

...on the other hand, we are bored by innocence

# Getting Rid of the Pains of Sin

John P. Sisk

After delivering the Encyclopaedia Britannica lecture early in 1974, Ivan Illich has been identified with the paradoxical thesis that "the medical establishment has become a major threat to health." Central to his position then (later elaborated in his *Medical Nemesis*) is the medical establishment's responsibility "for the individual's growing demand for institutional management of his pain." Pain, by becoming unnecessary, has become unbearable. It seems eminently reasonable then "to eliminate pain, even at the cost of health." So we have become addicted to whatever ambrosia promises that god-like but essentially negative state of being—painlessness.

There is a special kind of pain to which Illich does not address himself, though given his clerical training I have no doubt that he is quite capable of doing so. This is the pain of moral guilt, which American culture has managed to make into one of the most intolerable forms of suffering. In alleviating this pain we have expended immense energy and ingenuity, with considerable success. In the process we have become addicted; not, like certain old-style God-intoxicated fanatics, to virtue, but to any ambrosia that holds out the promise of sinlessness. This is understandable, given the extent to which we are torn between our nagging superegos and our conviction that, where morality is concerned, we have every right to expect to become more rather than less comfortable. This is one with our feeling that we have every right to expect to travel faster, eat better, and experience more cataclysmic orgasms. Why, having achieved our bicentennial year, shouldn't we at last, and at least, begin to be morally at ease with ourselves? We wish to be not simply without sin but fundamentally incapable of it, as if our most authentic ancestors were those New England antinomians whom the sin-conscious Puritans banished into Rhode Island.

Many of us would have liked it to have been the other way around: that the sin-conscious Puritans had been herded into Rhode Island and kept there like rare animals

in a zoo. Instead, as Eugene B. Borowitz has observed in an important *Worldview* essay ("Religion and America's Moral Crisis," November, 1974), "the hand of the Puritans still rests upon us," for they burdened us with that "sense of a transcendent ethical demand...which gave us our special brand of national idealism." The history of America, especially in this century, has in considerable part been the record of the effort to get rid of that burden—or, if one prefers, to get back to Rhode Island. By the same token the American character is defined historically, not simply by the pressure of that transcendent ethical demand, but by the strategies we have devised to feel sinless.

For a long time it was possible to think of America as itself a condition of virtue in which the pains of sin were bound to be minimal, the crossing over from the corrupt old world having had the effect of a longlasting moral aspirin. In the context of the Declaration of Independence even the pursuit of pleasure is expected to be a sinless affair. We are no longer quite so naive. But in the meantime we have managed to arrange our political institutions so that they are guilt-absolving. Even shrewd foreign observers (hampered as they are so often by old world simplicities) sometimes miss this point. The British commentator Henry Fairlie, for instance, has noted with some irony the disproportionate moralism of the public reaction to the recent sex scandals on Capitol Hill. Not all of us, he says, "are prepared to find, in the peccadillos of public men and women, proof that they are unfit for public life." He has a point, of course; if people in public life had to be as morally pure as much of the public seems to insist, public life could hardly go on at all. But Fairlie overlooks the peccant public person's function as moral scapegoat who takes on the burden of our sins. We may observe his immoralities with a mixture of moral indignation, envy, and vicarious pleasure; at the same time, the more extravagantly he sins (and thanks to the media it is difficult to imagine him sinning any other way) the more sinless we feel. Thus, not only Representative Wayne Hays but Richard Nixon and the whole Watergate crowd have had the side effect (a bicentennial gift?) of making many of us feel

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JOHN P. SISK is Professor of English at Gonzaga University, Spokane.

purser—which may be why *Time* was able to say in its bicentennial issue that “the nation may be in better shape this July 4 than it has been since Nov. 22, 1963.”

