Chapter VIII

THE ROLE OF THE SUPER-EGO

I

Exposition

Since the psychogenics of morality on Freudian view is intimately connected with the origin and growth of super-ego, it is necessary to explain the relation between psychoanalysis and moral values. This being done will throw a flood of light on the Freudian concept of super-ego.

Psychoanalysis, both in the levels of theory and method, is not basically concerned with moral values. As a theory, it investigates, explains and formulates a theory in psychological terms, about the structure and dynamics of personality. As a method it tends to make the hidden contents of the unconscious conscious. Anyway it is not essentially interested in moral matters. It never tends to better one's morals as well. However, psychoanalysis cannot leave morals completely; for it is a human phenomenon, a mode of behaviour and moral sense is psychological. Psychoanalysis is, therefore, obliged to embrace the study of moral ideas and norms, and certainly it adopts morality as a branch of its own in some way or other.

But it is to be noted that psychoanalytic study of morals is different from the ethical study. The former makes a positive approach, while the latter a normative one. The
moral behaviour is studied by ethics with reference to the highest good. The meaning of the 'good', its constitutive elements and its objective character are analysed, discussed and investigated successively. Nothing of this sort is done by psychoanalysis. "The attitude of the psychoanalyst is that of the psychological student of moral or other valuations and their inter-relation with other individuals or socio-psychological phenomena. His objectivity is scientific objectivity, his truth is scientific truth."\(^1\) Further, the relation of analysis to value problems was of necessity the same as that of any other science."\(^2\) In connection with this quotations, it may be put in this way: psychoanalysis gives an account of the "ontogenesis of moral values". It explains only what the psychological factors that play their part in our moral valuation are. Mention also may be made of that psychologists of world repute like Wundt, Titchener, James, Watson etc. did not intend to leave any psychology of morals. However, Freud ventured although by accident.

Let us now turn our attention direct towards the super-ego. With the help of this concept Freud was able to account for moral phenomena such as awareness of distinction between right and wrong, moral ideal, overbearing conscience etc. According to him, the child at birth is without any sense of moral values and is so for the first some years of its life

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1. Psychoanalysis and moral values - Heinz Hartmann, p. 2
2. Ibid., p. 20
before the coming of the oedipus complex. However, the child being born in a moral atmosphere, i.e., in the family and society having codes, ethos, picks up the codes through parents or other people. The parents, mainly the father, are more influential in this regard, by way of rewards and punishments. The various mechanisms by which the external code is internalised and also made a part of one's being are fully brought to light by Freud. In the course of the individual development a part of the inhibiting forces in the outer world becomes internalised; a standard is created in the *Ego* which opposes the other faculties by observation, criticism and prohibition. We call this new standard the *Super-Ego*. The Super-Ego is the successor and representative of the parents (and educators) who superintended the actions of the individual in his first years of life; it perpetuates their functions almost without a change.

Following Freud, it is found that out of the ego originates the super-ego through the processes of *introjection* and identification. They are traceable back to the oral stage and are also means by which the ego can give up its object- cathexes and set them up again within itself so as to overcome the sense of object-loss. A child depends on these processes to give up its mother-attachment and fear of father. The identification as it occurs with both the parents can enrich and deepen the constitutional bisexuality of a child.

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3. *Moses and Monotheism* - S. Freud, Part III, Section II
4. Ibid.
strong masculine dispositions in the male child leads to an intensification of the identification with the father. The emergence of the super-ego is the consequence. The broad general outcome of the sexual phase dominated by the oedipus complex may, therefore, be taken to be the forming of the precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two identifications in some way united with each other. This modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego-ideal or super-ego. As the parents are endowed with powers of punishment and reward to be given to the child, so is with the super-ego in its relation with the individual himself.

