

*The Immoral Superego:  
Conscience as the Fourth Element in the Structural Theory of the Mind*

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*Abstract*

I have argued (Carveth, 2013) that, coinciding with the rise of neo-liberalism and the culture of narcissism, psychoanalytic concern with problems of guilt and the superego was displaced in favour of a range of other preoccupations. Today issues of conscience appear to be returning from repression both in society at large and in psychoanalysis, but our theory in this area is deficient in many respects. We have largely identified the superego with the moral and the id with the immoral, thus downplaying the frequent immorality of the superego and the morality of the id. We have implicitly succumbed to a moral relativism oblivious to the existence of a conscience capable of judging both society and the superego it shapes. If we are to live up to our claim to be “*the* psychology of the innermost mental processes of man in conflict” (Kris, 1938, p. 140), we need to recognize conflict between superego and conscience—and conscience itself as the fourth element of the structural theory of the mind.

For decades 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), has been neglected in favor of a preoccupation with shame, narcissism, self, relatedness, intersubjectivity and, most recently, the neurological foundations of mind. Prior to the 1960s, psychoanalysts viewed superego analysis as central to the analytic process. Some analysts never lost sight of Freudian and Kleinian insight into the dynamics of guilt and self-punishment, but I think it is fair to say that many of the newer psychoanalytic approaches that came to prominence in the 1970s and 80s tended to downplay intrapsychic conflict in favor of an emphasis upon trauma, deprivation, abuse, and neglect by caretakers, that is, the ways in which we are more injured than injurious.

By the late 1950s, Sandler (1960) had already noticed that in the indexing of cases at the Hampstead clinic there was a “tendency to veer away from the conceptualization of material in superego terms;” he was wondering why “therapists have preferred to sort their clinical material in terms of object relationships, ego activities, and the transference, rather than in terms of the participation of the superego” (p. 129). Two decades later, Arlow (1982) observed that “[S]uperego function has been shunted to one side by the current preoccupation with the persistence of the regressive reactivation of archaic idealizations” (p. 230) and that “[T]he concept superego itself rarely appears as the central topic of a clinical or theoretical contribution” (p. 229). Würmser (1998) referred to the superego as the “sleeping giant” of contemporary psychoanalysis.

While the giant slept, having been anaesthetized in both society at large and the psychoanalytic thinking it encouraged, Thatcher, Reagan, Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, Ayn Rand, Alan Greenspan, and a host of others laid the foundations for the dismantlement of the welfare state and, with the avid assistance of the “banksters” and “fraudsters” of Wall Street and “the City,” prepared the ground for the economic crisis of 2007-8. I think it was no accident that the flight from guilt in psychoanalytic thought coincided with the shift from productive industrial to consumer capitalism, the emergence of what Christopher Lasch (1979) called the “culture of narcissism,” and the rise of neo-liberalism or market fundamentalism. *Ironically, the psychoanalytic preoccupation in the 1970s and 80s with narcissistic characters incapable of bearing guilt coincided with a flight from guilt in psychoanalysis itself.* In several streams of psychoanalytic thought the central role of guilt evasion in pathological narcissism was obscured—an instance of what Russell Jacoby (1975) referred to as the “social amnesia” in which “society remembers less and less faster and faster” and in which “the sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion” (p. 1).

Recently issues concerning the superego, guilt, and conscience appear to be returning from repression. Coinciding with the emergence of the Occupy movement and whistleblowers such as Assange, Manning and Snowden, psychoanalytic books and

articles have begun to appear with titles such as *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience* (Barnett, 2007); *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Morality* (Hughes, 2008); *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind* (Reiner, 2009); *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience* (Carveth, 2013); “Reflections on the absence of morality in psychoanalytic theory” (Frattaroli, 2013); and *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, and Management* (Akhtar, Ed., 2013). No doubt this “comeback” amounts to a reflection in psychoanalysis of a shift in the wider culture: the culture of narcissism 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.”

