is one’s most morally significant feature. It should be clear by now that the kind of accounting that I am proposing is different. First, while one’s debts must be the products of one’s wrongdoing, they do not track the quality of one’s will. One can, and should, “hold oneself accountable” in guilt for what one wrongfully comes to possess, even if that possession is partially a consequence of luck. Second, while my version of the ledger view of fitting guilt implies that your ledger is part of you, it does not imply that you are *only* your ledger.

But even the claim that one is partially constituted by one’s moral balance sheet can seem troubling. Why should we care so much about “getting even” and “balancing our books” in the first place? Isn’t this painful identification just the manifestation of what Nietzsche characterized

²⁴ In referring to “creditors,” I mean to include both the primary victims of one’s wrongdoing as well as one’s fellow citizens whom one has disrespected by expressing contempt for community rules (and enriching oneself in the process).

²⁵ Compare Jeremiah 17:1: “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their *heart*, and upon the horns of your altars” (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Zimmerman (1998) is a paradigmatic example.

as a destructive sadism turned inward? Would we be better off if we freed ourselves from this oppressive schema?

I cannot fully answer this question here, but I will conclude with some brief remarks in favor of a more sanguine, or least more complicated, view of the ethics of guilt. An ethical case for guilt must begin, I think, with Morris's insights about the ways in which guilt can separate us from others and threaten our integrity. We do not care about the purity of our books only for its own sake. Rather, we are invested in record-keeping largely because of the way a clean slate allows us to achieve communion with others. Injustice, disrespect, lack of self-respect, and feelings of unworthiness are all barriers to union, especially with those with whom we aspire to live on fair and equal terms. When we live in a community with such others, we are bound together by a set of broadly shared ideals and expectations, and the norms and emotions that reflect and express them. Among these ideals and expectations is a kind of respect, characterized by fairness and reciprocity, which, as I have been stressing, must be understood as irreducibly social. So long as we retain a deep psychosocial drive to live in a community governed by respect and equality, we will feel more distant from others when we wrongfully take more and therefore owe more, and we will not be able to maintain our self-respect without holding others to account and either forgiving or collecting debts.

To meet our need for communion, an ethic of respect and equality must encourage us to remember, for forgetfulness makes accountability, and therefore a certain kind of respect, impossible. The identification of person and ledger reflects the depth and centrality of this drive to recollect.²⁷ We are shaped not only by the ethical frameworks that structure our lives, but also

²⁷ See Miller 2006, chapter 7.

by our *standing* within those frameworks. Socialization into our moral system involves learning to (at least partially) become our balance sheets.

I am suggesting, then, that guilt is a painful recognition of one's failure to maintain one's good standing in a certain kind of moral system. That moral system, in turn, is an appealing response to a deep desire to build and preserve relationships shaped by some notion of respect, self-respect, equality, and fairness. In some ways, this analysis is not dissimilar to Freud's. Freud, as I understand him, sees guilt as a response to a threat to something valuable: the love and protection of the father, or, on a larger scale, of society, from the subject's own aggressive impulses. We feel an Oedipal ambivalence of love and aggression toward father/society, and guilt is the result of the super-ego's disapproving recognition and rebuke of our aggressive desires and intentions.

Nietzsche's critique attempts to get under even this layer of analysis. He agrees, I believe, that in guilt we chastise ourselves for threatening a social order to which we feel at least some loyalty. For Nietzsche, however, the rebuke *itself* is its own reward with its own distinctive allure: it is a manifestation of a stifled aggression that cannot be expressed naturally as joyous cruelty within the confines of society.

I do not see either of these views as inconsistent with my psychological account of guilt. They do, however, put pressure on attempts to ethically vindicate the emotion, and they do so in a similar way, by raising the suspicion that guilt could not, even in principle, be well-regulated by virtue. For Nietzsche, guilt is bound to overwhelm whatever we might define as its proper confines because the will to power (of which guilt is a warped expression) is boundless. In Freud, guilt always at least threatens to oppress because the omniscient super-ego will discover and censure not only anti-social *action*, but also anti-social *desire*, which we could never hope

(nor should we wish) to eradicate. Both critiques, then, to put the point in the language of my view and as bleakly as possible, condemn us to be perpetually stained to our cores, our ledgers marked by inescapable imbalance.

I believe that there is truth in both critiques, and I hope that my discussion helps to illuminate their urgency. Nevertheless, I find the previous paragraph's harsh statement of their upshot to be excessively pessimistic. Both raise real concerns not to be minimized, but if I am right that guilt is a constitutive part of an ethically attractive style of interpersonal and social life, then we must at least attempt to confront and manage its dangers rather than banishing it from our emotional repertoire. That task, however, will have to wait for another paper.

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