In this way the super-ego is the representative of parents, especially of father in the child. It is the heir of the oedipus complex. "The super-ego is in fact the heir to the Oedipus Complex and only rises after that complex has been disposed of."\(^6\) The power, the aims and even the nature of parental affection are taken over by the super-ego. Children replace the authority of their parents by their own inner authority through the process of assimilation of the moral authority of the parents. Such internalisation of parental authority causes one advantage in the child in that it enables him to control and regulate his behaviour in tune with the parental wishes in order to obtain their approval and avoid

\(^5\) The Ego and the Id - S. Freud

\(^6\) Outline of Psychoanalysis - S. Freud, Chapter VIII
their displeasure as well. The formation of the super-ego is
favoured by the long period in which the child is dependent on
the parents.

Of two constituents that may be treated as sub-systems -
the conscience and the ego-ideal - the super-ego is made up.

Onething worthy of mention in this stage is that the different
usages of the term, ego-ideal, are not consistent. Once, it
is identified with the super-ego; next it is differentiated
from it. For the sake of convenience at the moment, let us
treat them as unequal. About the origin of the ego-ideal,
Freud says, "There lies hidden the first and most important
identification of all, the identification with the father,
which takes place in the pre-history of every person. This is
apparently not in the first instance the consequence or outcome
of an object-cathexis, it is a direct and immediate
identification and earlier than any object-cathexis." The
ego-ideal represents the conceptions of the child of what his
parents regard to be morally good. Conscience is just the
opposite. It is what the parents consider morally bad.

Standards of virtue and vice are inculcated by the parents in
the form of rewards and punishments, i.e., reward for approval
and punishment for unapproval. Now rewards may be both
physical and psychological. The former is exemplified by
things such as toys, sweets, etc. the latter is showering of
love and affection either by word or anything else. Punishments

7. The Ego and the Id - S. Freud
are all opposites of these things and manners. Such behaviour of the parents towards the child is imbibed by the child and imposed upon himself.

Regarding the nature and form of rewards and punishments that the child adopts for use upon himself, it is necessary to go into further details. Physical rewards may be a costly meal, a long rest or sexual gratification. On the other hand, physical punishments may be an upset stomach, an injury or the loss of some valuable possession. Such Freudian insight into the workings of human personality has explained why people often get sick, have accidents and lose things. There is the question of self-punishment behind many accidents. One fitting example is the case of a young man wrecking his ear after having sexual relation with a girl. Actually speaking, a person is not usually aware of the relation between a guilty conscience and an accident. Rewards and punishments on the psychological level are feelings of pride and guilt or inferiority respectively. When virtuous thoughts or actions are thought or done, a feeling of pride flanks the ego. The ego feels ashamed when it falls a prey to temptations. Self-love is equivalent to pride, while self-hate to guilt. They are the inner representation of parental love and rejection.

On the relation of the super-ego with the ego, it was stated, "the details of the relation between the ego and the super-ego become completely intelligible if they are carried back to the child's attitude towards his parents. The parents' influence naturally includes not merely the
personalities of the parents themselves but also the racial, national and family traditions handed on through them as well as the demands of the immediate social milieu which they represent. In the same way, an individual's super-ego in the course of his development takes over contributions from later successors and substitutes of his parents, such as teachers, admitted figures in public life, or high social ideals. 

What, then, is the function of the super-ego? Primarily it controls and regulates such impulses as uncontrolled expression of which will threaten the stability of the society. They are sex and aggression. "The super-ego arises, as we know, from an identification with the father regarded as a model. Every such identification is in the nature of desexualization or even of a sublimation."10 In case the id is treated as the product of evolution and psychological representative of one's

8. An Outline of Psychoanalysis - S. Freud
9. Ibid.
10. The Ego and the Id - S. Freud, Chapter V
biological endowment, the ego as the outcome of one's interaction with objective reality, then the super-ego may be considered as the resultant of socialisation and the vehicle of cultural tradition.

