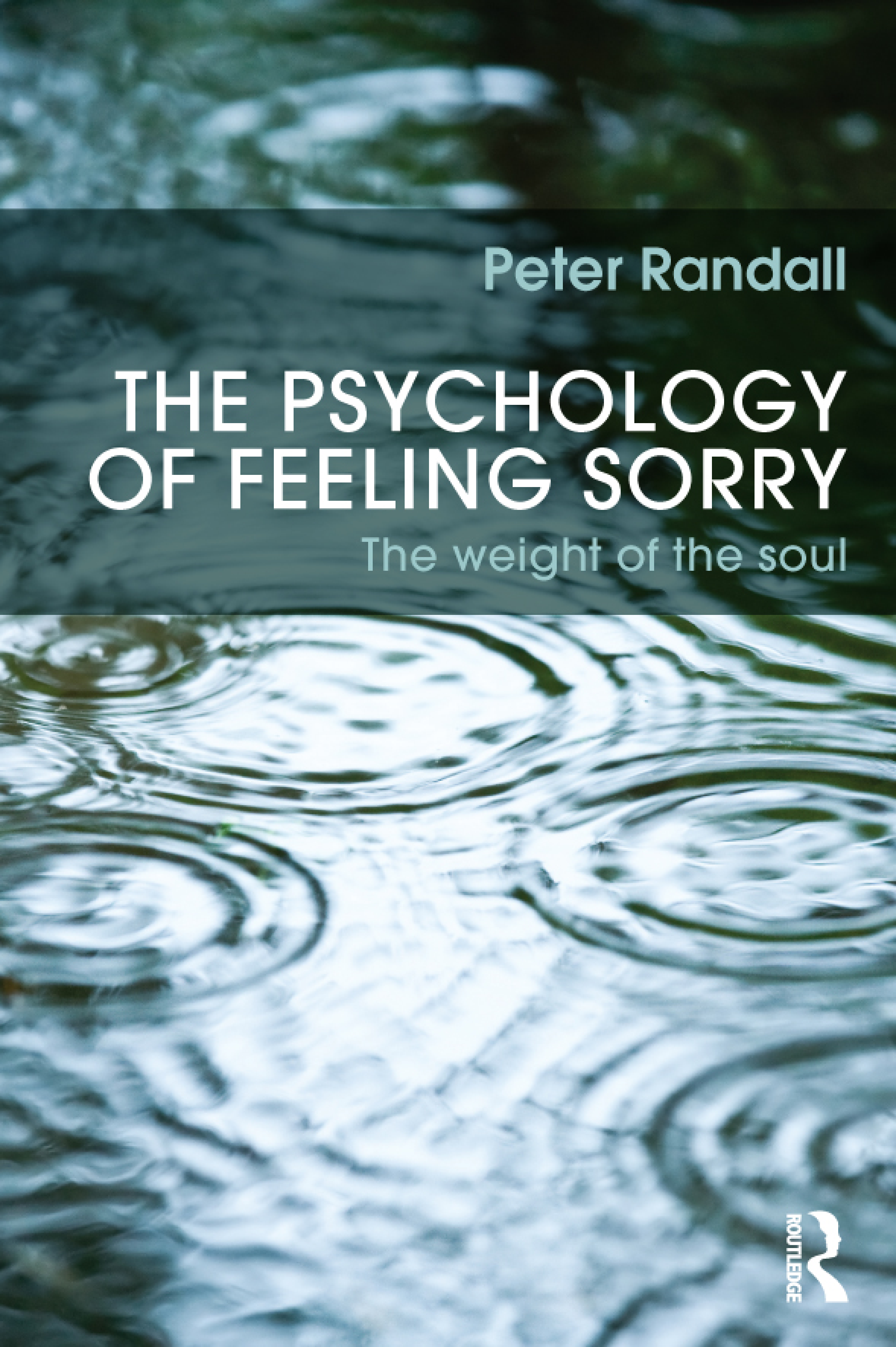

Peter Randall

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FEELING SORRY

The weight of the soul

ROUTLEDGE

The Psychology of Feeling Sorry

The concepts of betrayal, vengeance and forgiveness have long been a major part of religious doctrine throughout the world. However, only in recent times has the impact of these emotions become of interest to those involved in psychological study. In *The Psychology of Feeling Sorry*, Peter Randall links contemporary psychological research with religious teachings and doctrine that have provided spiritual guidance for hundreds of years.

Illustrated with explanatory narratives, Randall fuses religious precepts with psychological theory concerning one of the least understood but most common of human emotions: feeling bad about one's 'sins'.

Using an eclectic approach, Randall explores how much of what is believed within the domain of faith is now supported by modern psychological research. This book will be of interest not only to those with religious beliefs, but also to psychologists, psychotherapists, students, and anyone with an interest in the intersection of psychology, psychotherapy and theology.

Peter Randall is a retired Chartered Psychologist and Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

The Psychology of Feeling Sorry

The weight of the soul

Peter Randall

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For my wife, Marilyn, with love

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I would like to thank Derek Brooks and his colleagues at Leven public library, East Yorkshire. They are brilliant at acting successfully on my weird requests for esoteric literature without so much as a raised eyebrow.

Disclaimers

Although the contents of this book refer to various personal and mental health issues, it does not contain any material that provides therapeutic suggestions or guidance to people in distress. While I have sympathy with anyone in spiritual or psychological distress, I can only suggest that they seek assistance from appropriately qualified professionals.

I regret any errors in translation and interpretation of scriptural material that derive from quotations. I note that there are variations evident in translation of some material between sources.

Preface

The weight of the soul

Background

This book is an attempt to link contemporary psychological theory and research concerning the sorrowful feelings following interpersonal wrongdoing with religious teachings and doctrine that have offered guidance over hundreds of years. It is not an erudite tome that offers far-reaching additional knowledge to further either psychology or religion; it does not review the work of the great moral philosophers or espouse particular theological and psychological ideologies. Hopefully, it is also not a sententious rehash of some of the more florid material that has appeared in the areas of forgiveness and religious belief. Instead, it takes an eclectic approach to material relevant to one of the most common problems that afflict people, that of the feelings of profound sorrow arising from betrayal within interpersonal relationships. The study of this invariably painful experience falls not only within the domain of psychology, the scientific study of human behaviour and mental processes, but also of religious doctrine that provides a moral benchmark for many people, against which they critically judge the rightness of their behaviour.

