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# 1

## Freud's Dilemma and Freud's Solution

JULY 8, 1915, Sigmund Freud, fifty-nine years old, wrote a remarkable letter to J. J. Putnam in Boston. Putnam, a New England physician of some reputation, having become a convert to psychoanalysis in his late years and a correspondent of Freud's, urged the founder of psychoanalysis to speak out more on the relationship of morality to psychoanalytic principles.

Freud responded: "I think I ought to tell you that I have always been dissatisfied with my intellectual endowment and that I know precisely in what respects, but that I consider myself a very moral human being who can subscribe to Th. Vischer's excellent maxim: 'What is moral is self-evident.' I believe that when it comes to a sense of justice and consideration of others, to the dislike of making others suffer or taking advantage of them, I can measure myself with the best people I have known. I have never done anything mean or malicious, nor have I felt any temptation to do so, with the result that I am not in the least proud of it. I am taking the notion of morality in its social, not its sexual sense ....

"On one point, however, I see that I can agree with you. When I ask myself why I have always aspired to behave honorably, to spare others

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and to be kind wherever possible, and why I didn't cease doing so when I realized that in this way one comes to harm and becomes an anvil because other people are brutal and unreliable, then indeed I have no answer. Sensible this certainly was not. In my youth I didn't feel any special ethical aspirations, nor does the conclusion that I am better than others give me any recognizable satisfaction! You are perhaps the first person to whom I have boasted in this fashion. So one could cite just my case as a proof of your assertion that such an urge toward the ideal forms a considerable part of our inheritance. If only more of this precious inheritance could be found in other human beings! I secretly believe that if one had the means of studying the sublimation of instincts as thoroughly as their repression, one might find quite natural psychological explanations which would render your humanitarian assumption unnecessary. But as I have said before, I know nothing about this. Why I—and incidentally my six adult children as well—have to be thoroughly decent human beings is quite incomprehensible to me."<sup>1</sup>

What is so striking, in this circumstance, is that the man whose great historical role it was to reveal to us so much of the hidden shame of humankind—that, as children, we suffered from the wildest sexual longings; that our wishes included cannibalizing our enemies, eating our own feces, killing our fathers (or mothers), and sleeping with our mothers (or fathers)—that this same person, when faced with the human need for morality, found it "quite incomprehensible."

Such disclaimer of insight, however, was not destined to persist. Within eight years of the letter to Putnam, with the publication of *The Ego and the Id* in 1923, Freud announced to the world that the superego, which subsumed the moral function, was one of the three basic structures of the mind. In that work he proclaimed, with obvious pride, "If anyone were inclined to put forward the paradoxical proposition that the normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows, psychoanalysis, on whose findings the first half of the assertion rests, would have no objection to raise against the second half."<sup>2</sup>

It is of interest to observe that, by the time of the letter to Putnam, Freud was not as ignorant of the moral function as he claimed to be. He had already taken a first important step that would eventually lead to the discovery of the superego. "On Narcissism: An Introduction"

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was published in 1914. There Freud introduced the concept of the ego ideal, which was destined to become, within his theoretical structure, one of the component functions subsumed under the superego. The ego ideal resulted from a transformation of the belief in the possibility of perfection, a conviction that must be abandoned as the psyche matures: "[The child] is not willing to forego the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgment, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal."<sup>3</sup> Freud's letter to Putnam provides evidence that the ego ideal—the desire and capacity to live by certain perfect standards of behavior, the need to think well of oneself—can become intimately involved with moral action, at least with some individuals. Freud was consciously aware of boasting to Putnam about his own moral position.

That Freud chose not to reveal he had been working on the problem and confessed, instead, that he knew nothing about it is one small indication of Freud's ambivalence about morality, an ambivalence that profoundly affected his whole theoretical structure.

*The Ego and the Id* was a seminal work. It remains one of the basic foundation blocks of psychoanalytic theory, setting forth Freud's last global description of the psyche, the structural model. Three structures comprise the psyche and subsume all psychic action: ego, id, and superego. Because Freudian theory is always a theory of conflict, in this model all neuroses, ambivalence, and symptomatic behavior come from conflicts among, and within, these three structures. Within Freudian psychoanalysis today, though much controversy exists about the exact nature of ego, id, and superego, only a handful of theorists challenge the basic structural hypothesis.

