

Study Guide and Commentary ACIM® Text, Chapter 5, Section V

The Ego's Use of Guilt

Overview of the Section

This is the first in-depth discussion of guilt in the Course. It shows how our guilt arises mostly from the thoughts we think apart from God.

This section of the Text clearly states its purpose in the first sentence: to help us make the Course's concepts "clearer and more personally meaningful" (1:1) by clarifying how the ego makes use of guilt. Try reading with that in mind. If you want the Course to be clearer and more meaningful to you personally, you should pay particular attention to this section, since that is its purpose. Make a real effort to understand the ego's use of guilt, because doing so will bring the clarity and meaning you seek.

In particular, what Jesus wants to make clearer is what he referred to immediately before this in the dictation. That is indicated by the fact that the Urtext actually reads, "Perhaps *this* will become clearer..." (my italics). What was he saying in the preceding paragraph? It was that lovely paragraph about "All the past except its beauty is gone, and nothing is left but a blessing" (T-5.IV.8:2). He spoke of how all our loving thoughts "are beyond destruction and beyond guilt."

The ego, of course, is dead set against our becoming aware of our indestructible innocence. If we understand how the ego uses guilt to keep us in line, other teachings of the Course will make a lot more sense. For instance, the notion that we are *afraid* of finding our Self seems puzzling until we realize how much guilt we have buried in our minds.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹Perhaps some of our concepts [Ur: *Perhaps this*] will become clearer and more personally meaningful if the ego's use of guilt is clarified. ²The ego has a purpose, just as the Holy Spirit has. ³The ego's purpose is **fear**, because only the fearful can be egotistic. ⁴The ego's logic is as impeccable as that of the Holy Spirit, because your mind has [Ur: *all*] the means at its disposal to side with Heaven or earth, as it elects. ⁵But again, remember that both are in you.

• Study Question •

1. *Why is fear the purpose of the ego, according to this paragraph?*

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The ego's purpose is fear (1:3). We need to grasp that firmly in our minds. The ego itself will never tell us its purpose. In fact, the ego would vehemently deny that it seeks fear. It will insist that its purpose is to *free* us from fear. It tells us that our way out of fear is to build elaborate defenses against threat. Those defenses, however, just serve to make us more fearful.

The ego's purpose is fear, "because only the fearful can be egotistic" (1:3). Fear is love's opposite (T-In.1:8), so if we had no fear, we would be loving instead of egotistic. Therefore, the ego fosters fear and promotes it. What this section will explain is that the ego is also *attracted to guilt* because guilt serves the ego's purpose to keep us fearful, and the fear keeps us away from love.

Let this awareness be firmly etched into our minds, because it explains so much about why the ego does what it does. The reason we study the Course is to learn its concepts and to derive personal meaning from them. We all want that. So pay attention to this thought, because understanding it is a way to have what we want: *The ego uses guilt to keep us fearful, and thus to keep us away from love.*

The ego uses logic just as well as the Holy Spirit (1:4). Starting from false premises it arrives at false conclusions, but it uses our own minds, with impeccable logic, to do so (1:4). Our minds can side with either Heaven or earth; the choice is ours. We also need to remember that both Heaven and earth are in our minds (1:5) and not things or places outside of us.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹In Heaven there is no guilt, because the Kingdom is attained through the Atonement [Atonement being understood as the wiping away of guilt], which releases you to create [Ur: which creates it ['it' being the Kingdom] in you]. ²The word "create" is appropriate here because, once what you have made is undone by the Holy Spirit, the blessed residue is restored and therefore continues in creation. ³What is truly blessed is incapable of giving rise to guilt, and must give rise to joy. ⁴This makes it invulnerable to the ego because its peace is unassailable. ⁵It is invulnerable to disruption because it is whole. ⁶Guilt is *always* disruptive. ⁷Anything that engenders fear is divisive because it obeys the law of division. ⁸If the ego is the symbol of the separation, it is also the symbol of guilt. ⁹Guilt is more than merely not of God. ¹⁰It is the symbol of [Ur: the] attack on God. ¹¹This is a totally meaningless concept except to the ego, but do not underestimate the power of the ego's belief in it. ¹²This is the belief from which all guilt really stems.

