A Guilt Trip: Expressivism, Moral Judgment, and Basic Emotions[*]

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1 Introduction

In this essay, I first sketch Allan Gibbard's (1992) norm expressivism. Second, I consider Shaun Nichols' (2004) critique of Gibbard's account of moral judgment. In essence, Nichols argues that since norm expressivism assumes moral judgment requires the experience and attribution of guilt and that children younger than 7 - 8 cannot experience and attribute guilt, then they cannot make moral judgments. However, he contends that they can given that they can pass the moral/conventional task. Thus, Gibbard's norm expressivist account of moral judgment is fatally flawed. Third, I provide a response on behalf of Gibbard. Fourth, I conclude with an account of guilt as an emotion.

2 Norm Expressivism

Allan Gibbard writes,

> Narrowly moral judgments are not feelings but judgments of what moral feelings it is rational to have. Feelings, we think, can be apt or not, and moral judgments of when guilt or resentment are apt. (1992, 6)

A simple minded emotivism might hold the following: One judges an action morally wrong if, and only if, one would feel guilty for doing it. However, this would make it impossible for one to feel guilt inappropriately. Surely to judge something morally wrong is to judge that it is *appropriate* to feel guilty in that circumstance. For example, suppose I accidentally run into a child while riding my bike. If I could not have avoided the child, then it would not make sense to feel guilt. However, in saying that it would be irrational to feel guilt in that circumstance, we are not ascribing a property to that action according to Gibbard.

> According to my expressivistic analysis, to call something rational is not, in the strict sense, to attribute a property to it. It is to do something else: to express a state of mind. (1992, 9)

Thus, one judges something *rational* just in case one expresses acceptance of norms permitting it. And, one judges an act *wrong* if, and only if, one expresses acceptance of norms that permit the agent, were they fully responsible for the act, to feel guilt and others resentment for having done it.[1] On norm expressivism, norms are always norms of rationality; namely, what it "makes sense" to believe, feel, and think. We can think of a norm as a "prescription or imperative that gives the rule a sophisticated observer could formulate" (1992, 70).

We can *internalize* norms in one of two ways: *acceptance of* or *being in the grip of* a norm. Internalizing a norm is a "motivational tendency of a particular kind to act on that pattern" (1992, 69-70). To understand the state of accepting norms, we must consider several different concepts Gibbard provides. First,

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[1]Gibbard is thus not giving an analysis of the property *wrongness*, but giving a naturalistic account of what it is to make a moral judgment. One can either deny that there are moral properties or simply be agnostic about their existence.

normative governance is an ability to use language for thinking about "absent situations," which enhances fitness for social animals (e.g. gossip) (1992, 72). Second, *normative discussion* coordinates when it tends to consensus and responsiveness to demands for consistency. Third, *normative avowal* is to take a normative position (e.g. to express emotion, express hypothetical decisions, etc.) (1992, 73). Gibbard writes,

> To accept a norm, we might say, is in part to be disposed to avow it in unconstrained normative discussion, as a result of the workings of demands for consistency in the positions one takes in normative discussion. (1992, 74)

> The state of accepting a norm, in short, is identified by its place in a syndrome of tendencies toward action and avowal -- a syndrome produced by a language-infused system of coordination peculiar to human beings. (1992, 75)

Summarizing, one accepts a norm just in case one is motivated to avow it due to demands for consistency and consensus for coordination.

Gibbard provides a technical account of what normative sentences mean, which is useful to sketch before we move on. A proposition p is the set of possible worlds in which p holds.[2] Gibbard claims that the content of a normative sentence is identified with the *factual-normative worlds* in which it holds. Here are the crucial concepts for understanding Gibbard's approach. A *factual-normative world* is a set of ordered pairs $< w, n >$ which are possible worlds w and complete systems n of norms. A system of norms n is *complete* if, and only if, for every alternative x, n assigns one of the following three values: *forbidden, optional*, or *required*.[3] Thus, for any every normative predicate P and every system of norms, n, we replace the normative predicates with either *n-forbidden*, *n-optional*, or *n-required*. Finally, the content of a normative judgment that x-ing is rational is equivalent to $\{< w, n > | x$ is n-permissible in $w\}$. These normative sentences are purely descriptive. We when express acceptance of a system of

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[2] When we define a proposition as the set of possible worlds at which it holds, there is a straightforward problem for this proposal. Namely, there is only one necessary truth. We will simply disregard this worry.