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Psychiatrist and Ret. Navy Captain Wm. Nash (2012) recently reported on the role of what he calls "moral injury" in a common type of PTSD suffered by returning soldiers who in obedience to a superego shaped by parental and military authority committed unconscionable acts for which they are now unable to forgive themselves. Freud's (1923) decision to incorporate conscience and the ego-ideal into the superego has prevented us from conceptualizing such conflict as between the superego and the conscience. Instead we have been forced to think of it as *intrasystemic* conflict within the superego. Since, according to Freud (1940), the superego “represents more than anything the cultural past” (p. 205), we have tended to conceptualize inner moral conflict either as between incompatible internalized value-orientations, or between internalized values and incompatible, often *antisocial*, sexual and aggressive impulses arising from the id. We have not been blind to the fact that sometimes what we have been *taught* does not correspond with what we *feel* or *desire* but we have focused on situations in which what we have been taught is moral while what we feel or desire is immoral or antisocial, and we have mostly ignored situations in which what we have been taught is immoral while what we feel or desire is moral, composed of *prosocial* feelings derived from our attachments and libidinal object relations.

In his classic study, *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil*, Eli Sagan (1988) cites Mark Twain's (1885, chapter 31) depiction of "Huck's Dilemma" to illuminate our bias: while the racist superego Huck has internalized from his culture demands that he turn his runaway slave companion, Jim, in to the authorities, his conscience requires him to protect the friend he loves. After an agonizing mental struggle, Huck finally decides conscientiously to defy his superego and tears up the letter informing on his friend:

But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. ... I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:  
"All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.

Huck's conflict is between a moral imperative internalized from a racist society and a sense of obligation derived from feelings of attachment and love. Note that Huck fails to come up with a "compromise-formation." Like the liberalism upon which it draws, psychoanalysis has been more than half in love with this idea; but sometimes there are unavoidable forks in the road where no compromise is possible. Here, as Kierkegaard (1843) knew, it is a matter of *Either/Or* and recognizing this fact does not make one guilty of "splitting."

In *Les Misérables* (Volume Five, Book Fourth, "Javert Derailed"), Victor Hugo (1862) offers a moving illustration of the conflict between superego and conscience. The policeman/superego, Javert, comes finally to be touched by conscience, discovering "that one cherishes beneath one's breast of bronze something absurd and disobedient which almost resembles a heart!" As a result, "A whole new world was dawning on his soul: kindness accepted and repaid, devotion, mercy, indulgence, violences committed by pity on austerity, respect for persons, no more definitive condemnation, no more conviction, the possibility of a tear in the eye of the law." Confronted with the "terrible rising of an unknown moral sun," Javert, who until now has been entirely identified with the superego, chooses suicide. It is true that *Huckleberry Finn* and *Les Misérables* are

literature rather than life, but then so is *Oedipus Rex*. (See clinical vignettes further down).

While internal moral conflict can involve incompatible internalized values (e.g., sometimes it is unkind to tell the truth), and while internalized moral values may certainly conflict with antisocial id impulses, sometimes internalizations conflict with prosocial feelings and impulses deriving from libidinal attachments. And sometimes we have conflicting attachments. But what I want to emphasize is that *in our thinking about conflict between superego and id, we have had mostly the antisocial (incestuous and aggressive) id and mostly the prosocial superego in mind, neglecting both the antisocial superego and the prosocial id.*

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Another important thing to notice about Huck's dilemma is that it does not involve an abnormal, pathological, or archaic superego but a normal, albeit a racist, one. Until fairly recently a homophobic, heterosexist superego was normative in psychoanalytic circles and for years "under the banner of the superego" we rejected gay applicants for training. Many of us now think that superego was immoral. Although we have understood the superego as both aggression turned back against the self and values internalized from parents and society, we have devoted little attention to the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, childism (Young-Bruehl, 2012), possessive individualism, commodity fetishism, and so on, that characterize the normal, unconscionable superego. Where we have seen the immorality and destructiveness of the superego at all, we have attributed it to an "abnormal" or "pathological" superego, or to "superego lacunae," thus resisting recognizing the superego as a pathologically normal, that is, a "normopathic" phenomenon (Hantman, 2008).