• Study Question •

2. *Describe how guilt is the symbol of attack on God (2:10).*

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“In Heaven there is no guilt” (2:1). To bring you to the Kingdom of Heaven, the Atonement must purge you of everything that could give rise to guilt (2:1–3). When the Atonement is through undoing the mistakes you have made, all that is left is what is real in you, as was explained in the last paragraph of Section IV. What is left is called “the blessed residue” (2:2)), which is free to create with God. Everything that might cause guilt has been “undone by the Holy Spirit” (2:2). Therefore, the blessed residue cannot give rise to guilt, but only to joy (2:3).

Without guilt in you, the ego cannot find a foothold (2:4). You are invulnerable to it; you are whole; your peace cannot be disturbed (2:5). The point of all this is that guilt cannot possibly be of God; it does not belong in Heaven, where everything resides in peace and safety. By contrast, the presence of guilt in us disturbs our peace and makes us vulnerable to the ego.

The spirit in us, the blessed residue, is “invulnerable to disruption” (2:5), but “guilt is *always* disruptive” (2:6). (I think every one of us could testify to that.) Notice how Jesus puts “always” in italics to make sure we notice it. “Guilt is *always* disruptive.” It is never a healing emotion; it is always damaging. Some thought systems place value on guilt, but not the Course. As the Course sees it, guilt is always serving the purpose of the ego. In order for you to rest in peace in the spirit, you must be free from guilt. Guilt brings vulnerability with it; guiltlessness *is* invulnerability (see T-13.I, “Guiltlessness and Invulnerability,” especially T-13.I.8:1, “You are invulnerable because you are guiltless”).

Guilt “engenders fear” (2:7). That is why the ego uses guilt, because fear is the ego’s purpose. Guilt is disruptive because it is divisive (2:7); the fear entailed in guilt separates us from God or our brothers. The ego, therefore, is not only the symbol of separation but also the symbol of guilt (2:8). Guilt is what separates us. We are separate because we feel guilty, and we feel guilty for being separate!

Guilt is more than merely not of God. It is the symbol of attack on God. (2:9–10)

Let’s be sure we grasp what this simple but profound statement is saying. Guilt symbolizes the concept of *attack on God*. We feel guilty because we believe that we have, somehow, attacked God, sinned, or violated His “laws.” Where there is smoke (guilt), there is fire (belief in sin).

If I were to say to you that you think you have attacked God, you might reply that the idea of attacking God has never entered your mind. However, if you feel any guilt about anything, it proves that somewhere in your mind you believe that you have attacked Him. That’s what guilt is: emotional shorthand for the thought, “I’ve attacked God, and now He is going to punish me.”

The idea of attack on God “is a totally meaningless concept” (2:11).

Your self-deceptions cannot take the place of truth. No more than can a child who throws a stick into the ocean change the coming and the going of the tides, the warming of the water by the sun, the silver of the moon on it by night. (WrIV.IN. 4:2–3)

Our imagined “attack” on God is as ineffectual as trying to change the tides by throwing a stick into the ocean. It’s absurd to think that you or I could launch an attack on Almighty God! It would be just as fruitless as that puny stick.

The ego, however, does not think the idea is absurd. We should not lightly dismiss the notion of our attack on God, nor “underestimate the power of the ego’s belief in it” (2:11). The ego ardently believes that its attack on God had, not simply *some* effect, but a *profound* effect. *That belief is the source of all guilt* (2:12). The belief that our attack on God was real and meaningful, and that it had real effects, is the belief in *sin* (see 4:8–9). Understanding how deeply the ego is committed to this belief is crucial to understanding and unmasking the ego.

Paragraph 3

3. ¹The ego **is** the part of the mind that believes in division. ²How could part of God detach itself [divide off from Him] **without** believing it is attacking Him? ³We spoke before of the authority problem as based on [involving] the concept of **usurping** God’s power. ⁴The ego believes that this is what **you did** because it believes that it *is* you. ⁵[Ur: **It follows, then, that**] If you identify **with** the ego, you **must** perceive yourself as guilty. ⁶Whenever you respond to your ego you **will** experience guilt, and you **will** fear punishment. ⁷The ego is quite literally a fearful thought. ⁸However ridiculous the idea of attacking God may be to the sane mind, never forget that the ego is **not sane**. ⁹It **represents** a delusional system, and speaks **for it**. ¹⁰Listening to the ego’s voice **means** that you believe it is possible to attack God, and that a part of Him has been torn away by **you**. ¹¹[Ur: **The classic picture of**] Fear of retaliation from without [Ur: **then**] follows, because the severity of the guilt is so acute that it **must** be projected. **Although** Freud was wrong about the basic conflict itself, he was very accurate in describing its effects.