[3] We can characterize something as *n*-forbidden iff it is not *N*-permissible where something is *n*-permissible if, and only if, it is either *n*-optional or *n*-required.

norms, we are expressing acceptance of sentences of that form.[4]

3   Nichols' Objection

Shaun Nichols writes,

> The problem, in brief, is that prevailing sentimentalist accounts
> propose a sophisticated analysis of what is involved in moral judg-
> ment, and it seems that people can make moral judgments with-
> out having the kind of sophistication that sentimentalism would
> require. (2004, 85)

Thus, Nichols' argument is this. If moral judgment requires the capacity to
experience and attribute guilt, then children younger than 7 -- 8 do not make
moral judgments. Young children (< 7 -- 8 years old) *cannot* experience and at-
tribute guilt. However, they do make "core moral judgments" since that is just
to have the capacity to pass the moral/conventional task. Therefore, moral
judgment does not require the capacity to experience and attribute guilt. In
order to provide evidence for the second premise, we have to consider experi-
ments from developmental psychology, to which we now turn.

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[4]Notoriously, philosophers have worried about the Frege-Geach problem. The problem is
that normative sentences in asserted and unasserted contexts appear to have different mean-
ings. Consider this argument.

1. It is wrong to tell lies.

2. If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies.

3. ∴ It is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies.

(1) involves the expression of disapproval of lying, but the antecedent of (1) is "unasserted"
and hence disapproval of lying is not expressed. Hence, the two occurrences have different
meanings. Now, we can translate the sentences with the n-corresponding predicates.

1. Feeling guilty and resentment for lying is n-permissible in w.

2. If feeling guilt and resentment for lying is n-permissible in w, then feeling guilty about
   getting your little brother to lie is n-permissible in w.

3. ∴ Feeling guilt and resentment for getting your little brother to lie is n-permissible in w.

Thus, we have Gibbard's solution to the Frege-Geach problem. (1) and the antecedent of (2)
have the same meaning.

Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) is probably the most important piece of experimental evidence that children younger than 7 -- 8 cannot experience and attribute guilt. In their study, they considered several experiments and I will only describe the first one since it will make the point. In this study, they evaluated 4 -- 8 year old's ability attribute emotions to an uncaught thief and tempted child named "Florian." Florian finds himself in two episodes. In the *moral* episode, he realizes that his classmate Thomas has sweets in his coat pocket. Florian takes them, but then puts them back. In the *immoral* episode, he takes the sweets from his coat pocket, and keeps them. Each child in the study are asked the following questions: Do you think he can take them? Does he know he shouldn't take them? The children in the study all recognized that he shouldn't steal them.

There were 60 children with 27 boys and 33 girls, in the following age groups (4--5), (6--7), and (8--11). In the immoral version, the children were asked would Florian feel good after stealing. The results were:

- 74% of 4-year-olds

- 40% of 6-year- olds

- 10% of 8-year-olds

In moral version, the children were asked would Florian feel bad for having returned the sweets. The results were:

- 59% of 4-year-olds

- 74% of 6-year-olds[5]

- 41% of 8-year-olds

What is remarkable is that 3/4 of the 4 year olds believe Florian would feel good for stealing, and 3/5 of 4-year-olds believe Florian would feel bad for returning the sweets.

