

*KISS Jenő*¹:

Dealing with Guilt in Pastoral Care

Abstract.

This study starts from the current experiential reality of the family, described by sociologist Peter V. Zima as follows: The family, as a victim of society as an alienating structure, becomes itself an alienating structure, which makes it impossible to establish intimate and supportive relationships between family members and the future of the family.

The family therefore fails to fulfil its original role of being a place of embeddedness and a resource for society. It is also hampered by transgressions while hindering the search for fairness towards each other. Pastoral care can help families to recognize the essence of guilt and then seek effective resources of help. The paper, therefore, highlights the fundamental relational nature of human existence and the existential nature of guilt through philosophical, theological, and biblical anthropology (1). It then highlights the importance of the notion of existential guilt in contextual perspectives, therapy, and pastoral care (2). Finally, following a theological interpretation of the concept of guilt, it identifies in four points the areas in which the use of the concept of existential guilt in pastoral care is helpful (3).

Keywords: relational existence, multiple belonging, heteronomous existence, co-existence as divine discomfort, existential guilt, indebtedness (*debitum*), actual indebtedness (*culpa*), order of being, monologic stance, contextual pastoral care

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Introduction

The family, which this study is looking at, is a special place where people can seek in the most original way what is fair for each other and where they can eliminate what stands in the way of what they are seeking for. The family is a special place of the locality where people “live”, therefore, “after ‘being’ this is the first structure that unfolds in life”.² She is as a place where the people are deeply embedded. Because of this, the family is the most important source of hopes and opportunities for the society – contrary to the perception of Peter V. Zima,³ who called it in his book *Entfremdung (Alienation)* the family as a victim of the alienating structures that define society, which itself becomes an alienating structure.

In my experience, what prevents us from seeking again for what is fair for each other is, in particular, the wrong attitude towards the offences committed, i.e. denying, trivializing, or dramatizing the offences, avoiding the responsibility or passing it on to the other(s). Such an attitude to sin is one of that produces the most hopeless situations in pastoral counselling / pastoral care. In my study, I will be looking for hope in such emerging situations, and I am going to seek for valid sources of that hope.

1. A Description of the Nature of Sin

In looking for sources of hope, we start by stating that it helps the pastor/therapist as much as the perpetrator and the victim if they understand correctly and properly the essence of sin and guilt. This is because the social and individual interpretation of offence is

² “‘Wonen’ is na ‘zijn’ de eerste structuur die zich ontvouwt in het leven.” VANDAMME, Rudy (2013): *De Ontwikkelcirkel. Handboek Ontwikkelingsgericht Coachen van Teams*. Ramsel, Een uitgave van het Ontwikkelingsinstituut. 36. [All non-English quotations are the translations of the author of the present paper.].

³ ZIMA, Peter (2014): *Entfremdung. Pathologien der postmodernen Gesellschaft*. Tübingen, A. Francke Verlag. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see: KISS Jenő (2020): *Hogy az elidegenedettek visszatárljanak önmagukhoz és egymáshoz*, In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*. 65.1. 177–198.

extremely diverse, and its perception is highly subjective, all of this hindering wayfinding in the network of connections. In what follows, wherein I will try to outline this, I am going to view guilt and transgression as an explicitly ethical category, treating it as a sin. Meanwhile, I will consider the theological category for it only implicitly.

1.1. Anthropology: The Fundamental Relational Nature of Being

Sin is the sin of *man*, and as a result, we can define it more precisely if we outline the essence of human existence. Therefore, I will start with anthropology and present its basic features based on Martin Buber's work *I and Thou*, and then, based on biblical and theological anthropology and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, I will present the issue by sharing some relevant and representative thoughts.

According to Buber, “[t]o man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. [...] The one primary word is the combination *I–Thou* [...]. The primary word *I–Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”⁴

The creation stories at the beginning of the Bible⁵ depict the created man as a pair of people: God created man as a man and a woman, and they two together are the image of God (Gen 1:27).

These two beings intimately belong together. This is expressed in the biblical Hebrew words *iš* and *iššā*, in which the masculine and feminine forms of the same word coincide with each other and form a word pair (Buber). English displays this affiliation with the nouns ‘man’ and ‘woman’, but other European languages tend to perceive distinctiveness, and therefore perhaps different nouns are used. Another expression of togetherness, of belonging to each other, is the side/rib motif – God formed the woman

⁴ BUBER, Martin (2018): *I and Thou*, translated by SMITH, Gregor, London – New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 3.9.