To put it another way: Bad example can be more comfortable to live with than good example—which is only to say that in a pluralist society it is hard to find widely acceptable models of excellence. However, it is relatively easy to get people to agree on the entertainment value of discovering the corruptions of the highest, the brightest, and the best. One must know this to understand why the national obsession with the exposé spirit, whether expressed in high or popular culture or in the media generally, is not the passionate concern with virtue that it so often appears to be. Besides, not to know the ugly truth about people in high places is to risk not being able to do anything about one's own ugliness except live with it.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ought to be much more popular in America than it is, since it features a man, Kurtz, who, as a consequence of his own adventure in exposé, discovers that the ultimate truth is “The horror.” If at bottom there is only the horror, we are all forgiven for being horrible; we are, indeed, being most authentic when we are being most horrible. Kurtz, of course, went to Africa as a moral idealist, but moral idealism is a great generator of the pains of sin. This is why it was such a relief for many of us to discover that the legend of Camelot associated with the late John F. Kennedy was largely a fiction. The current effort to degrade Kennedy to a sex athlete (was the assassin not Oswald but perhaps a cuckolded husband?) is an expression of our ambivalence about heroes; if they cannot be proven venal or fraudulent, they are bound to make us feel guilty. Exposé is therefore the protective backlash from the threat of the heroic—a survival tactic that makes it possible to censor out of consciousness our own venality.

If Fairlie had been as American as cherry pie he might have connected corruption on Capitol Hill with the populist tradition and its dire need of a corrupt Capitol Hill to keep the rest of us from examining our consciences too closely. Certainly a good deal of Jimmy Carter's appeal stems from his ability to frame the American scene in terms of a fundamentally virtuous public enthralled by a corrupt government bureaucracy. Even John D. Ehrlichman, hot off the success of his exposé novel, seems to have come around to this position. He now proclaims himself an anti-Washington radical in the tradition of Carter, Wallace, and Reagan. This relates Carter and the rest of them to the moralistic and populist counterculture of the sixties, which is as much to be remembered for rediscovering evil as for rediscovering the best way to live comfortably with it: accomplished by locating evil in the system or in other people.

“I now put in with the people who are disenchanted,” says Ehrlichman. Disenchanted people may be suffering, true enough (who suffers more than King Lear or Willy Loman?), but they may also be possessed with a sense of victimization, in which case they are enjoying themselves, and especially enjoying the sense of being

without blame. Western civilization since the Renaissance has entailed the repeated discovery of perspectives that make it easy for individuals to believe they are not sufficiently in control of themselves and their environment to be guilty of anything. “Our country certainly has produced far more sexual victims than villains,” Karl and Anne Taylor Fleming conclude almost predictably after their interviews with twenty-eight celebrities about their initiation into sex. Indeed, Arthur Koestler has suggested that *Homo sapiens* “is the victim of some minute error in construction,” that a form of schizophysisiology, built into our species, has put “a delusional streak in our history.” Our science, psychology, and literature have been telling us for a long time now that we are all victims, which has made it extremely difficult for those especially convinced of their victimization (women, blacks, homosexuals, the elderly, the New World Liberation Front, etc.) to find a persuasive fixed point that other victims will honor.

Time in its unfolding has therefore functioned like a general absolution. In a way this has been a good thing, since otherwise the revisionist thrust of modern history, with its tendency to discover evil where we had thought virtue securely enshrined, would have overwhelmed us with a sense of moral contamination. Imagine a contemporary America deluged with information about evil in which Americans had no way of protecting themselves from Professor Borowitz's transcendent ethical demand. Imagine, in fact, a Jimmy Carter campaigning on the platform that people, taken one at a time or together, can be guilty as hell, guilty even in some measure of the mess of Watergate.

Traditionally, the prescription for the pains of sin has been confession, although to put it this way is to glorify by-product into prime reason. Ideally, one confesses his sins for reasons of charity—because they were violations of commitments to people or God or both. In *Whatever Became of Sin?* Karl Menninger points out that “it is the ‘against-ness’ or aggression in the intent or motivation that constitutes the designation sin.” But to think of sin in such terms when one is compelled by the contemporary ideal of autonomy is to put oneself down. Self-consciously autonomous persons get rid of the pains of sin by learning to see them as the means by which systems and establishments command their affiliation and thereby diminish them as persons. This is why so many compelling figures in our literature (to say nothing of the charismatic heroes of popular culture) are romantic transgressors, whose practical function is to redefine sin as personal growth—and why at the same time it continues to be possible to interpret a figure like the Fascist and anti-Semitic novelist Céline as though he were an uncompromising moral champion of the ruthlessly autonomous and honest individual against the corruptions of society.

