

# Superego, conscience, and the nature and types of guilt\*

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In his important but neglected contribution to psychoanalysis and social theory, *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil*, Eli Sagan (1988) argues that conscience and superego are distinct psychic structures that frequently conflict. Because Freud associated morality with the superego and immorality with the id, he never clearly grasped that in order to advance toward a mature and responsible moral outlook we must overcome the immoral morality of the merely conventional (often racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc.), authoritarian and tyrannical superego. In this paper, the author elaborates upon Sagan's contrast between the superego, based on identification with the aggressor and fueled by hate, and the conscience, based on identification with the nurturer and driven by attachment and love. A typology is offered differentiating and illustrating the operation of nine distinct types of guilt.

There are some societies in which the only place a decent person can be is in jail.

Anonymous

Against Freud's (1933, p. 66) conception of conscience as one of the three functions of the superego (the others being self-observation and maintaining the ego-ideal), Eli Sagan (1988), in his important but sadly neglected contribution to psychoanalysis and social theory, *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil*, argues that conscience and superego are distinct psychic structures that frequently conflict. Sagan

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cites Mark Twain's (1885) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to illustrate his point: Huck's dilemma is that while his conscience requires him to protect his beloved runaway slave companion, Jim, the racist superego he has internalized from his culture demands that he turn him in to the authorities. After an agonizing mental struggle between these conflicting psychic agencies, Huck finally comes to accept that he is "going to hell" and defies his punitive superego in favor of his loving conscience.

It was not until relatively late in his work that Freud turned his attention from the "lower" to the "higher" mental faculties—from his early preoccupation with the drives to the ego and finally to the superego. In advancing from id to ego psychology, he introduced the concept of the ego-ideal and later that of the superego, both concepts addressing the moral function but in different ways. Whereas the ego-ideal as "the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal" (Freud, 1914, p. 94) generates the desire to think well of oneself by living up to valued ideals, the superego as "heir to the Oedipus complex" (Freud, 1923, p. 48) is more about punishment for failure to do so and for unacceptable sexual and aggressive wishes and actions. Its standards are internalized from the wider culture via the parents and its punitiveness is driven by id aggression turned away under the threat of castration from the oedipal rival and back against the ego.

Freud finally subsumed the ego-ideal within his concept of the superego and increasingly emphasized the latter's punitiveness, especially as manifested in the moral masochism of those who turn its sadism upon themselves, a view that dominated psychoanalytic thinking for many years. Eventually, Schafer (1960) drew our attention to a "loving and beloved superego" and Furer (1967) to its role as a comforter. But while giving us a more balanced picture of superego functioning, these writers failed to posit a preoedipal origin of conscience separate and distinct from the superego that Freud viewed as coming into existence at around age five or six when the Oedipus complex "is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration" (Freud, 1925, p. 257).

Though increasingly emphasizing its destructive and irrational potentials, even referring to a superego that can at times

amount to “a pure culture of the death instinct” (Freud, 1923, p. 53), Freud nonetheless tended to associate morality with the superego and immorality with the id. He never quite clearly grasped the fact that in order to advance toward a more mature and responsible moral outlook we must overcome the immoral morality of the merely conventional (often racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc.), authoritarian, and tyrannical superego. If, like Huckleberry Finn, we overcome the punitive and immoral superego at all, we do so by listening and responding instead to the humane and loving voice of conscience.

Freud, of course, was not blind to these issues. In “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” (1921) he wrote of the destructive consequences that often follow when the individual puts a group leader in the place of the superego (a point later confirmed experimentally in Milgram's [1963] classic studies on obedience.) Here Freud views the superego of the individual as a conscience capable of resisting both the sadism of the id and of authority, but one that is prone to being usurped by a superego offered by a group or its leader. Regrettably, he failed to fully appreciate and elaborate upon the significance of this distinction. Given his theory of the origin of the superego in internalization of the culture and identification with the castrating oedipal rival, he could only have viewed this as a matter of one internalized set of values conflicting with and being overpowered by another.

In “Civilization and Its Discontents,” Freud (1930) emphasized the pro-social role of the superego in preserving social order by inhibiting and turning our aggression against ourselves, leading to our growing discontent in civilization. Freud had less to say about that common defense against the guilt inflicted by what Eagleton (2009) calls “the Satanic or super-egoic image of God” (p. 21) through “identification with the aggressor” (A. Freud, 1936, pp. 109–121): instead of being the victim of the sadistic superego one becomes its agent, making the lives of scapegoated others a living Hell, all in the name of ideals, ethics, and the law. The novelist John Connolly (2001) captures this dynamic in his description of the Reverend Faulkner, a serial killer, who claims, “I have nothing to answer for. The Lord did not send demons to kill the firstborn of Egypt . . . he sent angels. We were angels engaged in the Lord’s work, harvesting the sinners” (p. 426).