Nunner-Winkler and Sodian then classified the attributions of emotions as follows. An emotional attribution was *outcome oriented* if they said the actor

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[5]Nunner-Winkler and Sodian recognize that this result is odd since 3/4 of the 6-year-olds think Florian will feel bad for having returned the sweets. And this is greater than both the 4-year-olds and 8-year-olds. However, they do not have an explanation for this odd result.

was happy because they got the stolen object; sad if they didn't. An emotional attribution was *morally oriented* if they said the actor was sad that they stole; happy if they didn't. I will just consider the results in the immoral case, since it will make the moral general point. Here are the types of attributions given according to age:

- 4-year-olds: 12 outcome-oriented attributions; 3 morally- oriented attributions;

- 6-year-olds: 8 outcome-oriented attributions; 12 morally-oriented attributions;

- 8-year-olds: 2 outcome-oriented attributions; 18 morally-oriented attributions;

If guilt is a negative emotion which occurs when one transgresses a moral rule, then very few 4-year-olds can experience and attribute guilt. In general, they suppose that Florian will feel positively for getting what he wants.

Another important study is Harris et. al. (1987). They gave British and Danish children twenty emotion terms asked them to describe situations that would elicit them. 5-year-olds could suggest situations if there were recognizable facial displays (e.g. afraid, happy, and angry). However by age 7, children offered situations eliciting emotion where there was no characteristic facial expression (e.g. proud, jealous, grateful, worried, guilty, excited). The authors took this to suggest that guilt was an unavailable emotion for younger children.

Finally, one last important study is Thompson and Hoffman (1980). They took 72 children from first, third, and fourth grades. The children were given three stories in which a wrongful act by one child against another occurs with no external detection. They were asked to pretend to be the wrongdoer and were asked (a) how they would feel, (b) to rate the intensity of that feeling,(c) to explain their feelings, and (d) explain if they would feel differently if the act remained undetected, and (e) provide an ending to the story. What Thompson and Hoffman found was the following. Older children exhibited more intense guilt, greater concern for the victim's welfare, and more frequent use of "justice principles." Younger children exhibited more concern over detection and punishment, and happiness with regard to outcome of wrongdoing.

We can represent Nichols' argument more formally as follows.

1. Suppose moral judgment requires the capacity to experience and attribute guilt.

2. If moral judgment requires the capacity to experience and attribute guilt, then children younger than 7 -- 8 do not make moral judgments.

3. Children younger than 7 -- 8 cannot experience and attribute guilt.

4. ∴ Children younger than 7 -- 8 cannot make moral judgments.

5. However, 3 -- 4-years-olds make "core moral judgments" since that is just to have the capacity to pass the moral/ conventional task.

6. ∴ Moral judgment does not require the capacity to experience and attribute guilt.

In the next section, I will provide a response to Nichols' argument. Since the developmental evidence is quite powerful and uncontested for premise (3), to reject this reductio we must reject (5) and indeed we should as we shall see.

4   A Gibbardian Response

The response to Nichols' argument is as follows. First, (5) assumes a contrary account of moral judgment. As such, it simply begs the question against Gibbard. Second, Nichol's account of "core moral judgment" is insufficient for moral judgement. Merely passing the moral/conventional task is insufficient for moral judgment because 3--4 year olds are incapable of recognizing the relevance of causal responsibility. Third, even if 3 - 4-year-olds could experience and attribute guilt, the relevant question is do they accept systems of norms? Gibbard has independent arguments for claiming norm acceptance is required for moral judgment, and the very developmental psychologists Nichols cites suggest there is a difference between being in the grip of a norm versus acceptance of a norm. I will begin with the later considerations, and then return to issues of causal responsibility.

4.1   Independent Arguments

Gibbard has provided independent arguments for his norm expressivism. Specifically, suppose we thought claiming an action was rational, was attributing some property to it. What would such a property be? One contender is due to David Hume and Frank Ramsely; what we can call the "Hume-Ramsey theory."

> Hume-Ramsey theory: An action is *rational* just in case it most efficaciously achieves one's ends.

The argument that Gibbard deploys against the theory comes from a thought experiment involving Octavia.

> Octavia thinks reason demands that anyone give weight to his own future happiness. It makes this demand, she thinks, even on a person who is now indifferent to the future. Now whether or not she is right, if her thought is intelligible, it is unconfused linguistically and logically, then the Humean thesis is wrong as a claim about meaning... If the Humean thesis is right as a claim about meaning, then Octavia has meanings wrong or else she is logically confused. If her opinion is intelligible, then the Humean thesis is wrong as a claim about meaning. (1992, 12)

Gibbard's argument comes to this. If the Humean theory concerning the meaning of 'rational' is correct, then Octavia has made either a linguistic or logical mistake. Octavia has made no such mistake. Therefore, the Hume-Ramsey theory is incorrect.

