

Research Article

Harmony vs. Honesty: The Guilt–Repair Paradox

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Abstract

While guilt is traditionally characterized as a moral emotion that motivates individuals to repair damaged social bonds, this paper investigates conditions under which this reparative impulse comes into tension with the ethical demand for honesty. We conceptualize Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF) as a multi-level phenomenon encompassing evolutionary pressures for social cohesion, psychological mechanisms of ego-protection, and ethical tensions between immediate harmony and long-term integrity and epistemic clarity. Drawing on experimental evidence, organizational observations, and philosophical perspectives from Kant, Nietzsche, and Aristotle, the paper develops a bidirectional framework for understanding social repair [1]. This framework examines the Guilt–Honesty Paradox from both the sender’s and the receiver’s perspective, highlighting how attempts at relational repair may unintentionally undermine trust, learning, and accountability.

The paper further outlines practical strategies—supported by case illustrations, tables, and applied examples across organizational, educational, healthcare, and digital contexts—for reconciling concern for relationships with commitments to truthfulness.

Keywords: Guilt; Honesty, Social Repair, Moral Emotions, Temporal Narrowing, Trust, Ethical Decision-Making

Introduction

Guilt is widely understood as a moral emotion that motivates individuals to acknowledge wrongdoing and engage in reparative behavior aimed at restoring damaged social relationships [2,3]. Common forms of repair include apologies, compensatory actions, or expressions of concern [4]. In this sense, guilt is often described as prosocial and self-regulating. However, the same motivational force that drives repair may, under certain conditions, come into conflict with other moral commitments—most notably, honesty. This tension reflects a long-standing philosophical divide. From a Kantian perspective, articulated most prominently in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, truthfulness constitutes a categorical duty that cannot be overridden by considerations of outcome. Even well-intentioned deception, Kant argues, violates the autonomy of others by manipulating their capacity for rational judgment [5]. From this view, relational harmony achieved through dishonesty is ethically hollow.

By contrast, empirical and philosophical traditions influenced by consequentialist reasoning suggest that moral judgment is often

sensitive to perceived outcomes. Experimental findings indicate that guilt can shift attention away from abstract moral rules toward the immediate emotional and relational consequences of one’s actions [1,6]. When guilt is salient, individuals may prioritize reducing tension, discomfort, or anticipated conflict—even at the cost of compromising truthfulness. Rather than suspending moral agency, guilt operates as a mediating force that reshapes ethical attention. It narrows temporal focus toward immediate relational concerns, heightens sensitivity to interpersonal tension, and amplifies the perceived costs of confrontation.

As a result, individuals may prioritize short-term harmony while obscuring information that is essential for long-term trust, learning, and accountability. The present paper refers to this dynamic as the Guilt–Honesty Paradox and examines it through an integrated framework that combines psychological mechanisms, ethical analysis, and applied case illustrations developed in the sections that follow.

Case Illustration

Alex, a mid-level manager in a project-driven organization, fails to submit a critical report on time, creating downstream pressure for the team. Aware of having contributed to the delay, Alex experiences guilt and anticipates dissatisfaction among team members. In subsequent feedback conversations, Alex directs particularly positive and reassuring feedback toward a well-regarded team member whose opinion carries weight within the group, describing the individual's contribution as "fully successful," despite knowing that key elements of the task remain incomplete. Initially, the team member experiences relief and validation, and the positive appraisal contributes to a temporary easing of tension within the team. However, when later evaluations and project outcomes reveal unresolved deficiencies, the earlier feedback is retrospectively perceived as misleading. The team member not only feels unprepared but also begins to question the reliability of managerial communication more broadly.

In this case, guilt-driven relational repair produces short-term emotional relief while generating long-term epistemic costs. By selectively prioritizing immediate harmony and face-saving over accurate feedback, Alex inadvertently undermines trust, learning, and shared responsibility. The case illustrates how guilt-induced temporal narrowing can distort ethical judgment—not by eliminating concern for others, but by compressing moral attention to the present moment at the expense of future consequences.

Theoretical Framework

Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF) refers to a patterned narrowing of moral and temporal attention toward immediate relational repair. While its expression varies across contexts, STRF can be analytically understood at three interconnected levels: (1) an evolutionary level, where rapid reconciliation reduced social exclusion; (2) a psychological level, where ego-protection motivates swift emotional relief; and (3) an ethical level, where concern for harmony competes with commitments to truth and responsibility.

Guilt as a Social Debt

Nietzsche (1887/1994) conceptualized guilt (Schuld) as arising from a perceived debt (Schulden) within social relationships [7]. The guilty party experiences urgent pressure to "repay" this debt, often engaging in behaviors aimed at immediate social repair.

Example: An employee who misses a critical report deadline may lavish praise on colleagues or exaggerate appreciation for their contributions. Though well-intentioned, these actions reflect strategic relational repair rather than accurate assessment.

The Ego as the "Internal Auditor" of Social Debt

To fully understand the dynamics between harmony and honesty, the concept of social debt coined by Nietzsche must be expanded to include the psychological component of ego protection. In this framework, the ego acts as an "internal auditor" that constantly monitors an individual's social balance sheet. This ego-mediated dynamic should not be interpreted as an exculpatory mechanism. Rather, it explains why ethically suboptimal choices may feel subjectively compelling without diminishing the normative demand for honesty.

When a social debt is incurred, the ego experiences a threat to its self-conception as competent, reliable, or morally adequate. To mitigate this threat, the internal auditor presses for rapid settlement. This pressure activates STRF, redirecting attention toward the quickest available means of restoring harmony and emotional equilibrium.

Honest reconciliation—such as openly acknowledging failure or responsibility—is often experienced as costly, since it prolongs ego-exposure and risks further reputational damage. As a result, the ego may favor defensive communication, including flattery or selective omission. These forms of "deceptive kindness" operate as a low-cost currency, offering superficial relational relief without requiring confrontation with personal inadequacy. Temporal narrowing plays a crucial supporting role in this process. By compressing ethical attention to the immediate present, the ego shields itself from longer-term consequences, such as trust erosion or institutional dysfunction. The Guilt-Honesty Paradox thus emerges as a conflict between ego-protective urgency and moral integrity. While the ego seeks rapid discharge of discomfort, genuine social repair requires what might be described as a Kantian reboot: the reassertion of truthfulness over short-term emotional relief.

The Mechanism of Temporal Narrowing

Emotions function as orienting mechanisms, guiding behavior under uncertainty [8]. As introduced earlier, guilt concentrates cognitive and emotional resources on immediate relief of social tension, temporarily deprioritizing future consequences such as reputational impact, trust erosion, or integrity compromise.

Example: A teacher softens feedback for a student who performed poorly on an exam, prioritizing relational comfort over the student's ability to learn from mistakes.

The Golden Mean and Flattery

Aristotle (2009) described honesty as a virtue of the mean, balanced between extremes like boastfulness and harsh irony. While friendliness is also virtuous, guilt often drives individuals toward flattery—a deviation from truth motivated by relational anxiety rather than genuine benevolence. This form of "deceptive kindness" seeks relational harmony at the cost of epistemic clarity [9].

Example: A clinician might overstate a patient's progress to alleviate personal guilt over a medical error, risking long-term trust.

Evolutionary, Social, and Practical Dimensions of Guilt

The psychological dynamics described above are not merely situational but are rooted in evolutionary and socio-cultural processes that shaped guilt as a mechanism of social regulation. The phenomenon of guilt and its impact on honesty can be understood through both evolutionary and socio-cultural lenses, highlighting a dual origin of this moral emotion.

From an evolutionary perspective, guilt likely emerged as an adaptive mechanism to preserve social cohesion within cooperative groups [10,11]. Individuals who experienced guilt after causing harm were more inclined to engage in reparative behaviors, such as apologies, concessions, or compensatory

actions, which reduced social tension and maintained alliances critical for survival [6].

This short-term focus on relational repair—what the present paper describes as Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF)— can thus be seen as an adaptive strategy that enhanced the likelihood of ongoing support, resource sharing, and protection in ancestral environments. From this evolutionary angle, even behaviors that temporarily compromise honesty, such as flattery or softened feedback, may have historically increased inclusive fitness by preventing social ostracism or conflict escalation.

Simultaneously, guilt is shaped and modulated by social and moral development, reflecting cultural norms, ethical education, and community expectations [2,3]. Societies develop explicit and implicit rules governing when and how truth should be communicated, and how reparative actions should be carried out. Moral philosophies, such as Kantian deontology or Aristotelian virtue ethics, provide frameworks for balancing relational repair with honesty, emphasizing that the long-term integrity of social bonds depends on truthfulness, not merely short-term appeasement [5,9]. In modern contexts, this social dimension is crucial: the mechanisms that evolved to promote immediate survival must now be reconciled with ethical standards, epistemic clarity, and institutional trust.

This dual origin becomes particularly salient in professional and institutional settings, where guilt-driven actions may inadvertently compromise outcomes. In organizational contexts, managers who feel guilty about missed deadlines or mistakes may inflate performance evaluations or soften critical feedback to maintain harmony. While such behaviors temporarily reduce relational tension, they can undermine learning, accountability, and long-term trust, illustrating the persistence of evolutionary STRF tendencies in culturally complex environments. Similarly, in educational settings, teachers may provide overly positive

feedback to struggling students to alleviate guilt, inadvertently impeding skill development and self-regulation. In clinical environments, healthcare professionals who commit medical errors may downplay the severity of mistakes out of guilt, risking patient autonomy and informed consent, despite the long-term ethical imperative to communicate transparently.

Recognizing the interplay between evolution and social/moral development allows for targeted interventions that respect both psychological tendencies and ethical norms. For example, structured disclosure protocols in healthcare, “wise feedback” models in education, and carefrontation strategies in organizations leverage individuals’ innate concern for relationships while redirecting attention toward truthful and constructive communication. By explicitly framing honesty as a form of relational care, these interventions reconcile the Guilt-Honesty Paradox, aligning adaptive social motivations with long-term ethical and practical goals. In this way, the evolved tendency to prioritize relational repair is harnessed rather than suppressed, ensuring that guilt serves as a constructive force rather than a source of deceptive kindness.

Evidence and Observational Analysis

Empirical and observational research provides converging evidence that guilt reliably fosters Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF) and temporal narrowing, thereby intensifying tensions between harmony and honesty. Experimental studies in moral psychology demonstrate that guilt alters attentional priorities, increasing sensitivity to immediate relational strain while reducing consideration of longer-term epistemic and institutional consequences [1,3]. Similar patterns have been documented in organizational and educational contexts, where guilt reshapes evaluative judgment and communicative strategy [2,12].

Overview of Mechanisms and Consequences

Mechanism	Primary Effect	Illustrative Example	Potential Harm	Corrective Intervention
STRF / Temporal Narrowing	Prioritization of immediate relational repair	Inflated feedback to a subordinate	Reduced learning; erosion of trust	Future-focused nudging
Social Debt	Urgent pressure to “repay” relational imbalance	Flattery toward a colleague	Loss of credibility	Care-frontation
Attribution Bias (Receiver)	Suspicion toward positive feedback	Interpreting praise as guilt-driven	Relational deadlock	Explicit permission to be honest

These patterns jointly illustrate how guilt-driven communication may succeed in short-term appeasement while undermining the epistemic and relational foundations required for durable cooperation [5].

Pattern 1: Inflation of Evaluative Feedback

Finding; Experimental evidence shows that individuals placed in guilt-inducing conditions—as well as employees who perceive that they have “let down” a teammate—systematically inflate performance evaluations compared to control groups [1,2]. **Insight;** From the perspective of STRF, inflated feedback

prioritizes the recipient’s immediate emotional comfort over the Instrumental Value of Honesty (IVH), understood as the role of truthful communication in sustaining learning, accountability, and trust [12]. This dynamic resonates with care ethics, which highlights relational sensitivity while acknowledging that protective motivations may inadvertently distort fairness and accuracy [13].

Beyond concern for the recipient, inflated evaluations function as a form of ego-shielding for the evaluator. By avoiding direct confrontation, the guilty sender protects their self-concept

as competent and benevolent, even when such avoidance compromises epistemic clarity [3].

Pattern 2: Protective Shielding via Third-Party Advocacy

Finding; Guilt-driven distortion extends beyond direct interpersonal communication. Individuals experiencing guilt often selectively conceal or reframe information when interacting with third parties—such as supervisors, oversight bodies, or external collaborators—in order to shield those, they perceive as vulnerable [14]. **Insight;** This pattern mirrors a Hobbesian logic of conflict avoidance, in which relational stability is prioritized over transparency. Within STRF, truth is construed as a potential destabilizer, while selective disclosure is experienced as ethically justified by its harmonizing effect—even when it undermines institutional reliability or collective decisionmaking [14].

Pattern 3: Breaking the Cycle through Future-Focused Interventions

Finding; Experimental interventions that prompt individuals to consider the long-term utility of honest feedback—such as its impact on competence development, trust formation, and institutional learning—significantly reduce deceptive or inflated communication [1,12]. **Insight;** These interventions function as a Kantian reboot, redirecting ethical attention from immediate emotional relief toward principles that could be universally endorsed [5]. Importantly, this reframing does not negate relational concern. Instead, it recasts honesty as a precondition for genuine care and sustainable cooperation [9].

The Receiver's Perspective: Attribution and Suspicion

While much of the preceding analysis focuses on the guilt-driven sender, social repair is inherently relational. The meaning and effectiveness of reparative acts ultimately depend on how they are interpreted by the receiver (Hardin, 2002).

Receivers actively interpret feedback through prior experiences, contextual cues, and perceived motives. When positive feedback closely follows harm or failure, it may trigger a trust gap, in which praise is attributed to guilt-driven impression management rather than accuracy (Fein et al., 1990; Kramer, 1999).

This attributional suspicion can lead to a relational deadlock. The sender intends to be supportive, while the receiver experiences the communication as patronizing or manipulative. Both parties shift attention from informational exchange to identity management, resulting in the displacement of factual clarity by relational signaling (Goffman, 1959).

Example: In Alex's case, the team member initially welcomes the positive appraisal but later questions its sincerity once performance discrepancies become visible. Rather than fostering confidence or development, the feedback generates uncertainty and complicates future collaboration.

The trust gap is especially pronounced when the receiver interprets praise as an ego-centric repair strategy aimed primarily at alleviating the sender's discomfort. In such cases, the receiver's own sense of agency and competence is undermined, reinforcing suspicion and entrenching the Guilt–Honesty Paradox on both sides of the interaction.

Transition to Intervention

These empirical and observational patterns underscore a central insight of the present framework: guilt-driven strategies that succeed in restoring short-term harmony often sow the seeds of long-term relational and epistemic dysfunction. Addressing this paradox therefore requires interventions that operate simultaneously on psychological attention, ethical framing, and relational interpretation—an issue explored in the following section.

Real-World Applications: Bridging the Gap in Practice

In healthcare contexts, the Guilt–Honesty Paradox is particularly pronounced due to the high moral stakes involved. Clinicians who commit medical errors frequently experience what has been described as Second Victim Syndrome, characterized by intense guilt, anxiety, and fear of professional or legal consequences [15,16]. This emotional burden often gives rise to defensive communication, including the minimization of error severity or the selective omission of details in conversations with patients [17,18].

Hidden trade-off; While such strategies may reduce immediate distress for both clinician and patient, they conflict with foundational ethical principles, particularly respect for patient autonomy and informed consent [19]. By prioritizing short-term emotional protection, clinicians risk undermining the patient's capacity to make informed decisions and eroding long-term trust in the therapeutic relationship.

Application; To address this tension, many healthcare institutions have implemented structured disclosure models that encourage transparent communication following adverse events. These protocols explicitly acknowledge the social debt created by medical errors while maintaining epistemic clarity regarding what occurred, why it occurred, and how future harm will be prevented [20,21].

Strategic outcome; Empirical evidence suggests that transparent disclosure not only supports ethical obligations but also reduces the likelihood of litigation and facilitates psychological recovery for both patients and clinicians [22]. In this context, honesty functions not as relational harm, but as a prerequisite for genuine repair.

Education and Pedagogy: The Nurturance Trap

Educational settings offer another clear illustration of the Guilt–Honesty Paradox. Teachers often experience guilt when students struggle academically, particularly when they attribute failure to their own instructional shortcomings. Research on teacher emotions suggests that such guilt can foster emotionally protective strategies, including grade inflation or softened evaluative feedback [23,24]. These practices represent forms of deceptive kindness that prioritize a student's immediate self-esteem over long-term competence development.

Hidden trade-off; Although inflated praise may preserve short-term motivation, it deprives students of the Instrumental Value of Honesty (IVH)—accurate, actionable feedback necessary for self-regulation, learning, and growth [25]. Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF) thus shifts attention toward emotional reassurance at the expense of educational integrity.

Application; Interventions such as wise feedback explicitly combine honesty with care by framing critical comments as expressions of respect and high expectations. For example: "I'm giving you these comments because I believe in your ability to meet high standards." This approach preserves epistemic clarity while mitigating the relational threat of criticism [26].

Strategic outcome; By aligning care ethics with epistemic responsibility, wise feedback strengthens the teacher–student

relationship through a shared commitment to growth rather than shared avoidance of discomfort.

The Care-Frontation Matrix: Navigating Guilt and Honesty in Practice

To operationalize these insights across professional contexts, the Care-Frontation Matrix distinguishes communicative strategies according to their orientation toward honesty and relational harmony:

Communication Mode	Honesty Level	Harmony Focus	Resulting Dynamics
Deceptive Kindness	Low	High	Immediate emotional relief coupled with long-term trust erosion and stagnation
Radical Candor	High	High	Repair of social debt through truthful care, fostering learning and durable trust
Brutal Honesty	High	Low	Epistemic clarity achieved at the cost of relational damage and defensive responses
Avoidance	Low	Low	Neglect of both relational responsibility and truth, leading to disengagement

This matrix clarifies that the ethical challenge is not a simple choice between honesty and care. Rather, effective social repair requires communication strategies that integrate both. Radical candor, understood here not as bluntness but as truthful care, offers a practical resolution to the Guilt–Honesty Paradox by satisfying relational concern without sacrificing epistemic integrity.

Case Illustration: Guilt-Induced Feedback Inflation

After months of inflating praise to avoid discomfort from his own guilt, Alex notices his team falling behind. Team members have become complacent, believing their performance is "visionary," while upper management prepares for layoffs.

The Intervention: Alex initiates a Kantian Reboot and employs temporal reframing: "I realized that in my desire to support you, I haven't been as clear about our performance gaps as I should have been. I feel responsible for that. To ensure your long-term success here, I need to share the unvarnished truth starting today."

The Result: Though uncomfortable at first, the skepticism gap closes. Team members feel respected as autonomous adults capable of handling the truth. By integrating care-frontation, Alex repairs relationships not by hiding mistakes but by using truth to address their consequences.

Case Illustration: The Ghosting Paradox

In digital and professional contexts, the Guilt–Honesty Paradox often manifests in its most extreme form: ghosting. Whereas social repair typically involves active communication aimed at restoring relational balance [2], ghosting represents a passive avoidance strategy. Here, the sender attempts to eliminate social debt not by repair, but by withdrawal.

The Scenario; Employee A works in a highly competitive departmental environment where workload fluctuates significantly. During periods of peak demand—when collective effort is required—Employee A repeatedly takes extended sick leave, leaving her responsibilities to be absorbed by colleagues.

While sick leave is formally legitimate, its consistent timing raises concerns among team members.

At the end of the year, the manager evaluates Employee A's performance relative to her peers and assigns a below-average rating (C), explaining that agreed objectives were not met. As a consequence, Employee A does not receive a bonus or salary increase. She challenges this assessment by escalating the matter to the Workers' Council, arguing that her sick leave was legitimate and that the evaluation therefore lacks fairness.

The following year, the pattern repeats: Employee A again takes prolonged sick leave during high-demand phases. Despite no substantive improvement in contribution, the manager—now burdened by lingering guilt over the previous conflict—feels increasing discomfort. To avoid renewed confrontation, he upgrades her evaluation to a B, despite recognizing that this assessment is not fully justified.

The Ego-Protection Maneuver

Instead of engaging in care-frontation, the manager experiences acute Short-Term Relational Focus (STRF). Any honest, sustained conversation about patterns of absence and responsibility is perceived by his ego as an "expensive" exposure—one that risks renewed conflict, accusations of insensitivity, or institutional escalation. To protect himself from immediate emotional strain, he avoids deeper engagement and resorts to softened evaluation.

In this context, ghosting does not entail complete silence. Rather, it consists in avoiding sustained, accountable communication that would require acknowledging responsibility over time and confronting uncomfortable truths.

Having explored the mechanisms through which guilt drives reparative actions, we must now turn to a subtler challenge: the role of non-communication. Even with the best intentions, individuals may refrain from speaking or fail to convey their intentions clearly, producing outcomes that can be simultaneously constructive and destructive. Understanding this paradox of non-communication is essential to grasping the full

complexity of social repair.

The Paradox of Non-Communication

For the Sender (the Manager): Avoidance provides immediate emotional relief. By minimizing engagement, the manager temporarily silences the ego's "internal auditor" and reduces awareness of unresolved social debt (Schuld), in Nietzsche's sense [7]. Temporal narrowing leads him to prioritize short-term emotional safety over long-term fairness, credibility, and team cohesion.

For the Receiver (Employee A): The absence of clear, consistent feedback creates an epistemic vacuum. Deprived of the Instrumental Value of Honesty (IVH), Employee A lacks the information necessary to understand expectations, adjust behavior, or plan her professional future. From an Aristotelian perspective, the manager fails the virtue of truthfulness by opting for deficient communication as a means of concealing discomfort and shame [9].

Result

The attempt to shield the ego through avoidance ultimately compounds the social debt. By evading difficult conversations in the present, the manager creates a durable form of relational and institutional injustice—one that erodes trust within the team and undermines the legitimacy of evaluation processes. This case illustrates that when the ego enters a defensive state, withdrawal is often misperceived as kinder or easier than honesty. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely this avoidance that forecloses the possibility of genuine social repair.

Closing Integration

Together, these case illustrations demonstrate that guilt-driven strategies range from deceptive kindness to strategic silence. In all forms, the underlying mechanism remains the same: a temporally narrowed attempt to protect the ego at the expense of truth, learning, and long-term relational integrity.

The Systemic Cost: The Bystander Effect

Although guilt originates at the individual level, its behavioral expressions often have systemic consequences, influencing norms of feedback, merit, and psychological safety within groups. The Guilt–Honesty Paradox extends beyond the dyadic relationship of sender and receiver, impacting the broader organizational ecosystem. When a leader or colleague employs "deceptive kindness" to settle a personal social debt, they inadvertently compromise the psychological safety of the entire group [12].

While the sender's primary motivation is to repair a specific bond and alleviate the internal pressure of guilt, observers—bystanders who witness unearned praise or the strategic softening of critical feedback—often experience a decline in trust [2]. Highperforming observers, in particular, face a secondary ego-threat: they perceive their objective contributions as undervalued when guilt-driven flattery is used to balance social accounts. Consequently, the Instrumental Value of Honesty (IVH) is visibly diminished, signaling to the collective that immediate harmony is prioritized over merit and growth.

This systemic erosion demonstrates that what begins as a private attempt at social repair can manifest as a public catalyst for "polite stagnation", slowing learning, reducing accountability, and subtly reshaping organizational culture.

Conclusion: The Path to Virtuous Repair

The tension between harmony and honesty is an enduring feature of human social life. Guilt, while inherently prosocial, can narrow moral focus to short-term relational repair, fostering deceptive kindness that undermines trust and accountability. Recognizing the Guilt–Honesty Paradox allows individuals to consciously expand their temporal perspective, balancing immediate relational needs with long-term ethical outcomes.

Whether in hospitals, classrooms, or boardrooms, effective social repair relies not on the comfort of a lie, but on the difficult integrity of the truth. By integrating strategies such as temporal reframing and care-frontation, individuals can perform what might be termed Kantian Reboots, restoring honesty without jeopardizing relationships.

Future research may explore how institutional design, incentive structures, and feedback protocols can amplify or constrain STRF (Short-Term Relational Focus), determining whether guilt functions as a force for ethical repair or for epistemic distortion. From an Aristotelian perspective, the virtuous path involves repairing relationships through truthful care rather than temporary, guilt-driven deception, thereby aligning moral intent with sustainable social trust.

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