So far we have traced the view of Freud on super-ego. It will be an added advantage in case we explain the allied views of one or two psychoanalysts who followed Freud with some deviations. This is for the purpose for having more acquaintance with Freudian view. Freud has contended that super-ego is the heir to oedipus complex, implying further that it comes into existence all of a sudden as soon as the complex rears its head and also in a full blown form right from the beginning. Abraham, however, gives otherwise statements. In his "Pregenital Stages of the Libido", he remarked that the infant might experience it at the earliest oral stage and speculated that something like guilt might take place at the anal stage. Ferenczi was more precise on this issue. The fact that some of the earliest aspects of child's education are concerned with the learning to control the process of excretion so that they may occur at the right time and place was pinpointed. "The anal and urethral identification with the parents appears to build up in the child's mind a sort of physiological fore runner of ego-ideal or the super-ego. It is by no means improbable that this as yet semi-physiological morality forms the essential ground work of later purely mental morality."\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) The Analysis of Sexual Habits - Ferenczi, quoted by Flugel, Man, Morals and Society, p. 107
In this line of explanation Melanie Klein's views are more important than any other. Consequent on her analysis of children from two to six years old, she concluded that the beginnings of the super-ego could be forced back to the earliest months of a child. The characteristics of super-ego being severe and harsh were what noted by Freud already with his explanation that it was due to projection of aggressive impulses towards the father. He did not believe that aggression was essentially oral and anal. It was considered by him to be due to introjection of parental super-ego. "The Super-ego of the child is not really built up on the model of the parents but on that of the parents' super-ego, it takes over the same content." Klien, however, takes it to be due mostly to the processes of introjection and projection.

Some interesting features characterise the early stages of a child's life. On the psychological level, a child is not in a position to maintain a distinction between the ego and the non-ego, between himself and the environment. His impulses as well are highly ambivalent. His attitudes towards the same object are love-hate relationship. He loves what is pleasure-giving anal hates what is pain-evoking. On the physiological level, the processes of taking in and out dominate the child's life. They are taking in milk from mother's breast and expelling the forces out. The earliest mental states are based on these biological facts. The process of taking in

12. New Introductory Lectures - S. Freud
becomes oral introjection and that of taking out projection.

These two processes function in combination. When the child is frustrated, what aroused are anger and aggression which are the expressions of oral biting and aggressive introjection. He wishes to incorporate the nipple and breast as well as to consume the contents of the body of the mother. The objects of aggression being the object of love, the child becomes afraid of his aggressive impulses of which he subsequently tries to get rid by means of projection. As a consequence, the image of a fierce mother-figure arises in his mind - one who is prepared to bite, tear, destroy. In this way, the projection of the child's aggressive impulses may create quite a fantastic notion of cruelty and severity of the parents which is at the back of harsh super-ego.

It must be borne in mind that the ways of the super-ego were described by Freud as 'categorical imperatives', i.e., such dictations of the super-ego are really dictatorial commands which must have to be followed by the individual.

Let us then direct our attention to the role the super-ego plays in the etiology of the neurosis. As mentioned earlier in the foregoing chapters, it imposes some commands, prohibitions, restrictions on the ego. The act of imposition is with reference to the instinctual drives or wishes or impulses from the id. This is for the purpose of making the individual a social and cultural being. Adaptation to such a style of life has been taught since infancy by the parents of
the child. In this way the social and cultural heritage represented by the parents is passed on from the parents to the children and so on.

It is alright as far as it goes. But a stage comes when the individual ego cannot duly incorporate the dictates of the super-ego into the system under which the ego discharges its duty for the interest and welfare of the organism. What is a system and what is that system as mentioned here? Using our commonsense, a system is one whole, parts of which are connected purposively. In the Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, the term, 'purposively' is not mentioned. It means by system, "Anything formed of parts placed together or adjusted into a regular and connected whole: a set of things considered as a connected whole." The system as mentioned here is the whole formed of all elements coming from the id, the ego, the super-ego and the reality. The ego is to co-ordinate all elements including its own. There cannot be any alipshod, shortcoming, blackspot etc. in such a system where we consider a normal growth of personality. The purpose or duty or function of the system is to enable the ego to discharge its duty.

