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Study Hour

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Guilt and Anxiety as Social Controls

D. Ewen Cameron, M.D.

Before coming to grips with these topics, it is necessary to clear the ground — and clear our minds. For our predecessors made great use of anxiety and guilt in their thinking about human behavior. They used them to an exceptional degree as a driving force to turn the wheels of their social structure. They worked out ideas and beliefs about anxiety and guilt which were useful enough in their lives but which are now out of date and are muddling our thinking.

Each new group, as it takes over the scene from its predecessors — the Victorians, the Edwardians, those who lived through the first World War — has had this selfsame job of clearing away the wornout concepts, the used-up beliefs and the antiquated ideas left behind by those who occupied this uneasy earth before them.

When we come to consider this matter of the use of guilt and anxiety as social controls, the amount of clearing away that is necessary is quite prodigious because of the very fact mentioned above, namely, that those who went before us made such great use of them.

Let us start off by saying that social control is an essential of our survival. If we are to live together, then our actions — the actions of ourselves and of our neighbors — must be subject to control. For we are by nature expansionists, and aggressive expansionists at that. We seek continually to expand our mastery over our world — over the weather by building houses, over time and distance through the rapid development of our transportation systems, over our fellows in the endless rivalries and competition of the family, the office, and, in bloodier form, between national groups.

Fortunately we arrive in this rather difficult world with certain devices already built into our natures which greatly facilitate our capacity to establish social control. These devices are the capacity to feel pain, to feel anxiety, and to feel guilt.

The use of pain as a social control I shall dismiss briefly by saying that it is much less used than it was. True enough, the sound of the parental slipper is still heard at the bedtime hour, but not so much as formerly. The ecclesiastical rack and the torture chamber, once used to wrench the sinner back to the path of righteousness, have disappeared save for a brief and horrible revival under the Nazis.

We still use, and probably shall continue to use, anxiety and guilt for quite some time as social controls. We are using them, however, differently from the way in which our grandparents and great-grandparents wielded them. It is most important to define these differences since, oddly enough, although we use them differently there is still a hangover of our old ways of thinking about them.

At this point let me make some statements which our predecessors would not have made but which none-theless are gaining increasing acceptance in our days.

The first statement is that ideas of right and wrong are not inborn. During the last several decades a flood of information has come to us from other cultures all around the world — information concerning the very different ways in which such matters as the bringing up of children, the dividing of property, the managing of marriage, and the administration of justice can be carried out. There was a time when we were prone to dismiss these as the ways of natives, savages, or simply foreigners. Now we recognize them as the different ways in which human beings have been able to work out their relationships with each other and have been able to solve some of the profoundly difficult problems of liv-
ing together. We can see very clearly that in their various settings these quite different ways of managing things operate fairly satisfactorily. They work well even though they may not be acceptable in our own culture, though they may be designated as "bad." Similarly, those things which are accepted in our culture are often considered "bad," "wrong," "not done," in others. For instance, the simple custom of eating in public is regarded as a matter of embarrassment and shame in Bali.

In a word, "good" and "bad" are relative, not absolute things. The great difference between the way in which those who lived before us thought about anxiety and guilt and the way in which we think about them is thrust into still sharper outline by the statement that they looked upon the excessively conscientious person, the person prone to feel guilty over every passing trifle, as someone who had a specially delicate sense of right and wrong and who for that reason was to be considered a specially worthy person. We, however, think of him as having a limited and crippled personality and as having been damaged most probably by unhealthy childhood experiences. Similarly, anxious-minded people we now know to be very rarely those people who are taking unnecessary risks and are more often people whose sense of security has been badly shaken by exposure to insecure people during their earlier years.

We are born with the capacity to feel anxiety and guilt. We are not born feeling guilty about anything. The things to which we may respond with feelings of guilt when we are twenty are things which we have been taught, during the intervening years, to feel guilty about. The same is very largely true about anxiety. When we are born we have a capacity to respond by anxiety, but there are only a few things, such as loud noises and the fear of falling, which seem to be inborn. All other fears and anxieties are acquired through the experiences we encounter in living. We have now come to the point where we recognize that we ourselves decide what things we are going to feel guilty or anxious about, and also how guilty and how anxious we are going to feel about those things. This represents a very radical departure from the thinking of our predecessors, who felt that these things were inborn, that they were part of the nature which man had been given, and that for this reason we should not attempt to do anything about them.

Now, having contrasted the old and the new ways of looking at anxiety and guilt, let us say that we still need these two things as social controls, though they are crude and clumsy. The essential difference is that from here on we are going to attempt to use them rather than think of them as being something preordained.

Perhaps we can see something of what we are likely to do in the future about anxiety and guilt if we look at what we have already done about pain. We have not tried to abolish the capacity of individuals to feel pain. To do so would be very hazardous indeed since we might suffer a great deal of damage if we were not capable of knowing that the cigarette was burning our fingers or that something was going wrong with our appendix. But we have tried to eliminate the causes of pain and we have tried to prevent pain from going on unnecessarily. As soon as it has drawn our attention to the fact that something is wrong, we try, through aspirin, codeine, or the general anesthetics, to protect the individual against too much suffering. Interestingly enough, this last step, though now so widely accepted, was not achieved without something of a struggle. Shortly after the general anesthetics were introduced, their use in childbirth was proposed. For a time this was stoutly resisted, on the grounds that it was "natural" for a woman to suffer pain at such times, and to interfere with it was to interfere with the ways of Providence. Fortunately this ancient idea has been forced into the retreat into which all such dogmata are being driven.