This makes a good deal of sense, given the way it is with us in the world now. Transgressor-heroes simplify life morally by separating self-respect from respectability. Respectability is a matter of measuring oneself against communal rules and is thus an easy way out; whereas self-respect, for which there are no rules,



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demands that you “get in touch with your feelings.” This is identified as the new religion and makes us Rhode Island people gone secular. The psychiatrist Simon Sobo calls this new religion “narcissism.” For Sobo “both values and roles are the instruments of civilization,” whereas for others they diminish the person and burden him or her with guilt. In a divided society narcissism is a moral survival device, especially designed against the threat of being made to feel guilty for refusing to affiliate with others in the ongoing work of civilization. In response to this threat the self-respecting narcissist learns to say or imply: I will join you when you prove yourself worthy of me. Since, as Sobo points out, the narcissist “wants and waits for perfection, finding all else unsustainable,” he has no difficulty finding society utterly unjoinable and so shifts the burden of guilt back to it. Thus the narcissist can at once disencumber his conscience and congratulate himself on his high moral standards. If he has any gift of language, he may be able to persuade others that his special kind of blackmail (when the self is an absolute, all forms of commitment are blackmail) is really a kind of transcendent moral idealism.

Narcissists, seeking, as Sobo says, to have their version of the world judged perfect, though not in the world’s terms, can in fact achieve the kind of airtight moral enclave that the totalitarian state strives for. One of the attractions of totalitarianism is its promise to disencumber the individual conscience. The late Hannah Arendt has said of Adolph Eichmann that “there were no voices from the outside to arouse his conscience,” so that in effect his conscience was a blank check the state

was free to fill out in terms of its own needs. With the outside voices come the pains of sin, and it is the outside voices that the totalitarian state either eliminates or effectively muffles—which is why those who truly believe it get the full effect of its ambrosia in the new and liberating moral clarity of their lives. The narcissist too is liberated from the outside voices; if he has enough talent and power he may even make his voice prevail over all others, and thus (as though he were a god) so put them in touch with *his* feelings that he establishes the standards that make *them* feel guilty. Since the narcissist aspires to be an institution by himself, it is perhaps possible to define narcissism and totalitarianism as extreme conditions of the institutional management of the pains of sin.

One consequence of a general sense of victimization is the leveling out of sins so that moral distinctions crucial to civilization tend to disappear. If a people wishes, for instance, to avoid atrocity, it must be able to place atrocity in a hierarchy of sins. There is no hope of avoiding atrocities like the enslavement of the blacks or the A-bombing of Japanese cities unless it is possible not simply to feel guilty about them but to feel guiltier than one feels about polluting, income tax evasion, embezzlement, marital infidelity, or failing to get in touch with one’s feelings. But this is not possible if the outside voices are silenced, as they were in Nazi Germany, in the interest of making atrocity easy to live with, or if the individual is preoccupied with and protected by his own sense of victimization. The narcissist is protected from any guilty complicity with atrocity by his Iago-like conviction that others cannot be the victims of atrocities, they can only be guilty of atrocities committed against him. One might imagine then that as narcissism and consciousness of victimization become more general it will become more difficult for future Auschwitzes and Hiroshimas to compete for conscience-attention with the increasing number of private atrocities. It would then be a question of which private atrocities have sufficient power behind them to be converted into corrective public programs in which Auschwitzes and Hiroshimas could be accepted as necessary and conscience-binding means to virtuous ends.

In the bicentennial issue of the *New York Times Book Review* Irving Howe remarks how American it has been and still is to think of oneself not only as saved from the chaos of European history but from the past generally. Out of the past come the standards of respectability that make us feel guilty when, as it may be, we should be feeling guilty about feeling guilty. It is possible then to have the experience of absolution simply by identifying the guilt-generating values with the past. This is why it is not sufficient to warn Americans, as Santayana has done, about the dangers of ignoring the past; those who are not capable of understanding the interinvolvement of past and present had better ignore the past lest they feel more guilty than they do already. In effect, a capacity to ignore the past is itself ambrosia from the gods, who, not having to take their pasts into account, have no sins to worry about.

Those who cannot ignore the past can at least revise it so as to take the moral heat off the present; indeed, one way to understand the contemporary revisionist spirit is to see it as, in part, an effort to get a clear conscience. This is most likely why so much revisionist activity comes across as the arrogance of the present. The arrogance of the present, expressing itself about the sexual mores of previous generations, for instance, is absolutely certain that it has arrived at a position of final judgment. The historian Christopher Lasch has referred to this arrogance as "modernization theory," a naive concept of history according to which we assume "that earlier generations were incapable of understanding things we now take for granted," and that "love, sex, and personal autonomy are our own inventions." The present ideology of sexual emancipation, Lasch warns, "cannot be projected back into history without doing violence to our own experience. Nevertheless, the self-congratulatory arrogance that informs so much of the literature of the sexual liberation may be indispensable to that undivided state of mind that any successful revolution requires.