In his important study of *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton (1986) demonstrated that many were idealists who thought of the death camps as a necessary element in a project of public health that, like surgery, aimed to eliminate diseased parts that threatened the health of the whole. Eli Sagan (1988) writes:

One cannot read Lifton's book without being profoundly aware that we are not involved here with the psychological process of rationalization, wherein a person who wishes to perform sadistic acts and cannot admit to that desire invents a reasonable explanation for his actions. We are talking about profoundly corrupt but nevertheless dedicated and idealistic people. Without an ideology that they were performing a moral action—without the superego—the whole extermination process would have been impossible. (p. 11)

Though we would prefer (and our theory has inclined us) to think of them as sadistic, id-driven psychopaths, Lifton describes their ordinariness: "Neither brilliant nor stupid, neither inherently evil nor particularly ethically sensitive, they were by no means the demonic figures—sadistic, fanatic, lustful to kill—people have often thought them to be" (p. 5). In response to this unwanted finding a survivor friend of Lifton's remarked: "But it is *demonic* that they were *not* demonic" (p. 5).<sup>1</sup>

While sadism and dreams of erotic reward stemming from the id may play a part, the terrorist is most often driven by an authoritarian superego that entirely overpowers conscience. Since the superego is fueled by the drives as well as by internalized values and ideologies, there is no denying the influence of the id in its operations. The point is only that we have tended to play up the role of the drives and play down the role of values,

1 I have argued (Carveth 2007) that psychopathy is best conceived as a dimension of human personality as such, ranging from mild to moderate to extreme along with the narcissism that is its basis, rather than as a "taxon," a concrete entity, as when people speak of "the psychopath." While from this point of view both id-driven and superego-driven evildoers are destructive, and while evil is evil whatever psychodynamic motivates its perpetrators, it remains important to distinguish the destructiveness of those who require social and ideological sanction from that of those who act entirely independently of group support. The latter (i.e., the severely psychopathic) are readily recognized and marginalized by both criminal and political gangs on the basis of their total narcissism and untrustworthiness—their inability to subordinate immediate self-interest to the needs of the group. Most human destructiveness is committed not by psychopaths but by ideologues who sacrifice self-interest for the sake of an ideal that, often enough, serves as justification for mass murder.

ideals, and ideologies in the constitution of evil. This is because Freud tended to associate human evil with the “beast” in us (the somatically rooted drives of the id), rather than with what is most uniquely human about us (ego and superego), despite the fact that the beasts are never really beastly, only humans are. Here we witness a classic case of projection.<sup>2</sup>

While many ordinary people may conduct their lives according to what they take to be a universal moral ethic embodied in conscience, until recently they have enjoyed little support for this practice from what for many years has been the extreme social constructivism and moral relativism that have dominated social science in which morals are human creations constructed in radically different ways by different social groups. Even today such moral relativism is often invoked to oppose judgment of, for example, forced clitoridectomy as practiced in parts of Africa and the Middle East—though usually such relativism is not extended in any consistent fashion to such phenomena as rape and child murder in our own society, let alone to the moral perspective that condemns moral judgment of other cultures. If all moral judgment is culturally relative, on what basis is such judgment judged morally wrong?

Today the existence of a universal ethic is widely acknowledged by philosophers and social scientists, not just by ordinary people in their private lives. Despite wide variation in culturally specific folkways, mores, and laws, in one form or another the Golden Rule (ethic of charity or reciprocity) is universally recognized, though by no means universally practiced: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” Matthew 7:12 (King James Version). Though formulated differently in different cultural and religious contexts and in different philosophical frameworks—*vis-à-vis* the Kantian categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 1785)—in essence it is the same ethic: your act is only justified if

<sup>2</sup> For Sagan (personal communication), evil differs from ordinary immorality in that it involves sadism: its perpetrators enjoy the suffering they inflict on others; but on the broad historical scale the evil committed by sadistic psychopaths is as nothing compared to the immorality committed, as he puts it, “under the banner of the superego.”

you are willing to live in a world where everyone acts this way, a world in which you are not a special case, where the same rules apply to you as to everyone else.<sup>3</sup>

Social scientists influenced by George Herbert Mead (1934) view this universal ethic as grounded in the equally universal human capacity for empathic imagination of the experience of the other. According to Mead, the capacity to “take the role of the other” arises with symbolic functioning and is therefore universally human. There are no human groups without language and language is a system of shared symbols: I must know that the word I choose has substantially the same meaning for you as for me. I imaginatively put myself in your shoes, so to speak, in order to choose the signifier most likely to elicit the response I seek. It is this same capacity for “role-taking,” a capacity more fundamental than the role-playing it allows, that generates the fundamental ideas of reciprocity, mutuality, fairness, and justice. In every playground in every culture and every historical period, the words are heard in a myriad of different languages: “That’s not fair! You had your turn, now it’s mine!”