Now, if we look at anxiety, we will
see that we are already beginning to try to identify the causes of anxiety—
the dangerously insecure people who as parents transmit their anxieties to their children through the unhealthy atmosphere which they create, the anxiety produced by the high-speed industrial job, by economic insecurity. Many of the old anxiety-producing ways of looking at things are disappearing. We no longer try to control our children by telling them ghost stories, we no longer talk about the "unforgivable," the "uncorrectable." The nineteenth century woman who was "irretrievably ruined," and the Kiplingesque character who was "beyond the pale" live now primarily in fiction.

It may be that we can eventually accomplish something of the same thing with guilt that we have done and are trying to do with respect to pain and anxiety. Our first step must be to recognize that although for a time we shall have to continue to use guilt and anxiety as ways of controlling ourselves and our neighbors, a great deal of damage is done by the ignorant manipulation of the anxiety and guilt feelings of people. To this one must add that some damage is not done in ignorance but is done through the deliberate fingering and manipulating of other people’s feelings of guilt and anxiety for the profit of individuals and institutions.

Here is the kind of damage that can be done in ignorance by a mother who is herself prone to react to living by excessive guilt and excessive anxiety. A twenty-four-year-old girl comes to the psychiatrist saying that she feels inadequate, in the office, with her friends and, indeed, everywhere she goes. In particular she feels that she cannot make friends with boys, she is afraid of them. She has nothing to say when her girl friends begin to talk about dates and dances. We get a history, which she brings out with the utmost reluctance and with the strongest possible resistance, that from the age of four to eleven she had sexual adventures with a number of little boys. She went through these with apparently no more guilt feelings than she would have suffered in stealing cookies. At the age of eleven she told her mother what had happened. The latter responded explosively, with denunciations and, for a time, with complete rejection of the girl. She told her that what she had done had ruined her, that no one would ever have anything but contempt and loathing for her. She said that she could never trust her daughter again out of her sight, that the girl had no idea what men were like. From that time on, not unnaturally, the girl developed those fears and feelings of guilt in the presence of boys which now, at twenty-four, have entirely obliterated her capacity to enter into any friendships of even the most limited kind with men. Here, then, is the feeling of guilt and anxiety used as a means of social control to an excessive and extremely damaging extent.

Then again we find the feeling of guilt used by a mother who was deeply insecure herself and whose relations with others were pervaded by hostility. From the earliest years of her daughter’s life this mother used criticism and the withholding of affection as a means of controlling the girl. To these the mother added the fostering of the girl’s sense of guilt. The method is age-old and very well known. Whenever the child showed any tendency to rebel against her mother’s continuous criticisms, the latter would respond by saying, “You don’t appreciate what I am trying to do for you. I work day and night until I am so tired that I could drop. But you have none of the love that a daughter should have for her mother. You are an unnatural child.” This was carried on to its logical conclusion where the mother told the little girl that her continual naughtiness was causing her mother so much worry that her heart was becoming affected and that she might die. When by chance the mother did fall sick from an attack of pneumonia, she used the occasion to say to the girl. “Look what you have done to me.”

These things to the adult may look pretty small; they may seem things
that one could brush away pretty easily. But to the child whose mother and father are truly the yardsticks of his existence, they are tremendously important. The removal of the father or mother by death looms as a major catastrophe, and attitudes thus graven into the child are extremely hard to eradicate with the passing years. Consequently, when this girl reached her thirties, she still felt almost completely under the influence of her mother. She hardly dared feel hostility towards her mother's criticisms, because of the feelings of guilt which the latter had built up in her.

Eventually she came under treatment and very slowly began to recover. As her recovery became apparent her mother, however, felt increasingly threatened by the girl's emerging independence. Her critical attacks on her daughter increased and ultimately culminated in the vituperative cry, "You don't love me at all; you are only interested in my pocketbook." This was given spurious substance by the fact that the girl was so crippled by her guilt and anxiety feelings that she was unable to work and, therefore, had to depend upon her mother for financial support. Eventually the mother succeeded in her attacks and forced her daughter to break off treatment.

These are glimpses into the lives of real persons. It is easier for us to understand these great forces of anxiety and guilt in terms of people, but there is a time also to emphasize the universal nature and the tremendous potency of these forces. To realize this, and to realize at the same time to what extent our ideas about them are changing, is to realize that we are in the midst of a vast revolution of thought.

Save for a very few, it was generally believed up until the middle of the nineteenth century that man's social institutions, his systems of belief, were not really his own — they had been given to him, or, at any rate, they were there and he had to make the best use possible of them. If he could not make them work, that was his fault, it was a sign of some inherent weakness, of inborn sinfulness. Now all this is changing. We are beginning to recognize that our social institutions, our systems of belief, are our own inventions. If we invented them once then we can certainly invent and build up better ones. Most certainly a glance around the world would make us pretty sure that most of them could be improved.

In particular we have to be especially critical of those systems of belief, those social institutions, which make excessive use of anxiety and guilt to control people. In these decades when extremely difficult decisions have to be made we cannot afford to have our children growing up with minds blocked off by guilt feelings, growing up to be people who say, "You must not talk about such things," "That's not something which can be discussed." We cannot afford to have our children coming to adult years so anxious-minded that they cannot decide for themselves but must have others make their decisions for them. That is the road to totalitarianism, whether the system of belief on which you must depend belongs to the Right or to the Left. The Right and the Left do not really represent choices; they are the same thing. The choice is between them and freedom — freedom from unnecessary anxieties and guilts, freedom from taboos and useless prohibitions, freedom from all kinds of crippling social institutions.

Preview

We have heard of so many seeming miracles wrought by the use of penicillin. What effect does it have on syphilis? The latest word on the treatment of this disease will be featured next month under the authorship of Dr. B. D. B. Layton who is chief of the Division of Venereal Disease Control in the Department of National Health and Welfare.