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*Four Contributions to the Theory of the Superego, Guilt and Conscience*

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Eli Sagan. *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil*. New York: Basic Books, 1988. 270 pp. (paper). ISBN 0-465-02572-2

Herman Westerink. *A Dark Trace: Sigmund Freud on the Sense of Guilt*. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2009. Authorized translation from the Dutch language edition published by Uitgeverij Boom, Amsterdam (The Netherlands), 2005. 319 pp. (cloth). ISBN 978-90-5867-754-9

Bernard Barnett. *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience*. Psychoanalytic Ideas Series, edited by I. Wise & P. Williams. Foreword by M. Parsons. London: The Institute of Psychoanalysis and Karnac Books, 2007. 173 pp. (paper). ISBN 978-1-85575-983-1

Annie Reiner. *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind*. Foreword by James Grotstein. London: Karnac Books, 2009. 155 pp. (paper). ISBN 978-1-85575-705-9

After decades of neglect of what Freud (1933) himself regarded as “the preferred field of work for psychoanalysis,” namely “The problems which the unconscious sense of guilt has opened up, its connections with morality, education, crime and delinquency ...” (p. 61), in favor of a preoccupation with narcissism, shame, self, relatedness and, most recently, the neurological foundations of mind, issues concerning the superego, guilt and conscience appear to be returning from repression. No doubt this “comeback” amounts to a reflection in psychoanalysis of a shift in the wider culture: the “culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1979) got us into hot water. What three decades ago Rangell (1980) described in *The Mind of Watergate* as the “syndrome of the compromise of integrity” led eventually to the 2008 crisis of “casino capitalism.” It’s about time we began re-thinking the psychoanalytic theory of morality. These issues are central to the four related, yet quite different studies reviewed here.

In his neglected classic, *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil* (1988), the psychoanalytic sociologist Eli Sagan elaborated a theory of conscience and superego as distinct psychic functions developing in different ways and at different times. Whereas Freud viewed conscience as one of the three functions of the superego (the others being self-observation and maintenance of the ego ideal) and

saw it as arising around five years of age with the shattering of the Oedipus complex due to fear of castration by the rival, Sagan posited a preoedipal origin of conscience grounded in the infant's love for and identification with the primary nurturer.

Although Klein is not central to Sagan's theorizing, her work supports his general argument. Kleinians have long distinguished persecutory guilt, which amounts to self-torment, from depressive guilt which instead of being all about the self (as in shame and self persecution) is about caring for and making reparation to the other. The dating of the move from the paranoid-schizoid and narcissistic position into the depressive position and the capacity for concern is controversial, but there is no doubt that conscience, as depressive position concern for the other, arises far earlier than the Freudian superego. The Kleinian view, like Sagan's, is now supported by empirical infant research on "the moral life of babies" (Bloom 2010) that clearly indicates the pre-oedipal roots of moral functioning. As Sagan pointed out, it has long been difficult to comprehend how a mental function (the superego) formed from aggression turned back against the self under the threat of castration and operating in Freud's (1930) words "like a garrison in a conquered city" (p. 123) could be the seat of conscientious concern for others. For Sagan, whereas the superego is fueled by hate, the conscience is grounded in attachment and love.

Sagan illustrates the distinction between conscience and superego citing Mark Twain's (1885) depiction of "Huck's dilemma": his superego demands that he turn his runaway slave companion Jim in to the authorities, while his conscience requires him to protect his friend. While Freud understood that in addition to being about aggression turned against the self the superego is formed through internalization of the culture, he failed to fully appreciate the fact that the culture that is internalized has generally been racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc. Drawing on Lifton's (1986) work on the Nazi doctors, Sagan points out that they were, for the most part, not psychopaths but severely misguided idealists: they did their work, as Sagan would say, "under the banner of the superego," as did those who labored in "the killing fields" under the Khmer Rouge, and as do most terrorists. As I have argued elsewhere (Carveth 2010), psychoanalysts have been so inclined to find the roots of human destructiveness in the id, the alleged "beast" in man, that we have grossly failed to recognize its roots in the uniquely human superego. A rebel cries: "Is this humanity? The government are like animals!" To which I reply: "Is this animality? The government are like humans!"

