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## A Rational Superego

J. David Velleman

Just when philosophers of science thought they had buried Freud for the last time, he has quietly reappeared in the writings of moral philosophers. Two analytic ethicists, Samuel Scheffler and John Deigh, have independently applied Freud's theory of the superego to the problem of moral motivation.<sup>1</sup> Scheffler and Deigh concur in thinking that although Freudian theory doesn't entirely solve the problem, it can nevertheless contribute to a solution.

Freud claims that the governance exercised over us by morality is a form of governance that was once exercised by our parents and that was subsequently assumed by a portion of our own personalities. This inner proxy for our parents was established, according to Freud, at the time when we were obliged to give up our oedipal attachment to them. Freud therefore declares that "Kant's Categorical Imperative is . . . the direct heir of the Oedipus complex."<sup>2</sup>

Scheffler and Deigh are skeptical of Freud's claim to have ex-

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<sup>1</sup> Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chap. 5 ("Reason, Psychology and the Authority of Morality"); Deigh, *The Sources of Moral Agency: Essays in Moral Psychology and Freudian Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 6 ("Freud, Naturalism, and Modern Moral Philosophy"). See also Scheffler's paper "Naturalism, Psychoanalysis, and Moral Motivation," in *Psychoanalysis, Mind and Art: Perspectives on Richard Wollheim*, ed. Jim Hopkins and Anthony Savile (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 86–109; and chap. 4 of Deigh's book ("Remarks on Some Difficulties in Freud's Theory of Moral Development").

<sup>2</sup> "The Economic Problem of Masochism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogarth Press), 19:156–70, at 167. Freud also identified the superego with the Kantian "moral law within us" (*New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:61, 163 [77, 202]). (Page numbers in brackets refer to the Norton paperback versions of the *S.E.*)

plained the force of Kant's imperative. In Freud's thoroughly naturalistic account, our obedience to moral requirements owes nothing to their meriting obedience; it's due entirely to incentives that appeal to our inborn drives. Freud thus explains the influence of morality in a way that tends to debunk its rational authority, whereas the Categorical Imperative is supposed to carry all the authority of practical reason.

But Scheffler and Deigh believe that moral requirements can carry rational authority, as Kant believed, while still emanating from a distinct portion of the personality, formed out of identifications with other persons in the manner described by Freud. These philosophers consequently envision a rationalist version of Freudian theory. Scheffler describes this hybrid view as follows:

[T]he suggestion that an authoritative aspect of the self may play a role in moral motivation is not obviously incompatible in itself with the rationalist position. Offhand, for example, there seems to be no reason why one could not take the view that the (generic) superego is part of the psychological apparatus whereby purely rational considerations succeed in motivating rational human agents. On this view, the superegos of rational human agents confer motivational authority on moral principles in recognition of their status as principles of pure practical reason.<sup>3</sup>

Deigh also envisions a rationalist version of Freudian theory, but he would locate the force of reason in the ego, as "the force of the ego's initiative in negotiating peace among the id, superego, and the requirements of reality."<sup>4</sup> Of course, the ego's initiative in these matters is also attributed by Freud to the operation of natural drives. But Deigh finds this aspect of Freudian theory unsupported: "Nothing in the theory beyond its own antirationalist commitments . . . argues against a rationalist understanding" of the same phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Both philosophers thus think that Freud's conception of the personality could and perhaps should make room for a seat of reason, though they differ as to where reason should sit.

I think that this marriage of Freud and Kant is worth pursuing, for several reasons. Freud's theory of the superego provides a valuable psychological model for various aspects of the Categorical Im-

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<sup>3</sup>Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 96–97 n. 22.

<sup>4</sup>*The Sources of Moral Agency*, 130.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

perative, if not for its rational force. And Freud provides something that is missing from Kantian moral theory—namely, a story of moral development. If only Freud's theory could be purged of its antirationalism (as Deigh calls it), the result might be a valuable complement to Kant.

One feature of the Categorical Imperative that is reflected in Freudian theory is its dual status as a prescription and an ideal. On the one hand, the Imperative tells us what to do: "Act only on that maxim which you can simultaneously will to be a universal law." On the other hand, the imperative describes what a rational will does, and it thereby holds up the rational will as an ideal for us to emulate. In fact, the motive that induces us to obey the prescription is our reverence for the ideal that it conveys.<sup>6</sup> These two aspects of the Categorical Imperative are mirrored in Freudian theory by the concepts of the superego and ego ideal. The superego tells us what to do; the ego ideal gives us a model to emulate. A standard reading of Freud posits a division of labor between these two figures, but I shall argue that Freudian theory makes best sense if they are seen as unified, in the same manner as the corresponding aspects of the Categorical Imperative.<sup>7</sup> Our obedience to the demands of the superego must be seen as motivated by our admiration for it, in its alternate capacity as ego ideal.

Freud's moral theory also reflects the interplay between internal and external authority in Kantian ethics. On the one hand, Kant says that the moral law is necessary and inescapable; on the other hand, he describes it as a law that we give to ourselves. We are bound by the authority of morality, according to Kant, and yet we somehow exercise that authority in our own right. This combination, which sounds so paradoxical in the abstract, is made concretely imaginable by Freud. The external authority of morality is represented as the authority of another person, the parent; the autonomous exercise of that authority is represented as the assumption of the parent's role by a part of the self, in which the parent is internalized. Our ability to exercise moral authority over ourselves is thus explained by the familiar psychological process of internalizing other people.

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<sup>6</sup>I argue for this claim in "The Voice of Conscience," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1998): 57–76.

<sup>7</sup>See note 29, below.

One might think that personalizing the authority of morality in this fashion violates the spirit of Kantian ethics, which is often described as austerely impersonal. But here I disagree with the standard interpretation of Kant. The Categorical Imperative is not an impersonal rule but an ideal of the person, and our reverence for it is therefore akin to our feelings for persons whom we idealize. That's why respect for the moral law, in Kant, coincides with respect for persons.<sup>8</sup> Representing moral authority in the image of an idealized person is therefore compatible with Kantian ethics, as I interpret it.

Finally, this representation of moral authority yields a story of moral development that should be welcome to followers of Kant. Kantian ethics is an ethics of respecting persons, others as well as ourselves. But what awakens us to the personhood of others, to the fact that the creatures around us are persons like ourselves? Freud gives the only plausible answer to this question. The main theme of Freud's moral theory is that we are inducted into morality by our childhood experience of loving and being loved—the experience without which we would neither idealize nor internalize a parental figure. Love is our introduction to the fact that we are not alone in the world; and morality as formulated by Kant is our practical response to that fact.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the Freudian story of moral development can thus be assimilated into Kantian ethics only if it is significantly revised. The ideal that we internalize from those we love must not be merely a representation of social respectability or conventional propriety; it must be an ideal of personhood as rational nature; otherwise, the result will not be an internal moral authority that Kant would recognize as “the moral law within.” But I believe that Freudian theory needs to be revised in this direction anyway, and that the materials for such a revision are provided by Freud himself. My goal in this paper is to explain how this rationalist version of psychoanalytic theory emerges from the works of Freud.

### **Freud's Theory of Guilt: First Reading**

Freud often presents his moral psychology as a theory of the moral emotions, especially guilt. He claims to explain what guilt is and

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<sup>8</sup>I argue for this claim in “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–74.