But it is entirely possible to recognize that it is the other’s turn and just not give a damn—or insist the other had his turn bringing the sled up the hill so I can have mine going down. Language generates empathy not sympathy. For Kohut (1959) introspection and empathy are the data-gathering techniques that define the field of psychoanalysis. Self psychologists have often stressed that their empathic technique is not to be equated with sympathy and support. Beyond self psychology, empathy is widely seen as a primarily cognitive, data-gathering act of trial identification (Mead’s “role-taking”) in which one imagines oneself in the other’s shoes so as to try to understand what he may be thinking, intending, wanting, and feeling. But

<sup>3</sup> Brahmanism: “This is the sum of Dharma [duty]: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.” *Mahabharata*, 5:1517; Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” *Udana-Varga* 5:18; Confucianism: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” *Analects* 15:23; Islam: “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” Number 13 of Imam *Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths*; Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.” *Talmud*, Shabbat 31a; Zoroastrianism: “Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.” *Shayast-na-Shayast* 13:29. See: “Shared Belief in the ‘Golden Rule’ (a.k.a. Ethics of Reciprocity),” <http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>

coming to know how the other feels is not at all the same thing as the sympathy that moves beyond knowing to caring. The psychopath usually has a well-developed capacity for empathy that he employs to understand the minds of those he seeks to manipulate for his own ends. The sadist must empathize with his victims in order to enjoy their suffering. So for moral action to occur, empathy is not enough. It is one thing to know that others suffer; quite another to care and desire to relieve their pain. Our patients are often rightly suspicious of our empathic technique for they know that empathy and caring are two quite different things.

Whereas Freud identifies conscience with the superego that arises with the waning of the Oedipus complex, followers of Mead ground it in the capacity for role-taking that arises with symbolic functioning sometime during the second year of life. Advancing beyond Freud's emphasis on the centrality of the Oedipus complex and focusing far more on pregenital issues, Melanie Klein (1957, 1964) associated morality with the move out of the narcissistic, paranoid-schizoid position into the depressive position where true guilt (as distinct from persecutory anxiety and shame) and the drive toward reparation arise. Regrettably, feeling the need to exaggerate her continuity with Freud, Klein used the term superego to refer both to the internal persecutory bad object of the paranoid-schizoid position and the conscience (the capacity to experience guilt leading to reparation) that emerges with the depressive position. But her "depressive anxiety," reformulated by Winnicott (1965) as the "capacity for concern," emerges in the context of the overcoming of splitting and the achievement of love for, and introjection of, the whole good object, rather than hate retroflected against the self under threat of castration. While her dating of this developmental shift as between three and six months is now widely questioned, it certainly occurs long before Freud's dating of superego formation at five or six years of age. Like Klein, Sagan (1988) finds the roots of what will become conscience in the very earliest stages of development in the infant's most primitive identifications with the primary nurturer.

The desire to nurture others as we ourselves have been nurtured, to help as we have been helped, and to love as we have been loved is what we mean by conscience. This is the true ba-

sis of morality, and it arises far earlier than the Freudian superego.<sup>4</sup> For Sagan (1988), conscience arises in identification with the loving, comforting, and nurturing preoedipal mother and in our primordial tendency to turn passive into active. He describes "those delightful circumstances, familiar to all parents, when the infant first endeavors to feed the mother back" (p. 169). He cites Spitz's (1958) observation of a six-month-old child: "The mother, holding the child in her lap, is feeding the child from the bottle and introduces the nipple into his mouth. The child accepts it, sucks, and *at the same time pushes his finger into the mother's mouth*" (p. 391). At a little over a year: "There are no problems with his drinking milk from a cup, but when he is offered cake, noodles, etc., he is more interested in offering these to his mother than in eating them himself" (p. 391). The "good-enough" mother mirrors the affect states of her child and the child mirrors her back. Such mirroring, mutuality, or reciprocity is echoed in Chomsky's (2007) claim that "the most elementary of moral principles is that of universality, that is, if something's right for me, it's right for you; if it's wrong for you, it's wrong for me. Any moral code that is even worth looking at has that at its core somehow." The essence of the ethic of reciprocity is movingly expressed in the words of the No. 59 Chorale of Bach's (1734–35) *Christmas Oratorio*:

Ich komme, bring und schenke dir,  
Was du mir hast gegeben.

I come, bring and give to Thee  
That which Thou hast given me.

