

*Non-moral versus Moral ‘Guilt’  
and ‘Bad Conscience’*

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#### 4.1 OBJECTIVES AND DISTINCTIONS

This chapter focuses on two sentiments—‘guilt’ and ‘bad conscience’—that, as Nietzsche presents them, are central to both traditional morality *and* his new ethic of ‘life-enhancement’.<sup>1</sup> This focus has four objectives:

- (1) to explicate the non-moral, potentially life-enhancing, role played by these sentiments in the development of any society, of ‘higher’ culture, and, ultimately, of the ‘sovereign’ individual, the one who can maximally commit and command herself;
- (2) to explicate the life-denying development of these sentiments in traditional morality and in producing the old ideal of self- and world-denial to which Nietzsche is so opposed;
- (3) to understand what is involved in the crucial progression from non-moral to moral guilt and bad conscience—and to demonstrate that here, once again, Nietzsche’s attack is not on a basic concept employed by Christian morality, such as ‘guilt’, but rather on the *use* to which it is put in life-denial;
- (4) to explore how far that basic social form, the ‘debtor–creditor relationship’, is not only the historical ‘origin’ of the feeling of guilt, as Nietzsche suggests (e.g. *GM*, II, 4 and 8), but can also be used to model the nature of guilt.

I will argue that this relationship indeed successfully models the phenomenology of guilt, not only in the ordinary situation of an explicit contract between individuals, but also where the ‘creditor’ (or victim of a default) is taken to be a god or an ancestor or otherwise uncontracted in any conventionally reciprocal sense, or where the ‘credit’

<sup>1</sup> The discussion in this chapter is based largely on the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

cannot, even in principle, be calculated or repaid or voluntarily incurred. But I will also suggest that the debtor–creditor model has this explanatory fertility only if, like guilt itself, it presupposes a strong notion of personal accountability.<sup>2</sup> Whereas if it is taken to be just a mechanical transaction enforced by the threat of punishment, then it could not explain guilt. And if this is so, the conceptual distance between the debtor–creditor relationship and guilt is small in comparison with the conceptual leap represented by the appearance of a credible debtor–creditor relationship in the first place. But this is a leap which, I will argue, Nietzsche's genealogies do not address.

In order to draw the overall distinction between 'non-moral' and 'moral' forms of guilt and bad conscience, three points are in order:

First, the non-moral forms correspond to that normal intensity of guilt indebtedness and self-cruelty which, Nietzsche's arguments suggest, can be exhibited by an individual in any fairly developed society. In moral forms, by contrast, guilt is seen as defining a (human) world that must be 'transcended'. (This essentialism is, of course, the counterpart of the universal scope of *ressentiment*, which we discussed in Chapter 3.3.)

Second, guilt and bad conscience, in their general, non-moral forms, are phenomenologically quite different. Guilt, in its general form, is ethically experienced regret at one's failure (not necessarily intentional) to honour obligations to which one genuinely feels committed; whereas bad conscience, in its general form, arises from the cruel self-discipline needed to *avoid* guilty indebtedness to one's society. The general forms of these concepts do not necessarily lead to the moralized forms, though the latter obviously presuppose the former.

Third, the non-moral forms can be life-enhancing, whereas the moral forms are, according to Nietzsche, overwhelmingly life-denying. Guilt and bad conscience thereby exemplify my general thesis that all Nietzsche's 'slavish' categories—e.g. 'reactive' thought, *ressentiment*, the ascetic ideal—are potentially life-enhancing when they are sufficiently moderate to engage productively with 'masterly' traits, rather than overwhelming them with vengeful anger.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche suggests that a credible debtor–creditor contractual relationship *does* require that, for the debtor, the promise to repay is 'an obligation upon his own conscience' (*GM*, II, 5)—i.e. does presuppose an ethically charged notion of personal accountability.

This sharp distinction between general and moral forms of guilt and bad conscience helps us to analyse the tremendous differences between these forms as well as the questions posed by the transition from one to the other. Accordingly, the following discussion is divided into three sections: the first compares and relates these concepts in their general form; the second considers them in their specifically moralized form; and the third suggests some provisional conclusions—drawing on Nietzschean ideas but ranging beyond them.

## 4.2 THE NON-MORAL FORM OF 'GUILT' AND OF 'BAD CONSCIENCE'

On the debtor–creditor model, non-moral guilt and bad conscience both presuppose the agent's feeling of respect for the contractual relationship between debtors and creditors and for the discipline of promise-keeping that it demands.

### 4.2.1 *The general form of 'guilt'*

Guilt, in its most general form—that which appears in non-moral ethical codes—is a highly reflexive feeling of regret or inadequacy at failing to honour one's obligations, which one accepts, to a 'creditor'. The more substantial or stringent the obligation, the stronger the guilt. The position of 'creditor' can have different occupants, and Nietzsche, in the course of *GM* II (especially sections 19 and 20), suggests three main types, which, in order of increasing power, are: first, the individual with whom one has entered into some form of exchange of a classic debtor–creditor kind (such as trade); second, ancestors who are believed to empower the society, in return for which it owes them an increasing debt of gratitude; and, third, gods, whom Nietzsche depicts as the culmination of ancestor-worship.

This progression, all three stages of which occur, Nietzsche suggests, in 'prehistory' (*GM*, II, 19), and so are decidedly pre-moral, exhibits the interesting anthropological thesis that the power attributed to the creditor reflects the power of the society—so that to worship gods as its creditors is a sign of a society's strength rather than of its weakness (and, presumably, to concentrate all creditor-power in one god is the ultimate demonstration of one's confidence—at

least initially). For the first type of creditor—who is merely an individual—a complex society is not even needed. The creditor may, for example, be another nomad. In the second phase, however, the society has developed real power, which it must attribute to someone, and, given (one presumes) the belief that great power is unseen, ancestors, who founded and empowered the tribe with untold sacrifices and accomplishments, are the best candidate for that attribution—though, if this is so, the question arises for the debtor whether their credits can ever be repaid (*GM*, II, 19). In the third phase, the society's triumphs outstrip even the empowering capacity attributable to great ancestors, so that only gods are seen as grand enough to dispense such munificence. In the culmination of this phase, when the tribe turns itself into an imperial ruler, all power is vested in one god. 'Despotism', says Nietzsche 'always prepares the way for some kind of monotheism' (*GM*, II, 20)—a deeply unconvincing hypothesis given that not one of the three great monotheisms originated among imperial masters and that many empires, from the early Roman to the Mongol, were polytheistic.