I start with a brief description of the background to my studies that have led to the writing of this book. These studies began with a strong research interest from my undergraduate days in the area of human aggression. At its earliest, this interest encompassed all forms and manifestations of human aggression, including the vastly complex behaviours that we subsume under the hideously simple label of 'war'. Gradually, however, the inevitable buffeting of time and exposure to the panorama of emotion in day-to-day human relationships led me to narrow my focus. In particular, I became appalled at the enormous daily struggle of a largely unrecognised mass of school children against the predations of powerful bullies. At that time the study of bullying in childhood was emerging quite rapidly and becoming the massive research and practice topic that it is today.

Many strategies for alleviating this scourge have been established and offered up to parents, teachers and agencies dealing with children and young people. Among these were bullying 'hotlines'. My friend, Mike Donohue, now sadly deceased, was both a counsellor and teacher. Together we established a local hotline and, almost immediately, were nearly overwhelmed by a tidal surge of distress calls. Staggeringly, adults made nearly half of the calls. These callers were bullied at work, in their local community and often in both. Others were being abused at home within their intimate relationships. Many simply required support, guidance or assistance over employment rights. Others needed counselling or psychiatric sessions and medication to help them. We arranged those services as best we could.

I am neither a counsellor nor a clinician in the sense of offering therapy. Nevertheless, I did interview many victims and perpetrators for the purposes of information gathering to inform potential intervention.[1] Often issues of forgiveness and remorse emerged, particularly when some victims had also been perpetrators of bullying or some other behaviour that had been regarded as a betrayal by the recipients. Victims sometimes felt able to forgive significant cruelties when their bullies expressed remorse and many of the latter expressed sincere regret for their actions. Sometimes there was forgiveness but no regret; at other times there was sincere remorse but no forgiveness. Occasionally, devoutly religious people forgave the perpetrators of their hurt but on other occasions equally devout people turned their faces away from expressions of heartbreaking remorse and abject apology.

In addition, my experience of other forms of aggressive abuse, particularly the non-accidental injury of children, provided many examples of remorse as the consciences of perpetrators were sparked by the consequences of their actions. Child abusers spoke of their suicidal thoughts as they acknowledged the betrayal of their children; workplace bullies expressed shame over the way they had threatened co-workers; managers acknowledged their abuses of power in casting blame unfairly, and husbands, wives and partners cringed at the way their supposed loved ones had been reduced to nervous wrecks by manipulation and threat. Prisoners found religion and poured out their regrets in prayer and confession. Expressions of remorse and forgiveness were inextricably interwoven in the clinical narratives of the people involved. Inevitably, my interest in the expressions of human aggression began to incorporate these issues also.

The study of forgiveness is another that has burgeoned recently, particularly in the United States. It is noteworthy that this study has examined this uniquely human behaviour from both academic and practice orientations. In particular, the role of forgiveness within the realm of interpersonal relations has received much study. Many university-based researchers have tapped a rich vein of students responding to matters of troubled romantic relations and betrayal, using psychometric surveys. Shame, guilt and apology are included among the topics under investigation, alongside forgiveness and reconciliation.

In general terms, however, the behaviour of remorse has been significantly less thoroughly investigated than that of forgiveness despite evidence that forgiveness is often withheld until victims become convinced that expressions of remorse have been genuine. The role of conscience as a motivator of significant change in relationship behaviour is also much less studied and it seems to me that there has been little attempt to link the psychological basis of expressions of regret and remorse to other disciplines, such as theology, where they have been given great importance and much attention over hundreds of years. These lacunae are surprising and suggest the need of some redress.

Wrongdoing and betrayal

This book cannot be concerned with the whole multitude of betrayals that are perpetrated throughout the functioning of humankind. Thus, atrocities of war, torture and genocide are excluded, as are all types of wrongdoings perpetrated by offenders against victims not known to them. Instead, this book is concerned with harm and betrayal that takes place between people who are well known to each other, often intimately. In essence, these take the form of betrayals of the trust between people who are important to each other for any of a number of reasons. These reasons could include support, nurturance, affection, personal development, stimulation, succour, the meeting of dependency needs (e.g. as in parenting), a recognised duty of care and any other type of relationship between two or more people who depend on a state of loyalty between each other. Examples of such people are parents, romantic partners, close friends, dependents, elderly relatives, carers and members of the caring professions. Betrayal of relationships by these people of those who trust them is often devastating and associated with long-term harm. In many cases, not only the victims suffer but also many offenders who eventually come to feel such sorrow over their actions that their days are forever tainted by remorse and their lives become marinated in shame and guilt.

I emphasise that the betrayals referred to here are interpersonal. This is intended to limit the scope of consideration to a manageable level. It is also recognition that these are the betrayals that are of particular concern to most people as they go through their daily lives. There are few adults who have not experienced the pain of being let down or the sorrowful guilty feelings of letting others down. The impact of these betrayals is very often the cause of deep emotional harm, even mental health difficulties that require professional assistance from counsellors, psychologists or doctors. Infidelity in romantic relationships is a particularly strong example where feelings of betrayal are frequently coincident with the experience of depression.[2]

Obviously, there are other forms of betrayal that are very important. For example, the dictionary definition tends towards the betrayal of one's country through the divulgence of secret information. Although this behaviour may have impact on many thousands of individuals, the betrayal of trust is indirect and largely impersonal. In addition, the traitors may argue that they feel no remorse as they are ideologically driven and acting out of principle.

In addition, there are forms of betrayal of interpersonal relations that are so intense and horrifically damaging that they are beyond the scope of this book. The sexual abuse of children, for example, is excluded because the motivations for this horrendous behaviour are so extensive in range and the motivations of perpetrators acknowledging their abuse so tied to societal and legal responses that it is almost impossible to provide examples of genuine remorse confidently. Even abuse through the passive collusion of a partner or other party[3] is so multifaceted that, in my experience of child-protection investigations, expressions of remorse are often part of an attempt to avoid the removal of children into the care system. I am convinced that this topic could not be dealt with responsibly within a publication that is not specific to child abuse.