In light of our common experience of “Huck’s dilemma,” the conflict between our reactionary, authoritarian and sadistic superego and our progressive, humanistic conscience, we would do well to recall that Franz Alexander (1925) defined the goal of psychoanalysis as *elimination of the superego*:

The super-ego, therefore, is an anachronism in the mind. It has lagged behind the rapid development of civilized conditions, in the sense that its automatic, inflexible mode of function causes the mental system continually to come into conflict with the outer world. This is the teleological basis for the development of a new science, that of psycho-analysis, which, be it said, does not attempt to modify the environment but, instead, the mental system itself, in order to render it more capable of fresh adaptations to its own instincts. This task is carried out by limiting the sphere of activity of the automatically-functioning super-ego, and transferring its role to the conscious ego (p. 25).

Two years later, Ferenczi (1927) agreed: “Only a complete dissolution of the super-ego can bring about a radical cure” (p. 100). But confusing the superego with conscience, most psychoanalysts feared elimination of the former would entail destruction of the latter and amount to the promotion of psychopathy and so called for the modification and maturation of the superego instead of its elimination and replacement by conscience.

Against the immoral moralism of the superego, Alexander and Ferenczi, like Bion (1962) more recently, grounded true morality in *thinking*. They viewed conscience as a rational ego function in which one thinks through the consequences of one’s actions for oneself and others. We might formulate their dictum as: “Where superego was, there ego shall come to be.” In contrast to such rationalism, Sagan recognized that conscience arises not from *reason* but from *feeling*, from what Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1774) called “pity”—sympathy or fellow-feeling:

There is besides another principle that has escaped Hobbes, and which, having been given to man to moderate, on certain occasions, the blind and impetuous sallies of self-love, or the desire of self-preservation previous to the appearance of that passion, allays the ardour, with

which he naturally pursues his private welfare, by an innate abhorrence to see beings suffer that resemble him. I shall not surely be contradicted, in granting to man the only natural virtue, which the most passionate detractor of human virtues could not deny him, I mean that of pity, a disposition suitable to creatures weak as we are, and liable to so many evils; a virtue so much the more universal, and withal useful to man, as it takes place in him of all manner of reflection; and so natural, that the beasts themselves sometimes give evident signs of it. Not to speak of the tenderness of mothers for their young; and of the dangers they face to screen them from danger ... (Rousseau, 1754, chapter 2).

Given that science is *descriptive* not *prescriptive* and that “one cannot deduce an *ought* from an *is*” (the fact/value disjunction), we recognize with Rousseau and Pascal (1669) that “the heart has reasons that reason cannot know” (Section 4). Conscience is fundamentally grounded in non-rational, emotional processes of attachment, sympathy, concern and love. For Sagan, whereas the superego arises through *identification with the aggressor* and operates essentially in accordance with the talion law of revenge (“an eye for an eye”), conscience arises through *identification with the nurturer* and operates through an analogous reciprocity, only one in which one feels called upon to return love for love received.

Herman Westerink’s *A Dark Trace: Sigmund Freud on the Sense of Guilt* seeks to offer an account of Freud’s evolving conceptualization of the sense of guilt. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Carveth 2011), although it does not claim to do more than trace “a dark trace” in Freud’s work, it seems odd to read a contemporary publication that might well have been written in the 1940s. The book manages to go slightly beyond Freud’s own work on the sense of guilt, briefly addressing in the penultimate chapter the controversies stimulated by Melanie Klein, Karen Horney and others surrounding the pre-oedipal phase, the role of the mother and the psychology of women. But over five decades have passed since these controversies took place and many important contributions to this subject, such as Sagan’s, are entirely neglected here.

Greater familiarity with the wider literature in the field might have spared the author some embarrassment. For example, ignoring the extensive critical literature pertaining to Freud's "Dora" case, Westerink describes it as "a vivid portrait of a complicated, passionate relationship in a decent, bourgeois environment," when "decent" is about the last word one would want to use to describe Dora's family situation in which her father is attempting to bribe the husband of the woman with whom he is having an adulterous affair by offering him his daughter, an attempted "swap" with which Freud implicitly colludes, considering her objections to the arrangement symptoms of hysterical sexual inhibition. It is not clear whether the many textual problems that plague Westerink's book are the fault of the translators, the proofreaders, or the author.

