Manifestations of a Punitive Superego

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ABSTRACT: The superego retaliatory actions can be understood as unresolved conflicts at the oedipal and oral levels of development. At the oedipal level, the law of talion rules the superego organization. At the oral stage, matricidal wishes stimulate a punitive mother introject which requires compensation. In both cases, however, the superego is the internalized maternal imago whose severity is as harsh as the mother's introjected mother.

These last few years have seen a considerable amount of literature on the etiology, the functioning and disturbances of the ego. Major works on ego development and processes have added significant knowledge to our understanding of this fundamental intrapsychic organization. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate a particular type of functioning of another intrapsychic agency—the superego. We regret the neglect in the psychoanalytic literature of vigilant concern for this powerful and consequential mental structure. It is our view that superego disturbances play a predominant role in several pathologies, namely schizophrenia, narcissistic, and schizoid disorders.

The superego retaliatory actions can be understood at several levels of development. In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" we find this revealing passage:

What we have learnt about anxiety in phobias is applicable to obsessional neuroses as well. In this respect it is not difficult for us to put obsessional neuroses on all fours with phobias. In the former, the mainspring of all later symptom-formation is clearly the ego's fear of its super-ego. The danger situation from which the ego must get away is the hostility of the super-ego. There is no trace of projection here; the danger is completely internalized. But if we ask ourselves what it is that the ego fears from the super-ego, we cannot but
think that the punishment threatened by the latter must be an extension of the punishment of castration.¹

To comprehend Freud, in our viewpoint, is to understand the meaning of the dread of and wish for castration in the individual and group, in the transience of one’s life and in the historical process.

Freud, in our perspective, is the psychologist of the superego. As a Jew, a cultural anthropologist and a psychoanalyst of man and civilization, Freud preoccupied himself with the phylogenetic ancestry of the superego and the power it has accumulated through millenia of repression (Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism). On an ontogenetic level, Freud investigated in the microscopic mental space of the individual the ancestral battle of the ego against the outbreak and flowering of superego impulses. In this inner conflict the body serves, as in the case of conversion hysteria, as a battleground. Target organs suffer from the invasion and occupation of id impulses on the one hand, and the vengeful forces of conscience on the other.

At the oedipal level, the castration wish is associated to the archaic law of talion, a vestige of a phylogenetic drama that unfolded in the dawn of human consciousness, namely the retaliation for the primal patricide. Freud wrote abundantly on this trauma which led prehistorically to the taboo against incest. This is the punishment of literal or symbolic castration for the oedipal guilt. This organization is still prevalent in our modern psyche and could offer an explanation for the considerable amount of damage done to the body by so many of our patients. This particular form of punishment is connected in the ontogeny of the individual with the guilt that arises from sexual ideation towards a parental figure, and the parenticidal yearnings precipitated by such incestuous wishes. These few cases will illustrate this view.

Janet

Janet, a 22-year-old patient of Welsh and English extraction, had a strict mother and an emotionally invisible father. Sexually, she could not achieve orgasm, which is in itself an indicator of some intrapsychic blockage due to a strict superego. She masturbated rarely and contracted relationships with men of radical ethnic difference. She preferred men of Mediterranean origins. As therapy progressed, she began to masturbate more frequently. Her masturbatory episodes were usually followed by some damage to her fingers, her arm, or her legs. She would become physically awkward and accidentally bang her arms against tables or chairs, thus acting out a fantasy of self-mutilation. The damage was minor, but nevertheless noticeable. She realized the connection