Despite Freud's awareness of the role of the sadistic superego in psychopathology and his overall view of it as a hostile and destructive inner force that at times may even amount to "a pure culture of the death instinct" (Freud, 1923, p. 52), and despite his resultant call

for its clinical “demolition” (Freud, 1940, p. 180), in his sociological writings he contradictorily represented it as a *prosocial* force saving civilization from the antisocial forces of the beastly id. Freud saw the drives as arising from a somatic source, from the animal aspect of our nature. While transcending common sense in many respects, here Freud succumbed to it, projecting our uniquely human destructiveness onto the beasts and the animal in man, when animals are seldom beastly, at least not in the ways humans often are (Carveth, 2012). Thanks to the work of Robert J. Lifton (1986) on *The Nazi Doctors*, whom he shows were not for the most part psychopaths but superego-driven, racist ideologues, and similar studies of terrorism, “soul-murder,” and other forms of human destructiveness, we are finally forced to recognize the roots of human evil in the superego and the ego, not merely or even primarily in the id. Those responsible for the death camps, like those responsible for dropping an atom bomb on Hiroshima, and then again on Nagasaki—without giving the Japanese a chance to observe a test on an uninhabited island—were not for the most part psychopathic demons but superego-driven “do-gooders” who employed sophisticated ego function in the service of mass murder. *In tending to think of conflict as between a moral superego and an immoral id, we have tended to overlook both the immorality of the superego and the morality of the id.*

We have suffered from a similarly contradictory attitude toward guilt, sometimes seeing it as sadism turned against the self and at others as a sign of advance toward a more mature level of psychic development (Ury, 1998). This contradiction was finally resolved when Klein and her co-workers (Grinberg, 1964) differentiated *persecutory* guilt (including shame) on the one hand, and *depressive* or *reparative* guilt, Winnicott’s (1963) “capacity for concern,” on the other. In this light we are finally able to see that while in civilization we need less of the former (persecutory guilt—what I call superego) we need more of the latter (reparative guilt—what I call conscience). Because he failed to distinguish these two fundamentally different types of guilt, Freud also failed to grasp the role of persecutory guilt (superego) as a *defense* against depressive guilt (conscience). People often prefer orgies of self-punishment to acknowledging wrongdoing, bearing depressive guilt or concern, and foregoing masochism in favor of conscientious, reparative activity.

Following that side of Freud's (1940) clinical thinking that called for "the slow demolition of the hostile superego" (p. 180), Ferenczi (1928 [1927]) wrote: "Only a complete dissolution of the super-ego can bring about a radical cure" (p. 100). In this connection, Theodor Adorno (1966) wrote: "A critique of the super-ego would have to turn into one of the society that produces the superego; if psychoanalysts stand mute here, they accommodate the ruling norm" (p. 274). Unlike Ferenczi himself, who was both a political and a psychoanalytic radical, most psychoanalysts have pretty much stood mute here, accommodating the ruling norm.

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Like Ferenczi, Franz Alexander (1925) regarded the superego as "an anachronism in the mind" (p. 25). The therapeutic task, he wrote, "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). Because, following Freud (1923), most psychoanalysts have identified conscience with the superego, unlike Ferenczi and Freud himself they have feared its demolition would be tantamount to the promotion of psychopathy. Hence they have called, like Strachey (1934), for its modification and maturation (Jacobson, 1964; Kernberg, 1976; Schafer, 1960; Gray, 1994; Britton, 2003) rather than its replacement by conscience. Alexander and Ferenczi represent the minority view: against the immoral moralism of the superego they posit a conscience grounded in *thinking*, 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."