Whereas Westerink, a professor of practical theology and psychology of religion, approaches his subject from the standpoint of a scholar outside the psychoanalytic profession, Bernard Barnett is a training analyst and child analyst in the British Institute, a member of the Independent or Middle Group, and Director of the Squiggle Foundation. *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience* provides a good introductory overview of the contributions not only of Freud but also of Klein, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Bion and many others in this area and does so from the standpoint of one who has struggled clinically with the issues at hand. Barnett's discussion of the issues of guilt, superego and conscience is enhanced by case illustrations from his own practice and by recurrent reference to characters and themes drawn from George Eliot's classic novel, *Daniel Deronda*.

Although neglectful of the American literature, Barnett offers an even-handed survey, explanation and illustration of central concepts in the field that will be useful for graduate students and beginning candidates in analytic training. But his book is in no way a critical, penetrating or original study. In fact the first note of criticism doesn't appear until some forty pages into the text, at a point where it can hardly be avoided in favor of simple exposition in that Freud's infamous theory of the defective female superego is being reviewed. Despite distinguishing conscience and superego in the subtitle of his book in contrast to Freud who treated them as largely synonymous, Barnett fails to face, think through and elaborate clearly upon the distinction. In places he seems to consider conscience as a conscious moral function in contrast to

the superego as the unconscious conscience, but he does not clearly spell this out nor adhere to it consistently. In my view this is just as well since the voice of conscience, like that of the superego, may be repressed. Barnett makes no reference to Sagan's differentiation of the superego as grounded in identification with the aggressor and fueled by aggression from the conscience grounded in identification with the early nurturer and motivated by attachment and love.

It can only be the socially uncritical, bourgeois attitudes of mainstream psychoanalysis that account for the fact that in the course of discussing the role of internalization in superego formation Barnett, like most psychoanalysts, is largely blind to what should be obvious: the superego will inevitably function as the agent of cultural ideology—of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and all the others forms of domination and immorality pervading the culture—at least to the extent that it is not opposed by a conscience having some degree of cultural autonomy. In the course of discussing the superego as a mischief maker, the role of the severe superego in psychopathology, Barnett mentions identification with the punitive superego rationalizing aggression toward the other, the scapegoat, unto whom the subject's guilt has been projected. But he tends to see the severe or sadistic superego as entailing the “corruption of the superego systems ... (i.e., a reversal of normal civilized values) ...” (p. 116), whereas history provides plenty of evidence that the socially normal superego is itself both corrupt (i.e., sexist, classist, etc.) and tyrannical, while a humane and loving conscience is the exception rather than the rule. Freud himself, as we know, thought much of what appears as “moral” behavior is pseudo-moral, grounded in social anxiety rather than genuinely felt values: “The stars are indeed magnificent, but as regards conscience God has done an uneven and careless piece of work, for a large majority of men have brought along with them only a modest amount of it or scarcely enough to be worth mentioning” (Freud, 1933, p. 60).

Barnett, like most analysts, views the developmental transformation of the primitive, harsh superego into a more humane and reasonable conscience as a process of superego modification analogous to the sort of piecemeal social reform preferred by liberals. But, as we have seen, the matter may be conceptualized in revolutionary terms, not as one of modification but *elimination* of the superego altogether. But whereas Alexander and Ferenczi sought to replace the superego with the rational ego, viewing *thinking* as the foundation of moral function, Pascal, Rousseau and Sagan reject such rationalism, understanding that reason cannot specify value judgment. They recognize the foundation of conscience in

feelings of empathic and sympathetic identification with the other grounded in early identification with the nurturer. When the superego (identification with the aggressor) is deconstructed, it can no longer drown out the voice of conscience (identification with the nurturer). For Sagan, Freud's deficient understanding of the roots of conscience arises from his deficient psychology of women; more specifically his almost phobic theoretical flight forward to the oedipal and away from the overwhelming (divine and demonic) pre-oedipal maternal imago (Dinnerstein, 1976).

