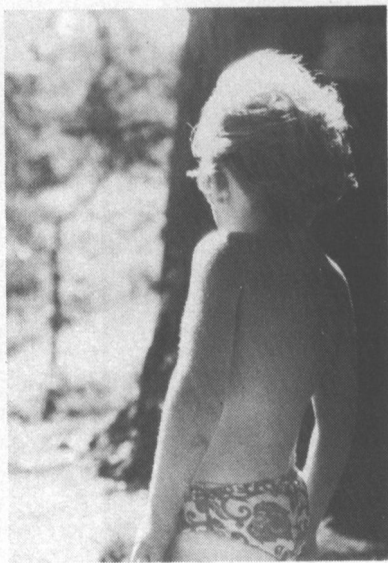


# A CHILD'S HEART:

## A Psychological Study

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'A Child's Heart' is a short story written by Herman Hesse concerning an eleven year old boy. As an account, in the first person, of the child's emotions it provides an insight into child development.

The child, for reasons unknown to himself, stole dried figs from his father's study on finding his father absent. There followed manifold expressions of guilt such as misery, remorse and resentment. Hesse describes his attitude toward his father as one of "reverence and rebellion" which "contested in my overladen heart."

Apart from test cases of children's verbal responses to stories of transgression, there is little systematic evidence regarding children's guilt. Piaget (1948)

pointed out that studies on morality, with children, are complicated by the possibility that what the child thinks about morality has no precise connection with what he does in his concrete experience.

At the beginning of this century, G. Stanley Hall acknowledged the years 8-12 as being a

"unique period of human life. The brain is near adult size and weight. Activity is greater and more varied than ever before."  
(Blair, Burton 1951)

In attempting to explain, at least in part, the emotion of guilt as it is experienced by the child various theories and empirical studies in psychology have been used.



### DEFINITION.

The author of psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud, stated that moral standards are largely unconscious products of powerful irrational motives, and are based on the need to keep antisocial impulses from conscious awareness.

Lawrence Kohlberg, a cognitive developmental theorist, states the general definition of morality as,

"... conscience, a set of cultural rules of social action which has been internalized by the individual." (Hoffmann, Hoffmann 1964)

Moral development is understood to be the increased internalization of fundamental cultural norms. Three aspects of such internalization are recognized:

- a) Behavioural: that of resistance to temptation.
- b) Emotional: the emotion of guilt.
- c) Judgemental: the capacity to

make judgements in terms of the internalized standard.

Since it is the emotion of guilt that predominates in this short story, it is the theme of this paper.

Anthropologists (M. Mead, 1950, Leighton and Kluckholm, 1947) have set down three criteria for the development of guilt behaviour, as distinct from shame.

"First, the child must accept the parent as omniscient and the source of all moral authority. Second, genuine guilt feelings can only exist where shame and other external sanctions are not operative. Third, guilt must be characterized by the conviction of sin and the need for atonement." (Ausubel, Sullivan 1970)

### THE FATHER AND THE CHILD

"... he of whom I stood in such awe." W. Sorell commenting on this story suggests that the child, disappointed at his father's absence from the study, then acted his

father's role by handling the possessions of the father. Hesse explains that the child, feeling ill at ease, decided to go up to his father's study.



"Although I was afraid of him it was sometimes good to turn to him . . . with Mother it was easier and simpler to find comfort, but Father's comfort was more valuable."

### DIGNITY AND POWER

To the child the father reflected "dignity and power", but also "punishment and guilty conscience." Yet in his distress he even thought "Maybe it was better to have a coarse father than such a refined and just one."

### FREUD

Freud (1950) theorized that the main authority figure in the family is the father. Since boys identify more with their fathers than girls, it follows that boys will have stronger consciences. (Wright 1971)

Bain, a Scottish philosopher (1859) stated that as a child advances in experience of authority a value of respect and love towards that figure brings about the fear of "giving pain to that beloved object." (Stephenson 1966)

### REVERENCE AND REBELLION

The 'reverence and rebellion' the child expressed for his father is common in the 'latency' period, or later childhood. The boy begins to rebel against the authority figure, in the search for his own identity.

### IDENTIFICATION AND GUILT

Identification, a psychoanalytic term, has been used to explain guilt as self punishment. Intro-punitive

refers to self inflicted remorse and unhappiness which may follow a misdeed ". . . now this misery was upon me," declares the boy.

The superego develops out of the oedipus complex. A child realizes his complete dependence on other people, especially parents, for his well being. In order to retain their love and attachment he reasons that he must act as they do; their wishes become his wishes, their demands his demands — thus identifying with them. By hurting them, he hurts himself. He feels guilty. The boy is said to 'introject' his father. He identifies with the aggressor.

Regarding self punishment, L. Kohlberg emphasizes that internalization of cultural standards bringing self punitive and self critical reactions of remorse and anxiety after transgression.



### THREE VIEWS OF GUILT.

The psychoanalytic view is the more complex. It does shed light on why the child felt as he did.

Even before the transgression the boy was "dogged by a guilty conscience," and "not knowing why." He expresses "dread of my own conscience, dread of stirrings in my soul which I considered forbidden and criminal." And later the child sees himself as a criminal. All totally out of proportion to the actual transgression.

