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Superego Dilemmas

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In this paper, the author suggests that there can be no adequate considerations of the functions of the superego without taking into account cultural attitudes toward authority. The current deconstructionist trends in academia seem to reflect a mistrust of authority that cannot but find its way into discussions (or avoidance of discussions) on the nature and function of the superego.

OCEANS OF INK HAVE BEEN SPILLED IN ATTEMPTS TO DESCRIBE THE functions of the psychic agency that sits in judgment of the ego or the self. In the literature, this agency is often associated with parental injunctions and disapproval, with the processes of introjection, incorporation, and identification, and is depicted as the most outwardly facing of the psychic agencies. Thus, it is associated also with cultural ideals and values and with motives for social conformity. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud stated clearly that social order depends on taboos and constraint, on bridling the appetites (an idea not unlike that presented by Plato in *The Republic* and other dialogues)—a process that necessarily involves repressive and oppressive forces condensed into Freud's notion of guilt. Thus, both guilt and the superego are associated with cultural ideals and with what prompts individuals to wean themselves from the "primary narcissism" of "His Majesty the Baby."

It is useful here to pause for a moment and consider the implications of Freud's ideas both for ideals of social order and for theories of individual freedom. Plato invented the myth of the charioteer to describe what he thought to be the need for the charioteer (Reason) to drive the horses (the Appetites). And there are Greek stories in which a failure to be able to drive the horses leads to disaster (Euripides's *Hippolytus*, a story taken up by Racine in *Phaedra*). In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the myth of the charioteer is strikingly clear on the need for external constraints and authority if the chariot is to be driven successfully. For one thing, the horses are engaged in active and open conflict: One is white, obedient, and stylish; the other is black, stubborn, rebellious, proud, insolent, and unresponsive. If the chariot is not to become impossibly dangerous, the black horse must be broken and cowed into submission, made to obey out of terror; it must be tamed, humbled, and forced to bend to the will of the charioteer. Furthermore, Plato goes on to explain, the black horse is shamed into submission.

But whereas Plato's version of the myth of the charioteer relies on essentially two agencies—the charioteer (Reason, the self) and two winged horses driven to power the chariot—Freud modified this configuration with his notion of the superego. Plato's metaphor is one of driving forces (the horses) and a driver, and Freud used the notion of drives, but whereas one of the motives of social order in Plato's *Republic* is the desire to do one's job well, whatever that job might be, and thereby to allow the philosopher king to deploy his wisdom (and reason to reign), for Freud the world had already become a far more complicated place, and faith in reason (however construed) was felt to be woefully insufficient as a guarantor of social order. By adding the superego to the ego and the id, Freud saddled himself with a dilemma: How could he retain enough faith in reason to make his system persuasive (something to which individuals might consent) while also calling on a repressive agency to enforce social order? Freud struggled with this dilemma throughout his life.

To return to "His Majesty the Baby," Freud was faced with another difficulty: How could he describe development from the state of primary narcissism to the state of responsible adulthood? In his emphasis on infantile sexuality and innate drives, Freud implicitly drew on the ideas of Rousseau, for whom childhood was idealized and

problems came with the "social contract" by means of which individuals constituted themselves in societies. In other words, Freud took over Rousseau's emphasis on childhood as hapless individualism and thereby made socialization repressive and theoretically problematic.

Let me turn our attention briefly to one of Freud's versions of superego functions. Freud's difficulties in making use of theories of social evolution are the same kind he faced in trying to think in terms of a developmental progression from infant to adult: How can the need for order be squared with the need for individual freedom?

For Freud, primitive promiscuity and chaos were present in the world at the beginning. How can these produce order of any kind? How can social order exist given Freud's assumptions about individual lusts and egocentrism? Freud never really solved this dilemma. If in some respects he was a Rousseauist, in others he was a Hobbesian. For there to be social order, there had to be coercion, not a contract, as with Rousseau. But the coercion could not appear to be authoritarian. Here is where Freud smuggled in unconscious motivation as a *deus ex machina* to solve his predicament. If coercion comes from the species, it is inherent; if it is inherent, then it does not come from any outside authority. Enter Lamarck. Freud cleverly used the ideas of Lamarck to hide the ghost in the machine.

