

Section 4 - Super-Ego and Conscience

Introduction:

I had occasion recently to give a talk during which I asked of the assembled group, “What is the super-ego?” To my surprise, I got a number of thoughtful but rather vague answers like “the conscience” or “that part of you that makes you behave yourself” or “that part of your mind that punishes you”. I thought that all of these ideas were correct in a certain sense, but they had no coherent, organizing logic to them.

What was most concerning to me was that they did not seem to be based on an understanding of emotional development in infancy. In turn, their understanding was not grounded in an understanding of the composition of the unconscious inner world and its functioning.

For me the concept of the “super-ego” is too much of an “abstraction”, i.e. it is a meta-psychological concept, and is not sufficiently “experience near”, to be useful except in the most general or crude descriptions. It does not flow logically from infancy and childhood and their relationship to external experience, combined with unconscious phantasy.

It also lacks a connection to the development of the brain in the first year of life. The result of this failure of specificity is that it leads to crude descriptive comments like someone has a “harsh super-ego” or “lacks a conscience”. These are only useful in the most rudimentary sense analogous to saying “look there is a bird”. It tells nothing about what it really is, how to think about it, or what to do with it.

So to launch this discussion I would like to make a few orienting observations in the form of axioms. I will follow with a few definitions and then try to succinctly explain the logic in my thinking.

Axiom #1: What is referred to as the super-ego is actually a depiction of a handful of object relationships, between parts of self and internal versions of mom and dad that exist in the unconscious inner world of every individual. These object relationships, being the only game in town, are externalized into the outside world where they are recreated. This recreation makes it possible to visualize what they are like in that persons unconscious inner world of psychic reality.

Axiom #2: When someone is said to “lack a super-ego” or have a “harsh super-ego”, those descriptions are referring to internal object relations that are dominated by views of life that originated in very early infancy, and may have been reinforced by ongoing later experiences. These primitive internal relationships are by definition, concrete in nature and dominated by the Law of Talion (i.e. “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”).