

The Reason for the Guilt

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Abstract: I may feel guilty for situations and events in which I seemed to play no causal role, which (it would seem) would have been exactly the same had I never existed. What is the reason for this guilt? The paper argues that it is to be found in a sense of universal connectedness: I take myself to always make a difference, no matter how distant I appear to be from anything that happens.

Keywords: guilt, causality, connectedness

I am driving down a deserted highway, late at night. Suddenly, I am at the site of an accident – a hit and run, to be precise. Someone, a pedestrian, is bleeding by the side of the road, and no one else is there. I could help, but a look at my watch and brief consideration of the time left before what I expect to be a pleasant meeting persuade me otherwise. I speed up; a few seconds later, I have disappeared in the darkness. The next morning, I read that the victim died after an agony of a few hours. And I feel guilty: I feel that I have killed the man, at least as much as whoever hit him in the first place.

Is my feeling of guilt reasonable? There are two elements to being guilty of X: having caused X and X being something evil. Without a doubt, there is something evil about an innocent pedestrian dying in agony by the side of the road; but the question is, Was I a causal factor in that death? A commonplace understanding of causality would seem to force a negative answer. For an element of this understanding would seem to be the following:

(*) A is a causal factor for X only if, were A never to have existed, X would not have taken place.

According to (*), the hit-and-run driver is clearly a causal factor in the death. If he had never existed, he would not have been driving and could not have hit the unfortunate pedestrian, which resulted in his death. But me? If I had never existed, there would have been no one driving my car, so the highway would have been *totally* deserted and the guy would have died in agony anyway. Stopping and helping would certainly have been a good thing to do (perhaps an act of supererogation); but *not* stopping did not cause anything. And, if I did not cause anything, how can I be guilty?

Still, I feel guilty, and probably most others would feel the same. So the question arises of how this guilt can be justified. For it to be reasonable, in the presence of (*), it must be the case that my presence in the world (not necessarily at that spot, at that time) did make a relevant difference, and, again, how could that be?

When I exonerated myself above, I did do so based on an implicit premise. I assumed that the event of my presence at that spot, at that time – even more, the very fact of my existence – could be erased from the history of the world while leaving everything else exactly the same. The accident, specifically, would have happened in the same way whether or not I ever came into the world. Once you grant this premise, the rest follows easily. So, clearly, my sense of guilt indicates that I (and most everyone else) reject the premise, however unconsciously. How we flesh out the rejection, or even that we do it at all, is an open question. For example, I could tell a story in which my use of precious world resources deprived that particular individual of the means of proper transportation, so he found it necessary to walk at night by the side of a dangerous highway and was hit by someone who hardly even saw him; and, just as the hit-and-run driver would have had to stop to repair the bad consequences of his action, I would have had to do the same. Or I might tell some other story, or no story at all; but if I reject the premise it must be because, in addition perhaps to (*), I am also committed to

(**) My presence and action in the world has consequences for all other humans (or all other beings?); so that, were I never to have existed, their fate would have been different.

I am not interested here in proving that I am *right* to feel guilty. What I am interested in is getting to the ideology implied by the guilt, and that, now, I can formulate as follows: The world in which I am exonerated from guilt is one in which every human (or every being?) is an island, that can be neatly detached from every other human (or being?). The world in which my sense of guilt is reasonable is one in which every (human) existence and every (human) move are relevant to all others. The sense of guilt, in other words, finds its reason in a sense of universal connectedness.