

THE IMMORALITY OF MORALITY

The traditional morality of conscience, according to Freud, is based for the most part on the suppression of the instincts.¹ His psychoanalytic theory provides a genetic and functional account of how and why this is so. Genetically, the theory purports to explain the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development of the traditional morality of conscience. Functionally it attempts to explain the failure of this morality and propose an alternative theory which will work out better in practice. Each part of his theory can be discussed separately, but neither can be divorced completely from the other. Freud's theory is not only an explanation of what morality in fact is from a descriptive scientific point of view, but also what morality ought and ought not to be from the normative standpoint of psychoanalysis. Thus, each part of the theory is integrally related to the other.

¹ Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al. (London, 1953-), XXI, 126. Cited hereafter as *S.E.*

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In this paper, then, I shall discuss Freud's theory of the origin and nature of conscience and its bearing upon what he calls traditional morality. In the course of the discussion I shall single out some problems in his theory and a number of moral problems it fails to account for. In conclusion, some general criticisms of the theory and its explanation of the traditional view of moral phenomena will be looked at. And here I shall also try to characterize the ambivalent and ambiguous view of immoral morality Freud's theory leads to.

Traditional morality, which is based upon the conscience of the individual, depends primarily upon motivation, according to Freud. In his theory Freud stresses the earliest motivations of childhood. These are the most significant, because the child is more impressionable due to: (1) the weakness of his ego and (2) the determination given at this time to the first manifestations of sexuality. For these two reasons, better causes, the motivations of childhood never cease to influence and direct the behavior of the individual. They can be varied later in life, but they can never be fundamentally modified. Freud also emphasizes the negative or repressive character of these earliest motivations, for they are the product of the renunciation of instinctual desires. Their influence upon the conduct of the individual is unconscious.² Since they are inculcated in the person during the weakest stages of his development, they become a part of his own ineradicable past. For this reason these motivations not only determine but also automatically regulate the behavior of the adult and apparently mature individual.

Furthermore, since on Freud's view a human being is a passive and inert creature who primarily strives to avoid excessive stimulation both internally and externally, he is a result of what happens to him rather than what he does. The world acts upon and causes the individual to be what he is rather than the other way around. Thus the theory attempts to explain the wishes, desires, intentions, purposes and actions of the individual in terms of causes, such as the lifelong motivational determination of the person's character during the period of childhood. "Reasons" in Freud's view are irrelevant to the moral, not to

² Freud, "The Future of an Illusion," *S.E.*, XXI, 40-42. Cited hereafter as "FI."

mention other, modes of human behavior. At best, reasons have the socially and culturally important role of bolstering our illusion that our moral judgments, decisions, intentions, etc., are objective in the sense of empirically grounded in our so-called "higher" nature.

For the purposes of his theory Freud divides the human personality into an id, an ego, and a superego. These divisions are pragmatic designations for the psychical agencies of the mental life of the person, and, except for a manner of speaking, are not meant to be reified.³ Each agency has a particular purpose which it strives to realize. Their constant interaction with one another and for the most part the constant conflict of their varying purposes constitute the person from the standpoint of causally understanding his behavior. For this discussion the superego is of primary importance, because it represents what Freud calls the conscience of the individual.

It should be noted first that the superego, as conscience, is a natural and inevitable stage in the development of the individual. It is *not* a superfluous accretion that ought to be ignored or dismissed. As the conscience of the individual the superego is the most significant agency in the mental life of the person, because his happiness, according to Freud, depends upon its proper development and functioning.⁴

It is not true that the human mind has undergone no development since the earliest times and that, in contrast to the advances of science and technology, it is the same today as it was at the beginning of history . . . External coercion gradually becomes internalized; for a special agency, man's superego takes it over and includes it among its commandments. Every child presents this process of transformation to us; only by that means does it become a moral and social being.⁵

But how does this transformation come about? And what is moral, not to mention social, about this transformation?

According to Freud, conscience begins to develop in the individual between the ages of three to six. The superego

³ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* (New York, 1933), pp. 110-111. Cited hereafter as *NI*.

⁴ Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York, 1960), pp. 50-52.

⁵ Freud, "FI," *S.E.*, XXI, 11.

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develops from the ego as a result of the conflict which the Oedipus complex brings about.⁶ The formation of the superego makes the individual capable of genuine moral behavior, because with its appearance he gradually learns to judge his own actions from a seemingly autonomous standpoint. This means that he has internalized the moral ideals and values of his parents and related but similar authority of figures, upon which conscience at first is and must be modeled. The child approves of what they approve of and disapproves of what they disapprove of. This process takes place by means of identification with the parents and other "authorities." By virtue of this mimetic ability the child then internalizes, as his conscience, the same authority over his own actions which the parents and others previously exercised.

But it is not just a complete imitation or unqualified identification with the parental, or more precisely the authoritarian, view. The transformation involves both a passive and an active reaction. The child is enjoined to be both like and unlike his father, and this, Freud tells us, supposedly brings about an "energetic reaction-formation" against the id, the id, of course, being the untameable agency which in this transformation has to be tamed.

