

## **Guilt and Helping**

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### **Introduction**

A wealth of research in social psychology over the past twenty years has examined the role that guilt plays in our mental lives. In this paper, I examine just one aspect of this vast literature, namely the relationship between guilt and prosocial behavior.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have typically found a robust positive correlation between feelings of guilt and helping, and have advanced psychological models to explain why guilt seems to have this effect. Here I present some of their results as well as draw out certain important implications that seem to follow for moral psychology and ethical theory.

This paper is part of a much larger project aimed at studying various psychological variables responsible for influencing helping behavior. In a number of recent papers, I have examined the effect of good and bad moods, empathy, audience inhibition, and embarrassment on prosocial behavior (Miller 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d), and so towards the end of this paper I briefly attempt to integrate work on guilt into a larger picture of the psychology of helping behavior.

Hence the paper will be structured as follows. Section one is devoted to characterizing the emotion of guilt and distinguishing it from shame. Section two then provides an overview of empirical work on guilt and prosocial behavior, followed by section three which attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> Here I follow Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998 in understanding prosocial behavior as “actions that are voluntary and that specifically benefit another person” (1998: 219). I typically treat ‘prosocial behavior’ and ‘helping behavior’ interchangeably.

draw out some philosophical consequences from that work. Finally, the fourth section of the paper will incorporate the discussion of guilt into a larger framework for thinking about helping.

## 1. Characterizing Guilt

In treatments of guilt in the psychology literature, it is customary to find it listed under the heading of a self-conscious emotion.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to more basic emotions such as anger, fear, and disgust, self-conscious emotions involve the self in their evaluations. More precisely, self-conscious emotions typically involve an implicit awareness of normative standards, of the self's individual responsibility for living up to those standards, and of the self's standing in relation to those standards. Success or failure in living up to these norms can elicit guilt, shame, pride, and/or embarrassment, among other self-conscious emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the concept of guilt, we can start with the commonsense observation that typically one feels guilt when (i) one performs an action (or omission) that violates one or more of the agent's normative standards for behavior, (ii) those standards have some significant degree of importance to the agent, and (iii) the action is such that the agent takes him or herself to bear some personal responsibility for performing it in the first place.<sup>4</sup> For instance I periodically feel

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is not concerned with legal guilt, where we say that a criminal is guilty of having broken the law. Rather, our focus is on the negative subjective experiences of guilt for actions we have performed that go against our normative standards. For different uses of the term 'guilt,' see Baumeister et al. 1994: 245.

<sup>3</sup> For more, see Caprara et al. 2001, Tangney et al. 2007a, 2007b, Tracy and Robins 2007, Basil et al. 2008, Menesini and Camodeca 2008, and Hosser et al. 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For similar claims see, e.g., Kugler and Jones 1992: 318, Baumeister et al. 1994: 245, Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995, Eisenberg 2000: 667, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 199-202, and Basil et al. 2006. These are not offered as anything like strict necessary conditions but rather as generalities. For instance, the phenomenon of collective guilt for the moral failures of others does not fall neatly under heading (iii) (see Baumeister 1994: 251-2, Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998: 216, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 358-9, 2007b: 28. Sinnott-Armstrong (2005: 202) proposes a nice revision to accommodate these cases.). Similarly, there is some evidence that guilt can arise just as strongly in response to accidental transgressions, which again is not in line with (iii) (Baumeister et al. 1994: 249). See Baumeister et al. 1994 for a thorough discussion of the complexities involved here.

Nor are these conditions proposed as jointly sufficient. Some psychologists, for instance, stress the role of punishment in guilt (Kugler and Jones 1992: 325, Caprara 2001, and Zemack-Rugar et al. 2007: 929; for criticism

guilt over not donating more money to famine relief because such an omission violates my moral norms about which I care a great deal, and is an omission for which I am thoroughly responsible. When we are talking about guilt in this way, we are referring to a state of guilt, or an occurrent feeling of guilt which arises consequentially from the performance of a particular action, the formation of a certain intention, or the omission of a specific behavior. State guilt is to be distinguished from the proneness to guilt or trait guilt, a disposition to experience a state of guilt in a wide variety of guilt-eliciting circumstances specific to that agent's normative standards.<sup>5</sup>

Given these familiar observations, how do psychologists go further and try to distinguish guilt from the other self-conscious emotions, and specifically from shame? Unfortunately there is no consensus in the literature, but three approaches can be quickly dismissed:

(a) One approach is to distinguish guilt on the basis of the types of situations which elicit it.

Unfortunately, studies have found that the very same situations involving lying, failing to help, stealing, and so forth can elicit guilt in some subjects and shame in others (and both guilt and shame in still others).<sup>6</sup>

(b) Another approach is to claim that guilt is a more "private" emotion involving painful feelings of conscience, whereas shame is a more "public" emotion involving public disapproval. Again, though, the empirical data points in the other direction. Subjects have been found to experience both guilt and shame in public contexts, and shame can be experienced in just as solitary and private a way as guilt.<sup>7</sup>

(c) A third approach claims that guilt is a strictly moral emotion, whereas shame arises in both moral and nonmoral contexts. However, just our ordinary experience alone suggests

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see Baumeister et al. 1994: 245). Others claim that regret over wrongdoing plays a central role (Kugler and Jones 1992: 325 and Eisenberg 2000: 667).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Kugler and Jones 1992, Jones et al. 1995: 308, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 347, 2007b: 22.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion, see Tangney 1998:4, Eisenberg 2000: 668, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 348, 2007b: 25.

<sup>7</sup> See Tangney 1998: 4, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 201, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 348, 2007b: 25.

that people can feel guilty as a result of committing certain non-moral transgressions as well, such as violating certain rules of etiquette or breaking laws which are not clearly part of morality.<sup>8</sup>

Setting aside these approaches, then, we can more positively distinguish guilt from shame by following what is the leading approach in the literature today, namely the self-action view initially developed by Helen Block Lewis in her 1971 book *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*.<sup>9</sup> The heart of this approach is that guilt involves a focus on a specific action or series of actions, whereas the object of shame is the self in general. Hence I feel guilty for having *done* something, such as lying to a friend, whereas I might be ashamed of *myself* for having lied to my friend. As Jennifer Manion writes, “one’s feeling of guilt concerns a rule or rule-like constraint that one has broken, the harm that has ensued and the people affected by the harmful act . . . the feeling of shame indicates a profound disappointment in the kind of person one thought one was” (2002: 76).

This basic conceptual point has a number of implications for the role that shame and guilt play in our psychological lives:

- (i) Shame often produces feelings of worthlessness as one “shrinks” from the world and tries to avoid public condemnation. A person’s self feels exposed, even if there is no actual public observing the perceived deficiency. Guilt typically does not produce these particular feelings and reactions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tangney 1995: 116. For a contrary view, see Eisenberg 2000: 668 and Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 201.

<sup>9</sup> For employment of this approach, see among many others Tangney et al. 1992, Baumeister et al. 1994: 245, Barrett 1995: 28, Tangney 1995, Quiles and Bybee 1997, Bybee and Quiles 1998: 274, Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998: 216, Tangney 1998: 5, Eisenberg 2000, Caprara 2001, Manion 2002, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 200, Tangney et al. 2007a: 349, 2007b: 25-6, Amodio et al. 2007: 528, Menesini and Camodeca 2008, and Hosser et al. 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Tangney et al. 1992: 469, Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995: 278, 283, 295, Barrett 1995: 41, Tangney 1998: 5, Manion 2002: 76, 80, Tangney et al. 2007a: 349, 2007b: 26, Amodio et al. 2007: 529, Menesini and Camodeca 2008: 184, and Hosser et al. 2008: 139.

- (ii) Because of the connection to the self, shame can inspire feelings of helplessness and an inability to do anything about one's condition, whereas a similar connection has not been found with guilt.<sup>11</sup>
- (iii) Closely related to the previous two consequences, shame tends to lead to avoidance of the shame-eliciting circumstances and more generally to social withdrawal, whereas guilt tends to lead to a focus on the action and correlates positively with attempts at reparation.<sup>12</sup>
- (iv) Both externalization of blame and feelings of anger have been positively correlated with trait shame and occurrent shame, with the externalized blame mediating the anger. Neither has been positively correlated with guilt.<sup>13</sup>
- (v) Similarly by focusing on the self shame impedes empathetic feelings, whereas guilt typically has the opposite effect.<sup>14</sup>
- (vi) Shame is typically considered to be the more painful of the two emotions, precisely because it is focused on the self rather than on just an instance of behavior.<sup>15</sup>
- (vii) Proneness to shame has been correlated with a number of psychological deficits, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Indeed many psychologists consider shame to be maladaptive.<sup>16</sup> The case of guilt is more complex. On the one hand, ordinary occurrences of guilty feelings which stem from a guilt

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<sup>11</sup> Tangney 1998: 7, Bybee and Quiles 1998: 274, Caprara 2001: 221, Tangney et al. 2007a: 349, 353, Amodio et al. 2007: 528, and Hosser et al. 2008: 139.

<sup>12</sup> Barrett 1995: 41, Tangney 1995: 119-120, 1998: 7-8, Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998: 216, Eisenberg 2000: 668, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 201, Tangney et al. 2007a: 350, 2007b: 26, Menesini and Camodeca 2008: 184, and Hosser et al. 2008: 139.

<sup>13</sup> Tangney 1995: 120-129, 1998: 7, Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995: 296, Eisenberg 2000: 669, Tangney et al. 2007a: 351-2, 2007b: 27, and Hosser et al. 2008: 139

<sup>14</sup> Baumeister et al. 1994: 254-5, Tangney 1995: 129-133, Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995: 296, Eisenberg 2000: 668, Manion 2002: 81, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 350, 2007b: 26-7.

<sup>15</sup> Tangney et al. 1992: 469, Tangney 1995: 117, 1998: 5, Eisenberg 2000: 667-8, Manion 2002: 77-78, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 201, and Tangney et al. 2007a: 349, 2007b: 26.

<sup>16</sup> See Tangney et al. 1992, 1995, 2007a, 2007b: 27. For cautionary notes about this claim, see Manion 2002 and Menesini and Camodeca 2008.

predisposition have been found to correlate with lower hostility, reduced depression, and other signs of mental health. On the other hand, a recurring condition of chronic guilt which is detached from the immediate actions performed by the agent has been found to correlate positively with symptoms of depression and psychopathology. This has led some psychologists to distinguish between two distinct kinds of guilt, chronic and predispositional, and in the remainder of this paper our concern will only be with the latter.<sup>17</sup>

(viii) As we will see in detail in the next section, guilt is positively correlated with subsequent prosocial behavior. In addition, it is worth noting that proneness to guilt is also related to decreases in the likelihood of problematic behaviors such as theft, drug abuse, unsafe sex, using risky needles, and inmates' post-release recidivism. Fewer such correlations have been found in the case of shame.<sup>18</sup>

Hence we have seen that guilt and shame are both self-conscious or regulative emotions, and they are both negatively valenced. They are concerned with moral norms, although not exclusively with such norms. And they can arise privately or publically in response to many of the same eliciting situations. But despite these similarities, we also see that these two emotions are significantly different in a variety of respects. For the remainder of the paper, we shall set shame to one side, and focus only on guilt.

## **2. Guilt and Helping**

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<sup>17</sup> For helpful discussion of these two kinds of guilt, see Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998: 224, Eisenberg 2000: 669-70, and especially Quiles and Bybee 1997, Bybee and Quiles 1998. And for guilt and mental health in general, see Tangney et al. 1992 and Tangney et al. 2007a: 351-354.

<sup>18</sup> Bybee and Quiles 1998: 270, Tangney et al. 2007a: 354-5, Hosser et al. 2008, and especially Stuewig and Tangney 2007. For cautionary notes about this claim, see Manion 2002 and Menesini and Camodeca 2008.

In this section I want to do two things: (i) provide a broad overview of empirical studies on the relationship between guilt and prosocial behavior, and (ii) carefully distinguish between competing motivational explanations for this relationship. By getting our hands dirty with the empirical work in this section, we can set the stage to draw some larger philosophical implications in the next one.

Over forty years of work on guilt and helping has consistently found a strong positive correlation between the two. Subjects who are induced to feel guilty in both laboratory and natural settings reliably help at statistically higher rates than control subjects. Furthermore, this applies both to studies examining trait guilt and state guilt. As a representative study, Regan et al. (1972) had a male confederate approach a woman in a shopping mall and ask her to take his picture using an expensive looking camera. He told the subject that the camera was rather sensitive, and every subject who then tried to take a picture found that the shutter would not work. Control subjects were subsequently told that the camera “acts up a lot” and that the subject did not do anything wrong. The second group of subjects was told that they must have done something wrong and jammed the camera, and that it would have to be fixed. The confederate then left the subject, and a few stores away a second confederate walked across the path of the subject carrying a “bag of groceries from which a corner at the bottom had been torn, such that if she walked, candy fell out of the bottom of the bag” (43). The measure of helping behavior was whether the subject let the second confederate know about the candy falling out of the bag. The results were as follows (44):

	Guilty Subjects	Control Subjects
Helped	11	3
Did not Help	9	17

Thus 55% of guilty subjects helped compared to only 15% of controls (44).