Physical abuse and the neglect of children are also excluded. These betrayals of children fall within the general domain of child abuse and are mentioned only in relation to the remorse shown by adults who caused such harm that they have come to the attention of child protection agencies. I acknowledge that some of the most genuine, heartfelt remorse that I have encountered is that of highly stressed parents who have harmed their infants in a moment of absolute desperation. The presence of remorse in these situations is regarded as a vital ingredient of future risk assessment. It can be part of the determination of whether the aggression that brought the parent to the attention of the child protection agencies was impulsive or instrumental. Aggression is considered instrumental if the parent believes it is a justified means of managing a child's behaviour. Such parents are likely to blame their children and feel little or no genuine remorse; clearly, they are likely to respond in much the same way if similar circumstances arise again. Conversely, aggression is thought of as impulsive if the parent knew it was unjustified, did not believe the child was to blame and expressed genuine remorse.[4] Such parents are less likely to respond in the same way under similar circumstances, particularly if they are given effective support and therapy. Obviously, great care has to be taken to ensure that the expressions of remorse are genuine and that the abuser is not 'cheating' in order to make a good impression on the agency's staff. I believe that this area of interpersonal wrongdoing is too substantial and important for me to cover adequately in this book.

The last comments, however, mention one example of cheating by individuals in order to avoid some aversive event. I have sometimes been asked, during discussions on remorse arising from the betrayal of intimate relations, why I make little reference to the behaviour of cheating. Certainly, it has been extensively researched, particularly so in relation to the variety of strategies used by men and women in respect of infidelity and their different motives for extra-relationship sexual behaviour. I have not made use of 'cheating' in this book because it is not a concept that is often employed in the common ground between religious and psychological debate. It is a relatively 'new' concept in this very old field of enquiry and is often used as a media colloquialism for promiscuity. Cheating, in common parlance, crosses a wide spectrum of human activity from the sexual betrayal of intimate relationships through to the manipulation of outcomes in sporting events. Increasingly, in the context of infidelity, it is viewed as having significant evolutionary significance[5] as a means of increasing the benefits derived from intimate dyadic relations, such as acquiring an improved partnership for child rearing.[6] This comment is not meant to disparage a study of cheating as behaviour worthy of investigation elsewhere, but I have to impose limits on the range of human behaviours that are under consideration here. In addition, whereas 'betrayal' is viewed almost universally as unacceptable, 'cheating' lies in a somewhat more acceptable grey area, having complex age, gender and family circumstance influences that render cross-disciplinary investigation open to significant obfuscation.

Conscience and remorse

The acknowledgement of the role of conscience in the recognition of wrongdoing and the expression of remorse has long exercised theologians and moral philosophers who propounded increasingly sophisticated arguments from medieval times onwards. By then, the study of conscience had advanced significantly. Two important concepts had been formulated, *conscientia* and *synderesis*. The former was seen as 'knowledge within oneself', the particular attitudes of individuals to specific instances of right and wrong behaviour, whereas the latter was viewed as the 'spark of conscience', the assumed ability of the individual's mind to understand the principles of moral reasoning and the drive to do good. Two distinct opinions concerning the linkage between conscience and synderesis had evolved by the late Middle Ages. Franciscan theologians, as represented particularly by Bonaventure, held that both are innate facets of practical reasoning and cross-stimulate each other such that there may be improvement of moral judgement with age and experience. The second, led particularly by Aquinas, was based on intellectual judgement. Synderesis was conceptualised as an intellectually based set of constructs that provide general guidance to conscience for application in specific situations. Thus, individuals can choose to 'listen' to this guidance in order to avoid potential wrongdoing in a given situation or ignore it in favour, for example, of pleasurable self-gratification. This viewpoint resonates well with contemporary psychological explanations of the function of conscience.

In very general terms, religious conceptualisation of conscience associates it with the divine, a universal drive to goodness and the morality that is unique to human beings. Such a stance does not always fit comfortably with secular and scientific considerations where cognitive, experiential and emotional qualities are emphasised. These lead towards a position where the development and manifestations of conscience owe more to a combination of genetic potential and learned behaviour intrinsic to the culture the individual develops within. The seeming lack of congruence between these views may, however, be more apparent than real. Both the religious and secular camps appear to share an understanding that, whatever its source, conscience is an intellectual judgement that differentiates right from wrong based on principles, rules, values and societal norms that, collectively, shape the morality espoused by individuals. Although the vocabulary defining the outcome of these judgements varies across religions and between religion and science, it seems generally accepted that a self-examination of one's behaviour that results in finding nothing blameworthy is associated with a feeling of relief and strengthened integrity. Conversely, an adverse judgement may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, remorse and regret.

The vocabulary associated with feeling sorry about one's wrongdoings is extensive and frequently used interchangeably. Here are some of the terms used in this context with an attempted summary at their widely accepted meanings:

Conscience: often referred to as an inner direction providing guidance about the rightness or wrongness of one's behaviour.
Remorse: feeling very regretful; and/or guilty because of an acknowledged wrongdoing; being sorry for one's personal responsibility concerning that wrongdoing.
Regret: sadness or (in religion) repentance about acknowledged wrongdoing.
Shame: painful feelings of humiliation and/or distress caused by the acknowledgement of wrongdoing.
Guilt: the unpleasant and aversive feeling arising from having done wrong.
Contrition: the state of feeling remorseful and penitent aroused by guilt.
Apology: typically, a regretful acknowledgment of an offence or failure made directly by the perpetrator usually to the victim(s).
Repentant: the feeling or expression of sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or, in religion, sin. Often, the repudiation of the aspects of one's character that generated the wrongdoing and a resolve to do one's best to extirpate those aspects. Sometimes, there is a resolve to atone by making amends for the harm that one has done.
Penitent: feeling or showing sorrow and regret for having done wrong and seeking forgiveness from God.
Atonement: reparation for a wrongdoing and, in religion, the expiation of sin. This is extended in Christian faith to include the concept of 'vicarious atonement'; the belief that Jesus took upon himself the weight and consequences of human transgression vicariously.
Vengeance: the punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for an injury or wrong.

As may be seen, these terms suffer from repetition of meaning, redundancy and ambiguity. Indeed, why should they not? The concepts that underpin them are diffused in clarity by the factors of significant interpersonal differences of understanding as well as by variations between religions, cultures and subcultures. I find, however, that people generally do seem to understand each other when these terms appear in everyday usage, despite the apparent lack of clarity.