The superego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: "You *ought to be* like this (like your father)." It also comprises the prohibition: "You *may not be* like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative."⁷

Theoretically the child actively confronts the desires of the id and contributes to the formation of his own conscience. But his active reaction or contribution which is the active part of the Oedipus complex takes place unconsciously. For this reason the dissolution of the Oedipus complex leads to a specious sort of autonomy. In fact, therefore, the acquisition of a conscience

⁶ Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," *S.E.*, XXI, 176-177.

⁷ Freud, "The Ego and the Id," *S.E.*, XXI, 34. Cited hereafter as "EI."

remains inevitably dependent upon the heteronomy of the unconscious.

Nevertheless, the development of conscience constitutes, in the social or cultural sense, an advance. Conscience becomes and ultimately is the capacity to experience a sense of guilt. And however harmful in the long run, on the whole, conscience, according to Freud's theory, is still an indispensable acquisition for the apparently mature and responsible individual.

A great change takes place only when the authority is internalized through the establishment of a superego. The phenomena of conscience then reach a higher stage. Actually, it is not until now that we should speak of conscience or a sense of guilt. At this point, too, the fear of being found out comes to an end: the distinction, moreover, between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from the superego, not even thoughts.⁸

The fact that the sense of guilt applies to actions whether they are merely thought of or performed is important. This means that the superego considers the mere thought of evil or a wrong action the same as actually doing it. The inability to discriminate between illusion and reality, as it were, is then at the same time the major disadvantage of conscience as *the* basis for the morality of the individual. Conscience condemns or suppresses without any regard for what actually occurs or happens. Wishes and desires are as morally reprehensible and praiseworthy as acting them out.

Instinctual renunciation now no longer has a completely liberating effect; virtuous continence is no longer rewarded with the assurance of love. A threatened external unhappiness—loss of love and punishment on the part of the external authority—has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt.⁹

The point of the above, according to Freud, is that guilt can have some foundation either in an empirically specifiable reality or in the unfounded fears of the superego.¹⁰ The superego,

⁸ Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," *S.E.*, XXI, 125. Cited hereafter as "CD."

⁹ Freud, "CD," *S.E.*, XXI, 127-128.

¹⁰ Freud, *NI*, p. 109.

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as conscience, exaggerates (unfortunately, it would seem) the "reality" of its own moral demands. It claims to represent as moral what are merely cultural pressures, namely figures of authority or of tradition as some sort of a moral order. But in this way conscience only becomes the representative of the moral ideals of the species rather than of the individual and is in effect nothing but a psychological burden. The morality of conscience is not amenable and sensitive to individual variability. The upshot is that the individual's feeling of moral guilt is almost always unrealistic since it has no determinable empirical referent other than a psychical one.¹¹

What is the source, however, of the tension of guilt which makes conscience what it is? What is the source of the demands which arise from the guilt that is experienced in the conflict between the ego, the id and the superego? Previous to the development of a conscience, Freud tells us, the parents regulated the behavior of the child. Thereafter the superego guides the child and represents the former parental authority. And, like the parents, the superego is also aggressive (as if it were an individual *within* another individual) towards the individual and frustrates his desires. Superego demands have their source, therefore, in the aggression that the child has stored up as a result of this parental frustration. Since the child is unable, before he has acquired a conscience, to direct his aggression outward because of parental restrictions and demands, aggression has been stored up internally. This storing up, so to speak, is due to the fact that the child is forced to renounce his own acts of aggression under the threat of punishment or loss of love from the parents. (Before conscience is formed, however, it is not quite accurate to speak of aggressive acts which had to be renounced. "Moral" renunciation is possible, according to Freud's theory, only when conscience is present with its attendant sense of guilt. But this early forced parental renunciation is relevant to the identification and internalization which produces the superego, for there is here an experience that the child presumably makes use of unconsciously in acquiring his conscience or sense of guilt.) This aggression, which is transformed by means of the Oedipal conflict into conscience, becomes the moral demands of the superego. The

¹¹ Freud, *NI*, pp. 233-234.

superego uses this aggression in order to renounce as immoral the instinctual desires and wishes of the id, which can be, according to Freud, all too easily satisfied by means of the ego.¹²

Two further questions are relevant here: (1) what is the origin of this aggression? and (2) why does it play such an important role in the origin and development of conscience? But before these questions, which necessitate a consideration of the erotic nature of conscience, can be considered, some other aspects of aggression should be look at.

Freud's theory refers to a transformation of aggression into the conscience of the individual, but the transformation never takes place. When conscience first develops, there is a conflict between the ego and the superego which works to the disadvantage of the ego. At first, this is a valuable and inevitable conflict, but later the disharmony this conflict causes in the ego can disrupt what, according to his theory, is a "normal" development of the superego.

This superego can confront the ego and treat it like an object; it often treats it very harshly. It is as important for the ego to remain on good terms with the superego as with the id. Estrangements between the ego and the superego are of great significance in mental life... Mental health very much depends on the superego's being normally developed—that is, on its having become sufficiently impersonal.¹³

The difficulty here is that the ego derives its energy from the id and attempts to direct the desires of the id in accordance with the reality as opposed to the pleasure principle. But this conflicts with the attempt of the superego to suppress the desires of the id according to its own reality principle. On the level of conscious awareness the superego seems to be successful, but, in fact, its suppression of the ego is inadequate, because it is

¹² Freud, *NI*, p. 109.

