

PART III  
THE  
PSYCHOANALYTIC  
THEORY OF  
MORALITY—  
A CRITIQUE

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The End of the Oedipus  
Complex and the Formation  
of the Superego

**F**REUD'S DESCRIPTION of the end of the male child's Oedipus complex reads like a nightmare. Panic-stricken by the notion that his desires to murder his father and sexually possess his mother will lead to severe retaliation by the father—that his father will cut off his penis—the boy renounces the most assertive (in Freud's terms, the most masculine) impulses he has ever experienced; renounces, that is, any real hope of ever becoming a man himself, in the narcissistic interest of preserving his anatomy. All possibilities of heroism are over; any prospect of rivaling the father is abandoned; childhood—and neurosis—are destined to last forever. At best, the boy identifies with the aggressor (his father) and participates wholeheartedly in repressing these oedipal wishes. At worst, the boy renounces all hopes of being a man, identifies with the mother, and presents himself to the father as a sexual object. It is a world in which there is only *one* father—the father—and no little boy can ever aspire to attain such an awesome office. It is the very essence of a pathogenic situation. Freud would

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have us believe that there is no escape from this catastrophic outcome. Within his own work, however, he demonstrates that this mythicist description is only a part, and by no means the whole, of the oedipal saga.

It is not my intention to challenge the basic psychoanalytic position on the nature and importance of the Oedipus complex and the fact that, at its conclusion, the superego makes its appearance as the heir to that conflict.\* I take these theoretical positions as given. What remains to be discussed is whether Freud's description of the manner in which, and the reasons why, the Oedipus complex dissolves, and the way in which the superego takes up its inheritance describe a pathological or a normal psychological progression. For every stage of psychological development there are characteristic pathological nonsolutions as well as normal, healthy resolutions. One may describe the early oral stage, for example, and state that all children, at some point and at some times in that stage, experience almost uncontrollable cannibalistic rages. If one were to conclude from this, however, that *all* adults will be subject to uncontrollable rages that will make it impossible for them to grant reality to the existence of other people, making love unattainable—if such were one's conclusion, it would be important to argue against that kind of deduction. Such rages in an adult would represent only one pathological possibility inherent in the early oral stage. This kind of analysis gives no weight to the healthy modes of overcoming such distress. There will, however, still be a great deal of insight and truth contained within the description of the pathological outcome, though it will not be the whole truth. It will be argued here, similarly, that Freud's description of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, brought about by the fear of castration and the subsequent

\* Whether that which is designated "superego" is an actual structure or department of the mind, or merely a series of discrete but related psychic impulses that we characterize as a structure because we cannot think about them in any other way, is a very important theoretical issue but not germane to this discussion. My own position is that there are no such structures or departments as ego, superego, id, and that when Freud talks about these various psychic impulses as if they behaved like the Department of the Interior (which has an office—a place where you can go, which has its own interests that are opposed to interests of other departments and so on), this is a mythical anthropomorphization similar to that which makes the north wind into a person blowing air.

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institutionalization of a harsh and punishing superego, is a portrayal of a pathological outcome of an important crisis. We can learn much from such a narrative, but it may also hide from us the fact that there exists a much healthier way to resolve oedipal conflicts, a way that, in fact, most people take to some degree or other.

It is of interest to observe that in regard to this question, as with so many other theoretical problems discussed in this work, Freud himself—at some point—clearly perceived both sides of the issue. In *New Introductory Lectures*, published in 1933, which represent a summary of his work after World War I, Freud succinctly states the discipline-and-punish canon: "Under the impression of the danger of losing his penis, the Oedipus complex is abandoned, repressed and, in the most normal cases, entirely destroyed, and a *severe superego is set up as its heir*."<sup>11</sup> Seven years before this, however, in an essay *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926), Freud stated the exact position that will be argued here—that the severe superego is a pathological formation: "Estrangement between the ego and the superego are of great significance in mental life. You will already have guessed that the superego is the vehicle of the phenomenon that we call conscience. Mental health very much depends on the superego's being normally developed—that is, on its having become sufficiently impersonal. And that is precisely what it is not in *neurotics, whose Oedipus complex has not passed through the correct process of transformation*. Their superego still confronts their ego as a strict father confronts a child; and their morality operates in a primitive fashion in that the ego gets itself punished by their superego."<sup>12</sup>

No statistical study is necessary to determine which was the official Freudian position and which the aberration. This last quote is the only one I find of this nature. The castration-severe superego postulate is reiterated over and over again. In regard to present-day status, a reading of current psychoanalytic journals unequivocally demonstrates the perpetuation of the official Freudian stance, although a few analysts have argued against it.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the harsh and punishing superego represents a normal or a pathological outcome of the oedipal crisis obviously has vast significance for the nature of morality. To equate morality with the superego and then to equate the superego with discipline and punishment is

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clearly to make a cripple of the moral function, to consign it to a diseased existence. It may be that for many, if not most, people their morality partakes precisely of this pathological formation, but we are not, therefore, obliged to call it health.

Let us look in detail at Freud's narrative of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. In *The Ego and the Id*, he was already arguing that not only is the superego the heir to that complex, but also that the repression of the complex cannot be accomplished without the formation of the superego, whose first job is to put an end to oedipal wishes. The dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the formation of the superego are simultaneous; they are each the cause of each other:

The ego ideal [superego] had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is to that revolutionary event that it owes its existence. Clearly the repression of the Oedipus complex was no easy task. The child's parents, and especially his father, were perceived as the obstacle to a realization of his Oedipus wishes; so his infantile ego fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself. It borrowed strength to do this, so to speak, from the father; and this loan was an extraordinarily momentous act. The superego retains the character of the father [in his most prohibiting, punishing aspects], while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression (under the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling and reading), the stricter will be the domination of the superego over the ego later on.<sup>54</sup>

In colloquial language, we may say that repressing the Oedipus complex is the job the superego is born to do. The very first words out of its mouth are: "Thou shalt not!" Do not desire thy mother or father, compete with thy father or mother, pretend to an adequate genital organ, overstep the limits of thy childhood. It understands authoritarianism at birth; we wonder how—if ever—it learns of democratic process.

In an essay published a year later, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), Freud discusses this problem at length. He begins by inquiring what causes the Oedipus complex to dissolve and give way to the latency period. Simply by asking that question Freud was doing something unusual; part of the answer is implied in the fact that the question is asked. Freud had never asked why, or for what reason,

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the oral stage is dissolved and gives way to the anal stage, or the anal to the genital. These questions did not seem worth asking because the assumption was that the developmental progression, oral-anal-genital, is a biopsychological given of everyone's psyche. The oral stage gives way to the anal stage because that is the way we are; our psyches are programmed at birth to undertake such a journey. With the oedipal stage, however, Freud finds such reasoning inadequate and, strangely enough, discovers the causes for the dissolution of the Oedipus complex in *actions taken by the parents*, not in the course of an inevitable biopsychological development. He begins the argument by stating and then rejecting the developmental concept. "Another view is that the Oedipus complex must collapse because the time has come for its disintegration, just as the milk-teeth fall out when the permanent ones begin to grow. Although the majority of human beings go through the Oedipus complex as an individual experience, it is nevertheless a phenomenon which is determined and laid down by heredity and which is bound to pass away according to programme when the next pre-ordained phase of development sets in. This being so, it is of no great importance what the occasions are which allow this to happen, or, indeed, whether such occasions can be discovered at all."<sup>55</sup>

This eminently reasonable argument, however, is rejected by Freud and, after a long discussion about the threat of castration, he declares with dogmatic certitude: "These connections justify the statement that the destruction of the Oedipus complex is brought about by the threat of castration."<sup>56</sup> A year later, in an essay concerned with the anatomical distinctions between the sexes, there has been an acceleration of the amount of violence needed to keep those oedipal wishes under control and Freud announces: "The Oedipus complex . . . in boys . . . is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration."<sup>57</sup> We may imagine that the severity of the superego, whose function it is to carry out this suppression, is increased accordingly. The more intense the oedipal strivings, the more energy is necessary to keep them under control, the harsher and more punishing the superego must become.

