

Guilt as Divine Evidence of Culpability?

A Bayesian and Cross-Cultural Appraisal — 26

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Central claim

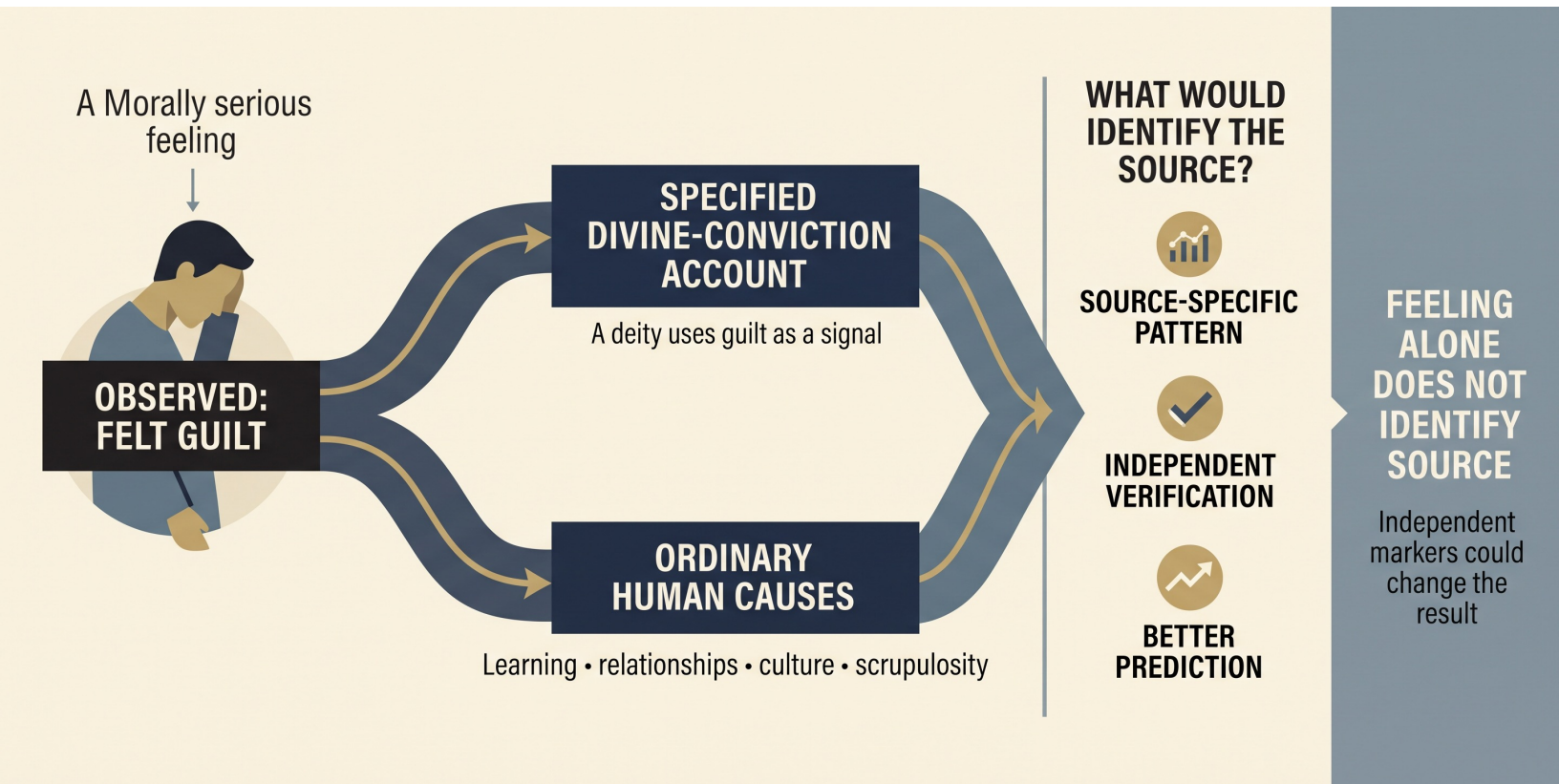
Christians and apologists may reasonably treat guilt as a prompt to examine possible wrongdoing, but the feeling alone does not identify divine conviction or establish culpability before a specified deity. Felt guilt is also expected under ordinary interpersonal, developmental, cultural, and clinical processes, including demonstrable false positives. Unless a divine-source account yields independently verified patterns that predict guilt better than these alternatives, the experience is publicly non-diagnostic; such markers could still change that assessment.