Oddly, in the course of his discussion of "blind obedience" among the Nazis, Barnett makes no reference to the classic studies on obedience by Milgram (1963) that experimentally validate Freud's (1921) concept of the usurpation of individual conscience by an authoritative leader (*führer*). Barnett's easy use of terms such as "normal" and "healthy" to describe the type of superego he values, and "criminal" for the type he devalues, reflects little more than uncritical bourgeois ideology. Despite his useful discussion of the SS, Lifton's (1986) work on the Nazi doctors and the mechanisms of "psychic numbing" and "doubling" that enabled them to split off an "Auschwitz self" from the self they resumed at home, Barnett does not fully grasp the fact that their abominable work was enabled and driven by the superego. The tendency to find the roots of evil in the id, rather than the superego, is deeply ingrained in psychoanalytic thought. But as a survivor friend of Lifton's (1986, p. 5) remarked: "It is demonic that they were not demonic!" That is, it is horrifying that they were for the most part not id-driven psychopaths but superego-driven ideologists. It is not as if Barnett is oblivious to the role of the superego in such behavior, but only that he views it as a "criminal" or "pathological" superego, which allows him to continue to think that "in health" the "normal" superego is humane and so to dodge the uncomfortable truth that *normally* the superego is not humane, which is why it comes into conflict with the conscience, provided the conscience can make itself heard over the ideological clamor of the superego.

Barnett offers a useful discussion of the superego dynamics of Holocaust survivors and the transmission of their pathologies to the next generation. To his credit, in the final chapter he discusses a range of post-Freudian approaches, reviewing the work of Klein, Winnicott, Fairbairn (on the so-called "moral defense") and Bion, but also that of such thinkers as Foucault, Kristeva, Zygmunt Bauman and Slavoj Žižek. As one who clearly grasps the pathology of the normal superego, Žižek sees advanced

consumer capitalism as fuelling our narcissism and undermining our freedom, not by commanding us to work, but rather by insisting that we “Enjoy!”

Like Barnett, Annie Reiner is a practicing psychoanalyst, a former student of Bion’s, and an associate faculty member of the Psychoanalytic Center of California in Los Angeles. James Grotstein writes a useful “Foreword” to her book in which he praises what he sees as the originality of her distinction between the superego and the conscience and her view of their separate lines of development. There is no recognition by either Grotstein or Reiner of Eli Sagan’s development of this very distinction some two decades earlier. Unlike Sagan who, like Klein and Winnicott, grounds conscience (as distinct from the critical superego) in early feelings of love and concern rather than in reason, Reiner follows Bion in finding the basis for conscientious development beyond the rigid, pseudo-moral “Super-ego” in *thinking*. For such thinking to occur it is necessary, she believes, for the subject to experience a “psychological birth” beyond the merely physical one, a “resurrection” of the true self that has early on been split off in favor of various degrees of false self development due to virtually universal deficiencies of containment on the part of the early nurturers.

Such metaphors of “second birth” and “resurrection” suggest the author’s unfortunate embrace of a type of “spirituality” that she, like Symington (1994) and others—and I freely admit that I myself have been guilty of this—is at pains to distinguish from the conventional forms of religiosity she devalues. In her view there is false, literalistic religion and there is true, sophisticated spirituality. She goes so far as to cite Nietzsche’s notion of the “Superman”—Grotstein prefers “Overman” and “Higher Man” (no “Higher Woman”?)—and “his” advance “beyond good and evil” as conventionally defined (the superego’s pseudo-morality) toward the more highly evolved, “authentic” spirituality of those special people (mystics, messiahs, etc.) who have managed to cast off their false selves and experience a “transformation in O,” “O” being defined as “ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself” (Bion 1970, p. 25).

It is easy enough for theologians and other intellectuals to engage in this, not so subtly self-congratulatory sort of talk in which the “inner truth” of religion, demythologized and interpreted in



existential and psychoanalytic terms, is distinguished from its “falsely reified and concretized forms,” from the “common man’s” magical and literal faith. But in my view the arrogance accompanying and informing the distinction is itself a symptom of the very false self development the “Higher Man” prides himself on overcoming. Freud (1927) understood and acutely diagnosed the self-deception involved in this maneuver:

In reality these are only attempts at pretending to oneself or to other people that one is still firmly attached to religion, when one has long since cut oneself loose from it. Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanour. Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense. They give the name of “God” to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so they can pose before all the world as deists, as believers in God, and they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding that their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines (p. 31).