According to Klein (1964), "Feelings of love and gratitude arise directly and spontaneously in the baby in response to the love and care of his mother" (p. 65). Unfortunately the origin of immoral action also lies in the preoedipal phase in identification with the aggressor rather than the nurturer for the mother who comforts and nurtures is at times replaced in the infant's experience by a mother who tortures and deprives. "The infant's feel-

4 In "The Moral Life of Babies" Bloom (2010), reviewing recent experimental infant research, writes that "A growing body of evidence . . . suggests that humans do have a rudimentary moral sense from the very start of life. With the help of well-designed experiments, you can see glimmers of moral thought, moral judgment and moral feeling even in the first year of life" (p. 1). While these glimmers may not yet amount to Sagan's "identification with the nurturer," they may well form the *anlage* of such identification.

ings seem to be that when the breast deprives him, it becomes bad because it keeps the milk, love, and care associated with the good breast all to itself” (Klein, 1957, p. 183). Bion (1962) writes: “Let us suppose the infant to have fed but to be feeling unloved. Again it is aware of a need for the good breast and again this 'need for a good breast' is a 'bad breast' that needs to be evacuated” (p. 35). In other words, the absent good breast is felt by the infant as a present bad, attacking breast that necessarily generates persecutory anxiety, rage, and the vicious cycle of rage projected leading to further persecutory anxiety, more aggression, and so on. To the extent that the inevitable fantasy of persecution is given substance by real, surplus frustration due to not good-enough parenting, the resulting pathology is intensified.

Fortunately, the primitive “talion” reaction that entails giving hate for hate (“an eye for an eye”) is paralleled by an equal tendency to give love for love. Although the punitive superego as aggression retroflected from the oedipal rival against the ego takes shape only at the end of the oedipal phase, it is grounded in earlier identifications with the persecutory part-object mother. As she hurt me, so I seek to hurt her and others who, in transference, represent her. Love begets love; and hate, even imagined hate, begets hate. In the early relationship with the mother, in fantasy and reality, lies the origins of love and hate, healing and hurting, comforting and tormenting. For Klein it is the infant’s overcoming of the splitting of love and hate and the introjection of and identification with a whole good object that generates depressive anxiety, mature guilt, and the drive toward reparation as distinct from persecutory anxiety and self-torment.

Due to its patriarchal bias and relative repression of the preoedipal phase and the preoedipal mother, Freudian psychoanalysis failed to comprehend the roots of conscience in the early mother-infant attachment.<sup>5</sup> As a result it lacked an adequate grasp of the conflicts between the superego (“law of the father”) that is developed much later and the conscience that embodies a moral standpoint, i.e., charity, from which the former must often be judged immoral. For the superego is a product not just of

<sup>5</sup> See May (2001) for a discussion of Karl Abraham’s (1911) overcoming of the Freudian repression of the mother, especially the “bad mother,” and Melanie Klein’s elaboration of Abraham’s breakthrough.

aggression turned against the self but of internalization of the culture, and that culture has to varying degrees been an unjust and immoral culture that results in an immoral superego.

With language comes the capacity to make distinctions and to categorize. Regrettably human beings have a tendency to distinguish those who count from those who don't. The suffering of the latter is regarded as not fully real or significant. Among the citizens of Athens not a single voice was raised demanding that the slaves be included in their democracy. Erikson (1968) described the problem of *pseudo-speciation*: "First each horde or tribe, class and nation, but then also every religious association has become *the* human species, considering all the others a freakish and gratuitous invention of some irrelevant deity" (p. 41). The ethic of charity apparently doesn't pertain to those who are not like us. The dictum that "what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after" (Hemingway, 1934, p. 4) doesn't apply when immorality goes unrecognized because it involves a category of others excluded from the moral community (animals, slaves, blacks, Jews, foreigners, immigrants, children, women, homosexuals, . . . ).<sup>6</sup>

To postmodern sociocultural relativism, as to classical Freudian theory that failed to recognize the conflict between superego and conscience, the idea of an immoral superego makes no sense since the socially constructed superego is itself the judge and there is no other judge to judge it—other than another socially constructed superego. There is no judge among all these judges to judge which is the righteous judge. Freudian psychoanalysis is left with moral relativism. But there is indeed a higher authority to judge both the superego and the culture that produces it: the conscience, originating in love for and identification with the nurturing mother, elaborated through the development of capacities for concern, empathy, sympathy, and reparation and forming the necessary basis for genuinely moral action and justified guilt.