<sup>9</sup>This way of putting my point was suggested by Christine Korsgaard.

how a sense of guilt is acquired. But Freud realizes that a theory of guilt must ultimately rest on a theory of moral authority, since a sense of having disobeyed that authority is prerequisite to feeling guilty.

Freud introduces the connection between guilt and moral authority as follows:

To begin with, if we ask how a person comes to have a sense of guilt, we arrive at an answer which cannot be disputed: a person feels guilty . . . when he has done something which he knows to be ['wrong']. But then we notice how little this answer tells us.<sup>10</sup>

What tells us little, according to Freud, is the answer that traces guilt to self-criticism framed in moral terms, such as 'wrong'. This answer is uninformative, Freud explains, because it "presuppose[s] that one had already recognized that what is [wrong] is reprehensible, is something that must not be carried out." "How," he asks, "is this judgment arrived at?"<sup>11</sup>

What needs to be explained, in other words, is how some self-reproaches are recognized to be authoritative about what must or must not be done, so that they can occasion guilt. Saying that they are couched in moral terms simply raises the further question how these terms are known to bear the requisite authority.

Freud prefers to think of moral authority as vested, not in a particular vocabulary of self-criticism, but rather in a particular self-critical faculty. This inner faculty is the superego, which is established at the resolution of the Oedipus complex, when the child imaginatively takes his parents into himself, through a process known as introjection.

Freud hypothesizes that the introjected parent criticizes the subject's behavior and, like a real parent, threatens to punish him for it. The subject's fear of this inner disciplinarian constitutes his sense of guilt. Thus, "the sense of guilt is at bottom nothing else but a topographical variety of anxiety; in its later phases it coincides

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<sup>10</sup> *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:59–145, at 124 [71]. I have substituted the term 'wrong' for the translation in the *Standard Edition*, which is 'bad'. Freud's word is *böse*, which differs from the English 'bad' in that it is essentially a term of moral criticism. If Freud had wanted a word that was morally neutral, like 'bad', he would have used *schlecht*. The difference is clearly marked by *Der Grosse Duden*, which defines *böse* as "sittlich schlecht"—"morally bad."

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

completely with *fear of the super-ego*.<sup>12</sup> Freud often refers to this fear as “conscience anxiety”: *Gewissensangst*.<sup>13</sup>

Here Freud equates the guilt induced by self-reproaches bearing moral authority with fear induced by reproaches bearing a threat. He thus appears to equate the authority of morality with the power to threaten. I do not believe that Freud’s view can be reduced to this simple equation of right with might. But the best way to arrive at Freud’s view, I think, is to consider various problems that would confront this simplistic version of it.

One problem is how the super-ego can credibly threaten the ego. What does the ego have to be afraid of?

What the child once feared from his parents is the loss of their love and of the protection that it afforded against their use of coercive force.<sup>14</sup> What the ego fears from the superego is less clear. Freud says, “The super-ego retain[s] essential features of the introjected persons—their strength, their severity, their inclination to supervise and to punish.”<sup>15</sup> He says that the superego “observes the ego, gives it orders, judges it and threatens it with punishments.”<sup>16</sup> Yet it is unclear what punishments the superego can actually inflict upon the ego, and so it is also unclear what punishments it can credibly threaten.

Although Freud refers repeatedly to the superego as aggressive, sadistic, and cruel, he never details its cruelties. At one point he says, “The super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of anxiety and is on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world.”<sup>17</sup> Yet the feeling of anxiety mentioned here is just the ego’s fear of harsh treatment, and so it cannot constitute the very harsh treatment that is feared.<sup>18</sup> And

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<sup>12</sup> *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:135 [82]; see also 124–29 [71–75].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 124 [71]. For the term *Gewissensangst*, see the editor’s note in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, S.E. 20:77–175, at 128 [56]. Freud seems to equate the sense of guilt with *Gewissensangst* at “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” S.E. 19:166–67. See also *The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:57 [60]; *New Introductory Lectures* S.E. 22:62 [77].

<sup>14</sup> *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:124 [71]; *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:62 [77]; *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, S.E. 23:141–207, at 206 [95].

<sup>15</sup> “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” S.E. 19:167.

<sup>16</sup> *Outline of Psychoanalysis* S.E. 23:205 [95]. See also *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:62 [77]: “the super-ego . . . observes, directs, and threatens the ego.”

<sup>17</sup> *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:125 [72].

<sup>18</sup> For a similar problem, see *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:78 [97],

Freud never explains how the ego might foresee and hence fear the superego's ability to enlist the external world in administering punishments, since these machinations take place outside of the subject's consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

A possible solution to the problem is contained in Richard Wollheim's account of introjection.<sup>20</sup> In Wollheim's account, the internalized parent is a figure of fantasy, whose aggression the child imagines both undergoing and watching himself undergo. Wollheim likens the fear of conscience to the fear felt by an audience when it empathizes with a character being victimized on the stage. The only difference is that victimization of the ego is enacted in

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where the superego is said to punish the ego with "tense feelings of inferiority and of guilt." How can the ego be punished with feelings of guilt, if feelings of guilt consist in the fear of this very punishment? (As for the feelings of inferiority, see the text at note 33, below.)

<sup>19</sup> One possible solution to the problem is suggested in this passage: "[W]e can tell what is hidden behind the ego's dread of the super-ego. The superior being, which turned into the ego ideal, once threatened castration, and this dread of castration is probably the nucleus around which the subsequent fear of conscience has gathered; it is this dread that persists as the fear of conscience" (*The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:57 [60]). Here the fear of conscience is described as a remnant of an earlier fear, felt by the child (a boy, of course) who perceived his father as threatening castration. If *Gewissensangst* is castration anxiety redirected at the superego, then it is actually misdirected and cannot be explained by any real danger. The superego could nevertheless torment the ego by exacerbating its misdirected fear, like a mugger brandishing a toy knife. Elsewhere, however, Freud admits that tracing *Gewissensangst* to castration anxiety only deepens the mystery (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, S.E. 20:139 [69]): "Castration anxiety develops into moral anxiety—social anxiety—and it is not so easy now to know what the anxiety is about." Freud therefore returns to his more general account of conscience anxiety: "[W]hat the ego regards as the danger and responds to with an anxiety-signal is that the super-ego should be angry with it or punish it or cease to love it." But why should the ego fear inciting the superego's anger or losing its love? In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:124 [71], Freud says that the loss of love is feared because it opens the way to punishment; and surely the same should be said about the incitement of anger. So the explanation once again depends on the superego's power to punish the ego, which remains mysterious. In the *Outline* (S.E. 23:200 [87–88]), Freud says that the children fear "*loss of love* which would deliver them over helpless to the dangers of the external world," but this remark is once again inapplicable to the loss of love from the superego.

<sup>20</sup> *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 121–29. Wollheim attributes this account to the work of Karl Abraham and Melanie Klein.

the mind, with the subject imagining himself in the roles of victim and audience simultaneously. In his imagined capacity as empathetic audience to this scene, the subject experiences real fear.

