

Presented at the *Freud Café*, sponsored by the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society, November 13, 2014 and published in *Clio's Psyche* 21, 3 (December 2014): 328-333. This paper summarizes some of the key themes developed in *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience* (London: Karnac, 2013).

## ***Civilization and Its Discontents—A Kleinian Re-View*** **Don Carveth—York University**

As early as his 1908 essay on “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” Freud was preoccupied with what he saw as the conflict between socialization pressures and our sexuality and aggression. But whereas in this early essay he places the term “civilized” in quotation marks to indicate ironic distance and goes on to offer a critique of an excessively repressive civilization, some two decades later, in “Civilization and Its Discontents,” the aging Freud has pretty much switched sides. Now civilization is a “thin veneer” protecting us from our own and others’ barbarous drives. While a few people of exceptional strength of character may be able to inhibit their antisocial drives without deceiving themselves about them, and a few may have the talent to redirect or “sublimate” them in prosocial directions, the majority are forced to resort to repression, setting up the inevitable disguised return of the repressed in neurosis—the price of civilized order.

Civilization, Freud concluded, requires inhibition, especially of what he viewed as our innate aggressive drive which, though exacerbated by frustration was, for him, ultimately a biologically-given, asocial or antisocial element of our human nature: “men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness.” To support his view, Freud quotes the Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus: “*Homo homini lupus est*”—man is a wolf to his fellow man. But this comparison is deeply unfair ... to the wolves, a highly prosocial species who, to my knowledge, have never been guilty of designing death camps, or dropping atomic bombs on civilian populations, or videotaping the rape, torture

and murder of their victims for future enjoyment of their humiliation and pain. Freud's thinking often transcends common sense, but here he succumbs to it, projecting the perverse destructiveness unique to humans onto animals. Animals are not beastly, at least not in the ways humans often are. In this connection, a student will sometimes point to her cat's "torture" of a captured mouse, failing to notice that if the mouse is removed and replaced by a rolled-up ball of paper, the cat will carry on in exactly the same way. Only human beings capable of empathy can invent diabolical forms of torment. As Erik Erikson has pointed out, Freud offers us a "centaur model of man" that conceives our fundamental conflict as between mind and body, culture and nature, the uniquely human vs. the animal in man. While body, nature and animal are conceived as the source of our antisocial inclinations (id), reason (ego) and culture (superego) are viewed as prosocial.

But in recent decades it has become clear that, at least in these respects, Freud got it backwards: that much or most of the evil humans do—their racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.—is learned or acquired from culture (superego) while our prosocial inclinations appear to have a biological basis. In associating the id with our allegedly natural destructiveness we have been blinded to the loving, caring, and sympathetic inclinations grounded in the innate, unlearned attachment systems we share with other primates. Animal research has revealed the positive, mutually supportive, and sympathetic capacities of other primate species, revealing the myth of "the beast" as a projection onto animals of uniquely human destructiveness.

At the same time, through a series of ingenious experiments, recent infant research shows that children as young as three months of age distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, and prefer the former. This is not evidence of an "innate" morality, for even three month old infants have had considerable opportunity to identify with the loving nurturance of their caretakers. However it

does demonstrate the roots of conscience in early attachment, quite distinct from the internalizations of cultural ideology at five or six years of age that Freud saw as forming the superego. It is high time that psychoanalysts deconstruct the false equations of the id with immoral nature when much of what is truly moral in us stems from innate attachment tendencies, and the superego with moral nurture when a great deal of our immorality is culturally acquired.

Freud's highly questionable view of the superego as the source of law and order and a bulwark against barbarism never sat well with his clinical insight into the destructiveness of the superego and its central role in psychopathology. The superego, he explained, is formed by repressing aggression and turning it back against the ego through the process Anna Freud described as "identification with the aggressor." Instead of attacking hated others we identify with them and aggress against or punish ourselves. It's easy to forget that suicides are self-murderers. Among Freud's greatest and enduring contributions is his discovery of the unconscious need for punishment (unconscious guilt) in a wide range of conditions that, on the surface, appear to have nothing whatever to do with moral issues—with wrongdoing, sin, guilt, the need to be punished or to punish oneself.

In the first century CE, the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, "Seneca the Younger," wrote: "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." In his classic 1938 text, *Man Against Himself*, Karl Menninger describes in thorough detail how the operations of the unconscious hanging judge, the superego, underlie not only depression, masochism and suicide, but a whole range of "guilt-substitutes"—self-sabotaging, self-limiting and self-tormenting conditions. Freud called attention to the "fear of success" (underlying procrastination and the tendency to "clutch defeat from the jaws of victory"); "those wrecked by success" (I think of all those graduate students who having finally completed and successfully defended their dissertations immediately fall

into what I think of as a “post-Ph.D.” depression analogous to the post-partum depression suffered by many women after successfully delivering a baby); and the “criminal from a sense of guilt” whose guilt rather than following the crime precedes it, a crime unconsciously committed in order to get caught and punished—so the “perp” leaves clues, returns to the scene, etc. The unconscious need for punishment at the hands of the tyrannical superego is also at work in a host of hysterical and psychosomatic conditions that bring pain and torment upon the self.