Preview: Argument at a glance

Target inference	Relevant comparison	Observed pressure	Bounded result
Felt guilt identifies divine conviction and culpability.	A specified divine-source account versus ordinary human causes.	Both predict guilt; ordinary causes explain content variation and false positives.	Feeling alone does not identify source; independent markers could discriminate.

The argument concerns the source-identifying force of a guilt experience, not whether some guilt is fitting, useful, or morally informative.

Visual preview:



One felt experience is compatible with two source accounts. Source-specific patterns, independent verification, or superior prediction could discriminate; the intensity of the feeling by itself cannot.

Abstract

Felt guilt by itself does not identify divine conviction or establish culpability before a specified deity. The apologetic inference is comparative: if a deity uses guilt as a source-specific signal, the complete pattern of guilt should be more expected under that account than under ordinary human explanations. Yet guilt has well-established interpersonal and self-regulatory functions; its objects and expression are shaped by learning and culture; and it can occur without wrongdoing or become clinically distorted in scrupulosity. These strands make guilt unsurprising under ordinary psychological accounts and expose a gap between feeling morally accused and knowing who, if anyone, is doing the accusing. The strongest reply is that emotions can sometimes provide defeasible moral justification. That point protects guilt's possible evidential value concerning wrongdoing, but it does not identify a supernatural source, a particular God-concept, or culpability under that account. A divine-conviction model could gain support through independently verified, source-specific, and predictively superior markers. Until such markers are supplied, guilt should prompt examination of harm, responsibility, and repair without being promoted into public evidence of divine origin.

Keywords: guilt; culpability; divine conviction; conscience; likelihood; cross-cultural psychology; scrupulosity

1. The Inference Under Pressure

A person remembers a betrayal and feels a sharp moral pain. The feeling may be fitting. It may focus attention on harm, motivate confession, and support repair. None of that yet answers a further question: what caused the feeling, and what larger claim does it establish? An emotion can be morally important without functioning as a signature from a supernatural source.

The public apologetic inference examined here moves from felt guilt to divine conviction, a moral lawgiver, or culpability before the Christian deity. Koukl presents guilt as ethical pain built into human beings and argues that people feel guilt because they are guilty (Koukl, 2013). The challenge is not that every guilt episode is false or useless. It is that the experience and the explanation are being run together. A felt accusation is data; the identity of an accuser is an interpretation.

Three distinctions prevent that slide. First, *culpability* is a normative status: an agent is blameworthy for an act under relevant conditions of knowledge, control, harm, and excuse. *Felt guilt* is an emotional state. A person can occupy either category without the other. Second, a *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity. The target here is not theism in general but a *divine-conviction God-concept*: a deity intentionally uses guilt to alert agents to genuine violations and to make their culpability knowable. Third, evidence for wrongdoing is not automatically evidence for the source of an emotion. Even when I correctly feel guilty for lying, the fit between my feeling and the wrong may arise through empathy, memory, learned norms, reflection, or a mixture of them.

The governing conclusion follows immediately in outline. Christians may take guilt seriously as a prompt to moral inquiry. But if ordinary human processes also predict the feeling, guilt alone cannot identify divine conviction or establish culpability before a specified deity. Public source identification requires a difference between what the divine-conviction account and its ordinary competitors lead us to expect.

The source-identification rule

An experience supports one source account over another only to the extent that the experience—including its content, accuracy, timing, and independence from prior teaching—is more expected under the first account. A powerful feeling can be important while having little source-identifying force.

2. What Guilt Can Legitimately Tell Us

The argument should not be won by making guilt trivial. Psychological research treats guilt as a serious self-conscious moral emotion. Interpersonal accounts connect it with perceived harm to relationships and with

motives to repair those relationships (Baumeister et al., 1994). Reviews of moral emotion research likewise distinguish guilt from shame and document its association with moral standards and behavior (Tangney et al., 2007). Measures of guilt proneness have also been designed to capture action-focused negative evaluation and reparative tendencies rather than global condemnation of the self (Cohen et al., 2011).

These findings undercut two careless dismissals. Guilt is not merely an arbitrary ache, and its social origin does not make it morally worthless. A socially learned capacity can track real features of the world. Language is learned, yet it can state truths; pain is mediated by a nervous system, yet it can reveal injury. Similarly, guilt can sometimes direct attention to a genuine wrong.

Philosophers who defend forms of epistemic sentimentalism go further: some emotional experiences may provide immediate, defeasible justification for evaluative beliefs. Cowan argues that emotions can be both reason-responsive and epistemically generative (Cowan, 2018). Zhao shows that guilt is not conceptually limited to cases in which a person already judges an act morally wrong; people can feel guilt about being implicated in a bad outcome without taking themselves to have committed a wrong (Zhao, 2020). Together these points complicate any simple equation between guilt and a prior moral verdict.