⁵ Cf. SEEBASS, Horst (1996): *Genesis I. Urgeschichte (1,1–11,26)*. Neukirchen–Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag.

from the side/rib of the man – and the so-called kinship formula “body from my body and bone from my bone” (Gen 1:22–23).

This togetherness, this belonging together is characterized by the interdependence expressed essentially in the biblical saying: “it is not good for man to be alone”. For “good” means that it fulfils its purpose, and “not good to be alone” means that males and females alone cannot fulfil on their own either their designation arising from their status as creations or their purpose, and neither can they live a full life.⁶

Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it this way in relation to the humanity of humankind: it is fundamentally wrong to attribute to man an abstract existence, that is to say, to attribute to man an abstract state of being severed from his fellow man. This could happen when we view man as opposed to his fellow man, or if one sees his/her fellow human person as neutral, indifferent to him/her. But something similar happens even when human coexistence is seen just as a casual complement to human existence. Therefore, “theological anthropology cannot enter the area at all where a man without a fellow man could be considered a real possibility”.⁷ And, similarly, “Pure humanity, the humanity of each human being consists in its existence determined by being together with the other human being.”⁸

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes relationality as a multiple belonging in which the other person of the other person is also part of the belonging, the context. At the same time, he emphasizes that coexistence is a burden, a divine discomfort. Therein lies the essence of man as a “Subject”. In the words of Meulink-Korf and Van Rhijn: “The word ‘subject’ must be understood in the strictest sense of the word:

⁶ “The most common meaning of *ṭòb* in the OT is utilitarian. From the perspective of the suitability of an object or person, the focus is on the functional aspect, as being in proper order or suited for the job. We are thus dealing with ‘goodness for something’, with a very concrete and tangible meaning in the background.” I. Höver-Johag, *טוֹב* in: BOTTERWECK, G. Johannes – RINGGREN, Helmer (eds.). (1986): *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Transl. David E. Green. Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, U.K., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. V/304.

⁷ „Die theologische Anthropologie kann sich gar nicht erst auf den Boden begeben, wo dieser Mensch ohne den Mitmenschen als eine ersthafte Möglichkeit in Betracht gezogen wird.“ BARTH, Karl (1948): *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. III/2. Zollikon (Zürich), Evangelischer Verlag A.G. 272.

⁸ „Humanität schlechthin, die Humanität jedes Menschen besteht in der Bestimmtheit seines Seins als Zusammensein mit dem anderen Menschen.“ Id. 290.

‘sub-iectus’ means subjected to a load or a burden [...]. It is about the burden of taking responsibility for the other person’s life.”⁹ Human existence is being for the Other (for Another). Man as a subject is not autonomous but heteronomous.

This other person is the source of my ethical attitude, sense of responsibility, and of my taking up the burden of responsibility. For the humanity of the other man is evocative and reminiscent of my humanity, the humanism of the other man is my humanism. In getting into contact with a being outside of itself, the “I” encounters something more than the “I” that requires and begs me to be fair. This pleading, which is also a call to action, pointing out my duty, creates and consolidates my freedom.

Based on the above, we should consider man as one who can only exist in a multi-directional belonging according to his destination and purpose. This belonging together / togetherness means mutual interdependence, and interdependence in its turn provides the opportunity for the individual to unfold, become a responsible subject by addressing the other, and so a relationship of mutual care is established, a real encounter takes place.

This image of man is not harmonized with the social philosophy of our time and with the individuals’ philosophy of life. Modernism, which extends into postmodernism, promotes the individual and individualism. We can contrast this view with the fact that the chance to awaken a sense of relational responsibility lies in another person and that we can gain individual significance only by taking on the burden of the other one’s existence and the merits thus gained. In the background of the atomization proclaimed by the postmodern, and the consequent increasing loneliness, we can claim that existence is the fabric, a living network of connections (i.e. context) that one holds, turns on, and embeds. We state this not with polemics in mind but with that kind of humble conviction that relational existence is more original than the isolated form of existence. This core belief is the foundation from which family therapy and counselling/ pastoral care/ of the families draws hope.

⁹ „‘Subject’ moet dan begrepen worden in de meest letterlijke zin van het woord: sub-iectus betekent ‘aan een lastgeving onderworpen’[...]. [...] Het gaat om een lastgeving van verantwoordelijkheid voor het leven van iemand anders”. MEULINK-KORF, Hanneke – VAN RHIJN, Aat (2002): *De onvermoede derde. Inleiding in het contextueel pastoraat*. Zoetermeer, Uitgeverij Meinema. 139.