• Study Question •

3. *We believe we did certain terrible things, a belief that causes our guilt and fear. In your own words, summarize what we believe we did.*



It may not be clear why separation implies a belief in attack on God, so Jesus explains in a little more detail. He first repeats this idea: “The ego is the part of the mind that believes in division” (3:1; compare with T-4.II.8:1, 4; T-4.III.3:2; T-4.VII.1:5). He then asks us a question: “How could part of God detach itself without believing it is attacking Him?” (3:2). In other words, to separate or divide from God *is* to attack; they are the same thing. If we were one with God, but have now detached ourselves from Him and gone off to do our own thing, we *must* believe that we attacked Him and that our attack hurt Him. (This belief is entirely false, of course; however, the ego believes it.)

He then returns to the topic of the authority problem (T3.VI). Earlier, he said we believe that we have “usurped the power of God” (T-3.VI.8:4) and have become our own creators. This is what *the ego* did; or rather, the ego is the belief that we did this. The ego believes that *we* did this because “the ego believes that it *is* you” (3:4). In other words, the ego believes that it has successfully attacked God. Now the ego, which is just a thought in my mind, thinks it is the whole of me. It thinks it *is* me, and therefore, because it and I are identical, it thinks what is true of the ego is true of me. If I identify with the ego—that is, if I buy into its delusion that I and the ego are the same thing—then I must perceive myself as guilty, guilty of attacking God and guilty of usurping His power.

From a belief in sin comes guilt; from guilt, comes fear. If I believe in the “sin” of separation, I must feel guilty, and fear follows close behind.

Whenever you respond to your ego you will experience guilt, and you will fear punishment. The ego is quite literally a fearful thought. (3:6–7)

If I feel guilty, I will naturally fear punishment. But remember: *this is the ego's purpose!* The ego *wants* us to feel fear because “the ego is quite literally a fearful thought” (3:7). That fear, that recoiling away from God, *is* the ego thought. This is the reason for the whole insane system of thought. This is what the ego is constantly striving to achieve: fear. It strives to achieve fear because *it is fear*.

The whole process may seem ridiculous when viewed from the perspective of a sane mind (3:8). Don't forget, however, that the ego is not sane, but delusional (3:8–9). When you listen to the ego, you *do* believe that “it is possible to attack God, and that a part of Him has been torn away by you” (3:10). The guilt of believing this is so severe that “it must be projected” (3:11). You therefore project that guilt and the desire to attack outside yourself. You believe that something outside yourself is attacking you. You see yourself as guilty, and project that onto God, seeing the blame as coming from Him. You project the guilt *onto God*, and therefore you fear retaliation *from God* (T-5.V.5:8).

The remark about Freud, I believe, is saying that Freud missed the fact that “the basic conflict” we are projecting is our guilt over attacking God, but he described the effect—projection—very clearly.

Paragraph 4

4. ¹Whatever you accept into your mind has reality for you. ²It is [Ur: however, only] your acceptance of it that makes it real. [Ur: As an extreme example of dissociation yourself, you should have little trouble in understanding that it is perfectly possible not to accept what is in your minds.] ³If you enthrone the ego in your mind, your allowing [the fact that you have accepted it, or allowed] it to enter makes it your reality. ⁴This is because the mind [Ur: as God created it] is capable of creating reality or making illusions [“or making illusions” was added by the editors]. ⁵I said before that you must learn to think with God. ⁶To think with Him is to think like Him. ⁷This engenders joy, not guilt, because it is natural. ⁸Guilt is a sure sign that your thinking is unnatural.

⁹Unnatural [Ur: Perverted] thinking will always be attended with guilt, because it is the belief in sin. ¹⁰The ego does not perceive sin as a lack of love, but as a positive act of assault. ¹¹This [is an interpretation which] is necessary to the ego's survival because, as soon as you regard sin as a lack, you will automatically attempt to remedy the situation. ¹²And you will succeed. ¹³The ego regards this as doom, but you must learn to regard it as freedom.

• Study Question •

4. *If you come to regard sin as a lack of love rather than a positive assault on God, you will act to remedy your lack (4:10–12). Based on your reading of the Text so far, what is one way (or more) that you might act to remedy the lack of love?*

You need to realize how thoroughly your mind has been deceived by the ego. If this insane thought system is accepted into your mind, *it becomes real to you* (4:1–2). "... your allowing it to enter makes it your reality" (4:3) because our mind *has* the power of creating reality (4:4). I believe the editors added "or making illusions" here to make it clear that this sentence does not mean that the separation is *actually* real; it is real *to us* but is not ultimately real.