One reason why we project our own ideology of sexual emancipation back into history is to find (or create) heroic transgressors who anticipate and validate us, and who together with us define all the others as guilt-ridden prisoners of the System. From a traditional point of view this is moral therapy by lowering standards—the sort recommended by some observers as a corrective to the West Point cheating scandal. Clearly, all scandals can be blamed on excessively high standards; and just as clearly, if you want the entertainment of scandal you must hold onto the high standards. We have then a contemporary dilemma: We would like to be rid of the pains of sin, but we have little relish for the boredom of innocence. Transgression is where the action is, as no one knew better than Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Thus it is quite possible to remain symbiotically attached to the virtues that gall us most.

If one is convinced, however, that to risk boredom is to risk the lesser evil, then one of the most effective ways to revise the past is to lower the standards passed on from it. Often it is a mere matter of semantics. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin referred to his peccadilloes as "errata," thereby putting an American stamp on a practice used to advantage by the perpetrators of Watergate. Even former Ambassador Anne Armstrong, who resigned as presidential counselor after the revelations of the June 23 tape, refers to Nixon's "tragic errors." But perhaps Ms. Armstrong has used the wrong genre here; for when sins become errors, it is the current form of melodrama, and not tragedy, that prevails; the exculpating villain who victimizes the best of us is that familiar devil, information overload. Nixon needs "tragic" errors for the same reason married people who have affairs need "supplementary," rather than adulterous, relationships.

It is possible to make an effective guilt-alleviant by combining the arrogance of the present with that very transcendent ethical demand that by itself can so bow us down with guilt. Thus the above-mentioned guilt-relieving program for the separation of self-respect from

respectability has the moralistic intensity proper to the activities of Susan B. Anthony or Frances Willard. To indulge an appetite for scandal can bother one's conscience unless the indulgence can be made to serve the cause of the truth, in which case the *National Inquirer* can be read as innocently as Ehrlichman's novel: To the justified all titillations are equal. The tabloids, in fact, are especially good places to learn how to sound moralistic while separating guilt from pleasure, particularly the pleasures of liberated sex. For instance, D.R. Butler (a prolific contributor to such men's magazines as *Duke*, *Stud*, *Dapper*, *Nymphet*, *Escapade* and *Man's Delight*) insists in *Writer's Yearbook* "that all these magazines, in their way, try to show sex as natural and healthy" and perform a useful and even morally commendable function for their readers by helping them overcome hang-ups and get rid of misconceptions about sex and women.

Obviously, Mr. Butler takes pleasure seriously, even as a duty—which makes him sound somewhat like those advertisements that present personal pleasuring as a moral imperative. (Who is more likely to take the line that you ought to get in touch with your feelings than the makers of Schlitz beer?) There is as usual, however, a trade-off. If one has a moral obligation to crusade against the efforts of the past to marry guilt to pleasure, those who are too slothful or selfish to join the crusade risk accumulating a fresh load of guilt. Again, it is quite possible to feel guilty about continuing to feel guilty.

Few terms are more important in this crusade than "natural," and nowhere is the arrogance of the present more apparent than in the conviction that we are now in a better position than all previous ages to know what the natural is, as distinguished from the artificial, the conventional, or the culturally conditioned. This is important, not only because of the American's long love affair with nature, but because of the success with which the natural has been established as the morally good. In practice this means that one can get rid of the pains of sin by identifying them with the historical context in which one lives, so that it is history (the other) that is guilty, not one's natural and authentic self. This is the assumption of books like Charles Reich's *Greening of America*, Tom Hatfield's *Sanstone Experience*, and Richard Neville's *Play Power*. In the last, the symbolic act that points toward a natural, honest, and guilt-free utopia is "happy, hippie playful sex."