In the work of Freud, the superego and the superego alone opens us to the worlds of others and weans us from the idyllic world of primary narcissism, instant gratification, and the primacy of drives. And it is the superego that allows societies to evolve toward greater order. If this is so, and it seems so to me, then Freud's approach to the superego brings with it both the problem of authority and the problem of evil—problems that at least in theory do not reside in either the ego or the id, in either the individual or society. The problems of authority and of evil cannot really be dodged by making the superego more complicated and less differentiated from the ego than it is sometimes assumed to be, or by avoiding discussions of superego conflicts; they are inherent in any theory of psychic process. Although Freud was extremely clever rhetorically at skirting the conflict between a Hobbesian position and a Rousseauist position (e.g., between the need for an external authority to impose order and a contractual agreement to express consent and freedom of will), psychoanalysts have willy-nilly been pulled into a conflict they have not often

understood. Their blindness is all the more understandable given that Freud hardly made the task easy. Freud's emphasis on infantile sexuality would seem to have given children insides, as it were, and provided reinforcement for the importance of childhood. But the emphasis on guilt as what allowed children to become socialized would simultaneously have leaned in a Hobbesian direction, as it implied external authorities that somehow (and in ways obscure and covert) need to become internalized. In evaluating the process of what we can loosely call "internalization," Freud implicitly relied on the need for punitive guilt as a means of keeping the lusts and appetites (his id) in check. Thus, Freud implied that guilt is necessary if not "good" for us. Guilt gives his charioteer the necessary authority to keep his horses in line.¹

You will at this point in the exposition have gathered that, in fact, Freud's three agencies work together; it is impossible to separate them out functionally. The id needs to be kept in check by the superego; the ego has trouble emerging from the id and more trouble still holding its own against the conspiracies of both id and superego. The way Freud defined each of his agencies required the others and gave value to his judgments about what he felt is necessary so that all three can work together harmoniously.

One of the persistent difficulties with any notion of an inner judge pertains to the process by which individuals internalize parental values and judgments, such that they constitute their own inner judges. How do such values and judgments, which theoretically begin "outside" the individual, get "inside"? How are they made one's own? What room is there in this process for free choice? Freud conceptualized this inner judge as the superego, a part of the self that sits over the self in judgment (literally above the ego, like the Supreme Court). But how that inner judge operates—what part of its functions can be associated with guilt (and repression), as Freud presented it to be, and what part can be associated with reactions to anxiety (affect regulation) and shame—is another question.

A patient recently said to me, apropos of her tendency to blame herself, that without her self-blame she would feel naked. This

comment came on the heels of her description of the hostility she felt from her niece, who had not spoken to her for years and with whom she was expecting to be confined in a hospital waiting room awaiting news of my patient's sister's operation. My patient was in tears over a memory of having slapped her niece's hand so hard that the little girl (no more than two years old at the time) reprimanded her. My patient kept repeating how guilty she felt about slapping her niece. Several points are worth noting. First, she reported the incident as one in which her niece was angry with her, not the other way around. Second, my patient had recognized her anger as being destructive and had spent much of her life warding it off. She has great inhibitions feeling or expressing anger and is especially attentive and generous even to (and perhaps especially to) those with whom she feels angry. But there is another level to the meanings of her guilt over hitting her niece. For her, letting her anger "show" (hitting her niece) was inexcusable and represented a shameful failure to conform to her ego ideal. Such failure is more painful than the guilt associated with hitting her niece's hand; this patient's judgment of herself is so harsh that she uses guilt to protect herself from the underlying shame-based recriminations.

Her comment suggests how complicated and various are the relations between shame and guilt. Furthermore, the guilt of self-accusation can be, as it is for this patient, a way of feeling "clothed." Without it, she would feel naked. Here, then, is one way of approaching superego problems—through the internalization (or introjection) of guilt, one function of which is a defense against shame and nakedness. The growing literature on survivor guilt (and shame) also suggests that guilt can at times be a defense against the shame of helplessness—a way of trying to clothe oneself.

One of the distinctions between shame and guilt has to do with the threat to internal orientation. Shame poses a far greater threat to orientation than does guilt, which can actually serve to orient. With guilt, there is a sense of who is doing what to whom: One feels guilty for having done something to someone. By contrast, shame draws more directly on the wellspring of helplessness; consequently, shame is characterized by an inability to locate the "enemy" except as a sense of the defectiveness of the self or in the form of splitting. In the case of splitting (which I think can sometimes occur in response to shame), it becomes easier to identify what one is attacking, even if it

¹What allows Freud to tame his horses, to subdue the appetites, is guilt, whereas what allowed Plato's charioteer to tame his horses was shame.

is a part of oneself. Guilt, by contrast, allows for a higher level of organization in the sense that it spells out who is doing what to whom. In addition, the usual definitions of oedipal guilt entail a putative victory (for the son if he eliminates his father and for the daughter if she eliminates her mother). With shame, victory is not possible, only a sense of disorienting failure with respect to which there is no getting one's bearings. All this does not mean that there is no superego conflict in shame. Of course there is. The ego ideal can judge harshly and can deliver a verdict of "failure," in response to which the self tries to hide, avoid, deny, and so forth.

