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Superego: Our Inner Authoritarian

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In attempting to work out our stance toward the many pressing moral, social and political issues of the day, we can become so focused on the ends we seek to promote and the evils we oppose that we lose sight of the question of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the means we intend to employ. Those who simply assume the ends justify the means don't have to think about this, so convinced are they of the righteousness of their cause that

other values, such as free-speech and democratic principles, are expendable.

As a politically naive young man I was so focussed on the evils I opposed that I associated myself with like-minded comrades, but failed to notice that we differed widely with respect to the methods or strategies to be employed in pursuit of our common aims. The scales began to fall when I was soon invited to join secret committees devoted to caucusing, plotting and manipulating the wider movement. I well recall an enthusiastic comrade attempting to allay my fears and belie my scruples by introducing me to the arcane doctrine of “democratic centralism.” My thoughts went to Orwell and “double-speak” and I began to recognize my Menshevism—my social-democratic commitment to both a Marxian critique of capitalism

and anti-authoritarian principles, procedures and attitudes. While excellent work on right-wing authoritarianism has been done by political psychologists some, such as Robert Altemeyer (Carveth 2004), have tended to turn a blind eye toward left-wing authoritarianism.

While many of us who have backgrounds in social science have long been “woke” to varying degrees, alert to class, gender, racial, generational and related patterns of social injustice, today we see that many of those who share our emancipatory aims have taken to pursuing them in distinctly authoritarian ways. Although it is not easy to critique those with whom we share many values, it is nevertheless incumbent upon the “woke” who are not authoritarian to call out the “woke” who are.

Regrettably, Freud too had his secret committee (see Grosskurth, 1991). He organized the IPA along patriarchal, hierarchical lines, such that former Bolsheviks, card-carrying members of the CPUSA, such as Charles Brenner, Jacob Arlow and Ralph Greenson (Richard's 2018), could feel quite at home there.

On entering New York harbour in 1909, Freud is reputed to have said "They don't realize we are bringing them the plague." I like to think that what he had in mind was his demonstration of our intrinsic contradictoriness: that there is no unitary ego; that we are all permanently divided selves; all both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Melanie Klein (1946) reaffirmed his insight through her elaboration of the two distinct mental worlds between which we oscillate throughout our lives. When, possessed by

a bad mood, I bark at my wife and later apologize saying “Sorry honey, I wasn’t myself,” I’m lying. The truth is I was myself in the paranoid-schizoid position. Because we have no unitary self we cannot entirely trust our judgment, for we have another self who may judge very differently. Even while proclaiming my Menshevism my inner Bolshevik may be stirring.

The PS world is characterized by narcissism, omnipotence, splitting and envy; the depressive-reparative (D) by object love, Concern, dependence and gratitude. The PS world is the home of authoritarianism; democracy depends upon the advance into D. Authority in PS is represented by the sadistic, authoritarian superego. In D it takes the form of a humanistic conscience.

The superego is formed out of both oedipal and pre-oedipal reactive (as distinct from primary) aggression turned back against the self, plus internalization of parental and social authority. Although in his sociological work Freud (1930) described it as something like a good cop saving us from a descent into barbarism, over time in his clinical work he described it in increasingly harsh, sadistic and tyrannical terms and viewed it as at the root of most psychopathology.

For Freud the superego is formed through submission to the Oedipal rival due to castration anxiety and operates thereafter “like a garrison in a conquered city” (Freud, 1930, p. 123). Melanie Klein finds its origin much earlier as internalization of and identification with the all-bad persecutory part-

object. I hold (Carveth, 2023) that the roots of conscience as distinct from superego lie in our primate inheritance and early internalization of and identification with the good object and, more generally, with the nurturers who kept us alive.

In our masochism we submit to the superego; in our sadism we identify with it and, marching under its banner, deploy its aggression against scapegoats, sometimes developing what Heinrich Racker (1957) called a “mania for reproaching” (p. 141). In enacting superego aggression against self and others we are out of synch with conscience. Only by developing and aligning ourselves with our biologically-grounded conscience, our “true self” (Winnicott, 1960), are we empowered to stand up to inner and outer tyranny.