Three years later, he added: “It is ... humiliating to discover how large a number of people living today, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions. One would like to mix among the ranks of the believers in order to meet these philosophers, who think they can rescue the God of religion by replacing him by an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle, and to address them with the warning words: ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!’” (Freud, 1930, p. 73).

No one disputes the difference between concrete, magical and fundamentalist forms of faith, on the one hand, and demythologized, “spiritual,” existentialist and/or psychoanalytic interpretations of religion as metaphor referring to “the absolute” or “the godhead” or “O,” on the other. It is necessary, however, to see this maneuver for what it is: only incomplete “psychological birth” beyond the false self mires one in such idolizing, paranoid-schizoid retreats from the depressive position and in such grandiose talk of “the absolute,” “the godhead,” “Higher Men,” “mystics” and “messiahs.” Regrettably, in addition to following Bion in his mysticism of “O,”

Reiner is uncritical of his peculiar type of neo-platonic rationalism that posits “the thought without a thinker” (Reiner, p. 8). Is “the proto-mental realm,” the place where un-thought thoughts patiently await the arrival of a thinker to think them, to all intents and purposes “the mind of God”?

Reiner posits that it is through a process of spiritual development in which the false self is overcome and the true self resurrected that the subject may acquire the capacity to think and to encounter and bear truth and so develop a maturing conscience. In this view, authentic conscience (as distinct from superego) is a spiritual attainment of one who evolves “beyond good and evil.” While Eli Sagan also sees the necessity to distinguish conscience from superego, his view of the matter, like Melanie Klein’s, is developed entirely in secular humanist and psychological terms. Following both Klein and Sagan we can say that while conscience does develop into more complex and sophisticated forms as maturation occurs, it is there virtually from the beginning in the infant’s simple preference for pleasure (good) over pain (bad) and its love for the nurturing good part-object breast and, later, good whole-object mother. Harold Searles (1975) pointed out that infants will put their own needs and development on the back burner and devote themselves to attempting to cure their depressed or anxious mothers—not merely out of a need to get her to straighten up and fly right so as to provide the mothering they need, or a need to make reparation to her for aggressive feelings and phantasies, but also out of sheer dumb love and the simple desire to make her happy.

For Sagan, conscience is grounded in the infant’s love for the mother who has loved and nurtured it and in its wish to love her back. We can expect to find the mature operation of such conscience not in the conceits of “spirituality,” but in moral and political concern and commitment to oppose and remedy the evils and injustices of the world. Despite the Enlightenment atheism Sagan shares with Freud, his perspective is congruent with that element of the Christian outlook that locates goodness in a peasant babe in a manger before whom sophisticated philosopher-kings (“Higher Men”) fall on their knees. Christianity was seldom surprised to find the demonic among sophisticated “thinkers,” nor simple goodness in the “Holy Fool.”

While Reiner fails to acknowledge Sagan’s priority, she implicitly validates his distinction between superego and conscience. In addition, she advances our understanding by insightfully applying Winnicott’s (1960) true self / false self theory, correctly associating conscience with true

self development and recognizing, with Fairbairn (1952), how this is almost universally derailed for, as Reiner puts it, “that which we generally consider to be a ‘good-enough mother’ may not be good enough” (p. 125). Through the process Fairbairn called “the moral defense” the inadequately contained and nurtured child blames itself for the parental failures since “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil” (Fairbairn, p. 66; quoted by Reiner, p. 69). This defense lays the basis for major moral confusion: what is bad is good and what is good is bad; what is true is false and what is false is true. One has now lost one’s existential compass.

Feelings arising from the true self, especially aggression in reaction to parental failure, are split off; the unconscious aggression fuels the hostile superego. But whereas Reiner thinks that in these circumstances conscience, like the true self, fails to develop, I think it is repressed but still in existence and generates an existentially valid sense of guilt distinct from that generated by the superego: an existential guilt, if you will; a guilt for failing to be one’s self, for failing to *be*, and for being false. One of the great strengths of Reiner’s book is the extensive, detailed and convincing case material she provides which, since she is a talented and lucid writer, wonderfully demonstrates both her clinical acumen and the validity of a good deal of her thinking. This is an important book; it contains false notes—all that “spirituality”—but also a great deal of truth.

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