In a similar experimental design, Konečni (1972) studied the behavior of subjects on the streets of Toronto. In the guilt condition, the experimental confederate walked towards the subject carrying three expensive-looking books. After absent-mindedly running into the subject and dropping the books, the confederate exclaimed, “They are not mine, and you have to do this” and walked away. Fifty to seventy five yards later, the subject came across another person walking out of a doorway who had forty computer-punched cards drop out of a folder. This confederate, while bending down to pick up the cards, said to the subject, “Please don’t step on them.” Control subjects did not have the guilt manipulation but just came across the confederate and the dropped cards. The helping variables were the number of subjects who collected cards and how many they collected, which came out as follows (32):

	% of subjects who collected cards	Mean number of cards collected
Control	16	1.29
Guilty	42	4.77

Once again we see a significant difference in helping behavior correlated with prior feelings of guilt, provided that the guilt manipulation is effective in this case.

Nor are these correlations limited to more mundane prosocial behavior. In a longitudinal study of six German prisons and 1,243 inmates, Hosser et al. (2008) examined the relationship between guilt and shame on the one hand, and criminal convictions after release from prison on the other. They found that twenty-four months after being released, 54.1% of inmates who felt guilt but no shame during imprisonment had no new convictions, compared to 39.7% of those who felt shame but no guilt (146).

And robust correlations have been found not only between actual experiences of guilt and prosocial behavior, but also between *anticipated* guilt and such behavior. Lindsey (2005), for instance, found a strong correlation between anticipated guilt over not helping those in need of a life-saving bone marrow donation, and both the intention to and actual compliance with requests to be tested as a possible donor. 146 undergraduate students were brought into the lab twice with 7-10 days in-between their visits. Subjects who were given a high anticipated guilt message had correlations of .63 between the message and anticipated guilt, .84 between anticipated guilt and behavioral intent, and .42 between behavioral intent and actual behavior (469).<sup>19</sup>

At this point, it is important to note a complication. For while guilt seems to engender prosocial behavior, it has also been associated with avoidance behavior in certain instances, especially with respect to inhibiting the very action which prompted the guilty feelings in the first place.<sup>20</sup> But as Amodio et al. (2007) argue, there need be no tension here between these two motivational facets of guilt. On their view, the initial experience of guilt “functions to halt the interpersonal damage being caused by the transgressive behavior” and to “survey the damage, and learn from mistakes” (525). Helping behavior, on the other hand, could be a subsequent effect of guilty feelings aimed at promoting one or more of the motivational goals described below. Amodio and his colleagues used electroencephalograph recordings of cortical activity to study racial prejudice and guilt reactions, and found empirical support for this proposal.

The above only scratches the surface of the experimental work on guilt and prosocial behavior – literally dozens of other studies show similar trends.<sup>21</sup> So let us accept a robust

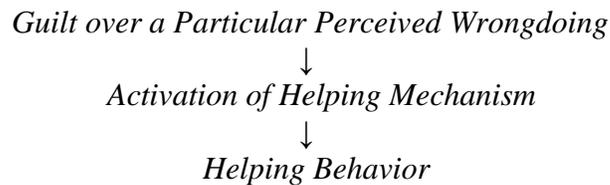
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<sup>19</sup> See also Basil et al. 2006 on anticipatory guilt and charitable donations.

<sup>20</sup> See Freedman et al. 1967, Baumeister et al. 1994: 258, and Amodio et al. 2007.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Freedman et al. 1967, Carlsmith and Gross 1969, Donnerstein et al. 1975, Harris et al. 1975, Harris and Samerotte 1976, Cunningham et al. 1980, Baumeister et al. 1994: 257, Quiles and Bybee 1997, Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998, Zhong and Liljenquist 2006, and Basil et al. 2008. For a very helpful list of early studies, see Salovey and Rosenhan 1989. Even subjects high in guilt proneness who were primed with subliminal guilt

positive correlation for now, and indeed go further and claim that it is *because* subjects are feeling guilty that they are exhibiting such behavior at higher rates than controls. Thus to use the first of several rough diagrams that will be employed in this paper, we have the following:



where the arrow is intended to symbolize causal influence. Naturally it is assumed in this diagram that other things are being held equal since if, for instance, there are no opportunities to actually help, or if something else besides the feelings of guilt is much more psychologically salient at the moment, then we would not expect increased helping behavior to result.

What psychological factors might best account for this relationship? More precisely, what motivational state(s) does guilt give rise to which in turn often fosters prosocial behavior?<sup>22</sup> Here the literature in social psychology is much less helpful. For a number of incompatible proposals have been offered, and in many cases with very little refinement or care in stating them. In the remainder of this section, I mention some of the leading candidates:

*Desire to Repair the Specific Wrong.* On this proposal, a state of guilt causes the formation of a desire to repair the specific perceived wrong performed by the agent, which in turn motivates helping behavior aimed at repairing the fault. Thus if I feel guilty for having stolen something from you, this could lead to the direct formation of a desire to atone for this wrong towards you in some way. There might be a variety of ways of doing so, such as making

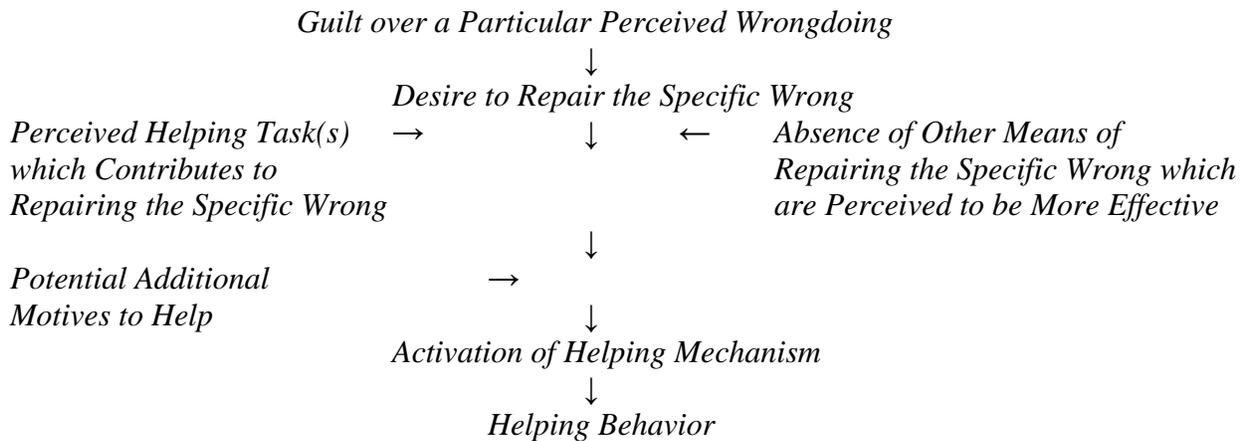
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adjectives helped more than both (i) similarly primed subjects who were low in guilt proneness and (ii) sadness primed subjects (Zemack-Rugar et al. 2007).

It is important to stress again that these studies do not pertain to chronic guilt, which as noted in section one is a different kind of guilt which would not be expected to correlate positively with prosocial behavior. See Quiles and Bybee 1997: 122.

<sup>22</sup> To simplify the discussion, in the remainder of the section I focus mainly on (i) consequential guilt upon performing an action deemed wrong rather than anticipatory guilt, and (ii) states of guilt rather than guilt traits.

financial compensation, buying a replacement item, and so forth. But it might turn out that the best way I can see to be make restitution for this wrong is to help you in some significant way. In those cases, and holding other things equal, we would expect the agent to help at a significantly higher rate than otherwise. Diagrammatically we would have the following:

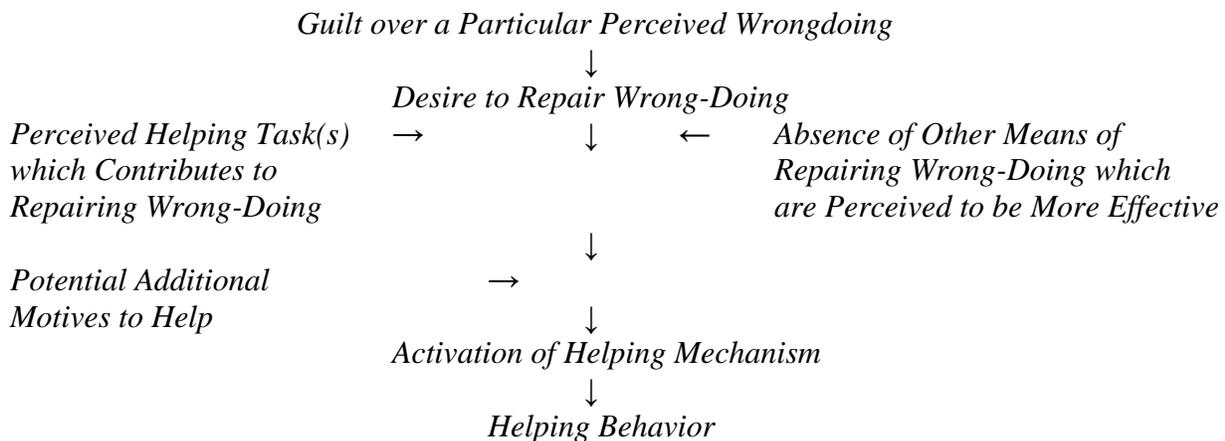


Thus one consequence of this model would be that subjects who are experiencing guilt would *not* help at increased rates when the helping task would not have any connection to repairing the specific wrong committed.

Unfortunately, despite this model's simplicity and elegance, it is clearly *too* simplistic as stated. As we saw in Regan et al. (1972) above, 55% of guilty subjects helped compared to only 15% of controls when it came to informing a confederate about the hole in her bag. This task clearly had no bearing on atoning for the specific action of breaking the camera. Even more striking is a series of experiments by Freedman et al. (1967). In one experiment, they had a room arranged so that subjects would likely knock over the carefully arranged index cards of a graduate student in his office. Half of subjects in this guilt condition were later asked to volunteer for an experiment by the same graduate student, whereas the other half were asked to volunteer for an experiment run by an unrelated student. In general 75% of subjects who knocked over the cards volunteered, whereas less than 39% of controls did. Strikingly, though, a

significant difference emerged only for the request to assist the graduate student not connected to the office or the cards (122).<sup>23</sup>

*Desire to Repair Wrong-Doing as Such.* The problem with this first model can be easily addressed if we switch from positing a desire to repair the specific wrong done, to a more general desire to repair the commission of a wrong as such. Manifestations of such a desire might include confessing the wrong action, attempting to make adequate reparation, making amends in some other way if reparation to the one wronged is not possible, punishing the self, committing to refrain from such wrong actions in the future, pleading for forgiveness, offering some form of penance over and above reparation, and so forth.<sup>24</sup> Thus in the Regan study, by notifying the confederate about the hole in her bag, subjects would be taking a step towards atoning for the fact that they earlier broke someone else’s camera. The diagram for this model would have to be adjusted as follows:



<sup>23</sup> An advocate of this first model could respond by positing a second desire to avoid confronting someone whom the agent has harmed. Indeed, Freedman et al. suggest this very possibility (123). However, this response would still leave unexplained the host of studies like Regan et al. 1972 which show increased helping in unrelated subsequent tasks.

See also Carlsmith and Gross 1969, who found that “guilt can lead to compliance even when there is no opportunity to make amends to the injured party” (238). Also relevant are Darlington and Macker 1966 and Harris and Samerotte 1976.

<sup>24</sup> See Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995 for related discussion.

Such a model would generate a number of testable predictions. One is that actions which serve to eliminate the agent's guilt without contributing in any way to repairing wrong-doing, should not significantly diminish subsequent helping behavior. Another is that whether a guilt-induced subject is independently experiencing positive affect (positive mood) should have little to no bearing on helping rates since the positive mood presumably would not satisfy the desire to repair the commission of a wrong.

The above model seems to have a strong following in the literature on guilt and helping.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, there seem to be a number of studies with results which are incompatible with the above predictions. Let me briefly mention one study with respect to each prediction. Regarding the first, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) asked subjects to recall an ethical or unethical action they performed in their past. Next subjects either used an antiseptic wipe to cleanse their hands or they did not. After completing a survey about their emotional state, they were given an opportunity to be an unpaid volunteer for a desperate graduate student in another research study. 74% of subjects who did not use the wipes volunteered to help, whereas only 41% who did use the wipes volunteered (1452). Note that the cleansing involved here was not a moral cleaning such as going to confession, which might be considered a means of trying to repair wrong-doing.<sup>26</sup> Rather it was simply an act of physical cleansing for eliminating germs from the person's hands. Thus some subjects might have otherwise volunteered were it not for their performance of an action which had no bearing on repairing their prior unethical behavior, which contradicts what the above model should imply.

Regarding the second prediction, Cunningham and colleagues (1980) examined the relationship between positive mood, guilt, and helping. Positive mood was manipulated by

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Freedman et al. 1967: 117, Baumeister et al. 1994: 257, Tangney 1995: 120, Amodio 2007, and especially Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995.

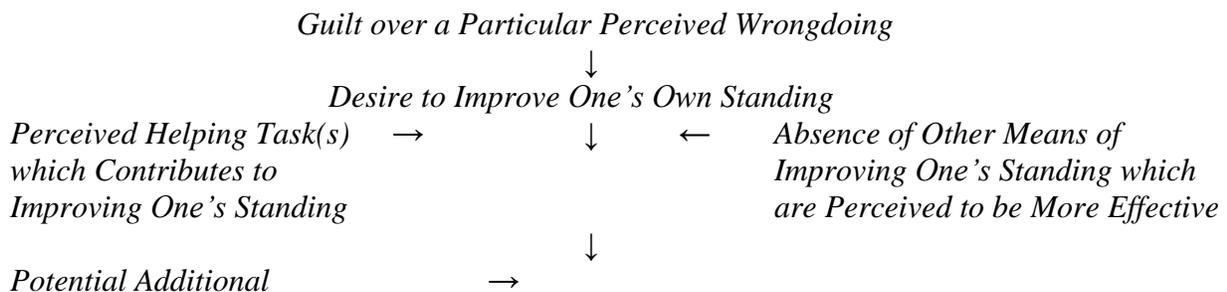
<sup>26</sup> For the effect of confession on helping behavior, see Harris et al. 1975.

having subjects find a free dime in the coin return slot of a pay phone. Guilt was manipulated by following the broken camera technique developed by Regan et al. 1972. And the helping task was assisting a confederate pick up papers which had been dropped in front of the subject. The results were as follows (184):

	Guilt	No Guilt
Positive Mood	33%	73%
No Positive Mood	80%	40%

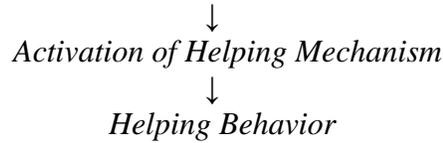
Hence whereas merely guilty subjects helped at much greater levels than controls, when subjects felt both guilty and in a positive mood, they did not. So contrary to the second prediction of this model, experiencing a positive mood does have an important bearing on helping behavior amongst individuals experiencing guilt.

*Desire to Improve One's Own Standing.* The previous model posited a desire which is concerned, not directly with the agent in question, but rather with morality itself and the importance of repairing a failure to live up to the agent's moral standards. In order to help explain the relationship between guilt and helping, we could instead posit a desire that the agent might have to improve his or her (actual or perceived) moral purity, worth, virtue, social image, social attachments, social and communal relationships, moral standing in the community, or the like.<sup>27</sup> The diagram here would look like this:



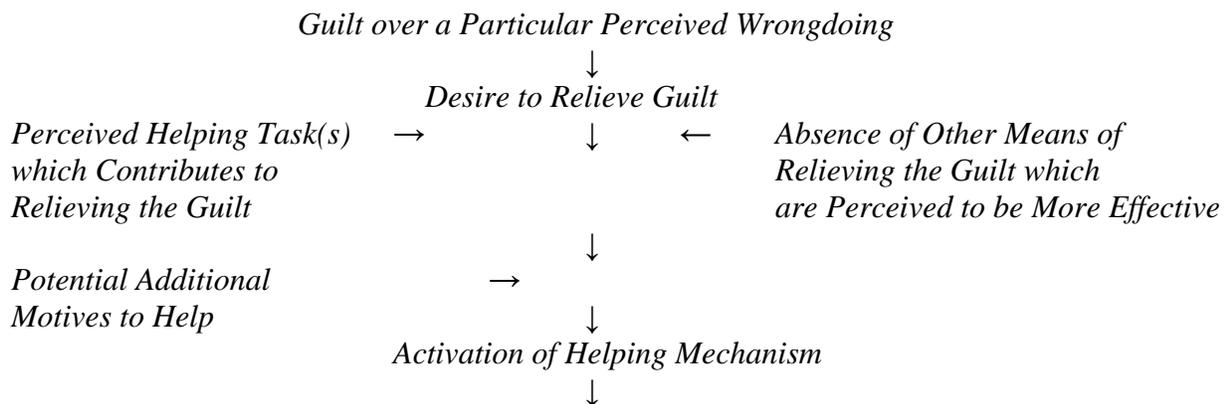
<sup>27</sup> See Carlsmith and Gross 1969: 239, Jones et al. 1995, Zhong and Liljenquist 2006, and especially Baumeister et al. 1994.

*Motives to Help*



Note that this model would generate some of the same predictions as the previous one: actions which eliminate guilt without improving moral or social standing should not significantly diminish subsequent helping behavior, and since positive moods would not improve the agent's standing, they should have little bearing on helping rates. Thus the studies mentioned above as troublesome for the previous model should cause problems for this one as well. For instance, using antiseptic wipes has no bearing on one's actual or socially perceived standing, and yet served to significantly reduce volunteering rates among guilty subjects.<sup>28</sup>

*Desire to Alleviate One's Guilt.* The fourth and final motivational model to be mentioned here holds that guilt states often cause the formation of a desire to eliminate or reduce the agent's guilt. Since helping is one very common way of making oneself feel better and no longer guilty about a prior wrong act, it is only to be expected that guilt would be positively correlated with helping, other things being equal. On this picture then, helping is treated as an instrumental means for promoting the agent's subjective well-being. Thus we get the following:



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<sup>28</sup> Advocates of this model could focus on certain specific variants of the desire to improve one's standing, such as a desire to restore one's moral purity, and argue that there is a psychological association between such a desire and a desire for physical cleansing. Thus by physically cleaning one's hands, one is also in the process undergoing an indirect form of moral cleansing. See Zhong and Liljenquist 2006 for discussion.