It is important to understand that, for Freud, the threat of castration is not simply an inward psychic anxiety that the child projects onto the parents. He believes that the intimidation is ever-present in the real

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world. Parents always, according to Freud, threaten that someone will remove the child's genital organ. In the world in which Freud lived, this was more than likely the case. In the case study of "Little Hans," Freud sets the background by describing Hans' parents, who were followers of Freud, people of progressive inclination who were attempting to raise their child in the most intelligent, humane way possible. On the very next page, Freud recounts that when Hans attempted to masturbate, his mother announced that she would call the doctor who would forcibly remove the child's penis.<sup>8</sup> We can imagine how, in that society, the less progressive, less humane parents behaved toward their children. For Freud, this openly stated threat to remove the child's penis is *the* precipitating cause of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex:

When the (male) child's interest turns to his genitals he betrays the fact by manipulating them frequently, and he then finds the adults do not approve of this behavior. More or less plainly, more or less brutally, a threat is pronounced that this part of him which he values so highly will be taken away from him. Usually it is from *women* that the threat emanates; very often they seek to strengthen their authority by a reference to the father or the doctor, who, so they say, will carry out the punishment. In a number of cases the women will themselves mitigate the threat in a symbolic manner by telling the child that what is to be removed is not his genital, which actually plays a passive part, but his hand, which is the active culprit . . .

Now it is my view that what brings about the destruction of the child's phallic genital organization is this threat of castration. Not immediately, it is true, and not without other influences being brought to bear as well. For to begin with the boy does not believe in the threat or obey it in the least. . . . It is not until a *freud* experience comes his way that the child begins to reckon with the possibility of being castrated, and then only hesitatingly and unwillingly, and not without making efforts to depreciate the significance of something he has himself observed.

The observation which finally breaks down his unbelief is the sight of the female genitals . . . with this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its detested effect.

. . . If the satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipus complex is to cost the child his penis, a conflict is bound to arise between his narcissistic interest in that part of his body and the libidinal cathexis of his parental objects. In this conflict the first of these forces normally triumphs: the child's ego turns away from the Oedipus complex.

. . . The object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications. The

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authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the superego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis. . . . The whole process has, on the one hand, preserved the genital organ—has averted the danger of its loss—and, on the other, *has paralyzed it—has removed its function*. This process ushers in the latency period, which now interrupts the child's sexual development.<sup>9</sup>

Thus is our morality, mankind's "higher nature," born in the environment of the penitentiary. Freud does not tell us what happens to the Oedipus complex in households where the parents never threaten castration. Such a situation is, clearly, unimaginable for him.

We may gain insight into the sources of this kind of distortion from observing the process of Freud's thought. After writing the text just cited, he is impelled to address the problem of the differences between men and women, boys and girls. He immediately recognizes that his description of the birth of the superego has gotten him into trouble when attempting to relate the developmental process in girls. It seems to me a more than reasonable conjecture that Freud's own infantile perception of the anatomical distinctions between the sexes was profoundly disturbing for him, that it did raise intense anxiety about the permanence of his own genital, and that he never quite recovered from this shock of nonrecognition. Confirmation of this hypothesis may be provided by the fact that nearly everything Freud has to say on the subjects of castration threat, the anatomical *and psychological* differences between boys and girls, and the relationship of the superego to these psychic events is touched with an air of fantasy, projection, and defensive theorizing. Directly after writing the long passage just quoted, Freud asks: "How does the corresponding development take place in little girls?" He goes on to wrestle with the question:

At this point our material—for some incomprehensible reason—becomes more obscure and full of gaps. The female sex, too, develops an Oedipus complex, a superego and a latency period. May we also attribute a phallic organization and a castration complex to it? The answer is in the affirmative, but these things cannot be the same as they are in boys. Here the feminist demand for equal rights for the sexes does not take us far, for the morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences

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of psychical development. "Anatomy is Destiny," to vary a saying of Napoleon's.

It is no mere coincidence that Freud's most famous putdown of women occurs right after a discussion of castration anxiety as midwife to the superego. Degrading women is one very significant masculine defense against castration anxiety. Freud goes on:

The little girl's clitoris behaves just like the penis to begin with; but, when she makes a comparison with a play fellow of the other sex, she perceives that she has "come off badly" and she feels this as a wrong done to her and as a ground for inferiority. . . . The essential difference thus comes about that the girl accepts castration as an accomplished fact, whereas the boy fears the possibility of its occurrence.

Because in this world the threat of castration is essential for the establishment of the moral quality in the psyche, it follows that little girls will have very little motivation to develop a conscience because they cannot have anxiety about what has already happened:

The fear of castration being thus excluded in the little girl, a powerful motive also drops out for the setting-up of a superego and for the breaking-off of the infantile organization. . . . The girl's Oedipus complex is much simpler than that of the small bearer of the penis; in my experience, it seldom goes beyond taking of her mother's place and the adopting of a feminine attitude towards the father.

The "beyond" in the last sentence, of course, refers to the erection of a strong, powerful, harsh and punishing superego. Toward the end of this discussion, Freud offers a caveat that does nothing except to underline his own ambivalence about these questions: "It must be admitted, however, that in general our insight into these developmental processes in girls is unsatisfactory, incomplete and vague."<sup>10</sup>

That lack of certitude did not prevent Freud, however, from making an even stronger statement, only one year later, about feminine failure to develop mankind's highest quality:

In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking. Castration has already had its effect, which was to force the child into the situation of the Oedipus complex. Thus the Oedipus complex escapes the

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fact which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's normal mental life. I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all this would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their superego which we have inferred above. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth.

And then comes what we, in this age of female demand for equality, have come to expect from men who both see and will not see the justice in the claim; we get the half apology: "I-did-not-really-mean-to-set-myself-up-above-all-women:

but we shall, of course, willingly agree that the majority of men are also far behind the masculine ideal and that all human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content."<sup>11</sup>

It is of great importance for us to try to understand why the foremost thinker of the twentieth century was capable of, and insisted upon, this kind of simplistic debasement of women. A full discussion of this belongs to a later chapter. But it is imperative to emphasize that a pathological anxiety about castration casts its dark shadow over the whole discussion. And this castration anxiety for the young boy comes not only—as Freud himself tells us—from the father as part of the oedipal struggle, but also significantly from the mother. She often is the parent who gives voice to actual castration threats; the sight of her genitals with the missing penis finally convinces the boy that there is a real danger that he will lose his own genital organ. She also, as Freud relates and as we shall discuss more fully later, wants a penis, wants a penis to replace the one she has "lost." What sensitive, intelligent little

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boy, intensely interested in such matters, would not conclude that the penisless mother wants nothing less than *his* own genital!