That is not, however, an adequate basis for scientific enquiry. If there is a significant degree of variation, then attempts should be made to delineate some meaning that can guide investigation. This book is about feeling sorry, that sensation associated with remorseful ideations of one's personal agency in wrongdoing. An important question that arises from this asks how 'tight' is the understanding of remorse when used in the context of perpetrators feeling sorry for their actions or failures to act? For example, can perpetrators who feign remorse be said to show remorse or are they merely actors on a stage portraying a character type that is not real? Is their subsequent make-believe penitence valid if it fools the victims into feeling that there is a recognition of the harm done to them and a genuine sorrow that it was inflicted?

What about displays of being sorry that appear to be 'over the top'? For example, do people who display extreme regret over a trivial wrong, such as a forgotten shopping date, seem as credible as a motorist who shows extreme regret over running down and killing a pedestrian? Can a serial killer who claims to have found God before repudiating his crimes, appear to be genuinely remorseful to a parole board?

Jefferie Murphy[7] provides a useful differentiation between two types of remorse that may lead to repentance. He states that repentance is the remorseful acceptance of one's wrongdoing, the refusal to accept the traits of character that were associated with the wrongdoing, coupled with a resolve to banish those traits and atone for the damage done. This embracing conceptualisation is, he believes, generally correct and useful but does not fully reflect the complexity of remorse. He suggests that not all expressions of guilt among morally guided people are necessarily associated with remorse. For example, the breaking of a promise that was of great importance to the person to whom it was made should stimulate feelings of guilt, but if there were no long-term painful or damaging consequences, it is likely that the term 'remorse' might be considered too extreme. Murphy suggests that the experience of remorse is more closely associated with extreme and powerful guilt feelings that are proportional to the grave seriousness of acknowledged wrongdoing.

In addition, Murphy considers that not only the degree of severity of the wrongdoing is important, but also that a sensation of hopelessness is essential and associated with an inconsolable 'bite' of a guilty conscience. He refers to the French medieval belief in the 'agenbite of inwit' as one type of remorse.

Dan Michel, a monk of Canterbury, brought this concept to England in a translation of 1340 and referred to the prick (agenbite) of conscience (the Old English word 'inwit', meaning an inner sense of right and wrong). Murphy suggests remorse of this type appears to engage more than guilt only and believes that the wrongdoing is so serious that the harm done can never be made right again such that the victim is irrevocably and permanently harmed. Clearly, a comparatively trivial wrong, such as a broken promise to go shopping, cannot generally constitute such a profound assault on the injured party. Murphy speaks of rape, murder and torture by way of comparison and comments that even if wrongdoers could impose an 'eye for an eye' form of atonement on themselves, there would still be no cessation of the inconsolable feeling of remorse because the self-imposed punishment is voluntary and so not comparable with the vicious deeds forced on the victims, robbing them of their autonomy.

I accept the force of the argument that remorse is a complex phenomenon and that Murphy's, and no doubt other, distinctions are viable. Nevertheless, I return to my comment above, that when used within the communications of most people, there is a reasonably effective shared understanding of descriptions such as 'remorse' and 'feeling sorry'. As a consequence, this book does not make such distinctions and uses the description in the form of an amalgam of the different types of remorse.

The weight of sin

It is hardly surprising that those who have found their conscience troubled by wrongdoing and the harm they have done to others, should express a feeling of being weighed down with guilt and often a need to 'unload' that weight through remorse and acts of contrition. Many people from different faiths have told me that confessing their sins has given them a profound feeling of forgiveness and cleansing. They explain that they feel unburdened, lighter of spirit and closer to their families and friends.

The 'weight' of one's sins is an age-old concept. According to Christian mythology, St Michael, the patron saint of warriors, is the guardian of the souls of the deceased. It was his duty to weigh both their good deeds and unreconciled bad deeds in perfectly balanced scales in order to determine whether they should go to heaven or hell. As with many other Christian beliefs, this was a plagiarised version of much older non-Christian mythology. For example, during the Judgement of Osiris from Ancient Egyptian myth, the soul's 'heart' was given to Osiris who, in the Hall of Truth, used a great golden scale to balance it against the white feather of Ma'at, the symbol of truth and harmony. If the soul's heart weighed less than the feather, it was allowed to enter into heaven, the blissful Field of Reeds. If, however, the heart was heavier than the feather, it was thrown to the floor and there consumed by Amenti, a horrific god with the face of a crocodile, the front of a leopard and the rear of a rhinoceros. The luckless person then ceased to exist.

What, then, of the influence of religion[8] on remorse and repentance? These concepts have been an essential ingredient of humanity's spiritual life long before psychology existed in any formal sense. In my experience, the understandings of these guides to moral behaviour are still very strongly associated with religious belief and doctrine, even among those who have no strong faith. Thus, remorse is often associated with moral guidance acquired from doctrinal and other religious teaching and this, perhaps, begs the question as to whether non-believers can feel truly remorseful about wrongdoing. It is certainly the case that many criminals allege that they have experienced[9] a religious conversion that has caused them to become remorseful and penitent, but is religious belief really the *sine qua non* of genuine remorse? I am of the view that such an opinion is based on simplistic consideration and argument. For example, extremist beliefs sometimes lead religious fundamentalists to perpetrate appalling attacks on innocent people. Although many of these perpetrators express regret for the harm suffered, it is rare indeed that there is any repentance or even acknowledgement that the assaults committed were wrong and against moral codes. Instead, it is typically the case that these extremists use their religious beliefs to support their horrendous behaviour and claim that their God will reward them for violence against victims unknown to them. It is perverse that religion has been used for centuries as the excuse for behaviour that resists even the most lenient judgement of wrongdoing. Thus, these perpetrators can transform themselves from the murderers they are in the eyes of most of humanity into devout soldiers who are engaged in a righteous struggle and superior to the point of being deserving of the rewards of martyrdom. Whereas many violent criminals can accept they have overstepped the boundaries of law and decency, these violent extremists sometimes delude themselves that they deserve lesser punishments or none at all. No logical argument, therefore, can be made convincingly that religious belief is a necessary or sufficient condition for remorse and repentance although, perversely, such beliefs may well be causally associated with criminal behaviour of the worst kind. In addition, many atheist and agnostic individuals have extremely well-developed empathetic responses to the people they have harmed and express sincere remorse and repentance.

