

SUMMARY OF MY WORK ON GUILT AND CONSCIENCE

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*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

**According to Freud
(1933) “the preferred
field of work for**

**psychoanalysis”
concerns “the problems
which the unconscious
sense of guilt has
opened up” (p. 61)—the
ways in which we are
often the unwitting
agents of our suffering,
unconsciously con-
triving to rekindle and
perpetuate our
childhood pain;
clutching defeat from**

**the jaws of victory;
fearing success; being
wrecked by success;
committing crimes in
order to be caught and
punished (Freud, 1916);
finding partners to
punish us so we need
not do it ourselves;
developing addictions
to destructive
substances, activities,
and people; developing**

painful hysterical and psychosomatic conditions – largely due to our unconscious guilt and the need for punishment for real or imagined sins or crimes.

But as Freud (1930, pp. 135-6) explained, “It is very conceivable that the sense of guilt . . . is not perceived as such . .

. and remains to a large extent unconscious, or appears as a sort of malaise, a dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations.” In *The Ego and the Id* (1923, pp. 49–50) he wrote: “In the end we come to see that we are dealing with is what may be called a ‘moral’ factor . . . which

**is finding its satisfaction
in the illness and
refuses to give up the
punishment of suffering.**

**. . . But as far as the
patient is concerned
this sense of guilt is
dumb; it does not tell
him he is guilty; he does
not feel guilty, he feels
ill.”**

Here Freud introduces us to the important idea of the “guilt equivalent” or “guilt substitute,” a conception that along with the related idea of the “suicide equivalent” was elaborated by Karl Menninger (1938) in *Man Against Himself*. Just as an animal caught in a trap may chew off its

leg to survive, so we may sacrifice our health, our marriages, our creativity, etc., to placate the savage God Freud called the superego.

But after nearly seven decades of revisionism (interpersonal, intersubjective, self and relational theory), how

**m a n y p s y c h o -
t h e r a p i s t s a n d
p s y c h o a n a l y s t s e v e n
s u s p e c t t h e r o l e o f
u n c o n s c i o u s g u i l t
b e h i n d p a i n f u l “ i l l n e s s , ”
m a l a i s e a n d r e l a t e d g u i l t
e q u i v a l e n t s ? A r e w e
l o s i n g , o r h a v e w e l o s t
t h e c a p a c i t y t o “ l i s t e n
w i t h t h e t h i r d e a r ” (R e i k ,
1 9 4 8) ?**

In North America, over time, Freudian psychoanalysis, including its Kleinian extensions, came increasingly to be superseded by a discourse of victimization at the hands of not-good-enough mothers; absent, authoritarian, or abusive fathers; and

other varieties of parental and societal failure. There is no denying the reality of trauma, exploitation and injustice. But trauma induces rage, mostly turned against the self. Although unjustified, abused children identify with the aggressor (A. Freud, 1936) and abuse themselves with

persecutory guilt and shame.

As early as 1960 Sandler noted that in the indexing of cases at the Hampstead clinic, people were no longer organizing clinical material around the concepts of guilt and the superego. Twenty years later Arlow noted

that few clinical presentations focussed on issues of guilt or the superego. By the turn of the millennium Würmser was referring to the superego as “the sleeping giant of contemporary psychoanalysis.”

In 1970 Marcuse proclaimed “the

obsolescence of the Freudian concept of man.” He argued Freud had been right but was now wrong because society had changed. It was no longer producing the structured personality suffering from conflict between Id, ego and superego but the unstructured personality

that Christopher Lasch (1979) called “the narcissistic personality of our time.” Kohut (1977) argued that in the culture of narcissism “Guilty Man” had been replaced by “Tragic Man” who suffers not from a conflicted but a fragmented self.

In its flight from guilt, conflict, superego and conscience (the psychic regulators) psychoanalysis was in tune with the wider culture which, under neoliberal capitalism, was embracing Ayn Rand's doctrine that "selfishness is good" and seeking deregulation and

privatization of the economy.

Though from the 1970s on many North American psychoanalysts were turning toward self and relational theory and evading guilt, some Freudians and Kleinians stuck to their guns. For example, Leo Rangel

had recognized early on that Richard Nixon was a sociopath. In 1980 Rangel published *The Mind of Watergate* and identified what he called the “syndrome of the compromise of integrity“ in which ego defences are directed less toward the id than toward the regulating functions of the mind

(superego and conscience). If this work had not been largely ignored, psychoanalysis might have contributed to the understanding of the superego pathology underlying pathological narcissism and—who knows?— perhaps the gangster fascism of Nixon's successor, Donald Trump, might

not have captured the White House.