Freud does not differentiate in *The Ego and the Id* between ego ideal and superego; he uses these terms interchangeably. Only later in his life did he consistently use the designation superego for the large psychological entity and assign to it three basic functions: self-observation, conscience, and maintaining the ego ideal, which demands greater and greater perfection.<sup>4</sup> A tendency on the part of some later theorists to

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equate superego and conscience persists, and this failure to differentiate the two concepts seriously limits our perception of the way morality works within the psyche. The failure to discriminate sharply the roles of superego and conscience, however, was already present in Freud's work.

Of crucial importance for the nature of the superego is the fact that it appears very late in the child's life—between the fourth and sixth year. Unlike the ego and the id, which certainly exist as independent psychic structures by the time the child is six months old, the superego comes into existence only after the child has endured a long psychic history. Whether or not the components of the superego, especially conscience and the ego ideal, exist before the birth of the superego is an enormously important question. If a three-year-old child already has the beginnings of a conscience, which is destined to be preempted and controlled by a superego that will appear roughly two years later, then it is not impossible that certain basic conflicts may develop between conscience and the superego. Because a child lives a long psychic life without any superego, it would not be unreasonable to hold that the nature of the superego would be profoundly affected by the vicissitudes of psychic history that predate its appearance.

The late emergence of the superego is determined, Freud tells us, by the fact that it comes into existence with the end of the Oedipus conflict. "The ego ideal [superego] had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is to that revolutionary event that it owes its existence." "The ego ideal [superego] is therefore the heir of the Oedipus complex ..,"<sup>5</sup> This structure is established by incorporating the parents—and their moral imperatives—into the psyche. Moral commands, which have come from an external source, now speak with an inner voice. That which in the past told us, for instance, always to tell the truth now appears as an inner compulsion toward the same behavior. All of these incorporated values, however, do not necessarily have to be good for the psyche. Harmful imperatives are also internalized by means of the superego. The alien voice of parental authority that had announced to the child "Don't masturbate" becomes transformed into an internal superego injunction: "Sex is bad!" External authority becomes internalized. It is crucial for the nature of the superego that it is born under both

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a blessing and a curse. The parents whose incorporation results in the creation of the superego have presented the child, in regard to moral values, with a double vision. They have been both nurturing and punishing, encouraging and defeating, loving and aggressive, sympathetic and castrating, estimable and frightful. The superego cannot select only the virtuous aspects of the parents. The parents are eaten whole; the superego becomes their agent inside the child's psyche. "But now that we have embarked upon the analysis of the ego we can give an answer to all those whose moral sense has been shocked and who have complained that there must surely be a higher nature in man: 'Very true,' we can say, 'and here we have that higher nature, in this ego ideal or superego, the representative of our relation to our parents. When we were little children we knew these higher natures, *we admired them and feared them*; and later we took them into ourselves.'"<sup>6</sup> And such is this "higher nature" in man that conscience, our most precious moral quality, is dependent for its efficacy on the fear of castration: "The superior being, which turned into the ego ideal [superego], once threatened castration, and this dread of castration is probably the nucleus round which the subsequent fear of conscience has gathered; it is this dread that persists as the fear of conscience."<sup>7</sup>

It is a grim picture. How paltry a figure Freud would have presented to Putnam (and himself) had he insisted that the reason he—and his six adult children—had to be "thoroughly decent human beings" was because they all feared castration if they ceased being so. This description of the functioning of morality should not be rejected, however, merely because it presents human beings as far from ideal creatures. Truth and what we wish for may be two very different things. The significant question is not how pessimistic but how accurate is Freud's account of the birth and the nature of morality.

Much evidence exists indicating that Freud himself did not quite believe his description of the relationship between conscience, Oedipus complex, and superego. Nothing in the whole of the psychoanalytic canon is as riddled with contradictions as Freud's narrative of the end of the Oedipus complex and the emergence of the superego. Freud himself displays a profound ambivalence about every aspect of this theoretical approach.