It is not my intention to attempt a sceptical argument against those who profess religious conversion. As a person without formal religion, it would not be appropriate for me to repudiate such experiences out of disbelief only. Nevertheless, there are significant difficulties in accepting the arguments of some who claim conversion and then argue they have been born again as different and better people such that they are no longer the same individuals whose perpetration of harmful wrongdoing would have led to adverse judgement of them.

People who acknowledge wrongdoing are unlikely now to fear the consumption of their souls by hungry crocodile gods, but many do fear divine retribution and a sentence to hell. Others fear more earthly retributions or simply feel weighed down by the punishments of their own consciences, their guilt and shame. The subtitle of this Preface reflects a belief that one's soul may be weighed down by an accretion of one's wrongdoing over the life course. One purpose of the book, therefore, is to explore the psychological processes that create this 'weight' and, if possible, to reconcile them with much older religious doctrine. I endeavour to present the developmental, learning, personality and social factors that contribute to this process within the domains of contemporary spiritual, religious and cultural discourse. It is believed that feeling genuinely sorry for wrongdoing is an important therapeutic experience, relieving this weight and restoring a sense of self-worth. Modern psychological study helps to bring substance to this subject and is illustrated by vignettes about people[10] who have come to acknowledge their responsibility for harm done to others.

Content

This section provides a brief description of the material in this book on a chapter-by-chapter basis. It may appear that some topics are rather incongruent with the book's title but each has a significant association with profound remorse after wrongdoing and this justifies inclusion. Each chapter has a summary and, for those chapters where it is appropriate, a section dealing with implications for practice. Illustrative vignettes are provided to support main issues where appropriate. Religious material is drawn mostly from the major world religions (defined by numbers of adherents) and is presented in no order of personal preference.

1 The stirrings of conscience

Research studies have indicated that wrongdoing leading to the harming of others that is not followed by feelings of remorse can be indicative of deficits in the development of conscience. This chapter examines the development of conscience from childhood and the links it has to feeling sorry for harm done to others.

2 Interpersonal relationships and betrayal

This chapter provides a discussion of the nature and impact of betrayal with particular reference to transgression within interpersonal relationships. Current theoretical considerations of the complexities of betrayal are presented and the impact upon 'victims' is discussed. Some examples are provided to illustrate important points and the door is opened to a discussion of potential responses from victims.

3 Interpersonal relationships, religion and vengeance

The religion-orientated concept of vengeance, or revenge as it is more usually referred to, is considered in its context as a response to real or perceived grievance. This chapter leads on from the second because the instinct of revenge is very strong among the victims of betrayal. As the philosopher Nussbaum opined, the act of vengeance often differs from the original wrongdoing only in the sequence of events and because it is a response rather than the original act. This rather Old Testament view is no longer congruent with a modern-day morality that often subscribes more to the fallacy of 'Two wrongs make a right'.[11] This kind of decision-making may lead to vengeful behaviour that has as many irrational and destructive consequences for the victim seeking vengeance as for the perpetrator. There may be damage done to the victim's integrity, social standing and personal safety simply for the sake of getting one's own back. What makes people seek out such a pyrrhic victory? This chapter considers the predictors of vengeance (e.g. age, gender, religious background, narcissism, global self-esteem, acknowledging remorse) and the factors that may make victims step back from thoughts of revenge to consider other options such as forgiveness. One of these factors might be that some victims do not want a weight on their own souls arising from a refusal to forgive.

4 Shame, guilt and remorse

Perpetrators of harm to others may acknowledge their responsibility to a greater or lesser extent. Some may feel guilty about their actions. This does not necessarily mean that their feelings will go beyond this. They may be able to rationalise why they acted as they did and some even blame the victims (e.g. as in many cases of domestic violence and sexual assault). In terms of contemporary theory, guilt may be experienced but not necessarily as a motivation for further action that benefits the victim. Perpetrators might, however, develop patterns of negative affect as a consequence of acknowledging guilt that may, in turn, lead to remorse. This trend is evident in case studies of perpetrators who have gone on from acknowledgement of guilt to the expression of remorse. Parallels are to be found in religious belief.

5 Remorse and criminal offending

This chapter examines the expressions of remorse from criminal offenders before, during and after their trials. This is now such an important area of multidisciplinary concern that it is worthy of separate investigation. The judiciaries of several countries attend to expressions of remorse that affect sentencing in particular. In addition, many guilty prisoners (and some on remand) claim to have found God and wish to demonstrate a newly acquired moral code that will turn them away from further wrongdoing. Both psychological and legal studies reveal opposed views on whether expressions of remorse and acquired spirituality are worth considering during the legal process. Is finding religion in prison a sufficient reason for the mitigation of a sentence or not? If it is, what tests should be applied in order to detect deception? There are many studies and published opinions. This chapter presents a cross-section and gives examples to support the main pros and cons. For example, some authorities provide forceful opinion against taking account of remorse, whereas others argue equally strongly in favour of the spiritual components of restorative justice that include remorse.

6 Religion, spirituality and remorse

Given the importance that most cultures attach to religion (and spirituality in general) is it important to consider the religious/spiritual connotations of remorse, particularly as they relate to relevant psychological processes. That some perpetrators 'feel sorry' for the harm they caused is of central importance to the interwoven consideration of their forgiveness. Likewise, the healing powers of acknowledging guilt (perpetrator) and turning from a lifetime of vengeful grudge-bearing (victim) are thought to benefit mental health. The acolytes of all major religions have sought to encourage these benefits for millennia; now modern counsellors and psychotherapists pursue the same goals. It is very important, therefore, to the consideration of the interaction of victims and perpetrators to provide comment on the potential influences of religion and spirituality.

7 Forgiveness

This chapter deals mainly with forgiveness in relation to transgressions within interpersonal relationships. This is an important area for study because it provides a potentially strong link between the responses of victims to perpetrators. Behaviour of perpetrators that is indicative of remorse, of regret for their wrongdoing, is one of the more powerful influences on victims that may increase the probability of forgiveness and reconciliation. A review of the contemporary psychological understanding is provided and the religious connotations are considered.