The ego, by acting out an id impulse, has incurred the wrath of the superego, or conscience, the source of guilt feelings: the inner representative of the parents. The child decides to flee "from Father, from punishment, from myself, from my conscience . . ." Fleeing from his home,

"I ran and ran . . . and behind me my guilt ran and with it, huge and fearsome, ran the shadow of my Father in hot pursuit."

### GUILT

Guilt is a compensatory process to restore equilibrium between ego and superego. Superego development occurs when the child is mature enough to have awareness of another person (cognitive) and their values. The conflict lies in the comparative immaturity of the ego to truly comprehend these values. In a way he misinterprets, by over exaggeration, the parental attitudes of disapproval, and is

". . . more rigid and condemnatory than his parents about certain of his faults . . . Freud said that the superego might be harsher and more demanding than the parent." (Baldwin 1967)

For the child's mind in anguish,

"My fantasies eddied back and forth . . . raised me up to a dauntless criminal, and dragged me down again to a child and a weaking."

The severity of the superego, and inward aggression, increases tension. Temporary relief is obtained by outward turning of superego aggression onto another person. He finds fault with someone else close to him, when it is himself he really blames. Against Weber, his friend, the child is angry with no justification. But,

"I had an enemy, one I could come to grips with . . . I felt myself poured out upon the unfortunate Weber."

In his thoughts the child imputes blame to his father for even having had the figs in the drawer.

### MORAL EMOTION

Unlike Freud's view of moral emotion as an internal unconscious structure, neo-Freudians such as D.

Ausubel and E. Erikson, see moral emotion, guilt and anxiety as types of reaction of a social self. It is concerned with maintaining self esteem in the eyes of significant others. This varies according to culture; what is 'good' and 'evil'.

To learning theorists, whose material is mainly based on empirical studies with animals, anxiety is learnt by conditioning from past experience. Guilt is a learned technique for reducing this anxiety. It is resolved in confession and reparation. To explain self punitive behaviour in learning theory terms, Unger (1964) presented this analysis:

The child transgresses, and later is punished in some way. So the transgression.

"becomes a signal evoking the anticipatory anxiety that unpleasant things are to follow."

(Wright 1971)

The two origins of the anxiety are the wrongdoing and the sanctions themselves. The anticipatory anxiety is reduced by the terminal anxiety stimuli (subsequent punishment). Thus the child actually seeks punishment in order to relieve the anxiety caused by the wrongdoing.

With the child in the story, his thoughts were that if only he could restore the figs to the drawer. "If only I could be rid of them." The child longed for restoration to the former happier family relationship. Terminal anxiety stimuli is implied in his words. If his father who would not be deceived knew,

"Why was he torturing me beforehand? He might as well lead me away right then and there and beat me to death for all I cared."

In experiments with animals trained to expect an electric shock a brief time after a certain signal, distress is evident until the shock, then relief is observed.

Further with the child, he can submit himself to this punishment, and supposedly obtain reduction of anxiety. This is by applying (again with the immature ego of Freudian

theory) parental sanctions to his own behaviour. Indeed the following day after transgression, but before discovery, the child declares,

"Yesterday I had atoned for my guilt, even though it was only by the pangs of conscience."

### EMPHASIS ON ANXIETY

With learning theory the emphasis is on anxiety, rather than guilt as in psychoanalytic theory.

Martin L. Hoffmann proposes what he terms the more common-sense view. He states that guilt is simply a conscious experience that follows violation of an internalized standard. Self criticism and remorse felt by the child is in knowing that he has done wrong. Direct guilt, or self criticism is reported as very rare in studies of younger children, but is found in a majority of 12-13 year old children. (Hoffmann 1963, Aronfreed 1961)

This conception of guilt does not account for the extent of the child's emotion of guilt as it is expressed in 'A Child's Heart'.

### GUILT AND PARENTAL DISCIPLINE.

M. L. Hoffmann suggests that parental techniques of discipline which relate to self critical guilt are not the infliction of psychological or physical pain, extrinsic to the act, such as physical force or love withdrawal. Rather the use of psychological induction of remorse by reasoning and pointing out the harm caused to others, has been found to be correlated with internal guilt.

In a study by Aronfreed (1961) parents were interviewed regarding techniques of discipline used by them (number of persons not stated). (Hoffmann, Hoffmann, 1964) Techniques of discipline were classified into induction and sensitization. Induction in that it was capable of arousing unpleasant feeling reactions independent of external threat; the child accepting responsibility for his own actions.

Sensitization techniques aimed at inhibiting the child's unacceptable behaviour by focusing on physical consequences, including shouting.

Induction techniques resulted more frequently in internalized motivation and self correction in the child. While sensitization methods effected externally motivated actions. However these categories represent opposite poles of discipline techniques, and the study does not refer to the variations between.

### HOFFMAN

Hoffmann distinguishes between an authority orientated conscience and a need orientated conscience. Feelings of guilt and unworthiness may also arise out of the child's deepening appreciation of acceptance by his parents. He is obliged and grateful to them. Although this does not appear to be very well supported in studies.

