

Why do we feel so guilty all the time?

Food, sex, money, work, family, friends, health, politics: there's nothing we can't feel guilty about, including our own feelings of guilt. By

theguardian

Tuesday 3 October 2017 01.00 EDT

I feel guilty about everything. Already today I've felt guilty about having said the wrong thing to a friend. Then I felt guilty about avoiding that friend because of the wrong thing I'd said. Plus, I haven't called my mother yet today: guilty. And I really should have organised something special for my husband's birthday: guilty. I gave the wrong kind of food to my child: guilty. I've been cutting corners at work lately: guilty. I skipped breakfast: guilty. I snacked instead: double guilty. I'm taking up all this space in a world with not enough space in it: guilty, guilty, guilty.

Nor am I feeling good about feeling bad. Not when sophisticated friends never fail to remind me how self-involved, self-aggrandising, politically conservative and morally stunted the guilty are. Poor me. Guilty about guilty. Filial guilt, fraternal guilt, spousal guilt, maternal guilt, peer guilt, work guilt, middle-class guilt, white guilt, liberal guilt, historical guilt, Jewish guilt: I'm guilty of them all.

Thankfully, there are those who say they can save us from guilt. According to the popular motivational speaker Denise Duffield-Thomas, author of *Get Rich, Lucky Bitch!*, guilt is "one of the most common feelings women suffer". Guilty women, lured by guilt into obstructing their own paths to increased wealth, power, prestige and happiness, just can't seem to take advantage of their advantages.

"You might feel guilty," Duffield-Thomas writes, "for wanting more, or for spending money on yourself, or for taking time out of your busy family life to work on improving yourself. You might feel guilty that other people are poor, that your friend is jealous, that there are starving people in the world." Sure enough, I do feel guilty for those things. So, it is something of a relief to hear that I can be helped - that I can be self-helped. But, for that to happen, what I must first understand is that a) I'm worth it, and b) none of these structures of global inequality, predicated on historical injustices, are my fault.

My guilt, in other words, is a sign not of my *guilt* but of my *innocence* - even my victimhood. It's only by forgiving myself for the wrongs for which I bear no direct responsibility that I can learn to release my "money blocks and live a first-class life", according to Duffield-Thomas.

Imagine that: a first-class life. This sort of advice, which frames guilt as our most fundamentally inhibiting emotion, takes insights from psychoanalytic and feminist thinking and transforms them into the language of business motivation. The promise is that our guilt can be expiated by making money.

It's an idea that might resonate especially in the German language, where guilt and debt are the same word, *schuld*. One thinks, for example, of Max Weber's thesis about how the "spirit of capitalism" conflates our worldly and heavenly riches, on the basis that what you earn in this

world also serves as a measure of your spiritual virtue, since it depends on your capacity for hard work, discipline and self-denial.

But what Weber calls “salvation anxiety” within the Protestant work ethic has the opposite effect to the self-help manual’s promise to liberate entrepreneurs from their guilt. For Weber, in fact, the capitalist pursuit of profit does not reduce one’s guilt, but actively exacerbates it - for, in an economy that admonishes stagnation, there can be no rest for the wicked.

So, the guilt that blocks and inhibits us also propels us to work, work, work, to become relentlessly productive in the hope that we might - by our good works - rid ourselves of guilt. Guilt thus renders us productive and unproductive, workaholic and workphobic - a conflict that might explain the extreme and even violent lengths to which people sometimes will go, whether by scapegoating others or sacrificing themselves, to be rid of what many people consider the most unbearable emotion.

What is the potency of guilt? With its inflationary logic, guilt looks, if anything, to have accumulated over time. Although we tend to blame religion for condemning man to life as a sinner, the guilt that may once have attached to specific vices - vices for which religious communities could prescribe appropriate penance - now seems, in a more secular era, to surface in relation to just about anything: food, sex, money, work, unemployment, leisure, health, fitness, politics, family, friends, colleagues, strangers, entertainment, travel, the environment, you name it.

Equally, whoever has been tempted to suppose that rituals of public humiliation are a macabre relic of the medieval past clearly hasn’t been paying much attention to our life online. You can’t expect to get away for long on social media without someone pointing an accusatory finger at you. Yet it’s hard to imagine that the presiding spirit of our age, the envious and resentful troll, would have such easy pickings if he could not already sense a whiff of guilt-susceptibility emanating from his prey.