1. Though the superego incorporates both the nurturing, loving,

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admiring parents and the punishing castrators, Freud, in theoretical works written after 1923, writes ten times as much about the harsh, punishing aspects of the superego as he does about its loving, benevolent attributes.

2. Civilization, which represents the unfolding of superego demands through history, is portrayed in some of Freud's works (but not in all) as the greatest contributor to neurosis in our time.

3. Women, to whom even sexist thinkers in the nineteenth century assigned the task of keeping alive the flame of moral values while their men sullied themselves in real-world achievement and corruption—women, Freud announces, are incapable of the same degree of super ego development as men.

4. Though the superego subsumes conscience and the ego ideal, nonetheless at times Freud argues that one of the main purposes of psychoanalytic treatment is to free the ego from superego demands.

5. And when the end of the Oedipus complex is described in detail, Freud tells us that it is "smashed to pieces by the threat of castration."<sup>8</sup> As the superego is the heir of that catastrophe, one may wonder what kind of crippled, pathological moral imperative must result from such a birth trauma.

It would not be accurate to conclude from all this that Freud and psychoanalytic theory was antimorality, opposed to civilization, against nurturing and benevolence, and unredeemably sexist. Freud was proud of his own moral behavior; he could write about civilization and Eros with almost rapturous enthusiasm; he was keenly aware of how essential adequate nurturing is to psychic health; and he had a capacity to deal with and treat with women on a basis of equality that was rare in his time (the proportion of women to men who became analysts in Freud's day is remarkable). What is true is that Freud's psychoanalytic theory demonstrates the most profound ambivalence about everything that centrally or peripherally touches on questions of morality. And this ambivalence is all of a piece. That the superego (for men) is installed as a result of a tremendous fear of castration; that women are "castrated" before the Oedipus conflict and, therefore, never achieve a developed superego; that nurturing and love have, somehow, nothing to do with morality; that conscience and superego are confused with each other—all these inadequacies in psychoanalytic

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theory arise from a basic repression of the memory of the pre-oedipal mother and the love, identification, idealization—and hostility—the child (male and female) feels for her. Freud's world of Oedipus complex, castration, superego is a male world where women exist only as prizes awarded to conquerors.

It would be a mistake to look for the source of these confusions in some inadequacy of Freud's psyche or character. That could not explain why, with only slight modifications, four generations of analysts have held to these views. More important, such an approach would obscure the fact that the same ambivalence runs very deeply through the whole of Western culture. The splits between body and soul, between reason and feeling, which are intimately related to questions of nurturing and morality, are as old as Plato and St. Paul. In the twentieth century, ambivalence about morality, civilization, nurturing, and women define the moral agenda of our time. The observation that our culture has failed to resolve these ambivalences will provoke, I am sure, very little dissent. If certain aspects of Freudian theory have a strong antifeminine bias, it is important to comprehend that Freud lived in a pervasively sexist society and to accurately describe the precise nature of that sexism. If the psychoanalytic theory of morality is riddled with ambivalence, it is essential to understand the profound moral conflicts that characterized the social and political world of the nineteenth century. In part II of this book, we will explore the historical background of the superego in detail. Morality—and confusions about morality—can never be understood without regard for the historical situation in which it exists. Freud's superego, like everyone's, was profoundly determined by the society in which he lived.

The dependence of the superego on the *particular* society in which it exists underlines a fatal flaw in the theory of the superego as representing the *moral* function within the psyche. Far from carrying out the task of morality in the psyche, the superego is essentially amoral and can be as easily immoral as moral. Within a slave society, the superego legitimates slavery. Within a racist or sexist society, the superego demands racism and sexism. And in a Nazi society, the superego commands one to live up to genocidal ideals. A careful reading of the German catastrophe reveals that that whole Nazi enterprise would have been impossible without a strong and powerful superego passionately striving for its objectives.