2. Guilt: Endangering Relational Existence

If man's existence depends on ethical belonging, then guilt and any sin are directed against belonging, and thus basically against actual existence. Guilt threatens existence. Below I will introduce some basic ideas on existential guilt by Martin Buber, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Barbara Krasner, Aat van Rhijn and Hanneke Meulink-Korf, and Barbara Krasner and Austin J. Joyce.

2.1. *Existential Guilt in the Writings of Martin Buber*

Martin Buber deals mainly with the issue of existential guilt in his studies *Schuld und Schuldgefühle*¹⁰ and *Dem Gemeinschaftlichen folgen*.¹¹ There is close connection between these two treatises.¹² The first deals with the positive, i.e. active, aspect of existential guilt and the second with its negative, i.e. passive, aspect.

2.1.1. *Existential Guilt as a Concrete and Actual Event*

Buber in his treatise *Schuld und Schuldgefühle* speaks of the concrete reality of the patient and understands, on the one hand, “the events of the life of the suffering person burdened with transgression”¹³ and, on the other hand, “[...] the relationship of the patient with the person with whom he is in a strong, life-determining relationship [...]”¹⁴ The term “offence-laden events” indicates the tangible existence of offences. This is the primary meaning of the existential signifier.

¹⁰ BUBER, Martin (1958): *Schuld und Schuldgefühle*. Heidelberg, Lambert Schneider Verlag.

¹¹ BUBER, Martin (1962): *Dem Gemeinschaftlichen folgen*. In: *Werke I, Schriften zur Philosophie*. 454–474.

¹² These two studies also exist in English (in the volume: BUBER, Martin (1966): *The Knowledge of Man – A Philosophy of the Interhuman*. New York, Harper & Row. Transl. by Smith, Ronald Gregor.), but the author of the present study could not gain access to it.

¹³ „[...] die aktuellen schuldhaften Begebenheiten im Leben des »Patienten«, des leidenden Menschen [...]“ BUBER 1958, 7.

¹⁴ „Das Verhältnis des Patienten zu einem Menschen, mit dem er in einem sein eigenes Leben stark bestimmenden Kontakt steht [...]“ BUBER 1958, 9.

On the other hand, it is clear from the above quote that the existential signifier refers to both personal reality *and* the whole existence of man. Buber speaks in the same breath about how man becomes who he is and about making a real connection with the human world. Man's becoming himself/herself and his/her active participation in that form a single unit in the relationship between him/her and the human world. "[S]he can be merely accepted, neglected, violated. Violation of the relationship means that the human order of being in that place has been violated."¹⁵

The third feature of existential guilt is the ontic aspect. In the penultimate paragraph of his study, Buber refers to Kafka's novel *The Trial* and talks about the ontic nature of guilt, the depths of existential guilt, the guilt that permeates and interweaves existence.

2.1.2. Existential Guilt as an Indifferent Withdrawal Resignation from the World

Although the essay *Dem Gemeinschaftlichen folgen* is more philosophical in nature, it contains a serious ethical message. According to Buber, "Heraclitus makes vigilant co-existence our duty and responsibility. He rejects [...] the dreamlike denial of we [...]"¹⁶

Based on the teachings of the Tao and the most ancient Upanishads, as well as the writings of Aldous Huxley, he speaks of man retreating and his withdrawal into "situationlessness", which he interprets as "[...] the escape of a person from the existential requirement imposed on him, which has to be realized instead in the "us". It is an escape from the human talk as authentic speech aspect of language, in whose realm an answer is demanded, and an answer means responsibility."¹⁷

So, man is fundamentally indebted to the communal, and withdrawing from the "us" is nothing more than an escape from responsibility, or an escape from response, meaning "response-ability", running away from the existential requirement demanded from a person.

¹⁵ „[Das] Verhältnis [...] kann lediglich hingenommen; kann vernachlässigt werden; es kann verletzt werden. Die Verletzung eines Verhältnisses bedeutet, daß an dieser Stelle die menschliche Seinsordnung verletzt worden ist.“ BUBER 1958, 31.

¹⁶ „Heraklit stellt uns in die reine Pflicht und Verantwortung des wachen Miteinanderseins. Er verwirft [...] die traumhafte Absage an das Wir [...].“ BUBER 1962, 456.

¹⁷ „[...] eine Flucht vor dem Existentialanspruch an die Person, die sich im Wir bewähren soll. Es ist eine Flucht vor der authentischen Gesprochenheit der Sprache, in deren Reiche Antwort geheischt wird, und Antwort ist Verantwortung.“ BUBER 1962, 473.