It wasn’t meant to be like this. The great crusaders of modernity were supposed to uproot our guilt. The subject of countless high-minded critiques, guilt was accused by modern thinkers of sapping the life out of us and causing our psychological deterioration. It was said to make us weak (Nietzsche), neurotic (Freud), inauthentic (Sartre).

In the latter part of the 20th century, various critical theories gained academic credibility, particularly within the humanities. These were theories that sought to show - whether with reference to class relations, race relations, gender relations - how we are all cogs in a larger system of power. We may play our parts in regimes of oppression, but we are also at the mercy of forces larger than us.

But this raises questions about personal responsibility: if it’s true that our particular situation is underpinned by a complex network of social and economic relations, how can any individual really claim to be in control or entirely responsible for her own life? Viewed in such an impersonal light, guilt can seem an unhelpful hangover from less self-aware times.

As a teacher of critical theory, I know how crucial and revelatory its insights can be. But I’ve occasionally also suspected that our desire for systematic and structural forms of explanation may be fuelled by our anxiety at the prospect of discovering we’re on the wrong side of history. When wielded indelicately, explanatory theories can offer their adherents a foolproof system for

knowing exactly what view to hold, with impunity, about pretty much everything - as if one could take out an insurance policy to be sure of always being right. Often, too, that's as far as such criticism takes you - into a right-thinking that doesn't necessarily organise itself into right-acting.

The notion that our intellectual frameworks might be as much a reaction to our guilt as a remedy for it might sound familiar to a religious person. In the biblical story, after all, man "falls" when he's tempted by fruit from the tree of knowledge. It's "knowledge" that leads him out of the Garden of Eden into an exile that has yet to end. His guilt is a constant, nagging reminder that he has taken this wrong turn.



Illustration: A Richard Allen

Yet even within that source we see how man's guilt can be deceptive - as slippery and seductive as the serpent who led him astray. For if man has sinned by tasting of knowledge, the guilt that punishes him repeats his crime: with all its finger-wagging and tenor of "I told you so", guilt itself comes over as awfully knowing. It keeps us, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has written, in thrall to that boring and repetitive voice inside our head that endlessly corrects, criticises, censors, judges and finds fault with us, but "never brings us any news about ourselves". In our feelings of guilt, we seem already to have the measure of who it is we are and what it is we're capable of.

Could that be the reason for our guilt? Not our lack of knowledge - but rather our presumption of it? Our desperate need to be sure of ourselves, even when what we think of ourselves is that we're worthless, useless, the pits? When we feel guilty we at least have the comfort of being certain of something - of knowing, finally, the right way to feel, which is bad.

This may be why we're addicted to crime dramas: they satisfy our wish for certainty, no matter how grim that certainty is. At the beginning of a detective story, we're conscious of a crime, but we don't know who did it. By the end of the story, it has been discovered which culprit is guilty: case closed. Thus guilt, in its popular rendering, is what converts our ignorance into knowledge.

For a psychoanalyst, however, feelings of guilt don't necessarily have any connection to *being guilty* in the eyes of the law. Our feelings of guilt may be a confession, but they usually precede the accusation of any crime - the details of which not even the guilty person can be sure.

So, while the stories we prefer may be the ones that uncover guilt, it's equally possible that our own guilt is a cover story for something else.

Although “the fall” is originally a biblical story, forget religion for a moment. One can just as well recount a more recent and assuredly secular story of the fall of man. It’s a “story” that has had countless narrators, perhaps none finer or more emphatic than the German Jewish postwar critic Theodor Adorno. Writing in the wake of the Holocaust, Adorno argued famously that whoever survives in a world that could produce Auschwitz is guilty, at least insofar as they’re still party to the same civilisation that created the conditions for Auschwitz.

In other words, guilt is our unassailable historical condition. It’s our contract as modern people. As such, says Adorno, we all have a shared responsibility after Auschwitz to be vigilant, lest we collapse once more into the ways of thinking, believing and behaving that brought down this guilty verdict upon us. To make sense after Auschwitz is to risk complicity with its barbarism.

For Adorno too, then, our knowledge renders us guilty, rather than keeping us safe. For a modern mind, this could well seem shocking. That said, perhaps the more surprising feature of Adorno’s representation of guilt is the idea expressed in his question “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living - especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared”.