Consider another descriptive property that we might identify rationality with -- a desire that is the result of Richard Brandt's "cognitive psychotherapy." Suppose that one undergoes *cognitive psychotherapy* just in case they have relevant available information which they repeatedly represent to themselves in an ideally vivid way at the appropriate time. Thus,

> Brandt theory: A person's desire is *rational* if, and only if, it would survive or be produced by cognitive psychotherapy and it is irrational otherwise.

Gibbard considers a civil servant who realizes that if he undergoes cognitive psychotherapy, he would yield to temptation.

> A civil servant who firmly rejects all offers of bribes might fear that if he dwelt vividly on all that he is forgoing, he would yield to temptation. That, roughly, is to fear that his determination not to take bribes is irrational in Brandt's sense. (1992, 20)

But, surely it is not irrational to forgo cognitive psychotherapy. But, if that is correct, then Brandt's descriptive analysis of *rational* is incorrect. Gibbard generalizes from these cases and concludes judgments of rationality are endorsements; i.e. expressions of acceptance of norms.

Gibbard is a motivational internist. He accepts this claim,

> Motivational Internalism: Necessarily, if one judges an action wrong one is motivated not to do it.

The arguments above are arguments for motivational internalism. However, one might urge motivational externalism.

> Motivational Externalism: It is possible that one can judge an action wrong and lack a motivated to not do it.

'Necessarily' and 'possibly' can understood as quantifiers over all possible worlds or restricted to ones for which the laws of nature are true, etc. Even if one is not persuaded by Gibbard's arguments above, there are other arguments for motivational internalism. In fact, Nichols has supplied one of the more persuasive ones. Consider the fact that psychopaths cannot pass the moral/conventional task (Turiel, 1983). That is, they cannot distinguish moral and conventional norms due to the former being serious, having wide applicability, authority independence and non-conventional justifications. According to Nichols, the best explanation for their inability is deficit in affect. They can mind read since they can pass the false-belief task, they do not physiologically response to distress cues even though they do response to threatening stimuli (Blair, 1995).

Thus, the case where we are considering nomological possibilities, psychopaths suggest that one cannot make a moral judgment and not be motivated. This provides evidence for motivational internalism in addition to, or in the absence of, Gibbard's internalist arguments.

4.2   Developmental Psychology and Acceptance of Norms

As we have seen, for Gibbard, to judge something wrong, guilt is not enough since one must recognize the appropriateness of guilt. Nichols himself writes,

> If moral judgments are judgments of the appropriateness of guilt, then one cannot make a moral judgment unless they can make judgments about the rationality of guilt. (2004, 89)

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What is particularly interesting is that in the very studies that Nichols cites, developmental psychologists appear to be distinguishing accepting a norm and being in the grip of a norm. If young children cannot accept norms, then according to Gibbard they cannot make moral judgments. Whether they can experience and attribute guilt is a secondary issue. What I will now do is show psychologists seem to be articulating the difference between types of moral internalization.

Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) write in the study we discussed,

> In accordance with findings by Turiel (1983), preschoolers showed an elaborate moral knowledge, being able to give perfectly adequate reasons why rules should be binding and distinguishing between transgressions of different severity in accordance with adult standards. Yet young children do not seem to be aware of the significance of conformity to moral rules for a person's self-evaluative and empathic emotions. Thus, children may first come to know moral rules in a purely informational sense, that is, they know that norms exist and understand why they should exist. Not until several years later, however, do they seem to treat them as personally binding obligations the intentional violation of which will be followed by negatively charged self-evaluative emotions or genuinely empathic concerns. (1988, 1336)

What is crucial here is that Nunner-Winkler and Sodian recognize a difference between recognizing norms "in an informational sense", and treating them as "personally binding obligations." This is precisely the distinction that Gibbard draws.