8 Remorse, empathy, forgiveness and therapy

Therapies for the trauma of betrayal of close relationships are redolent with processes that link religion/spirituality with contemporary psychology. This chapter does not seek to describe specific therapies in detail; such an endeavour is beyond the scope of this book and has been well served by other publications. Instead, this chapter seeks to observe the dimensions of remorse and forgiveness that are bound up in the processes through which sincere acceptance of blame by the offender become enmeshed with the gradual erosion of the victim's negative emotions to a point where it becomes possible to consider forgiveness, if not reconciliation. Central to this movement are the workings of empathy: from the offender in relation to the pain suffered by the victim and from the victim in relation to the pain associated with the sincere portrayal of remorse. The role of therapeutic endeavour in this movement is considered.

9 The weight of the soul

The final chapter examines a difficult time near the end of life when the experience of feeling sorry may rise to a particularly critical point. At this time people realise the opportunity for acting on remorse may have passed and they may also experience anxiety about what happens to them in the afterlife. How sorry they feel for wrongdoing, particularly the betrayal of relationships, may be intensified by their conceptualisation of events after death (including judgement and punishment), particularly if these have been shaped by religious doctrines that may have been important to them throughout much of their life course. Thus, this content completes an examination of the factors underpinning feeling sorry for wrongdoing that began with the development, during childhood, of conscience (Chapter 1). I will also attempt to provide an amalgam of the disparate opinions and multidisciplinary sources that contribute to this book. In short, the evidence is that, for most people the burden of guilt or vengeful grudge bearing is a heavy weight to bear. This burden leaves little space for any 'feel-good' factor and unresolved transgression within intimate relations always seems to leave its weight on the soul.

Chapter 1

The stirrings of conscience

Lord Byron's line from *The Giaour* 'No ear can hear nor tongue can tell the tortures of the inward hell' (1813), reminds us that conscience is as much a source of pain and discomfort as it may be a reassurance of good moral fibre. The pains evoked by stirring conscience have stimulated a mass of compelling attempts to describe its impact on those troubled by their wrongdoings. The simile of conscience as a quiet oppressive voice is exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi's comment, 'The only tyrant I accept in this world is the still voice within'. The power of troubled conscience to unman us is also frequently referred to; for example, William Shakespeare's famous line points out, 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . .'. He understood that the workings of our conscience might lead us to painful feelings of remorse when we act against our moral values. This is congruent with the writings of Paul (e.g. Romans, 2:15) who sees conscience as an internal witness of our behaviour, accusing us according to its wrongness. On the positive side, however, we may experience a sense of integrity or righteousness when our behaviour meets our moral standard.

What is this quiet tyrant of our private minds? How can it guide our conduct and punish our shortcomings? How is it shared with our fellows such that the essence of our personal morality is also part of a communal benchmark enabling cooperative social behaviour? Are we born with it or does it steal up on us with age and experience? It can evoke strong emotions, yet is it emotional or merely cognitive? Does one's religion cause conscience to develop or merely influence it? Questions on the nature of conscience has been the subject of philosophical debate for centuries and its development in terms of moral thinking has exercised psychologists in countless research studies.

For the purposes of this chapter, conscience is considered to comprise both the cognitive and emotional processes that constitute people's internalised moral regulator of their behaviour.

Relatively recently, psychologists have examined the role of moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt, in moral behaviour. There has been a significant change of opinion on the validity of studying such individually based experiences of emotionality in relation to moral behaviour with an increasing awareness that such experiences may inhibit immoral behaviour and motivate prosocial moral behaviour. Previously it had been argued that the non-deliberate nature of emotional experience militates against the rational and considered judgement that is assumed to underpin moral behaviour. In addition, emotions are not considered to be impartial in that they are usually focused on specific instances or events and reflect personal and self-interested perspectives. It is a purpose of emotionality to energise action that is focused on personal perceptions of problems rather than on a broader perspective that requires intellectual deliberation. Not surprisingly, therefore, a common excuse for grossly undesirable behaviour is that an excess of emotional lability robbed wrongdoers of their reason and overcame their customary restraints. It was argued, therefore, that emotionality is counterproductive to the manifestation of moral behaviour.

Yet this cannot be wholly or always true, as examples abound of moral emotions that have led to highly organised and considered actions. On occasion, these events have led people to take up arms in order to save others from oppression, their revulsion at ethnic cleansing or other monstrous behaviour having animated them to violent remedies. At these times their moral compass and strength is defined not by cold intellectualism but by loathing, sadness and an overwhelming urge to protect the vulnerable from unendurable wrongdoing. Whereas the purely intellectual response might have been to stand by and remain detached, the moral emotional imperative has been to take sides and do whatever is needful. Indeed, it may be harder for those who are deficient in emotionality to evince moral responses generally as they lack the spurs of compassion and humanity.

Ben-Ze'ev (1997), for example, argues that we do have a responsibility over our emotions that emanates from indirect control over the circumstances eliciting them. He contends that the partial or biased nature of human emotions can impart a moral perspective of particular circumstances in addition to that provided by intellectual processing. Consequently, they enable the establishment of core values and commitments that form the fundamental guidelines of moral behaviour. This analysis of the influence of emotion on moral behaviour fits well within the general psychological conceptualisation of emotion as changing patterns of physiological arousal, feelings, cognitions and behaviours that are made in response to personally significant circumstances. Both basic and higher-order emotions are thought to be involved with moral behaviour. For example, Kochanska's (1997) report on multiple pathways to conscience described the importance of fearfulness (a basic emotion) as a possible enhancer of the developmental rate of conscience. In addition, Walker and Pitts (1998) studied moral maturity and reported on moral excellence in terms of higher-order factors. The results of their research led them to describe the highly moral individual as one who holds strongly to a range of values and principles that reflect externalised moral guidelines and the internal workings of conscience. Integrity is prized and revealed as an awareness of personal agency such that this individual is committed to acting according to the ideals of compassion for others, helpfulness and the maintenance of relationships through reliability and fidelity.

In essence, therefore, the role of emotionality in the development and functioning of conscience is now accepted despite some caveats about labelling. Both basic and higher-order 'moral' emotions may be assumed to play a part in the workings of conscience and the following section provides a summarised consideration of this.

