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SIN, GUILT AND SHAME

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1. Christian teaching on the original and universal character of sin has always given offence to those who have taken certain fundamental intuitions about human responsibility seriously. This teaching involves the notion that sin is an inherited, common property of the human race, a property in which we all unfortunately share simply by being members of that race. Not least amongst the paradoxical ideas engendered by these doctrines is the thought that one man may share in the sin of another. J.S. Whale in his *Christian Doctrine*[1] speaks of sin as having a 'solidarity aspect', and this theological teaching about sin seems to tell us that I share in, or am tainted by, the sin of others just by virtue of being a member of the human family.

2. It is not difficult to present the conflict between such ideas about collective sin and our ordinary notions of responsibility and guilt. The condemnation of the notion of collective sin from the standpoint of ordinary morality would go something like this[2]. One cannot be blamed or feel guilty for an act of omission unless one is responsible for that act or omission. But responsibility is essentially something that belongs to individuals not collectivities. For responsibility allows the possibility of blame and guilt being attached to one's acts only because, if one is responsible for an act, one has the power to act otherwise. One is responsible for it because one has control over it. So I cannot share in the evil deeds of other men because, by and large, I have no control over those deeds.

3. Just as it is not difficult to see the prima facie conflict between this theological teaching and moral intuition, so it is not difficult to reinterpret the teaching and avoid its unpalatable consequences. For the conflict discussed only arises if sin is held to entail guilt or blame, and if the damnation that results from sin is thought of as the punishment guilt brings with it. The oddity of the notion of a corporate or universal sin is the oddity of the notion of a corporate or universal guilt. The moral monstrosity attaching to the notion of this sin is contained in the thought that one man may be blamed and punished for the deeds of another. But if we detach the notion of guilt from that of sin, and reinterpret talk of Hell so that it no longer refers to a place of punishment for this guilt, then the oddity and monstrosity evaporate. Sin may be described not as a form of guilt, which in some way all men inherit, but as a state of alienation natural to the human condition. This state of separation or distance from God is an inevitable part of human finitude and thus may be spoken of as a shared property of the human race. Sin, then, becomes something which can properly be inherited, since it is an inevitable part of the humanity we share in. This state of separation from God is not at the same time one of guilt, nor are damnation and Hell punishments meted out for this shared, inherited sin. They are rather 'poetic' representations of the limiting case of the state of deprivation which is the inevitable consequence of this alienation. In these ways the apparent injustices enshrined in the notion of an inherited, universal sin are removed[3].

4. When thus reinterpreted, these doctrines do not commit one to any of the paradoxes involved in notions of corporate responsibility. Far from clashing with our moral intuitions, they may seem to say something which even the secular moralist may feel is true and important. I do not wish to argue against such modern interpretations of the doctrine of original sin, rather I wish to supplement them by drawing upon other moral intuitions which support the doctrine. These intuitions centre upon the notion of shame.

5. Many writers have remarked upon the crucial fact about shame which I wish to make use of and which marks an important difference between shame and guilt[4]. This difference lies in

the fact that whilst one cannot feel guilty for the wrong deeds of other men, one may feel shame on account of others' wrong acts. The immoral acts and omissions of other men should not, if one is rational, produce feelings of guilt in one, but it may be quite proper and rational to let such acts provoke feelings of shame in one. This difference is founded upon another. What makes vicarious guilt irrational or inappropriate, is that guilt presupposes responsibility and responsibility cannot be vicarious. But shame may be in place even where there is no responsibility; feeling shame at the wrongful deeds of someone else does not at all imply that one is responsible for those deeds. One can highlight this contrast between guilt and shame even more by introducing the notion of remorse. It will be readily admitted that there is something very odd about feeling remorse at the actions of others. One may regret the wrongful deeds of others, but one cannot feel remorse on account of them. Yet even though one can only regret those acts, one can feel shame on account of them.