Freud's (1925, 1931, 1933) idea that the feminine superego is weak because, unlike that of the male, it is not driven by the

6 Greenwald (2009) describes what he calls "tribal self-absorption" and likens it to early adolescent "self-centeredness, self-absorption and empathy-free self obsession."

threat of castration has been felt by feminists as an insult. It is actually a compliment for the Freudian superego is essentially aggression turned against the self due to castration anxiety plus an overlay of internalized societal ideology, much of which is immoral by the standards of conscience. In this sense, having a weak superego may be a virtue if its relative weakness precludes it from silencing the voice of conscience. As Gilligan (1982) observed, while the moral reasoning of men has tended to be about protection of individual rights from infringement by others, that of women is about what one owes to the other with whom one is in relationship, a difference that echoes that between superego and conscience. One might argue that those without much conscience better at least have a superego. But it is doubtful this would help for without conscience the subject will likely identify with the punitive superego and self-righteously channel aggression away from the self onto the sinners whom it is his mission to punish.

In addition to the conflicts between id, ego, and superego with which we have long been familiar, our patients suffer from conflict between superego and conscience. A good deal of the confusion we experience in this field stems from our failure to distinguish these agencies and our use of a single term, guilt, to describe their very different effects. As I have argued elsewhere (Carveth, 2006), whereas the superego generates an essentially narcissistic need for self-punishment resulting in various forms of painful self-torment and shame—or, alternatively, the infliction of such torment upon a scapegoat—the conscience gives rise to a wish to make creative reparation toward the injured other. The superego is fueled by aggression; the conscience by attachment, concern, and love.

The fundamental ideas of reciprocity, fairness, and justice grounded in the universal ethic of charity that is the essence of conscience eventually led in the West to the extension of rights to many categories of others who previously didn't count. One need not subscribe to the neoliberal ideology of Progress, or blind oneself to the continuing reality of capitalist and other forms of exploitation, to acknowledge that there has been moral progress in the West: slavery has largely been extinguished; racism is a continuing reality, but America now has a black President; women have achieved a good measure of equality though

misogyny, abuse, and injustice have in no way been eliminated; homosexuals can now marry in many states, even in Iowa, and even when they “come out” they can become psychoanalysts (at least in some locales); infanticide is largely a thing of the past, though widespread child abuse and neglect remain. While much remains to be done, much has nevertheless been accomplished during the past few centuries, despite some severe cultural regressions provoked by the deep anxieties arising from such progress (e.g., Nazism, Stalinism). But while we owe such moral progress to conscience, even today as in the past it is frequently opposed by the superego.

### Justified and unjustified guilt<sup>7</sup>

The superego often inflicts guilt for wishes, feelings, and even actions that by the standards of conscience (that is, the ethic of charity) one should not feel guilty about. If one feels guilt for having consensual sexual intercourse with the partner one cherishes—and setting aside the possibility that the guilt derives not from the sex but from perverse unconscious fantasies accompanying it—then a puritanical superego is likely at work, a result of early socialization and internalization of standards one may now consciously reject. This is unjustified guilt inflicted not by conscience but by an antierotic superego. In order for change to occur, the antisexual attitudes must be rendered fully conscious, critically evaluated, and altered or eradicated. Such superego modification may entail separation from and mourning of a puritanical internal object.<sup>8</sup>

But by no means is all guilt unjustified. If the guilt arising from intercourse with one’s partner is not due to a puritanical upbringing but to unconscious destructive wishes and fantasies, then, to some degree, such guilt is justified by the standards of a loving conscience. But the superego often fails to distinguish

7 Since value judgment lies outside the domain of the means–end calculations that are the province of rationality, one cannot properly speak of rational or irrational moral judgment or guilt. Hence I have rejected such usage in favor of the distinction between guilt that is justified or valid from the standpoint of conscience and guilt inflicted by the superego that may not be justified at all in this sense.

8 Actually, as Sagan (1988) points out, the Puritans were not “puritanical” in regard to their ideas about sexuality in the context of marriage. I am employing the term in its conventional, albeit historically inaccurate, sense.

wishes and fantasies from actions. While, for example, sadistic acts toward a loved object certainly merit guilt, wishes and fantasies that are not acted upon deserve much less, particularly to the degree that they find a sublimated outlet that may even enhance the object's as well as the subject's pleasure. Such well-sublimated transgressive desire should be compatible with conscience, however much the superego, itself an essentially sado-masochistic structure, may be alert to opportunities to inflict pain even for thoroughly sublimated wishes and fantasies. Here is an instance of the perversity of the superego: it glories in sadistically punishing any evidence of sadism.

But some guilt is entirely justified. Our conscience informs us we have done wrong and deserve to feel guilty. Although our "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, 1979) has tended to regard all guilt as unjustified, useless, and therefore to be gotten rid of, the truth is that a capacity to bear and constructively deal with the guilt arising from wrongdoing and even from wrong feeling<sup>9</sup> is a sine qua non of maturity and mental and spiritual health. We *should* feel such guilt; we *should* bear it; we *should* experience contrition; we *should* apologize; we *should* make reparation; we *should* seek to change in positive ways (repent) and seek therapeutic help if necessary to do so; and we *should* seek and accept forgiveness, provided our contrition and repentance are genuine.