### *Helping Behavior*

Such a model would imply among other things that whether a person experiencing guilt helps is in significant part a function of whether the helping task would be more costly than the benefit derived from relieving the guilty feelings.<sup>29</sup>

Such a guilt relief model is perhaps the leading proposal in the psychology literature today,<sup>30</sup> but even this view has met with some recalcitrant data. For instance, Zemack-Rugar and colleagues (2007) compared the helping behavior of subjects who were high in guilt-proneness and had been subliminally primed with guilt adjectives, with that of similarly primed subjects low in guilt-proneness and also subjects primed with sadness adjectives. After the priming procedure and emotion measures were administered by a computer, subjects were told of another study that involved “an array of annoying, boring, and repetitive tasks designed to assist a charity in formulating its research questionnaires.” Subjects were asked how much time (between 0-20 minutes) they would like to volunteer to help the charity as unpaid volunteers. The initial experiment was also cleverly rigged to supposedly last 60 minutes but proceeded quickly enough so that subjects could volunteer for the entire 20 minutes if they wanted to without scheduling conflicts. The mean number of minutes volunteered was as follows (935):

High guilt proneness, guilt prime:	8.4 minutes
High guilt proneness, sadness prime:	3.9 minutes
Low guilt proneness, guilt prime:	3.1 minutes
Low guilt proneness, sadness prime:	2.2 minutes

But it is unclear why guilty subjects would be so much more inclined to be dedicated volunteers for what seems to be a very costly task if helping behavior is being influenced by cost-benefit

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<sup>29</sup> For related discussion, see Batson et al. 1986.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Donnerstein et al. 1975, Cunningham et al. 1980, Baumeister et al. 1994:255-6, Quiles and Bybee 1997: 104, Estrada-Hollenbeck and Heatherton 1998: 221, and Lindsey 2005.

assessments pertaining to guilt relief and there will likely be plenty of subsequent opportunities available to relieve guilt in other ways.<sup>31</sup>

Let me conclude this section with some comments about these models. First, they clearly each need to be more carefully developed than has been done above, although even this presentation is more detailed than one typically finds. Furthermore, each of the models is really just a label for a family of closely related proposals. For instance under the heading of the desire to improve the agent's standing, we can distinguish a desire to improve the agent's *actual* moral standing given the agent's personal set of norms, versus a desire to improve the agent's socially *perceived* moral standing. Clearly these two desires could lead to the performance of different actions in certain cases. In addition, while recalcitrant empirical results were mentioned for each of the four models, they should not be taken as decisive problems but rather as initial concerns. And finally, these models need not be regarded as exclusive – it might turn out that some agents instantiate one of these kinds of desires whereas others instantiate another kind, and it might even be the case that some agents instantiate two or more of these desires at the same time when feeling guilty.

### **3. Broader Implications of the Relationship between Guilt and Helping**

Despite this admittedly quick overview of the psychology literature on guilt and prosocial behavior, we are in a position to draw a number of consequences which should be of particular interest to those working on moral psychology and ethical theory. Then in the following section we can integrate these consequences into a larger framework for thinking about what explains and predicts prosocial behavior.

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<sup>31</sup> For another study involving guilt and an unpleasant helping task, see Darlington and Macker 1966. For critical discussion of this fourth model, see Zemack-Rugar et al. 2007: 934 and especially Lindsay-Hartz et al. 1995.

(a) *The default state for most human beings is to not help.* Recall that control subjects almost never helped in the studies mentioned above. Regan et al. (1972) had only 16% of controls notify a woman that her bag was leaking candy, and Konečni (1972) found that only 15% of controls would stop to help pick up dropped cards. This would not be surprising if the helping tasks were very demanding or time consuming. But note how trivial these tasks are, a result which is consistent with the behavior of control subjects in a variety of studies on other variables associated with helping such as good moods, bad moods, and empathy.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, not only do many control subjects not help, an omission which itself is often morally problematic, but they often go further than that. For instance in the Konečni study, “the control subjects tended to make a fairly large and unnecessary semicircle around the pile of cards, and hardly ever commented on what had happened” (1972: 32).

Thus the first implication is that, apart from the boost provided by guilt or one of the other motivational variables such as a good mood which will be mentioned in the next section, most people tend to not exhibit helping behavior even with respect to simple helping tasks.

(b) *Guilt influenced helping seems to be cross-situationally consistent.* While the experimental literature on guilt and helping has involved a wide variety of guilt-eliciting circumstances (such as giving electric shocks, breaking a camera, and knocking over books) as well as helping opportunities (such as picking up dropped cards, volunteering for an experiment, and notifying someone about a torn bag), a remarkably consistent pattern has emerged that subjects experiencing guilt help at higher levels than do subjects who do not, other things being equal. We have every reason to expect this trend to continue in future experiments involving new

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<sup>32</sup> See my 2009c and 2009d for an overview of these studies.

guilt-eliciting circumstances and helping tasks. Thus there is a remarkable degree of cross-situational consistency in the experimental results.

This consistency allows us to make what should be fairly accurate predictions about the helping behavior of individuals experiencing guilt. Or rather, such would be the case once we have a better idea as to what the correct model is of the motivational state(s) which mediates guilt and helping. For as we saw above, each of these models makes different predictions about what helping tasks a person feeling guilty would likely perform. So just for the sake of simplifying the discussion, let us assume that the fourth, guilt-relief model is correct. Then we can formulate conditionals which attempt to accurately capture certain trends in helping behavior. Here are two such conditionals based on the guilt-relief model:

- (C1) Other things being equal, if an agent is *not* experiencing guilt as a result of some perceived wrong the agent has committed, and:
  - (i) Is presented with a helping opportunity.
  - (ii) Takes himself to be able to perform the helping task.  
that agent will probably *not* attempt to perform the helping task.
  
- (C2) Other things being equal, if an agent *is* experiencing guilt as a result of some perceived wrong the agent has committed, and:
  - (i) Is presented with a helping opportunity.
  - (ii) Takes himself to be able to perform the helping task.
  - (iii) Takes the benefits of helping in terms of guilt relief to outweigh the perceived costs associated with helping.
  - (iv) Does not take there to be any more effective means available for relieving the guilt.  
that agent *will* probably attempt to perform the helping task.

Note that the consequents of the conditionals are stated in terms of what the agent will “probably” do – none of the studies showed that all of the subjects in the guilt condition helped, just as none of them showed that all of the subjects in the control condition did not help. So the claim is not that each individual will always try to perform some helping task when experiencing guilt and when the conditions in (C2) obtain. Rather, what we would expect to find if we monitored that person’s behavior and guilt levels over time is a significant difference in the

*frequency* of his helping versus not helping which positively correlates with his experiences of guilt, other things being equal.

Unfortunately, while we have a wealth of data on how different individuals react to particular helping opportunities when feeling guilty, what we do not have is a number of longitudinal studies focused on the *same* individuals as they experience guilt on multiple occasions and are confronted with various opportunities to help. So we can only speculate at this point that the same helping trends we see across subjects involved in the same experiment, will also apply with the same subjects over time.

