Original Article

Why we should stop conflating the superego with the conscience

Donald L. Carveth
Department of Sociology, Glendon College, York University, 2275 Bayview Avenue, Toronto, ON M4R 1C1, Canada.
E-mail: dcarveth@yorku.ca

Abstract Freud's decision to merge conscience into the superego has made it difficult to study conflict between them. While the superego comprises aggression turned back against the self, identification with the aggressor, and (often immoral) internalized social norms, conscience emerges from early libidinal attachments and identification with the nurturer. The distinction between superego and conscience is grounded in the Freudian and Kleinian distinctions between Thanatos and Eros and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive or reparative positions. While Freud, Alexander and Ferenczi all viewed the analytic cure as involving the demolition of the superego, mainstream psychoanalysis, following Strachey, has preferred superego modification to recognition of a separate conscience, failing to understand that it is only on the basis of conscience that one can know in which direction the superego needs to be modified. The social and cultural as well as the clinical import of these distinctions is explored.
Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2017) **22,** 15–32. doi:10.1057/pcs.2016.13; published online 28 April 2016

Keywords: superego; conscience; persecutory guilt; reparative guilt; borrowed guilt; capacity for concern

For decades what Freud (1933) regarded as "the preferred field of work for psychoanalysis," namely "[t]he problems which the unconscious sense of guilt has opened up, its connections with morality, education, crime and delinquency…" (p. 61), has been neglected in favor of a preoccupation with shame, narcissism, self, relatedness, intersubjectivity and, most recently, the neurological foundations of mind. Prior to the 1960s, psychoanalysts viewed superego analysis as central to the analytic process. Some analysts never lost sight of Freudian and Kleinian insight into the dynamics of guilt and self-punishment, but many of the newer psychoanalytic approaches that came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s tended to downplay intrapsychic conflict

in favor of an emphasis upon trauma, abuse, deprivation and deficit, often losing sight of the aggression and dynamics of self-destruction that are their sequelae.

By the late 1950s, Sandler (1960) had already noticed that, in the indexing of cases at the Hampstead clinic, there was a "tendency to veer away from the conceptualization of material in superego terms," wondering why "therapists have preferred to sort their clinical material in terms of object relationships, ego activities, and the transference, rather than in terms of the participation of the superego" (p. 129). Two decades later, Arlow (1982) observed that "superego function has been shunted to one side by the current preoccupation with the persistence of the regressive reactivation of archaic idealizations" (p. 229) and that "the concept superego itself rarely appears as the central topic of a clinical or theoretical contribution" (p. 230). Würmser (1998) referred to the superego as the "sleeping giant" of contemporary psychoanalysis.

While the giant slept, having been anaesthetized in both society at large and the psychoanalytic thinking it encouraged, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, Ayn Rand, Alan Greenspan, and a host of others laid the foundations for the dismantlement of the welfare state and—with the avid assistance of the "banksters" and "fraudsters" of Wall Street and the City—prepared the ground for the economic crisis of 2007-8. I think it was no accident that the flight from guilt in psychoanalytic thought coincided with the shift from productive industrial to consumer capitalism, the emergence of what Christopher Lasch (1979) called the "culture of narcissism," and the rise of neoliberalism or market fundamentalism. Ironically, the psychoanalytic preoccupation in the 1970s and 1980s with narcissistic characters incapable of bearing guilt coincided with a flight from guilt in psychoanalysis itself. In several streams of psychoanalytic thought the central role of guilt evasion in pathological narcissism and a wide range of other conditions was obscured—an instance of what Russell Jacoby (1975) referred to as the "social amnesia" in which "society remembers less and less faster and faster" and "the sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion" (p. 1).

Recently, issues concerning the superego, guilt, and conscience appear to be returning from repression. Coinciding with the emergence of the Occupy movement and whistleblowers such as Assange, Manning and Snowdon, psychoanalytic books and articles have begun to appear with titles such as *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience* (Barnett, 2007); *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Morality* (Hughes, 2008); *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind* (Reiner, 2009); *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience* (Carveth, 2013); "Reflections on the absence of morality in psychoanalytic theory" (Frattaroli, 2013); and *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, and Management* (Akhtar ed., 2013). No doubt this "comeback" amounts to a reflection in psychoanalysis of a shift in the wider culture: the culture of narcissism got us into hot water. What three and a half decades ago Rangell (1980) described in

The Mind of Watergate as the "syndrome of the compromise of integrity" led eventually to the 2008 crisis of "casino capitalism."

***

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923) set out his famous tripartite model of the mind—id (passions), ego (reason) and superego (morality)—and chose to identify conscience with the superego, thus obscuring the crucial differences between them. The superego involves judgment and punishment for real or imagined violations of internalized social norms, norms that may sometimes themselves be immoral. It involves punishment fueled by aggression—mostly turned on the self, though often righteously displaced outwards onto scapegoats. Conscience, on the other hand, is grounded in early attachment needs that we share with other primate species (Bowlby, 1969-80) and involves caring, both for others and one's true self (Winnicott, 1960, 1963), caring fueled by attachment and love. Whereas, as a social construct, the content of the superego is socially relative, varying widely from one culture or subculture to another, the conscience (although sometimes undeveloped or deeply repressed) arises from a universal dimension of both our animal and our human nature: our infantile dependency, need for nurturance and love, and our attachment to those who care for us and who, through our identification with their goodness, stimulate in us a need to care for and nurture others.