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### *The Superego and the Genocide of the Jews*

In his book *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton brilliantly documents the fact that the genocide of the Jews had its origins, first, in programs of sterilization and, second, in a project of euthanasia. The sterilization course was set in motion by the Nazis a few months after Hitler came to power in 1933. The original objects of these blood-purifying programs were not Jews but insane, mentally retarded, and habitually criminal *Germans*. These programs were embarked upon under the powerful superego injunction of purifying the race in the effort to create an ideal society, more perfect and more free of blemish than any that had ever existed. Konrad Lorenz, who attained international respectability and reputation for his work on animal behavior after this "grand" experiment proved a horrible failure, was just one of many who extolled the ideal nature of the program. He wrote in 1940:

It must be the duty of racial hygiene to be attentive to a more severe elimination of morally inferior human beings than is the case today.... We should literally replace all factors responsible for selection in a natural and free life.... In prehistoric times of humanity, selection for endurance, heroism, social usefulness, etc. was made solely by *hostile* outside factors. This role must be assumed by a human organization; otherwise humanity will, for lack of selective factors, be annihilated by the degenerative phenomena that accompany domestication.<sup>9</sup>

Doctors played the central role in these programs because sterilization and euthanasia were doctors' business. As the emphasis changed in the late 1930s from sterilization to euthanasia, the superego was an essential element in bringing the doctors along. Rudolf Ramm was on the medical faculty of the University of Berlin and published an important manual that urged a doctor to become not only a caretaker of the sick but also a "cultivator of the genes," a "physician to the *Volk*," and a "biological soldier." Ramm made an easy transition from traditional moral values: "inner calling, high ethics, profound knowledge ... sacrifice and dedication," to "the idealistic *Weltanschauung* of National Socialism." And when this whole process ultimately led, af-

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ter 1941, by inexorable logic, to the extermination of the Jews, the "moral" reasons for undertaking that "final solution" had already been clearly established.

Pointing to the chimneys in the distance, [Dr. Ella Lingens-Reiner] asked a Nazi doctor, Fritz Klein, "How can you reconcile that with your [Hippocratic] oath as a doctor?" His answer was, "Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind."<sup>10</sup>

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.

These medical participants in mass murder were held to the regime behind the murder by the principles of what Dr. B. [an Auschwitz doctor] called 'coherent community' ... and 'common effort' ... in discussing his and others' sense of the Nazi movement's commitment to overcoming staggering national problems.... In all this, 'the bridge ... is the ideology.' And that 'bridge' could connect the Nazi doctors to an immediate sense of community and communal purpose in their Auschwitz work.

Many of the Auschwitz doctors—whose job it was to make the "selections" on the entering ramp that determined how many were to be gassed immediately and how many sent to live in the camp—contended that their oath of loyalty to Hitler, which they took as SS officers, was much more important to them than the Hippocratic oath of their medical school days." An oath—a superego mechanism—remarkably enough, remained essential.

This extraordinary mixture of idealism and sadism was noticed by many reflective people. Dr. Karl Brandt was one of the leaders of the euthanasia program directed against mental patients. One hero of the resistance to that genocidal design was the Reverend Fritz von Bodel-

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schwingham, who protected his patients from the killers. Yet, after the war, it is reported that Bodelschwingham commented: "You must not picture Professor Brandt as a criminal, but rather as an idealist."<sup>12</sup> In one part of Brandt's mind, at least, the killing project was undertaken for idealistic, moral reasons. How the other parts of Brandt's mind judged these actions, to what intense conflicts he was subject, no one has yet been able to successfully elaborate.

Even the notorious Josef Mengele cannot be dismissed with a simplistic diagnosis—pathological, sadistic, near psychotic—because these words give no place to the "moral" fervor that propelled his work. Teresa W., an anthropologist prisoner at Auschwitz who was used by Mengele for his "research" on twins, commented that he was like "a religious man ... absolutely so committed that he will only consider the people going to church as the right people—or [those who] have the same face as he has." She was convinced that Mengele believed "that Hitler [was] doing something absolutely incredibly good."<sup>13</sup>

And this is not the first time in history we encounter this remarkable combination of sadism and idealistic behavior. The Inquisition burned many disbelievers to purify the world, and the Crusaders, when they finally took Jerusalem, slew every non-Christian being they found there—all for the greater glory of the superego.

What was so striking for Lifton in his research into this unbelievable human experience was the tremendous importance placed, over and over again, on doctors in the whole genocidal project. Doctors—the very symbol of healing, caring, and the value of life. There seems to be no question that it was a deliberate Nazi motive to bring all the force of the superego to bear on the killing enterprise. Lifton writes of "the powerful Nazi impulse, sometimes conscious and at other times inchoate, to bring the greatest degree of medical legitimation to the widest range of killing." The evidence of Auschwitz confirms this analysis:

In terms of actual professional requirements there was absolutely no need for doctors to be the ones conducting selections: anyone could have sorted out weak and moribund prisoners. But if one views Auschwitz, as Nazi ideologues did, as a public health venture, doctors alone became eligible to select. In doing so, the doctor plunged into what can be called the healing-killing paradox.<sup>14</sup>

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In summary, then, the Nazis used all the trappings of the superego ; to promote genocide: purifying, healing, curing; oath, community, the *Volk*, social usefulness, ideal society; sacrifice and dedication, ideology, idealism, and morality. The mechanism of the superego makes it possible to use almost any virtue in the most horrible of human projects. If the superego, man's "higher nature," is so susceptible to corruption, can it possibly be the moral instrument in the psyche?

### *Superego Pathology*

It may be argued at this point that I have been describing not a healthy and robust superego but a diseased, pathological, or, at the least, corrupt one. The superego, the argument may run, can still be the moral instrument in the psyche even though it is prevented by pathology from doing its work. A diseased heart is a heart nevertheless. In my view, this analogy does not hold. First, we can observe that, throughout history, the corrupt superego—sanctioning slavery, racism, sexism—has been the *norm*, not the exception. Second, when we consider that most of the worst troubles that humankind has brought upon itself, including warfare, are impossible without the functioning of the superego, that is analogous to discovering an organ in the body whose function it is to bring disease. And last, it should be pointed out that the superego is Freud's discovery, and, at times, his description of it seems to assume its pathology: for instance, when he tells us that this moral instrument behaves like a "garrison in a conquered city"<sup>15</sup> and when he emphasizes its brutal and punishing aspects. If we accept the concept that the superego represents the moral function within the psyche, we are then faced with the frightening possibility that there is no moral capacity within the psyche at all.

When an organ in the body is diseased, its pathology usually results from having too much of something it does not need or too little of something it has essential need of. One may analyze the Nazi superego in this mode. Too much sadism and aggression; too much of the drives to dominate, degrade, and destroy other people. And too little of what?

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The superego to be healthy needs a large component of love, what Freud liked to call "Eros." And a large component of *conscience*. It was precisely these qualities that were severely underrepresented in the Nazi superego.

When we call a sadistic superego "pathological" or "corrupt," by what standard are we judging it? Is there an instrument in the psyche that can differentiate between the moral and immoral attributes of the superego? It is the argument of this book that *conscience* is such an instrument; that conscience, unlike the superego, knows clearly which actions are moral and which immoral; that conscience, unlike the superego, is incapable of corruption and pathology. It may be silenced or paralyzed, but one can never accurately speak of a diseased conscience. Here we come upon a crucial distinction: *the superego always collaborates with its own corruption*. The relative health or pathology of the superego is dependent on how much or how little of conscience is operative in its functioning.

And conscience, unlike the superego, does not have to wait until the child's fourth or fifth year to make its presence felt. Conscience has its origins in the basic nurturing situation, and identification with the nurturer plays an essential role in its composition. Traditionally it is the mother, not the father, who presides over the birth of conscience, over the beginnings of morality. The Freudian theory of morality had to repress the memory of conscience in favor of the superego, because it was deeply involved in repressing the remembrance of the pre-oedipal mother and the overwhelming importance she has in the life of the child. In order to reconstruct the psychoanalytic theory of morality, it is necessary to lift that repression and to restore conscience and Eros to their rightful place at the very center of morality.

And conscience, not the superego, is the essential element in moral social progress. We may ask: What makes it possible for any child—grown to adulthood—to act more morally than his or her parents? What makes moral progress—the giving up of cannibalism, infanticide, slavery—realizable? The psychoanalytic theory of the superego, taken by itself, creates the necessity for answering these questions negatively: Nothing makes it possible. If the fear of castration by the parents is the foundation of morality, the overwhelming psychological imperative must be to incorporate the values of the parents (and soci-

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lety) in order to protect one's bodily and psychic integrity. This is an accurate description of much, if not most, psychosocial action, but it is not a description of *all* such behavior. People do triumph over inadequate nurturing. Society does change profoundly in regard to moral values. Conscience and Eros contribute a crucial portion to those forces that drive history.

# 2

## Huckleberry's Dilemma: The Conflict Between Conscience and the Superego

**H**UCKLEBERRY FINN, fleeing the homicidal inclinations of his alcoholic, psychopathic father and liberating himself as well from the ministrations of those respectable members of the community who were determined to "sivilize" him, sets out on a raft to drift down the Mississippi River. Very soon after beginning his journey he encounters, and invites to join him, the black slave Jim, who is running away from his master, a Miss Watson, one of those dedicated to the salvation of Huckleberry's soul. Through a series of adventures, misadventures, and just drifting and looking at the sky, Jim and Huck become attached to each other. In a sublimated way, one could say they fall in love with each other, Jim being more conscious of this than Huck. Through this emotional tie Huck begins to perceive that a black man—and a slave—is a human being very much like himself. Love and identification reinforce each other.

With it all, Huck is ambivalent and resists the idea that a black slave could be his human equal. An amorphous feeling of guilt for having

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stolen away Miss Watson's "nigger" disturbs the preconscious part of his mind. Despite having learned the lesson of civilization only in part, he nevertheless feels that he is doing something profoundly wrong.

As the result of a complicated set of circumstances, at one point Huckleberry starts out to give Jim up to his pursuers. We are then witness to a dialogue within Huck wherein the superego, which demands the reenslavement of Jim, and humanitarian conscience, which pleads for Jim's freedom, struggle for Huckleberry's soul.

Huck begins by trying to convince himself that Jim would be better off back home. But that resolution won't work because Miss Watson would probably sell him down the river again, nothing would be accomplished, and Huck would be shamed in front of the whole town for having helped a "nigger" escape. And yet, returning him is seemingly the "right thing" to do.

The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame, but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday School, you could 'a' gone to it; and if you'd 'a' done it they'd 'a' learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about the nigger goes to everlasting fire."

Resorting to prayer to assist him in his determination, Huck finds he cannot pray. "It was because my heart warn't right... I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing ... and go and write to that nigger's owner ... but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out."

Faced with the threat of castration from "Him," Huck has no choice



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but to write a letter to Miss Watson informing her where her slave is to be found.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking ... how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking... and I see Jim before me all the time ... we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him.... I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me ... and see how glad he was when I come back out of the fog... and would always call me honey and pet me ... and how good he always was ... and he ... said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world ... and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

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.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they were said... I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it... I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.<sup>1</sup>

Twain's genius brings us a brilliant description of the way the super-ego operates. It is, indeed, the fear of the punishment of hell, the threat of castration from a father figure, that drives Huck to do "the moral" thing and return Jim to slavery. The difficulty, of course, is that the "moral" action is really immoral and the supposed immoral behavior is moral. Huck's response neatly demonstrates Freud's concept that when people do something at variance with what their superego dictates, they will feel guilt and expect to be punished. Huck does feel guilty about helping Jim escape. His actions can be accurately described as *feeling guilty about behaving morally*. This irony clearly demonstrates that something is radically wrong with a theory that equates morality and superego.

At this point, the objection may be raised that a work of fiction cannot be used as evidence for criticizing psychological theory. Huckleberry's dilemma, however, is one that many people face in their lives. Having been taught by the parents to hate Jews, despise Blacks, and

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cheat on one's income tax—all of which can be superego imperatives—a person may decide not to do any of these things, and will feel "guilty" and expect punishment for defying parental imperatives. Psychiatrist Robert Coles relates a very moving story of a young white man in the American South involved with the great conflicts over integrating the public schools. Like Huck's dialogue, it demonstrates how disorienting and exhilarating it can be to challenge superego commands in the interest of Eros:

I didn't want any part of them here. They belong with their own, and I we belong with our own—that's what we all said. Then those two kids came here, and they had a tough time. They were all by themselves. The school had to get police protection for them. We didn't want them and they knew it. But we told them so in case they were slow to get the message. I didn't hold back, no more than anyone else. I said, "Go, nigger, go," with all the others. I meant it. But after a few weeks, I began to see a kid, not a B nigger—a guy who knew how to smile when it was rough going, and who walked straight and tall, and was polite. I told my parents, "It's a real shame I that someone like him has to pay for the trouble caused by all those federal judges."

Then it happened. I saw a few people cuss at him. "The dirty nigger," • they kept on calling him, and soon they were pushing him in a corner, and it looked like trouble, bad trouble. I went over and broke it up. I said, "Hey, cut it out." They all looked at me as if I was crazy, my white buddies stopped and the nigger left. Before he left, though, I spoke to him. I didn't mean to, actually! It just came out of my mouth. I was surprised to hear [•, the words myself: "I'm sorry." As soon as he was gone, my friends gave it to me: "What do you mean, 'I'm sorry!' " I didn't know what to say. I was as silent as the nigger they stopped. After a few minutes, we went to basketball practice. That was the strangest moment of my life.<sup>2</sup>

When the concept of the superego first made its appearance, Viennese psychoanalysts assumed it stood for the father who was commanding one to behave in a morally upright manner. Very quickly one critic of the concept inquired as to what happened to the superego if one's father was a criminal.\* What is essential to understand is that the superego is not just the internal representative of the parents' moral values but of *all their values*, good and bad, moral and immoral. The same internalized voice that commands one to keep one's room clean,

\* Otto Isakower, personal communication.

respect others, tell the truth, may also (and frequently does) give orders to hate Blacks, despise women, and repress sexual pleasure. Some part of the superego is always corrupt. Metaphorically speaking, everyone's father (and mother) is a criminal to some degree.

The psychoanalytic theory of the superego seems valid when it describes a revolutionary development at the end of the Oedipus complex wherein external commands are internalized, a process that results in the creation of many and varied internal imperatives. These imperatives are then modified and expanded as the child grows: its perception of its parents changes, teachers and other authority figures enter its life, and, as an adult, he or she becomes part of a community and a culture with a complex value system of its own. The theory of the superego does describe how and when a child internalizes moral commitments, but the theory can do nothing, by itself, to distinguish what is moral from what is immoral. It explains absolutely nothing about the child's capacity to judge the various—and many times contradictory—elements within this superego structure.

It is helpful to return to Huckleberry's dilemma. The humor, the pathos, the triumph all result from the fact that he is in a state of conflict, driven in two directions at the same time. We know what impels him in the direction of giving up Jim. The superego with its commitment to the current values of society, backed by its own particular psychic police power: guilt and the fear of punishment and castration. But what psychic power is it that gives Huck the capacity to say no to this corrupt aspect of the superego? What psychic function is it that gives any of us the ability to discriminate between moral and immoral aspects of the superego? "Conscience" is the word I use to describe this psychological function, though "morality" or "the moral capacity" can serve just as well. The advantage of all three expressions is that there is no ambiguity in their use, as there is with the concept superego. Huck's conscience or moral capacity would never command him to give Jim back. Conscience calls for the opposite behavior; for both Huck and for Coles's informant, conscience provides the power that defies superego imperatives.

Whereas Freud asserted that the superego, after its formation, subsumed the functions of the ego ideal, conscience, and self-observation,<sup>3</sup> it may be more accurate to say that only conscience, using the capaci-

es of idealization and self-observation, has the capacity to judge the superego. Only conscience can tell us what is moral or immoral; only conscience can discriminate between the beneficial and the corrupt aspects of the superego. It is conscience, not the superego, that enables a person to behave more morally than his or her parents and provides the capacity for society to make moral progress. The superego, by itself, can only reproduce the exact same value system from generation to generation. Where there is no conflict between conscience and superego, society remains stagnant. All the great moral heroes of the world—including Freud—have championed the dictates of conscience against the inflexible commands of the corrupt superego.