(c) *Guilt-produced motivation to help is not altruistic.* Genuine altruistic motivation to perform an action is motivation concerned with the good of another person, independently of whether the action will directly benefit the agent or not. While it used to be popular to think that there is no such motivation, the tide seems to be shifting. More specifically, over the course of the past thirty years Batson and his colleagues have provided a wealth of experimental evidence for the empathy-altruism hypothesis, or the claim that “empathy evokes motivation directed toward the ultimate goal of reducing the needy person’s suffering; the more empathy felt for a person in need, the more altruistic motivation to have that need reduced” (2002: 92).<sup>33</sup> However, what might be true of empathy-influenced helping behavior, does not seem to hold for the motivational contribution that guilt makes. Take again our four models from the previous section. The first two involve moralistic motivation:

*Desire to Repair the Specific Wrong.*

*Desire to Repair Wrong-Doing as Such.*

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<sup>33</sup> For reviews, see Batson 1987, 1991, 2002, and Batson et al. 2003 as well as my 2009d.

In both cases, the primary concern is with what morality demands, rather than with, say, the interests of someone in need. To the extent to which it stems from such a desire, helping the other person is thereby treated as instrumental to satisfying normative standards, and so is not genuinely altruistic action.

Similarly, recall that the other two models of guilt-produced motivation were the following:

*Desire to Improve One's Own Standing.*

*Desire to Alleviate One's Guilt.*

And these are egoistic desires. If they give rise to helping behavior, then a person in need is being treated as a means to achieving one of these goals that the agent has. So in having such a desire, the agent does not really care about the person in need for his or her own sake, and indeed would not even help in the first place if another, more attractive means of achieving the desire were available.

The upshot then is the following. If one or more of the four leading models of guilt-produced motivation to help is correct, then the action which results will not be altruistic to the extent that it depends on such motivation. Furthermore, while it is still a good thing in most cases that the person helps, we might conclude that the helper's action deserves no moral worth. This is plausible in the case of egoistic motivation such as a desire to alleviate one's guilt; to adapt Michael Stocker's famous example, if you are in the hospital and find out that your best friend has come to visit you in order to alleviate her guilt, then while you are glad that your friend is visiting, her action deserves no moral worth whatsoever. Indeed, it calls into question the extent to which she really is your best friend (Stocker 1976).

In my view, the same is true in the case of moralistic motivation, although as we know from Kant's famous discussion of moral worth in the *Groundwork*, here the issues are much more complex and unfortunately there is not adequate space to investigate them here. Let me only note that if your friend comes to visit due in large part to a desire to repair the moral damage done by a series of wrongdoings that she had performed towards someone else earlier in the day, such an action does not show any special attachment towards you and is likely to strike many people as cold and impersonal. Thus, not only it is not clear that guilt-produced motivation to help is altruistic, it is also not clear that it bestows on the action any significant degree of moral worth.

(d) *Most people do not possess compassion.* In light of the first three implications, we can arrive at the final conclusion of this section, namely that other things being equal, most people do not have the virtue of compassion. To see this, consider the following familiar claims about what a virtuous person with the character trait of compassion would be like:

- (i) A person who is compassionate will, other things being equal, typically perform simple and straightforward helping tasks when in helping-relevant circumstances.
- (ii) A compassionate person's helping behavior which arises solely from his or her trait of compassion will, other things being equal, not be dependent on the presence of morally problematic or morally insignificant factors such as whether he or she is feeling guilty or not.
- (iii) A compassionate person who helps someone solely out of his or her trait of compassion, other things being equal, always does so for morally admirable reasons and motives.

For example, we would expect a compassionate person to help pick up dropped computer cards, to do so regardless of whether she is feeling guilty or not, and to do so for virtuous motives. On the other hand, we have seen that the following claims appear to in fact be true:

- (i\*) Most people will, other things being equal, typically *not* perform simple and straightforward helping tasks when in helping-relevant circumstances.

- (ii\*) The helping behavior of a person *will*, other things being equal, often be dependent on the presence of morally problematic or morally insignificant factors such as whether he or she is feeling guilty or not.
- (iii\*) A person who helps someone primarily out of a guilt-produced motive, other things being equal, often does *not* do so for morally admirable reasons and motives.

Thus a person might often not help pick up dropped computer cards, and even when he does help, he might do so as a result of feeling guilty, thereby making the helping behavior at least partially if not entirely dependent on morally suspect motives like a desire to eliminate his guilt.

One qualification should be noted here. Researchers have repeatedly found a positive correlation between guilt and empathy. If it turns out that (i) by focusing the agent on the harm caused to others by his or her wrong action, feelings of guilt will in some instances *give rise to* empathetic feelings for another's suffering or misfortune, and if (ii) Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis is correct, *then* motivation to help which arises from empathy for the other person's situation, rather than directly from one of the four guilt-produced desires in section two, would typically be altruistic and so be compatible with compassionate motivation. But even here it is unlikely that *all* cases of guilt-influenced helping are mediated by empathy, rather than just some. And even if all were, that would still not call into question claims (i\*) and (ii\*) above.<sup>34</sup>

Having said this, the experimental data on guilt and helping is compatible with the existence of a *few* people who might have the virtue of compassion to some degree. Recall that 15% of controls still stopped to help pick up the computer cards in Konečni's study, and 16% of controls called attention to the torn bag in Regan's study. Indeed the existence of a few, rather than many compassionate people might be just what we would expect given our ordinary experience of the world and the course of human history.

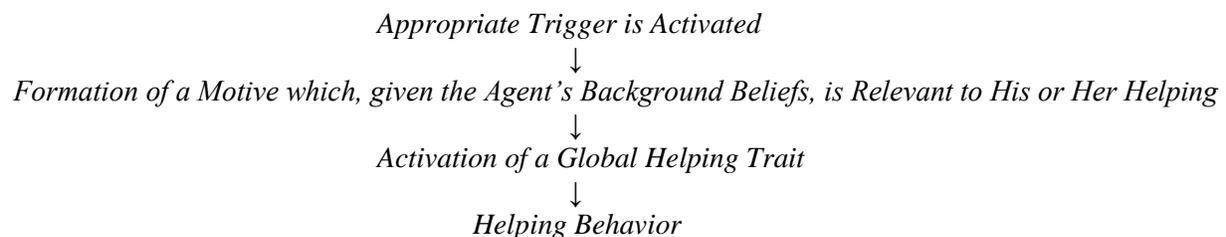
#### **4. Integrating Guilt into a Broader Picture of Helping Behavior**

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<sup>34</sup> For more on guilt and empathy, see Tangney 1995: 131-133 and Tangney et al. 2007a: 350-351.