When the ego has entered, from your mind's perspective, the ego *is* you. That isn't true. It's an illusion; you are *not* the ego, and the ego is *not* you (T-4.VI.3:6; T-4.VI.6:3). But the mind that has enthroned the ego sees itself as nothing *but* the ego. The cycle of sin, guilt, and fear becomes all that you are aware of. Consciously or unconsciously, you make fear your purpose, and seek more guilt to engender more fear.

Thinking with God and like God, rather than thinking with the ego, "engenders joy, not guilt, because it is natural" (4:5–7). Thinking like God is natural to you (4:7), and living according to your nature is always joyful.

Guilt is a sure sign that your thinking is unnatural. Unnatural thinking will always be attended by guilt, because it is the belief in sin. (4:8–9)

Guilt, then, always comes from *unnatural thinking*, not from any external actions. Unnatural thinking always entails belief in sin and separation, a belief that you are something God did not create. You actually believe that you have become *evil* in some way. The next time you are feeling guilty, remember where guilt comes from, and tell yourself, "My thinking is unnatural. I am not evil; I just lack love. There is no cause for guilt or for fear. Let me ask God for the love I seem to be lacking."

The ego sees sin as "a positive act of assault" (4:10), a violent attack on God. It *must* see sin as active evil because without that aspect *there would be no guilt and therefore no fear*. (Remember, the ego wants to keep you in fear.) If sin is simply a lack of love, guilt is no longer a problem. Once you are able to see sin as a lack of love, "you will automatically attempt to remedy the situation. And you will succeed" (4:11–12). If love is

lacking, you will supply it, or call out for it; you will reach out again to God. To the ego, that is doom; to you, it is freedom (4:13).

We need to look upon our supposed “sins” and realize they were merely *mistakes* or *lacks*, and therefore *without guilt*. If we have no guilt we will have no fear, and our hearts will automatically open to God’s healing.

Paragraph 5

5. ¹The guiltless mind cannot suffer. ²Being sane, the mind heals the body because *it* has been healed. ³The sane mind cannot conceive of illness because it cannot conceive of attacking anyone or anything. ⁴I said before that illness is a form of magic. ⁵It might be better to say that it is a form of magical **solution**. ⁶The ego believes that by punishing **itself** it will mitigate the punishment of God. ⁷Yet even in this it is arrogant. ⁸It attributes to God a punishing intent, and then takes this intent as its **own** prerogative. ⁹It tries to usurp **all** the functions of God as it perceives them, because it recognizes that only total allegiance can be trusted.

• Study Question •

5. “...sickness is but a faulty problem-solving approach...” (M-5.II.1:5).
Likewise, here we read, “...illness...is a form of magical solution” (5:4–5).
What is the problem we hope to solve, and how is illness supposed to solve it in the ego’s way of thinking?

If we have no guilt, our bodies are healed. Since the guiltless *mind* cannot suffer, the mind heals the body because the mind has been healed. Illness is an attack (by the mind on the body), and the sane mind cannot conceive of attack, and therefore cannot conceive of illness (5:1–3). When this says that the guiltless *mind* can’t suffer, it’s talking about the suffering brought on by guilt. There is no greater suffering than the moral anguish of intense self-reproach. A mind free from the suffering of guilt engenders a body free from physical ailment. The reason this is so may not be evident at first, but it is hidden in the conjoining here of physical illness with the idea of *attack*. A sane mind “cannot conceive of attacking anyone or anything” and *for that reason* the mind heals the body (5:2–3). Lurking in that sequence of thought is the realization that *illness is caused by the mind’s attack on the body*, which is what the remainder of the paragraph goes on to explain. (This explanation of illness is repeated elsewhere in the Course. See T-28.VI.5 and M-5.I.)

When we listen to the ego, we fear God’s retribution, which poses a serious problem. Being punished by God Himself *is* a fearful concept. So we ask the ego for a solution to this new problem: How can we avoid being punished by God? The solution the ego comes up with is “a form of magic” (5:4). The ego’s solution is, “Punish *yourself* and

God won't punish you." The ego tells us that if we suffer, even if God *does* go ahead and punish us, He will take pity and "mitigate" His punishment (make it less severe) (5:4–6).