But the problem with this, as with Freud's own rationalism, his call for the dominance of the ego over superego and id, is that the rational ego is incapable of serving as a conscience. For while thinking through the consequences of our actions for ourselves and others is *relevant* to moral decision, reason cannot serve as an authority establishing one value over another. The knowledge that smoking causes cancer and that cancer can cause

death is relevant to the decision whether or not to smoke, but reason cannot establish that health is superior to illness, nor life worth living. More recently, Bion (1962) and, following him, Reiner (2009) find the basis for conscientious development beyond the rigid, pseudo-moral superego in *thinking*. While the type of thinking they have in mind, involving “containment,” reverie, alpha function, etc., leading to “transformations in O,” cannot be reduced to simple ratiocination, it remains significant that they choose to label the mental process they have in mind as “thinking.” In contrast to both Freudian and Bionian rationalism, Sagan (1988) recognized with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754) that conscience arises not from *reason* but from *feeling*, from what Rousseau called “pity”—sympathy or fellow-feeling. Our feelings of both sympathy and antipathy originate in our histories of attachment and object relations and in what Sagan views as our resulting identifications with the nurturer on one hand and with the aggressor on the other.

Given the fact/value disjunction, the confinement of reason and science to the *descriptive* field of the *is* and its incompetence with respect to the *prescriptive* field of the *ought*, we are forced to recognize that conscience is fundamentally grounded in non-rational, emotional processes of attachment, sympathy, concern and love, not in the head but the heart—for, as Pascal (1669, Section 4) famously put it, “the heart has reasons reason cannot know.” But even while recognizing the limits of reason, the later Freud placed his confidence in secondary process thinking, regarding feeling, like primary process and the unconscious, with suspicion, associating it with madness rather than valuing it as a source of existential orientation, potential wisdom and creativity. It is due to this suspicion of feeling and overestimation of reason (which Sagan recognized as stemming from Freud’s devaluation of the feminine, the preoedipal and the maternal) that even those psychoanalysts who recognize the destructiveness of the superego have for the most part felt no need to posit a separate conscience, thinking that the ego itself can serve as a sufficient moral guide. For Freud (1933), “Our best hope for the future is that intellect—the scientific spirit, reason—may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man” (p. 170). But anyone who, following Freud’s recommendation, actually succeeded in establishing a “dictatorship of the intellect,” achieving dominance of the ego over id and superego, and living as an “enlightened hedonist” in accordance with the



pleasure and reality principles, would today be rightly diagnosed as a pathological narcissist or a psychopath. Freud (1914) himself, it will be recalled, wrote that “A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love” (p. 84). Conscience is grounded in attachment and love and is beyond both the pleasure and reality principles, as well as being beyond the narcissism in which, as Freud (1914) pointed out, the other we “love” is really nothing more than the self we are, or were, or wish to be.

While few psychoanalysts have followed Freud, Alexander and Ferenczi and defined the goal of psychoanalysis as *demolition* of the superego, most have shared Strachey’s implicit devaluation of the harsh superego and his conception of the analytic cure as involving, among other things, substantial superego modification or modulation, a development conceived most often as advance beyond an archaic or pathological superego toward a more mature or healthy one. The use of terms such as “archaic” vs. “mature,” and “pathological” vs. “healthy,” cloaks what is really a moral judgment defining love and forgiveness as superior to hate and retribution. Psychoanalysts have traditionally attempted to “de-moralize” psychoanalytic discourse in this way, representing it as an ethically neutral, “value-free,” scientific and medical discipline when, as I have argued (Carveth, 2013, ch. 1) it is and always has been a thoroughly moral enterprise from beginning to end. At least in Freud’s own writings the demoralizing disguise at times wore very thin, as in his demand (Freud, 1914) that we overcome narcissism in favour of object love and his hope, expressed at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*, that “the other of the two ‘Heavenly Powers’ . . . , eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary” (Freud, 1930, p. 144). To those who would inflate the notion of analytic neutrality to condemn as unanalytic the making of such value judgements, I would point out that our very showing up to analyze—that is, our rejection of suicide and our choice of life over death—is an implicit endorsement of a value judgement enacted in every session.