According to the psychologist Daniel Yankelovich, the real achievement of the counterculture of the past decade is a "new naturalism" that, mistrusting "rational, conceptual, calculative and abstract modes of thought," promises "to grow at an ever increasing tempo." This optimistic assessment not only suggests the possibility that Koestler's error in construction is not beyond correction and that narcissism will be no problem (it could even turn out to be natural), but that the rationalizing and dividing mind is responsible for the pains of sin. This possibility seems to have been in the mind of Kenneth MacLeish when he visited with those Stone Age remnants, the gentle and seemingly innocent Tasadays of the Mindanao rain forest. "Maybe we ought to look back to primitive peoples to find out where the

world went wrong," he wrote in *The National Geographic*. "Maybe we can learn from the Tasadays."

Fortunately, we have a solution to the guilt-laden problem of the natural and the artificial much closer at hand in that American version of oriental mysticism known as Zen. The British scholar R.C. Zaehner in an analysis of the career of Charles Manson points out the derivation of the latter's violent acts in his direct or indirect experience with Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts, especially the former with their bias for moral relativism. Far from being mad, says Zaehner, Manson "seems to have had a lucidly logical mind" and "had learned that in Hindu mysticism and in Zen the enlightened man who has realized himself as the Absolute—what he called the Soul—was beyond good and evil." This locates him at the center of the Now-intoxicated counterculture, and at the same time suggests his affiliation with the earlier Beats (especially Ginsburg and Kerouac); with the New Thought Movement that began late in the nineteenth century; with the pre-Civil War Transcendentalists, who had their own heady romance with oriental mysticism; with, ultimately, the Rhode Island antinomians, who believed, as Perry Miller writes in *The New England Mind*, "that the union of the elect with the Holy Spirit is immediate and intimate." It may not be especially comforting to think so, but Manson was himself as American as cherry pie—infused with his oriental holy spirit and therefore absolved of all sin.

But suppose that our most pressing moral problem is not more reliable and longer lasting alleviants for the pains of sin but the fact that we have such a pressing need of alleviants. Suppose, in other words, that what Illich says of physical pain ("only the recovery of the will and ability to suffer can restore health into pain") is true of moral pain as well. Menninger, I think, would be on Illich's side. To the former "sin is the only hopeful view," for when "no one is guilty, no moral questions are asked; when there is, in short, just nothing to do, we sink in despairing helplessness." Professor Sobo's ex-



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planation for this condition is that the conscience ceases "to structure frustration and the rage and chaos of the word 'no.'" Without this structuring one easily gets stuck in narcissism and so "becomes either a victim or, in compensation, a conqueror," but in either event conscience-free.

Those of us who were born early in the century and grew up in the humanities know how easy it is to identify guilt with neurosis and to accept inhibition as a thoroughly pejorative term. Donald T. Campbell in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association last summer (reprinted in the December, 1975, *American Psychologist*) observed that psychology and psychiatry "tend to see repression and inhibition of individual impulse as undesirable, and see all guilt as a dysfunctional neurotic blight created by cruel child rearing and a needlessly repressive society." His own position is close to those who, like Menninger and Sobo, "have come to regard much human sin with almost traditional disapproval, and who are recommending that guilt feelings often should be cured by confession, expiation, restitution, and cessation of guilt-producing behavior, rather than by always removing the demands of conscience, interpreting away feelings of guilt as neurotic symptoms."

Professor Campbell also thinks it likely "that losses in social-evolutionary retention systems have led in our present day to a non-optimal production of underinhibited, overly narcissistic, and purely selfish individuals." He speaks with irony of those psychologists and psychiatrists who "have led people to believe that they are being cheated if their experience samples are not totally pleasurable." He believes that for both marriage and work experiences a doctrine "recommending duty rather than one promising pleasure might produce more overall pleasure."

Such a doctrine implies, of course, not only that it is normal, even natural, to suffer the pains of sin, but that the capacity and willingness to do so are a condition of human growth and freedom. At this point we are as far from Rhode Island as we are from the world of the gentle Tasadays. We are, in fact, closer to Prague and that specialist in all the refinements of sin and guilt, Franz Kafka—who, though he admired Franklin and Whitman, and sent the hero of his first novel here, never managed to get to America himself. He says in "Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope and the True Way":

You can hold back from the suffering of the world, you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided.

Perhaps it is possible to draw a Kafkaesque corollary from this observation. If you hold back narcissistically from the moral suffering of the world, it is quite possible that someone else will be happy to bear that burden of suffering for you—someone who has learned the power that goes along with being the encompassing and totalitarian voice that keeps all other voices from being heard.