The strongest conclusion available from a well-calibrated episode is therefore modest but real: *something about this act, omission, relationship, or outcome deserves moral attention*. That is already enough to justify reflection, fact-checking, apology, restitution, or seeking counsel. It is not enough to infer a supernatural causal history. The difference matters because a source claim adds content that the feeling itself does not contain: which deity, which norm, which act, which mode of communication, and which conditions of culpability.

3. The Comparative Evidential Test

Likelihood reasoning makes the missing step visible. Evidence favors one account over another when the evidence is more expected under the first. This comparative idea does not require invented probabilities or a complete partition of every conceivable explanation (Sober, 2008). Let the two focal accounts be:

- **Divine conviction:** a specified deity intentionally produces or guides guilt as a recognizable signal of genuine culpability.
- **Ordinary human causes:** guilt arises through interpersonal concern, learning, moral appraisal, cultural norms, temperament, memory, anxiety, or clinical processes, without a source-specific supernatural signal.

The observation is not merely that guilt exists. The complete evidence includes what evokes it, how accurately it tracks harm and responsibility, whether it persists when a learned norm changes, whether incompatible communities receive incompatible signals, whether non-culpable people experience it, and whether culpable people reliably do. A universal capacity could fit both accounts. What discriminates is the pattern.

Bayes's theorem can update prior odds, but it cannot rescue an unmeasured comparison. The crucial ratio is the probability of the evidence under divine conviction divided by its probability under ordinary human causes. The source offers no defensible dataset for assigning numerical priors or likelihoods to a specified deity's communicative policy. Numerical examples can illustrate sensitivity, but they cannot establish a posterior by stipulation. The responsible question is directional: does guilt's observed profile occur appreciably more as the divine account predicts than its human competitors predict?

Four strands of evidence bear on that comparison. None proves that divine conviction never occurs. Together they show why the feeling alone is not source-specific.

4. A Cumulative Case for Non-Diagnosticity

4.1 Ordinary functions already predict guilt

Guilt is expected when social agents care about people they have harmed, anticipate relationship loss, appraise themselves against standards, or seek to repair damage. Those functions do not explain away the moral reality of the harm. They explain why an organism capable of relationships and self-evaluation would experience a painful, action-focused emotion. Interpersonal and moral-emotion research therefore makes the denominator in the likelihood comparison substantial: ordinary human accounts predict guilt rather than treating it as an anomaly (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 2007).

This is the first pressure on the apologetic inference. A feature can be widespread and useful without identifying a unique metaphysical source. Vision may be reliable enough for navigation while revealing little about which evolutionary, developmental, or providential history ultimately produced it. Guilt's usefulness supports taking the signal seriously; it does not settle the signal's source.

4.2 Structure can recur while content is culturally shaped

Cross-cultural variation must be stated carefully. It would be too strong to claim that guilt requires invariant elicitors under every divine account. A deity might permit learning, distorted norms, or incomplete moral understanding. Nor does cultural variation show that no moral truths exist. The relevant finding is narrower: the emotional machinery and its objects can be partly separated.

Scenario-based research in Belgium, Hungary, and Peru found both common structure and meaningful person- and situation-based variation in guilt and shame reactions (Fontaine et al., 2006). Work among Rarámuri and rural Javanese participants likewise examined recognizable guilt and shame phenomena across linguistic and cultural differences (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006). These studies resist both extremes. Guilt is not a wholly local invention, yet neither its categories nor its elicitors arrive as a content-invariant code.

That mixed pattern is expected if a broadly shared emotional capacity is calibrated through relationships, practices, and concepts. It is compatible with a deity using such a capacity, but compatibility is not confirmation. To favor a divine-conviction account, the pattern must carry information that ordinary enculturation does not equally predict—for example, reliable convergence on independently established wrongs despite contrary training.

4.3 False positives separate feeling from culpability

Source identification becomes harder when guilt occurs without the status it supposedly reveals. Zhao's analysis of guilt without perceived wrongdoing shows that the emotion can attach to causal involvement or implication even when the agent does not judge the action morally wrong (Zhao, 2020). Clinical research supplies a sharper case. Scrupulosity involves distressing religious or moral obsessions and compulsive attempts to neutralize feared wrongdoing. The Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity measured fears of sin and punishment in a non-clinical sample and found meaningful relations with religious background (Abramowitz et al., 2002). A newer scale places scrupulosity explicitly within an obsessive-compulsive framework and reports associations with anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and religiosity (Johnson et al., 2024).