Failure to distinguish conscience from superego has made it difficult to recognize conflict between them. Recently, for example, psychiatrist and Ret. Navy Captain W. Nash (2012) reported on the role of "moral injury" in a common type of PTSD seen in returning soldiers who, in obedience to a superego shaped by parental and military authority, have committed unconscionable acts for which they are unable to forgive themselves. As Sagan (1988) has pointed out, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain (1885/2006) offers us a classic illustration of such conflict through his description of Huck's dilemma: whether to obey his racist superego's demand and send the letter turning his runaway slave companion Jim in to the authorities, or risk eternal damnation by defying his superego by following his conscience and protecting the friend he loves:

> But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. … I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.
>
> (p. 1364)

Because Freud associated the superego with the moral and the immoral with the passions of the id, the idea that one might be sent to hell for obeying superego commands seems odd. But Twain was alert to a truth to which Freud was blind—namely, that sometimes the superego's "morality" is immoral by the standards of

conscience, requiring us to do wrong, while the passions of our hearts encourage us to do right.

Without the distinction between superego and conscience it is not only difficult to recognize conflict between them, but also to distinguish the two very different types of guilt each generates: persecutory guilt generated by superego and reparative guilt generated by conscience. The superego wants to shame and punish; the conscience to heal. If I've injured another and, while he bleeds, I self-flagellate, that is persecutory guilt (superego); but if I put down my cat-o-nine tails and reach for my first-aid kit and begin bandaging, that is reparative guilt (conscience). Those naïve psychologists who think guilt is something we need to rid ourselves of have only punitive guilt in mind. Because Freud himself was not alert to the distinction later elaborated by Melanie Klein and colleagues (Klein *et al*, 1952) and Leon Grinberg (1964), he failed to see that, while in civilization we need less persecutory guilt, we are in need of a great deal more reparative guilt; in other words, in civilization we need less superego and more conscience.

While Freud was mistaken in finding the superego's origin at the end of the oedipal phase at around five or six years of age, he was certainly correct to view it as id aggression turned away from one's significant others and back against the ego; instead of attacking the perceived aggressors, we identify with them and aggress against ourselves. Melanie Klein found essentially the same dynamic operating much earlier in the so-called pre-oedipal, mother-infant relationship, where the infant turns aggression toward the frustrating primary carer back around against itself, forming a primitive, persecutory superego as a result. In adding to the superego a final layer of culture internalized via the parents, Freud failed to note the frequent immorality of the values so acquired—the racism, sexism, heterosexism, authoritarianism, classism, childism, consumerism, possessive individualism, commodity fetishism, etc., infecting not only Huck's superego but ours. Under the banner of a heterosexist superego, until fairly recently many psychotherapy and psychoanalytic training institutes rejected gay applicants for training.

In contrast to the superego, conscience is grounded in primary love toward and introjection of good objects, the good primary carer (still most often the mother) of the so-called pre-oedipal period and both the good mother and father of the oedipal phase. Whereas the superego entails identification with the aggressor and operates according to the talion law, "an eye for an eye," conscience flows from identification with the nurturer and returns love and gratitude for love received. As Sagan (1988) has pointed out, Freud's emphasis upon the Oedipus complex, his devaluation of women and relative neglect of the preoedipal phase, led to his blindness to the roots of conscience in the mother-infant relation. As Melanie Klein understood, it is in reaching and working through the depressive position that the entirely narcissistic persecutory shame and guilt that predominate in the paranoid-schizoid position may to a degree be transcended in favor of what Winnicott (1963) called the "capacity for concern," and the reparative wishes and identifications with the nurturer that lie at the core of conscience.

Although mainstream psychoanalysis has shrunk from acknowledging it, Schafer (1960) going so far as to advance the notion of a "loving and beloved" superego, the truth is that in both Freud's and Klein's work it is not merely the "archaic" or "pathological" superego, or superego "precursors" or "lacunae," that are the problem: the superego as such is an internal bad object, a pathologically normal or normopathic (McDougall, 1980; Bollas, 1989) persecutor, fueled by hatred turned on the self, and at best pseudo-moral in that it loves to catch us in wrongdoing— not because of any genuine moral concern for the self or others, but only because doing so offers it an opportunity to do what it loves to do: give us a beating.

But instead of reversing Freud's (1923) decision to merge conscience and superego, mainstream psychoanalysis has preferred, following Strachey (1934), to distinguish a "mature" superego from an "archaic" one. In so doing and calling for modification instead of elimination of the superego in favor of the conscience, we have blinded ourselves to the fact that *we are relying precisely on the conscience in making this distinction*. It is only by the standards of conscience that we can know in what directions the superego needs to be modified. In reality, what has been called a "mature" or a "loving and beloved" superego is … the conscience. To embrace the idea of superego modification while resisting recognition of conscience as a fourth structure of the mind is self-contradictory, for the very concept that is refused (conscience as a separate structure) is at the same time implicitly assumed as the basis for knowing in what direction the superego needs to be modified.