Dem Gemeinschaftlichen folgen can be interpreted as an expression of man's indebtedness (*debitum*) and the essay *Schuld und Schuldgefühle* as an expression of man's concrete and actual indebtedness (*culpa*). Man's indebted state precedes its process of actually becoming indebted. This approach is expressed in the contextual approach in that it favours asymmetric relationships with respect to existential guilt.

2.2. Existential Guilt in Contextual Approach and Therapy

2.2.1. Existential Guilt in the View of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Barbara R. Krasner

2.2.1.1. Existential Guilt as Actual Indebtedness (*culpa*)

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner refer to Buber in their book *Between Give and Take* on existential guilt as follows: “existential guilt is to be differentiated from superego guilt. Existential guilt is founded on a person's actual harm to the justice of the human order (Buber, 948), and thus requires interpersonal repair. It is also the source of *due* remorse on the part of the perpetrator.”¹⁸

The above phrasing refers to the nature of the sin as a wrong action/deed and interprets existential guilt as actual sin, the most appropriate indication of which is the concept of *culpa* derived from Roman law. The existing sin is to be found primarily in the first dimension of the reality of being, and it should be sought in the dimension of facts.¹⁹ To put it in a different way, this can be found mainly in asymmetric relationships in the field of retaliatory injustice caused by humans. The nature of the act of offence committed, its tangibility and publicity allow us to catch it in action – as opposed to inner guilt, including real guilt, which is difficult to access. When transgressions are made public, the way opens up to individual freedom and dialogue.

¹⁸ BOSZORMENYI-NAGY, Ivan – KRASNER, Barbara R. (1986): *Between Give and Take. A Clinical Guide to Contextual Therapy*. New York, Brunner/Mazel Publisher. 60.

¹⁹ Cf. id. 43–66.

2.2.1.2. Existential Guilt as a Debit (or *debitum* in Latin)

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner talk about the “natural, existential indebtedness”²⁰ of offspring to parents in relation to intergenerational consequences and expectations. Debt is placed in intergenerational relationships and is perceived as a *debitum*. The indebtedness of the offspring comes from the benefits received and is manifested in adequate repayment to the parents as well as responsible care for the next generation. Debt repayment is done forward rather than backward.

2.2.2. *Existential Guilt in the Interpretation of Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf*

Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf talk about existential guilt mainly in their book *De Context en de Ander* and believe that in relation to existential guilt one must first think of “[...] what is at stake between parents and children, and thereby placing asymmetry in the real (‘genuine’) dialogue as well”.²¹ There is clear consistency with the interpretation of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner, who express the primacy of asymmetric relationships with the notion of “natural existential debt” and by pointing out the risks that this debt poses to offspring.

Another important insight of the authors is that in Boszormenyi-Nagy’s thinking, the emphasis is not on the factuality of debt (which is the opposite of guilt) but on the factuality of the consequences for the other person, which result from the violation of the order of being. This is an important addition to the concept of Buber on existential guilt, which primarily refers to the specific/concrete act.

2.2.3. *Existential Guilt in the Interpretation of Krasner and Joyce*

Krasner and Joyce in their book *Truth, Trust and Relationship* use the term “inter-human existential guilt” as sin and guilt are placed in the context of relational justice when they talk about it. The authors believe that sin and guilt are by-products of the central dilemma of when to give and when to accept; when we need to do something for ourselves

²⁰ Cf. id. 118.

²¹ “[...] wat op het spel staat tussen ouders en kinderen. En daarmee wordt ook in de ware (‘genuine’) dialoog [...] de asymmetrie vooropgezet.” VAN RHIJN, Aat – MEULINK-KORF, Hanneke (2001): *De Context en de Ander. Nagy herlezen in het spoor van Levinas met het oog op pastoraat*. Zoetermeer, Uitgeverij Boekencentrum. 325.

and when we need to act for others. The author pair makes a distinction between the “resource” and “pathological” sides of transgression/sin. The former “performs the necessary function of leading a person to want to set relations straight”, “[while the other ...] isolates, insulates, and forces people into unintended disengagement from lived life”.²²

According to the authors, “[t]rue guilt has to do with a failure to respond to the legitimate claims and address of the world. [...]. Real guilt has to do with an insular, monologic stance in which we either use ourselves as the sole reference point for events that occur between us and the people with whom we have to do; or totally abandon ourselves as a valid point of reference, and regard other people’s expectations and feelings as more legitimate than our own.”²³

These wordings are strongly reminiscent of how Buber wrote about individualism in *Dem Gemeinschaftlichen folgen*. They can be seen as relational applications of Buber’s philosophical statements: what happens in the larger cosmic dimensions is found to a lesser extent in asymmetrical and symmetrical relations.