Instead, narcissism came mostly to be seen in terms of deficit rather than conflict and the narcissist as a simple victim of selfobject failure. What went largely unrecognized was the rage stemming from trauma that turned

upon the self takes the form of what Bion (1962) called the *ego-destructive superego* that, in my view, produces the fragmentation of the self.

Much of the psychoanalytic study of narcissism emphasized the ways the patient,

**like King Lear, was
“more sinned against
than sinning” – the
victim of environmental
failure. Attention
focussed upon the
narcissist’s shame and
away from his defences
against his savage
superego, the real origin
of both his shame and
fragmentation.**

A good deal of our confusion in this field stems from Freud's failure to distinguish persecutory from reparative guilt, later differentiated by Melanie Klein (1940) and Leon Grinberg (1964). If, having injured someone, I flagellate myself, this is persecutory guilt. But if I put down my cat o'

nine tails and pick up my first aid kit and start bandaging, that is reparative guilt. In my work, I associate the former with the superego and the latter with conscience. Recently, I have been thinking that although guilt may be about what I have done while shame concerns who I

**am, like guilt shame
may at times lead
beyond persecution
toward reparation.**

**While we certainly need
less persecutory guilt
and shame in
civilization, as Freud
(1930) argued, we need
much more reparative
guilt and shame, which
Winnicott (1960)**

helpfully described as the capacity for concern. In my view this means we need less superego and more conscience.

Because he lacked the distinction, Freud was unable to see how persecutory guilt and shame may defend against reparation. That

is, how the paranoid-schizoid position defends against advancement into the depressive/reparative position. People may prefer to indulge in orgies of self-punishment for years rather than move towards contrition, repentance and reparation. I think this is

largely due to the splitting in which the PS subject fears that if he acknowledges any badness whatsoever, it will spread like ink in the water and he will be all-bad.

In my view, the fragmentation and emptiness of so-called tragic man, rather than

being a simple manifestation of a deficit resulting from environmental failure is actually the product of a savage ego-destructive superego. Tragic man may appear indifferent, like Mersault in Camus' *L'Etranger*, but he is unconsciously guilty and ashamed. Why else

would he kill and get himself killed?

Despite Freud's description of the superego as something like a good cop protecting us from a descent into barbarism (in his sociological work), in his clinical writings he was well aware of its savagery,

even calling for its therapeutic “demolition” (Freud, 1940, p. 180). With Franz Alexander (1925) and Sandor Ferenczi (1927/1928) Freud believed the sadistic superego could be eliminated without producing psychopathy by handing over the moral functions to the rational ego.

But in light of the work of David Hume in the 18 century Freud, Ferenczi and Alexander should have known the rational ego is incapable of serving the moral functions. We “cannot deduce an ought from an is.” Science is descriptive, not prescriptive. It can tell

us how to build a bridge, but not whether we should.

James Strachey (1934) was correct to reject demolition in favour of modification of the superego. But he gave us no clue as to in what directions it should be modified. Should it become more strict?

More lenient? To answer this question, or even the question as to how we are to know the superego should be modified in the first place, we need a judge to judge the judge.

This cannot be the ego-ideal because the ego-ideal is an entirely narcissistic construct.

When I compare my real ego to my ego-ideal, my mind is entirely on myself, not the other.

I argue we need the concept of a conscience grounded in the prosocial id and identifications with nurturers to call out and demand modification of the tyrannical superego.

We have long been familiar with the idea of a moralistic superego conflicting with the antisocial drives of the id. But we lost sight of both the prosocial id and the antisocial superego. The Id, after all, is the seat of EROS, which is much wider than infantile sexuality

and includes the general tendency to integrate, attach and connect. And whatever prosocial moral norms the superego may at times contain, it is also the repository of our racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, commodity fetishism, etc.

Freud was captured by the 19th century myth of “the beast,” blaming human destructiveness on the animal in man when we now know that this is a terrible insult to animals who are incapable of the kind of sadistic depravity that characterizes human history. Animals lack the imagination to commit

evil, most of which, we now know, is superego-driven. Robert Lifton (1986) demonstrated the Nazi doctors were not, for the most part, psychopaths, but dedicated physicians striving to root out the cancer that in their racist ideology was the Jews.