In a way, we treat our body like a voodoo doll. We think we deserve God's punishment on our soul, but we try to forestall it with punishment of the body. Sickness, then, is our magical way of trying to appease God's anger. We punish ourselves while silently saying to God, "Look how miserable I am! You don't have to do a thing to punish me; I'll take care of it for You."

Yet even in this it [the ego] is arrogant. It attributes to God a punishing intent, and then takes this intent as its own prerogative. It tries to usurp all the functions of God as it perceives them, because it recognizes that only total allegiance can be trusted. (5:7–9)

Even the self-punishment of illness is an arrogant usurpation of God's function, as the *ego* sees God's function (5:7–9). This is a part of the ego's impeccable logic: If it is going to usurp God's functions, it will be totally faithful to that pattern. It will usurp *all* of God's functions, even functions it has only imagined are God's, even to the point of self-punishment.

Paragraph 6

6. ¹The ego cannot oppose the laws of God any more than you can, but it can interpret them according to what it wants, just as you can. ²That is why the question, "What do you want?" must be answered. ³You are answering it every minute and every second, and each moment of decision is a judgment that is anything but ineffectual. ⁴Its effects will follow automatically until the decision is changed. [Ur: This is a redundant statement, because you have *not* learned it. But again, any decision can be Unmade as well as made.] ⁵Remember, though, that the alternatives themselves are unalterable. ⁶The Holy Spirit, like the ego, is a decision. ⁷Together they constitute all the alternatives the mind can accept and obey. ⁸The Holy Spirit and the ego are the only choices open to you. ⁹God created one, and so you cannot eradicate it. ¹⁰You made the other, and so you can. ¹¹Only what God creates is irreversible and unchangeable. ¹²What you made can always be changed because, when you do not think like God, you are not really thinking at all. ¹³Delusional ideas are not real thoughts [Ur: thought], although you can [Ur: think that you] believe in them. ¹⁴But you are wrong. ¹⁵The function of thought comes from God and is in God. ¹⁶As part of His Thought, you cannot think apart from Him.

• Study Question •

6. a) *We have only two alternatives: In every moment we are choosing the ego or the Holy Spirit. What about thoughts we might call "idle" or "neutral"; are they really neutral, or are all thoughts a choice? (Check your answer against T-2.VI.9 and W-pI.16.2.)*
- b) *Some people believe that thinking is unspiritual, while feelings of the heart are truly spiritual. What does the Course say about "the function of thought"?*
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The ego interprets the laws of God for its own purpose (6:1). The purpose we give to a thing is what decides its outcome; "That is why the question, 'What do you want?' must be answered" (6:2). In other words, "What is the purpose?" (T-4.V.6:9). What *do* we want? ("Do" is emphasized in the original.) Since the ego's purpose is fear, it uses the concept of God's laws fearfully, to keep us fearful. Even the Bible becomes the source of fear when read through the ego's lens: "The Bible is a fearful thing in the ego's judgment" (T-5.VI.4:5). We read, "Thou shalt not..." and we picture a giant god waiting to strike us down with lightning bolts.

The ego wants fear and destruction; the Holy Spirit wants love and healing. We are choosing "every minute and every second" (6:3) between those two alternatives, which are the only alternatives we have (6:5–7), and "each moment of decision is a judgment that is anything but ineffectual" (6:3). The laws of mind, set in place by God, apply equally to the creations of love and the projections of the ego; the results are inevitable.

The effects of each decision "will follow automatically until the decision is changed" (6:4). In physics, the law of inertia states that a body in motion will tend to stay in motion in a straight line unless acted on by an outside force. There is a similar law of mental inertia: When you choose the ego or choose the Holy Spirit, your mind will continue along the line of that choice until you make another deliberate choice to change your mind (6:4). Jesus mentioned this before: "When you make a decision of purpose, then, you have made a decision about your future effort; a decision that will remain in effect unless you change your mind" (T-4.V.6:11). This is why we drift along most of the day in the ego mind-set unless we take conscious action to adopt a spiritual mind-set. The good news, as the Urtext points out, is that "any decision can be Unmade as well as made."

On the positive side, however, if we choose for the Holy Spirit, our mind remains in *that* mind-set until we make another, equally conscious, choice for the ego! This is the whole basis of *practice* as taught in the Workbook and the Text. By pausing at the beginning of the day and frequently during the day to consciously set our minds on God, we can gradually bring about the total transformation of our minds.