Krasner and Joyce’s views on guilt are also relevant to existential guilt. According to them, people “use guilt feelings to substitute for an ethical obligation to respond. [...] A life devoted to compiling guilt feelings invariably obscures the way toward a stance of responsible response”. “Guilt feelings confine persons to the boundaries of their own psyche, and erode their freedom to take fresh soundings of trust. Even more, one person’s guilt feelings make little room for another person’s differentiated life.”²⁴

What’s more, “[p]aradoxically, people often use guilt feelings to defend against a proper acceptance of guilt”.²⁵

2.3. Theological Considerations Related to the concept of Sin

In the Bible, several notions denote sin or transgression. Here the biblical Hebrew notion of *ḥāṭā’* is relevant, the basic meaning of which is to mislead the goal.²⁶ In the

²² KRASNER, Barbara R. – JOYCE, Austin J. (1995): *Truth, Trust and Relationship. Healing Interventions in Contextual Therapy*. New York, Brunner/Mazel Publishers. 33.

²³ KRASNER – JOYCE 1995, 34.

²⁴ Id. 36.

²⁵ Id. xii.

²⁶ Cf. Klaus Koch: חָטָא in: *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* IV/304.

New Testament, the original (profane) meaning of the Greek verb *para-baïnō* is ‘to deviate’, ‘to diverge’ from the original and actual direction.²⁷ These two verbs do not refer to a specific transgression but to an action different from the order of being and thus detrimental to relationships. This is supported by the fact that, in addition to the verb *hātā*’, we often find the expression ‘what he should not [= should not have] done’ (cf. Leviticus 4:2.13.22.27; 5:17). This term presupposes an existing and valid order of law and life, and the word *hātā*’ denotes such a transgression that goes against the world and the order of human existence and violates the sacredness indicated by the spheres and jurisdiction (Leviticus 4–5).

The state created by guilt is denoted by the noun *hātā*’t, which indicates both the act and its consequences, a near-death state. Because it represents the injury and disturbance of the world order and the way of life, disturbing it causes chaos, and the disorderly turmoil endangers life.

As ethical category, the biblical concept of guilty act does not look primarily at the specific act of sin but at its consequences for the other person, which severely limit or even endanger this other person’s existence. Thus, this concept is very close to the concept of existential guilt known from the contextual point of view or from the concept of Buber on human guilt: it emphasizes the actual consequences of guilt and takes into account the whole of human existence and the human world.

3. The Benefits of the Notion of Existential Guilt in Pastoral Care and Family Therapy

As I mentioned, in pastoral care we often encounter the denial of guilt, which is backed up by a complex intrapsychic and relational dynamics (e.g. shame, loyalty). The existential nature of sins and the concept of existential guilt can be an important source of help for both the context and the counsellor/therapist.

²⁷ Cf. GÜNTHER, Walther (1983): παράβασις. In: COENEN, Lothar (ed.): *Theologisches Begrifflexikon zum Neuen Testament*. Wuppertal, Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus. 1199–1201.

1. The factual nature of the offences encourages us to responsibly dwell on the first dimension and to carefully examine what wrongdoing (divisive or retaliatory) has taken place. The transgressions expressed and interpreted herein may set someone free to admit that.

2. The specific nature of existential guilt to draw attention to the consequences of an act or to omission as an injustice or debt can trigger in the perpetrator the sense of admitting and can encourage contrition, urging the person to face it and honestly admit it. Thus, existential guilt can be at the same time the source of repentance that the perpetrator owes, as Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner claim. Or, as Krasner and Joyce put it: the awareness and sin-consciousness transforms into a resource and encourages people to settle relationships. At the same time, the factuality of the consequences may encourage the offender to start looking for possibility of remedy and for specific reparations and amends.

3. Existential guilt, such as the violation of the order of existence, may make it clear that the family context is part of a larger community and that damaged trust in the family also means damage to the reliability of the cosmos, of humanity. Responsibility for the human world, for the “we”, also reinforces the social responsibility and role of the family: as a place of trust, it can contribute to the healing of the human world. How much this is needed is clear from Zima’s description cited above. By paying close attention to asymmetric relationships and caring for future generations, contextual therapy can effectively help prevent the family from becoming an alienating structure.

4. Finally: relational anthropology behind existential guilt suggests that the ultimate goal of pastoral care and family therapy is reconciliation, that is, initiating and restoring dialogue within the context (i.e. the fabric of relationships), and forgiveness and exoneration are the goals before the ultimate one.

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