These cases are not curiosities to be dismissed as defective exceptions. They establish that sincerity, intensity, religious content, and felt accusation can occur without a reliable readout of culpability. Any responsible theology already needs a way to distinguish fitting conviction from obsessive fear, learned shame, survivor guilt, excessive responsibility, and manipulation. That discrimination cannot be supplied by the presence of guilt itself without circularity.

4.4 The feeling carries no unique address label

Phenomenologically, guilt presents an act or self-relation as morally troubled. It does not ordinarily arrive with independently verifiable information naming a supernatural source. A Christian, Muslim, former believer, and

secular moral realist may experience similar moral pain while embedding it in incompatible interpretations. The intensity of an experience can raise its personal urgency without increasing its ability to choose among those interpretations.

The evidence ledger gathers the cumulative point. Each strand contributes something distinct: an ordinary production route, calibration by social context, demonstrated false positives, and the absence of a unique source label. Their force is convergent rather than multiplicative; the paper assigns no fabricated independence or numerical weights.

Evidence strand	What we observe	Comparative force	What it does not show
Interpersonal function	Guilt attends perceived harm and can motivate repair	Makes guilt expected under ordinary relational psychology	That fitting guilt is never divinely mediated
Cross-cultural pattern	Shared structures coexist with learned concepts and variable elicitors	Favors calibration through human social worlds over a content-invariant signal	That morality is relative or no common moral capacity exists
False positives	Blameless guilt and scrupulosity can be sincere, intense, and religiously framed	Breaks the identity between felt accusation and culpable status	That all religious guilt is pathological
Source opacity	Similar experiences support incompatible interpretations	Shows that phenomenology alone does not name its cause	That independent source-specific markers are impossible

5. The Strongest Divine-Source Replies

5.1 The moral machinery needs an ultimate explanation

An apologist can concede every ordinary mechanism and shift the argument. The claim then becomes: psychology explains how guilt operates, but not why morally responsive creatures exist, why guilt sometimes tracks real wrongs, or why moral requirements have authority. A divine ground could explain the entire moral order rather than appearing as one more proximate cause.

This reply deserves separate evaluation. It is a moral or metaphysical argument from normativity, rational agency, or moral knowledge. The present paper does not refute it. It does, however, block an evidential shortcut. The existence of felt guilt cannot do the work of a full argument for objective moral facts, their authority, and a personal divine ground. Secular moral realism, constructivism, naturalistic accounts, and theistic accounts disagree precisely over that explanatory question. Calling the feeling “ethical pain” restates its moral character; it does not identify which metaethical account is true.

5.2 A deity may use ordinary psychology

A second reply holds that divine conviction need not bypass learning, culture, memory, or neural processes. A deity could work through them. This is coherent, and it explains why ordinary mechanisms would be present even in a divinely ordered world.

But the reply creates an evidential fork:

The every-outcome dilemma

If divine conviction produces a source-specific, independently testable difference, that difference should be stated and examined. If it produces no such difference—if accurate guilt, false guilt, culturally variable guilt, scrupulosity, and absence of guilt are all equally compatible with the account—then guilt cannot also be advertised as public confirmation of that account. A model may remain possible while losing discriminating power.

Compatibility therefore protects possibility, not confirmation. The point is not hostile to mediated causation. Ordinary perception also works through physical processes, yet source claims become credible when they yield discriminating patterns: stable information, independent checks, successful predictions, and error correction. A divine-conviction account can ask for the same evidential dignity.

5.3 Guilt can justify a moral belief directly

The most philosophically serious reply says that guilt can be like perception. A person may see cruelty in an act through the emotion rather than infer it from neutral premises. If emotions are appropriately reason-responsive, they may give defeasible justification for evaluative beliefs (Cowan, 2018).

Granting that thesis does not close the source gap. A visual perception may justify believing that a red object is present without justifying a theory about who created the perceiver's visual system. Likewise, guilt may justify a belief that I wronged someone without justifying a specified divine-conviction account. The emotion's moral object and its ultimate causal history are different questions. The paper's conclusion survives even on a generous epistemology of emotion.