### **Primitive (self-punitive) and mature (reparative) guilt**

But people often find unbearable the narcissistic injury entailed in admitting their faults. This closes off the avenue of contrition and reparation. When the conscientious path is blocked in this way, it seems the superego takes over and self-torment replaces reparative guilt and we flagellate the self instead of bandaging the injured other. It has been difficult for us to see this

<sup>9</sup> While it is important to distinguish feelings and actions, the notion that guilt is justified only in relation to the latter is unfounded. Though immoral acts merit substantially more guilt than immoral feelings, the truth is that feelings such as destructive envy and hate are judged to be wrong by both the conscience and the superego though the former is more interested in constructively transcending them, while the latter simply wants to punish. Since such feelings are rooted less in psychobiology than in childhood pain and fantasy, they are analyzable and potentially resolvable.

because Freud (1916, 1920, 1923, 1924, 1930) equated guilt and self-punishment and failed to see that the latter often serves as a defense against the former, functioning essentially as a *guilt-substitute*, a consequence of the evasion of mature guilt. Grinberg (1964) called such narcissistic self-torment “persecutory guilt” and distinguished it from the “depressive guilt” that manifests a capacity for conscientious concern for the other. Such self-punishment may well be a response to genuine wrongdoing, but in failing to make reparation to the other and indulging instead in sadism toward the self, it entails further abuse of both the other and the self.<sup>10</sup>

### Conscious and unconscious guilt

In addition to distinguishing justified and unjustified guilt, and self-punitive and reparative guilt, we must distinguish guilt that is conscious from guilt that has been rendered unconscious through repression and related defensive processes. While conscious guilt can be justified or unjustified by the standards of conscience, being conscious it is open to reality-testing and modification. If I find myself feeling guilty about something that my conscience tells me I need not feel guilty about, then I should stop feeling guilty. If my guilt does not subside, then a deeper analysis is indicated. Perhaps my guilt really stems from another, unconscious source that truly merits guilt. Perhaps I have pled guilty to a lesser charge, telling myself my guilt stems from enjoying sex with my partner when, unconsciously, in fantasy, I have been enjoying sex with someone else’s partner or with incestuous objects or with objects opposite to my heterosexual or homosexual identification. Here analysis and the making conscious of the deeper sources of the guilt are needed.<sup>11</sup>

Becoming conscious of these sources may permit modification and modulation of the hitherto repressed desires and fantasies or their sublimation, perhaps even their acceptance on the

10 Although shame serves important social control functions, it is essentially identical with persecutory as distinct from reparative guilt in that it is entirely narcissistic, entailing little concern for the other. A crucial moment in emotional growth occurs when a narcissistic subject begins to feel ashamed of his inability to get his mind off himself enough to be able to experience genuine concern for and guilt toward the others against whom he has transgressed.

11 In my view “oedipal guilt” is not a type of guilt per se, but only a context in which the types of guilt enumerated here may occur.

level of fantasy and play. According to Stoller (1979, 1985) and Kernberg (1991a, 1991b, 1993) exciting sexuality entails a transgressive element. Kernberg suggests that if a couple's sex life is not to deteriorate into boredom, the puritanical superego of each must not be permitted to ally with and reinforce that of the other, both partners managing instead to contain and, in sublimated forms, play with the transgressive elements of their sexuality in order to form and maintain a lively sexual bond.

Conscious guilt that has been subject to reality-testing and found justified by the standards of conscience is more likely to lead to contrition, apology, and efforts at reparation. But if such guilt proves unbearable (most likely because it constitutes an unacceptable insult to narcissism), it may be repressed or projected. Because the superego knows everything and is always on the lookout for an opportunity to inflict pain, the inevitable consequence of refusing to suffer conscious guilt is painful self-punishment inflicted by the superego—unless such punishment is instead inflicted via projection on a scapegoat.

Guilt and the need for punishment should not be equated since the latter serves as a defense against and substitute for the former when guilt is found unbearable and repressed. When guilt is repressed the alleged sins or crimes that generate it are also unconscious and, hence, unavailable for critical evaluation by secondary-process thinking. But if guilt and its grounds can be rendered conscious, they become open to rational examination. It may turn out that the sins or crimes exist, at least in part, only in fantasy and not in reality—as in the case of a patient who for years unconsciously accused herself of murdering her sister when, in reality, she had nothing whatever to do with her sister's death. Although as the injustice of the superego accusation of murder came to be appreciated her guilt was reduced accordingly, it did not disappear because, while not causing her sister's death, a part of her had been gratified by it and probably had wished for it. Although the superego's accusation of murder was seen to be unjust, her conscience remained troubled until she was able to recover the love she had felt for her sister in addition to the envy and hate. At this point reparative action was able to take place: a headstone was belatedly placed on the neglected grave. Morally unjustified guilt should be able to be transcended; if not, then its deeper sources need to be

explored. Only when guilt is repressed will self-torment and/or scapegoating automatically take its place.