I am not arguing that Freud is telling us outlandish untruths. Little boys undoubtedly do suffer castration anxiety when their mothers threaten to have their penises cut off; that anxiety can, understandably, be heightened by the perception of the "organless" female genital; and all boys in the oedipal stage certainly assume that their fathers will counterattack and not allow the fulfillment of oedipal impulses. To conclude from all this, however, that in all circumstances—diseased as well as within normal range—the Oedipus complex is "literally smashed to pieces by the threat of castration" is to make a serious error. This last is a description of pathology. If the first experience the boy has with genital sexuality ends in such a traumatic way, everything we know about the compulsion to repeat and the formation of neurosis would indicate that when such a child—grown to adolescence—again faces the problems of genitality, heterosexuality, love, and adult sexual behavior, he will miserably fail to achieve a satisfactory resolution of these conflict situations. Adolescence, as we know, is a time of revisiting and redoing the oedipal situation. What adolescent male can have the courage to revisit, or the health to reexperience and transform, an Oedipus complex that ended so disastrously the first time round? Many, if not most, adolescents and young men find themselves in this exact state of neurosis; it is the job of a successful psychotherapeutic situation to lessen significantly castration anxiety that causes sexual dysfunction and makes loving impossible.

Freud, we may grant, has given us an accurate and penetrating description of the pathological ending of the Oedipus complex: Is there an alternative narrative, one wherein health triumphs, one that makes adult sexuality and love possible? Not quite surprisingly, such a description can be found within the body of Freud's own work. It is never openly stated that such a nonpathological resolution of the Oedipus complex is either desirable or possible; what we have are certain strong, unconscious indications in this direction—something more than a hint but less than a theory. The data that Freud gives us, however, speak for themselves.

At the end of *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), Freud tells us an etiological myth about the brothers of the primal horde and their father that

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purports to explain the origins of religion, civilization, moral order, and democracy. In this horde, mankind's original social situation, the father was an authoritarian monster who kept all the women to himself, leaving the younger men (his sons) with no possibility of heterosexual fulfillment. One day the sons united among themselves, overthrew, murdered, and ate the father, and took the women for their own use. Determined that no one should ever again assume such absolute authority, they lived in a state of equality with each other. The totem feast, wherein a godlike figure is eaten, was subsequently introduced to commemorate this awesome revolutionary experience and this, Freud comments, "was the beginning of many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion."<sup>12</sup>

It has never been established with any certainty whether Freud actually believed such an event had happened—once or a thousand times—in history, or whether he was merely trying to reconstruct the psychodynamics behind certain social and religious forms. What is certain is that Freud had absolutely no evidence of such an event or events, and therefore, no matter what he imagined it was, it was definitely a made-up story. Having been made up, Freud could have constructed it any way he wanted. He does *not* tell us that the brothers, intent on rebellion and parricide, got together and then became paralyzed by the threat of castration by the father, abandoned their oedipal goals in the interest of preserving their anatomy, and settled down to be obedient, latency children. Civilization, religion, social and moral order were not produced, as Freud tells us, by a renunciation of oedipal aims, but by *their fulfillment*. Only when the brothers succeeded in doing what every little oedipal boy imagines doing—killing the father and possessing his women—did a higher level of human existence become possible. Success in the pursuit of oedipal goals, not failure, makes adult life achievable.

What Freud gives us in *Totem and Taboo* is a parable for what really goes on in the successful, nonpathological resolution of the Oedipus complex. The healthy Oedipus complex dissolves for reasons exactly opposite to what Freud offers in his theoretical discussion. The male child imagines—in a way that is not quite clear—that he has accomplished his goals; he has obtained the mother and eliminated the father; he has taken his father's place. The father has been successfully dis-

patched and ingested, as in the story of the brothers. And it is this act of orally incorporating the father that produces the superego. The person who used to command "Do this! Don't do that!" is now inside the psyche's stomach, now barking orders that seem to be internal, not external—much as the duck in *Peter and the Wolf* continues to quack even when inside his devourer. It is a primitive process based on the original incorporation of the oral mother, but a process absolutely necessary for psychic health. Freud himself, in one of his last theoretical works, made the connection between cannibalism and the formation of the superego. "The basis of the process is what is called an 'identification'—that is to say, the assimilation of one ego to another one, as a result of which the first ego behaves like the second in certain respects, imitates it and in a sense takes it up into itself. Identification has been not unsuitably compared with the oral, cannibalistic incorporation of another person."<sup>13</sup> It seems clear from everything we know about the superego—the irrationality with which it can act, its inability to distinguish between positive and negative traits taken over from the parents, its commitment to harshness and brutality as well as benevolence—that its formation is truly an act of primitive incorporation.

It is not strange that the Oedipus complex should end with an incorporation, since every previous stage of libidinal development had been overcome and surpassed by a similar incorporative mechanism. The child moves from the oral to the anal stage only by incorporating the oral mother into itself, and the child who cannot accomplish such incorporation remains at least partially fixated in the oral stage. Having succeeded in introjecting the oral mother into itself, the child is free to expend its libidinal energies in another direction. The anal stage, similarly, is not left behind until anal cathexes to people or things have been incorporated into the psyche. This method of cathexis, incorporation, movement to another stage, is a fundamental given of psychic development. Why, then, should the oedipal stage be an exception? Why should the oedipal stage be the only psychic stage to end on a note of renunciation? The psyche is free to move on from the oedipal situation only when it has succeeded in incorporating its sexual and emotional cathexes.

The oedipal differs from previous stages of libidinal development in that it has a complex, unconscious narrative underlying it: the killing

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of the same-sex parent and the possession of the parent of the opposite sex. Even for a child of five, to accomplish such acts in reality must appear bizarre and (as Freud has said) frightening. And yet, psychic health and development demand that the child have the courage to imagine it. Failure to accomplish these acts imaginatively means failure to incorporate the cathexes of the Oedipus complex, and fixation in that stage. Hans Loewald has underlined this strange irony in human development: "Insofar as human beings strive for emancipation and individuation as well as for object love, parricide—on the plane of psychic action—is a developmental necessity." "On the plane of psychic action" refers clearly to what I am calling imaginative acts. The child does not have to do the acts; he or she is required to have the courage to imagine doing them. Loewald elaborates: "Without the guilty deed of parricide there is no autonomous self. And further, from the viewpoint of received morality, individuality and its maturity—I am not speaking of an unbridled individualism—is a virtue, . . . at any rate in modern Western civilizations. To live among these paradoxes appears to be our fate for the time being."<sup>14</sup>

Seen from this point of view, the threat of castration becomes not the essential situation for the establishment of a healthy superego but the greatest hindrance to accomplishing that result. The greater the actual or imagined threat of castration, the less the child will be inclined to risk—imaginatively—the accomplishment of oedipal goals, the more the child will retreat from the Oedipus complex, the less the superego will be internalized and the more it will speak in an external, authoritarian voice. The less the actual or imagined threat of castration, the more the child will be willing to risk the accomplishment of oedipal inclinations, the more the superego will be incorporated and speak with an internal voice. These two descriptions relate to each other as do sickness and health.

Everyone to some degree, even a rather neurotic person, imaginatively accomplishes the oedipal task. The revisiting and reworking of the Oedipus complex in adolescence is a crucial preparation for adult life. This recollecting of that experience works because the original oedipal adventure ended, to some degree, on a note of triumph. It is the job of adolescence to recall that triumph and expand upon it, enabling the young person to become independent of the sexual and

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emotional ties of childhood. Should a heightened threat of castration persist, along with the accompanying harsh and punishing superego, the chances of success are proportionally diminished.

When the natural process of liberation from infantile and childhood attachments fails, psychotherapy may provide an answer. And it is in one of Freud's case studies—that of "Little Hans"—that we find corroboration of each of the points being made here concerning the threat of castration and a healthy resolution of the Oedipus complex. Hans was the young son of a Viennese couple who were believers in Freud's theories and method. At the very beginnings of the oedipal phase Hans developed strong phobic reactions to going out into the street and expressed a particular acute anxiety about horses. The parents consulted with Freud, and it was decided that the father should become Hans' therapist with Freud as the supervising doctor. On the basis of the original evidence and the material that Hans brought up in the treatment, it was agreed by all the adults concerned that Hans was suffering from intense castration anxiety, not necessarily brought about, but certainly intensified, by his emerging Oedipus complex. After many months of therapy, Hans overcame his phobias and made a remarkable recovery from his illness.