We have two choices and two choices only: ego or Holy Spirit (6:8). The Holy Spirit was created by God and is therefore eternal; we cannot eradicate that choice (6:9,11). However, *we* made the ego; God did not; therefore, the ego is not eternal, and *we can*

eradicate it (6:10). What we made can always be changed. That's good news! It means that none of our mistakes have eternal consequences.

We can change what we made in error, because “when you do not think like God, you are not really thinking at all” (6:12). This reasoning is further developed in the remainder of the paragraph: “Delusional ideas are not real thoughts” (6:13). They exist *as illusions* but are not real. Delusional thoughts don't *create* anything real; they can only *make* insubstantial illusions, and therefore, what they make can be changed. (This is a restatement of the difference between *make* and *create*, discussed in T-2.VIII.1:4–5 and T-3.V.2.) True thought “comes from God and is in God” (6:15); therefore, we *cannot* think apart from Him (6:16). We can *believe* we think apart from Him, we can hallucinate, but we cannot actually think apart from God. Workbook lesson 99 reiterates the same concept:

The mind that sees illusions thinks them real. They have existence in that they are thoughts. And yet they are not real, because the mind that thinks these thoughts is separate from God. (W-pI.99.3:2–4)

The good news we can derive from what may seem to be a complex concept is simply this: Nothing the ego makes is final; it can all be undone. The effects of ego thoughts will “follow automatically until the decision is changed” (6:4), but when we change the decision, when we set a new purpose, the effects of our choice for the ego will vanish!

Paragraph 7

7. ¹Irrational thought is disordered thought [Ur: is a thought *disorder*]. ²God Himself orders your thought because your thought was created by Him. ³Guilt feelings are always a sign that you do not know this. ⁴They also show that you believe you *can* think apart from God, and *want* to. ⁵Every disordered thought [Ur: *thought disorder*] is attended by guilt at its inception, and *maintained* by guilt in its continuance. ⁶Guilt is inescapable by those who believe they order their *own* thoughts [Ur: *thought*], and must therefore obey their dictates [Ur: *its orders*]. ⁷This makes them feel *responsible* for their errors [Ur: *mind errors*] without recognizing that, by *accepting* this responsibility, they are reacting irresponsibly. ⁸If the sole responsibility of the miracle worker is to accept the *Atonement* for himself [Ur: *accept the Atonement*], and I assure you that it is, then the responsibility for *what* is atoned *for* *cannot* be yours. ⁹The dilemma [Ur: *This contradiction*] cannot *be* resolved except by accepting the solution of undoing. ¹⁰You *would* be responsible for the effects of all your wrong thinking *if it could not be undone*. ¹¹The purpose of the Atonement is to save the past in *purified* form only. ¹²If you accept the remedy *for* disordered thought [Ur: *a thought-disorder*], a remedy whose efficacy is beyond doubt, how can its symptoms remain? [Ur: *You have reason to question the validity of symptom cure. But no one believes that the symptoms can remain if the underlying cause is removed.*]

• Study Question •

7. *This paragraph tells us that to feel responsible for the effects of our mistaken thoughts is irresponsible. The Course repeatedly makes it clear that we are doing this to ourselves; nothing outside of us is responsible. How, then, can we avoid feeling responsible for our errors?*

“Irrational thought” (7:1) of course refers to ego thoughts. The ego’s thoughts are “disordered thought,” and therefore they are not our real thoughts. Real thoughts are not *disordered*, they are *ordered by God* (7:2). In other words, our real thoughts come from God; disordered thoughts cannot come from God, and so cannot be real.

Guilt feelings demonstrate that we do not know that God orders our thoughts (7:3). If only God is the source of our true thoughts, what is there to be guilty about? This parallels the idea of usurping the power of God: Guilt shows that we believe (1) that we can think apart from God, and (2) that we want to (7:4). Such a belief is a denial of the fact that He created our thought, and an attempt to create *our own* thought.

Guilt always *accompanies* disordered thought (7:5), because the thought is an attack on God. The disordered thought is also *maintained* by guilt (7:5). In a vicious circle, thinking separately from God brings on guilt; then the fear resulting from guilt keeps our minds separated from God. Because guilt maintains the ego, the ego is attracted to guilt. But we still have not gotten to the deepest reason why guilt and self-ordered thoughts go together. This is a very subtle point but a very important one; our understanding of accepting the Atonement depends on it.