¹³ Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis," *S.E.*, 223. In the above quotation Freud seems to equate mental health with being moral. This may be so but in fact as I shall show later in this paper the more important concern for Freud is, at least in regard to morality, the attitude of being impersonal. Hence I shall avoid discussing here the obvious incommensurability of mental health and morality.

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unrealistic, that is, not empirical. Since, according to Freud's theory, the purpose of the ego in the mental life of the individual is to adjudicate between the desires of the id and the demands of the superego in regard to the internal and external world, the ego *ought* to be the dominant agency.¹⁴ (And matters are further complicated here because all three agencies function to some important extent unconsciously and hence the ego can never be certain that it is really operating on its own. The superego, for example knows more about the desire of the id than the ego. Hence, the ego is battered morally and otherwise from all sides.) Instead, the aggressive drives of the individual superego which are the source of the demands of conscience become the dominant agency. But this means that there is no substantial transformation, because the superego is merely the aggression of childhood which now functions in the name of morality. In effect then it follows from Freud's account that morality is identical with, or equivalent to, aggression, since only the words used to describe this phenomenon have changed, not the phenomenon itself.

The ordinary view sees the situation the other way round: the standard set up by the egoideal seems to be the motive for the suppression of aggressiveness. The fact remains, however, as we have stated it; the more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his own ego. It is like a displacement, a turning round upon his own ego. But even ordinary normal morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality.¹⁵

However, according to Freud's theory, it not only can but should be "the other way round," for aggression, as I shall explain below, is not on an empirical basis simply a source of frustration and inhibition and immoral morality.

Aggression it also, Freud claims, a constructive force in human behavior. The achievements of culture are to a great extent the result of the "proper" sublimation of aggression. Aggression when it is channelled into the external world, as it is through science and technology, has a beneficial influence upon human

¹⁴ Freud, "EI," *S.E.*, XIX, 56-57.

¹⁵ Freud, "EI," *S.E.*, XIX, 54.

affairs. In fact both Eros and aggression are, according to Freud, necessary components of all human endeavors. Love, for example, because it must involve mastery over someone or something, is dependent upon aggressiveness. Aggression is also a positive and constructive influence upon human moral behavior. The cause of justice and freedom depends to some degree upon aggression. Thus Freud is not altogether consistent about the relation that holds between these two energies or instincts. He claims that aggression is the ineradicable cause of the hostility of the individual to culture and its aims for mankind. For this reason, he maintains that, wherever and whenever it is possible, aggression ought to be diminished, checked by therapy or channelled by means of culture into constructive achievements.¹⁶ But we are never given any justification why this aggressive drive under certain conditions is not to be indulged. One reason for this omission is that on the descriptive genetic grounds of psychoanalysis there can be no such justification. Somehow or other aggression is the core of what we call conscience and a necessary component of any human action. But it also *ought* to become as dispensable and diminishable as is possible for the sake of the individual and humanity. The only possible justification is that such an evaluation of aggression is morally preferable. (And if so, one might ask how Freud's view on this problem differs from traditional ones?) But this means of justification is not open to Freud's theory, unless it is moral and normative rather than descriptive and explanatory. There is a serious inconsistency here which we shall consider further in this paper.

What then is the basic source of aggression? Aggression can be observed, according to Freud, in the behavior of both children and adults, for example, in the phenomenon of repetition-compulsion.¹⁷ It is also observable in the hostility manifested in human relations and even in the relations of nations to one another. These and other possible manifestations of aggression have their source in what Freud called the death instinct. This instinct represents the somatic energy of the individual, which is the basic source of aggression and hence not further reducible

¹⁶ Freud, "Why War," *Collected Papers* (London, 1950), V, 286-287. Cited hereafter as *CP*.

¹⁷ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *S.E.*, XVIII, 21-23.

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to anything else.¹⁸ Biologically the death instinct or its aggressive manifestations are simply part of the human constitution. It receives psychical representation as a drive that determines to some extent the purpose of human behavior, namely to want to die, at least in the sense of not wanting to get involved in the complexities and subtleties and nuances of what the existentialists call an “authentic” human existence. Eros too affects human behavior. The purposes of the id, the ego and the superego are a combination of the energy of the death instinct and the erotic instinct. Both are present in every action, although in varying and not easily determinable degrees. Hence, besides the death instinct, there is the indispensable erotic component of conscience, which we shall consider further below.

Conscience as a sense of guilt, according to Freud’s theory, is not only a struggle for the individual, but a struggle that constitutes the history of the human race. This racial struggle concerns the phylogenetic inheritance of the nature of conscience. This inheritance stems from the killing of the primal father by his sons. The killing of the primal father leads to the institution of morality and the agency of conscience. The sons kill the father out of their aggressive hatred of his possessions and privileges, in particular his possession of and his privileges with women. But they also love him and, therefore, have remorse for their deed.