Apart from factors attributable to the ego, certain factors are traceable to the super-ego in their roles in neurosis. First, in ambivalent types of personality, one's attitude towards the same object is double-fold. The question of love-hate relationship is an example. One relation is

diametrically opposed to the other. Still they are fused together and the fusion defies any tendency towards defusion. To come to our subject matter, when the instinctual drives from the id come up to the ego the morality in the super-ego is aroused. Consequent on this, the id drives are checked by the ego from being discharged, taking into account the dictates of morality in the super-ego. It is not the question of being strong or weak only, rather, it is also that of incompatibility. This process is a big step in the direction of neurosis.

Although the super-ego represents the social and cultural relations, they are not one and the same things. The social and cultural milieu as represented by the individual super-ego may be traceable to years back. Since then the social and cultural milieu has been changing ceaselessly. Moreover, one's super-ego has no direct concern with it as the former is a legacy of the parents. There is always a possibility of the gap between them being more and more widened with years to come. Of course, additions and cancellations will always take place in the super-ego with the change in the social and cultural traditions. But there cannot be any sort of guarantee as to the stability of the relative changes in both the spheres. Now this uneveness or irregularity in the changes has much to do with neurosis. As soon as the id drives are referred to the ego, the impositions of the super-ego will swarm in the arena of the ego. They will, however, distort the real nature of the social and cultural traditions, amidst which the id drives are to be discharged. Such complications may surely
lead to neurosis, as the ego will be puzzled in the next step.

There is still another two ways by which the ego may be made inactive by the super-ego. The imperatives of the super-ego may be very much obscure and thereby baffling. Though obscure, their forces to work are much in tact. In case the ego fails to understand the actual nature of the imperatives, the individual is prone to neurosis. On the other hand, some usually heavy, apparently odd, impositions may be made by the super-ego on the ego. It is beyond the standard of common place morality. To give an example, let us remind ourselves of the advice given by Krishna to Arjuna in the Mahabharata when the latter attempted to make a flight from the battlefield where many relatives, friends, guides etc. were to be killed. It was usual for a Kshetria to fight and fighting alone could bring truth, morality and dharma. Though infrequent, such cases take place occasionally in one person or another. The ego, being unbearable to obey or oppose the super-ego becomes susceptible to neurosis.

14. It is a great epic of the Hindus in which a battle between five brothers and on one side and hundred brothers on the other side is narrated. Shri Krishna also took part in favour of the five brothers of which Arjuna is one.
II

Discussion

We owe a great deal to Sigmund Freud for his detail and elaborate explanation of super-ego regarding its influence in human behaviour in general and in neurotic behaviour in particular. It took so much time and labour to bring up the deepest layers of the super-ego from the human mind to the surface of common knowledge. The place that the super-ego occupies in the whole scheme of psychoanalysis is never less than those occupied by the ego and the id. On the other hand, Freud had an unshaken belief in a key role played by it in neurosis and devoted much pain to an attempt so that a neurotic may be free from the bondage of a fierce super-ego. However, it will be necessary to take up some points for discussion.

It is said that the super-ego is the heir of Oedipus complex and, therefore, arises only when the complex has been disposed of. Further, it is said that the inhibiting forces of the outer world are internalised and the standard thus created is the super-ego. As the formation of super-ego will take place after the oedipus complex is disposed of, we are to say, for the sake of compromising with the other statement, that Freud meant by the internalization of the standard only such standards as could or would compel the oedipus complex to be disposed of. The castration threat is an example. We may then ask Freud if he will answer to the questions of restraint and restriction imposed on the child during its developmental stages. Such restrictions are control of bladder, sphincter,
oral libidinal restrictions. They are imposed on the child while it is quite young and it also learns it.

New learning can be divided into two divisions regarding its sources: (a) actual personal experience and (b) sayings of specialists, elders, authorities, etc. We are forced to learn from the second sources although they are just opposite of the first and we also learn. For example, we are taught that the earth moves round the sun and we learn it with a belief that it is the saying of specialists. But we use such expressions as 'the sun is moving', 'the sun is rising up' etc. This is a strange nature of human learning in that all learning has no direct concern with practical life.