Even if we concede the superego's ability to instill fear in the ego, a more serious problem remains, in that fear differs from guilt and cannot come to resemble it just by being internalized.<sup>21</sup> The merely "topographical" characteristics of fear—its being located in the ego and directed at the superego—seem insufficient to transform it into the emotion of guilt.<sup>22</sup>

There is no reason to think that an emotion originally felt by a person interacting with other people would give rise to an entirely new emotion just by being consigned to one part of his psyche interacting with other parts.<sup>23</sup> Consider a child who is continually teased as ugly or stupid and who internalizes that teasing. We can expect that he will be unduly afraid of attracting attention, and that when he does attract it he will feel unwarranted embarrassment. That is, we can expect him to re-experience, in the face of his internal tormentors, the same emotions that he experienced in the face of their external models. To be sure, internalization will have altered the relevant interactions in some respects. For example, internal ridicule will greet his mere thought of saying something in public, before he ever opens his mouth.<sup>24</sup> Although

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<sup>21</sup>This point is the main thesis of David H. Jones, "Freud's Theory of Moral Conscience," *Philosophy* 41 (1966): 34–57. See also Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 87–88; Herbert Morris, "The Decline of Guilt," in *Ethics and Personality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. John Deigh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 117–31, at 121–22.

<sup>22</sup>Commentators on Freud tend to use the term 'topographical' to distinguish Freud's earlier model of unconscious, preconscious, and conscious minds from his later, "structural" model of id, ego, and superego. In their terminology, the location of fear with respect to ego and superego would be a matter of structure, not topography. But Freud himself used the term 'topographical' for the latter model as well as the former. See, for example, "Psycho-Analysis," S.E. 20:261–70, at 266.

<sup>23</sup>Here I am disagreeing with John Deigh, who argues that the occurrence of anxiety in the ego may well amount to the occurrence of some other emotion, such as guilt, in the person ("Remarks on Some Difficulties in Freud's Theory of Moral Development," 90ff.). In principle, Deigh is right to reject "the assumption . . . that for the purpose of ascribing emotions to someone that person and his ego are identical" (91). But I see no reason why the difference between a person and his ego should make the difference between guilt and anxiety.

<sup>24</sup>This point corresponds, of course, to Freud's point about the super-

he never raises his hand in class, his teachers will be able to tell when he knows the answer, because he has blushed. But internalization won't alter the emotions themselves: internal teasing will arouse embarrassment just like real teasing.

Similarly, if a real threat inspires ordinary fear, then so should an intra-psychic threat. Why, then, does the ego's fear of the superego amount to the subject's feeling guilty rather than merely afraid?

This problem reflects back on the superego's authority, which was supposed to consist in the power to issue credible threats. Corresponding to the fact that this power might arouse only brute fear rather than guilt is the fact that it might constitute only brute muscle rather than authority. The power to threaten is the power of a bully.

Another way to pose this problem is to ask how the aggression of the parents or the superego comes to be conceived as punishment rather than some other form of coercion. Part of the answer ought to be that the parents' aggression is conceived as punishment because it is seen to be backed by authority. Yet what has been posited in back of this aggression, thus far, is merely the power to threaten it, which doesn't adequately differentiate it from any other form of aggression. The question therefore remains why the parents, and their internal surrogate, come to be conceived as authorities administering punishment rather than as arm-twisting bullies.

I doubt whether Freud thought that the authority of parents or the superego could be reduced to their power to issue credible threats. For that very reason, however, I doubt whether he thought that the superego inspired guilt simply by inspiring fear. I rather think that he sought to explain guilt as a particular species of fear, differentiated from other species by its intentional object.

### **Freud's Explanation of Guilt: Second Reading**

The idea behind this explanation is that fear of being punished by an authority is a different emotion from fear of being coerced by a bully, because it has a different conceptual content. By "fear of

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ego's punishing wishes as well as deeds (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:125, 127 [72, 74]).

the superego" Freud means, not fear of a figure that happens to be the superego, but fear of the superego so conceived—conceived, that is, as playing the superego's role, of an authority administering punishment. This "topographical variety of anxiety" differs from other varieties by being about a particular part of the psychic topography, functionally specified—namely, the part with the authority to punish.<sup>25</sup> Anxiety about this authority has moral content and therefore qualifies as intrinsically moral anxiety, which is equivalent to guilt.

This interpretation diminishes the explanatory importance of the subject's projecting the object of his fear. Guilt does not arise, on this interpretation, whenever fear is redirected from outer to inner aggressors. Rather, guilt arises when the object of fear is conceived as a punishing authority. Hence the introjection of the parents to form the superego is not the crucial step in the development of guilt. The superego can inspire guilt only because it is formed out of figures already conceived as authorities administering punishment; and external authorities so conceived would already be capable of inspiring moral anxiety, and hence of inspiring guilt.<sup>26</sup>

The crucial step in the development of guilt, according to this interpretation, is the recognition of aggressors as authorities, and of their aggression as punishment. So interpreted, however, Freud appears to have largely postponed his question rather than answered it.

The question was how some self-reproaches are recognized to have that authority which inspires guilt. The answer initially attributed to Freud was that they are recognized to have this authority when they are perceived to be backed by a credible threat. That

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<sup>25</sup>Freud himself says that his "topographical" method is in fact a way of expressing the interrelations of "agencies or systems" (*An Autobiographical Study*, S.E. 20:3–74, at 32 [34–35]). See also note 22, above.

<sup>26</sup>Note that Freud vacillates on precisely this point in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In part 7 (S.E. 21:125 [71]) he suggests that the child's fear of external authority should not be described as a sense of guilt, because the phrase properly applies only to fear felt in the face of internal authority, or conscience. But in part 8 (S.E. 21:136 [83]), he says that the sense of guilt "is in existence before the super-ego, and therefore before conscience, too. At that time it is the immediate expression of fear of the external authority." Deigh resolves this inconsistency in the opposite direction. I discuss it further in note 35, below.

answer was inadequate because it could explain only the production of generic anxiety rather than guilt, which is specifically moral anxiety. The initial answer has therefore been superseded by the claim that self-reproaches inspire moral anxiety when they are recognized as the reproaches of an authority administering punishment; which is just to say that they are recognized to have the requisite authority when they are seen to issue from a figure of authority; which is not to say very much.

But it is to say more than nothing. The answer now attributed to Freud gives some characterization of the authority that a self-reproach must be seen to have if it is to occasion guilt: the requisite kind of authority is the authority to punish. Even if Freud's answer to our question ended here, it would not be entirely trivial. In fact, however, I think that Freud's answer continues, with an explanation of how the authority to punish is recognized. I therefore turn to this further explanation.

### The Source of Moral Authority

In many passages, Freud describes the sense of guilt as something more complex than fear of the superego. He describes it as "the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego,"<sup>27</sup> making clear that this tension reproduces a multiply ambivalent relation between child and parent.

As we have seen, the child fears his parents in their capacity as disciplinarians, and he introjects them to form an agency of self-discipline. But the child also loves and admires his parents, and he similarly gives himself an inner object of love and admiration, the ego ideal. Although Freud undergoes various changes of mind on this subject,<sup>28</sup> he generally describes the feared disciplinarian and

<sup>27</sup> *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:61 [76]. See also "The Economic Problem of Masochism," S.E. 19:166–67; *The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:37, 51 [33, 51]; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, S.E. 21:136 [83].