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But while some psychoanalysts accepted Freud's view of the superego's sadism and therefore sought to either radically modify it (Strachey) or demolish it altogether as a bad internal persecutory object (Freud, Alexander, Ferenczi), Schafer (1960), reacting against Freud's own focus upon its sadism, advanced the idea of a "loving and beloved superego" that he constructed from small hints and suggestions appearing here and there in Freud's writings but that Freud himself had notably not allowed to alter his overall view. Admitting that "Freud was not prepared to pursue to its end the line of thought leading to a loving and beloved superego or to integrate such a conception with his decisive treatment of the criticizing and feared superego" (Schafer, 1960, p. 163), Schafer nevertheless proceeded to do the job for him. Subsequent readers of Schafer's paper seem to have thought it revealed that Freud himself had a more benign view of the superego, when what the paper truly revealed was what Schafer and others *wished* had been his view, not the superego Freud actually gave us. In the work of Paul Gray (1994, chapters 5 and 6) one sees another retreat from Freud's predominant view of the superego, this time as one of the three structures of the mind, to a view of it as a defensive ego operation, a view that correctly emphasizes the role of retroflected aggression in superego formation while largely ignoring that of internalized cultural ideology. Because it has represented itself as a cautious extension of Freudian insights, the degree to which post-Freudian ego psychology, including so-called modern conflict theory, represents a radical revision of Freudian theory and a retreat from some of its most radical insights has tended to escape recognition.

A sociologist might suggest that whereas Freud himself gave us a late-nineteenth century European father-superego, Schafer gave us that of mid-twentieth century America. If this were so, it would imply social progress: that we were getting a more modulated view of the superego because superegos had become modulated. But is that fact or wish? At the very time Schafer was advancing his view of the superego as more "Pop" than "Vater," Kohut (1978) was celebrating the passing of "Guilty Man" altogether in our culture. Here we must boldly bring psychoanalytic thinking to bear and distinguish between what is

conscious and what is unconscious. Perhaps due to changes in culture, gender roles, family structure, etc., harsh paternal authority had diminished and, at least on the conscious level, the authoritarian superego along with it. Yet Freud (1930, pp. 128-129) explained how a severe superego may result from a lenient upbringing, its severity having as much to do with the turning of aggression against the ego as with actual parental behavior. Our clinical experience would suggest little decline in the role of the sadistic, tyrannical unconscious superego in psychopathology. Of course, this is a point that one is only in a position to affirm or deny to the extent that in clinical work one still “listens with the third ear” (Reik, 1948) to the unconscious.

Schafer’s post-Freudian revision of Freud’s theory of the superego has, like Gray’s (1994), been very influential, even among analysts not usually fond of revisionism, and for several reasons. First, it compensated to some extent for the lack of any concept of a loving and forgiving conscience with which to offset the harshness of the superego. And second, it did so without calling, like Alexander, Ferenczi and Freud himself, for the superego’s demolition. Even Britton (2003), who possesses a clear understanding of the role of the ego-destructive and envious superego in psychopathology, seeks only to reform it by liberating it from hostile, alien, internal, bad occupying forces rather than recognizing it, as Klein and even Freud did (in his clinical writings at least), as a bad, persecutory internal object as such. In calling for a strengthening of the ego and modification of the superego Britton would certainly be joined by mainstream, American psychoanalysis which, likewise, seeks only the “maturation” of the superego, rather than recognizing it as an intrinsically bad object of the paranoid-schizoid position and seeking to disempower and displace it in favor of the capacity for concern and reparation characteristic of depressive position functioning. The superego remains, after all, in unconscious phantasy, the parent, and out of our need to “honor thy mother and thy father” there remains strong resistance to anything approaching its radical critique. Can we liberate ourselves sufficiently from our parental complexes to be able to actually grow up and disempower the superego instead of merely compromising with it?