The moral emotions

Moral emotions are a vital but seldom regarded facet of functional prosocial decision-making and consequent behaviour. They are, therefore, integral to the composition of conscience. One description of them, provided by Haidt (2003), is that they are coupled to the welfare of people other than oneself and also to the interests of society in general. These emotions supply the motivating force to avoid causing harm to others and to behave in a manner that is considered 'good' within one's society. Typically, the moral emotions are subdivided into categories relating to their impact on the individual (e.g. Eisenberg, 2000). For example, among the self-conscious emotions there are those that are negatively experienced, such as guilt, shame and embarrassment, and those that are positively experienced, such as pride, gratitude and the underlying feelings of empathic processes.[1]

The self-conscious moral emotions

Self-conscious emotions are those elicited by the sometimes painful processes of self-examination. Although self-examination may start unbidden and unnoticed, it cannot remain so as awareness must bloom for self-consciousness to be engaged and for the resulting emotion to energise some response. At the point where self-consciousness occurs, the self becomes aware that it is evaluating its functioning or potential functioning within the circumstances that have stimulated the process. Thus, it is not always necessary for there to have been an overt behavioural response to have occurred in order that the self begins to subject itself to scrutiny; it is enough that individuals can become aware of how they might behave under the prevailing circumstances that is sufficient to stimulate an emotional response. Consequently, it is not unusual to hear people state that they are 'ashamed' of their own thoughts, or of 'looking over their shoulders' as though they had been observed merely thinking about potential wrongdoing. It is probable that this emotional response to 'wrong' thinking is engendered by a prior history of acting poorly in similar circumstances, in which case the negative self-conscious emotion is a punisher for past behaviour. This anticipatory response provides a firm guide about what not to do, whereupon the individual has an opportunity to respond in a morally acceptable way instead.

Apparently, therefore, moral self-conscious emotions impart prompt sanctions upon behaviour by punishing that which is or could potentially be unacceptable or reinforcing behaviour that is deemed morally correct. The emotions of guilt, shame, embarrassment, self-approval and pride provide a moral compass for a route to take or one that has already been taken.

It is axiomatic, however, that none of this is possible for those individuals who are insensitive to such emotions. The feeling of shame is only available to those who are disposed to the experience of shame. Thus, Tangney (1990), in her paper on the assessment of proneness to shame and guilt, states that *emotion disposition* is the propensity to experience an emotion across a range of circumstances. If, for example, the specific emotion was guilt, then those who are highly disposed to its occurrence would be more likely to experience it if they catch themselves anticipating acting badly and also are more likely to experience it as a consequence of actually acting badly.

Embarrassment

Examination of the broad spectrum of relevant literature indicates that shame and guilt are the negative moral emotions that have been studied most during research enquiry into the nature and development of conscience. These are given particular attention in the next section, but some mention of the emotion of embarrassment is appropriate here, given that it is sometimes considered within the same grouping as guilt and shame.

Eisenberg (2000) reviewed contemporary understanding of the negative self-conscious emotion of embarrassment. She reflected opinion that embarrassment can be differentiated from guilt and shame in that it has antecedents, experience and displays that are not evident in respect of other emotions. For example, in comparison with shame, Miller and Tangney's (1994) findings suggest that embarrassment was less intense, less enduring, resulted from less grave behavioural transgressions and associated with less serious outcomes. The negative feelings were not as likely to be associated with self-directed anger and disgust. The research findings of Robbins and Parlavecchio (2006) on embarrassment and shame indicate that embarrassment includes feelings of surprise at one's unintended behaviour and a concern that observers have observed failings in the self that is presented to them rather than the preferred 'core' self. They suggest that these elements are less likely to be evident in experiences of shame. Indeed, the nature of the embarrassing incidents may even be a source of amusement to the person involved, whereas that is unlikely to be the case for shame. In short, there is agreement that embarrassment is distinguishable from other negative self-conscious moral emotions and has only a minor role, if any, in moral functioning.

Shame and guilt

The following are definitions of shame and guilt provided by Ferguson and Stegge (1998) and cited by Eisenberg (2000) that are used within this section. It is acknowledged that they are open to argument but provide a basis for the ensuing discussion.

> *Shame:* a dejection-based, passive, or helpless emotion aroused by self-related aversive events. The ashamed person focuses more on devaluing or condemning the entire self, experiences the self as fundamentally flawed, feels self-conscious about the visibility of one's actions, fears scorn, and thus avoids or hides from others.
>
> (Ferguson and Stegge, 1998, p. 20)

> *Guilt:* an agitation-based emotion or painful feeling of regret that is aroused when the actor actually causes, anticipates causing, or is associated with an aversive event
>
> (Ferguson and Stegge, 1998, p. 20)

It is broadly accepted that shame and guilt are moral emotions. As Thomaes *et al.* (2010) point out, both are elicited by moral transgressions that reflect badly on one's moral credibility and may evoke empathetic concerns about the harm done to victims of those transgressions. In addition, it is axiomatic that the experience of shame and guilt is possible only if the individuals involved are possessed of a morality that delineates right from wrong (e.g. Eisenberg, 2000). Finally, it is acknowledged that from the internalised lessons of childhood socialisation, shame and guilt are potential self-punishers of moral transgression that provide an opportunity to back away from wrongdoing or to do better in future. As such, they act as motivators for moral behaviour (e.g. Olthof *et al.*, 2000).

As stated above, shame and guilt have been the subjects of much, if not the majority of research studies on moral emotions. Indeed, Thomaes *et al.* (2010) among others regard them as the quintessence of moral emotions. Their significance was captured by Gaylin (1979) in his comment that they are noble emotions, essential to the maintenance of civilised society, and vital to the development of the refined and elegant qualities of human potential, namely generosity, service, self-sacrifice, unselfishness and duty. Given this level of importance it is, perhaps, surprising to find that many people – clinicians, researchers and laypeople alike – have tended to use the terms 'shame' and 'guilt' as synonyms. In particular, shame has received less attention, probably because guilt has been perceived to be a higher order indicator of conscience at work, with shame being a component of it.

Tangney *et al.* (2007) report that there have been three kinds of effort to distinguish between them. The first examines a distinction based on the nature of eliciting events, while the second is founded on the public versus private nature of the wrongdoing. The third is an intrapersonal judgement based on the degree to which the wrongdoer considers the emotion-eliciting transgression to be a failure of their whole self rather than a particular instance of their behaviour ('It's not like me to behave like that'). Of these, the first appears to have received the greatest attention. Generally, however, it is found that research into reports of the personal experiences of children and adults of shame and guilt following wrongdoing events do little to differentiate between the two emotions. Tracey and Robins (2006) report that there appears to be little distinction between those transgressions that evoke either one or the other. Whereas many common examples of transgressions were described, including cheating, stealing, lying, disobedience and failing to help others, there were no consistent trends as to whether the subjects reported experiencing shame or guilt associated with them. Some subjects reported shame, whereas others reported guilt for the same wrongdoing. It would appear, therefore, that the nature of the event when wrongdoing has occurred does not have much to do with the distinction between shame and guilt.