<sup>28</sup> As I shall explain below, Freud first hypothesized that the ego gave itself an ideal to receive the narcissistic love that it could no longer invest in itself, in light of parental criticism; but he later traced the ego ideal to the parents, on the hypothesis that the superego contained precipitates of them not only as objects of fear but also as objects of admiration. The vagaries of Freud's views on this subject are summarized in Joseph Sandler, Alex Holder, and Dale Meers, "The Ego Ideal and the Ideal Self," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 18 (1963): 139–58. See also Joseph Sandler, "On the Concept of the Superego," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15 (1960): 128–62.

the admired ideal as coordinate functions of a single internal figure.<sup>29</sup> The disciplinarian criticizes and threatens to punish the ego for not living up to the example set by the ideal. The introjected parent, in which these functions are combined, is therefore the internal object of mixed feelings, which combine fear and admiration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>An alternative interpretation holds that these two functions are independent: the disciplinary function enforces norms of conduct and inflicts feelings of guilt, drawing on the instinct of aggression; the ideal function holds out norms of personal excellence and inflicts feelings of inferiority, drawing on the erotic instincts. (See Deigh, “Freud, Naturalism, and Modern Moral Philosophy,” in *The Sources of Moral Agency*, 111–32, at 126–28. See also Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, 218–25; and Jeanne Lampl-de Groot, “Ego Ideal and Superego,” *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 17 (1962): 94–106.) At best, I think, this interpretation reconstructs a view toward which Freud might have been gravitating in his later works: it is certainly not a view at which he ever arrived. There is no question but that the superego first entered Freud’s thought as the critical faculty that compares the ego with its ideal (in “On Narcissism”). Here disciplinarian and ideal work together, the former taking the ego to task for violating the norms embodied in the latter. This alliance continues in subsequent works, such as *The Ego and the Id*, where the terms ‘super-ego’ and ‘ego ideal’ are used interchangeably. The alternative interpretation relies on the *New Introductory Lectures*, where Freud distinguishes a sense of inferiority from a sense of guilt, saying that “[i]t would perhaps be right to regard the former as the erotic complement to the moral sense of inferiority” (S.E. 22:66 [82]). Note that even here, Freud fails to draw a sharp distinction between inferiority and guilt, since he refers to the latter as “the moral sense of inferiority,” to be distinguished from an erotic sense of inferiority that is found in the “inferiority complex” of neurotics. (See also *The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:51 [51–52].) Hence no general distinction between inferiority and guilt is intended. Nor is there any textual evidence, to my knowledge, for a division of labor between ego ideal and superego in producing these feelings. Freud goes on in the same passage, for example, to say that the superego “punishes [the ego] with tense feelings of inferiority and of guilt” (S.E. 22:78 [97]). (I discuss this statement in note 18, above, and in the text, below. See also *Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:131 [81].) The notion of an alliance between the disciplinary and ideal functions of the superego is supported not only by the weight of textual evidence but also by the philosophical considerations that I shall adduce. The alliance helps Freud to account for the moral content that differentiates guilt from other forms of anxiety.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, *The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:36 [32]: “When we were little children we knew these higher natures, we admired them and feared them; and later we took them into ourselves.” In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud asserts that conscience “arose, on a basis of emotional ambivalence, from quite specific human relations to which this ambivalence was attached” (S.E. 13:68). Freud’s account of conscience in this work is rather different

The ego ideal provides the normative background against which the superego can be conceived as having authority. The superego's aggression is seen as premised on a normative judgment, to the effect that the ego has fallen short of the ideal. This judgment is what justifies the superego's aggression, insofar as it is justified. The question of moral authority thus comes down to the question why the ego recognizes this normative judgment as justifying aggression against itself.

Part of the answer is that the norm applied in this judgment is the ego's own ideal, "by which the ego measures itself, which it emulates, and whose demand for ever greater perfection it strives to fulfil."<sup>31</sup> The ego thinks that it is being criticized and punished

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from the theory that he subsequently developed, beginning with the paper "On Narcissism," which appeared in the following year. Nevertheless, *Totem and Taboo* contains several references to the form of ambivalence that I am currently discussing—namely, the combination of admiration and fear. See, for example, p. 50 ("distrust of the father is intimately linked with admiration for him") and p. 130 (Little Hans "admired his father as possessing a big penis and feared him as threatening his own"). This particular combination of emotions is only one of many cited in this work as accounting for taboo, "the earliest form in which the phenomenon of conscience is met with" (S.E. 13:67]). In a later work, however, it is singled out as carrying the entire explanation. Here (*Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:135 [86–87]) Freud says that the father of the primal horde was "at once feared and honoured, a fact which led later to the idea of taboo." My interpretation of Freud preserves the connection between conscience and taboo, as objects of admiration and fear combined.

<sup>31</sup> *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:64–65 [81]. The idea that the ego's admiration for the ideal constitutes its acceptance of norms is supported by the following passage, with which the concept of the ideal is first introduced: "We have learnt that libidinal instinctual impulses undergo the vicissitude of pathogenic repression if they come into conflict with the subject's cultural and ethical ideas. By this we never mean that the individual in question has a merely intellectual knowledge of the existence of such ideas; we always mean that he recognizes them as a standard for himself and submits to the claims they make on him. Repression, we have said, proceeds from the ego; we might say with greater precision that it proceeds from the self-respect of the ego" ("On Narcissism," S.E. 14:93). Freud then introduces the ego ideal as the vehicle of the ego's self-respect. He thereby suggests that the ego ideal represents the subject's acceptance of ethical norms "as a standard for himself." See also this passage from the *Outline*, S.E. 23:206: "[I]f the ego has successfully resisted a temptation to do something which would be objectionable to the super-ego, it feels raised in its self-esteem and strengthened in its pride, as though it had made some precious acquisition."

for a failure to meet its own standards, the standards that it accepted as applicable to itself when it adopted an ideal.

Yet the ego's having accepted these standards as applicable to itself doesn't necessarily entail having acknowledged a particular figure as authorized to enforce them. Where does the superego get the authority to demand that the ego fulfil its own standards, and to punish it when it fails?

The authority for the demand comes, I think, from the superego's being an aspect of one and the same figure as the ideal. This figure, in its capacity as ego ideal, sets an example for the ego; in its capacity as superego, it demands that the ego live up to the example. The demands that it makes in the latter capacity merely articulate the requirements that it mutely establishes in the former. The superego's authority to make demands on the ego was thus granted by the ego itself, as part and parcel of the ideal's authority to set requirements. The one authority is just the verbal correlative of the other.<sup>32</sup>

But what about the authority to punish? What gives the superego the authority to make the ego suffer for falling short of its own ideal?

At one point Freud describes the superego as punishing the ego with "feelings of inferiority."<sup>33</sup> This lash was placed in the superego's hands by the ego as well. Insofar as the ego can be punished with feelings of inferiority, it exposed itself to this punishment by idealizing the figure to which it can now be made to feel inferior.

Unfortunately, this subtle, psychological form of suffering is not one with which the ego can feel threatened when criticized by the superego. For as soon as the ego has been criticized, it already experiences this suffering and is no longer in a position to fear it. And if there is nothing further for the ego to fear, beyond the sense of inferiority that it already feels under the superego's criticism, then it will not feel any anxiety, without which there can be no sense of guilt. In order for the superego's reproaches to inspire moral anxiety in the ego, they must threaten something other than the feelings of inferiority that they have already inflicted.

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<sup>32</sup>Also relevant here is Freud's suggestion that idealizing a person entails deferring to his judgment. See the passage from "Three Essays" quoted in note 42, below.

<sup>33</sup>*New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:78 [97], discussed in note 29, above.

But the child will have been punished by his actual parents, and unless he has been abused, their punishment will have inflicted more insult than injury. He will therefore have come to associate parental criticism with punishment, as if punishment were another form of criticism, expressed in actions rather than words. When the child's ego hears criticism from the introjected parent, it will expect punishment to follow, but it is unlikely to distinguish between them with respect to their legitimacy. It will regard the anticipated punishment as the practical aspect of criticism, which it has authorized the superego to make, as the voice of the ego ideal.

