

On the Psychoanalytic Sociology of Eli Sagan

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In his specific contribution to psychoanalytic theory, *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil* (1988), Eli Sagan addresses and corrects a serious deficiency in Freudian theory. Freud considered conscience one of the functions of the superego (the others being self-observation and maintenance of the ego ideal) and viewed the superego as coming into being around five years of age with the shattering of the Oedipus complex due to fear of castration by the rival. But according to Paul Bloom, “The Moral Life of Babies” (*New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2010), we now know, in light of empirical infant research, that conscience has its roots much earlier than this.

Although the work of Melanie Klein is not central to Sagan’s theorizing, her work and that of her colleagues supports his general argument. Kleinians have long distinguished persecutory guilt, which amounts to self-torment, from depressive guilt. Instead of being all about the self (as in shame and self-persecution), depressive guilt is about caring for and making reparation to the other. The dating of the move from the paranoid-schizoid and narcissistic psychic position into the depressive position and the capacity for concern is controversial. However, there is no doubt that conscience, as depressive position concern for the other, arises far earlier than the Freudian superego. As Sagan points out, it is difficult to comprehend how the superego can be the seat of conscientious concern for others when, according to Freud, it is formed by turning aggression toward the oedipal rival back against the self under the threat of castration and operates “like a garrison in a conquered city.” Whereas the superego is fueled by hate, the conscience is grounded in attachment and love.

Sagan beautifully illustrates the distinction between conscience and superego by pointing to “Huck’s dilemma,” referring to Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. His superego demands that he turn his runaway slave companion, Jim, in to the authorities, while his conscience demands that he protect him. As Sagan explains, the superego, in addition to being about aggression turned against the self, is formed through internalization of the culture and the culture that is internalized is often racist, sexist,

heterosexist, etc. Drawing on Robert Lifton's work on the Nazi doctors, Sagan points out that they were, for the most part, not psychopaths but severely misguided idealists: they did their work "under the banner of the superego." In my 2010 article "Superego, Conscience and the Nature and Types of Guilt" (*Modern Psychoanalysis*, 35,1), I have elaborated on these issues.

In addition to the important distinction between superego and conscience, *Freud, Women and Morality* contains many other important corrections to standard Freudian theory, such as the point that only a few Freudian analysts (such as Hans Loewald) have grasped: that the healthy resolution of the Oedipus complex is not renunciation out of fear of castration but rather finding a sublimated way to "kill" the rival and possess the desired loved one ("object" in psychoanalytic terminology). Sagan points out that even Freud's own case history of "Little Hans" makes this clear: Hans is freed from his phobia when he dreams that he gets a symbolically bigger and better penis than his father's and has babies with his mother. Sagan's first book, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form* (1974), one of the very few psychohistorical studies of the currently neglected concept of sublimation, describes the progressive cultural development from cannibalism (oral devouring), to head-hunting (anal collecting), to human sacrifice and on to slavery and other forms of (phallic) domination (classism, racism, sexism).

Cannibalism is followed by *The Lust to Annihilate: A Psychoanalytic Study of Violence in Ancient Greek Culture* (1979), *At the Dawn of Tyranny: The Origins of Individualism, Political Oppression and the State* (1985), *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America* (1991), and *Citizens and Cannibals: The French Revolution, the Struggle for Modernity, and the Origins of Ideological Terror* (2001). Following the lead of Talcott Parsons and his student Robert Bellah and elaborating on their work, Sagan has developed a psychoanalytically informed theory of the stages of social evolution: from primitive (hunter-gatherer and tribal society organized through kinship), to what he calls complex society (kingdoms such as those that existed in Buganda, Hawaii, and Tahiti), to the archaic civilizations (Sumeria, Babylonia, and Egypt), to the classical civilizations (Athens and ancient Israel—Parsons' "seed-bed" societies), to the early-modern monarchies and finally the emergence of modern democratic societies.

In all this Sagan, like Hegel, sees in history the gradual evolution of the spirit of liberty and the extension of human rights, not just to the narrowly defined citizens (as in Athens, where the slaves and women were excluded), but to an ever-widening group of people. He views this as an attempt to transcend the paranoid position and to sustain and develop the miracle of democracy, which is based on the remarkable capacity of some people to regard the opposition as loyal, not as evil aggressors to be eliminated. This is progress, but it induces such anxiety that periodic severe regressions (Stalinism, Nazism) occur. Sagan sees the modern world as intensely ambivalent: on one hand, we appear to want to carry the democratic project to its natural conclusion, but we are stalled by the anxiety such liberation evokes and by the reactionary forces. The incapacity of Democrats and Republicans in America today to even speak to each other, and such phenomena as the Tea Party, are evidence of such ambivalence. The 1960's youth counterculture displayed both of these characteristics: an impulse toward generosity, peace, love, play, pleasure, and democracy, on one hand, but also severely regressive tendencies toward paranoia, narcissism, sexism, and authoritarianism on the other.

Returning to the themes of *Freud, Women and Morality*, we might think of this contradiction precisely as conflict between a progressive, humanistic conscience and a regressive, reactionary superego. In 1925, Franz Alexander defined the goal of psychoanalysis as elimination of the superego; two years later, in 1927, Sandor Ferenczi agreed. But most psychoanalysts confuse the superego with conscience and fear that elimination of the former will entail destruction of the latter and amount to the promotion of psychopathy. While Alexander and Ferenczi posited mature morality as a rational ego function involving thinking through the consequences of one's actions for others and oneself, Sagan recognizes with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that conscience arises not from reason but from feeling, from what Rousseau called "pity," by which he meant empathy or fellow-feeling. Since learning in Philosophy 101 that "one cannot deduce an *ought* from an *is*," that science is *descriptive* not *prescriptive* and, therefore, limited to the field of fact, not value (the fact/value disjunction), I have recognized with Pascal that "the heart has reasons, reason cannot know." Eli Sagan understands that whereas the superego arises through *identification with the aggressor* and operates essentially in accordance with the *talion* law of revenge ("an eye for an eye"), conscience arises through *identification with the nurturer* and operates through an analogous reciprocity, only one in which one feels called upon to return love for love received.