

The guilty conscience as an existential problem (Ioannis Kornarakis)

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The great Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung made a significant contribution to understanding the spiritual life by underlining the moral character of most of the personality's repressions. Jung argued, on the basis of his clinical psychotherapeutic and medical experience, that these repressions were usually of a moral nature. In fact, in some cases, Jung went even further and taught that neurosis, which is today a very common disharmony in the personality, has a religious character. This is why, in his opinion, the problem of neurosis is actually a religious problem.



Jung's view here on the primary content of our modern repressions has been corroborated by many psychological and psychotherapeutic studies, as well as by philosophical thought. In fact, a lively discussion has begun in many quarters regarding the existential significance of the guilty feelings that plague modern people, often without them even being aware of the role of these feelings. The unconscious part of the human personality suffers from the pressure of repressions, which usually consist of strong moral conflicts, without the person being aware of the particular way in which these conflicts generate feelings of guilt. However, in spite of this, it is today well established in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy that the concept of guilty feelings, or the concept of the guilty conscience, is a psychological factor accepted even by psychoanalysis.

In any case, in terms of psychology and psychotherapy, we should take note of the book by the German psychologist and theologian Helmut Harsch, in which he attempts a systematic exposition of the problem of guilt in the areas of theology and depth psychology. The combination of these two areas of the spiritual life in researching the problem of guilt takes on particular significance today, inasmuch as this research recognizes, and provides scientific validation for, the idea that the problem of guilt stands as the foremost existential problem of our times.

This claim is neither unfounded nor exaggerated, given the enormous influence Franz Kafka's famous work *The Trial* has had on modern thought and art, as well as

on philosophy in general. *The Trial*, which was performed not long ago at a theater in Thessaloniki, is the creative product of a man who was greatly skilled in studying the way in which guilty feelings are repressed in the human psyche. Of course, the interpretations offered of this Czech author's work are many and varied, and critics' disagreements over the book's deeper meaning are well known. Nevertheless, nearly all Kafka scholars agree that, in *The Trial*, Kafka dissects and analyzes with incomparable skill and precision the existential nature of the feeling of guilt. It thus comes as no surprise that, with the incredible interest generated by Existentialism, *The Trial* became the subject of research highlighting the feeling of guilt, i.e. the guilty conscience, as modern man's central problem.

On the other hand, it is, of course, understandable why such a claim would not be easily accepted, since, as is clear from psychotherapeutic practice, guilty persons carefully hide the causes of their neurotic behavior, and, in fact, react strongly to any attempt to bring this cause (i.e. guilt) to the surface of their consciousness.

Source: J. K. Kornarakis, "Psychology and spiritual life," pp. 33-40, published by Orthodoxos Kypseli [in Greek].

(To be continued)