When we know an object, it is made possible by identification and internalization of experiences gained by identification. This method is also known as introjection. When restrictions and controls are repeatedly imposed on the child in some way or other, a child eventually stops putting harmful things in the mouth. It just learns without having any knowledge of the nature of the things. It is by means of introjection and identification. So the learning of the restrictions by the child in the early period prior to oedipus complex is contributory to the formation of the super-ego.

Freud says that proper disolution of the oedipus complex guarantees the growth of normal super-ego and thenceforth normal personality. In the reverse case, neurosis is the consequence. If we mean by super-ego the restrictions, inhibitions internalized, then it is not necessarily connected
with oedipus complex. No doubt, the dissolution of the complex also contributes to the formation of super-ego. As the contents of the super-ego are traceable back to the earliest months of the child, its formation started since long, i.e., from the pre-oedipal stages as stated above.

The superintending influences of the parents include not only their personalities but also the racial, national and family traditions etc., handed over to them by their predecessors and also the demands of the immediate social and cultural milieu. In this stage we find some elements of heredity in the super-ego as we found in the id. The situation becomes more complex and even complicated. It becomes a very difficult and even impossible task to form a comprehensive knowledge about a man's super-ego by tracing the influence of the fore-fathers of both the maternal and paternal lines as well as the demands of social and cultural milieu. This is only to complicate the nature of the super-ego.

Freud states that relationship between the ego and the super-ego depends on the child's attitude towards his parents. What is the child's attitude? Is there something which may be separately called child's attitude? Generally an attitude is the result and depends upon one's previous experiences and wish factor at a particular moment of experience. A child is, therefore, to interpret a situation in so far as it is connected with his past experiences, and the wish factor at that moment of experience. One thing to be noted in this stage is that of inherited factors. This is excluded from the discussion and
it is better to do so because of its inherent complexity. By super-ego we mean 'the name of the new standard in the ego created by internalization of the inhibiting forces in the outer world'. The act of recognition of these inhibiting forces and consequent internalization of them remains a primary function of the ego. So we may coordinate that the formation of the super-ego depends not upon the child's attitude but upon his ego. It is to interpret the stimuli coming from the parental side. This is supported by the fact that identical twins do not have identical super-egos.

The ego-ideal is connected with the immediate or remote aims of life. The standard it represents, however vague that may be, is formed by a slow and gradual process. Man seeks pleasure and avoids pain. The ego-ideal is connected with pleasure but not necessarily. It is sometimes painstaking. However, the ego strives for it. The individual sometimes achieves masochistic satisfaction or pleasure in such strivings. It so happens that the ego-ideal in some cases is set by the ego at a height that is much beyond the reach of the individual. This is modified with experience in the case of normal persons. Some persons fail to modify it and are prone to neurosis. The super-ego lays its icy hand on such persons for not being able to realize the ideal set forth. It appears that this point is not clearly and fully explained by Freud.

The progress of the discussion compels us to make a distinction between the super-ego and the ego-ideal. As for Freud, the two were equalized or distinguished at different
times, as explained in the beginning of this chapter. Some inhibiting forces of the outer world are necessary for the formation of the super-ego. Then comes the ego-ideal and conscience. In other words, we may say with some limitations that they are the by-products of the super-ego. The ego-ideal is formed by the individual, unlike the super-ego which is thrust upon us per force. In the tasks of realizing the ego-ideal, the super-ego is the guardian or protector. It works in the disguise of the conscience.

The super-ego also is to change with experience. It may be rapid or slow in the process. Circumstances in the outer reality situations, forces attributable to inner urges, the ego's organization and strength, the nature and character of the already formed super-ego, have much to do in such a change of the super-ego. On the other hand, a good supply of supporting materials and energy for its stability and maintenance is required. The super-ego of the normal person is mobile, accepting due changes wherever necessary. That of the neurotic is rigid, adverse to circumstances in practical life. Such a change in the super-ego necessitates a change in one way or another in the ego-ideal and conscience. Freud seems to be less interested in this direction.