Near the end of the treatment Hans had two significant dreams. The first was of a thinly disguised situation where he had managed to marry his mother and have many children with her. The second brought Hans a penis as large as his father's. Concerning the second dream, Freud relates the father's communication to him:

"On May 2nd Hans came to me in the morning. 'I say,' he said, 'I thought something today.' At first he had forgotten it, but later on he related what follows, though with signs of considerable resistance: "*The plumber came, and first he took away my behind with a pair of pliers, and then gave me another, and then the same with my widdler [penis]. He said: 'Let me see your behind!' and I had to turn round, and he took it away; and then he said: 'Let me see your widdler!'*"<sup>15</sup>  
Hans' father grasped the nature of this wishful phantasy, and did not hesitate a moment as to the only interpretation it could bear.  
'I: "He gave you a bigger widdler and a bigger behind."  
'Hans: "Yes."  
'I: "Like Daddy's because you'd like to be Daddy,"

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*'Hans: "Yes, and I'd like to have a moustach like yours, and hairs like yours." (He pointed to the hairs on my chest.)*

So successful was this imaginative fulfillment of oedipal strivings that it immediately produced remarkable changes. "In the course of the next few days," Freud writes, "Hans' mother wrote to me more than once to express her joy at the little boy's recovery."<sup>16</sup>

In summary, Freud writes unequivocally of the importance of these fantasy accomplishments for psychic health.

We have already considered Hans' two concluding phantasies, with which his recovery was rounded off. One of them, that of the plumber giving him a new and . . . a bigger widdler, was not merely a repetition of the earlier phantasy concerning the plumber and the bath [an expression of castration anxiety]. This new one was a *triumphant, wishful phantasy, and with it he overcame his fear of castration*. His other phantasy, which confessed to the wish to be married to his mother and to have many children by her, did not merely exhaust the content of the unconscious complexes which had been stirred up by the sight of the falling horse and which had generated his anxiety. It also corrected that portion of those thoughts which was entirely unacceptable for, instead of killing his father, it made him innocuous by promoting him to a marriage with Hans' grandmother. *With this phantasy both the illness and the analysis came to an appropriate end.*<sup>16</sup>

And Anna Freud, in her first major work, deals with this case at length, reemphasizing the importance of imaginative working through. "The analyst (who was Hans' father) had no difficulty in recognizing in these fantasies the fulfillment of the two wishes which had never been fulfilled in reality. Hans now had—at least in imagination—a genital organ like that of his father and also children with whom he could do what his mother did with his little sister."<sup>17</sup>

It seems almost unnecessary, at this point, to emphasize that we are not told that Hans achieved psychic health by reconciling himself to the fact that his Oedipus complex was smashed to pieces by the threat of castration. The intensity of that threat, in fact, was the cause of Hans' illness. He did not overcome the intense anxiety manifested in his phobic reactions by withdrawing from oedipal impulses. Exactly the contrary. Health came when he had the courage—in his particular case, with his father's permission and reassurance—to play the role of

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Oedipus with all his imaginative power. The picture that Freud drew, in the later part of his life, of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the establishment of a harsh and punishing superego cannot endure as anything except a description of a situation fraught with the probability of pathology. Consummation, not renunciation, is the way to psychic health.

Why did Freud reject, in his conscious theoretical works, a truth that had been clearly perceived unconsciously with Hans and the etiological myth of the brothers? Inadequacy of intellect cannot be the answer. We must look to the area of psychic conflict for explanation. Almost all of our evidence points to the fact that Freud was fixated on the problem of castration anxiety, a fixation that made it impossible for him to think clearly about the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the beginnings of the superego. Castration anxiety for Freud is not limited to the male child's concern that the father will eradicate his penis. An earlier stage of castration anxiety also exists, one that centers on the prohibition of masturbation, and here the primary enemasculator is the mother. She threatens castration as the punishment for masturbation; her penisless genital provides the final proof that the permanent removal of the penis is a real possibility.

When Freud, therefore, began to discuss the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and its relation to castration anxiety, these two stages of anxiety and the two executioners (female and male) became conflated one with the other. The father's projected threat to retaliate on the small boy for the latter's oedipal desires could not be thought of independently of the more ancient anxiety centered on the mother. The dread of the mother and the rage engendered by her prohibition of sexual pleasure, therefore, cast their shadows on the whole discussion of the termination of the Oedipus conflict and the origin of the superego. Freud revenged himself on all women-mothers by constructing a theory that established their genital and moral equipment as vastly inferior. The theory of morality was a casualty of that unnecessary vengeance. The superego took on a harsh and brutal configuration, not only because it incorporated the father in his most merciless aspects, but also because it internalized the disciplining and punishing mother who had her own singular reasons for separating the boy from his penis. The denial of full equality for women makes it impossible to

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think clearly about a theory of morality. The first step in constructing an adequate psychoanalytic moral theory is to disavow the need to take retribution from women and mothers. Freud was incapable of that renunciation; the moral theory of the harsh and punishing superego was the consequence.

# 6

## The Harsh and Punishing Superego

**F**REUD BELIEVED that the catastrophic circumstances inherent in the origin of the superego determined its nature throughout its existence. Born in “the valley of the shadow of death,” it became permanently characterized by harsh and punishing attributes. A brutal and disciplining superego was as inevitable for Freud as the Oedipus complex itself.

Freud gave very little indication that he understood that the superego is historically determined, that it changes profoundly as society changes. His overriding tendency was to regard the superego as immutable, like the drives, biologically not socially determined. “For this superego is as much a representative of the id as of the external world. It came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id’s libidinal impulses—namely, the two parents . . . Only in this way was it possible for the Oedipus complex to be surmounted. This superego retained essential features of the introjected persons—their strength, their severity, their inclination to supervise and to punish.”<sup>34</sup> He never distinguished between the biopsychological inevitability of the superego and the *particular form* (harsh or loving; authoritarian or liberating; racist, sexist, or egalitarian); it takes, Freud

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had as much trouble imagining a loving and benevolent superego as he had envisioning a nonbrutal end to the Oedipus complex.

In the usual circumstance, the superego does not take on its more or less permanent attributes until late adolescence or very early adulthood. Social and cultural circumstances play a crucial role in determining its final form. No matter what may have been the particular narrative of the oedipal—castration—enthronement-of-the-superego time in the life of an individual psyche, the superego of a conforming person (and most people fit this description) in a Nazi society will differ profoundly from that of a conforming person in a liberal, democratic society. As one further proof that the superego, as such, may not be equated with morality, it is of interest to observe that one cannot argue that a conforming Nazi will have *less* superego than a conforming liberal democrat. It is easy to imagine a young Nazi berating himself and feeling gully or ashamed about his failure to live up to Nazi ideals; his superego would certainly punish him for his sins against the Nazi faith. A Nazi superego would differ in quality from a liberal, democratic superego, but it would not be any less of a superego. We who live in a liberal, democratic, racist, sexist society should not be shocked to discover strong evidence of liberalism, democracy, racism, and sexism in our superegos. Every superego is more or less corrupt, more or less immoral. A Nazi-society superego is merely the exaggerated form of the moral contradiction existent within any superego.