This remorse for the murder of the father was the result of the primordial ambivalence of feeling towards the father. His sons hated him but they loved him too. After their hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love came to the fore in their remorse for the deed.

On Freud’s theory this reaction to the father characterizes the essential development of the agency of conscience. The development is essentially the same as it was when conscience first arose. The phenomenal manifestations of remorse and guilt may vary, but both are still a part of an age-old struggle.

Whether one has killed one’s father or has abstained from doing so is not really the decisive thing. One is bound to feel guilty in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to

¹⁸ Edward Glover, *Freud or Jung?* (London, 1950), pp. 55-56.

ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death.

But remorse, although it represents and has always represented the erotic component of conscience, is for all practical purposes not morally efficacious. It cannot “help us to discover the origin of conscience and of the sense of guilt in general.”

Freud, in tracing the origin of the phylogenetic nature of conscience back to the killing of the primal father, also considers the question of whether guilt was already present before the deed.

But if the human sense of guilt goes back to the killing of the primal father, that was after all a case of remorse. Are we to assume that (at that time) a conscience and a sense of guilt were not, as we presupposed, in existence before the deed?

Freud’s answer to his own question is *prima facie* uncomplicated. Aggression came first and initiated the killing of the father. Remorse or love, the erotic element, came afterwards but it was of no affective significance.

It, remorse, relates only to a deed that has been done, and, of course, it presupposes that a conscience—a readiness to feel guilty—was already in existence before the deed took place. Remorse of this sort can, therefore, never help us to discover the origin of conscience and of the sense of guilt in general. What happens in these everyday cases is usually this: an instinctual need acquires the strength to achieve satisfaction in spite of the conscience, which is, after all, limited in its strength; and with the natural weakening of the need owing to its having been satisfied, the former balance is restored.

Remorse, therefore, according to Freud, does not affect the origin of conscience because it only appears after the deed.¹⁹ It restores the balance that was present before the deed, but this is of no *affective* importance. Remorse has nothing to do with the fact that conscience can arise only as a result of some act which satisfies an instinctual need. But is this the case? Some qualification seems to be in order.

It would seem that remorse should either heighten or lower

¹⁹ For the quotations cited in this part of the paper, see Freud, “CD,” *S.E.*, XXI, 131-132.

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one's aggressive attitude or drive. In psychological fact it does affect the person's conception of his overall behavior or, at least, his feelings about the moral or immoral qualities of any particular action that he performs. Hence even if remorse appears after an instinctual need has been satisfied, in spite of the prohibitions of conscience, can it be so easily accounted for, that is to say, by being dismissed as irrelevant? According to Freud's theory, conscience is the "eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death." But if this is so, why is it that the phenomenal manifestation of Eros in conscience, namely remorse, has no efficacious role to play in the origin and development of conscience? Its function would seem to be equivalent to if not the same as that of aggression. Even if the assumed truth of the phylogenetic origin of conscience in aggression be granted—something that as matters presently stand in science cannot be granted—it follows that without remorse there could not have been a sense of guilt, much less the agency of conscience. This does not mean that aggression for *ad hoc* reasons is not at times or even quite frequently the crucial part of the tension of guilt, which makes conscience what it really is. But it does mean that the recognition of guilt as the aggressive basis of conscience is intertwined with remorse as an expression not only of its erotic but its aggressive basis as well. According to Freud's theory, the phylogenetic origin and the ontogenetic development of conscience make no sense without acknowledging and accounting for the role of both remorse and aggression. The fact is that Freud's theory cannot account for the affective element of benevolence in some human beings, if not to some limited extent in our so-called human nature. That his theory could account for the above in terms of its "defense mechanisms" is too circular to warrant serious consideration. The fact is that there is a genuine though undeniably sporadic concern for *the other* even in traditional morality(ies), which Freud's theory cannot explain, except by its reference to the nebulous force of Eros.

Freud's theory of conscience also begs the question. The individual or individuals, who commit the aggressive deed, are able to feel remorse, although they do not yet possess a conscience. But, if the latter were the case, why should the

aggressive deed have bothered the sons? How were they able to recognize that the deed was aggressive? What made them feel that, although they satisfied an instinctual need, they ought to feel remorseful? Aggression may very well have come first. It may also have been necessary that aggression in the form of some overt deed and "transgression" come first. But that only tells us that aggression came first. The remorse which came afterwards had to be present, if it was only vaguely and dimly felt, in order for Freud's account to explain what it purports to explain. It does not suffice to say that remorse only restores a balance since the balance, somehow or in some way must be there to upset? But instead his theory assumes what it is supposed to explain, namely that both Eros and aggression were present before the deed of killing the primal father or before an instinctual need had been satisfied. Remorse is an expression of Eros or the love for the father and therefore it is indispensable to Freud's account of the origin and nature of conscience. According to Freud's account both instincts are already present. There is no way in which his theory can give precedence to one or the other in the origin and development of conscience. At best the preference for the aggressive instinct provides an *ad hoc* justification for the psychoanalytic theory of conscience. But it does not explain either the nature, or the development, of morality, much less conscience.