It seems that the guilty must suffer. Either we suffer consciously, bear our guilt, and strive to make reparation, or if we refuse, we suffer myriad forms of self-punishment. Evasion of such self-punishment through projection and scapegoating leads only to deferred self-punishment for the unconscious superego is aware of this deflection of responsibility and unconsciously insures that we ultimately suffer for it. Manifest appearances to the contrary, no one really gets away with anything.<sup>12</sup> The apparent absence of conscience in some people is due to strong defenses against it. The Athenians were not lacking in conscience, but merely restricted its application to their fellow citizens, excluding the slaves. Nations make mass slaughter possible by dehumanizing the enemy. Even severe psychopaths have conscience (i.e., understand the Golden Rule, know right from wrong, and experience some desire to return love for love received), but the desire is deeply buried and the rules are felt to apply only to others and not themselves: *they* must be treated justly; others just don't count.

Without some minimal degree of maternal care a human being will not survive physically or be sufficiently psychologically functional to be able to do much harm. It follows that anyone who has survived childhood, learned language, and adapted sufficiently to be able to function socially to any degree, however antisocially, will have identified to some degree with the object or objects whose care has enabled such functioning. That is, such a person will have a degree of conscience, however minimally expressed, repressed, or defensively split off. Current tendencies to reify the concept of an entirely conscience-less "primary psychopath" (Meloy, 2007) have evoked a range of critical responses (Carveth, 2007; Watson 2008; see note 1 above).

## Borrowed guilt

In "The Ego and the Id" Freud (1923) writes:

The battle with the obstacle of an unconscious sense of guilt is not made easy for the analyst. Nothing can be done against it directly,

<sup>12</sup> If jail is avoided, observe the hellish marriage, the hateful kids, the psychosomatic illness, the bizarre accidents, . . . and make sure to keep observing "unto the third and fourth generation" (Numbers 14:18).

and nothing indirectly but the slow procedure of unmasking its unconscious repressed roots, and of thus gradually changing it into a *conscious* sense of guilt. One has a special opportunity for influencing it when this *Ucs.* sense of guilt is a “borrowed” one—when it is the product of an identification with some other person who was once the object of an erotic cathexis. A sense of guilt that has been adopted in this way is often the sole remaining trace of the abandoned love-relation and not at all easy to recognize as such. (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 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.

### **Defensive guilt**

Borrowed guilt is not the only type of unjustified guilt that is defensive. Fairbairn (1943) was perhaps among the first to draw attention to what he called “the moral defense against bad objects” in which children blame themselves for their parents’ inability to love them:

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,” is the moral defense that preserves the child’s omnipotence, warding off the unbearable recognition of helplessness. 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. In the tradition of modern psychoanalysis (Spotnitz & Meadow, 1976) this is known as the narcissistic defense.

Although in his review of the literature on borrowed guilt Fernando (2000) does not include Fairbairn's (1943) contribution, the phenomena they describe are related. But whereas the borrowed guilt arising from externalization by a narcissistic parent entails the child's identification with the parent's guilt, in Fairbairn's moral defense (Spotnitz's narcissistic defense) the child doesn't identify with the parent's guilt; instead he absolves the parent and blames himself. If the parent is unloving, the child doesn't accuse himself of being unloving but of being unlovable. It's true that in both cases the child ends up accusing himself of being bad in order not to have to see the parent as bad, but different dynamics underlie this common outcome.

## Survival guilt

To feel guilt and a need for punishment for surviving would appear to be entirely irrational and unjustified. Certainly magical thinking that fails to distinguish thoughts or words from actual deeds is often involved. Waylon Jennings is said to have suffered life-long survivor guilt because he gave another musician his seat on a plane that subsequently crashed, killing his friend Buddy Holly and everyone else aboard. At the time, Holly had quipped, "I hope your old bus breaks down," to which Jennings replied "And I hope your plane crashes," a remark that haunted him for the rest of his life (Gray, n.d.).