Likewise, Thompson and Hoffman write,

> Developmental changes in children's reasons for guilt paralleled those of moral judgment studies: older children exhibited victim-oriented concern and relied on internal justice principles; younger children feared detection and punishment. (1980, 155)

Clearly, they are distinguishing between cases where a child internalizes norms or moral principles, and when children obey norms due to external detection and punishment. Again, we see different ways of internalizing norms.

Paul L. Harris, more than the other psychologists we have discussed, has done work on internalization of norms. He writes,

> To perceive the relevance of each factor [responsibility and norma-
> tive standards], they must see themselves and other people not as
> agents who may or may not attain their desires, and feel happy or
> sad as a result, but as social beings who voluntarily try to live up
> to certain norms or standards, and feel pride, or shame or guilt,
> depending on whether they succeed or fail in doing so. (1989, 96)

Again,

> Thus, younger children have two difficulties. They ignore the rel-
> evance of responsibility in the attribution of pride, shame, and
> guilt. Second, they ignore the relevance of normative standards.
> These two problems do not arise because they do not know about
> responsibility or normative standards. They can make accurate di-
> agnoses with respect to each. They know whether someone did
> something deliberately or by accident. Similarly, they know the
> normative standards that have been violated. Their difficulty is in
> seeing the relevance of those two considerations to their emotional
> life. (1989, 91)

Harris distinguishes between two questions, "What actions are wrong?" and
"What someone should do?"

> To an adult ear, these questions are inextricably related. Having
> worked out what is wrong, one should not do it. Yet the two ques-
> tions may be very different for young children. They may know a
> good deal about what is wrong without assuming that such knowl-
> edge has much impact on one's course of action. (**?**, 98)

The "external observer" is relocated for older children.

> ...the emergence of this alternative audience is reflected in chil-
> dren's form of words; at about eight years of age they begin to speak
> explicitly of feeling proud and ashamed of themselves, whereas
> younger subjects talk about the other people who will be proud or
> ashamed of them. (1989, 101)

If, as developmental psychologists suggest, there is a distinction between
accepting a norm and merely being in the grip of norm as I have argued, then

the issue of whether young children can experience and attribute guilt is a secondary issue. That is, *even if* they could experience and attribute guilt, if they cannot accept norms then according to Gibbard they cannot make moral judgments. Thus, the developmental psychologists findings though important miss the fundamental issue. And, these psychologists seem to want to make a distinction relevant to moral judgment just as Gibbard does.

5 What is Guilt, or What Does a Gibbardian Moral Psychology Look Like?

In order to understand what guilt in fact is, we should consider a study done by Graham, Doubleday, and Guarino (1984). In this study, 120 children between 6--11 were asked to recall experiences of pity, anger, and guilt and then rate the controllability of those situations. The controllability rating was on a scale of 1--9 where 9 represents complete control. The question they asked these children was this:

> Was [the cause of emotion] mostly something that you (target) made happen or mostly something that you (target) couldn't stop from happening?

The results of the study were as follows.

MEAN CONTROLLABILITY RATINGS AS A
FUNCTION OF EMOTION AND AGE

Emotion	Age 6–7	Age 9	Age 11
Anger	6.1	6.9	7.1
Guilt	3.9	5.9	6.7
Pity	2.9	2.4	2.8

NOTE.—N = 40 in each age group. High ratings indicate high perceived controllability; scale was 1–9.

Figure 1: Mean Controllability Ratings

Anger is perceived as controllable roughly independent of age. Pity is is perceived to be uncontrollable roughly independent of age. Finally, guilt per-

ceived as uncontrollable at ages 6--7, but increasing is understood to require controllability.

In another study, Graham (1988) studied 125 children from three age groups. She offered the children the following story.

> This is a story about a boy named Jason. One day Jason was riding his bike in the park. Suddenly he crashed into another boy named Tommy who was also riding in the park. Tommy fell off his bike and broke his front wheel.

She then consider two cases.

- Uncontrollable: Jason avoids running into small child, but cannot avoid hitting Tommy.

- Controllable: Jason was doing tricks where other kids were playing.