Nevertheless, it is also important to bear in mind what Freud was trying to do. His emphasis upon the aggressive origin and nature of conscience is due to the fact that, in the light of his own findings, the aggressive aspect of morality is neither stressed enough nor fully understood. On the traditional view, as seen by Freud, most theories of man's moral nature ignore aggression at the cost of considerable suffering to the individual whose moral capacities in consequence are overestimated. Freud's point then is that what we consider to be evil is at least a necessary condition of moral goodness. But the evil or repressive or aggressive features of morality are too quickly and too glibly brushed aside. The consequence is a melioristic theory of man that is unwarranted on both empirical and normative grounds.

This concern with the source of both good and evil in man leads Freud into his one-sided and illogical account of the origin

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and nature of conscience. However, his account is not the result of his ignorance about the positive sources and the constructive nature of morality. Quite the opposite is the case. For example, according to Freud's theory, the most destructive and disadvantageous effect of conscience and the moral judgments reached in accordance with its aggressive dictates is the subjective ground of such judgments. These judgments are based upon the wishes and desires of the person. Because they are not based upon any reliable empirical knowledge, they are, in consequence, detrimental to the person, his relation to other persons and the realization of his values and ideals and those of culture. Freud's theory is an attempt to show that a deeper understanding of the immoral foundation of morality might furnish a more secure foundation for morality. The aim, if not the accomplishment of the theory from the critical standpoint, then, is an explanation of the weakness in the traditional morality of conscience, which, if acknowledged, might help to make morality more human or paradoxically, more moral, which is for Freud in a way to say the same thing. However erroneous it may be, this is the import of the theory. Hence, in criticizing the theory, we must take note of the fact that it does throw some light on the ambiguous nature of conscience as the foundation of morality and according to Freud the ineradicably ambivalent nature of morality as morality.

The most crucial part of this "deeper understanding," which Freud sought, is dependent upon the hypothesis of the unconscious. As we saw above, the moral values which are acknowledged on the apparently reliable conscious level of the superego are mainly the result of unconscious influences. These influences in turn are related to the Oedipus complex, the dissolution of which leaves behind an unconscious sense of guilt. And this Oedipal guilt is bound up with the dread the child experiences in the face of paternal castration.

The superior being, which turned into the egoideal, once threatened castration, and this dread of castration is probably the nucleus round which the subsequent fear of conscience has gathered; it is this dread that persists as the fear of conscience.²⁰

²⁰ Freud, "EI," *S.E.*, XIX, 57.

This dread and fear make conscience dependent upon unconscious influences. Furthermore, these influences become the source of our consciously moral acts. Kindly pity, for example, such as Dostoevski showed toward criminals “is not just kindly pity.”

It is identification on the basis of a similar murderous impulse—in fact, a slightly displaced narcissism. (In saying this, we are not disputing the ethical value of kindness.) This may perhaps be quite generally the mechanism of kindly sympathy with other people, a mechanism which one can discern with especial ease in the extreme case of the guilt ridden novelist.²¹

But Freud’s observations on “kindly pity” raise some difficulties. If his claim about identification does not dispute the ethical value of “kindly sympathy,” what bearing does it have upon such a moral value? What is the point of bringing in the notion of identification here, or mechanisms in general, which have some relation to human behavior? Is kindly sympathy “a slightly displaced narcissism” in a motivational sense only? And if this is so, does such a motivation alone determine whether or not a person will act with kindly sympathy towards other people? Or is Freud again trying to show how the goodness of moral acts often arises from the immoral motivations of human beings?

If anyone were inclined to put forward the paradoxical proposition that the normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows, psychoanalysis, upon whose findings the first half of the assertion rests, would have no objection to raise against the second half.²²

This would mean that Freud’s point is a purely descriptive one, and for this reason it does not affect the ethical value of an act of “kindly sympathy.” However, this reason is inadequate, because his claim does bear upon the moral assessment of acts which are the result of mechanisms beyond the awareness of the so-called “normal” person, but more obvious with the “guilt

²¹ Freud, “Dostoevski and Parricide,” *CP*, V, 237.

²² Freud, “EI,” *S.E.*, XIX, 52.

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ridden novelist." Since this is the case, it is of more importance in the case of normal persons to know why and how this sort of awareness has such an effect rather than in the "extreme case of the guilt ridden novelist."

The above problem is bound up with other difficulties in Freud's theory. He maintains, as we saw above, that both Eros and aggression are necessarily part of any human action, but he treats them as if they operated independently of one another. Presumably, Eros mingles with aggression, and aggression with Eros; yet aggression in many forms ought not to be mingled with, so to speak. Or, if aggression is inevitably present—and it must be present according to Freud's theory—it ought to be controlled in the proper manner. (And what will be the criteria for deciding upon what is "proper"?) Similarly, "kindly sympathy" would have to be the result of an identification motivated by narcissism, of which the individual is not conscious. But this narcissism does not affect the moral value of kindly sympathy. The problem is that there is here and throughout psychoanalysis a confusion between the scientific and the normative. Mechanisms determine moral behavior but have no bearing upon the moral value of this behavior. By the same token, however, they do and must affect moral behavior because they make the "normal" man "far more immoral than he believes." An example may help to illustrate how this confusion arises in Freud's theory.