According to Theodor Adorno, “The history of philosophy is the history of forgetting.” For historian Russell Jacoby, “what was known to Freud, half-remembered by the neo-Freudians, is unknown to their successors” due to a process of *social amnesia* in which “society remembers less and less, faster and faster” and “the sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion.” In psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis we have experienced some five decades of forgetting of the central importance of guilt in human experience. The reason for this is not hard to find. As cultural historian Christopher Lasch explained, since the 1960s we have been living in the “culture of narcissism” created by advanced consumer capitalism, a culture characterized by what Herbert Marcuse called “repressive de-sublimation” in which self-indulgent consumption rather than self-regulation is encouraged, a culture hostile to rules, regulators and whistle-blowers (just ask Edward Snowden). If, as the old saying has it, the superego is soluble in alcohol, in narcissism it appears it may be liquidated altogether. But this is merely an appearance. While it is true that the last thing a narcissist wants to face is his guilt, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have any: it merely means he works hard to keep it unconscious, from which it returns in a myriad of disguised self-sabotaging and self-tormenting ways.

As insightful as are his insights into unconscious guilt, Freud’s analysis is flawed by his failure to distinguish the two fundamentally different types of guilt

subsequently differentiated by Melanie Klein and her co-workers: the punitive or *persecutory* guilt inflicted by both Freud's post-oedipal and Klein's pre-genital superego on the one hand, and on the other the *reparative* guilt that stems from what I recognize as a conscience quite distinct from the superego. In my view, Freud's merging of conscience into the superego (in *The Ego and the Id*, 1923) is regrettable: whereas the superego is about punishment fuelled by aggression, mostly turned on the self though often righteously displaced outwards onto scapegoats, conscience is about caring, both for others and one's true self—caring fuelled by attachment and love. Whereas persecutory or punitive guilt is generated by the superego, reparative guilt is generated by conscience. The superego wants to beat, the conscience to heal. If I injure someone and while he bleeds I self-flagellate, that is punitive guilt; but if I put down my cat-o'-nine tails and reach for my first-aid kit and start bandaging, that is reparative guilt. Those naïve psychologists who think guilt is something we need to rid ourselves of have only persecutory guilt in mind. But a good deal of our confusion in this area is due to the pseudo-moral superego's need to masquerade as the conscience. In order to unmask this impostor we need only heed the following advice: "By their fruits ye shall know them" (*Matthew 7:20*). The fruits of the superego are humiliation and pain, while those of conscience are forgiveness and reparative love.

Due to the fact that Freud himself was not alert to this distinction, he failed to see that while in civilization we need less persecutory guilt we are in need of a great deal more reparative guilt; we need less superego and more conscience. Whereas the conscience is grounded in our primate heritage, our innate attachment tendencies and capacities, and in our earliest nurturing experiences, the superego, as Klein understood, is grounded in pregenital introjection of the persecutory part-object (the so-called bad breast), together with later turning of aggression away from the oedipal rivals back against the ego, to which is then added internalization of (often immoral) cultural values via the parents' superegos. Despite his clinical awareness of its sadism, Freud's contrary

association of the superego with the prosocial and the moral has made it difficult for us to keep its destructiveness clearly in mind, including the antisocial ideologies (the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, childism, etc.) we internalize in socialization (which, in this respect, might well be thought of as “antisocial-ization”).

It is worth noting in this connection that the terrorists responsible for the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre were superego-driven ideologues more than id-driven psychopaths—not unlike the Nazi doctors most of whom, as Robert Lifton discovered, were racist ideologues, no more psychopathic than Truman and those who dropped bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the so-called “counter-terrorists” currently waging our terroristic “war on terror.” One of the main reasons that in my recent book I recommend distinguishing the superego from conscience is that while the superego plays a central role in the cycle of violence wherein the formerly terrorized come to terrorize others, the conscience represents our only hope of transcending it.

Neurotic sufferers are self-tormentors, even when their self-torture has its roots in trauma and the more or less unconscious rage arising from it. Victims of abuse usually end up as abusers, directing their unconscious rage at themselves and often enough also at others. Male violence against women is, in my view, grounded in deep unconscious resentment and rage toward our first nurturer, first frustrator, and first dominator—still today, most often the mother. (As a child, I assume, Mr. Ghomeshi was hurt; but instead of working through his pain in analytic therapy he appears to have been passing it on to his scapegoats.) In the all-too-present historical cycle of violence we witness victimized people unconsciously imposing their own victimization upon others and in this way bringing further victimization upon themselves. Wilfred Bion writes of the “bizarre objects” created when the bad object is attacked and fragments proliferate into a multitude of bad objects—as in those myths and horror films in which when you

chop off the monster's head it immediately grows five more. In seeking to destroy terrorism we create many more terrorists, not least by becoming terrorists ourselves.