If we think that we generate and direct our own thoughts, we will believe that we must do what our thoughts tell us (7:6). They are *our* thoughts, after all! “This makes [us] feel responsible for [our] errors...” (7:7). In other words, disordered thoughts lead to disordered deeds, and because we believe we are in charge of our thoughts, *we feel responsible for the disordered deeds, which are the effects of our thoughts*. That’s where the guilt gets cemented in place. If our disordered thoughts are real thoughts, the effects are real effects. If they are real—Brother! We’ve had it! We’re damned.

I believe that what the Course is saying here is something quite radical. It also can be easily misunderstood and misapplied by the ego, so I’m going to try to state this cautiously but plainly. What the Course is saying here is that *we are not responsible for the effects of our thoughts*, although it is quite clear, here and elsewhere (T-2.VI.2:5–7), that we *are* responsible for our thoughts.

Lest you think I am misstating what is being taught here, look at sentence 10:

You would be responsible for the effects of all your wrong thinking if it could not be undone. (7:10)

If the effects of our wrong thinking were permanent, then we would be responsible for them, and guilty. But if the effects of our wrong thinking *are* undone (as if they never happened), we are *not* responsible for them and not guilty. Therefore, if we accept

responsibility for the effects of our thoughts *we are acting irresponsibly!* (7:7). We are taking blame for something that never happened.

Our only responsibility is to “accept the Atonement” for ourselves (7:8). What does that mean? It was precisely defined in Chapter 2:

[Accepting the Atonement for yourself] means you recognize that mind is the only creative level, and that its errors are healed by the Atonement. (T-2.V.5:2)

To accept the Atonement is to let your *mind* be healed; to recognize your mistaken thoughts, bring them to the Holy Spirit for healing, and choose differently, with Him. Mind is the only level that matters; if mind is changed, behavior will follow automatically. That is your only responsibility, and if that is so, “then the responsibility for *what* is atoned for cannot be yours” (7:8). That is, you cannot be responsible for the *effects* of those thoughts. Undoing the effects of our wrong thinking is the job of the Holy Spirit. Undoing the effects is what the Atonement is for. We can say, “I do not feel guilty, because the Holy Spirit will undo all the consequences of my wrong decision if I will let Him” (T-5.VII.6:10).

Here is the key to freedom from guilt. If guilt were caused by my actions in an unalterable past, then guilt would be permanent. If the effects of my disordered thoughts take a form that can never be changed, and if I am responsible for those effects, then I am forever guilty. But if guilt is caused only *by a present thought*, not by its effects, then I can change that thought and be free of guilt.

If I am willing to change that thought, if I am willing to accept the Atonement and bring my mind under God’s ordering, the Holy Spirit will apply “the solution of undoing” (7:9) to all the consequences of my previous wrong decision. *He will take care of setting things straight.* I am responsible for *accepting the Atonement* but I am not responsible for *what is atoned for*.

You *would* be responsible for the effects of all your wrong thinking if it could not be undone. The purpose of the Atonement is to save the past in purified form only. If you accept the remedy for disordered thought, a remedy whose efficacy is beyond doubt, how can its symptoms remain? (7:10–12)

The Holy Spirit undoes the past; He saves it for us in purified form (7:11; see also T-5.IV.8:2). It may seem difficult for our minds, which think of time in a linear fashion, to realize that changing our minds *now* can literally change the *past*. Yet that is what the book says; when we accept Atonement *now*, the past gets purified. The thought that caused the effects in the past is still in our mind. If that thought is healed *now*, its effects *in the past* are undone. The symptoms cannot remain once the disease is cured (7:12). The Urtext adds that it would be reasonable to “question the validity” of curing *only* the symptoms (that is, undoing the effects of our wrong thinking) if our mind was still screwed up and thinking separation thoughts. But if the cause (the thought) is removed, the symptom cannot remain.

Paragraph 8

8. ¹The continuing decision [Ur: will] to remain separated is the only possible reason for continuing guilt feelings. ²We have said this before, but did not emphasize the destructive results of the decision [Ur: at that time]. ³Any decision of the mind will affect both behavior and experience. ⁴What you want you expect. ⁵This is not delusional. ⁶Your mind *does* make your future, and it will [can] turn it [your future] back to full creation at any minute if it accepts the Atonement first. ⁷It [your mind] will also return to full creation the instant it has done so. ⁸Having given up its disordered thought [Ur: thought disorder], the proper ordering of thought becomes quite apparent.