One very important reason that Freud writes so often of the superego as enemy is the fact that he lived his life in a culture that was repressive of healthy sexual expression and activity. And that repression was impossible without the power of the punishing superego. Freud’s picture of a superego intent on repressing instinctual drives and an ego trying to mediate between an authoritarian conscience and legitimate drives desiring fulfillment results from living within a culture intent on degrading the sexual function. As methods of child rearing since Freud have become less authoritarian, as the repression of legitimate (healthy) sexual desires has lessened, there is no question that the typical superego in our society has become less harsh and punishing, less in conflict with the demands of the sexual drives. In regard to sexuality, at least, our superego has become less corrupt.

Once we grant that the particular attributes of the superego are sub-

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ject to change under social influence, we have opened the door to a much more complex view of moral control than that given in Freud's id-derived (biologically determined) approach. Even if we grant that the superego is always, to some degree, harsh and punishing, we may observe that a good part of the history of the world derives from the changes and permutations in *that degree*. The malleability of the superego, its capacity to integrate more and more of the dictates of conscience, is what makes moral progress within society possible.

Since Freud, there has been a rather faint chorus of demurrals from psychoanalytic theorists on the question of the inevitable brutality of the superego. Both Heinz Hartmann and Roy Schafer have recognized that the crucial consideration in regard to superego formation is that it is constructed with what is given, not with what is necessarily moral. "I mention the well-known fact," writes Hartmann, "that pleasure premia are in store for the child who conforms to the demands of reality and of socialization; but they are equally available if this conforming means the acceptance by the child of erroneous and biased views which the parents hold of reality."<sup>12</sup> And Schafer tells us: "Exhibitionistic tendencies transmitted from parent to child will carry with them implied or explicit ideals for maximally satisfying display. Some show-offs may succeed more than another. The same for parental passion, greed, cruelty, sensuality, etc."<sup>13</sup> Neither Hartmann nor Schafer used this fundamental insight in an attempt to reconstruct the theory of the superego. The theorist who most perceptively understood the unacceptable rigidity in Freud's concept of the superego was the psychoanalytically influenced sociologist Talcott Parsons, who made use of insights about the nature of the superego to construct a global theory of society. It is of value to quote him at length:

Freud's insight was profoundly correct when he focused on the element of moral standards. This is, indeed, central and crucial, but it does seem that Freud's view was too narrow. The inescapable conclusion is that not only moral standards, but *all the components of the common culture* are internalized as part of the personality structure. Moral standards, indeed, cannot in this respect be dissociated from the content of the orientation patterns which they regulate. . . . the content of both character-attitudes and cognitive-status definitions have cultural, hence normative significance. This content is cultural and learned. Neither what the human object is, in

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the most significant respects, nor what it *means* emotionally, can be understood as given independently of the nature of the interactive process itself; and the significance of moral norms themselves very largely relates to this fact.

. . . the cognitive definition of the object world does not seem to have been problematical to Freud. He subsumed it all under "external reality," in relation to which "ego-functions" constitute a process of adaption. He failed to take explicitly into account the fact that the frame of reference in terms of which objects are cognized, and therefore adapted to, is cultural and thus cannot be taken for granted as given, but must be internalized as a condition of the development of mature ego-functioning. In this respect it seems to be correct to say that Freud introduced an unreal separation between the superego and the ego—the lines between them are in fact difficult to define in theory. . . . the distinction which Freud makes between the superego and the ego—that the former is internalized, by identification, and that the latter seems to consist of responses to external reality rather than of internalized culture—is not tenable. . . . internalization is a very special kind of learning which Freud seemed to confine to the superego.

. . . The essential point seems to be that Freud's view seems to imply that the object, as cognitively significant, is given independently of the actor's internalized culture, and that superego standards are then applied to it. This fails to take account of the extent to which the constitution of the object and its moral appraisal are part and parcel of the *same* fundamental cultural patterns; it gives the superego an appearance of arbitrariness and dissociation from the rest of the personality—particularly from the ego—which is not wholly in accord with the facts.<sup>14</sup>

The superego is as much conditioned by reality as is the ego. It has many fewer "eternal" attributes than were given to it by Freud.

Is the harsh and punishing superego a pathological configuration? In places, Freud argued that it was. "We can either accept it as a fact that in obsessional neurosis a superego of this severe kind emerges, or we can take the regression of the libido as the fundamental characteristic of the affection and attempt to relate the severity of the superego to it. And indeed the superego, originating as it does from the id, cannot dissociate itself from the regression and defusion of instinct which have taken place there. We cannot be surprised if it becomes harsher, unkindler and more tormenting than where development has been normal."<sup>15</sup> And in another essay Freud discusses the formation of symptoms—a pathological event—as the result of repression of an instinctual impulse, and says of such a symptom:

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The ego finds its unity threatened and impaired by this intruder, and it continues to struggle against the symptom just as it fended off the original instinctual impulse. All this produces the picture of a neurosis. It is no contradiction to this that, in undertaking the repression, the ego is at bottom following the commands of its superego—commands which, in their turn, originate from influences in the external world that have found representation in the superego. The fact remains that the ego *has* taken sides with those powers, that in it their demands have more strength than the instinctual demands of the id, and that the ego is the power which sees the repression in motion against the portion of the id concerned and which fortifies the repression by means of the anticathexis of resistance. The ego has come into conflict with the id in the service of the superego and of reality.<sup>6</sup>

Severe superego repression and neurotic symptom formation, we are being told, are two aspects of the same process.

It is interesting to observe in this last quotation from Freud a demonstration of the unreal split between ego, superego, and id that Parsons argues against. Freud says that the ego, in order to serve the interests of the superego and of reality (that is, the parents and society) represses an instinctual impulse of the id. Ego interests and id interests clash. But if we ask ourselves *why* the ego would want to serve the interests of the parents and the community, is it not clear that it does so because it wants love and approval from them? Is the desire for love and approval not an id impulse? The conflict is not between the ego and an id impulse. The conflict arises from the ego's attempt to satisfy two opposing id impulses: one that would fulfill the drive and the other that wants to be loved by parents who, for whatever reason, oppose the drive. Parents and society dead set against adolescent sexual fulfillment is a perfect representation of such a symptom-forming situation. That the superego would tend to grow in severity and harshness in such a situation seems obvious.

When Freud comments that the task of psychoanalysis is to free the ego from the demands of the superego, he does so because he has only the punishing, pathological aspects of its form in mind. Roy Schafer is one of the few analytic theorists who has clearly perceived these relationships. He observes: "In other words, severity of superego function testifies to the inadequacy of superego formation. It is therefore no great jump to recognize that disturbances in the parental superego

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play a double role in disturbing the child's superego development: it exaggerates the oedipal conflict and provides a faulty model for dealing with it. In this way, superego pathology is perpetrated." And health involves leaving the comforting and encouraging aspects of the superego in place: "The ego values, depends on, and loves this inner, paternal source of strength and organization. As with the id, the ego's relations with the superego are not simply antagonistic and the therapeutic task with regard to the superego is not simply to establish the ego's independence from it."<sup>7</sup> One may wonder how an ego free from all superego incentives, such as encouragement and approval, could function at all.