These psychic materials strike me as sufficient to constitute a rudimentary conception of the superego's authority to punish. It is not, in my view, an adequate conception of such authority, but it comes as close as Freudian theory can come, pending revision. I shall therefore return to this topic briefly at the end of the paper, after I have proposed a philosophical revision to the theory.

### The Importance of Idealization

If this reading of Freud is correct, then his explanation for the sense of guilt depends crucially on admiration as well as fear of the parents or their internal representative. The ego's idealization of these figures is what cloaks their aggression in the authority that inspires moral anxiety rather than brute fear. Because the ego has set these figures on a pedestal, it now fears their aggression *from above*—as aggression before which it bows as well as cowers—and this concessive form of anxiety constitutes the emotion of guilt.

Under this interpretation, however, a child internalizes his parents' discipline in two distinct senses.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, he introjects his parents to form an inner agency of criticism and aggression. On the other hand, his admiration for these figures, both real and introjected, entails that his ego accepts and applies to itself the values that they express. So the child not only *takes in* the demanding figures of his parents but also *buys in* to their demands.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>On the different modes of internalization, see Roy Schafer, *Aspects of Internalization* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968); and Drew Westen, "The Superego: A Revised Developmental Model," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 14 (1986): 181–202, 190ff.

<sup>35</sup>At times, Freud seems to assume that the former internalization necessarily entails the latter, perhaps because a figure that is introjected, or

Both operations are necessary to produce a sense of moral authority, and hence a sense of guilt. An introjected parent might not carry the authority needed for inspiring guilt rather than brute fear if it were not an object of admiration, expressing standards that the ego applies to itself. The voice of conscience is partly in the ear of the beholder, so to speak: it's the voice of an inner critic as heard by an admiring ego. And what lends this voice the authority that's distinctive of morality is precisely the admiration with which it is heard.

Freud's theory of moral authority thus requires an account of idealization, the process by which people, real and introjected, come to be admired as ideals. Freud offers two distinct accounts, both of which attribute idealization to the effects of love.

Before I discuss the relation between idealization and love in

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taken in, becomes “a differentiating grade in the ego,” whose demands upon the subject also qualify as *his* demands upon himself. But when a subject issues himself demands in the guise of an internalized other, he still *receives* those demands *in propria persona*, as represented by the undifferentiated remainder of his ego. And in this capacity as recipient, he—or, rather, his ego—may or may not accept the demands as applicable to him. He may instead take a dismissive or defiant attitude toward them, despite their issuing from a part of himself. His accepting them as applicable to him is what would constitute the second internalization—the “buying in,” as I have called it. I believe that Freud is confused, or at least undecided, about the relation between *taking in* a demanding figure and *buying in* to his demands. As I have said, Freud sometimes seems to think that the former entails and hence explains the latter; but he also provides the latter with an independent explanation—as if the former doesn't explain it, after all. The independent explanation is that a child buys in to the demands represented by his parents insofar as he loves and admires them. I have made this explanation central to the view that I attribute to Freud because I believe that it is indeed necessary to account for the sense of guilt. But I acknowledge that Freud himself seems uncertain as to its necessity.

I suggest that this uncertainty is what led Freud to vacillate on the question whether a child can experience guilt before having introjected his parents. (See note 26, above.) *Taking in* one's parents is not, in fact, necessary for guilt, since one can feel guilty in the face of one's actual parents, acknowledged as external authorities. But *buying in* to the demands of one's parents, or of other authority figures, is indeed necessary if fear of their punishment is to be transformed into moral anxiety, or guilt. Because Freud couldn't decide whether *taking in* parental authority entailed *buying in* to it, he vacillated on whether guilt without introjection was possible.

Note, by the way, that Freud claimed introjection to be necessary for the opposite of guilt as well—that is, for the feeling of pride in one's self-restraint (*Moses and Monotheism*, S.E. 23:3–137, at 117). I suspect that the same confusion is at work in this passage as well.

detail, I should say that I am favorably inclined toward the theory that I have attributed to Freud thus far—up to the relation between idealization and love, but not including the details of that relation. Experience and introspection lead me to believe that we do indeed give ourselves moral direction and criticism in identification with other people whom we have loved, idealized, and imaginatively incorporated into ourselves. Like Scheffler and Deigh, I think that these leading elements of Freud's theory help us to understand the motivational force of moral authority; I would add that they also help us to understand the morally formative role of love.

But Freud's overall outline of this role is separable from his specific conception of love, and of how it leads to idealization. I shall argue that Freud's conception of love actually undermines his attempt to cast it as a morally formative emotion.

### Freud on Idealization

Freud initially describes the ego's establishment of an ideal as independent of—and, presumably, prior to—idealization of the parents. He says that the ego ideal is conjured up by the maturing subject as a means of recapturing the narcissism of infancy:

As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal.<sup>36</sup>

Here Freud may seem to have presupposed much of what he is trying to explain. He's trying to explain how the ego establishes standards of perfection for itself, in the form of an ego ideal. But his first step is to assume that the infantile ego already regards itself as perfect, and hence that it already possesses rudimentary standards of self-evaluation, however self-serving. At most, then, his story would seem to trace the evolution of these standards, not their inception.

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<sup>36</sup>“On Narcissism,” *S.E.* 14:94.

Clearly, however, Freud thinks that he is also explaining the inception of self-evaluation, by explaining where the very idea of perfection comes from. He thinks that it comes from the experience of primary narcissism, which is a primordial pooling of libido within the ego.<sup>37</sup> During this period of development, the subject's ego, bathed in the positive energy of libido, is presented to him as a first instance of perfection—his first ideal, after which all subsequent ideals are fashioned.

Unfortunately, the details of this explanation reveal it to be fallacious. As we have seen, the subject is said to project the ego ideal because he is “incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed” or of “forgo[ing] the narcissistic perfection of his childhood.”<sup>38</sup> He conjures up a new ideal “with the intention of re-establishing the self-satisfaction which was attached to primary infantile narcissism but which since then has suffered so many disturbances and mortifications.”<sup>39</sup> The problem is that these passages describe the idealizing effects of the narcissistic libido in equivocal terms.

Since libido is an instinct, according to Freudian theory, it operates by means of an inner irritant that the subject is motivated to allay with the help of an object, from which he thereby attains a temporary satisfaction.<sup>40</sup> The subject of primary narcissism can be described as self-satisfied, then, because he finds relief from instinctual tension within himself, without the need for an external object. And libido theory would indeed predict his unwillingness to give up such an immediate fulfillment of his needs—which might be described either as “a satisfaction he had once enjoyed” or as “the narcissistic perfection of his childhood.”

But Freud then takes these phrases to denote a flattering self-image, such as would initially make the child “his own ideal” and would subsequently be undermined by “critical judgement.” Freud thereby implies that the child initially satisfies himself, not only in the sense of fulfilling his own needs, but also in the sense of meeting with his own approval. The young narcissist is portrayed, not

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<sup>37</sup>“Three Essays,” *S.E.* 7:218; “On Narcissism,” *S.E.* 14:75–76; *Introductory Lectures*, *S.E.* 15–16, at 16:416 [517–18].

<sup>38</sup>“On Narcissism,” quoted above, at note 36.

<sup>39</sup>*Introductory Lectures*, *S.E.* 16:429 [533]. Freud also describes the narcissism of children as “self-contentment” (“On Narcissism,” *S.E.* 14:89).