6. It is important to get clear about the precise claim I am making for the possibility of vicarious shame. One must recall here the distinction between being ashamed *for* someone else and being ashamed *because of* someone else[5]. The difference is that only in the latter case is the shame felt really one's own; only in the latter case does the shame felt involve a lessening of the image of one's own self. To feel ashamed for someone else is to enter sympathetically into their situation. It is to attempt to see their shortcomings, defects or failings from their standpoint. This sympathetic identification with another's lot is perfectly possible, but of its very nature it does not entail any feeling that one's own value or worth has been lessened. It may even be possible to sympathetically enter into someone's feelings of guilt or remorse. If one can take sympathetic identification so far as to feel their remorse or guilt, then we do not have here something that sharply separates guilt and shame. It is only feeling ashamed *because* of someone else's acts that provides a point of difference. This type of shame does provide a way in which the wrong-doing of others can reflect on oneself, but it does not at the same time overturn our intuitions about responsibility. Evil-doing can become a corporate matter without there being any need of doctrines of corporate responsibility.

7. This account of shame may be further expounded and defended by considering an example. I take it from Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion*. Sir Walter Elliot has moved to Bath. He is concerned to make his way in Bath society and to this end sets about ingratiating himself with socially important, but personally worthless people, much to the horror of the more discerning members of his family:

> "Sir Walter, however, would choose his own means, and at last wrote a very fine letter of ample explanation, regret and entreaty to his right honourable cousin. Neither Lady Russell nor Mr. Elliot could admire the letter; but it did all that was wanted, bringing three lines of scrawl from the Dowager Viscountess. 'She was very much honoured, and should be happy in their acquaintance.' The toils of business were over, the sweets began. They visited in Laura-place, they had the cards of Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and the Hon. Miss Carteret to be arranged wherever they might be most visible; and 'Our cousins in Laura-place',—'Our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret', were talked of to everybody.
>
> Anne was ashamed. Had Lady Dalrymple and her daughter even been agreeable, she would still have been ashamed because of the agitation they created, but they were nothing. There was no superiority of manner, accomplishment or understanding. Lady Dalrymple had acquired the name of 'a charming woman', because she had a smile and a civil answer for everybody. Miss Carteret, with still less to say, was so plain and so awkward, that she would never have been tolerated in Camden-place but for her birth."[6]

As I read this passage Anne Elliot clearly feels shame *because of* her father's lapse, rather than simply feeling shame *for* him. Yet it is also clear from the context that she is in no way responsible for what happens, no blame attaches to her conduct.

8. Now someone puzzled about the possibility of vicarious shame may ask why, if Anne is no way to blame for what has been done, should its

evil at all reflect on her. Why should we share in the evil of other people's acts if we are in no way responsible for them? The answer must be that the example reflects the possibility of seeing one's own good and harm as being bound up with that of others. Here Anne Elliot sees herself as belonging to a wider unit: the family. Her fortunes are partly determined by the fortunes of this larger unit. Because of their common membership of this unit, what her father does may reflect upon her. People can feel vicarious shame because they feel their lives to be bound up with the lives of others through social institutions such as the family, the nation, the club etc. People's plans of the good, indeed their very identities, are dependent on the social relations which bind them to others[7]. David Richards sums up this point: "if, as part of a wider identity, one views the actions of others as part of the realization of one's ideal of the excellent, then one can be ashamed of their actions"[8]. So one answer to the question of why Anne should feel this shame is that her sense of belonging to the wider unit—the family—is important. One of the most central features of the moral outlook presented by Jane Austen's novels is that the good of the individual is only possible in the wider context of such social units as the family.

9. I have countered this objection against the possibility of vicarious shame by suggesting that the individual's sense of his own worth may be bound up with his sense of the worth of wider institutions to which he belongs. But my objector may not be at all satisfied with this. The point he may wish to insist on is this: that the agent's sense of his own *moral* worth cannot surely be affected by the doings of other members of his family or nation[9]. He may concede that it is natural for us to become emotionally involved in the successes or failures of others. But our moral stature cannot be increased or decreased by this association with others, unless our own conduct changes under their influence, because our moral worth depends directly upon the nature of our own acts. My own moral stature cannot be lessened through vicarious shame. Having stated this objection, I must admit that there is a sense in which it is unanswerable. It is unanswerable because it rests upon a tautology. As many writers use the phrase 'moral worth' it is a definitional truth that the moral worth of an individual depends upon nothing but the worth of his own acts. Moral worth is thought of as something essentially belonging to the agent's will; it is not affected by external circumstance and *a fortiori* not by the actions of others. If moral worth is the property of the agent's own will, then of course it cannot be lessened by vicarious shame. What I would wish to ask, however, is this: is moral worth (so defined) the only, or even the most important, type of human worth? Only if one gives an affirmative answer to this question, could one conclude straightway that we are not lessened at all by the wrongful acts of others and the shame they provoke. I shall say more later by way of explaining how our sense of worth could be lessened by vicarious shame, but it is worth pointing out now that we do recognise other types of human worth apart from the moral worth philosophers talk about. Think, for example, of the worth of a man blessed with some great artistic talent. The gifts of a great violinist or painter may increase our sense of his worth as a human being, even though these gifts were acquired through nature rather than through the exercise of the will.