Graham then asked about controllability, affect, and action. Her results were as follows.

Variable	Age Group					
	5–6 (n = 34)		7–8 (n = 46)		10–11 (n = 39)	
Pride						
	Int	*Ext*	*Int*	*Ext*	*Int*	*Ext*
Locus	5.0	2.9	5.7	2.5	5.8	1.9
Angry	1.0	1.3	1.0	1.3	1.0	1.6
Proud	4.9	4.1	4.7	3.7	4.7	2.6
Self-reward	8.7	7.8	8.0	4.8	8.1	2.8
Gratitude						
	Con	*Unc*	*Con*	*Unc*	*Con*	*Unc*
Controllability	4.7	2.9	5.6	2.3	5.5	1.7
Scared	1.8	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.0	2.3
Grateful	4.7	4.5	4.5	3.5	4.1	1.8
Reciprocation	5.2	4.5	5.5	3.8	5.0	2.0
Guilt						
	Con	*Unc*	*Con*	*Unc*	*Con*	*Unc*
Controllability	3.2	1.4	3.9	1.7	4.9	1.8
Glad	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.1	2.0
Guilty	4.0	3.5	4.2	3.3	4.1	2.7
Reparation	15.1	15.0	13.6	12.9	16.1	11.5

Note. Scales range from 1 to 10 for self-reward, from 1 to 5 for reciprocation, and from 1 to 20 for reparation. High numbers indicate greater intended action. *Int* = internal, *Ext* = external, *Con* = controllable, and *Unc* = uncontrollable cause.

Figure 2: Mean Controllability and Reparation Ratings

What is remarkable in the above graph is that children between 5--6 think that guilt is appropriate regardless of whether Jason's hitting the child is controllable or not. We can see this weaken as children age. It is also interesting to note that reparation ratings for guilt in the controllable and uncontrollable situation is identical.
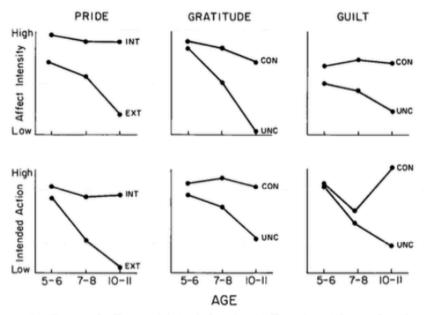
Figure 1. Reported affect and intended action in Experiment 1 as a function of affect scenario, causal condition, and age group.

Figure 3: Mean Controllability Ratings

Additionally, we can see that affect intensity associated with guilt amongst 6--7-year-olds with regard to controllable and uncontrollable actions is almost identical, and not so with 10--11-year-olds. Likewise, intended action is the same with regard to guilt for 6--7 year olds and not for 10--11-year-olds.

We are not in a position to sketch a Gibbardian developmental psychology. Here are the stages roughly associated with ages.

- 4 years old: attribute basic emotions based on facial expressions, (b) distinguish moral/conventional norms and (c) recognize causal responsibility but see no relevance.

- 6 years old: (a) attribute basic and non-basic (i.e. self-conscious) emotions, (b) distinguish moral/conventional norms, and (c) recognize moral responsibility due to external (dis)approval.

- 8 years old: (a) attribute basic and non-basic (i.e. self-conscious) emotions, (b) distinguish moral/conventional norms, and (c) recognize moral responsibility due to internal (dis)approval.

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Finally, we are in a position to articulate what guilt is as an emotion. First, guilt is a negatively valenced emotion whose elicitors are moral transgressions for which one is causally responsible. Second, it very well might be a basic emotion such as sadness whose "core relational theme" is loss or anger whose "core relational theme" is offense, and whose elicitors are moral transgressions brought about oneself. Third, it has no characteristic facial behavior; however is associated with normative avowal and reparative behavior.

6 Conclusion

In this essay, I first presented Allan Gibbard's norm expressivism. Second, I considered an objection raised by Shaun Nichols. Third, I provided a response to this objection. But, the most important conclusion is an account of developmental psychology compatible with Gibbard's expressivism and an account of guilt.

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