For Adorno, the guilt of Auschwitz belongs to all of western civilisation, but it’s a guilt he assumed would be felt most keenly by “one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed” - the Jewish survivor of the second world war.

Adorno, who had left Europe for New York in early 1938, was probably attesting to his own sense of guilt. Yet his insight is one we also get from psychologists who worked with concentration camp survivors after the war; they found that “feelings of guilt accompanied by shame, self-condemnatory tendencies and self-accusations are experienced by the victims of the persecution and apparently much less (if at all) by the perpetrators of it”.

What can it mean if victims feel guilty and perpetrators are guilt-free? Are objective guilt (being guilty) and subjective guilt (feeling guilty) completely at odds with each other?

In the years after the war, the concept of “survival guilt” tended to be viewed as the byproduct of the victim’s identification with their aggressor. The survivor who may subsequently find it hard to forgive herself because others have died in her place - why am I still here when they are not? - may also feel guilty because of what she was forced to collude with for the sake of her survival. This need not imply any incriminating action on her part; her guilt may simply be an unconscious way of registering her past preference that others suffer instead of her.

On this basis, then, it may be possible to think of survivor’s guilt as a special case of the guilt we all bear when, aware or unaware, we’re glad when others, rather than ourselves, suffer. Obviously, that’s not a pleasant feeling, but neither is it a hard one to understand. Still, there remains something deeply uncomfortable about accepting that survivors of the worst atrocities should feel any guilt for their own survival. Instead, shouldn’t we be trying to save the survivor from her (in our view) mistaken feelings of guilt and thus establish, without smirch or quibble, her absolute innocence?

This understandable impulse, according to the intellectual historian Ruth Leys, saw the figure of “the survivor” emerge in the period after the second world war, alongside a shift in focus from

the victim's feelings of guilt toward an insistence on the victim's innocence. This transformation, Leys argues, involved replacing the concept of guilt with its close cousin, shame.

The difference is crucial. The victim who feels guilt evidently has an inner life, with intentions and desires - while the victim who feels shame seems to have had it bestowed from outside. The victims of trauma consequently appear to be the objects rather than the subjects of history.

Shame, then, tells us something about what one is, not what one does - or would like to do. And so the effect of this well-intentioned shift in emphasis may have been to rob the survivor of agency.

It may be tempting to assume that survival guilt is an extraordinary case, given the abject powerlessness of the victims of such traumas. But, as we will see, attempts to deny the validity of the guilt of others often have the similar effect of denying their intentions as well. Consider the case of "liberal guilt", the guilt we all love to hate.

Liberal guilt has become a shorthand for describing those who feel keenly a lack of social, political and economic justice, but are not the ones who suffer the brunt of it. According to the cultural critic Julie Ellison, it first took hold in the US in the 1990s, on the back of a post-cold-war fragmentation of the left, and a loss of faith in the utopian politics of collective action that had characterised an earlier generation of radicals. The liberal who feels guilty has given up on the collective and recognises herself to be acting out of self-interest. Her guilt is thus a sign of the gap between what she feels for the other's suffering and what she will do actively to alleviate it - which is not, it turns out, a great deal.

As such, her guilt incites much hostility in others, not least in the person who feels himself the object of the liberal's guilt. This person, AKA "the victim", understands only too well how seldom the pity he elicits in the guilty liberal is likely to lead to any significant structural or political changes for him.

Rather, the only "power" to be redirected his way is not political power, but the moral or affective power to make those more fortunate than he is feel even more guilty about the privileges they are nonetheless not inclined to give up.

But just how in control of her feelings is the guilty liberal? Not very, thinks Ellison. Since feelings aren't easily confected, her guilt tends to assail her unbidden, rendering her highly performative, exhibitionist, even hysterical. In her guilt, she experiences a "loss of control", although she remains conscious at all times of an audience, before whom she feels she must show how spectacularly sorry she is. Her guilt, then, is her way of "acting out", marking a disturbance in the liberal who doesn't know herself quite as well as her guilt would have her think.

The idea of guilt as an inhibiting emotion corroborates the common critique of liberal guilt: that, for all the suffering it produces, it fails completely to motivate the guilty subject to bring about meaningful political change.