<sup>40</sup>“Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” *S.E.* 14:111–40, at 118–23.

just as perfectly satisfied, but as satisfied *that he's perfect*. He isn't just inwardly sated; he's smug.

The term 'satisfaction' has now been used in two different senses. In libido theory proper, the term denotes the experienced fulfillment of instinctual need; when the theory is applied to primary narcissism, however, the term denotes a favorable value judgment.<sup>41</sup> By eliding the gap between these senses, Freud gives libido theory the semblance of explaining why a child would begin life with a favorable self-assessment, whose loss to external criticism would then oblige him to project an ego ideal. In fact, libido theory has no resources to explain why the child would initially approve of himself, much less why he would want to continue approving of himself or receiving his own approval.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>For a particularly clear instance of this equivocation, see *Group Psychology*, 18:110 [52–53]: “We have said that [the ego ideal] is the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego enjoyed self-sufficiency [sich selbst genügte]; it gradually gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to; so that a man, when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself [mit seinem Ich selbst nicht zufrieden sein kann], may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction [Befriedigung] in the ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego.”

<sup>42</sup>Freud sometimes attempts to provide an explanatory connection between libido and value judgment, but without success. In one passage, he explains that libidinal objects are idealized so that they can replace “some unattained ego ideal . . . as a means of satisfying our narcissism” (*Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:112–13 [56]). Of course, this explanation implicitly assumes the idealizing effect of libido in the case of narcissism, which is just another instance of what needs to be explained. Freud’s other attempts at explanation are no more successful. For example: “It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stops short at its genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it. The same over-valuation spreads over into the psychological sphere: the subject becomes, as it were, intellectually infatuated (that is, his powers of judgement are weakened) by the mental achievements and perfections of the sexual object and he submits to the latter’s judgements with credulity. Thus, the credulity of love becomes an important, if not the most fundamental, source of authority” (“Three Essays,” S.E. 7:150). At the beginning of this passage, Freud equates taking an object as “the goal of the sexual instinct” with setting a “valuation” on it, or having an “appreciation” for it. But the goal of the sexual instinct, according to libido theory, is either relief from sexual tension or an object sought as a source of that relief. And how does an object’s being sought for sexual purposes amount to its being valued or appreciated? Freud then says that the subject expands his valuation of the object because of being “infatuated,” in the sense that “his powers of judgment are weakened.”

Freud's early account of the ego ideal therefore lacks the very element that's needed to complete his explanation of moral authority. What's needed is an explanation of how the ego comes to elevate someone or something to the status of an ideal, which can become the object of moral anxiety. In his first attempt at this explanation, however, Freud offers only an equivocation instead.

Freud later attributes the ego ideal to introjection of the parents as objects of admiration.<sup>43</sup> The ego ideal is now thought to preserve the idealized parents rather than replace the idealized self. As before, however, the question is how the prior idealization comes about—in this case, the idealization of the parents.

The answer in this case is that the parents are idealized through the mechanism of primary identification:

A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he takes his father as his ideal.<sup>44</sup>

This primary identification antedates the boy's introjection of his father into his superego; indeed, it antedates the Oedipus complex, which will be resolved by that later, more consequential identification.<sup>45</sup>

In primary identification, the child idealizes his parents in the sense that he wants to be like them, and he wants to be like his parents because he wants to ingest them. The child is in his oral phase, when “sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food” and so “the sexual *aim* consists in the incor-

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This explanation would make no sense if the latter phrase meant that the subject loses his capacity to make evaluative judgments: the phrase must mean that the subject becomes less demanding or critical in his evaluations. The explanation therefore presupposes the existence of an evaluative faculty whose standards can be corrupted by the libido. And this evaluative faculty must then be the “fundamental source of authority,” since it provides the capacity of judging another person to have “achievements” and “perfections” that justify deferring to him. The libido appears to be responsible only for the misapplication of these judgments—and hence the misattribution of authority—to undeserving objects.

<sup>43</sup>For example, *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:65 [81]: “There is no doubt that this ego ideal is the precipitate of the old picture of the parents, the expression of admiration for the perfection which the child then attributed to them.” See also note 28, above.

<sup>44</sup>*Group Psychology* S.E. 18:105 [46].

<sup>45</sup>*The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:31ff. [26ff.]; *Group Psychology*, chap. 7; *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:64 [80].

poration of the object.”<sup>46</sup> The child’s love therefore takes the form of a desire for “the oral, cannibalistic incorporation of the other person.”<sup>47</sup> And because of an imaginative association between incorporating and embodying, as it were, the desire to incorporate the other turns into a desire to *be* the other, or at least to resemble him.<sup>48</sup>

Now, idealizing someone does entail wanting to be like him, or even wishing that one were he; and this entailment lends some plausibility to Freud’s account of identification. Strictly speaking, however, the account requires an entailment in the other direction, since it seeks to explain idealization of the father in terms of the desire to resemble or be him. This explanation will work only if wanting to resemble or be another person is sufficient for idealizing him.

We can imagine why this latter entailment might be thought to hold. Assume, for the sake of argument, that whatever is desired, is desired *sub specie boni*, as good.<sup>49</sup> This assumption implies that if a child wants to be like his father, then he regards being like him as good. And placing value on resembling someone comes very close to idealizing him.

But not close enough. In order to idealize a person, one must not just regard being like him as *a valuable way to be*; one must regard it as *a way of being valuable*. The idealizing thought is not just “It would be better if I resembled him” but “*I* would be better if I resembled him.” Insofar as one places value on the state of resembling the other person, one must do so because of value placed on that person, or on the person one would be in that state.

Suppose that resembling another person appeals to you merely as fun. In that case, you value the resemblance without necessarily valuing who it would make you; and so a lack of resemblance would

<sup>46</sup> *Three Essays*, S.E. 7:198.

<sup>47</sup> *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:63 [79].

<sup>48</sup> If we say that the child’s desire to be like his parents is, at bottom, a desire to incorporate them, then shouldn’t we say that his desire to be like his ego ideal is, at bottom, a desire to incorporate *it*? Hasn’t he already incorporated it? The answer, I suppose, is that in establishing his ego ideal, the child has incorporated his parents only incompletely, so that the incorporative desire persists. See the discussion in *Group Psychology*, chap. 11, of the ego’s ongoing desire to “coincide” with the ego ideal.

<sup>49</sup> I believe that this assumption is false. See my paper “The Guise of the Good,” *Noûs* 26 (1992): 3–26.

make you feel frustrated without making you feel diminished—disappointed with the outcome but not disappointed in yourself.

The same goes for the boy who wants to embody his father. The boy has this desire only because he doesn't yet distinguish between loving a person and hungering for a meal. Loving his father, he hungers for him.<sup>50</sup> The resulting desire to incorporate his father should hardly lead him to like or dislike himself according to whether he succeeds. The desire to fill his belly isn't an aspiration to be a full-bellied person. Similarly, the desire to incorporate father, if formed on the model of hunger, wouldn't constitute an aspiration to be father-ful.<sup>51</sup>

More significantly, wanting to incorporate one's father would not entail conceding his authority to punish one's failure to incorporate him. Idealization brings a sense of exposure to punishment only because it places a value on the ideal, as worthy of governing one's life. As I put it before: when someone has been placed on a pedestal, his aggression can be feared as coming from above, as aggression before which to bow as well as cower. But he cannot inspire such moral anxiety by virtue of being placed on a serving dish instead. His aggression, in that case, is more likely to be perceived as a defense against being consumed than as punishment for one's failure to consume him.