Nonetheless, as in the story of masters and slaves in *GM* I, the palpable fictionality of Nietzsche's genealogy need not diminish the importance of the conceptual *forms* he proposes. The form of guilt which emerges from *GM* II may, in summary, be defined as a feeling of depressive, ethically charged inadequacy consequent upon failure to honour a debt to a recognized creditor—i.e. one to whom one accepts the obligation of repayment—where (a) the position of creditor may have a variety of occupants, such as the three types suggested in the historical story, (b) the intensity of guilty indebtedness (*das Schuldgefühl*) is proportionate both to the seriousness of the obligation—i.e. how substantial and stringent it is—and to the perceived power of the creditor,<sup>3</sup> and (c) the debt need not have been explicitly agreed with a creditor—as in most debts to ancestors and gods or, indeed, in obligations which one feels towards oneself. This basic account of guilt is, I suggest, very helpful; but we must be alert to three sources of possible confusion which exist, or loom, in *GM* II.

First, though 'debt' and 'guilt' are obviously related, they cannot be straightforwardly equated. (The fact, to which Nietzsche points in *GM*, II, 4, that they are denoted in German by the same word,

<sup>3</sup> The seriousness of the obligation and the perceived power of the creditor may, of course, be related—and in the Judaeo-Christian tradition arguably are.

*Schuld*, may tempt one to suggest such a false equivalence.) 'Debt' denotes an obligation, which one may or may not be capable of discharging and which one may or may not recognize; whereas 'guilt' denotes a feeling consequent upon failure to discharge an obligation that one does recognize. Thus, not all debt engenders guilt: specifically, not debt that one can and does repay on time, or that one never recognized as repayable. Indeed, where debt exists on terms that are agreed and respected by both sides, it is a guilt-free transaction without which societies would be immobilized, if not impossible. In short, guilt is neither entailed by, nor equatable to, debt.

Second, Nietzsche cannot, therefore, be right to regard the feeling of guilt as simply a feeling 'of personal obligation' (*GM*, II, 8). Guilt is occasioned only by *failing* to honour what we take to be an obligation. Now that failure may occur not only for the conventional reason that a pre-agreed repayment schedule cannot be met, but also (as with debts to gods or ancestors) because the creditor's terms are not known or even knowable, or because repayment has no conceivable terminus. That a debt may confer strength on the debtor is therefore not inconsistent with the fact that his guilt at his inability to discharge it is necessarily experienced as impotence. (This feeling of impotence in all guilt is further discussed in the Endnote to this chapter.)

Third, a 'contractual relationship' between debtor and creditor, both conceived as 'legal subjects' (*GM*, II, 4), cannot be a simple mechanical transaction if it is to be useful as a model for blame and *Schuldgefühl*, but must itself be structured by a robust conception of accountability and responsibility. The limits of accountability may be a matter of convention—for example whether or not bad luck, such as everyday misfortunes or the unforeseeable workings of fate, is taken to mitigate one's accountability. But that a developed notion of accountability is in play here cannot be denied—or else the model would not work.

Two questions follow from this account of guilt in its basic form. First, what happens when guilt becomes moralized—i.e. when guilt becomes conceived as constitutive of life and as demanding to be 'transcended'? Second, why does guilty indebtedness not *decline* with the rise of atheism, i.e. with the disappearance of creditors possessing the power of gods? These questions are intimately related, for the particular conception of guilt that makes it a pillar of 'morality' (and that turns it into something essentially life-denying) *also* fortifies it against atheism.

To answer both questions, we need the concept of 'bad conscience'. The moralization of 'guilt'—and of 'obligation' or 'duty', which it presupposes since one feels guilty only when one disrespects what one regards as a duty—is, Nietzsche says, 'their pushing back into the conscience; more precisely, the involvement of the *bad* conscience with the concept of god' (*GM*, II, 21). But if we are to understand this obscure formulation, we must ask, first, what 'bad conscience', in its general form, is and, second, how exactly it is related to the moralization of guilt through this 'pushing back'. I will take these two questions in turn.

#### 4.2.2 *The general form of 'bad conscience'*

Nietzsche's concept of 'bad conscience', in its general form, denotes the pain of regarding one's unsublimated 'masterly' passions, like '[h]ostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting' (*GM*, II, 16), as a perpetual source of potential guilt towards the rest of society, as constantly endangering one's social acceptance, and, thus, as making oneself a liability to oneself. The code of every society inevitably requires the individual to rein in these passions; but, before he has perfected this self-control, they will naturally strive to exert themselves externally, as they could do in a pre-social state. By thus threatening to flout the social code, they become a potential cause of both social rejection and of guilty indebtedness towards society; and by needing to be forcibly reined in, they pit the individual against instincts of which, *prima facie*, he is proudest (because 'masterly'). This unpleasant combination of potential guilt towards society, liability towards oneself, and the need for self-aggression towards masterly instincts, is, I suggest, the 'bad conscience'.

Now Nietzsche actually advances two reasons why socialization of the individual leads to this turning inwards of his masterly passions—the one a pragmatic imperative, the other a quasi-'physiological' reflex. The pragmatic imperative is the need to secure the benefits of society by becoming gentle and calculable (*GM*, II, 2). Historically, this imperative arises because the context has changed from one where man roamed free to one where he is 'enclosed within the walls of society and of peace' (*GM*, II, 16). It is enforced by the incessant 'acts of violence' that forge a coherent society out of 'a hitherto unchecked and shapeless populace' (*GM*, II, 17). Such calculability demands, in turn, the ability to guarantee one's promises, i.e. to respect contracts and

rules of justice and, should they be broken, to accept or make payment in kind, such as punishment in its many forms. In other words, becoming a citizen demands the *self-mastery* to participate in what is effectively a debtor-creditor relationship writ large, with the individual as the debtor and society, with its many benefits, as the creditor. By contrast, the reflexive reason for the inward-turning of masterly passions is simply an instance of the natural law that '[a]ll instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward*', i.e. that psychological forces hitting an obstacle head on are deflected directly back on themselves. This hypothesis might be called Nietzsche's 'law of the conservation of psychic energy'. It operates when these 'old instincts of freedom' suddenly run up against 'bulwarks' of a society, like its mores and punishments (*GM*, II, 16)—though whether this 'law' applies as much to the tender or possessive instincts, such as sympathy and love, as it does to the cruel and gregarious ones is open to question.

These remarks indicate why bad conscience is 'bad' and why it concerns 'conscience' and not 'consciousness'.

Bad conscience is 'bad' not in the sense that Nietzsche regards it as ethically bad, but because the agent experiences it as unpleasant. And the agent experiences it thus not merely because calculability demands painful self-cruelty, but, more profoundly, because, in being a potentially guilty debtor to society,<sup>4</sup> he has inescapably become a liability to himself. This great burden of self-consciousness lasts as long as his masterly instincts are seen as potential traitors to himself and to society, and, in place of the freedom to conquer, are assigned petty clerical tasks, such as 'inferring, reckoning, and coordinating cause and effect' (*GM*, II, 16). This is so *whether or not* he has actually transgressed or been punished, and whether he is the criminal or the judge. The tragedy of becoming a liability to himself visits the agent not because he has abused his powers or flouted society's norms, but just because, unless and until he has become a fully 'sovereign individual', one aspect of his nature—his outward-straining 'instincts of freedom'—is perpetually in potential conflict with another aspect—namely his inescapable commitment to that munificent creditor called 'society'.