Thus far in this paper, we have examined a number of issues associated with the empirical literature on guilt and helping. But that literature is only one part of a vastly larger body of work in social psychology on various psychological variables which have been positively or negatively correlated with helping behavior. Positive correlations have also been found, for instance, with empathy, good moods, and certain instances of bad moods, whereas negative correlations have been found with anger, fear of embarrassment, and fear of being blamed. So let me end this paper with a much more speculative discussion of how these variables – guilt among them – might be incorporated into a broader picture of helping behavior.<sup>35</sup>

The place to begin, in my view, is with the idea of what I call “global helping traits” (GHTs), which I have explored in a number of recent papers.<sup>36</sup> GHTs are dispositions to try to help whose activity is sensitive to a number of different “triggers,” one of which, not surprisingly, is guilt. The presence of one of these triggers, other things being equal, increases the probability that the agent will attempt to help when in situations where helping opportunities are thought to be available. Diagrammatically, the picture is as follows:



For example, we saw that the trigger of guilt might lead to the formation of a motive to eliminate the guilt, depending on whether the fourth mediation model of guilt and helping behavior turns out to be correct. Given the agent's background beliefs that helping is a means of relieving guilt

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<sup>35</sup> This section draws in part on my 2009a.

<sup>36</sup> Miller 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d.

and that the agent is in a position to help certain people, this motive could activate the relevant GHT which in turn leads to the agent's trying to do so.

In addition to guilt, the past forty years of research in social psychology have shown that helping behavior is remarkably sensitive to the following psychological factors (among others):

Embarrassment.<sup>37</sup>  
Moderately Good Moods.<sup>38</sup>  
Empathy.<sup>39</sup>

These other triggers can lead to the formation of quite different motives of their own, such as a motive to promote the well-being of another person in the case of empathy or a motive to maintain a good mood in the case of positive affect. Such motives in turn might be just as effective as the motive to eliminate guilt in leading to helping behavior.

But what exactly is the contribution that GHTs are supposed to make to a story about helping behavior? I take GHTs to stand for certain clusters of mental states – beliefs, desires, intentions, and the like – which in many cases play a causal role in bridging the gap between the presence of a trigger on the one hand, and elevated or reduced helping behavior on the other. Let me elaborate by returning to guilt and helping. We said that guilty feelings can give rise to a motive to relieve those feelings (again, provided that the fourth mediation model turns out to be correct). An agent with a GHT will have a cluster of mental states related to helping and guilt. These might include:

- Beliefs about the relationship between helping others and various personal costs, such as lost time, money, alternative activities, and so on.
- Beliefs about the relationship between helping others and various social reactions, such as moral approval, gratitude, praise, and so forth.
- Beliefs about the relationship between helping others and various moral consequences, such as living up to the agent's norms, improving one's moral standing and purity, and so forth.
- Beliefs about how these various personal costs, social reactions, and moral consequences contribute towards alleviating the agent's guilty feelings.

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<sup>37</sup> Apsler 1975.

<sup>38</sup> Isen 1987, Carlson, Charlin, and Miller 1988, and Schaller and Cialdini 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Batson 1987, 1991, 2002, and Batson et al. 2003.

A motive to help when doing so will contribute towards alleviating the guilty feelings, and a motive to not help when doing so will perpetuate or worsen the guilty feelings.

Thus the agent might have a motive to relieve his guilt, and a belief that a helping opportunity is available. The first three sets of beliefs might lead him to an implicit judgment about what social reactions, moral consequences, and personal costs might ensue if he actually helped. And the fourth set of beliefs might lead him to connect these various consequences to alleviating his guilt. Finally, the result of this (largely unconscious or automatic) collective evaluation might bring to bear a motive to help or to not help in connection with relieving the agent's guilty feelings. For example, if the helping task is very costly for the agent and outweighs the perceived benefits for guilt relief, this might lead to the formation of a motive to not help because helping might be thought to do nothing towards alleviating the guilty feelings.

On my view, the default condition for most people with GHTs is that none of the appropriate triggers is typically present, and that frequently a GHT is not activated even in helping-relevant circumstances. As we have already seen, this claim appears to be in line with experiments in social psychology on helping behavior in which, for many helping tasks, only a small percentage of control subjects seems to attempt to help. However, when activated in one of the relevant ways, and other things being equal, GHTs should lead a person to try to help both in a wide variety of circumstances and in repeated instances of the same circumstance. At the same time, we would expect such continued helping behavior to be performed *provided that* the motive which led to the GHT's being triggered is still present at a suitable strength. To take the same example, the motive to relieve guilt can trigger a GHT which in turn motivates several instances of helping behavior. But if such behavior is actually successful at relieving the guilt, then we would expect the helping behavior to dissipate.

As character traits which are alleged to be widely possessed, GHTs are meant to play a robust explanatory and predictive role. Concerning the latter, they allow us to formulate conditionals which can offer fairly precise, testable empirical predictions for helping behavior. Indeed, we have already seen examples of such conditionals in the previous section with (C1) and (C2), and here is a third example for moderately good moods:

- (a) If an adult possesses a GHT and is experiencing intermediate levels of increased positive affect, that person will probably engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

The ‘moderate’ qualifier in the consequent is intended to exclude what are taken by the agent to be extremely demanding acts of assistance, which we can predict are not likely to be performed very frequently. Similarly for a trigger like empathy:

- (b) If an adult possesses a GHT and is experiencing intermediate levels of increased empathy, that person will probably engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

However, if no inputs are present to trigger a GHT, then:

- (c) If an adult possesses a GHT which has not been triggered, that person will probably not engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

Once again it is assumed that various other relevant considerations are being held equal, i.e., that the person is not also experiencing depression or an intense emotion like anger or fear.

## 5. Conclusion

Much more could be said about GHTs, and I have done so elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> As far as this paper is concerned, I hope to have provided a helpful overview of experimental work on guilt and helping behavior. In addition, I aimed to use the existing research to call attention to a central area where further conceptual and experimental work needs to be done concerning the

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<sup>40</sup> See my 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, and 2009d. In particular, in my 2009a I explore how GHTs can not only be triggered but also inhibited by, for instance, fear of embarrassment.

motivating state(s) that mediates guilt and helping behavior. Furthermore, I attempted to draw some interesting implications from the existing research, culminating in the conclusion that most people do not have the virtue of compassion. At the same time, though, there is initial reason to think that most people *do* have an alternative character trait instead, namely one or more GHTs which are sensitive not only to feelings of guilt, but also to other psychological factors such as empathy and mood. Clearly there is much exciting empirical and philosophical work left to be done in this area.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This paper is a shorter version of my 2009b, which in addition to guilt also examines the relationship between embarrassment and helping.

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