6. What Would Make Guilt Discriminating?

The constructive task is not to demand a supernatural glow or a distinctive brain region. A specified divine-conviction account should state in advance what pattern it predicts better than ordinary alternatives. Three standards follow from the comparison:

1. **Source specificity.** The marker should identify more than generic moral concern. It must discriminate the specified deity and communicative intention from empathy, social learning, anxiety, memory, and rival religious interpretations.
2. **Independent verification.** Accuracy should be assessed against facts about harm, responsibility, and excuse that are not merely read back from the feeling or the tradition interpreting it. Otherwise “the guilt is divine when it matches our rule” becomes circular.
3. **Predictive advantage.** The account should anticipate a pattern that ordinary models do not equally anticipate—for example, reliable correction of entrenched harmful norms, convergence despite contrary teaching, or information unavailable through ordinary channels. The proposal must also specify likely errors and absences rather than counting every result as success.

These are evidential profiles, not findings already in hand. Any empirical study would need preregistered definitions, validated measures that distinguish guilt from shame and anxiety, diverse samples, independent moral coding, explicit treatment of dependence, and safeguards for participants vulnerable to scrupulosity. Even a positive result would require cautious interpretation. A cross-cultural regularity might support common human cognition; accurate guilt might reflect ordinary learning; an unusual experience might remain an anomaly. The point of testing is to compare those possibilities rather than assume the preferred explanation.

For everyday moral life, no such study is needed before taking guilt seriously. The immediate rational response is to ask: What happened? Who was harmed? What control and knowledge did I have? What repair is owed? Is

the feeling proportionate, or is it being intensified by obsessive doubt, coercion, or an inherited norm that cannot withstand scrutiny? These questions respect guilt without surrendering judgment to it.

7. Conclusion

Guilt can be morally revealing without being self-authenticating. Its interpersonal function, partial cross-cultural stability, cultural calibration, and capacity for painful false positives jointly make it well expected under ordinary human accounts. That cumulative pattern does not disprove divine conviction, theism, objective morality, or the moral value of guilt. It shows that the feeling alone does not identify a supernatural source or establish culpability before a specified deity.

The central evidential rule is simple: compare what the whole pattern would look like if the divine-conviction account were true with what ordinary human causes already lead us to expect. If a specified God-concept predicts source-specific, independently verified, and predictively superior markers, those markers could change the assessment. If every pattern is assimilated after the fact, the account may remain logically possible but cannot use guilt as public confirmation.

The practical implication is neither denial nor submission. Treat guilt as a reason to investigate harm, responsibility, excuse, and repair. Do not treat emotional intensity as a source label. Anyone who offers guilt as evidence of divine culpability should name the difference the divine-source account predicts and permit that difference to be tested by the same standards applied to rival explanations.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Plain-language reconstruction

- P1.** Felt guilt is public evidence for a specified divine-conviction account over ordinary human-source accounts only if the complete guilt pattern is more expected under the divine account, or if independent source-specific markers favor it.
- P2.** Ordinary interpersonal, developmental, cultural, and clinical processes predict felt guilt, its variable content, and demonstrated false positives.
- P3.** The available evidence does not establish that the complete guilt pattern is more expected under the divine account than under ordinary human-source accounts. The feeling alone also supplies no independent source-specific marker and does not establish that its object is a culpable act.
- C.** Therefore, felt guilt alone does not publicly favor the specified divine-conviction account over ordinary human-source accounts and does not establish culpability before the specified deity. Independent discriminating markers could alter this result.

The inference is deductively valid given the comparative evidential requirement in P1 and the failure of its evidential conditions in P3; P2 supplies the cumulative empirical support for that failure. Its substantive force remains inductive because P2–P3 summarize empirical and interpretive evidence rather than necessary truths. The conclusion is deliberately limited: it concerns guilt alone, not every possible argument for a deity, objective morality, fitting guilt, or divine conviction.

A.2 Symbols

- D : the specified divine-conviction account.
- H : an ordinary human-source account used as the relevant comparator.
- G : the target experience of felt guilt, considered without independent source markers.
- M : an independently verified, source-specific marker accompanying or predicting guilt.
- P : a probability function relative to the same background information.

A.3 Symbolic comparison

The ordinary likelihood condition for guilt alone is:

$$G \text{ favors } D \text{ over } H \iff P(G \mid D) > P(G \mid H).$$

The cumulative case argues that the currently described experience does not establish that inequality. In particular:

$$P(G \mid D) \leq P(G \mid H) \implies \neg(G \text{ favors } D \text{ over } H).$$

The scope limit is represented by a live evidential route:

$$P(M \mid D) > P(M \mid H) \implies M \text{ favors } D \text{ over } H.$$

Thus the formal result is non-diagnosticsity of G by itself, not the falsity of D . The conditional comparisons are valid by the stated likelihood criterion. Whether their inequalities hold is an empirical and interpretive question; the body supports the first non-favoring judgment cumulatively and leaves a genuinely discriminating M open.

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