Despite these complexities, current psychological theory does differentiate between these two moral emotions. There is some evidence that shame is elicited by a wider range of circumstances that include both moral and non-moral failures and wrongdoings, whereas guilt is more specifically linked to moral transgressions (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2002). As a consequence, the degree of doubt about guilt's provenance within the range of moral emotions is slight. That of shame is less secure. To further the argument that shame is a true moral emotion, Tangney and her colleagues call upon the 'Big Three' ethics of morality (Tangney *et al.*, 2007) proposed by Shweder and colleagues (e.g. Shweder *et al.*, 1997). This proposal originated with the commonplace observation that different cultures value different moral rules. Thus, Shweder and colleagues reported that the conventional moral judgement of people from the Indian culture is bound by strict social rules that are universally applied. These are founded on community duties and sometimes on religious doctrine. The morality of people from the United States, however, was less constrained by such rules and they espoused instead, a morality founded on individual rights. Subsequent analysis by Shweder and colleagues led them to conclude that it is possible to reduce a base-set of universal moral concepts to a 'Big Three' group of ethics – namely, the ethics of autonomy, the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity (Shweder *et al.*, 1997). It is postulated that these three can coexist within cultures but with varying degrees of emphasis according to the individual differences of each culture.

The *Ethic of Autonomy* defines the individual as the source of moral authority. This moral system is founded in people's rights to pursue their needs and desires but also on fairness and justice.

The *Ethics of Community* are founded upon respect for others and authority, loyalty, honour, effective self-control, and behaviour appropriate to social roles and duties to other individuals, family, community, nation, and other interpersonal groups that define a person's identity. In essence, the ethic of community locates individuals as members of groups to which they have commitments and obligations. It is these responsibilities that provide the basis of the individual's moral beliefs and values (Arnett *et al.*, 2001).

The *Ethics of Divinity* evolved from the study of two distinct religious traditions: American monotheistic Christianity, and Indian polytheistic Hinduism, with core concepts shared by both types of tradition. In essence, the concepts underpinning these ethics locate individuals as spiritual entities subject to a higher order. The self is connected to a higher force, and the body is considered sacred thereby making vital the keeping of its purity (e.g. Haidt *et al.*, 1993). Although the ethics of divinity do not require faith in any particular religion, they adhere to belief or faith in divine or natural law. These beliefs may well be rooted in religious authorities and texts (e.g., the Bible, the Koran, the Vedas scriptures), as well as duties and sanctions associated with supernatural forces (e.g. Arnett *et al.*, 2001).

Shweder's publication of the Big Three codes of ethics prompted many research studies across cultures and nationalities and, in general, the results have supported the usefulness of the conceptualisation. Guerra and Giner-Sorolla (2010) reviewed much of this research as part of their validation of a quantitative measure of the Big Three moral codes: namely, the Community, Autonomy and Divinity Scale (CADS).

Returning to Tangney's arguments favouring shame as a moral emotion, she and her colleagues take the view that it is less associated with the ethics of autonomy but more strongly with those of community and divinity. When an instance of an individual's behaviour is essentially oriented towards self-gratification but obviates the requirements of social obligation or produces breaches of religious doctrine, then there will be an experience of the negative emotion of shame. Consequently, therefore, shame may be said to function as a sanction against selfish acts and as a motivator of future improved behaviour.

Moral pride

This section leaves consideration of those self-conscious moral emotions that are experienced negatively and considers an example that is experienced positively. Pride is a positively experienced emotion, at least until it comes just before the proverbial fall from grace. It is described as being elicited by socially approved acts or by being a socially respected person (Tangney *et al.*, 2007). Its force is thought to reinforce other approved behaviour and so increase the probability of repetition. Although it is a powerful motivating force, it has not been closely studied; indeed, Tangney and her colleagues describe it as the neglected sibling of the self-conscious emotions. In addition, Eisenberg (2000) points out that although pride is a self-evaluative emotion and that it can be elicited by moral behaviour, it has been researched mostly in relation to achievement. As a consequence, its role in the functioning of conscience is imperfectly understood.

Tracy and Robins (2004a) acknowledge that much of the research on pride has emphasised the experience of that emotion in association with achievement, usually in respect of occupational, educational or sporting attainments. Nevertheless, they argue that most people strive to be good, decent and to treat others well (Tracy and Robins, 2004b) such that success in these leads to feeling authentic pride. This may act as a positive motivation reinforcer for behaving in morally acceptable ways according to the Big Three ethics. Tracy and Robins (2007) distinguish between authentic pride that is associated with self-esteem and hubristic pride that provides only a 'short cut' to a status that is probably unwarranted and short-lived. The latter is not a viable self-conscious moral emotion and Tangney *et al.* (2007) refer to hubris as the 'evil twin' of pride.

Other-focused moral emotions

The consideration of moral emotions above has examined the self-conscious emotions (embarrassment, shame, guilt and pride) that arise when individuals scrutinise and pass judgement on their core selves or instances of their behaviour given the benchmark of their own moral standards. Psychologists, notably Haidt (e.g. 2000, 2003), have extended the range for consideration by the addition of other-focused emotions that are elicited by judging the behaviour of others in the light of the same moral standards. The other-focused emotions include the negative ones of 'righteous' anger, contempt and disgust, and the positive ones of gratitude and elevation.

Rozin and colleagues have provided several studies on the negative emotions of anger, contempt and disgust (Rozin *et al.*, 1999). They cite Izard's reference to them as the *hostility triad* and locate each within Shweder's Big Three triad of moral emotions.

Righteous anger

The emotion of anger is not usually thought to fall within the moral domain. The range of eliciting circumstances is very broad and need not be associated with moral infringement; indeed, animals are capable of displaying anger and are not known for their moral codes. In human terms, for example, a valid parking ticket may well elicit anger but there is usually no sense that the traffic warden had breached a moral code in issuing it. In addition, anger may