It may be objected here that it is not conscience that keeps Huck from betraying Jim or Coles's informant from allowing the beating of the Black student. It is merely Eros, it may be argued, a not very sublimated sexual attachment between the men involved. Huck "loves" Jim; Coles's white student is attracted to the other's looks and demeanor. It is not morality, such an argument goes, it is nothing more than love.

Nothing more—and nothing less. There is no morality without love; "eternal Eros," Freud would say on occasion.<sup>4</sup> The mode of thought that separates morality from love is the same mode that brings us the harsh and punishing superego, that sees in the threat of castration the grounds of morality. The split between love and morality goes very deep within our culture and has brought us innumerable philosophical compromises, from utilitarian liberalism to the superego-as-morality. Freud, as we shall see, could argue passionately on both sides of this issue. Sometimes it is Eros, at most other times only a harsh demanding superego, that can save humankind from its own destructiveness.

I argue that conscience (morality, the moral function) has its genesis in the original nurturing situation between the child and its primary caretaker(s). Love and morality cannot be sundered. All morality is a sublimated and transformed manifestation of the Eros of nurturing. This proposition is a central tenet in the attempt, which occupies part IV of this work, to construct a different psychoanalytic theory of morality, an attempt that takes acute cognizance of the pre-oedipal life of the child.

A careful reading of Huckleberry's predicament reveals many im-

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portant questions about morality and society, about morality and history. Slavery, and its imperatives against which Huck struggles, is an institution of society that legitimizes the ownership of one human being by another. The racism exposed within the story of Coles's informant cannot be considered an institution, since it has no legal foundation, but it is certainly institutionalized within the society (by the *de facto* existence of segregated schools). The permission to own slaves or practice racism is granted by the superego, which has incorporated the values of the parents and the society into the psyche. Twain, who created Huck's dilemma, despised "civilization" as much as did Huckleberry and liked to believe that only an individual living outside the boundaries of an unprincipled society could act morally. Society, and the superego that spoke for it, was, for Twain, almost totally corrupt. This is a romanticized view that ignores the fact that the very moral values Twain wishes to live by are themselves endorsed, even though in a hypocritical way, within the value system of the culture. The Sunday school from which Huck was truant did proclaim that one should love thy neighbor as thyself, and one of the great documents of the Republic announced that all men are created equal.

Twain would like to believe that from society he received only corruption and that moral insight came solely from himself. He would be all conscience and society all corrupt superego, but the truth is that the superego within society had institutionalized *conflicting* values, some moral, some immoral. Twain's insight into the malignant nature of slavery (and racism, since the book was written twenty years after slavery was abolished) was possible for him only because he lived in the nineteenth century when ambivalence about racism had grown to a degree of intensity unknown to the previous history of the world. If Twain had lived in ancient Greece, he probably would have written comedies, but they would not have been about the evils of slavery, because no one in that society was capable of this moral stance.

Conflicting values always exist within the superego. The essentially moral person, nonetheless, does not have to remain passive in this situation. Faced with conflicting and opposite superego imperatives (all men are created equal but it is proper to own slaves), conscience is the one autonomous instrument within the psyche that has the power to choose the moral alternative. To a certain but crucial degree, con-

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science is independent of society because it has its beginnings in the intimate infantile situation of child and nurturer. The autonomous nature of conscience makes moral progress possible.

The perception of the self-directing nature of conscience reveals a crucial theoretical truth about society and the individual's place within it: there is a moral system within the psyche *independent* of the value system of the culture; there is a moral insight within the psyche *independent* of the superego's conflicted system of values. One cannot, therefore, equate the moral system and the value system.

Slavery and its passing, racism and its longed-for passing—all these are facts of history. The moral destiny of human beings is revealed, ultimately, through historical process. Before we can proceed to examine and critique the psychoanalytic theory of morality and civilization, it is helpful to determine the theory's place in human history. Every-one's view of right and wrong is deeply imbedded in historical process. Conscience, though autonomous, is far from being totally free of society. No one enjoys full freedom from inherited values. Even Huckleberry on his raft, despite his every intention, had to deal ultimately with that fact. We turn to history to see what it may teach us about the possibilities, and limitations, of morality and conscience.