<sup>4</sup> This guilt is, of course, still 'pre-moral' because it is not yet interpreted as an argument against human nature or life.

Moreover, what is bad here is 'conscience', precisely because what constitutes it is the always-looming guilt to which I have referred.<sup>5</sup> Since, as I have argued, guilt presupposes one's commitment to norms, and hence a developed notion of personal accountability or responsibility, bad conscience can be experienced only by someone who is genuinely committed to the social norms for the sake of which he represses his masterly instincts. It is because punishment does *not* bring about such genuine commitment (but rather only prudent or tactical obedience) that Nietzsche, interestingly, claims that punishment for breaking promises is *not* the 'soil' from which bad conscience, and its guilt, grow (*GM*, II, 14). Punishment, he insists, 'tames' but does not improve; it cultivates caution not remorse; thus, it actually hinders guilt rather than fostering it. (And the matter is viewed identically by the punishers, for whom the offender is merely 'an irresponsible piece of fate', rather than a 'guilty person'.)

Of course, punishment may foster the '*mnemotechnics*'—the capacity to remember—that is required for all promising and so for all 'calculability' (*GM*, II, 3). But the calculability of a person capable of 'bad conscience' is more than Pavlovian conditioning because it crucially involves one's *identification* with social norms which only a real sense of belonging to a society can instil. Violence and force may play their part in enforcing obedience to those norms (and, of course, in creating the society in the first place), but only a genuine sense of belonging to and needing the society can ensure the personal allegiance or responsibility towards its norms that is a condition for the possibility of guilt.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche himself clearly equates bad conscience with 'the consciousness of guilt' (*GM*, II, 4). Indeed, because the possibility of guilt is central to the operation of bad conscience, *schlechtes Gewissen* is properly translated as 'bad conscience', rather than as 'bad consciousness'—as Danto insistently renders it (for example, in A. Danto, 'Some Remarks on *The Genealogy of Morals*', in Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, 43). Moreover, *Gewissen* always means 'conscience' and never 'consciousness'; and had Nietzsche intended the latter he could have termed it *schlechtes Bewusstsein*—the sort of nausea that Zarathustra feels at the eternal recurrence of the 'small man' (*Z*, III, 13).

<sup>6</sup> Though punishment may not be the straightforward, proximate cause of genuine commitment to norms, it may, perhaps, feature in a detailed psychological account of how individuals come to recognize the authority of such norms—analogously to the way in which, for example, Bernard Williams argues that fear of the anger of a victim or viewer of one's actions plays a role in triggering guilty feelings about them. (See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 219 and 221.)

## 4.2.3 General 'bad conscience' as 'active' or life-enhancing

Now it is important to note that, in its general form, 'bad conscience' can be life-enhancing—indeed, Nietzsche calls it 'active' bad conscience (*GM*, II, 18), as we will see. This is so for both conceptual and practical reasons.

*Conceptually*, bad conscience has the *form* of a master. In terms of Nietzsche's master/slave dualism, bad conscience is actually a quintessential expression of active, 'form-giving', drives—i.e. of 'master' instincts—whose recalcitrant object is no longer other people but one's own unruly passions. (To suggest, as one might be tempted to, that bad conscience, being a response to social pressure, must be 'reactive' would be to confuse a *precondition* for socialization with a *response* to socialization. Bad conscience, as such a precondition, is no more reactive than a language-speaker following the rules of a linguistic community. What he does with himself once socialized is another matter—and here he may be either active or reactive.)

*Practically*, there are two reasons why bad conscience is life-enhancing. First, the straightforward turning-inwards of the 'masterly' instincts is a strategy for the individual's preservation and, indeed, enhancement in a society; and unless Nietzsche holds, which he does not and could not, that socialization *per se* is life-denying (on the criteria reconstructed in Chapter 3.1), he cannot deem bad conscience itself to be life-denying.

Second, and much more interestingly, bad conscience can give rise to a series of major conceptual and ethical innovations. For, Nietzsche suggests, to direct violent cruelty against oneself rather than others, to burn into a great part of one's nature a 'no' to its outward expression, to become contemptuous of instincts of which one was 'formerly' proudest, to live with the contradiction of a freedom that is both restricted (externally) and enhanced (internally), creates a wholly new phenomenology: that of human nature as problematical and contradictory, that of oneself as a riddle to oneself, that of the tortured 'inner life' perpetually examining itself, that of a compromised 'outer' freedom versus a purer 'inner' freedom. In short: with the 'bad conscience' we get 'the *internalization* of man', his creation of an inner, freer world, later christened 'the soul'. Nietzsche calls this state 'active' bad conscience (*GM*, II, 16).

The *conceptual* correlate of this new phenomenology of contradictions is a world of polarities: free versus unfree, beauty versus

ugliness, reason versus desire, knowledge versus opinion. For in this inner world of inescapable contradictions concepts embracing polar opposites become natural, such as beauty (necessarily opposed to ugliness) or the ideal (necessarily contrasted with its non-fulfilment). This, it seems, is the meaning of Nietzsche's statement that the self-cruelty of bad conscience is 'the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena', of 'strange new beauty and affirmation' and even of 'beauty itself' (*GM*, II, 18). Interestingly, beauty here originates from conflict and alienation and maturity, and not from wholeness and innocence, as almost every nostalgic fantasy would have it.

The *ethical* correlates of this new phenomenology are complex but, I suggest, include three that, in 'morality', are highly developed. First, the hallowed connection between freedom and morality may be established here since freedom, experienced primarily as something internal, is pictured as a direct result of ethical discipline. Second, the quality of 'intentions' becomes important in ethical valuations—for they are the warning signals of danger and must, therefore, be watched and judged. Only by focusing on intentions can the individual isolate the horse before it has bolted (in the shape of socially proscribed actions). And third, this new world of polarities may also foster the '*faith in opposite values*' which, in its extreme form, Nietzsche regards as central to morality (*BGE*, 2).

In sum, Nietzsche's point here might be that this experience of being at war with oneself rather than only with others facilitates *all* thinking and acting and valuing that depend on polarities. Thus, it becomes natural to think in terms of ideals, in just the way that Plato, say, inaugurates, or of all things as either good or bad, and beautiful or ugly. And it also becomes natural to pursue values that in their very nature are self-contradictory—such as '*selflessness*' (*GM*, II, 18), i.e. the direction of the self against the self; indeed, not merely to pursue these values, but, in the new manner of thinking, to set them up as *ideals*. This may be why Nietzsche speaks of '*active "bad conscience"*' as '*pregnant with a future*' (*GM*, II, 16) and as an illness like pregnancy (*GM*, II, 19) which, though risky, can be the progenitor of a new life in which man, for the first time, is '*included among the most unexpected and exciting lucky throws*' of fate (*GM*, II, 16).