10. The concrete example of vicarious shame presented is meant to illustrate the possibility of a certain human solidarity in wrong-doing which may be accepted by those who would reject the apparently barbarous notion of vicarious guilt. We have considered one objection to this possibility which essentially asks: if there is no feeling of guilt how can there rationally be a sense of loss of worth? In reply I have pointed to the way in which a sense of one's own worth may be tied up with the fortunes of collectivities, such as one's family or country, even though one is not responsible for all or even most of the actions of that collectivity. This is to separate sharply the notions of guilt and shame. But this separation is open to an objection from a completely different quarter: namely from those who think that collective guilt is, after all, possible. The fact that the good of individuals is often bound up with the good of collectivities to which they belong has been used to support the contention that one man can be answerable for another's misdeeds. In particular, it has been argued that a sense of nationality may be so

strong as to allow present citizens of a country to feel guilt at the past misdeeds of that country[10]. One should note here Karl Jaspers' apparent readiness to speak of the collective guilt of the German nation for the ghastly crimes committed under National Socialism[11]. Do we not all in some way feel responsibility for what is done in the name of our country?

11. If our sense of the collective aspect of wrong-doing is taken thus far it will again run up against our basic moral intuitions. Guilt is only rationally felt where I personally have fallen short of standards of right conduct. Of course it is reasonable in *some* circumstances to feel guilt on account of the acts of others. Others' wrong-doing may be the result of my bad influence upon them. Sometimes I may be in a position to prevent others' misdeeds, but fail to do so. So I may properly feel guilt at the actions of my country, if I was in a position to influence its government for the better or to prevent its agents from doing shameful things. But in this sort of case we do not have vicarious guilt or shame in any strict sense. For guilt here attaches to me essentially because *I* failed to do something which I reasonably could have been expected to do. The fact that I can and do influence other people's actions gives only a limited way in which I might share in the wrong-doing of others. The influence, for example, that a private citizen can exercise over the affairs of a large nation state is small and his control over the past doings of that nation is non-existent.

12. In so extending the range of guilt that may be felt on account of others' deeds, some writers may be influenced by an ambiguity or vagueness in the notion of responsibility. I may indeed feel responsible for the wrong-doings of an organisation or collectivity to which I belong, even though this wrong-doing was the result of other men's behaviour over which I could not reasonably have been expected to exercise control. But this feeling of responsibility may only amount to a recognition that my membership of the collectivity or organisation places upon me an obligation to help in putting right, or making reparation for, the effects of the wrong-doing[12]. So let us suppose that my Faculty at King's College is involved in some wrong-doing that hurts outsiders and that I am in no way implicated in the wrong-doing. Now the mere fact that I could say "I was in no way to blame for this" does not remove my responsibility in helping to make amends. If I take my membership of this larger unit seriously, I do assume a certain responsibility for what happens in that I realise that I am liable to help in putting things right. The important point to recognise is that not only does this sort of responsibility not entail blame, but also it need not bring with it any sense that my own worth or merit has been lessened by the wrong done. This sort of vicarious responsibility equally fails, then, to capture the sense of solidarity in wrong-doing that we are after.

13. I return to my point that it is the notion of vicarious shame, here distinguished sharply from guilt, which does capture this sense of solidarity. It is one of the merits of my example from *Persuasion* that it illustrates the type of shame in a pure form, untainted by either of the two possibilities discussed above. There is first no sense in which her father's conduct reflects wrongful acts or omissions on Anne Elliot's part. On the contrary, throughout the novel she is represented as the one member of the family (with Lady Russell) who acts to maintain the genuine honour of the family. Her father and elder sister put that honour at risk despite Anne's conduct, not because of it. Nor is this example complicated by a responsibility to make amends to others which might incline us to talk of shared answerability. For the wrong done by Sir Walter is one that redounds on himself and his family alone. No reparation is owed to others and so Anne's sense of sharing in the wrong done is not accounted for by a feeling that she must help in making amends to others.

14. So far the possibility of vicarious shame has been discussed in the context of a man's allegiance to organisations or collectivities larger than himself: families, nations, professional bodies. One who accepts what has been said so far may still question the extent to which vicarious shame serves to illuminate or support doctrines about the universal, original character of sin. For the latter refers to something that is common to the human race as such and as a whole, whilst we see that the scope of vicarious shame is limited. It enables us to share in the wrong-doing

of other men only in so far as there is some special tie between us, like that provided by common nationality. Could the mere fact of common membership of the human race provide a sufficiently strong bond for vicarious shame to operate?

15. We may approach this question by way of a particular example. We have spoken already of the possibility of a German feeling guilt at the crimes committed in the name of his country during the Nazi era. Whilst I would strongly question the appropriateness of guilt feelings here, I could certainly see how such a man could feel shame at those crimes, even though he did not actively or passively encourage them. I would find such a sense of shame natural. But could I, who have no connections with Germany, reasonably feel shame upon reading about such things? It seems to me that I could. The fact that those who performed these foul deeds were fellow members of the human race is a sufficient bond for me to feel vicarious shame. Indeed, I wish to go further and say that all men ought to hang their heads when they read of such things. Common membership of the human race is sufficient here because it allows the possibility of the following thought: "Human nature is capable of this". That men could perform such deeds tells us something about human nature, about the depths to which it can sink. This allows for the possibility of all of us feeling shame because such things took place when we remind ourselves of the common humanity we share with the men who did these things. These things were done by men. That they were done tells us something about the possibilities of human nature and our common humanity gives us a share in that nature.

16. I hope that the above argument may be allowed to stand despite the fact that the extent to which there is a common human nature is capable of endless philosophical debate. The claim about a common human nature can, I hope, be accepted at a common sense level. Its strength in this context lies in the fact that the evil deeds in question were not merely the casual aberrations of a few. They were systematically performed over a long period of time and involved the willing co-operation of many. What is more, there are numerous parallels to such systematic evils in the history of mankind. If we reflect upon such crimes and upon our common humanity with their perpetrators, it would be odd if we did not feel some shame because of these things. We do not, in the case of Nazism, even have the possibility of the specious thought that these things were done by primitive, uncivilised people. In many other respects, pre-War Germany was a highly civilised, cultured community.

17. A piece of science fiction fantasy may help to make the point I am after. Imagine that we did establish contact with beings from another planet. They wish to learn about the human race, about what sort of creatures human beings are. In order to enlighten these creatures we describe to them the history of the human race. It would be natural for us to swell with pride when recounting the deeds of some historical figures. For in a way the achievements of a Newton reflect well on all of us. Equally, however, it would be natural for us to feel shame as we told our visitors of some of the monstrous crimes committed by human beings. Such things would reflect badly upon the human race and it would be odd if we did not feel some sense of loss of worth as we recounted them.

18. I have laid stress upon talk of 'a common human nature' or of 'our common humanity' in attempting to show how vicarious shame might be used to justify aspects of the theological account of sin. Also supporting my argument is our readiness to speak of 'the human family'. If the recognition of kinship is sufficient to allow the possibility of vicarious shame, then the fact that we recognise a certain kinship with *all* men is significant. But again we must face the fact that some will object to my argument. Someone strongly disinclined to accept the suggestion that one man may share in the wrongdoing of another may want to know how these dismal reflections upon human nature could provide any reason for the guiltless individual to hang his head. For granted that human nature is capable of these crimes, two possibilities need then to be considered. Either these potentialities for evil have manifested themselves in the individual's life or they have not. If the former, then the individual is morally guilty, either through thought or deed. In which case he

should hang his head, but not because of some mysterious kinship that he has with other evil-doers, but rather because he himself is guilty before the bar of morality. He himself is responsible for evil thoughts or actions and there is nothing vicarious in the sense of wrong he feels. If, however, these evil potentialities have not in any way manifested themselves in the individual's life, then he has no reason at all to hang his head. He has done no wrong, and whatever evils in human nature the wrong-doing of others testifies to, since these evils have no sway in his life, he has in effect disowned them and should not be further haunted by them.

19. In a sense, this objection has already been met by what has gone before. It is based upon a refusal to see that there is a significant difference between a sense of guilt and a sense of shame, and also upon a refusal to see that while the former presupposes personal wrong-doing (if it is rational), the latter does not. We have seen that what vicarious shame does presuppose is a certain view of oneself and one's relations to others. One needs to see a certain community between oneself and others before one can feel shame at their misdeeds. The question is: does the mere fact of common membership of the human race provide a sufficient rational foundation for this sense of community? I can only contend that it does, at least in certain circumstances.

20. One might add to this reply by stressing the fact that this sense of community is supported through a recognition of the role that luck or fortune plays in human affairs. Many philosophers would wish to deny that luck could in any way affect an individual's moral worth. This depends not on the contingencies of external circumstance but upon the orientation of the agent's own will. Despite this philosophical stance we do in ordinary life recognise that luck enters into moral guilt and innocence[13]. One way in which we recognise that luck enters into these matters is through the circumstances in which individuals find themselves having to make moral decisions. These are never entirely of their own making. We may be guilty of no moral evil, either in thought or in deed, but nevertheless admit that if we had lived through the circumstances that others had faced, we would not have maintained our virtuous character. The characteristic thought prompted by such an admission would of course be "There but for the grace of God go I" (a thought perhaps available to both believer and unbeliever). Here the kinship felt with the evil-doer simply on account of common humanity and human nature may be very strong indeed.

21. I have not tried in this paper to offer anything like a full justification of theological doctrines about the original and universal character of sin. We are obviously coming close to the import of such doctrines if we accept that our common humanity may be sufficient to give us a share in the wrong-doing of others. Our humanity is original, unacquired and inherited. I have tried to show the weakness in the simple claim that these doctrines about sin offend against our fundamental moral intuitions. What is true, it seems to me, is that though such doctrines conflict with some of our intuitions, they are supported by others. The ordinary moral consciousness does seem to recognise ways in which one man may share in the wrong-doing of another. The real point in articulating the distinction between guilt and shame is that it enables us to show that the ordinary moral consciousness is not here in conflict with itself. It shows why, though the theological doctrine *seems* flatly counter-intuitive, it is not.

22. None of this, as I said, provides a complete justification for theological teaching. For one thing, it is plain that if we can share in another's wrong-doing through vicarious shame, it is also true that we can share in other people's achievements through vicarious pride. Most of what can be said about wrong-doing and shame can be said mutatis mutandis of achievement and pride. So there could be a real debate (it would be between pessimists and optimists) as to whether our common humanity was an inheritance of sin or glory. Even if one did not wish to decide wholly in favour of the latter alternative, one might still wish to question strenuously the finality of theological teaching.

NOTES

1. London: Collins, 1957, p.46.
2. H.D. Lewis *Morals and the New Theology*, London: Gollancz, 1947, contains a forceful statement of this condemnation. See Chapters 5 and 6.

3. See K. Ward *Ethics and Christianity*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1970, for an example of such an interpretation.
4. See e.g. D.A.J. Richards *A Theory of Reasons for Action*, Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1971, p.254.
5. See Joel Feinberg *Doing and Deserving*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 237-8.
6. Pp. 161-2 of the Penguin text.
7. See W.H. Walsh 'Pride, Shame and Responsibility' *Philosphical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, 1970, p.12.
8. *A Theory of Reasons for Action*, p.254.
9. See H.D. Lewis *Morals and Revelation*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1951, p.108.
10. See W.H. Walsh, op.cit. p.2.
11. In *The Question of German Guilt*, the relevant passages are reprinted in H. Morris (ed) *Guilt and Shame*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1971, pp.40-53.
12. Feinberg, op.cit. pp.232ff, makes a similar point.
13. See T. Nagel 'Moral Luck', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, L, 1976, pp.137-151.

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