It may seem strange that there was need within the psychoanalytic community to make the argument that the superego was, in addition to its punishing-disciplining activities, also involved with imperatives about honesty, love, loyalty, concern with other people. It was Freud's overwhelming involvement with the pathological aspects of superego formation that made it necessary for Hartmann to state: "Not only the prohibitions of the parents, but also their love survives in the relation of the superego to the ego." He goes on to argue: "The much discussed questions of whether morals are, because of their origins, of necessity 'authoritarian' is, it seems to me, not always put in the right way. Every moral system has its origins in the relations of the child to adults who are not only loved and hated but also persons in authority. However, the value systems evolving from these origins may have an authoritarian, a nonauthoritarian, or an antiauthoritarian character."<sup>8</sup> The implication in this, though Hartmann does not spell it out, is that the relative authoritarian or nonauthoritarian nature of the moral system is intimately dependent on the relative harshness or benevolence of the superego. It was Schafer in his important article "The Loving and Beloved Superego in Freud's Structural Theory" who finally elaborated the importance of the nonpunishing aspects of superego functioning:

There is a loving and beloved aspect of the superego. It represents the loved and admired oedipal and preoedipal parents who provide love, protection, comfort, and guidance, who embody and transmit certain ideals and moral structures more or less representative of their society, and who, even in their punishing activities, provide needed expressions of parental care, con-

tact, and love. The maturing child will identify himself with these parental aspects. . . . By means of this identification the child ultimately attains the position of being able to love, protect, comfort, and guide himself and his children after him, and of doing so according to relatively ego-syntonic, culture-syntonic and impersonal sets of ideals and moral standards.<sup>9</sup>

It is another testimony of Freud's ambivalence about moral questions that he also knew all this to be true. The transference is an essential instrument in any successful therapy, and the superego, Freud argues in one of the last things he wrote, is essential for the operation of transference: "If the patient puts the analyst in the place of his father (or mother), he is also giving him the power which his superego exercises over his ego, since his parents were, as we know, the origin of his superego. The new superego now has an opportunity for a sort of *after-education* of the neurotic; it can correct mistakes for which his parents were responsible in educating him."<sup>10</sup> Clearly the task of psychoanalysis is not to free the ego from the superego but to use the benevolent, encouraging aspects of the superego for therapeutic effect. This becomes possible because, regardless of the actual parents' adequacy or inadequacy, the superego has the capacity for idealization. The superego carries within itself an image of ideal parents, ideal nurturing, ideal psychic functioning. These ideal images are manifest in the positive therapeutic transference. Any individual whose aptitude for such idealization is severely crippled will be incapable of an adequate positive transference and, therefore, incapable of being helped by psychoanalytic therapy. The possibilities of idealization make the after-education and the correction of mistakes that Freud discusses a reasonable aim of the therapeutic situation. The harsh, punishing, pathological aspects of the superego are a hindrance to such a positive resolution, and have to be overcome if therapy is to be successful.

It is a reasonable assumption, I believe, that this whole discussion, both here and within the psychoanalytic community, would have been unnecessary had not Freud argued so vehemently the position that the superego is, essentially, corrupt. In *The Ego and the Id*, where it first makes its appearance, we are immediately told that the superego is erected around the dread of castration and that "even ordinary normal morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality." It is from this, indeed, that the conception arises of a higher being who

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deals out punishment inexorably."<sup>11</sup> This Old Testament morality continues when Freud argues, a year later: "It is easily conceivable that, thanks to the definition of instinct which occurs along with this introduction into the ego, the severity was increased. The superego—the conscience at work in the ego—may then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge."<sup>12</sup> And, finally, in *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), where Freud summarizes his position on many issues, we are told that we cannot escape a corrupt superego even if the parents have been kind and loving. A harsh and punishing conscience is humankind's fate: "The superego seems to have made a one-sided choice and to have picked out only the parents' strictness and severity, their prohibiting and punitive function, whereas the loving care seems not to have been taken over and maintained. If the parents have really enforced their authority with severity we can easily understand the child's in turn developing a severe superego. But, contrary to our expectations, experience shows that the superego can acquire the same characteristic of relentless severity even if the upbringing had been mild and kindly and had so far as possible avoided threats and punishments."<sup>13</sup> Since neither Freud—nor anyone else as far as I can discover—has presented us with case material wherein a kind and loving upbringing has resulted in a relentlessly severe superego (and, certainly, Hans' parents with their threats of actual castration will not do), there seems to be no support for this most inconsistent argument.

Putting aside Freud's exaggerated vocabulary in regard to morality, there seems to be nonetheless a tendency of superego judgments toward harshness and severity. I am reminded of an occasion that occurred when one of my daughters was quite young. I was reading her Bible stories and had arrived at the narrative of David and Absalom. Why did that happen? she inquired. I, making use of my own interpretation and version of the story, explained that God was punishing David for taking away another man's wife. She stopped to meditate for a full forty seconds and then commented: "The punishment was too great." Anyone with a sensitive relationship to his or her own moral imperatives recognizes that superego punishments are inclined to be much more severe than the trespass would indicate. This tendency toward severity, if established as a truth, does not necessarily present a picture of psychic health. In itself it may be one important contribu-

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tion to the fragility of the human psyche, one significant and inevitable distortion of reality that a healthy psyche must deal with and overcome.

Freud and others have given many reasons for the harshness of the superego. First, there does seem to be a very primitive form of expectation of punishment as a result of trespass. The trespass may be of a purely ritualistic, magical nature with absolutely no moral content and the expected punishment equally primitive. The concept of taboo, which we have observed in nonliterate cultures, represents this archaic trespass-punishment configuration. It seems probable that all children in our culture go through a stage, in infancy or early childhood, where they believe in the inexorable workings of taboo as much as did the ancient Hawaiians. The Orthodox Jew in our culture, whose every meal is surrounded by taboos, demonstrates the staying power of such primitive notions. This sense of taboo, this primitive conception of trespass-punishment, is somehow related to the more developed concepts of morality and guilt, and the superego incorporates these more ancient attitudes into its own structure. The Orthodox Jew, for instance, undoubtedly feels moral about the observation of dietary laws and a keen sense of guilt should he break them. Freud, of course, observed this when writing *Totem and Taboo*: "If I am not mistaken, the explanation of taboo also throws light on the nature and origin of conscience. It is possible, without any stretching of the sense of the terms, to speak of a taboo conscience or, after a taboo has been violated, of a taboo sense of guilt. Taboo conscience is probably the earliest form in which the phenomenon of conscience is met with."<sup>14</sup>

Taboo morality, taboo conscience, taboo guilt, taboo anxiety are all primitive conceptions; they are included in the superego and contribute to its severity. In the healthy, mature psyche they play a small, not a major, role in determining morality. In some preliterate cultures the food of the chief is taboo to anyone else; should someone eat it, even unknowingly, he or she is subject to death. In our society many people cannot go against the wishes of the president simply because he is the president. Both these circumstances represent a morality—of sorts. A superego overly dependent on taboo mechanisms for its functioning is a superego a mature person learns to live without.

A second factor that contributes to the severity of the superego is

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actual harsh treatment by the parents. As we shall see, Freud's ambivalence about analyzing this situation was complete; a harsh superego can result *both* from cruel treatment *and* from a loving and mild upbringing. "If the father was hard, violent and cruel," writes Freud in *Dostoevsky and Parricide* (1928)—and no one can read *The Brothers Karamazov* without comprehending the relationship of cruelty and the harsh superego—"the superego takes over those attributes from him and, in the relations between the ego and it, the passivity which was supposed to have been repressed is reestablished. The superego has become sadistic, and the ego becomes masochistic. . . . A great need for punishment develops in the ego, which in part offers itself as a victim to Fate, and in part finds satisfaction in ill-treatment by the superego (that is, the sense of guilt). For every punishment is ultimately castration and, as such, a fulfillment of the old passive attitude towards the father."<sup>15</sup>

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, however, Freud argued the opposite and the same view in one paragraph: "Experience shows, however, that the severity of the superego which a child develops in no way corresponds to the severity of treatment which he has himself met with. . . . A child who has been very leniently brought up can acquire a very strict conscience. But it would also be wrong to exaggerate this independence; it is not difficult to convince oneself that severity of upbringing does also exert a strong influence on the formation of the child's superego. What it amounts to is that in the formation of the superego and the emergence of a conscience innate constitutional factors and influences from the real environment act in combination."<sup>16</sup> It is a most reasonable argument, I believe, that constitutional factors do affect: the harshness or mildness of the superego; some people are born with an inclination toward an inflexible, harsh moral control system. To say this, however, is a long way from saying that a child can develop a "very strict conscience" even if gently brought up or, as Freud said in the quote from *New Introductory Lectures* cited earlier, that a relentless, severe superego may result even from "mild and kindly" upbringing. One wonders what, or whom, Freud had in mind. He never gives us any actual data that would indicate such a denouement.