But what if the liberal's guilt actually has another purpose, to allow the liberal respite from the thing she may (unconsciously) feel even worse about: the lack of a fixed identity that tells her who she is, what her responsibilities are and where these come to an end.

If anything can be said to characterise the notoriously woolly liberal, guilt may be it. Liberal guilt suggests a certain class (middle), race (white) and geopolitical (developed world) situation. As such, despite the torment it brings to those who suffer it, it might, paradoxically (and, again, unconsciously), be reassuring for someone whose real neurosis is that she feels her identity is so mobile and shifting that she can never quite be sure where she stands.

If this is what chiefly concerns her, then one might envisage her guilt as a feeling that tells her who she is, by virtue of telling her who she is failing to be for others. Who is the liberal? She who suffers on account of those who suffer more than she. (I know whereof I speak.)

This may suggest why, in recent years, there has been mounting criticism of the liberal's sensibilities. To her critics, the liberal really is guilty. She's guilty of a) secretly resenting victims for how their sufferings make her feel, b) drawing attention away from them and back towards her, c) having the audacity to make an exhibition out of her self-lacerations and d) doing practically nothing to challenge the status quo.

For critics of the guilty liberal, in other words, feeling guilty is part of the problem, rather than the solution. And yet this criticism is itself subject to the same accusation. Given that criticising someone for feeling guilty is only going to make them feel guiltier, guilt has, as we've seen, proved a tricky opponent - one that its various modern combatants have yet to defeat.

Once again, therefore, in the case of liberal guilt, we encounter a feeling so devilishly slippery that it repeats the problem in the course of confessing it. Because there is, of course, a form of guilt that does not inspire us to act, but prevents us from acting. This type of guilt takes the uncertainty of our relations with others (and our responsibility for others) and turns them into an object of certainty and knowledge.

But since the "object" in this case is our own self, we can see how liberal guilt, too, mutates guilt into a version of shame. Shame, in fact, could well be a more accurate appellation for what motivates the guilty liberal in her public and private self-condemnations.

However, before we declare the liberal "guilty as charged" - as in guilty of the wrong kind of guilt - it's worth reminding ourselves of the survival guilt that has likewise been viewed by many as guilt of the wrong kind. For as we observed in that case, in seeking to "save" the victim from her guilt, the victim becomes deprived of the very thing that might distinguish her from the objectifying aggression that has assailed her: a sense of her own intentions and wishes, however aggressive, perverse or thwarted these might be.

For this reason, then, it's vital to preserve the notion of survivor's guilt (and, despite obvious differences, liberal guilt) as that which could yet return to the survivor (or the liberal) a power of agency such as must be absolutely necessary if she is to have a future that isn't bound, by the resolving or absolving of her guilt, to repeat the past ad infinitum.

If religion often gets the blame for framing man as sinner, the secular effort to release man from his guilt hasn't offered much relief. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests that subjective innocence belongs to a bygone age, the age of the tragic hero. Oedipus, for example, is someone whose objective guilt (parricide, incest) is matched by the subjective innocence of the man who acts before he knows. Today, however, says Agamben, we find the opposing situation: modern man is objectively innocent (for he has not, like Oedipus, murdered with his own hands),

but subjectively guilty (he knows that his comforts and securities have been paid for by someone, somewhere, probably in blood).

By falsely promising a tabula rasa bound to his historical and intellectual emancipation, modernity may not only have failed to obliterate man's subjective guilt, but may even have exacerbated it. For what many a modern man is guilty of is less his actions than his addiction to a version of knowledge that seems to have inhibited his capacity for action. As such, the religious assignation of man as sinner - a fallen, abject, endlessly compromised, but also active, effective and changeable creature - begins to look comforting by comparison.

Such a view also shares much in common with a certain psychoanalytic conception of guilt as a blocked form of aggression or anger toward those we need and love (God, parents, guardians, whomever we depend on for our own survival). But if guilt is the feeling that typically blocks all other (buried, repressed, unconscious) feelings, that is not in itself a reason to block feelings of guilt. Feelings, after all, are what you must be prepared to feel if they are to move you, or if you are to feel something else.

Main illustration by A Richard Allen

Adapted from Feeling Jewish (A Book for Just About Anyone) by Devorah Baum, which will be published by Yale University Press on 19 October at £18.99. To buy it for £16.15, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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