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Psychoanalytic critique of the superego has focused almost exclusively upon its destructive manifestations in the life of the individual, in self-punishment, self-sabotage, masochism, depression and suicide, and not upon the morally objectionable internalized socio-cultural ideologies of which the superego is comprised and that are reflected even in its normative, let alone its pathological expressions. Freud's incorporation of both conscience and ego ideal into the superego hampers our capacity to undertake such a critique for, in the traditional view, the superego is the only judge and there is no other judge to judge it, no higher court of moral appeal. In this framework we can only describe superegos with different content, ones that are racist and sexist and ones that are less so, right-wing and left-wing ones, harsh and critical or more loving and forgiving ones. But to move beyond description and to judge one superego as morally better or worse than another requires an autonomous basis for such moral judgment.

Whereas in the past social scientists and philosophers have often succumbed to the moral relativism arising from a view of morality as entirely a social product constructed in radically different ways in different historical and cultural contexts, today there exists widespread agreement regarding the existence of a universal moral standpoint beneath all cultural accretions and variations that holds simply that one ought not do to others what one does not wish to be done to oneself, the principle of reciprocity that Kant (1785) embodied in his categorical imperative. The universal moral norm of reciprocity constitutes the basis of both conscience and the conscientious critique of superego ideologies and practices that violate it. Without it, critics of the superego, such as Freud, Alexander, Ferenczi, Bion and, more recently, Britton have been forced to appeal to reason against the superego's moralism, a responsibility that, as we have seen, the rational ego is incapable of assuming.

While Freud recognized the role of *identification with the aggressor* in superego formation toward the end of the oedipal phase, and Klein understood its role in formation of the preoedipal superego (identification with the all-bad persecutory part-object), due to the largely unrecognized work of Eli Sagan (1988) we have failed to grasp the preoedipal

roots of conscience in *identification with the nurturer*. If the superego is comprised of the aggressive drive (or *Thanatos*) turned on the self, and identification with the aggressor, then the conscience is comprised of the libidinal drive (or *Eros*) directed outward and inward, and identification with the nurturer. Whereas the superego derives from aggression, the conscience derives from libido, today understood to include a primary (unlearned) drive-based need for attachment. Although inevitable frustration despite the best possible caring imaginable generates hatred toward the primary object experienced as a persecutor, for Klein: “The newborn infant unconsciously feels that an object of unique goodness exists, from which a maximal gratification could be obtained and that this object is the mother’s breast” (Klein, Heimann, Isaacs, & Riviere, 1952, p. 265). In primary love and attachment, together with the principle of reciprocity that takes the form not just of the talion law of hate for hate but also that of love for love, lie the drive foundations of conscience, the overlooked morality of the id mentioned above. Value imperatives internalized from parents and society, i.e., superego, often generate something of a “false self” (Winnicott, 1960) on the basis of compliance that conflicts with desires arising from the “true self” and its need to express both its hatred toward the persecutory bad object, identification with which forms the core of the superego, and its love and gratitude toward the nurturing good object, identification with which forms the core of conscience and that generates the need for prosocial behavior and authentic self-expression.

One of the strengths of classical psychoanalysis has been its refusal to succumb to overly socialized, culturally determinist, entirely relational models of human nature, calling our attention to universal drives that conflict with social forces. While well aware of conflicts between social pressures and the drives of sex and aggression, we have paid little attention to those between social internalizations (superego) and moral feelings and obligations grounded in attachment and love (conscience). Conscience, grounded in *Eros*, frequently conflicts with superego, grounded in *Thanatos*. As Freud in his clinical writings as distinct from his sociological speculations understood, and as Klein consistently grasped, the superego is a bad, persecutory internal object. What we have been calling the loving and beloved superego is the conscience. Therapeutic progress

requires us to progressively quarantine and disempower the superego and strengthen both the conscience and the rational ego (though the rational ego, being merely rational, is no substitute for conscience). But instead of recognizing the superego as an intrinsically bad object and calling for its displacement by conscience we have preferred the idea of superego modification. In so doing we have failed to recognize that *without conscience we lack any basis for judging one superego as superior to another. To reject the idea of conscience as separate from the superego and instead focus on the goal of superego maturation is self-contradictory, for we can only distinguish a mature from an immature superego by the standards of conscience.* There is no denying that the superego sometimes represents the internalization of cultural values congruent with conscience; in such cases one is pulled both by one's conscience and one's superego in prosocial directions, though even here the superego, as aggression retroflected against the self as well as internalized norms will be more inclined to exhort and punish, while the conscience will push for change and reparation.