Aristotle is reputed to have defined luck as the arrow hitting the person next to you. Unfortunately, such luck often comes at a high cost in survivor guilt. Sometimes this arises from simple relief that it was another who suffered instead of oneself. Sometimes it is connected to related feelings of triumph. Sometimes it arises in connection with unconscious death wishes one may have harbored toward those who did not survive, leading to the feeling that one has murdered them. Sometimes, upon analysis, it emerges that the guilt is connected to what one may have actually done in order to survive, not just to what one felt like doing or imagined having done.

## 124 **Existential guilt**

Kierkegaard (1849) drew our attention to two types of existential guilt that are universal, unavoidable, and not in themselves neurotic. They entail a kind of catch-22. On one hand, there is the guilt arising from our failure to develop our potentials; on the other, the guilt precisely for doing so. Self-development involves disruption of a preexisting equilibrium, and this can entail a kind of betrayal of older relational covenants. If we do not grow, we fail ourselves; if we do, we risk failing others. Hence existential guilt, like the existential anxiety that accompanies our freedom, is unavoidable; neither is in itself neurotic. 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.

No wonder analytic work is difficult for we are in the business of helping people transform “hysterical misery into common unhappiness,” that is, into the existential pain refusal of which resulted in the neurosis in the first place (Freud, 1895, p. 305). Bion (1962) elaborated on this existential element in Freud's work. The Symingtons (1996) describe Bion's attitude as follows:

The phenomenon of someone moving from evading pain to acceptance of suffering is in direct opposition to the pleasure principle. Yet this movement is quite central to Bion's theory of development. . . . He says that the crucial determinant in mental growth is whether the individual “decides” to evade frustration or to tolerate it. (p. 6)<sup>13</sup>

### **Induced guilt**

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1887) drew attention to what he called “the will to power of the weak”:

That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching those birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: “these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?”—there is

<sup>13</sup> I would prefer to say it depends on to what *degree* a person decides to tolerate or evade frustration.

no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: “*we* don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them; nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb” (First essay, Section 13, pp. 44–45).

In direct battle with the strong, the weak will lose. But if the weak invent a morality in which strength is evil (“the meek shall inherit the earth”) and induce their enemies to believe it, the strong will fall on their own swords. According to Shakespeare, “Conscience [read superego] doth make cowards of us all” (*Hamlet* 3.1.83). Hence, one motive for inducing guilt in others is to undermine their self-respect and so disempower and control them.

It is common for people tormented by guilt to employ interpersonal projective identification (Bion, 1962; Sandler, 1987) or emotional contagion (Spotnitz & Meadow, 1976) to induce their guilt in others. Sometimes this is done merely to evacuate unbearable guilt. At other times it serves as a communication in the service of being understood. Sometimes guilt is induced in the hope that the other may be able to contain and detoxify it and return it in a symbolically processed form leading to understanding and transformation (Bion, 1962). As noted above, sometimes people suffering from unbearable guilt inflicted by a harsh superego defend themselves by identifying with the superego and developing what Racker (1957) called a “mania for reproaching” (p. 141). Instead of owning their sins, they become the righteous punishers of sinners, projecting the latter role onto scapegoats who may be rendered more easily dominated and controlled through guilt induction.

## Collective Guilt

Jaspers (1947), writing immediately after World War II on *The Question of German Guilt*, argues that “Every human being is fated to be enmeshed in the power relations he lives by. This is the inevitable guilt of all, the guilt of human existence. It is counteracted by supporting the power that achieves what is right, the rights of man” (p. 34). Jaspers goes on to conclude that:

Every German is made to share the blame for the crimes committed in the name of the Reich. We are collectively liable. The question is in what sense each of us must feel co-responsible.

Certainly in the political sense of the joint liability of all citizens for acts committed by their state—but for that reason not necessarily also in the moral sense of actual or intellectual participation in crime. Are we Germans to be held liable for outrages which Germans inflicted on us, or from which we were saved by a miracle? Yes—inasmuch as we allowed such a regime to rise among us. No—insofar as many of us in our deepest hearts opposed all this evil and have no morally guilty acts or inner motivations to admit. To hold liable does not mean to hold morally guilty. (p. 61)

Jaspers is not writing about *guilt-feeling* but about *objective guilt*—that is, about guilt that by the standards of conscience we *should* be feeling, whether or not we actually do. Above and beyond the guilt due to our personal wrongdoings and failures of responsibility is that arising from the misdeeds of our communities. Sometimes the latter is displaced from the collective to the personal domain. According to Mills (1959), the sociological imagination seeks to reveal the degree to which what appear to be entirely personal troubles reflect public issues. I believe there exists in Western society a kind of free-floating guilt, more or less unconscious, that we tend to attribute to our failings as individuals, but that also has to do with collective wrongs—such as the fact that those of us in the West who enjoy affluence do so on the basis of unconscionable capitalist exploitation of the poor both at home and abroad.

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