It is possible that Freud was thinking of the situation of "spoiling"

the child. We can imagine that when parents place almost no limits on a child's behavior, indulge it to the utmost in its inclinations, seemingly give the opposite of a harsh and cruel upbringing—and the child responds negatively to such parental aggression—that in such a case a child may develop a severe superego. Spoiling is not a case of kindly nurturing, but its opposite. Parents spoil a child either out of aggression toward it or because of a fear within themselves of showing any aggression toward the child. Such spoiled children end up furious with their parents; in certain circumstances where the parents demonstrated an intense ambivalence about the spoiling behavior, it may happen that the child, out of anger toward them and the perception of their aggression and ambivalence toward him, develops an inflexible, harsh superego in an attempt to resolve these conflicts. Spoiling is not love. A child brought up unambivalently lovingly will evolve a severe superego—because of innate constitutional factors—only in rare circumstances, circumstances so rare that a theory of the superego cannot be built upon them. Constitutional factors are significant, but in regard to punishing or loving aspects of the superego, they cannot compare with the importance of the quality of nurturing the child receives.

A third factor contributing to the severity of the superego is what Freud describes as "the decision of instinct," which happens at the end of the Oedipus complex and the first formative moments of the superego.<sup>17</sup> What precisely this means is anyone's speculation. It represents Freud at his most metapsychological; the phrase was never explained by him or anyone else. He must have dimly perceived some process going on, but he was not able to tell us about it in conscious argument.

A fourth mechanism that increases the severity of the superego is that whereby aggression that cannot be expressed outward is turned inward toward the psyche itself. We are now most familiar with this psychic procedure. People who have difficulty in expressing normal amounts of aggression, people who deny themselves a reasonable amount of aggressive satisfaction and sublimation, may become masochistic or depressed—or both—as the repressed aggression turns back onto the self. Because the superego, in Freud's view, begins with the refusal to live through oedipal aggressive inclinations, the aggression that was originally aimed at the father or mother—being incapable of

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even imaginative satisfaction—allies itself with the newborn superego and tyrannizes over the ego.

His aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from—that is, it is directed towards his own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as superego, and which now, in the form of 'conscience', is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would like to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals. The tension between the harsh superego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city.<sup>18</sup>

That grisly metaphor should alert us that there may be something which Freud is not expressing. Does it make any difference, at that crucial moment of the genesis of the superego, how the parents behave? Even with garrisons in conquered cities there is a vast degree of difference in the amount of rape, pillage, and just plain tyranny exhibited by, for instance, the Huns and the British. As conqueror is inevitable, all of us, I assume, would rather be garrisoned by General Braddock than by Attila. Does the parents' behavior help determine whether the domination of the superego is more or less tyrannical? No question that it does. A father or mother who actually threatens castration, or merely expresses great anger at the child's ordinary misbehavior, or communicates to the child, in the way that parents know so well, that the child must be a most sinful and despicable person to even imagine doing such terrible things to its parents—such instruction cannot help but affect the degree of repression of aggressive feelings that the child imagines is necessary. As the severity of the superego is dependent on the child's repressing its own anger at the parents, if repression admits of degrees, so must the severity of the superego. The relative harshness with which the child is treated during the oedipal stage cannot help but influence the kind of superego that results.

A fifth contribution to superego severity is independent of the parents' behavior. All children, but particularly those with a strong aggressive component in their temperament, will try to deal with their own inclinations toward aggression by projecting these onto the par-

ents: The child denies its own anger by pretending the anger originates in the caretakers, saying, in effect: "It is not I who am furious with them, but they who feel hateful toward me." Anger projected onto the parents will easily settle in the superego, one of whose jobs it is to contain aggressive inclinations, and the superego will take on the intensity of the original anger toward the parents. "The authority now turns into his superego and enters into possession of all the aggressiveness which a child would have liked to exercise against it."<sup>19</sup> This process will unfold itself regardless of whether the parents are essentially loving or hostile toward the child, but here again the parents' stance cannot help but influence the manner in which this conflict is ultimately resolved.

The last circumstance I shall consider that is purported to intensify superego severity—the situation wherein the child is prevented from expressing legitimate aggressive feelings—is related to other phenomena that have already been discussed. Herman Nunberg observes:

One might therefore assume that the intensity of the sense of guilt is dependent on the severity of the person who rears the child. This is, however, not always valid, since an excessive feeling of guilt may develop in boys, for instance, whose fathers were indulgent and weak, or in a boy whose father was absent altogether while he grew up surrounded by women who spoiled him. The more love a child receives and the more indulgent his parents are, the more his aggression may be inhibited and changed into feelings of guilt. Thus children grow up who are exceedingly good and who suffer enormously from the excessive burden of their feeling of guilt. The aggression prevented from reaching the outside world is bound to turn against the ego and to perform its work of destruction inside [within the superego].<sup>20</sup>

Nunberg is confusing the situation of spoiling and the circumstance where the child is prohibited from expressing his or her aggressive feelings. To say that the more a child is indulged, the more his aggression is inhibited is a contradiction in terms. To be indulged means to be permitted an excess of instinctual satisfaction; it means an emphasis on drive impulses over the reality principle. The truly spoiled child is permitted too much aggression toward the parents. But let us take the case wherein the child is told over and over again how much the parents love it, in return for which the child must express only affection

toward his or her nurturers. There comes a time in every child's life when it feels the need to express toward the parents, with great intensity, "I hate you." In any reasonably nonauthoritarian household, the child will at some point risk open expression of such words. If the parents express dismay or horror—or extreme anger—that the child could entertain such devilish feelings, then there is no question that the repression and turning inward of these hostile emotions may, especially in households where superego prerogatives are held in high esteem, result in severe superego formation. In such circumstance, the child's distress is augmented because the parents maintain a very problematic relationship to their own aggression.

It is of importance to observe that every one of these circumstances which contribute to the harshness of the superego—whether the initial conflict begins with the parents, the child, or the "diffusion of instinct"—reveals, as an initiating cause, the failure to deal adequately with aggression. In each situation of conflict, if aggression is handled in a more productive manner, the superego maintains itself at a lesser degree of severity. Since Freud we have become increasingly aware of how important aggression is in the etiology of neurosis; it is certainly as important as, if not more important than, sexual dysfunction. If the failure to adequately sublimate, repress, and diffuse aggressive energy produces a pathological psyche, it would not be unreasonable to assert that the harsh and punishing superego, which evolves from the same inadequate psychic transactions, deserves the attribution "pathological."