• Study Question •

8. *Why is it that your past errors are not the real cause of your guilt feelings?*

The first two sentences in this paragraph are startling in their implications:

The continuing decision to remain separated is the only possible reason for continuing guilt feelings. We have said this before, but did not emphasize the destructive results of the decision. (8:1–2)

There is only one cause for continuing guilt feelings: a decision, begun in the past and *continuing* in the present, to remain separated. *Guilt comes not from past misbehavior but from a present choice of the mind.* This decision of the mind must be changed, and that is the *only* correction that is necessary; all else will follow automatically.

Jesus tells us that he “said this before” (8:2). The nearest thing to it I can find is this sentence: “The ego arose from the separation, and its continued existence depends on your continuing belief in the separation” (T-4.III.3:2). My friend and colleague, Greg Mackie, helped me see how this contains the same idea when he wrote to me:

My paraphrase of the second part of T-4.III.3:2 would be, “The continuing belief in the separation leads to the continuing existence of the ego.” My paraphrase of T-5.V.8:1 would be, “The continuing decision to maintain the separation leads to continuing guilt feelings.”

That helps us answer the question that comes to mind: What are “the destructive effects” of this decision? They are *guilt* and *fear*. The decision to remain separate not only maintains the ego; it produces *guilt*. If we do not correct our choice to remain separated, the future will be like the past (8:6). The continuing decision affects both behavior and experience. The choice for separation is the core of the ego, so it produces the fruits of the ego: fear and guilt. Continuing to choose separation guarantees guilt and fear in our future because, in listening to the ego, *we want that guilt and fear*.

But in this present moment, we can alter our future by accepting the Atonement and being released from guilt. In this holy instant, our minds, by our new choice, can turn our future back to full creation (8:7). Accepting the Atonement changes everything. When we

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give up disordered thought (guilt) (8:8) and choose the Holy Spirit rather than the ego, everything changes. The “proper ordering of thought” becomes clear to us (8:8) as our minds are brought under the sure guidance of God’s Thought, and brought into the only function ever intended for them. Removing guilt makes way for the pure thoughts of God.

Guilt, then, is wholly of the ego and has no place in the healed mind; only the ego has a purpose for guilt, and its purpose is fear. For us, guilt is a sign of disordered thinking, a symptom of the ego, evidence that our minds are continuing to choose to remain separated, “a sure sign that your thinking is unnatural” (4:8). Guilt feelings tell us our minds need healing; that is their only meaning.

When you feel guilt, there is only one appropriate response: Bring it to the Holy Spirit and accept the Atonement. Do not believe that you must clean up your past behavior, a thought which keeps you bound in guilt and fear. Turn, and let the Holy Spirit heal your present thinking. That is all that is needed, and all that is asked.

Answer Key

1. “The ego's purpose is fear, because only the fearful can be egotistic” (1:4). An egotistic person is self-centered, and unless we are fearful we cannot be self-centered. Only fear causes us to close ourselves off from others and from God, as the ego wishes us to do.
2. Guilt is caused by the belief that we sinned by attacking God. Thus, when we feel guilt, it shows (or symbolizes) our belief that we attacked God.
3. We believe that we attacked God, tore part of Him away, and usurped His power. By projecting our belief onto God, we come to think that *He* believes these things about us, and wishes to punish us.
4. Possible answers: Ask God to supply the love that seems lacking; invite the Holy Spirit to fill your mind with love; extend love to another so as to receive it for yourself.
5. The problem we are trying to solve is God’s imagined anger and desire to punish us. The ego’s “magical solution” is for us to *punish ourselves* with sickness, hoping that this will magically be accepted in place of the anticipated punishment from God.
6. a) There are no other choices besides ego and Holy Spirit; there are no neutral thoughts. Choosing God means choosing to think like the Holy Spirit. If the thought is based on love it is of God. If the thought is based on fear, no matter how great or trivial its content, it is of the ego.
b) The Course reverses the common notion that thinking is of the ego, and says: You can *only* think *with God*, and when you think with the ego you are not thinking.
7. You are responsible for *causing* your errors. You are not responsible for *cleaning them up*. “Responsibility” in this paragraph refers to cleaning up your errors and their effects. We are asked to accept Atonement for ourselves (accept that we are forgiven and guiltless), rejoice, and leave it to the Holy Spirit to clean up the results of our mistaken thinking.
8.
 - Because the past is gone.
 - Because your guilt is only caused by the current decision to remain separated.
 - Because you are not responsible for the effects of your past errors. Your only responsibility is to accept the Atonement, which will then undo your past errors and their effects.