Bearing in mind, then, the complicated relationship between shame and guilt, one way of approaching the problematic subject of how the superego is created and sustained is to assume that it is the result (as well as the cause) of processes of self-evaluation and of the evaluation of the world begun at birth (if not before) and out of which emerges whatever sense of orientation in the world we manage to acquire. We cannot say, "First I am I, and then they are they," as self-awareness and awareness of the world and of others are intermingled from the outset. Thus, the skepticism directed at the concept of primary narcissism by members of the so-called object relations school (e.g., Fairbairn, Guntrip, Winnicott) seems well founded. But by being skeptical of Freud's notion of primary narcissism, these writers implicitly give up Freud's Lamarckian argument, which brings them face to face with the problem of authority. However, many writers in various schools (object relations, self psychology, interpersonal, relational) have assumed that they can get around the problem of authority by positing a priori something like positive social instincts: Humankind is essentially good, their argument might go, but is distorted by social forces. And these writers then go further to imply that they know how these social forces can best be combated to restore to the individual his or her integrity (the authentic self). For many of these writers, the problem of evil is implicitly in society rather than in the individual, and individuals need to be freed from socially imposed inauthenticity. By contrast, writers in the Kleinian school follow Hobbes in mistrusting human nature and approach the problem in a manner consistent with the British emphasis on gardening as a process in which shrubs and plants are "lopped and bound." Accordingly, psychoanalytic technique must be suitably adversarial.

In the United States, the Freudian emphasis on sexuality, childhood, individualism, and innate drives has squared well with our cultural assumptions about the dangers of authority, the value of individualism and Emersonian self-reliance, and fears of centralization. This emphasis has allowed us to villainize society (or government) to keep our notion of the essential purity of the individual intact. But, whereas Europe has remained squarely within the Aristotelian tradition (in which people are essentially social animals, but ones requiring an imposed order—an idea bolstered by the Catholic Church), Americans increasingly have defined themselves by their freedom and their mistrust of authority, in confused and confusing combinations. True, Freud emphasized infantile helplessness and dependency, but these were infantile states to be overcome during development. What is viewed as therapeutic for many therapists (and analysts) has therefore become the liberation of the "child within" from the shackles of society and from the external forces of power—a posture that denatures the problem of authority.

This individualistic focus in the United States, this emphasis on freedom and opportunity, has tended to obscure the problem of authority in American social and human science. Humans defined a priori as Aristotelian social animals somehow got lost in the shuffle. In the past two decades, writers of the so-called interpersonal, constructivist, and relational schools and writers of similar bents have taken umbrage at the focus on individual fantasy and individualism (even as writers like Lasch have addressed the "culture of narcissism") but have failed to connect their interests with obvious and historical currents in the history and philosophy of the social and human sciences in our Western tradition. Uncannily consistent with deconstructionism, theirs is in part another reaction against authoritarianism in the bumpy and sometimes blind tradition of American politics. Clearly, there can be no fruitful discussion of the superego or the ego ideal without a backdrop of cultural attitudes toward power (and the problem of evil).

In short, in reconsidering the concept of the superego, it seems useful to note how essential are cultural values in framing any discussion. Cultural attitudes toward authority are different in the United States and in Europe and are very different now from what they were in Freud's day. As was the case with Rousseau, Hobbes, Aristotle, and Plato (indeed with all social theorists), individual and cultural

attitudes toward authority cannot but find their way into debates about the nature and function of society and about the relation between social order and individual well-being.

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Superego Revisited— Relevant or Irrelevant?

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The superego has become a great and encompassing symbol that cannot be abolished without much concern. It is a symbol for the subjective experience of moral systems, as an inner part-person in conflict with other parts, a symbol for their various functions, affects, and contents, and a symbol for their objective genesis as discovered in introspective work and observation of children. Its images, like "conscience" and "inner judge," are mental contents of great evocativeness.

*Superego as Abstract Symbol for Conscience, Inner
Judge, Moral System, and Value Hierarchy*

MANY FIND THE CONCEPT OF "SUPEREGO" AND MUCH OF WHAT IT refers to in clinical observation outdated, not very relevant, and its systematic study and use not worthwhile (e.g., Brenner, 2002; Lichtenberg, this issue; Milch and Orange, this issue). I could not

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