As our inner authoritarian the superego can function like a fifth column. In our struggles against authoritarianism we ourselves can easily become authoritarian, for authoritarianism is a part, but not the whole, of our nature. Those of us who oppose it in the name of democratic principles need to keep it under regular surveillance.

Franz Alexander (1925) saw the superego as a vestigial organ. Freud (1940) called for its “demolition” (p.180). Ferenczi (1928) argued no analysis can be complete without its “complete elimination” (p. 100).

Although James Strachey (1934) saw the superego’s severity and its central role in psychopathology, against the radicalism of Freud, Alexander and Ferenczi who called for its

“demolition,” he adopted a more moderate position, calling for the modification rather than elimination of the superego. He was right to do so for two reasons. First, Freud, Alexander and Ferenczi were naive to think the moral functions could be handed over to the rational ego. We have known since the 18th century work of David Hume that reason 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 ought to. Second, we need the Law, a rule-book, even though the socially constructed norms are culturally relative.

But while he was correct to call for modification rather than elimination of the superego, Strachey gave us no clue as to how we are to know in which directions it ought to be modified. The very value judgement that the superego ought to be modified

comes from somewhere. What is the source of that value judgment? It seems we need a judge to judge the judge. It is for this reason that I call for us to reverse Freud's (1923) decision to fold conscience and ego-ideal into superego and instead posit conscience as a separate psychic structure and function capable of conflicting with, judging and calling the superego to account.

Such a conscience may be conceived either as a separate mental structure along with id, ego, superego and ego-ideal, yielding a five structure model of the psyche, or as having its roots in the prosocial, as distinct from the antisocial part of the id.

The distinction between conscience and superego has its roots in the New Testament. In

psychoanalytic discourse, it was pre-figured as early as 1950 in Erich Fromm's (1950) distinction between authoritarian and humanistic conscience. In a remarkable (1958) essay, Carl Gustav Jung clearly differentiates conscience from superego and argues that conscience has an archetypal basis, by which I understand him to mean a natural foundation.

Just as Bowlby argues that like other primates we come into the world with an unlearned need for attachment so, like other primates we arrive with unlearned needs to respond altruistically to our fellows (see De Waal, 1997). Paul Bloom's (2010; 2013) research at Yale shows that infants as young as three months of age already have a rudimentary conscience, preferring characters who help others over those who obstruct or frustrate them.

I am often asked how in the clinical situation we can distinguish the voice of conscience from that of the superego. While some superegos are more authoritarian than others, the superego generally speaks in a language that is more or less harsh, dictatorial, dogmatic and unforgiving. In contrast, although conscience has a bite, it generally speaks in the language of concern and mutual aid (Kropotkin, 1902). It does not wish to punish, berate or humiliate, but only to call the errant subject back to conscientiousness and, like the father of the prodigal son, to welcome him home.

In what some see as the war currently dividing American psychoanalysis, the proponents of CSJT (critical social justice theory) are full of political passion and moral indignation. Whether their call for

psychoanalysts to become activists means outside the clinical consulting room or inside it as well is not always clear. The idea of carrying our political, religious or other passions into the clinic would seem to be utterly incompatible with the time-honoured ideals of abstinence and technical neutrality. Without the ongoing struggle to contain our countertransference psychoanalysis would be displaced in favour of education, indoctrination, or conversion. Instead of analyzing a patient it would be a matter of urging him to become a “Mini-me.”

There is no doubt a parallel danger on the other side: being so dispassionately ensconced in D that one becomes complacent in the face of the serious issues of the day. This is the pathology of D. On the other hand, the therapist’s forbearance, self-control,

even at times self-abnegation preserve the essential boundaries that make analysis possible.

We have and need a superego, but we also need a conscience. We live at times in PS and strive to advance into D. Beyond oscillating between these polarities, we might, at times, manage to advance dialectically to a kind of “transitional area“ (Winnicott, 1955) in which we can do justice to both. This is an ideal from which we usually fall short, but it is an ideal worth striving toward.

While we need to be “woke” to the varieties of injustice pervading our world, we at the same time need to awaken to how our very “wokeness“ can manifest as authoritarianism. “Woke” ends do not justify authoritarian means. People on the right have long sought deregulation. Those of us on the left

must disavow the flight from guilt and regulation and embrace a superego modified and disciplined by conscience.

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