### Materials for an Alternative Account

I have now argued that Freud encounters two dead-ends in attempting to explain the authority of the superego. He attributes this authority to the love that was felt in infancy for one or another precursor of the superego—either narcissistic love for the self or identificatory love for a parent. In neither case can Freud explain how love endows its object with the sort of authority that, when

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<sup>50</sup> Freud contrasts object love with identification by saying that the former is a desire *to have* while the latter is a desire *to be* (*Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:106 [47]). But the desire to be, when traced to its origins in the oral phase, turns out to consist in a desire to incorporate. A more accurate contrast would be that between a desire *to have* and a desire *to have for dinner*. For an interesting discussion of this contrast, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 28ff.

<sup>51</sup> Similar points are made by Schafer, *Aspects of Internalization*, 18–22.

inherited by the superego, would make it an object of moral anxiety.

I think that Freud makes various gestures toward a third and more successful account of idealization. These gestures point to a capacity in the ego to conduct evaluative reasoning about ideals that it has adopted or might adopt. Freud never follows up these gestures: the rational capacities of the ego seem not to engage his interest. Pursuing this third account of idealization therefore entails a fair amount of extrapolation from the Freudian texts.

I want to attempt this extrapolation because I believe that it reveals, first, why the superego as Freud conceived it cannot play the role of moral authority; but, second, how Freud's conception of the superego can be revised so as to play that role. We can locate moral authority in figures who were loved and consequently internalized, I shall argue, provided that we expand on Freud's understanding of what gets internalized from the objects of love.

The third, implicit account of idealization is that it is the work of an independent faculty of normative judgment, located in the ego. This faculty is hinted at in both stories that Freud tells about the development of the ego ideal.

In Freud's first story, the ego ideal is created to receive the approval that the ego can no longer bestow on itself. The ideal is therefore fashioned out of those virtues which the ego has found itself to lack. It "gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to."<sup>52</sup> The child's failure to meet these demands is reflected back to him in the "admonitions" that render his primary narcissism untenable.<sup>53</sup> And the ego now envisions its ideal as meeting those particular demands, and hence as an improvement upon its discredited self.

Yet the child must fail to meet a vast miscellany of demands, whose collective embodiment would yield a motley and rather banal ideal. The ego ideal that survives into adulthood cannot simply be the agglomeration of whichever demands the ego has not managed to satisfy in childhood. Of the demands that my father made

<sup>52</sup> *Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:100 [52]. See also p. 131 [81]: "The ego ideal comprises the sum of all the limitations in which the ego has had to acquiesce."

<sup>53</sup> "On Narcissism," S.E. 14:94 (quoted above, at note 36).

on me as a child, the ones to which I was most notoriously unequal were to switch off the lights when I left a room, to wash my hands before coming to the table, and to lower my piercing voice. But I have never harbored an idealized image of myself as a well-manicured baritone conservationist.

Even if the raw materials of the ego ideal are derived from demands made on a child by others, he must somehow select among them, rank them, and organize them into a coherent image of a better self. He must figure out how to extrapolate from the finite corpus of past demands to the indefinite series of novel situations that he will encounter in the future. Here is one point at which he must engage in evaluative reasoning.<sup>54</sup> Freud himself appears to acknowledge the child's use of such reasoning, for example, when he refers to "the awakening of his own critical judgement."<sup>55</sup>

This acknowledgment becomes clearer when Freud subsequently attributes the ideal to introjection of the admired parents. In telling this version of the story, Freud often points out that the child gradually transfers his admiration from his parents to other figures, who are often of his own choosing.

Freud describes this shift of allegiance as occurring in two phases. Initially, adults outside the family come to share the parental role, including that of shaping the superego:

This parental influence of course includes in its operation not only the personalities of the actual parents but also the family, racial and national traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social *milieu* which they represent. In the same way, the super-ego, in the course of an individual's development, receives

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<sup>54</sup>One might argue that the parents select and organize their demands for the child, by offering general principles of conduct. This suggestion would be in keeping with a famous remark of Freud's: "[A] child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgements of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation" (*New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:67 [84]). Yet this remark suggests a mechanism for propagating principles of conduct, not a mechanism for formulating them in the first place. If the child's ancestors were, like him, passive receptacles of demands made upon them, then they would no more have organized and generalized their ideals than he.

<sup>55</sup>"On Narcissism," quoted at note 36, above.

## A RATIONAL SUPEREGO

contributions from later successors and substitutes of his parents, such as teachers and models in public life of admired social ideals.<sup>56</sup>

Subsequently the child becomes disillusioned with parental figures altogether and replaces them with other adults as objects of his admiration. But these replacements are not introjected:

The course of childhood development leads to an ever-increasing detachment from parents, and their personal significance for the super-ego recedes into the background. To the *imagos* they leave behind there are then linked the influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes, whose figures need no longer be introjected by an ego which has become more resistant.<sup>57</sup>

When these two phases are conjoined, the process looks like this:

In the course of development the super-ego also takes on the influences of those who have stepped into the place of parents—educators, teachers, people chosen as ideal models. Normally it departs more and more from the original parental figures; it becomes, so to say, more impersonal. Nor must it be forgotten that a child has a different estimate of its parents at different periods of its life. At the time at which the Oedipus complex gives place to the super-ego they are something quite magnificent; but later they lose much of this. Identifications then come about with these later parents as well, and indeed they regularly make important contributions to the formation of character; but in that case they only affect the ego, they no longer influence the super-ego, which has been determined by the earliest parental *imagos*.<sup>58</sup>

First the personal stamp of the actual parents is eroded from the superego by the imprints of other parental figures. Then the superego becomes fixed, and subsequent ideals make their impression upon the ego instead.

These descriptions indirectly credit the child with evaluative judgment in his attachment to adults other than his parents. Although the new objects of attachment usually occupy socially defined positions of authority, they do not include everyone occupying such positions. Not every caretaker, teacher, or cultural hero wins the child's admiration. In the passages just quoted, Freud twice describes the child as exercising a choice among the models

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<sup>56</sup> *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, S.E. 23:146 [16]. See also *The Ego and the Id*, S.E. 19:37 [33]; *Group Psychology*, S.E. 18:129 [78].

<sup>57</sup> "The Economic Problem of Masochism," S.E. 19:168.

<sup>58</sup> *New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:64 [80].

available to him, and this capacity for choice would seem to require a capacity for evaluative reasoning.

Evaluative judgment plays an even clearer role in the child's detachment from his parents. Although this detachment is motivated in part by emotional conflict within the family, it is also guided by the child's growing appreciation for real differences in value:

For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. The child's most intense and most momentous wish during these early years is to be like his parents (that is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his father and mother. But as intellectual growth increases, the child cannot help discovering by degrees the category to which his parents belong. He gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them. Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents, and for using, in order to support his critical attitude, the knowledge which he has acquired that other parents are in some respects preferable to them.<sup>59</sup>

Later the child will long for "the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women."<sup>60</sup>

Freud doesn't explain how the child acquires the knowledge that other parents are in some respects preferable to his own. If the child's standards of what is noble or lovely are in fact images of his own father and mother, then he won't discover anyone who meets those standards better than father and mother themselves. How, then, does he discover that other adults are nobler or lovelier than the figures who epitomize these qualities for him?