The emphasis upon the severity of superego imperatives within psychoanalytic thought has exaggerated the importance of guilt and the desire for punishment as guides to moral action. There has been a tendency to regard as the same mechanism that which produces remorse and the need for punishment in Raskolnikov and that which keeps us from axing an old lady in the first place. As Freud correctly pointed out many times, people feel guilty about aggressive desires that they never really intend to carry out, and this is especially important for children in the oedipal phase who feel strong aggressive inclinations toward the parents. If we ask, however, what it is that keeps a reasonably healthy adult from acting out his or her hostile inclinations (some of which have a primitive intensity), guilt and the fear of punishment



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are too simplistic as answers. The Raskolnikov syndrome of acting out followed by intense guilt is itself a pathological configuration. "Let us recall the type of patients," writes Edith Jacobson, "who constantly act out impulsively and then pay for their sins with depressive conditions and the destructive results of their actions; persons whose superego is punitive but, in spite of this, never serves either as a moral preventative or as a moral incentive. Fundamentally their moral conflict appears to survive and to remain unchanged from one depression and one impulsive action to the next."<sup>21</sup> The problem with the harsh and punishing superego is that it is not, in itself, capable of forestalling such acting out in the first place; the difficulty with guilt as the regulator of moral action is that, many times, it exhibits no preventive power.

Unlike Raskolnikov, the average reasonably healthy human being is prevented from acting out primitive aggressive inclinations by the fact that he or she is not that primitive. Ordinary human beings refrain from killing old ladies because they are not that ill, and a crucial indicator of their health is a system of moral control—as deeply indebted to conscience as to superego—that operates *before* the act. Conscience is never pathological. The same cannot be said of the harsh, punishing, severe superego, riddled with guilt and a masochistic need for punishment.

A fundamental concern, if not *the* fundamental concern, in evaluating the relative health or pathology of the superego is the determination of whether it speaks with an internal or an external voice. When one hears the clear voice of the moral imperative, is it "them" talking or "me" talking? Psychoanalyst Otto Isakower has said that the "trick" in raising a child is to get the superego inside its head.\* We are discussing relative internality or externality. No one presents such a picture of psychic integration that he or she completely perceives moral injunctions as coming only from the self, and conversely, even the most pathological person has some internal recognition of behavioral dictates. The more external the superego is perceived to be, the more pathological its formation, the less capable it is of curbing acting out in a preventive way and the less useful it becomes for integrating the whole psyche. The significant internalization of the superego is a pro-

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found moment in the history of an individual psyche and in the history of culture. The transcendent scene in the First Book of Kings, where the prophet Elijah ascends to the top of the mountain to communicate with God and finds that the Lord is not in the "great and strong wind" or the earthquake or the fire but in a "still small voice"<sup>22</sup> is a profound symbolic narrative of the internalization of the superego, its reunion with the conscience.

For Freud, however, except at rare moments, God is always in the fire and the earthquake. "The institution of conscience was at bottom an embodiment, first of parental criticism, and subsequently of that of society—a process which is repeated in what takes place when a tendency towards repression develops out of a prohibition or obstacle that came in the first instance from without. The voices, as well as the undefined multitude, are brought into the foreground again by the disease, and so the evolution of conscience is reproduced regressively.

... His conscience then confronts him in a regressive form as a hostile influence from without."<sup>23</sup> And no more profound metaphor for the externality of the superego can be imagined than Freud's image, given earlier, of a garrison in a conquered city. In Freud's narrative of the birth of the superego, keeping it primarily external is a requirement of health. Who could completely internalize an intense threat of castration without suffering severe pathology? An unremediable split between ego and superego is a necessary postulate in the Freudian canon. Such a split requires, and results from, the externality of the superego.

What enables us to separate ourselves from the theoretical bind that enclosed Freud's thought on this issue is not the fact that he suffered from a defect of personality, of which we are free. The basic disagreement with Freud on this issue arises out of a profound change in culture to which he, in great part, contributed. We view the superego differently because we disagree profoundly with the culture in which Freud lived on the question of how children should be raised, particularly in regard to how much authoritarianism (force, threat of punishment, preservation of the harsh aspects of hierarchy between parents and children) is necessary to the process. We endeavor to get the superego inside the child's psyche as much as is possible. Freud's culture could not even understand that as a goal: an external conscience, it was felt, was a necessity for adequate worldly functioning. In regard to

\* Personal communication, 1956.

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parents and children the question is how hierarchical and tyrannical, as against how mutual and equal, the nurturing process should be. Full equality between parents and children is not possible, but that does not imply that the necessary hierarchical (and tyrannical) stance does not admit to degree. The harsh, punishing, severe, and *external* superego is the inevitable precipitate of an authoritarian child-rearing pattern. The loving, comforting, encouraging, *internal* superego proceeds from a concept of child care that insists that "maternal" nurturing need not disappear when the father enters the child's life.

Jean Piaget wrote about a post-Freudian generation, struggling to free itself from the cultural pattern of authoritarian child rearing:

Such a form of education leads to that perpetual state of tension which is the appanage of so many families, and which the parents responsible for it attribute, needless to say, to the inborn wickedness of the child and to original sin. But frequent and legitimate in many respects as is the child's revolt against such methods, he is nevertheless inwardly decimated in the majority of cases. Unable to distinguish what is good in his parents and what is open to criticism (in the terms of the discussion here, because the superego by itself cannot make such a distinction), incapable, owing to the "ambivalence" of his feelings towards them, of criticizing his parents objectively, the child ends in moments of attachment by inwardly admitting their right to authority they wield over him (the severe superego being a perfect instrument to accomplish such a process). Even when grown up, he will be unable, except in very rare cases, to break loose from the affective schemes acquired in this way, and will be as stupid with his own children as his parents were with him.<sup>24</sup>

In essence, what Piaget is saying is that as long as the authoritarian superego reigns supreme, no one can really grow up. This emphasizes how important it is, if a culture wishes to produce real adults, that the Oedipus complex end on a note of triumph, not disaster. Only then can the superego lodge primarily inside the child's head.

The existence of a primarily external superego becomes probable in a psyche habituated to the process of psychic splitting. The mechanism of splitting between the good mother and the bad mother, between the positive, loving aspects of nurturing and the negative, aggressive effluences of the process, has been emphasized in the writings of Melanie Klein. Health, Klein tells us, depends on the healing of that

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inevitable split, and pathology results from the failure to achieve reconciliation. It is my view that an emphasis on the severe, punishing aspects of the superego emanates from the need to perpetuate that original divide, from an incurable ambivalence toward the primary nurturer. Klein writes cogently and simply about what is necessary to achieve reconciliation.

For I assume the ego develops largely round this good object, and the identification with the good object shows externally in the young child's copying the mother's activities and attitudes; this can be seen in his play and often also in his behavior towards younger children. A strong identification with the good mother makes it easier for the child to identify also with a good father and later with other friendly figures. As a result, his inner world comes to contain predominantly good objects and feelings, and these good objects are felt to respond to the infant's love. All this contributes to a stable personality and makes it possible to extend sympathy and friendly feelings to other people. It is clear that a good relation of the parents to each other and to the child . . . play a vital role in the success of this process.<sup>25</sup>

It is more than probable that Freud would have found such an analysis—unencumbered with any reference to the drives and their diffusion and vicissitudes—inadequate, if not sentimental in the extreme. It would be profitable to attempt to discover the ambivalence Freud demonstrates toward the great, omnipotent, engulfing, pre-oedipal mother: the primary nurturer. We may discover that the harsh and punishing superego not only owes its nativity to the threatened loss of the penis, but also that it is brought into being partially to substitute for the hard, indomitable, overpowering penis itself—that penis, one of whose main functions is to make impassable the road that runs backward to the powerlessness of infancy. One of the primary functions of the harsh and punishing superego—and the belief in its inevitable formation—is to forbid regressive tendencies that may lead to reentanglement by the mother. Only when we overcome intense anxiety on this latter account, only then will we be free enough to abandon the commitment to a pathological system of moral control.