Despite this creativity and its attendant joys, the conscience *remains* 'bad' because one's 'calculability' is never perfect. Thus, great cruelty against oneself must be sustained; second, 'guilty

indebtedness' to society (or other 'creditors' such as ancestors or gods) always looms; and, third, one still regards precisely the masterly drives of which one was 'formerly' proudest as one's greatest liability because their impulsiveness constantly threatens that calculability. Even if bad conscience stops short of the systematic self-loathing that characterizes its later, for example Christian, forms, these three feelings, taken together, cannot but be experienced as something alien, dark, and frightening.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.2.4 What is 'good conscience'?

Two obvious questions remain: what would 'good conscience' be, and why doesn't Nietzsche use this term? As to the first, 'good conscience' would, I suggest, be the exhilaration of being perfectly able to discharge any debts and, as a result, to *guarantee* one's own freedom (through power over oneself and external circumstances). And it would be good 'conscience', rather than 'consciousness', because it would carry with it a sense of what Nietzsche calls the '*right to affirm oneself*' (*GM*, II, 3) stemming from the capacity to be, under all circumstances, sovereign and unindebted.<sup>8</sup> There would no longer be a trace of that depressing sense, characteristic of bad conscience, that, despite painful self-control, one remains imperfectly sovereign and, to that extent, a continuing liability to oneself. (Clearly, good conscience would not result from the absence of debts *per se*—which could be assured simply by luck or cowardice.)

Now the person of 'good conscience' is, I suggest, precisely Nietzsche's '*sovereign individual*', his perfectly 'autonomous and supramoral' man who is the culmination of the long 'breeding [of] an animal with the right to make promises', and 'its ripest fruit' (*GM*, II, 2). He both fashions new forms out of himself, much like a sculptor moulding his bronze, and has perfected his powers of sustained willing and self-discipline—and hence is able to 'live out' his highest values to the full. 'Circumstances', which were once so constraining, are now malleable under the force of his power to do as he promises; society imposes no restraints upon the 'higher' matters that concern him—those internal and refined pursuits of the soul; he

<sup>7</sup> If, as Nietzsche repeatedly maintains, the first of these feelings—self-cruelty—occasions the same sadistic pleasure as externally directed violence (*GM*, II, 18)—this may mitigate the horror of the other two, but surely only marginally and intermittently.

<sup>8</sup> This feeling that one has the *right* to do something is just the sense in which one declares: 'I did it with a good conscience.'

is unoppressed by any system of punishment and rewards in virtue of his lordly ability to pledge himself. Thus, the ruthless conformism that socialization initially required—imposed by the whole ‘morality of mores’ that was needed to make men calculable—is the ladder that finally leads to the ‘sovereign’ individual, and that is discarded once he has been attained. Indeed, the initial indispensability of, and subsequent liberation from, this ‘morality of mores’ might be one good example of Nietzsche’s obscure ‘law of life’ that ‘[a]ll great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming’ (*GM*, III, 27).

It is in this sovereignty to promise that Nietzsche sees the real (as opposed to imaginary) senses of ‘freedom of the will’ and ‘responsibility’—concepts that, like ‘guilt’, he interestingly regards as arising historically from the accumulation of strength, rather than of weakness. And it is the innate awareness of this sovereignty, and of the ‘extraordinary privilege of [this] *responsibility*’, that Nietzsche calls ‘*conscience*’ (*GM*, II, 2). Hence we may say, in brief, that when this awareness of sovereignty is punctuated by doubts the conscience is ‘bad’, and that when it is perfectly free of doubts the conscience is ‘good’.

So why does Nietzsche nowhere refer in *GM* II to the individual of ‘good’ conscience? Because, I suggest, *infallibility* in controlling one’s ‘animal’ nature, in committing oneself to ethical standards (individual or collective), and so in avoiding any possibility of guilty indebtedness or bad conscience, is unattainable. The ‘end of this tremendous process’ of self-mastery in the ‘sovereign individual’ (*GM*, II, 2)—which might also be seen as a culmination of the modern project of ‘autonomy’—is, it seems to me, a theoretical endpoint, which can be approached but not reached. For an individual to be *perfectly* ‘autonomous and supramoral’ and ‘like only to himself’ is to be endowed with qualities previously attributed only to God. This man-god is, one surmises, as elusive as the ‘dead’ God; though, in taking the place of the old God, he presumably has, for Nietzsche, one great advantage over his predecessor: that he is not world-transcending, and that the path to him is not one of world-denial. (Moreover, the man-god’s attainment is undesirable, even in terms of Nietzsche’s own values, because he has nothing left to overcome and therefore nothing to live for. I will explain what I mean by this in Chapter 6.3.)

In other words, if perfect commitment to ethical standards (social or individual) is an unattainable goal, there can be no well-formed

society whose members are altogether free from the possibility of bad conscience<sup>9</sup> and no individual altogether free from the possibility of guilt. The possibility of bad conscience will exist because there will always be a residual need for self-cruelty in taming those 'animal' instincts that crave free expression and resist socialization (even if the latter is restricted to one's own 'type' or 'caste'<sup>10</sup>); while the possibility of guilt will loom as long as the capacity to honour one's ethical commitments is imperfect—commitments which may be to one's entirely individual standards or ideals, as well as to wider social norms. In short, insofar as individuals feel themselves committed to ethical standards and to membership in societies, both guilt and the 'illness' of bad conscience are, though Nietzsche does not explicitly recognize this, necessarily universal<sup>11</sup>—a point to which I return in concluding this chapter. Thus, if Nietzsche wants to abolish *all* guilt or bad conscience—rather than, say, their *moralized* forms (and the linked notion of 'sin')—as part of creating a 'second innocence' (*GM*, II, 20) of mankind, then he will *not* succeed.

I do not, however, think that such a final elimination of the possibility of guilt or bad conscience is part of his project. As to guilt, Nietzsche suggests that a 'second innocence', if it were to come about, would eliminate only one type of guilt (albeit the historically dominant type): namely that associated with religious belief and,

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche makes it clear that even his 'noble races' or 'good men' of *GM*, I, 11, some of whom are portrayed as being quite undeveloped socially, do, *among themselves*, exhibit 'self-control' and 'the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society'—i.e. do exhibit something like 'bad conscience'. Indeed, it is precisely in order to seek relief from this tension that they unleash it on those outside the tribe, where 'they savor a freedom from all social constraints' and 'go back to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey'. Note Nietzsche's use of the word 'conscience' here, in, I suggest, just the way in which he defines it in *GM*, II, 2—and his notion of going back to an innocent conscience from, presumably, a bad conscience. (The 'blond beasts of prey' of *GM*, II, 17, who lack bad conscience, do not count as a society, but are simply a 'pack'—though they create proto-states out of the peoples they conquer.)

<sup>10</sup> This is the sort of socialization that Nietzsche seems to commend (e.g. *A*, 57; *BGE*, 259; *GS*, 76. See also Chapter 6.5.1–2).

<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is implausible that the Greeks managed, for a long time, to 'ward off' the bad conscience by casting their gods as deifications of the very animal nature that is suppressed in bad conscience, a projection which, Nietzsche claims, enabled them both to ennoble this nature and to blame the gods for the troubles it caused (*GM*, II, 23). For one could not convincingly claim to be 'deluded by a god' *every* time one's nature got one into trouble, as distinct from those singular occasions on which one was manifestly not in 'one's right mind'; and the idea that 'the Greeks' blamed their gods in this way, or that their gods accepted the 'guilt' for man's wickedness, is, anyway, dubious—a point to which I return in Chapter 5.6.

specifically, with indebtedness towards god(s) who are held to be the absolute source of man's life, powers, and values—i.e. who are held to be mankind's 'origin, its *causa prima*' (*GM*, II, 20). Since, I suggest, the 'death' of God ultimately encompasses the discrediting of *all* belief in timeless, absolute, impartial standards, a 'second innocence' would, broadly construed, be the elimination of all guilt triggered by failure to respect such standards. Atheism, in the *simple* sense of not believing in a deity, is insufficient to abolish belief in such standards; and so such atheism will not, itself, lead to a 'second innocence'. (The prospect that it will do so, which Nietzsche teasingly holds out in concluding *GM*, II, 20, is immediately dashed by him in ending the first paragraph of the next section.) Only 'the *complete and definitive* [my italics] victory of atheism might free mankind of this whole feeling of guilty indebtedness towards its origin, its *causa prima*'—and such an ultimate victory entails, I suggest, the final overcoming of belief in *any* timeless or absolute or impartial standards. Thus, when Nietzsche claims elsewhere that guilt does 'not exist' (*GS*, 250), or that man is completely unaccountable for his actions and nature (*HAH*, 107), he can mean only two things: first, that the proposition that someone is 'guilty' or 'accountable' simply because he has failed to respect standards construed as impartial or normative (for example, as given by God, reason, or society) is a fiction, belief in which should be abolished; second, that we should abandon all moral interpretations of human nature that are advanced to explain such ascriptions of guilt—such as the notion of the essential corruption of man, to which I will presently turn.

This does not mean, however, that Nietzsche sees as either possible or desirable the elimination of guilt towards *any* ethical standards or ideals that the individual fails to respect—including standards which are self-legislated and life-enhancing. The elimination of such guilt would be impossible: for guilt is an entirely natural—indeed, inevitable—feeling on the part of the self-responsible individual who has failed to respect standards to which he or she is loyal. Moreover, to eliminate such guilt would be undesirable: for guilt plays a major role in inducing the individual to persevere with the arduous ethical ambitions that, for Nietzsche, are indispensable to life-enhancement. In short: what is key in Nietzsche's ethic, it seems to me, is not that the individual should never feel guilt, but that those standards, failure to respect which triggers guilt, should

be life-enhancing and nature-affirming<sup>12</sup> and not, as with morality, the other way round.

As to bad conscience, Nietzsche concludes the second essay of *The Genealogy* not by calling for its abolition but, on the contrary, by demanding that the bad conscience now be directed against morality—and, by extension, against the moral conception of guilt and of bad conscience itself. The 'goal', if only one were 'strong enough' for it, is 'to wed the bad conscience to all the *unnatural* inclinations' that foster and are fostered by morality, rather than, as hitherto, to man's 'natural inclinations'. 'The attainment of this goal would require a *different* kind of spirit from that likely to appear in this present age': a spirit of '*great health, . . . the redeeming man of great love and contempt, . . . Antichrist and antinihilist*', to cite just a few of Nietzsche's paeans to this 'man of the future' (*GM*, II, 24, *passim*). In other words, bad conscience is not only residually present in this great figure, but is essential to his historic task.

The crucial next question, therefore, is what happens when, in a particular ethical community such as Nietzsche's 'Christians', the otherwise manageable 'illness' of bad conscience runs uncontrolled—i.e. what happens when it reaches that 'most terrible and most sublime height' (*GM*, II, 19) where the specifically *moral* form of bad conscience is born? This is a question which, as Nietzsche addresses it, is more about the 'what' than the 'why': that is, about what concepts (or functions or 'interpretations' of concepts) feature in the moral form of bad conscience (or guilt) that were absent in the pre-moral form; rather than about why the moral form and its new concepts (or their functions) appeared at all. Indeed, Nietzsche's response to this question is a classic instance of how he constructs a genealogical account—i.e. a real or fictional history of the changing functions or 'interpretations' of particular ethical concepts, values, and practices in the lives of communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 'Nature-affirming' in the sense of Nietzsche's hope that it will be possible to "*“naturalize”* humanity' (*GS*, 109; cf. *BGE*, 230).

<sup>13</sup> In other words, in Nietzsche's method of genealogy an enduring practice (or 'procedure' or institution or value) is shown to receive a succession of functions or interpretations or 'meanings' (which may replace each other or be cumulative or, more likely, be a bit of both). Nietzsche's genealogical method, as portrayed in the second essay of *GM*, thus distinguishes between 'procedures', which he takes to be '*enduring*', and the 'meaning' attached to these procedures, which is '*fluid*' (*GM*, II, 13). At any given point in time, a practice is marked by a 'synthesis' of the various meanings that have historically attached to it—a synthesis that is 'hard to analyze' and, ultimately, 'totally *undefinable*'. Hence,

#### 4.3 THE MORAL FORM OF 'GUILT' AND OF 'BAD CONSCIENCE'

Bad conscience and guilt are moralized, Nietzsche seems to suggest, when they are blamed on, or interpreted in terms of, some putatively innate corruption of human nature (or, more generally, of 'life' or 'the world') which one must therefore strive to suppress, extirpate, or 'transcend'. In the case of guilt, this supposed corruption is used to explain the belief that debts are both undischageable and continually being incurred (say to gods or society). In the case of bad conscience, it is used to explain both the inevitable recalcitrance of one's 'animal' nature and the pain attendant on the effort to tame it. In both cases, guilt comes to be seen as constitutive of human nature—indeed, as one of its main defining features. The principal orchestrator of this new interpretation is, of course, none other than that fallen noble, the 'priest'.<sup>14</sup> His name for the corruption that is henceforth taken to be constitutive of humanity is 'sin' (*GM*, III, 20).

This conspicuousness of guilt is expressed in Nietzsche's image of the 'pushing back' of general guilt 'into the conscience' when it gets moralized (*GM*, II, 21). This image suggests the idea of many small 'islands' of guilt (arising from ordinary failures to repay debts) coalescing both with each other and with the much more permanent and fixed guilt (or potential guilt) of 'bad conscience' to form one leaden aggregate of guilty feeling, which then gets interpreted as 'essential' guilt before God. Moreover, this 'pushing back' of guilt into bad conscience suggests that, in the moralized state, they are phenomenologically one and the same—i.e. that, once moralized, general guilt and bad conscience are no longer experienced as distinct, but are melted into one experience of the individual as essentially guilty. Whether or not this attempt to interpret Nietzsche's idea of 'pushing back' is useful, it is clear that moralization is defined (critically though not exhaustively) by the idea that one's human

Nietzsche memorably says, 'only that which has no history is definable' (*ibid.*)—i.e. in terms of a fixed essential meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche frequently suggests that the nobles and the priests are originally kin; for example, when he says 'how easily the priestly mode of valuation can branch off from the knightly-aristocratic and then develop into its opposite' (*GM*, I, 7). This is very much like a secular doctrine of the Fall. (And, as discussed in Chapter 5.3, Nietzsche regards the ascetic priest as 'among the greatest *conserving* and yes-creating forces of life'—*GM*, III, 13.)

nature is essentially and undischargably guilty and *hence defective*.<sup>15</sup> Now we recall from our discussion of general guilt that the position of creditor can be occupied not only by one's society or god(s) but also by abstract objects such as ideals (which, particularly in their Platonic conception, act exactly like creditors to life, being the source of all its reality and truth). Hence the phenomenon, of which Nietzsche pointedly reminds us, that atheism does not abolish moralized guilt or bad conscience. For the same conceptual form obtains in a godless world: namely that some ineliminable characteristic of oneself always threatens to impede the honouring of one's obligations to a recognized higher authority, in this case an ideal.

Now it is a short step from this conceptual form to a still more general one: that life as such, or even 'the (phenomenal) world', is depraved and guilty before a higher authority from which it obtains, in some sense, its sustenance—and for whose sake it must be 'overcome'. But this concept is none other than the form of the 'ascetic ideal', to which the next chapter is devoted. And, I suggest, the ascetic ideal is one of two concepts by which guilt and bad conscience, in their moralized forms, are structured, justified, and (potentially) overcome.

The other such concept is metaphysical 'free will' and its associated dichotomy of the "doer" as distinct from his deeds (*GM*, I, 13). This embraces the idea that human beings have freedom of action that, at least in the moral sphere, is insulated from all contingency, and that through this they are perfectly responsible and causally efficient, so that their happiness follows from what they imagine to be their freely chosen virtues (rather than, as Nietzsche thinks is the case, the other way round).<sup>16</sup> Such a notion of 'free will' performs, I suggest, four functions in this context, the first two of which reinforce the notion of essential guilt, the latter two of which offer relief from it.<sup>17</sup>

First, 'free will' reinforces the notion of the debtor's ineliminable depravity by restricting the 'moral' self—the only agency capable of

<sup>15</sup> The converse—i.e. that human nature is defective and *hence guilty*—does not hold because phenomenologically, at least in Nietzsche's story, the guilt is prior: one incurs debts to society or gods, and then needs reasons for their being inexorable and undischargable.

<sup>16</sup> These notions belong to 'The Four Great Errors' of morality advanced in *TI*, VI, 1-8.

<sup>17</sup> In terms of the aims of moral asceticism, these pairs of functions are, of course, entirely consistent. For the first establishes the reality of a guilty world, while the second offers the possibility of 'transcending' it.

perceiving and doing what is good or right—to a realm isolated from the contingent self, which latter, by contrast, is unfree to be good: i.e. is inescapably guilty.

Second, 'free will' rationalizes the idea that God is interested in *witnessing* all our actions—and hence that our guilt is noticed and reckoned. Indeed, long before the idea of freedom of action was employed by the divine creditor to blame and forgive the debts of man, it was, Nietzsche says, invoked 'to furnish a right to the idea that the interest of the gods in man . . . *could never be exhausted*', and so to avoid the appalling boredom for them of a wholly deterministic world (*GM*, II, 7). All the more entertainment would, therefore, be afforded to the Judaeo-Christian God, whose humans have unprecedented freedom to choose.

Third, 'free will' makes the notion of essential guilt more bearable by claiming to *guarantee* the possibility of 'willing' a change in behaviour, and thus of reducing, though never eliminating, guilty indebtedness to the creditor. (This is, however, a classic instance of a medicine that aggravates the sickness because one's inevitable failure, in practice, radically to change course—inevitable because the theory is flawed and hence the guarantee hollow—only confirms the problem of one's culpability from which free will was believed to offer relief).<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, if the deed is doubled (by dividing it into a 'doer' and an action that he 'does'), then the forgiveness of the deed must also be doubled, first time for the willing of it and then a second time for the deed itself. This offers further relief from guilt by enabling the doer to be forgiven even when his deed is condemned.

In sum, the 'ascetic ideal' and 'free will' are two crucial concepts in structuring an explanation of moral guilt. For they posit a realm that is essentially unfree and contingent, and thus inevitably prone to guilt; while positing another realm which is free and uncontingent, and thus offers hope of 'transcending' that burden. Clearly if the 'problem' of guilt is a phantom, then, to that extent, 'free will', in a roughly Kantian sense, loses much of its utility, even if it still possesses a residual role—perhaps, on this argument, equally bogus—in, for example, a general theory of action (and thus in informing concepts such as the 'intentional' or the 'voluntary').

<sup>18</sup> This idea of guaranteed freedom is, of course, employed by the 'slaves' in *GM*, I, 13 to insist that '*the strong man is free to be weak*'.

Yet to claim that these two concepts are, or were historically, central to structuring moral guilt is not the same thing as claiming that they are 'logically' presupposed by the concept of moral guilt on something like a Kantian transcendental argument. For the developmental stories of ethical concepts<sup>19</sup> or their functions told by genealogies attempt to explain one set of concepts or their functions only in terms of their *contingent* relation to an earlier or more elementary set, or higher order motivations for them in terms of more basic ones. Such explanations do not attempt either to *reduce* or 'logically' to relate the later to the earlier concepts (or functions thereof) or the higher order to the more elementary motivations.<sup>20</sup> In other words, a genealogy, even if fictional, simply provides a way of thinking about the present functions and motivations of our ethical concepts, practices, and values by seeing them as contingent successors to possible earlier or more elementary functions and motivations in a manner which is free of the search for timeless 'groundings'. By re-presenting those functions and motivations in the light of such 'historical' explanation, the genealogist frees them up, as it were, from the immense authority of tradition and habit by which they are hallowed, so that their value to us may be reassessed in terms of our deepest ethical commitments. In addition, these (more or less) hypothetical patterns of explanation can then be tested against detailed historical or anthropological data. To qualify the role of genealogy in this way is, clearly, not to criticize it, but merely to state its proper, and, for ethics, very valuable, function.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Or of values or 'practices'.

<sup>20</sup> Nor, incidentally, do they assume that the meaning of a practice or concept, at any particular point in time, either *consists* of its developmental process up to that point or *necessarily* arises out of it. On the former, a practice embraces just those 'meanings' (or 'synthesis' thereof) that cleave to it at any given time, place, and context in which it is employed; but those meanings need not include *all* the meanings historically ascribed to it throughout the developmental process that genealogy has reconstructed. On the latter, Nietzsche, at least when he is doing genealogy, is too un-Hegelian and too insistent on the contingent relationship between the successive functions or meanings of practices at different historical times to see their developmental relationships as governed by an inherent logic or necessity.

<sup>21</sup> This general statement about the possible role of genealogies suggests that they can be employed to assess the functions and motivations of ethical practices not only in terms of specifically Nietzschean explanatory concepts (i.e. the 'will to power' which those practices supposedly disguise and serve) or standards of value (i.e. 'life-enhancement'), but also in terms of other explanatory concepts and standards of value. For further accounts of the genealogical method, see, for example: David C. Hoy, 'Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method', in Yirmiyahu Yovel (ed.), *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 20–38; and Michel Foucault's 'Nietzsche, Genealogy,

## 4.4 CONCLUSIONS

Nietzsche's conception of guilt and bad conscience suggests to me the following conclusions:

First, in a Nietzschean ethic, the possibility of guilt and bad conscience is central to any *description* of, respectively, ethically responsible individuals and a cohesive society. Indeed, the possibility of guilt exists wherever an agent feels genuine ethical commitments—i.e. a sense of personal accountability to standards (whether these are social or individual) which is not sustained simply by external threats, rewards, and monitoring and which, therefore, functions as an internal censor, as in any feelings of obligation structured by the debtor–creditor model.<sup>22</sup> To the extent that such commitment exists in pre-moral—or, in general, non-moral—societies (as it must do if they are to be ethical at all), *so too* does the possibility of guilt and bad conscience. Though 'morality' greatly intensifies these feelings, it surely does not invent them.<sup>23</sup>

Second, guilt and bad conscience are *valuable* to a Nietzschean ethic—insofar as guilt motivates the agent to respect his self-legislated, life-enhancing standards, and insofar as bad conscience is directed against 'morality' and creates the 'womb' for many of the cultural riches most prized by Nietzsche. Hence, the 'second innocence' conceived by Nietzsche will be free from certain sorts of guilt: especially from guilt dependent upon norms regarded as absolute or impartial; from guilt towards agents, such as gods, which are con-

History', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 76–100. (Foucault's account of genealogy, though bold and fascinating, invests it with an almost mystical power of historical insight and insufficiently recognizes the degree to which useful genealogies, including Nietzsche's own, can be fictional rather than painstakingly documentary.)

<sup>22</sup> On the debtor–creditor model, such a notion of personal accountability involves the idea that I have received a credit (or incurred a debt), that I am in a state to realize I have received it, and that only I (rather than some substitute) can acknowledge or repay it. Within this framework, the limits of accountability are then a matter of convention—such as whether they range beyond credits received under formal contract to those that are regarded as covered by implicit contract (e.g. taboos, rules of citizenship, or debts to gods), or as unilaterally extended (e.g. the power conferred by ancestors), and, within the latter, what counts simply as good luck that needs no reciprocation; whether they cover unintentionally incurred debts; what states of mind release the agent from repayment; what counts as repayment; etc.

<sup>23</sup> This conjecture is corroborated by Bernard Williams's discussion of the central role of such concepts in the ethics of Homeric Greece, in *Shame and Necessity*, *passim*.

ceived as the original source of the individual's life and power; and from moral explanations for guilt—for example, explanations which ascribe it to a 'fallen' nature or to the failure to exercise metaphysically 'free will'. But a 'second innocence' will not be free from *any* guilt—and, in particular, not from guilt arising from failure to respect self-legislated, life-enhancing standards. In short, to suggest that Nietzsche's ethic excludes, or seeks to overcome, 'guilt' *tout court* would be seriously to misunderstand it.

Third, the debtor–creditor model suggests just how varied can be the obligations which, when disrespected, occasion guilt. These can range far beyond an agent's formal obligations to other people to encompass all rules or norms which he or she regards as necessary to a flourishing life and thus as requiring respect. These rules could be either public or individual. And the object of the obligations they entail—i.e. the occupant of the position of creditor—could be the agent himself (resulting in guilt towards himself), or abstract objects like ideals, or unknown and unseen powers, such as ancestors, as well as many others. In sum: the crucial precondition for guilt—i.e. respect for certain ethical commitments or rules—could be generalized to range over all rules regarded by the agent as central to a good life.

Fourth, the value of 'bad conscience'—i.e. the kinds of goods that are attainable by disciplining the 'animal' in man—seems to depend critically on its intensity: too little bad conscience results in psychic dissipation or crudity; too much produces crushing guilt, self-disgust, and the paralysis of talent; while the right amount makes possible autonomy, beauty, and imagination. (Have we found here a successful application of Aristotle's 'theory of the mean'?—cf. Chapter 3.4, n. 40.)

Fifth, if the proximate cause of guilt is *not* punishment of the debtor, or his fear of punishment (which, as we discussed earlier, instils only prudence rather than guilt), but his experience of failing to respect an obligation to which he is, in some sense, wholeheartedly committed—i.e. to which he has 'promised' himself and, therefore, considers himself responsible—then guilt is not a 'reactive' emotion, as interpreters of Nietzsche sometimes claim,<sup>24</sup> but is, rather, quintessentially 'active'. Indeed, if, philosophically, guilt presupposes a notion of agent responsibility, one might hazard the

<sup>24</sup> For example, Randall Havas, in *Nietzsche's Genealogy*, 236, who claims that, for Nietzsche, responsibility and guilt are opposed in the sense of activity and reactivity.

suggestion that, psychologically, guilt can help reinforce the individual's feeling of agency and responsibility. This conjecture suggests that one reason for the frequent urge of human beings to accept guilt and responsibility where they have none is a deep-seated need to feel power over their lives, whether by influencing fate or by authoring events. It suggests, in other words, that accepting guilt may, on occasion, be the only way of attributing efficacy to oneself—and, as a corollary, that the pain of guilt may, in such circumstances, be less than the pain of irrelevance. Such self-attribution of guilt would, therefore, not so much *create* the feeling of being a victim, as arise *from* it (or from the urge to overcome it).

Finally, if, as I have argued, the debtor–creditor relationship can model the operation of guilt only by itself presupposing the concept of personal accountability—i.e. a strong sense that one's obligations are justified—then that relationship no more *explains* the conceptual leap to guilt than does, say, *ressentiment* explain the conceptual leap to the universalism of slave morality (see Chapter 3.3). For just as *ressentiment* explains the development of slave morality only because (so I argued) it is *already* structured by two of the principal presuppositions of the latter, namely universality of rights and of duties, so the debtor–creditor relationship successfully models guilt only because it already contains the latter's key presupposition, namely of personal accountability. In both cases, the 'revolutionary' concept—be it personal accountability or universalism of rights and duties—appears in the *explanans* as well as in the *explanandum*; but in both cases it is the appearance of this revolutionary concept that Nietzsche's genealogy does not account for. This is, however, no criticism of genealogy in general or of Nietzsche's genealogies in particular:<sup>25</sup> for every genealogy, whether fictional or real, must have *some* starting point at which the ethical concepts (or values and practices) whose development or successive functions and motivations it traces are simply taken for granted. Everything prior to this origin is left unexplained—and, in particular, why the relevant concepts or values which featured in it appeared at all. But this does not mean that further genealogical accounts could not, in principle, provide such explanations—although how far back they extend and whether any ultimate origin can be determined will, evidently, depend on the concept or practice under investigation. (Thus, for the ubiquitous

<sup>25</sup> Though he, perhaps, makes '*ressentiment*' do too much work in explaining slave morality, and does not do enough genealogy on the origin of *ressentiment* itself.

practice of punishment a single ultimate starting point is unlikely to exist, whereas for the, culturally more specific, conception of 'free will' it may. The institution of 'morality' itself, being made up of so many diverse elements, could almost certainly not be traced to a single starting point.<sup>26</sup>)

In sum, though Nietzsche's genealogy leaves the origin of personal accountability vague, the 'debtor-creditor relationship' is, indeed, a fertile model for the phenomenology of guilt and enables us to see just how varied are the circumstances which can occasion it, in both moral *and* pre-moral ethics.

#### ENDNOTE: OUTLINE OF A MODEL FOR GUILT AND SHAME<sup>27</sup>

Guilt is an experience of reprehensible failure (not necessarily intentional) to respect ethical obligations which one recognizes as justified. More broadly conceived, it is the phenomenology of being inadequate to one's loyalties. This definition has four main features. First, guilt presupposes loyalty to the rules against which one has failed. Second, insofar as someone is presumed harmed by that failure, the experience of guilt generally involves the thought of a victim<sup>28</sup>—though that thought may turn out to be illusory, since breaking the relevant obligation may, in fact, hurt no one. Third, there must be a witness (or enforcer) to point out the failure and thereby to trigger the experience. This witness is *necessarily* internal—i.e. the inner censor who recognizes the obligations and their failure to be respected—but can, in addition, be external (though an external witness need not be the same as the victim, if there is one). Fourth—and least important by far—guilt is an experience of impotence. For once the debtor accepts that credits must be repaid (a precondition for his feeling guilt), it is only insufficient self-mastery or

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Geuss interestingly contrasts the 'seemingly unlimited and ramifying series of ancestors' traced by a typical genealogy to the singular point of origin that marks a pedigree. See his 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2/3 (1994), 274–92, especially n. 8 and p. 276.

<sup>27</sup> This whole Endnote owes a great deal to Bernard Williams's discussion of guilt and shame in *Shame and Necessity*, though he might disagree with much of what I suggest here.

<sup>28</sup> That victim can, of course, be oneself as well as others—as in feelings of guilt towards oneself (e.g. for having wasted or 'betrayed' one's talents).

bad luck or inability to know the terms of the creditor or, in moralized guilt, the liability of an essentially flawed nature—all of them forms of powerlessness—that prevents a mutually agreed discharging of the debt.

If, as the whole thrust of this chapter has suggested, the only necessary condition for all guilt is failure to honour obligations to which the agent is loyal, then neither actual retribution, nor actual contracts, nor, therefore, actual victims, are invariably required to trigger it. Guilt could be triggered even if no one had reminded the agent of his failure by their anger, even if his commitment to the rule or code were entirely 'unilateral' (and, perhaps, unreasonable to those putatively hurt by its infringement!), and even if, therefore, he had manifestly harmed no one. Such a model may be useful in explaining, for example, the perplexing phenomenon of 'survivor guilt', where exactly these conditions obtain.

With shame, by contrast, the agent's concern is primarily with (perceived) impotence.<sup>29</sup> There are three key points here. First, what is decisive about one's failure to meet certain standards is not, as with guilt, that one has been disloyal to them or hurt a victim in the process, but simply that one has been insufficiently powerful to meet them. In other words, the standards matter primarily as indices of one's power rather than for any other reason. This means not that the standards *themselves* are devoid of ethical content and concern only power—on the contrary, they may be ethically extremely sophisticated—but, rather, that what matters about their infringement is that it shows up a lack of power: for example, of self-mastery. This need *not*, however, make shame a more selfish emotion than guilt, both because the power with which shame is concerned may be crucial precisely to the agent's social roles and responsibilities and because the standards in relation to which the agent has failed may, as just mentioned, embody an ethic that is concerned with far more than just power.

Second, failure to meet such standards must be *observed* (or be believed by the agent to be observed) by a witness. The witness may be either external or internalized and must matter to, or be respected by, the agent (for example, for his own power or for common membership of an ethical or familial community). But the role of the witness—whether external or internal—is quite different in shame and

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, e.g. 221.

in guilt. For one thing, in shame an internalized witness is not necessary—whereas an internal censor is essential to guilt. An external witness, in whose eyes one wishes to appear powerful (or at least not to lose power) will suffice; and, again unlike guilt, one need *not* espouse the standards in relation to which an external witness judges one's power in order to feel shame at falling short of them. In other words, in shame the external witness is far more important than he is in guilt (if he features at all in triggering the latter). For another thing, the internal censor in guilt is committed to the relevant standards for more complex (or, at least, for different) ethical reasons than is the case in shame—where, as just mentioned, the agent observes standards mainly out of a need to feel (or be perceived as) not impotent.

Third, this need to feel powerful is *not* necessarily connected to social acceptance: the internalized witness need not be simply a proxy for an external or social witness. Indeed, the less (in any given ethical community) the individual's self-esteem is explicitly a function of his social acceptance, the more the need to feel powerful is something one feels 'before oneself'.

These proposals suggest that shame and guilt are, indeed, quite different. First, with shame, the standards against which the agent fails either command his loyalty only as measures of power (though, as mentioned, this does not preclude those standards from being ethically sophisticated), or do not command his loyalty at all (i.e. where his concern is purely with impotence in the eyes of an external witness whose respect he desires, but whose standards he may not share); whereas with guilt, the agent is not only necessarily loyal to the standards against which he has failed, but is loyal for reasons that extend beyond a concern with power. Second, for shame, an external witness can suffice, whereas for guilt an internalized censor is essential. Third, in shame there is no necessary presumption of a victim who is harmed by the failure; whereas for guilt there is always such a presumption. Shame and guilt overlap *only* insofar as guilt is experienced as impotence (though, as I have suggested, impotence is the least significant feature of guilt). But there is clearly no sense in which guilt is simply a special case of shame.

This is not, however, to subscribe to the view that shame and guilt belong to different sorts of ethics, in that, say, shame is pre-moral and guilt is moral. As has been argued in this chapter from a purely theoretical point of view—i.e. without reference to the kind of

historical societies analysed by Williams—shame and guilt can both exist in pre-moral as well as in moral communities, since neither of them necessarily makes moral assumptions.