The answer must be that the "intellectual growth" and "critical attitude" to which Freud alludes somehow enable the child to apply evaluative concepts autonomously, even to the extent of re-evaluating the instances from which he first learned them. This answer implies that the child possesses an evaluative faculty that is independent of the received values preserved in his superego.

This faculty is probably one and the same as that which Freud repeatedly cites as instrumental to the therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis. The benefit of revealing previously repressed impulses

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<sup>59</sup>"Family Romances," *S.E.* 9:236-41, at 237.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

in psychoanalysis, Freud explains, is that they can then be submitted to “acts of judgment,” by which they will be accepted or rejected rather than merely repressed.<sup>61</sup> In such acts of judgment “the compass of the ego [is] extended,”<sup>62</sup> and repression is thereby replaced by “the highest of the human mental functions.”<sup>63</sup>

What now begins to emerge is that the superego is not a final or ultimate authority in the Freudian psyche. The superego wields authority only in the eyes of an admiring ego, and the ego possesses an independent faculty of judgment as to whom or what to admire. This evaluative faculty lends authority to the superego but can also call that authority into doubt.

### The Locus of Authority

The secondary position of the superego in the order of normative authority raises a question about Freud’s account of morality. If Freud doesn’t think that the superego holds ultimate authority for the subject, why does he make it the seat of conscience?

The answer, I suspect, is that Freud doesn’t think of conscience or morality as holding ultimate authority, either. For Freud, “morality” means so-called morality—what society defines as morality—not the abstract, true morality of moral philosophers. By the same token, “conscience” means the psychic agent of so-called morality, the inner representative of a social force, rather than a faculty of moral perception or reasoning. Freud is deeply ambivalent about the social force called morality, and he consequently places its inner representative under the ultimate authority of the ego, whose evaluative capacities he would never have accused of being “moral.”

To those who do not share Freud’s moral skepticism, the superego’s lack of ultimate normative authority is a reason for denying that it plays the role of moral authority. That role may appear to

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<sup>61</sup> *Autobiographical Study*, S.E. 20:30 [32]. See “Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” S.E. 11:3–55, at 28, 53; “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy,” S.E. 10:3–149, at 145; “Repression,” S.E. 14:143–58, at 146; *Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, S.E. 23:179 [58]. See also *Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 16:294 [364]; “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” S.E. 21:238–48, at 309–10.

<sup>62</sup> *Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, S.E. 23:179 [58].

<sup>63</sup> “Five Lectures,” 11:28. See also “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy,” S.E. 10:145.

have fallen instead to the ego, which has the final say. Moral philosophers may therefore be tempted, if not to discard Freudian theory, then at least to revise it by relocating the seat of conscience.<sup>64</sup> But I favor an alternative approach. What Freud's account of the conscience needs, I think, is not so much revision as supplementation, at precisely that point where Freud loses interest—namely, the ego's capacity for evaluative judgment.

Freud describes the ego as the seat of “reason and good sense.”<sup>65</sup> But how can the ego exercise reason and good sense if there are no standards of rationality to which it aspires? The rational function that Freud has assigned to the ego would seem to require that it have a more extensive ideal than he has provided.

The only ideal that Freud has provided for the ego embodies minor and essentially contestable virtues. It is modeled upon contingent features of people whose contingent relations to the subject placed them in the way of his instincts early in life. The standards set by this ideal are simply the standards that happened to be set by the first people he happened to love. Indeed, they are standards set by the halo in which such people appeared to the child through the haze of his libido.

The Freudian superego lacks ultimate authority, then, because it reflects the child's infatuation with his parents, which is superseded in maturity by evaluative reasoning undertaken by the ego under norms of rationality. But how does a child acquire the latter norms? How does he learn to exercise reason and good sense, if not by observing and emulating the example of his parents?

To be sure, a child's love for his parents causes him to glamorize them, and the glamour is bound to fade. But the child's love is also, and fundamentally, his response to a value that the parents genuinely possess.

Out of their love for the child, the parents care for him with a wise good will, to which he responds with love. What the child experiences in being loved by his parents, and what he responds to in loving them, is their capacity to anticipate and provide for his needs, often at the expense of their own interests. And this capacity of the parents is nothing other than their practical reason,

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<sup>64</sup>This appears to be the revision favored by Deigh (see the material at note 4, above).

<sup>65</sup>*New Introductory Lectures*, S.E. 22:76 [95].

or practical good sense, by which their immediate self-gratification is subordinated to rational requirements embodied in another person. It's their capacity to take another person as an end. Hence the child's love for his parents doesn't merely project a superficial glow onto them; it registers the genuine value of their reason and good sense—what Kant would call their rational nature, or humanity—as manifested in their loving care.

Although the child may overvalue his parents as the noblest and loveliest specimens of humanity, he does not err in loving them, to begin with, as specimens of humanity, in the Kantian sense of the word. And when he later internalizes their tin nobility and paper loveliness, he must also internalize their humanity, which is pure gold—a standard not to be superseded by other ideals.

Thus, the parents' loving care of the child demonstrates their capacity to take him as an end in himself, and this capacity provides an object for his love, to begin with, and later an object for his reverence, as an ideal to be emulated. When he internalizes this ideal, in the image of his loving parents, he internalizes the Categorical Imperative, which just *is* a description of the capacity to take persons as ends.

This ideal carries genuine moral authority, which underwrites the issuance and enforcement of more specific demands. In issuing and enforcing these demands, parents do not merely spell out for the child what is required of him by the ideal of taking persons as ends; they also instantiate the ideal itself, by treating him as a responsible person who can be held to rational requirements.<sup>66</sup>

Insofar as the child sees parental discipline as expounding respect for persons and as expressing respect for him, his fear of that discipline will be tempered by respect or reverence for its moral authority, thus being transformed into genuinely moral anxiety. Of course, respect for parental discipline as embodying the Categorical Imperative is a sophisticated attainment, which cannot be expected of a younger child. But a younger child can still idealize his parents in other ways and hence feel an approximation of what he will feel later, when he can look to them as instances of the moral ideal.

For this reason, I do not want to reject Freud's notion that the

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<sup>66</sup>Here I have benefited from Tamar Schapiro's paper "What is a Child," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 715–38.

child's fear of his parents is initially transformed into guilt by his admiration for their nobility and loveliness, or even for their physical size and strength. This admiration, too, depends on the ego's capacity for evaluation rather than on the effects of libidinal drives; but it is an immature admiration, yielding an immature sense of the parents' authority. The initial account of parental authority that I attributed to Freud, and the present account that I have imposed upon him by way of revision, should thus be taken as describing different stages of development, the one serving as an early prototype of the other.

So perhaps the superego really can be the Categorical Imperative. All that would be required for a true marriage of Freudian and Kantian moral theory is this: on Freud's side, that the ideals incorporated into the superego include an ideal of practical reason; and on Kant's side, that the Categorical Imperative—which is an ideal of practical reason—take the form of an ego ideal.

I have argued elsewhere that Kant's contribution to this marriage is available in his own words.<sup>67</sup> I have not argued here that the same can be said of Freud. What I have argued instead is that Freudian theory has a place for his contribution—a blank space, where Freud neglected to provide the ego with norms to govern its practical reasoning. I have also suggested that a self-ideal to fill this space could indeed be acquired in the manner posited by Freud, through the internalization of that which a child values in his parents by reciprocating their love.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>See my "Voice of Conscience."

<sup>68</sup>This suggestion depends on arguments that I give in "Love as a Moral Emotion."