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#### *Case Vignette 1: Mrs. A.*

Mrs. A, an ambitious young lawyer in her early thirties on the fast track to becoming a partner in a prestigious law firm declined to take the full maternity leave to which she was entitled. This decision appeared to be grounded in both her professional superego, her devotion to her profession, her firm, her colleagues and her ideals of hard work, and also in her fear that to go on leave would cause her career to “stall in the water” as she had seen happen to other women colleagues whose careers never seemed to recover when they returned from “mat leave.” So as soon as she was strong enough and her daughter stabilized on the bottle and attached to the live-in nanny, she had returned to work full-time. Although her husband, an academic, helped to fill in, Mrs. A., though exhausted, was having trouble sleeping, being awakened by tormenting dreams and by the re-emergence of the migraine headaches that had troubled her for a time before her marriage but that had for a few years largely disappeared. In addition she was having occasional anxiety attacks that appeared to “come out of the blue” and for which she could find no conscious, rational reasons. In her analytic psychotherapy it became evident that Mrs. A was feeling persecuted by a critical superego formed in identification with her “stay-at-home” mother and informed by her internalization from her

family and the wider culture of ideals of maternalism from the standpoint of which she felt judged guilty for “abandoning” her baby. Working through in these terms did not yield any significant relief, despite her attempts to reassure herself that her baby was being well-taken care of, that she seemed to be doing well, as well as being reassured by her husband and others that she was spending “quality time” with her daughter, and so on. It gradually became evident that in addition to superego pressure there were deeper sources of her guilt and self-punishment stemming from her deep love of and attachment to her child and her need to be with her to deliver the nurturance she longed to provide. Her final decision to take a leave of absence from the firm, despite whatever negative effects this might have on her career, did not appear to amount to a surrender to superego pressure, but rather to an act of conscience.

Mrs. A’s professional and maternal ideals represented superego elements that pulled in opposite directions. Her conscience, though pulling in the same direction as her maternal superego, was grounded in her deep attachment to her child. Mrs. B’s conflict was somewhat less complex.

#### *Case Vignette 2: Mrs. B.*

In her late teens while in college Mrs. B had had several brief, but exciting homosexual affairs with girlfriends but by her senior year was dating men and had come to dismiss her earlier dalliances as meaningless. To her close girlfriends at that time she jokingly called herself a “LUG” (lesbian until graduation) or a “*hasbean*” (pronounced so as to rhyme with “lesbian”), terms defined by the Urban Dictionary as “An adult female ... who has affairs with women and declares herself lesbian when young but decides later that she's really hetero and becomes a totally straight *hausfrau*, married, PTA, making apple pies, the works ....” The year after graduation Mrs. B. married a man she had begun dating in her last year of college and with whom she established a marriage and a sex life she described as “pretty good” initially, but that soon came to feel routine, boring and empty to her, as increasingly did her work life. Contraception had been abandoned for some time and Mrs. B became pregnant. Her marital sex life never seemed to recover after the birth of her son. For several years she lost her libido and by the time her son was off to nursery school and then kindergarten Mrs. B was becoming increasingly anhedonic, at times suffering from a low-grade depression. She eventually spoke of this to her family doctor who prescribed an antidepressant and for a time this had seemed to help. When, to her surprise, she found herself beginning to experience sexually arousing fantasies about women and attempting to use these fantasies to promote arousal in intercourse with her