The idea of intrasystemic conflict within the superego (as distinct from conflict between the superego and conscience) has largely failed to generate in a discipline claiming to be "*the* psychology of the innermost mental processes of man in conflict" (Kris, 1938, p. 140) anything like sufficient attention to internal moral conflict. Separating conscience out from superego directs our attention to such conflict and, more generally, encourages psychoanalysis to concern itself, far more than it has in the past, with issues of conscience in general and, more particularly, the conflict between what society tells us is moral (superego) and what is really moral (conscience). A final reason for advancing the duality of conscience *vs*. superego is precisely that both Freudian and Kleinian theory have traditionally assumed this duality. For Freud it is the duality of Eros *vs*. Thanatos, libido *vs*. aggression, love *vs*. hate, while for Klein it is the duality of the depressive or reparative position *vs*. the paranoid-schizoid position. While conscience is grounded in reparative love, the superego is a persecutory bad object driven by hate. When Hamlet says "Conscience does make cowards of us all" (III.1), he is actually referring to the superego, the attacks of which undermine self-esteem and confidence. Reconciling with conscience disarms the superego and strengthens self-respect and courage.

Long dissatisfied with the psychoanalytic theory of morality, Erikson (1976) differentiated between "an earlier, a moral conscience and a later, an ethical one" (p. 212). Although there is no problem with his description of the

crushing moralistic superego, Erikson's view of conscience as "the more adult pole of our ethical nature" sees it essentially as a maturation of the superego. This misses the origin of conscience in early identification with a loving presence. Far from being reducible to a maturation of the superego, conscience embodies the very principle on the basis of which we can know in what ways the superego needs to mature. As a socially constructed and internalized structure the superego is socially and historically relative. In contrast, conscience arises from a universal dimension of human *being-in-the-world*—our infantile dependency upon and identification with the nurturer (Sagan, 1988, pp. 159-182; Bloom, 2010, 2013). While we have long understood the principle of psychic reciprocity in its negative form as the talion law, psychoanalysis has largely failed to recognize that the positive form of this principle finds expression in the need to give back love for love received (our identification with the nurturer). Here lies the foundation for what is recognized in one form or another in virtually all cultures and religions as the universal law of charity—"don't do to others what you don't want them doing to you" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)—that Kant formulated as the categorical imperative and that forms the core of conscience. In this connection Chomsky (2002) writes "if an action is right (or wrong) for others, it is right (or wrong) for us. Those who do not rise to the minimal moral level of applying to themselves the standards they apply to others—more stringent ones, in fact—plainly cannot be taken seriously when they speak of appropriateness of response; or of right and wrong, good and evil."

Following Freud's recognition of a libidinal element in the formation of ideals in addition to the aggression at the core of the superego, Erikson (1958) attempted to find in the ego-ideal a positive conscience with which to counterbalance the harsh superego. But this project was doomed to failure for, as "heir to the lost narcissism of... childhood in which he was his own ideal" (Freud, 1914, p. 93), the ego-ideal is a narcissistic structure. When I measure my real ego against my ego-ideal, my attention is focused on myself, not the other. If, for example, I parent primarily from a desire to live up to an ideal of parenting, so as to be able to view myself as a good parent and feel good about myself as such, this is not at all equivalent to the parenting that flows from authentic love and concern for one's child, who can certainly tell the difference.

***

In light of Kleinian contributions we understand the superego as originally grounded in pregenital aggression toward and introjection of the persecutory part-object. On almost every page where Klein (1952) displays semantic loyalty to Freud by citing projection of the death instinct to account for the inevitable persecutory anxiety of even the most sensitively cared-for infant, she at the same time offers an alternate and far more acceptable explanation: namely, that given its cognitive limitations, the infant is bound to misinterpret every frustration as an

attack and, hence, that the absent good breast is felt as a present bad attacking breast:

> … from the earliest days onwards, frustration and discomfort arouse in the infant the feeling that he is being attacked by hostile forces. Therefore the sensations experienced by the infant at birth and the difficulties of adapting himself to entirely new conditions give rise to persecutory anxiety. The comfort and care given after birth, particularly the first feeding experiences, are felt to come from good forces.
>
> (p. 433)

Contrary to the widespread misapprehension fostered by Bowlby and colleagues (Bowlby *et al*, 1986; see discussion in Carveth, 2013, Chapter 9), among others, that she ignored or minimized the role of real parenting in health and pathology, Klein (1940) constantly stressed the crucial importance of good, loving care-taking, for only this can hope to offset the inevitable rage and paranoia resulting from frustration, both that which is basic and unavoidable and the surplus frustration arising from parental failure in varying degrees:

> Through being loved and through the enjoyment and comfort he has in relation to people his confidence in his own as well as in other people's goodness becomes strengthened, his hope that his "good" objects and his own ego can be saved and preserved increases, at the same time as his ambivalence and acute fears of internal destruction diminish.... Unpleasant experiences and the lack of enjoyable ones, in the young child, especially lack of happy and close contact with loved people, increase ambivalence, diminish trust and hope and confirm anxieties about inner annihilation and external persecution; moreover they slow down and perhaps permanently check the beneficial processes through which in the long run inner security is achieved.
>
> (p. 128)

While attuned, non-intrusive and non-depriving caring is, as Klein insisted, essential to mitigate such paranoia, it cannot hope to eradicate it altogether, because frustration cannot be eliminated by even the most attuned and responsive carers imaginable. Whereas the superego is essentially an identification with the persecutory part-object and involves turning aggression against the self, the conscience is grounded in primary love toward and introjection of the good part-object of the paranoid-schizoid position, plus the capacity for concern for, introjection of and identification with the whole, repaired and restored, good objects of the depressive position.

* * *

In relation to Ferenczi's (1928 [1927]) statement that "[o]nly a complete dissolution of the super-ego can bring about a radical cure" (p. 100), Adorno

(1966) wrote: "[a] critique of the super-ego would have to turn into one of the society that produces the superego; if psychoanalysts stand mute here, they accommodate the ruling norm" (p. 274). Unlike Ferenczi himself, who was both a political and a psychoanalytic radical, with a few important exceptions such as Fromm (1955), most psychoanalysts *have* pretty much accommodated the ruling norm. Although in his clinical thinking Freud (1938) recognized the superego's destructiveness, even calling for "the slow demolition of the hostile superego" (p. 180), in his sociological contributions (Freud, 1930) he viewed it in prosocial terms as the upholder of law and order, while projecting what is antisocial and perverse in human nature onto the id, the repository of the alleged animal in man. Despite his clinical awareness of its sadism, Freud's association of the superego with the prosocial and the moral has made it difficult for us to keep its destructiveness clearly in mind, including the destructive ideologies we internalize in socialization (which, in this respect, might well be thought of as "antisocialization.")

In associating the superego with "nurture" and the prosocial, and the id with "nature" and the antisocial, we have been blinded to both the antisocial lessons society teaches and deposits in our superegos, and the prosocial, caring and sympathetic inclinations grounded in the primary or unlearned attachment systems we share with other primates. Recent animal research (De Waal, 1997, 2009) has gone a long way toward exploding the myth of "the beast," which turns out to be mostly a projection of our own disowned beastliness onto animals who are seldom beastly in the ways humans often are (Carveth, 2012). In affirming the Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus' view that "man is a wolf unto man," Freud (1930, p. 110) is being very unfair... to the wolves, a highly social species that, to my knowledge, has never been guilty of organizing death camps, or dropping atom bombs on civilian populations, or of videotaping the rape and murder of their victims for future enjoyment. Only human beings capable of empathy can invent and enjoy truly diabolical forms of torture.

***

In recent years many psychoanalysts have come to dismiss the superego as part of an abstract metapsychology, often losing sight of its crucial clinical relevance. Even while turning in the 1970s and 1980s to the study of narcissism, psychoanalysts were theorizing it more in terms of deficit than conflict and downplaying the role of guilt evasion, in a pathology many of us now recognize as characterized by a marked proclivity toward shame combined with an inability to bear reparative guilt. While it is true that people who can bear reparative guilt may also feel shame, those who suffer from significant narcissistic pathology may only be able to experience persecutory guilt and shame—at least until they reach that turning point at which they begin to feel ashamed of their incapacity to bear reparative guilt. The point is that while studying narcissism in the midst of the culture of narcissism some analysts (e.g., Kohut, 1978 and his followers) tended

to lose sight of our best insights into the unconscious self-punishment underlying diverse symptoms that on the surface appear to have little or nothing to do with moral issues. Any symptoms that cause suffering—not just depression and anxiety, but obsessions, addictions, perversions, hysterical and psycho-somatic conditions, seeking out or remaining in situations in which one is abused—all bring pain and torment upon the self and, hence, all serve to gratify the sadistic superego.

Tragically, victims of trauma, violence and abuse regularly end up abusing themselves and sometimes others. In order to understand this, the concept of the superego is essential. Trauma generates rage that, due to both fear of retaliation and ambivalence toward the abuser, is turned on the self in the form of the superego. As Freud taught us, the more aggression is repressed the more it is taken over by the superego and turned against the self. Instead of turning the aggression stimulated in me by the abusers against them, I identify with them and become self-attacking, self-sabotaging, self-limiting. In the all-too-present historical cycle of violence we witness victimized people not only unconsciously victimizing themselves, but often enough unconsciously imposing their victimization upon others and in this way bringing retaliation and further victimization upon themselves.

As early as 1938 in *Man Against Himself*, Karl Menninger brilliantly surveyed the myriad suicide equivalents, symbolic suicides, and guilt substitutes that constitute much of the psychopathology we see, but that for decades we have had difficulty understanding as the products of the internal hanging judge: the superego. As Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Seneca the Younger (4 BC to AD 65), famously put it: "Let wickedness escape as it may at the bar, it never fails of doing justice upon itself, for every guilty person is his own hangman" (Seneca, n.d, p.121)—that is, unless he identifies with the sadistic superego, projects his guilt onto a scapegoat, and hangs him or her instead. We are in the business of helping our patients become conscious of the hangman's work so that they may cease being both its victim and its agent.

In order to do this we need to be clear in our own minds about the difference between the superego and the conscience. The only escape from the clutches of the persecutory superego is through an advance into and working through of the depressive position where, through overcoming splitting, we achieve ambivalence or whole object functioning and evolve a conscience capable of generating depressive instead of persecutory anxiety, and reparative rather than persecutory guilt. It is only by facing and bearing one's guilt, working through one's regrets (Kavaler-Adler, 2013), and making reparation, that one can escape persecution. Regrettably, people often prefer persistent self-torment to the narcissistic injury entailed in acknowledging their faults and taking responsibility for their destructiveness. In providing a fundamentally safe holding environment that clearly distinguishes the sinner from the sin, we can sometimes assist people to reconcile with conscience, thus depriving the

superego of opportunities to attack, and generating sufficient self-respect to fight back in the face of its bullying.

***

Unfortunately, reconciliation with conscience is seriously hampered in those who suffer from what Freud (1923) called "borrowed guilt"—guilt that is "a product of an identification with some other person" (p. 50, n. 1). Here we have a type of unjustified guilt stemming not from any wrongdoing on the part of the guilty subject but from his or her unconscious identification with the guilt of a significant other. Fernando (2000) argues that the child who develops a "borrowed" sense of guilt has usually been the target of externalization on the part of a narcissistic parent who cannot bear to own it and who trains the child to accept it instead. The child's acceptance of the guilt as his own serves to defend against conscious perception of the badness of the significant other and eases fears of abandonment. So-called "borrowed guilt" is not the only type of unjustified defensive guilt. Fairbairn (1943) was perhaps among the first to draw attention to what he called "the moral defense against bad objects" (pp. 65-67) in which children blame themselves for their parents' deficiencies and wrongdoing:

> If the delinquent child is reluctant to admit that his parents are bad objects, he by no means displays equal reluctance to admit that he himself is bad. It becomes obvious, therefore, that the child would rather be bad himself than have bad objects; and accordingly we have some justification for surmising that one of his motives in becoming bad is to make his objects "good". In becoming bad he is really taking upon himself the burden of badness which appears to reside in his objects. By this means he seeks to purge them of their badness ….
>
> (p. 65)

"They would love me if I weren't bad." The moral defense preserves the child's omnipotence, warding off the unbearable recognition of helplessness. This type of guilt after trauma entails an attempt to reduce helplessness: the idea that one could have prevented it may be preferable to the idea that the traumatic events were random and senseless. The moral defense also serves to preserve the needed tie to the loved objects by shifting the blame from the object to the self.

I have gone out of my way to place the term "borrowed guilt" in inverted commas, indicating ironic distance because, as Paola Leon (2015, personal communication) has helped me to see, such guilt isn't "borrowed" at all. Those who donate it want it to be kept and carried by the scapegoat; the last thing they want is for it to be given back. Fernando (2000) pointed to the externalization of such guilt by a narcissistic parent, but to continue calling it "borrowed" implies the child is somehow actively accepting it instead of having it imposed upon her. Similarly, Fairbairn's model of the moral defense stresses the child's activity in deflecting blame from the parents onto the self. But whether imposed by white

people upon black people, men upon women, heterosexuals upon LGBT people, higher class or caste people upon those from lower social classes, the rich upon the poor etc., induced feelings of shame, guilt and inferiority are often neither borrowed, nor defensively engineered by the *subjects*, but imposed upon emotionally abused and scapegoated *objects* via projective identification on the part of sadistic others.

Emancipation from the superego requires reconciling with conscience. But in order to face, work through and make reparation for the guilt for which one *is* responsible one must first emancipate oneself from the guilt and shame for which one is *not* responsible. In order to facilitate this it is crucial that, as therapists, we establish a non-judgmental atmosphere. As Karl Stern (1975) pointed out, this constitutes "one of the oldest traditions in medicine, even outside psychiatry, and even before Christianity. In ancient Chinese and Greek medicine, one of the natural rights of the patient was not to be morally judged by the physician" (p. 71). Beyond such medical and professional requirements, a range of religious traditions provides different versions of the command to "*judge not*." Experienced therapists know that, if the patient encounters moral judgment on the part of the therapist, the therapy will fail, either because the outraged client will leave, or because he or she will derive masochistic gratification in submitting to judgment and punishment by an external superego in the form of the therapist.

But does establishing such a non-judgmental atmosphere mean one necessarily becomes blind, deaf and dumb when it comes to moral issues—that like the three wise monkeys one "sees no evil, hears no evil and speaks no evil?" Does good therapeutic technique involve "turning a blind eye" to the ethical dimensions of the patient's behavior and problems? On the contrary, as Stern has argued, the most effective therapeutic situation is one where patients have "a complete sense of non-condemnation" by therapists who have "something in their personalities that gives the patient a sense of the primacy of charity and acceptance," who do not preach, but who at the same time convey to their patients "an awareness that the therapist … believes in moral values" (p.73). Here is where I think the distinction between superego and conscience becomes crucially important. Patients have a right to expect acceptance and exemption from superego judgment by their therapists but, whether they know it consciously or not, they need the therapist to have a conscience and to be able to hear its "still small voice," for the entire therapy depends upon their getting our help to be able to hear it themselves. For this is the only avenue of escape from the persecutory superego. Since the conscience is devoted to truth, love and justice, it will naturally assist us in sorting out what we are authentically responsible for and what we are not.

There is no doubt that sometimes internalized values (superego) correspond with conscience. And sometimes, in addition to conflicts between superego and conscience, there may be conflicts within each. Conflicting values may be internalized into the superego and conscience can pull in conflicting directions,

reflecting competing loyalties and attachments and incompatible goods (e.g., the need to be truthful when doing so may be unkind). Sometimes our concern for others puts us in conflict with core elements of our true self. I think here we approach the area of what Kierkegaard (1849) and May (1950, pp. 32-51) described as *existential* as distinct from neurotic guilt: on the one hand, there is the guilt arising from our failure to develop our potentials, and, on the other, the guilt precisely for doing so. If we do not grow, we fail ourselves; if we do, we risk failing others. For Kierkegaard, much neurotic guilt and anxiety arise from our evasion of the existential guilt and anxiety that are simply a part of the human condition but which, nevertheless, we often refuse to bear. But beyond this there is the unconscious guilt arising from complicity with unconscionable societal and institutional practices that we are afraid even to acknowledge as such, let alone begin to resist.

I have argued (Carveth, 2013, Chapter 1) that, though we have always denied it, psychoanalysis is and always has been an intrinsically moral enterprise: we rightly valorize life over death; consciousness over unconsciousness; self-reflection, self-control and sublimation over acting-out; and object love over narcissism and hate. While we are right to seek not to be "superego-ish" with patients, due to our conflation of superego and conscience, in seeking not to reinforce the former we have sometimes side-stepped the latter, often attempting to steer clear of moral issues altogether. In practice we have often tended to rationalize as therapeutic neutrality what has really amounted to avoidance of dynamically important issues and conflicts. But whether or not we judge them, our patients certainly judge themselves, if not consciously then unconsciously. While they often do so quite irrationally, blaming themselves so as not to fault the others upon whom they depend, or surrendering to and absorbing the guilt or degradation projected into them by others, sometimes their unconscious guilt is quite justified by the standards of conscience. We may be able to protect our patients to a considerable degree from our superegos but not from persecution by their own—unless and until we manage to help them to reconcile with conscience, provided they are willing and able to do so.

Psychoanalysts have commonly understood Marcellus's comment to Horatio that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet*, I.4) in individualistic terms with reference to "the state" of the self. But our "private troubles" are often reflective of "public issues" (Mills, 1959). My patient's pathological narcissism is inseparable from the "culture of narcissism" in which both he and I are immersed. His dysthymia and chronic sweating were finally cured when, after years of careful "neutrality," I finally got around to asking him if he ever wondered how his wife would feel if she knew about the happy-ending massages he had been managing for years not to recognize as cheating on her. Sometimes the problem may be more about cheating on one's taxes than on one's spouse, or engaging in other forms of financial chicanery. Sometimes the fundamental practices of one's business, industry or nation may put one in conflict with one's

conscience, however muffled its voice may be, thus rendering one an easy target for attack by the unconscious superego even while, on the conscious level, one remains unaware of any connection between moral issues and, say, the sudden appearance of panic attacks, migraines, depression or "chronic fatigue." Elsewhere (Carveth, 2010) I have referred to a kind of free-floating anxiety and unconscious guilt that those of us in the West who enjoy a degree of material security may experience in relation both to the poor at home and in other parts of the world who, in colonial and neo-colonial forms, are the objects of our exploitation. We can only begin to imagine the long-term unconscious emotional consequences for the populace of a nation of the aggression, exploitation and genocide committed in its name. What kind of manic defenses must we chronically employ to keep all this persecutory guilt at bay in order not to have to face it, bear it, and seek to make reparation?

***

The phenomenon of guilt evasion cannot be adequately comprehended exclusively from the standpoint of the psychology of the individual. To attempt to do so would entail a failure of the sociological imagination. Human beings have always been reluctant to face and bear guilt. But economic and socio-cultural forces create conditions that may either encourage or discourage acts of conscience. I have argued that, from the very beginning, psychoanalysis sought to cloak its intrinsic moral ethic beneath a positivist, de-moralizing façade. In recent decades the de-moralizing trend has intensified, leading to neglect of the concepts of guilt and the superego, concepts through which psychoanalysis had earlier managed to address moral issues, even while seeking to obscure the fact and while failing to distinguish superego and conscience.

As I have indicated, I think it is no coincidence that the psychoanalytic retreat from guilt and the superego in favor of a preoccupation with the "self" occurred simultaneously with the economic shift from productive industrial to consumer capitalism and the culture of narcissism it creates. This is a culture of release rather than restriction; a culture hostile to regulation and regulators; a culture that tolerates, even encourages, the bending or evasion of rules; a de-moralizing culture hostile to moral critique and to whistleblowers; a culture averse to conscience. (Are any of the banksters responsible for the economic crisis of 2007-8 or the more recent manipulation of the libor rate yet in jail?)

As Lakoff and Wehling (2012) have pointed out, due to its rationalism and traditional reluctance to moralize, the Left surrenders moral discourse to the Right, which takes full advantage. In relation to recent events in Wisconsin, they write: "Where progressives argued policy—the right to collective bargaining and the importance of public education—conservatives argued morality from their perspective and many working people who shared their moral views voted with them and against their own interests. Why? Because morality is central to identity and, hence, trumps policy." What these authors mean by the morality of the Right corresponds, in the psychoanalytic terms employed here,

to the morality of the superego, while the morality of the Left corresponds to conscience. "Progressive morality fits a nurturant family: parents are equal, the values are empathy, responsibility for oneself and others and cooperation," while "Conservative morality fits the family of the strict father, who is the ultimate authority" and in which "You are responsible for yourself and not anyone else and no one else is responsible for you." Due to their commitment to de-moralizing—their inveterate reluctance to preach what they practice—progressives have failed to overtly bring their values into everyday public discourse, to loudly advocate their moral vision, while "conservatives have managed to get their moral frames to dominate... on virtually every issue." In my view the de-moralizing discourse of both traditional and contemporary psychoanalysis has had a similar destructive effect, not least in its failure to discriminate conscience (the ethic of nurturance) from superego (the ethic of authority) and its failure to fully recognize and confront the destructiveness of the latter.

* * *

As Searles (1959), Loewald (1979) and Sagan (1988), among others, have suggested, Freud's concept of the normal oedipal resolution as a *renunciation* of incestuous and parricidal desires out of both love and fear of castration, leading to turning of aggression toward the oedipal rivals against the self, and resulting in the superego as an identification with the aggressor, is a description not of health but of a widespread (normotic) pathology. Sagan (1988) points out that, although Freud (1925) does not allow the data to cause him to revise his view that "[t]he Oedipus complex … in boys … is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration" (p. 257), his own case study of "Little Hans" (Freud, 1909) indicates that the true oedipal resolution is not *renunciation* out of fear of castration but *sublimation* or symbolic *fulfillment* of oedipal desire:

> Near the end of the treatment Hans had two significant dreams. The first was a thinly disguised situation where he had managed to marry his mother and have many children with her. The second brought Hans a penis as large as his father's. … So successful was this imaginative fulfillment of oedipal strivings that it immediately produced remarkable changes. "In the course of the next few days," Freud writes, "Hans' mother wrote to me more than once to express her joy at the little boy's recovery."
>
> (Sagan, 1988, pp. 82-83)

Loewald (1979) writes that "it is no exaggeration to say that the assumption of responsibility for one's own life and its conduct is in psychic reality tantamount to the murder of the parents, to the crime of parricide" (pp. 756-757). Can we really expect to be able to help our patients demolish the superego and resurrect and reconcile with conscience unless and until we manage to accomplish this

ourselves? Many of the problems that have plagued psychoanalytic theory, practice and institutions have followed from our failure to do so.

About the Author

Donald L Carveth, Ph.D., RP, FIPA is Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social & Political Thought at York University in Toronto. He is a training and supervising analyst in the Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis, past Director of the Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis, and past Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis/Revue Canadienne de Psychanalyse*. His recent book, *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience,* was published by Karnac in 2013. Many of his publications are available on his website at http://www.yorku.ca/dcarveth. On October 9th, 2015, he delivered the inaugural lecture of the Karl Stern Lecture Series, "The Cartesian Chasm: Karl Stern's Understanding of the Roots of our Cultural Pathology," at Duquesne University. A native Torontonian, he now divides his time between Toronto and Center City, Philadelphia.

References

Adorno, T. (1966) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum, 1983.

Akhtar, S. (ed.) (2013) *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, and Management*. New York: Jason Aronson.

Arlow, J. (1982) Problems of the superego concept. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 37: 229–244.

Barnett, B. (2007) *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience*. In: I. Wise and P. Williams (eds.) Psychoanalytic Ideas Series, London: The Institute of Psychoanalysis and Karnac Books.

Bloom, P. (2010) The moral life of babies. *New York Times Magazine* 3 May, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html, accessed 6 April 2016.

Bloom, P. (2013) *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*. New York: The Crown Publishing Group.

Bollas, C. (1989) Normotic illness. In: M.G. Fromm and B.L. Smith (eds.) *The Facilitating Environment: Clinical Applications of Winnicott's Theory*. Madison, CT, US: International Universities Press, pp. 317–344.

Bowlby, J. (1969-80) *Attachment and Loss*. Vols. 1-3. London: Penguin.

Bowlby, J., Figlio, K. and Young, R.M. (1986) An interview with John Bowlby on the origins and reception of his work. *Free Associations* 1: 36–64.

Carveth, D. (2010) Superego, conscience and the nature and types of guilt. *Modern Psychoanalysis* 35(1): 106–130.

Carveth, D. (2012) Freud's and our paranoid myth of "the beast". *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis/Revue Canadienne de Psychanalyse* 20(1): 153–157.

Carveth, D. (2013) *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience*. London: Karnac Books.

Chomsky, N. (2002) Terror and just response. *ZNET,* 2 July, https://chomsky.info/20020702/, accessed 6 April 2016.

De Waal, F. (1997) *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

De Waal, F. (2009) *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. New York: Harmony Books.

Erikson, E.H. (1958) *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E.H. (1976) Psychoanalysis and ethics—Avowed and unavowed. *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 3: 409–414.

Fairbairn, W.R.D. (1943) The repression and return of bad objects (with special reference to the "war neuroses."). In: *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952, pp. 59–81.

Ferenczi, S. (1928 [1927]) The elasticity of psycho-analytic technique. In: M. Balint (ed.) *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 87–101.

Fernando, J. (2000) The borrowed sense of guilt. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 81(3): 499–512.

Frattaroli, E. (2013) Reflections on the absence of morality in psychoanalytic theory and practice. In: S. Akhtar (ed.) *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, and Management*. New York: Aronson, pp. 83–110.

Freud, S. (1909, 1955) Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy. *Standard Edition,* 10. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1-150.

Freud, S. (1914, 1957) On narcissism: An introduction. *Standard Edition,* 14. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 67-102.

Freud, S. (1923, 1961) *The Ego and the Id. Standard Edition*, 19. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1-66.

Freud, S. (1925, 1961) Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes. *Standard Edition,* 19. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 241-258.

Freud, S. (1930, 1961) *Civilization and its Discontents. Standard Edition,* 21. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 57-146.

Freud, S. (1933, 1964) *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth Press,
pp. 3–182.

Freud, S. (1938, 1964) An outline of psychoanalysis. *Standard Edition,* 23. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 139-208.

Fromm, E. (1955) *The Sane Society*. New York: Rinehart & Company.

Grinberg, L. (1964) Two kinds of guilt: Their relations with normal and pathological aspects of mourning. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 45: 366–371.

Hughes, J.M. (2008) *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Morality*. London: Routledge.

Jacoby, R. (1975) *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology from Adler to Laing*. Boston: Beacon.

Kavaler-Adler, S. (2013) *The Anatomy of Regret: From Death Instinct to Reparation and Symbolization Through Vivid Clinical Cases*. London: Karnac.

Kierkegaard, S. (1849) *The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by A. Hannay. London: Penguin, 1989.

Klein, M. (1940) Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 21: 125–153.

Klein, M. (1952) The origins of transference. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 33: 433–438.

Klein, M., Heimann, P., Isaacs, S. and Riviere, J. (1952) *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*. London: Hogarth Press.

Kohut, H. (1978) *The Restoration of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.

Kris, E. (1938) Review of Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 19: 115–146.

Lakoff, G. and Wehling, E. (2012) Why did Walker win Wisconsin? *Truthout*, 13 June, http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/9751-the-wisconsin-blues, accessed 8 September 2015.

Lasch, C. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Warner.

Loewald, H.W. (1979) The waning of the oedipus complex. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 27: 751–775.

May, R. (1950) *The Meaning of Anxiety*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.

McDougall, J. (1980) Plea for a measure of abnormality. In: *Plea for a Measure of Abnormality*. New York: International Universities Press, pp. 463–486.

Menninger, K.A. (1938) *Man Against Himself*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Grove.

Nash, Capt. W. (2012) Moral injury in the context of war (research). Workshop session 508 at the National Zarrow Mental Health Symposium & Mental Health America Annual Conference, September 20th. Tulsa, OK.

Rangell, L. (1980) *The Mind of Watergate: An Exploration of the Compromise of Integrity*. New York: Norton.

Reiner, A. (2009) *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind*. London: Karnac.

Sagan, E. (1988) *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil*. New York: Basic Books.

Sandler, J. (1960) On the concept of the superego. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15: 128–162.

Schafer, R. (1960) The loving and beloved superego in Freud's structural theory. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15: 163–188.

Searles, H.F. (1959) Oedipal love in the countertransference. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 40: 180–190.

Seneca, L.A. (n.d.) *Seneca's Morals by Way of Abstract. To which is Added, a Discourse, Under the Title of An After-thought*. By Sir Roger L'Estrange, Knt. 9th edn. (Google eBook), https://archive.org/details/senecasmoralsbyw00senerich, accessed 3 January 2015.

Stern, K. (1975) The problem of guilt. In: *Love and Success*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Giroux, pp. 63–75.

Strachey, J. (1934) The nature of the therapeutic action of psycho-analysis. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 15: 127–159.

Twain, M. (1885/2006) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Project Gutenberg eBook, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule, accessed 10 March 2016.

Winnicott, D.W. (1960) Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. London: Hogarth Press, 1965, pp. 139–152.

Winnicott, D.W. (1963) The development of the capacity for concern. In: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. London: Hogarth Press, 1965, pp. 73–82.

Würmser, L. (1998) The sleeping giant: A dissenting comment about "borderline pathology". *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 8: 373–397.