In order to understand how victims come to victimize themselves and others the concept of the superego is essential. Trauma generates rage that for a variety of reasons is turned on the self in the form of the superego. As we have seen, the superego is formed through identification with the aggressors; instead of retaliating against them I identify with them and turn my aggression against myself. Later, as a defence against self-victimization, I may identify with my persecutory superego and victimize (scapegoat) others in my place. Through projection these others come to embody my own aggression, a projection aided by evidence of *their* aggression, including that which mine has provoked in them. In this way the cycle of violence is perpetuated.

It is becoming ever clearer that there is only one way out: this is for victims to recognize the aggressor in themselves and to seek to disarm and make peace with the enemy inside, rather than continuing to project, provoke, and find it in the other and thus perpetuate rather than breach the vicious cycle. While Freud is right to point to the neurotic consequences of the build-up of punitive guilt due to repression of aggression and its turning against the self (superego), he fails to understand that authentic morality (conscience) is not something we learn from society but something that derives from both our primate heritage and our earliest experiences of life-giving nurturance that establish our need to nurture others as we ourselves have been nurtured. Conscience not only calls us to reject the immoral superego and the false societal values comprising it, it requires us to recognize that "the enemy is us." As G.K. Chesterton put the point:

No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he's realized how much right he has to all this talk about 'criminals,' as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles

away; till he's got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skills; till he's squeezed out the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat (*The Secret of Father Brown*).

But achieving recognition of my inner Nazi (or, to vary the metaphor, my inner ISIS executioner) is excruciatingly painful, especially if I am a former victim of such aggressors with whom I have become unconsciously identified. I swore I would never tease or corporally punish my son the way my father occasionally did to me; but then, to my shame, I found myself teasing him. Once when he was about ten I asked him to help me load the car. As he turned away and told me to “fuck off,” to my shame I observed my foot heading in the direction of his behind. Recognizing and struggling to overcome the inner aggressor instead of projecting it outwards onto enemies is a “crucifying” experience that can sometimes happen on the individual level in the crucible of a deep psychoanalytic process. In Kleinian terms this is advance from the paranoid-schizoid to the reparative position.

Whereas for Freud the central human problem is the conflict *between* mind and body, the uniquely human and the animal in man—that is, between a socialized ego-superego and a primitive, ultimately animal id—for Melanie Klein the conflict is one *within* the human mind and heart between our love and our hate, our constructive and our destructive inclinations. In transcending Freud’s centaur model of man Klein was following out the implications of Freud’s own thinking more consistently than he himself managed to do. It was, after all, Freud himself who in 1920 altered his earlier psychobiological theory of drives into his final dualistic drive theory of *Eros* vs. *Thanatos*, the life drive vs. the death drive. Klein’s achievement was that while manifestly adhering to Freud’s concepts she came to treat the life and death “drives” as, to all intents and purposes, entirely psychological and emotional motives or passions of love on the one hand and hate on the other. In other words, whereas Freud himself was never able to



entirely transcend material in favour of immaterial or *psychic reality*, Melanie Klein managed to do so, transcending psycho-biology in favour of psychoanalytic psychology.

Over time and with much testing analysands can sometimes develop sufficient trust and respect for their analysts that the latter are finally able to confront them in ways that are not experienced as a superego attack, or that cause them to attack themselves, but that instead evoke their conscience. Freud discovered the role of the transference in therapy. Subsequent analysts elaborated the role of empathy, “holding” and “containing” in the healing process. Through such therapeutic provision patients can be helped to achieve developmental milestones previously unattained. But it is one thing to help individuals advance beyond the narcissistic, paranoid-schizoid position to the reparative position, to develop the capacity for concern, and then to work through the neurotic symptoms and inhibitions accompanying that advance, quite another to achieve such progress on the collective level. For on the collective level the sort of intense, tried and true bond between therapist and patient that provides the context in which such healing can occur is largely absent.

As Fred Alford has explained, whereas in small groups where face-to-face contact occurs one can encounter and be affected by the other, in larger, more anonymous groups such feedback is unavailable. Alford points out how in large groups personal identity is less supported and anxiety is generated. For these and other reasons it is hard for people to find in large group settings the kind of responsiveness that facilitates personal growth and, as a result, regression rather than progression all too frequently occurs. The trouble with abstract substitutes for the therapist, such as a loving and forgiving God for believers, or a trusted theory of history providing political guidance, is that such abstractions are precisely that—abstractions—rather than living, breathing others with the heart and the conscience to confront. Such abstract others are not really “other” and

can as easily support destructiveness as personal growth. They can easily come to represent not the conscience but the superego which, in any case, frequently seeks to masquerade as and even usurp the role of conscience, even though it is driven by hate rather than love. When Abraham heard the voice of "God" telling him to sacrifice Isaac, this I submit was the superego, or the Devil, not the still small voice of conscience.

Feeling that my trusted therapist is fundamentally on my side sometimes allows me (eventually) to tolerate him being "other," thinking differently, even confronting my darkness. An abstract significant other, such as God or my theory of the laws of historical development, is as likely to feed my madness as it is to help me overcome it. Occasionally an admired and trusted leader may earn sufficient authority to appeal to conscience and persuade people to forebear from and harness their destructiveness. But to do so is to risk becoming its target and getting crucified in the process.