On moral grounds a parent may place restrictions on the behavior of a child. His motive may be aggressive, and the restrictions symptomatic of a regression to the way the parent was treated as a child. But, following Freud, Eros or love must accompany this aggression and regression. On the one hand this treatment of the child is unfair and immoral, because it is unconsciously purely vindictive. On the other hand it is also done, theoretically at least, for the sake of good, namely the benefit of the child. Unless it can be shown that such a restriction is excessively aggressive and nothing but the satisfaction of some unconscious desire on the part of the parent, aggression here supports and reinforces Eros. And this should be for the most part all to the good of such parental behavior. (Quite possibly Freud might point out here the paradox, if not moral

contradiction, of using physical violence in one form to restrict or eliminate it in another form. For how shall the undeveloped child discriminate between the two forms and why one is right and the other wrong?) Thus any number of defense mechanisms may be determinants of human actions, but it is necessary to make clear exactly what role they do play morally and what is the bearing of these mechanisms upon the explanation and evaluation of moral behavior. Freud claims that it is easy to discern the mechanism at work in the case of the "guilt-ridden novelist;" it is simply a matter of a "displaced narcissism" with Dostoevski. But then we must account for the alternative explanation that for a person like Dostoevski to be kindly in his attitude to criminals is an expression of his character and moral values. And this, needless to say, is, unless we are mistaken, misguided, misinformed, and however else confused, an integral part of what we call morality. And it is this latter which Freud's theory fails to account for, though his theory serves up incomparable insights into the empirical workings of *this* morality.

In an article dealing with a parapraxis in his own life Freud proposes a solution to the above problem.²³ In the article he claims that selfishness could be the deeper motivation behind an act of generosity and that this is possibly what enhances the ethical value of such an action. Thus the point of his own descriptive analysis of morality would be that moral actions depend upon more subtle and ambiguous motivations than we allow for. This means that traditional morality rests upon a one-sided simplistic concept of motivation. In fact what a person judges to be morally good or evil, praiseworthy or reprehensible, is internally bound up with the unconscious instinctual drives which dictate to such judgments. Because these pressures are unconscious and irrational, moral judgments are subjective in two senses. First, they are dependent upon the unconscious influences of which the person is unaware and these influences determine the individual's moral behavior. Second, they are subjective on the conscious level, because these moral judgments depend upon the mental development of the person and they

²³ Freud, "The Subtleties of a Faculty Action," *S.E.*, XXII, 234.

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shape his ability to resist and to overcome these unconscious drives. The subjectivism consists in judging in terms of what one has learned to approve of or disapprove of on emotional grounds. And the emotional or affective influences are both conscious and more important for Freud's theory unconscious. Thus from each standpoint the individual is determined morally and otherwise in ways that he cannot control. Since the traditional theory or theories of morality overlook these subjective factors, all these various attempts to provide an objective foundation for morality have been misconceived. Without the requisite psychoanalytic knowledge about the unconscious and conscious subjective nature and basis of morality, there can be no objective foundation of the sort scientific knowledge (which includes psychoanalysis) alone is able to provide. The use of "subjective" here then is intended to be neutral. Freud is not so much condemning as he is lamenting that moral judgments, decisions, values, commitments, characterizations, evaluations, etc., *qua subjective*, deprive the individual of what little chance he has to achieve personal happiness. Hence, the appeal to apply scientific knowledge to morality is, for Freud, humanistic in aim and in intention.

Since the morality of conscience is dependent upon unconscious motivations which are a product of childhood development, the past, as we saw above, dictates to and determines the behavior of the mature person. The dependence of childhood and the lengthiness of this period of development cause the strong hold which the unconscious exercises over the conscience of the person.

We came to see that the first years of infancy (up to about the age of five) are, for a number of reasons, of special importance. This is in the first place because they contain the first expansion of sexuality, which leaves behind decisive determinants for the sexual life of maturity; and, in the second place, because the impressions of this period come up against an unformed and weak ego, upon which they act like traumas. The ego cannot defend itself against the emotional storms which they call forth except by repression and in this way it acquired in childhood all its predispositions to subsequent illnesses and disturbances of function.²⁴

²⁴ Freud, *NI*, pp. 200-201.

These earliest experiences produce, strictly speaking cause, the conscience of the adult, whose moral standards never advance beyond those of a child. Given the way his conscience develops, the individual fears in regard to his moral actions only that he may be seen or get caught rather than the good and evil or rightness and wrongness of his actions. For the presumably mature individual the fear in question here is a loss of love or the threat of punishment either from society or from the immediate environment in the form of school, church or friends. These external sources of fear take the place of the parents for the child. But, according to Freud's theory, such individuals still behave like children because they are subject to unconscious influences. They are only moral in a social and superficial and external sense. Although the individual by definition is mature, his morality is still unconsciously a matter of pleasing his parents and other authorities, such as those of the school and his religion. Thus, according to Freud, "social anxiety is the essence of what is called conscience."²⁵ And, on the basis of what we saw above, "social anxiety" is then nothing but "aggression" made morally respectable.