husband she decided to enter therapy. Just prior to beginning her analytic psychotherapy she had begun exploring chat groups of women with “bisexual” interests. Despite efforts to put this activity “on hold” as advised by her analyst in order to get into the therapeutic process and exploration, she continued and, before long, had connected online to one particular woman. They soon graduated to email and then to the telephone and then agreed to meet for coffee, and thus began Mrs. B’s first extramarital affair. She went off antidepressants and her depression and anhedonia were, of course, a thing of the past, until this affair was broken off by her friend because she wanted more than Mrs. B was prepared to give her. Despite having loving as well as sexual feelings for her lover, and despite her unhappiness in her marriage, she loved both her son and her husband (albeit in a non-erotic sense) and was very attached to her home, her circle of friends, and couldn’t contemplate the shame, disruption and pain she anticipated bringing upon her immediate family and her very conventional parents if she were to “come out.” So she attempted to repress her homosexual interests, to throw herself back into her marriage, but it didn’t work; her depression returned, at times making it difficult for her to function very well at all. Once again she began to feel better when she began to flirt with and to secretly “date” other women; but this time these affairs seemed more superficial, more emotionally restricted, as Mrs. B appeared to have decided to remain in her marriage but from time to time to indulge in these limited homosexual connections. It now became clear to Mrs. B that her “depression” was not neurochemically caused as she had wanted to believe, but rather grounded in both sexual repression and in guilt about cheating on her husband, depriving him of a normal sex life, and living a lie. She not only had to hide all evidence of her extramarital activities but had to control her gaze and her interest in women when in the presence of her husband, family and friends.

Despite several years of analytic work on Mrs. B’s internalized homophobia, her heterosexist superego, she finally decided she was not prepared to renovate her life. As she moved to termination, she expressed gratitude to the analyst for helping her achieve self-understanding: that her unhappiness was not the result of a biologically-based depression, nor due exclusively to her heterosexist superego and internalized homophobia, but was also the price she was paying for choosing to continue to live a life of deceit and the bad conscience resulting from this choice. I think in many analyses there comes an existential turning-point at which some patients find themselves equipped to begin to actualize the true self (Winnicott, 1960), at whatever painful cost to themselves and others, while others are unable to do so, feeling forced to settle for less and, as a



result, opting for lives of “quiet desperation.” Often we can only speculate about the childhood conditions and possible constitutional strengths and weaknesses that enable some to re-find, resurrect and strengthen themselves, not least by reconciling with conscience, while others find themselves unwilling or unable to do so.

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In recent years, rather than seeking to elaborate structural theory, prominent psychoanalytic theorists, such as Schafer (1976), Brenner (1994, 1998, 2002), and others, have become concerned with the problem of reification of psychoanalytic concepts, such as id, ego, superego and the very notion of “psychic structure” itself, all of which they view as abstractions referring ultimately to the human actions and compromise-formations of which they are comprised. I agree we must seek to avoid what Whitehead (1925) called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” or the literalization of metaphor. But since all thinking and communicating depends upon metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), I believe we must take care not to extend our critique of reification of abstraction to a condemnation of abstraction *per se*. Philosophers do not prescribe but only analyze what scientists do; we must not allow philosophical strictures to impede scientific creativity and communication. I believe it sometimes serves us to work at the molecular rather than the atomic or subatomic levels of analysis. It is true, to take but one example, that “social structure” is an abstraction referring ultimately to human individuals acting and interacting in patterned ways, yet sociologists have found the concept highly productive in social analysis.

Freud himself did not view *Eros* and *Thanatos* as compromise-formations but as the forces that enter into compromise-formations. Nor did he consider the superego a compromise-formation but as aggression turned against the self plus cultural internalizations. In my view, id, ego, superego and conscience are not compromise-formations but the forces comprising the compromise-formations we see. There is no doubt that underlying these macro-structures there exist complex self and object-relational processes and dynamics that psychoanalytic research legitimately seeks to

better comprehend. But just as we must resist over-simplification, so we must be on guard against the subtle resistance to facing simple truths that may sometimes take the form of flight into defensive complexification. In my view, there is no need to concretize the hypothetical constructs id, ego, superego and conscience to work with them productively, even while seeking to comprehend their underlying components.

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