**Thanks to Melanie Klein
we recognize the
superego as grounded
in the bad, persecutory
part-object of the oral
phase, elaborated in
later phases, as Freud
understood, as id
aggression turned back
against the ego— t_0
which is added, as a
second layer, the
internalization of,**

**frequently immoral,
cultural norms.**

**I n c o n t r a s t , t h e
c o n s c i e n c e i s g r o u n d e d
i n t h e g o o d , n u r t u r i n g
p a r t - o b j e c t o f t h e o r a l
p h a s e a n d i d e n t i f i c a t i o n
w i t h a l l l a t e r n u r t u r i n g ,
s o o t h i n g , a n d l o v i n g
o b j e c t s .**

Despite his misleading descriptions of the superego as a protector against barbarism in his sociological works, in his clinical writings Freud increasingly described its barbaric cruelty as at the core of psychopathology. When Roy Schafer (1960) wrote of a “loving and beloved, superego” he

was not describing the superego at all, but the conscience.

Erich Fromm (1947) distinguished between what he called an authoritarian and a humanistic conscience — the former corresponding to the Freudian superego. In his 1958 essay, “A

Psychological View of Conscience,” C.G. Jung argued that unlike the socially derived superego, the conscience has an archetypal (i.e., a natural) foundation. In *Freud, Women and Morality; The Psychology of Good and Evil* (1968) Eli Ssgan made the distinction, as

did Neville Symington (1994) and Carveth (2013).

Both in the microcosm of our personal psychopathology and in the sociopolitical macrocosm we confront the tyranny of the authoritarian, sadistic superego. Progress, both in therapy and in

society, requires the calling out of and resistance to both the internal and external authoritarians – including those who defend themselves against the sadistic, superego by identifying with it, marching under its banner and displaying what Heinrich Racker (1957) called a

**“menia for reproaching”
scapegoats. Whether on
the Left, the Right or the
Center, the authoritarian
superego must be
stripped of its power
and subjected to
conscientious (i.e.,
liberal democratic)
control.**

**Psychoanalysis is not a
value- neutral but a**

value-infused science. It affirms life over death, love over hate, and truth over lies. It needs to “come out of the closet,” recover and affirm its conscience and offer a conscientious critique of the superego.

**S u p e r e g o a n d
conscience conflict to**

varying degrees. Think of a Venn diagram with that area where the two circles overlap. In the ideal case conscience and superego would perfectly coincide. In reality, there is a greater or lesser degree of conflict between them. Conscience, the prosocial id and Winnicott's "true self"

**pretty much coincide.
But these functions
frequently conflict with
the false selves and the
antisocial id and
immoral superego.**

**Here the therapeutic
task is clear:
deconstruct the false
selves; strengthen the
true self; liberate the
prosocial id and the**

conscience; and subject the immoral superego to conscientious critique and revision.

When we restore the two functions Freud (1923) absorbed into the superego—the ego-ideal and the conscience—we have a five structure model of the mind. In addition to

the five intra-systemic conflicts we have ten inter-systemic conflicts, several of which we have failed to carefully study (Carveth, 2015).

While we must not be superego-ish with our patients, we must carry the conscience in the treatment until such time as our patients are

able to carry it themselves. If patients succeed in inducing their superego in us, the treatment is doomed because our goal is to get them to recognize that the sadistic superego resides in them, not us. Of course, it also resides in us, and it is the purpose of our training analysis to

**make us aware of this
and to liberate us from it
as much as possible so
that it cannot easily be
activated via projective
identification by our
patients.**

**How this is to be
accomplished in the
clinic is a part of the art
as distinct from the
science of**

psychoanalysis. Suffice it to say here that I try to contain my moralistic countertransference and sit back and watch for the inevitable consequences of the patient's acting-out. Then I can say, with apparent naïveté, "Have you noticed every time you cheat on your wife, the migraines return?"

“ In these ways I try to help patients recognize the moralist in themselves and the ways they unconsciously contrive to punish themselves for what they themselves unconsciously consider their wrongdoings. Some patients finally conclude that “the

game is not worth the candle“ and throw in the towel and decide to repent and strive to become more decent human beings.

Although Freud (1914) clearly stated the goal of psychoanalysis as the transformation of narcissism into object love – for “we mustl

begin to love in order not to fall ill and we are bound to fall ill if ... we are unable to love” (p. 83)— he backed away from this way of speaking, for this is the same *conversion* described by Klein as the transformation from PS to D, and also promoted by the

Abrahamic religions he so hated.

But although he tried to cloak our salvational work under a medical disguise, the process remains the same as it has always been: a form of alchemy or sublimation seeking the transformation of what is base into something

**sublime, what is bad
into something good.**

**But psychoanalysts
have usually obscured
this aspect of our work,
even at times
disavowing our very
desire to be healers,
with considerable
resulting confusion,
both in ourselves and
our patients. It is time**

**for us to become clear
and honest about who
we are and what we are
about.**

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