Guilt According to Nietzsche

Kudzai Zinyemba

Nietzsche states in the second essay of the *Genealogy of Morality* his theory of why humans feel guilt. It could be stated that his argument tends to culminate in a sort of circular reasoning, but I will posit that, taken within its original and intended conditions and applications, his thesis does in fact maintain its stability and is a valid postulation for the origins and effects of guilt in modern society.

Nietzsche’s argument is in sum the conclusion that humans feel guilt due to the feeling that we owe our own suffering to some larger ideal, typically society at large. The use of the word ‘owe’ is very important—the feeling of guilt could be analogized to an overdue loan or payment. Because we have not done our due diligence as citizens, we ‘owe’ some repayment to the ideals we have disappointed. Yet, what kind of collateral can there be for an intangible exchange? The burden of failing repayment must also be intangible. Historically, we have taken suffering as repayment for defaulted loans, and that mentality persists, even though the meaning of the suffering has been lost, the meaning being that it was pleasurable for whoever was owed some vast sum to dole out punishment in retaliation. In this way, the exchange becomes two-fold; money or material goods are exchanged for a person’s “body, or his wife, or his freedom, or his life”¹, the lack of which would cause emotional anguish that is inherently satisfying to the creditor. To give another person control over essential aspects of one’s life is distressing, and that distress becomes an adequate substitute for the lost materials and finances. It’s important to

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¹ “[The debtor]...in order to etch the duty and obligation of repayment into his conscience, pawns something to the creditor by means of the contract in case he does not pay, something that he still ‘possesses’ and controls, for example, his body, or his wife, or his freedom, or his life”

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Genealogy of Morals*, pg. 40
note that the loss of love and limb is not meant as a *deterrent*. It is simply a compensation for the creditor. The punishment was solely for his satisfaction. Any ability of those actions to influence the debtor’s actions was circumstantial, a pleasant side effect. But it was never the intrinsic goal. The end goal of inflicting cruelty on a debtor is, in fact, the chance to inflict cruelty, a much sought after privilege. “Compensation is made up of a warrant for and entitlement to cruelty”\(^2\) in that cruelty is inherently satisfying of itself.

The idea that people are inclined to cause other people’s suffering may invoke controversy, but then, that depends on the perspective from which that statement is viewed. It is possible to claim that humans dislike causing each other suffering on a basal level, that given the opportunity people are hesitant to dole out harsh punishments. Nietzsche would likely attribute this to the same societal fabric- the “morality of mores”- that makes doling out punishments so satisfying. In modern society, people are taught from birth not to bring harm to others. It is the job of any respectable human to keep themselves in line with societal virtues and values, all of which include not inflicting any suffering on people other than yourself. Thus, the urge to cause anguish of any kind is rejected, pushed deep within the human psyche, even if a harsh punishment may seem warranted or deserved. The concept of a punishment being deserved, as we have already discussed, is another modern fabrication in itself-people crave “the enjoyment of violating” more than they miss whatever has been lost. Under this set of parameters, in a modern society so restrained by the morality of mores, punishments given would be watered down and unenthusiastic, as even harboring vindictive intent is not as satisfying as it once was.

Because we cannot inflict suffering on others, despite that being one of our most primal desires, we must find another outlet for it, namely ourselves. The suffering that cannot be

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\(^2\) Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Genealogy of Morals*, pg. 42
expressed eternally is internalized and expressed as guilt: a constant, self-imposed anguish. And yet, as history proves, for what other reason would we be suffering except if we had done something wrong? To satisfy this dissonance, we invent offenses we have committed and people we owe things to. What is guilt if not a vast internal anguish “transformed into the imaginative and spiritual,”\(^3\) so that we can feel it without the introspection of wondering why we inflict such anguish on ourselves? To invent a religious philosophy that claims all men were born ‘sinful’, to claim that overcoming your own sinful nature is impossible no matter how much you labor over your ideals and behavior…it is the perfect system to allow yourself to revel in your suffering, the only variety of which you are permitted to indulge. In this way, guilt becomes internalized as the expression of repressed malicious intent.

This deep, existential guilt that we attribute to metaphysical origins, emotional baggage, or simply the nature of being human is instead the logical resolution of centuries of repression and rejection. By maintaining belief in this religious system, people give meaning to their guilt and suffering and are able to accept it as rational and necessary. It also feeds into the supposed “morality of mores” as it creates a constant drive in people to improve for the sake of bettering their world more so than benefitting themselves. Rather than sitting in pain and melancholy over their existence, people hold onto the hope that one day they can achieve a level of ‘goodness’ that will make them worthy of their religious ideals. Of course, no one will ever reach that point because the nature of religion is to make those goals unreachable, but the pursuit of ideals is

\(^3\) “Perhaps I can even be allowed to admit the possibility that pleasure in cruelty does not really need to have died out: perhaps, just as pain today hurts more, it needed, in this connection, some kind of sublimation and subtilization, it had to be transformed into the imaginative and spiritual, and adorned with such inoffensive names that they do not arouse the suspicion of even the most delicate hypocritical conscience”

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Genealogy of Morals, pg. 44
noble and there is no guarantee people would pursue them if they did not feel some deep dissatisfaction that they cannot name.

“But to suffer is to be human,” goes the typical complaint. “There doesn’t need to be an origin to something that is central to the human experience.” I challenge, is suffering a result of the human experience or is it the result of living in a society? To this day we have little record of how-or if-humans lived without the strict constrains of solitary existence. Nietzsche has taken this absence of record as an opportunity to insert his own theories about the origin of man and his guiltless existence, how he lived simpler and unburdened with all these moral consequences. I would challenge both Nietzsche’s idealization and its rebuttal and instead pose the question, “Is it possible to not live in a society?” After all, Nietzsche’s argument hinges on the answer. If internal human suffering is the consequence of living in a society, then by nature, it could be avoided if humans were to dissociate themselves from the values that constrict them. I propose in this case, the existence of being human and the fact of living in a society are indivisible. No one lives in isolation. The question of if humans would suffer if they were not taught to suffer is beyond even the bounds of the argument, because all humans are taught to suffer. Even the choice to abstain from participating in society is still a submission to society; the decision to become a hermit beyond the bounds of man requires one to either sublimate or embrace the guilt you carry in having wasted society’s resources.

Of course, if you are not regretful in the slightest of your misdeeds and the insult you leave in the wake of your actions, you would not feel guilt. People in today’s society are shamed for not feeling guilt over their deeds. They are called ‘evil’ themselves for their lack of a conscience’. This seems to disprove Nietzsche’s theory again: “How does it make sense that guilt would only affect those least deserving of suffering?” But suffering, any instance, is not a
reaction to an offense. It is a repayment. “The aggressive person as the stronger, more
courageous, nobler man, has always had a clearer eye, a better conscience on his side”\(^4\) because
he gets what he desires. There is no anguish to internalize if you act on your desires. Guilt can
only manifest for actions that were not fulfilled to satisfaction, as it is an ancestor of punishment.
If those who are by and large innocent are plagued with guilt all their waking hours, then I
suppose it’s because they need that guilt in order to sustain them and remind them of what they
have been taught. No one can be moved to preventative guilt. You can be pressured into regret,
yet regret and guilt are not, as it happens, of equal origin and severity.

Do I believe in this hypothesis? I can say I don’t disbelieve it. I believe it makes several
notable and valid points about the internalization of culture over the course of human history.

I think Nietzsche makes a valid claim in that “punishment, too, has such very strong
festive aspects”\(^5\), as modern civilization as we know it still participates in a morbid fascination
with the suffering of ourselves and others. Popular thought and culture continue to emphasize
misery, and how misery seems to be a result of everyday existence, brought on my loved ones
and unavoidable parts of daily routine. In shared misery, humans find commune and connection.

Secondly, the aforementioned point about honesty and responsibility has some merit—a
human trying to contribute to a more amicable society would aim to reduce conflict, and the
simplest way to reduce conflict is to not start any of your own volition by breaking oaths and
telling lies. Internalized shame towards stigmatized behavior allows the general public to police
themselves rather than constantly turning to a higher authority for moral and personal guidance.
In this way, guilt creates personal responsibility and standards. If people were not imbued with

\(^4\) Nietzsche, Friedrich, Genealogy of Morals, pg.48
\(^5\) Nietzsche, Friedrich, Genealogy of Morals, pg. 41
an instinctual aversion to the emotions that arise from doing unsanctioned behavior, society as a communal effort would be untenable.

Nietzsche’s efforts to prove the origin of guilt and conscience may seem oversimplified, but I can’t help but feel that people tend to overcomplicate aspects of society that are essential. The declaration that people feel guilt because it is necessary for the function of society may be unusual but taken in context with many other aspects of modern existence this seems at least, the most minimally offensive. In the echoes of a largely theocratic culture, the analysis of a longing for an acceptable, yet unattainable version of yourself is particularly visible in daily interaction and typical self-image. Nietzsche makes no claims about any one person’s innocence or moral failings. He makes no claims about the state of the modern man in his own solitary prison. All he claims is that these prisons are self-made, these morals upheld solely by continued belief, which, as I said before, is not an offensive claim. It makes sense to uphold a moral you believe in. Even makes sense to suffer for it, as that is, after all, how we have grown to show devotion.