Studies on guilt in children agree on the one point,

"that techniques of discipline which rely on appeals to personal and social motives in the child are more effective in its inculcation than are more direct, physical methods of discipline which lead only to fear of the consequences of wrongdoing." (Stephenson 1966)

### STUDY

G. M. Stephenson (1966) in a study on 'Control by Guilt Feelings', supports the relationship between psychological discipline as perceived by the child, and guilt feelings. Pre-adolescent boys were found to be more sensitive to psychological discipline by the father than by the mother, whose discipline was more resented.

Further to psychoanalytic theory on suppression of aggression, the superego, and self punitive guilt, Stephenson found that the father is of greater significance.



“Paternal Suppression of Aggression being significantly related to Intropunitive Guilt, but not maternal.”

For boys the appeal to social and personal motives by the father is more positively meaningful and acceptable. The child, in Hesse's book, on being confronted with “Did you steal the figs?” saw

“how he (the father) suffered and was disappointed, how he appealed in vain to all my better instincts. As if I would not have been sorry! As if he could not see how the whole affair hurt me, how it twisted my heart. As if at this point I could have taken any pleasure in my act and in those wretched figs!”

For the mother positive accepting attitudes were of greater importance to the boy's capacity for feeling guilt. With his mother the child

“felt surrounded by loving solicitude.”

Hoffmann and Saltztein took a selection of children without fathers in their homes, and compared it to a sample group of similar intelligence and socio-economic background with fathers at home. Boys without a father's presence consistently showed lower moral development scores. (Mussen 1970)



### **GUILT AND THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION.**

Herman Hesse was the son of missionary parents, his father being a theologian. Frequently in this story the child refers to God in a similar way to that of his father. At one time striving to be “ardent and devout” to God, and struggling to “achieve obedience to my parents.”

Yet in the torment of guilt the child retaliates against God and his father. He imagines revenge against his father, “murder, a cruel killing,” and toward God,

“I wanted to mock and anger you. Because I hate you and I spit at your feet, God . . . you have made laws nobody can keep . . .”

The aggression appears to rise out of his inability to cope with his emotion. A covert hostility toward those with whom he has strong attachment.

“Again and again . . . I fell abruptly, inescapably into sin.”

Those securing the child's loyalty and affection induce guilt when he fails them. Emphasis on self punishment is greater in certain societies where individual responsibility is paramount.

“Sin, as a contravention of the divine law is considered to have great individual significance. This tends to increase the level of personal guilt and remorse in wrongdoing, and is an important factor determining conduct.” (Stephenson 1966)

It is difficult to test the specific extent of religion on moral development, since it is closely bound up with other environmental variables. There is little evidence directly comparing Christians and nonChristians on measures of guilt. P. O. Peretti (1969) concluded that Christians do have more intense feelings of guilt. The sense of sin is against God as well as others (Wright 1971). Kohlberg points out that we should not conclude that there is no relation between religious experience and moral character. However evidence does not encourage the view that, in general, influence of religion strengthens the conscience.

Moreover there are varying religious emphases regarding moral responsibility. And while religious observance is not highly correlated

to moral conduct, actual personal religious conviction may well differ. In certain judgemental situations Jewish and Roman Catholic children can be distinguished. In a test case of the accidental injuring of a peer, the Jewish child responded at a higher level of moral judgement. These were concerned with the victim's feelings, while the Catholic children were more conscious of the guilt of the offender. (Boehm 1966, cited in Ausubel, Sullivan 1970)



### **INTENSITY OF GUILT FEELINGS.**

Apart from the psychological discipline and religious influence previously referred to possibly intensifying the sense of guilt, other factors are considered.

Freud believed that aggression and drive energies formerly directed to oedipal objects, partly become superego directed in the phallic and latency periods. Where oedipal fantasies were particularly fierce, the child will have a greater sense of guilt.

Hesse was, in fact, hot tempered, obstinate and strong willed as a young child. An indication of the intensity of the child's guilt feelings has been stated. Another example is

“The devil was inside me, in my throat and innards, and he was choking me.”

Hoffmann and Saltztein (1960), in empirical studies on children's response to violation of conduct classified them as expressing an in-

ternalized standard, or just the fear of detection and punishment. Internalized subjects, both boys and girls, gave more guilt responses in a story completion test.



### CONCLUSION.

The theories and empirical studies selected are to provide an explanation in psychological development terms of the child's emotion of guilt, and not to justify it. No one theory presents a whole explanation. Possibly few eleven year old boys would experience the depths of

emotion described by Hermann Hesse; or it may well be his ability to express the inexpressible.

Guilt itself can be a variable emotion. This can be according to such factors as, the nature of the person offended by the transgression, degree of awareness of others or egocentricity, and the motive of the wrongdoing.

A short note was recorded by the child's mother Marie Hesse, in her diary on November 11th, 1889.

"Hermann's theft of figs discovered."

Not a significant incident to his parents. Just one of the many that occurred in the process of his growing up. But to Hermann Hesse it meant much more. At thirty years of age he vividly recalled the time,

"playing judge and healer while writing about 'A Child's Heart'." (Sorell 1974)

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