The aggressive and sexual drives are not, however, something we unconsciously desire to renounce. We are forced to renounce them on the conscious level, but this is done on the superficial conscious level. This renunciation results from a need for security or from fear of the consequences in not doing so. The internalization which leads to the formation of the agency of conscience is not a choice or decision which is based on a profound conscious awareness. Instead, it is an imposition, the nature and function of which the greater majority of people never understand. This renders the moral values and ideals of the individual conscience hopelessly and thoroughly irrational. In the name of conscience we pay lip-service to these values and ideals, but this is the superficial and involuntary acknowledgment of our limited conscious awareness. What we acknowledge is not fully integrated into the *psychical* structure of the individual, as Freud's theory explains this structure. The failure to see this difference between the psychoanalytical and traditional view of

²⁵ Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," *S.E.*, XVIII, 75.

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the psychical development of the morality of conscience makes all values and ideals radically—and for Freud tragically—subjective and destructive of the moral purposes of both the individual and culture.

One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgments of value follow directly his wishes for happiness—that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.²⁶

This means that the failure to distinguish what is moral from the conventions, customs and demands of society leads in the case of the development of conscience to a loss of autonomy, namely morality, at the very moment that the individual supposedly achieves it. The early immature autonomy of childhood is disguised or latent heteronomy. *E. g.*, I believe that I do not want what I renounce, but what I renounce is what I *really* want.

There are a host of problems in Freud's account of the various relations between conscience and morality. Before conscience is formed, how is the child able to discriminate between what his parents tell him is right and wrong? How does Freud's theory account for this prior ability that the child has? ²⁷ Before conscience is formed, the child possesses the ability to learn and is able to imitate and copy what others do and say. From the reactions of his parents and other authorities to his conduct, he learns what to approve of and what to disapprove of. Strictly speaking, of course, the child at this stage of his development cannot yet discriminate at all. What he judges to be right or wrong is a product of what others have inculcated in him, more precisely, forced him to accept. By means of his experiences of threats of punishment over a long period of supervision, he learns to apply the dictates of authority to his own behavior. Later he may begin to exercise his own limited power of discrimination. This discriminatory power presumably—and hopefully—comes about through social contact with other children and the influence of school, religion and reading.

²⁶ Freud, "CD," *S.E.*, XXI, 145.

²⁷ For the above quotations, see Freud, "Appendix: A Letter from Theodore Reik," *S.E.*, XXI, 196.

Nevertheless, all these influences and others are at best variations on the ineradicable earliest unconscious influences. No stage is ever reached at which any reasons for why one ought to do one thing rather than another become part of the individual's make-up. Thus, Freud's theory of conscience leaves unanswered the question of what we usually consider the ability to discriminate between *ought* and *ought not* from a moral point of view. His theory tells us only what the child learns. But this reduces all morality to a matter of custom, convention and tradition and fails to account for its distinctive features. Even customary as opposed to reflective morality involves a modicum of criticism and and reason giving, though the criticism be weak and the reasons inadequate.

Freud's theory explains the formation and development of conscience in terms of defense mechanisms and unconscious influences. But this explanation falls into a reductionism. It denies that conscience has any distinctive character of its own. Human beings do experience moral obligation and do act on principle and in the light of their conscience. This is the sort of moral data Freud as a psychologist fails to explain with his theory because his theory explains such data away. Furthermore, it explains the obscure by the more obscure and renders any alternative explanation on the level of consciousness by definition unacceptable and superficial. The hypothesis of the unconscious makes the morality of conscience merely a problem of psychical guilt or a need for punishment. Any account that stresses the more active character of this moral agency is by virtue of that very fact psychologically inadequate and factually false. According to Freud's theory, the problem of conscience is simply a complex question of whether or not a feeling of guilt has any real, that is, empirical, foundation. If the individual's superego or conscience is sufficiently impersonal and allows the ego to play the dominant role in decisions about various courses of action, a relatively conflict-free existence can be achieved and mental harmony or mental health, namely a relative absence of aggression, attained. A balance or harmony among the forces of Eros and aggression is what *ought* to be brought about through morality, and this *ought* to be the advantage of the ego. But this is in effect to assert a pre-established *psychological* harmony in the world of

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the ego. Morality, therefore, is a psychological problem of keeping our unconscious instinctual desires and wishes in proper check, or in harmony, if you will.

The above question is also related to another problem in Freud's theory: is morality merely a matter of renunciation? Theodor Reik criticized the view of morality Freud, whether consciously or unconsciously, espoused in his essay, *Dostoevski and Parricide*. According to Reik, Freud in the essay equated renunciation with morality. But for Reik this meant that the Philistine was morally superior to Dostoevski.

Renunciation was once the criterion of morality; today it is one of many. If it were the only one, then the excellent citizen and Philistine, who, with his dull sensibility, submits to the authorities and for whom renunciation is made much easier by his lack of imagination, would be far superior to Dostoevski in morality.

Freud made the following reply.

I hold firmly to a scientifically objective social assessment of ethics, and for that reason I should not like to deny the excellent Philistine a certificate of good ethical conduct, even though it has cost him little self discipline. But alongside of this I must grant the subjective psychological view of ethics which you support.

