What is Moral about Moral Emotions? Guilt Elicits Prosocial Behavior as Well as Antisocial Behavior

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Moral emotions have been portrayed as the social mortar of human societies because these feelings encourage us to put the concerns of others above our own and to engage in prosocial behavior. The hallmark moral emotion is guilt, which is typically described as an “adaptive emotion, benefiting individuals and their relationships in a variety of ways” (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007, p. 26). However, is it really the case that moral emotions make the interest of others paramount, neglecting our self-interest?

Guilt mostly arises from a moral transgression in which the actor has violated an important norm and has hurt another person. This elicits a preoccupation with the victim and the ensuing reparative action tendencies are aimed at restoring the relationship between transgressor and victim. This victim-oriented focus explains the often-replicated finding that guilty people contribute more of their endowments to others in comparison to non-guilty people. It is clear that in dyadic situations guilt produces behavior that benefits others.

However, we have reason to believe that the very characteristics of guilt that make it beneficial to the victim in dyadic interactions have disadvantageous side effects for others in the social environment. In dyadic interactions the costs of acting prosocially come necessarily at the expense of oneself. But in daily life it is also possible to act prosocially at the cost of others. We think that the generosity towards the victim has disadvantageous consequences for the social environment. Precisely because guilt induces a preoccupation with restoring the harm to the victim, it simultaneously causes a neglect of others. Consequently, a guilty state may not evoke a disregard for personal concerns (as is often assumed) but rather a depreciation of the concerns of non-victimized others.

We predict that when taking such a broader, more ecologically valid perspective, it will appear that people experiencing guilt are motivated to benefit the relationship with the victim, but at the best possible outcomes for themselves. Three experiments investigated if the experience of guilt induces prosocial behavior towards the victim at the expense of others rather than the self.

In Experiment 1, participants reported a personal experience of feeling guilty (Guilt condition), or described a regular weekday (Control condition). They were asked to think of the person they felt guilty towards (guilt condition) or of a person they had met during the weekday (control condition). This person was labeled Person A. Participants then divided $50 between the birthday of Person A, the fundraising of the victims of a flood, and themselves. We found that Guilt participants offered more money to Person A than Control participants. At the same time, guilt participants offered less money to flood victims than Control participants. Guilt and Control participants did not differ in the amount they kept for themselves.

In summary, it appears that guilt, the hallmark moral emotion, can motivate behaviors that do not fit the predicate moral. When people experience guilt, they are preoccupied with repairing the harm done to the victim, leading to disadvantageous effects for others in their social environment. We found that participants in the Victim-present Guilt condition offered significantly more to the victim than participants in the Victim-present Control condition, and than participants in the Victim-not-present Guilt condition. They also offered significantly less to the third player than participants in the Victim-present Control condition, and than participants in the Victim-not-present Guilt condition. Higher offers to the victim did not come at personal expense: all conditions did not differ in tickets kept for oneself.