Renunciation is not in fact morality according to Freud, but this is what the greater majority take it to be and what they are taught that morality is. This is then what traditional morality is and, only according to these traditional standards, is the Philistine superior to Dostoevski. But, since Freud's normative theory is also a critique of this traditional view of morality, Dostoevski is truly superior in that he engaged in "self-discipline" and did not just submit to "authority." However, even within the limits of Freud's "scientifically objective social assessment of ethics," there are further distinctions that must be drawn among certificates of "good ethical conduct," such as the puritanical the perverse, the conscientious, the profligate, the saintly and the reprehensible. Renunciation does not exhaust all of these possible moral characterizations and evaluations, and Freud's theory does not account for these varieties of renunciation or moral phenomena.

This question about renunciation however is bound up with a further question about unconscious guilt. According to Freud, most if not all human behavior from the moral point of view is a matter of rationalization, reaction-formation and similar defense mechanisms.²⁸ Because of unconscious influences we cannot fully control our own behavior, and our choices are determined because our character is. The range of our conscious awareness is too circumscribed, and short of being psychoanalyzed, the requisite awareness for being moral is not accessible to the individual.

But, if this awareness is not accessible, all moral actions are compulsive. Individuals cannot help the way in which they choose to act. Moral freedom, it would seem, is an ability which must, and can only, be acquired through psychoanalysis, except for rare individuals, and those who like Freud psychoanalyze themselves and achieve this freedom on their own. But even a person who has been analyzed might face the same difficulty, because it does not follow that, if the analyzed is made aware of the causes of his compulsions, he will cease to act upon them.²⁹ This is the pervasive and fundamental problem in all of the questions raised thus far. According to Freud's theory of both moral and other behavior, human actions are motivated and determined by past experiences so that self-control is only possible in a deceptive and illusory sense. At best we have a feeling that there is such a thing as self-control or human freedom. However, the hypothesis of the unconscious which by definition is inaccessible to us can account for subjective feelings of freedom. If this is so, Freud's theory of conscience and the nature of morality falls into the same one-sidedness and oversimplification which is strikingly similar to if not identical with his major criticisms of traditional morality. Just as traditional morality presumably is based upon a one-sided and oversimplified theory of consciousness that purports to be *the* sole correct version, thus Freud's moral theory hinges solely upon the hypothesis of the unconscious as *the* sole correct version.³⁰ For thoroughgoing

²⁸ Freud, *NI*, pp. 149-151.

²⁹ Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1949), *passim*. Cf. also Freud "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," *CP*, V, 316-357.

³⁰ Freud, "CD," *S.E.*, XXI, 109-111.

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indeterminism we are asked to accept an equally and possibly more thoroughgoing determinism.

In this paper I have tried to point out that the way in which conscience develops is, according to Freud, the major determinant of the moral values and character and principles of the individual. The human being, according to Freud's theory, is a historical creature. This means that his predominantly unconscious past can "live him" in the following sense: it controls and directs his behavior rather than the other way round, as the traditional view maintains, because man should not allow that to happen to his "higher" nature. This is due to the prior fact that conscience as a product and function of the superego is molded very early in life by the renunciatory demands of the race as a whole as opposed to and in conflict with the desires of the individual. Thus for the most part (but not necessarily if the aims of psychoanalytic—or any other—therapy can be achieved), conscience fails as the agency of traditional morality. Conscience is unrelated to the psychological needs of the inner life of the person, for example, his instinctual desires. It is also unrelated to the demands made upon the ego by that "reality" which is presumably independent of the mental life of the individual. The effects of this immoral state of affairs upon the individual's attempts to live according to the moral values and ideals of culture makes all morality, but that of Freud's psychoanalysis, irremediably and incurably immoral. If Freud's theory is correct, there is no morality that is not immoral and no immorality that is not moral. But then from the so-called traditional standpoint it must follow further that Freud must be practically wrong even though he may be theoretically right.

Freud is theoretically right in that he is arguing for a morality of being as opposed to a morality of doing. Ideally, according to Freud's theory, we should all be creatures with such a broad range of conscious awareness, informed by the most reliable scientific knowledge about ourselves and culture, that morality would follow as a matter of course. This is to say that the final import of Freud's theory in regard to traditional morality is that human beings are expected to do what is morally good and morally right, but this unfortunately presupposes that they

are a sort of creature which they are not. Since human beings are shaped and formed through the various and multitudinous forces and influences of society and culture, it becomes impossible for all but the gifted or lucky few to be moral. The cultural or racial superego which is also in a twisted manner inculcated in the individual superego is the final arbiter of what is moral behavior, but this behavior is enjoined upon the person in isolation from what he psychologically is like. Thus until we know what the person is, according to Freud, morality is a myth, however efficacious and productive; and it is an immoral myth as well because of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the human being. But Freud knew he was practically wrong, unless he could psychoanalyze entire cultures which he thought unuseful, for, as he said in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

What would be the use of the most correct analysis of social neuroses, since no one possesses authority to impose such a therapy upon the group? But in spite of all these difficulties, we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities.