

The Loving Superego: A Defence of Freud’s Moral Naturalism

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Abstract: Against Freud’s well-known moral scepticism, some philosophers suggest that it is possible to construct a “rationalist” version of psychoanalytic theory, to the effect that a person’s mature moral sense is grounded not so much on infantile desires as on his developed rational capacities. This paper examines specifically the argument for “a rational superego” given by David Velleman, a proposer of this rationalist project, with a view of showing that it is faulty because: (1) it is at odds with the most important insights about the infantile mind as provided by psychoanalytic theory; and (2) it overlooks the possible contribution that irrationality can make to the good life. Taking a Kleinian line of argument, I propose to replace the idea of a rational superego with that of a loving but irrational superego, one which is constituted by certain benign phantasies about the good parent-child relationship, and which I take to be more congenial to Freud’s naturalist view of morality.

We are far from overlooking the portion of psychological truth that is contained in the assertion that conscience is of divine origin; but the thesis needs interpretation. Even if conscience is something “within us”, yet it is not so from the first. In this it is a real contrast to sexual life, which is in fact there from the beginning of life and not only a latter addition.

—*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

Few of us, if any, would deny that Freud is among the most important critics of morality in history. Being such a radical thinker who is sensitive to the work of the unconscious, he has no brief in saying that our conscience owes its origin to something external to us—not God, but some parental figures to which our love and hate were once directed. During infancy, we were defenceless against the authority of parents. We thus internalized them; we made an internal version of them through the making of the superego, which unfortunately became a great burden in our search for a happy life. Morality is accordingly a price we pay for our infantile irrationality, and not a fair one by Freud’s standard.

Some philosophers disagree. On their perception, Freud’s naturalist model of moral motivation may well be an interesting one, and yet it does very little to undermine the rational authority of morality. However irrational Freud may say of

the origin of the superego, they argue, his account leaves much room for the possibility of a well-developed conscience, which is grounded on the person's rational capacities and not on infantile desires.¹ In the words of David Velleman, a prominent advocate of the present view, what is proposed here is a “rationalist version of psychoanalytic theory”, one which renders possible the marriage between Freud and Kant.²

For reasons to be given below, I think this rationalist project is not one that we can take with confidence. Whether we are ultimately to endorse Freud's theory of moral development, I argue that the project not only is at odds with some of the most important insights about the infantile mind as provided by psychoanalytic theory, but it also overlooks the possible contribution that irrationality can make to the good life. I shall specifically look at several difficulties confronting Velleman's reconstruction of Freud, which I deem to be indicative of the faults of the rationalist approach to Freud in general. Further to this, I will try and develop a version of Freudian moral naturalism, one which affirms the place of irrationality in human morality.

1. Velleman's Argument

For many readers, it may seem unimaginable how Kantian ethics can be clothed in a psychoanalytic fashion without loss of meaning. Velleman, however, suggests that this is possible, provided that we make some necessary but harmless revisions of Kantian and Freudian theory respectively. This claim is worth close examining for the Kant scholars. But my purpose in the present section is a different one. I want to highlight those features in Velleman's revisionary reading of Freud, which speak against the latter's well-known moral scepticism. I then continue to suggest in the following sections why these features are problematic from both the philosophical and the psychoanalytic perspective.

Velleman compares the superego favourably with the Categorical Imperative. In doing so, he aims to show that Kantian moral theory can benefit from being supplemented with a model of moral development in which parental influence plays a pivotal role. He thinks Freud has provided such a model for us, since the dual status of the Categorical Imperative as “a prescription and an ideal” fits in well with the structure of the Freudian moral sense: “the superego tells us

¹ Some arguments for this rationalist view can be found in Cavell (1992); Scheffler (1992), ch.5; Deigh, (1995), ch.6; Velleman, (2006), ch.6. It was Velleman who first suggested the idea of Freudian moral rationalism, and he attributed it explicitly to Scheffler and Deigh.

² Velleman (2006), pp.130-131.

what to do; the ego ideal gives us a model to emulate.”³ He also credits Freud’s theory with the ability to make the idea of internal moral authority “concretely imaginable”. And most importantly, he argues that the superego story provides a clue to how we become awakened to the humanity of others: it is the experience of loving and being loved which induces the child to set up an ideal image of the parent, and this gives him grounds to model on that image and develop his sense of humanity.⁴

What this suggests, in contrast with Freud’s official view on the matter, is that a capacity for love is essential to the growth of a person’s moral sense. Why should a Freudian accept this at all? In reply, Velleman draws our attention to the double aspect of the superego that Freud does not often bother to articulate. To be sure, Freud often associates the superego with a harsh conscience in the person, which controls the person’s thought and action, and threatens him with punishment if he does not submit to its authority. But other than conscience, Freud also suggests a different component of the superego, *the ego ideal*, “by which the ego measures itself, which it emulates, and whose demand for ever greater perfection it strives to fulfil”.⁵ Given these characterizations, Velleman asks us to consider what it means to say the superego is an “aggressive, sadistic, and cruel” figure which torments the ego with anxiety and threatens to punish it. It will not do to say the anxiety and fear so produced is all about the harsh treatment of an aggressive object, as this fails to explain why it is *guilt* and not merely *fear* that the child experiences when he fails to meet the demands of the superego. Rather, “the parents’ aggression is conceived as punishment because it is seen to be backed by authority”, and the introjected parents have authority to the extent they play both the function of a disciplinarian, and that of “an inner object of love and admiration, the ego ideal”.⁶ Because of the child’s love and admiration directed originally to the parents, now an internal representative of them is set up to measure itself. Since this ideal is what the ego sets up for itself, it too has the capacity to demand the latter to live up with the ideal.

This so far is what Velleman sees to be the most charitable reading of the Freudian account of the superego, which traces the source of normativity and the sense of moral authority back to the child’s idealization of some loved object. He is not satisfied with it, though. For one thing, he is aware that the conception of love

³ Ibid., p.131.

⁴ Ibid., p.132.

⁵ Freud (1932); quoted from Velleman, *ibid.*, p.140.

⁶ Ibid., pp.136 & 138.

as employed by Freud is no different from what we call “self-love”: it is either a regress to the “primary narcissism” of the infant, who treats himself as an ideal object of love and the source of pleasure, or else a form of “identificatory love” motivated by the child’s desire to *have* his parent, a desire for the “oral, cannibalistic incorporation of the other person”.⁷ In neither case can love explain how the idealized parent is valued independently of the child’s desires. With the introduction of self-love, the authority of the ego ideal becomes a false one, a thing that merely serves the person’s pleasure. It thus cannot explain why the child will feel guilty for failing to model on the ego ideal, in addition to feeling *frustrated* for it. To solve this problem, Velleman feels obliged to revise Freud’s conception of love. And he does it by a two-step argument.

The first step is to introduce to Freud's account the idea of “a capacity in the ego to conduct evaluative reasoning about ideals that it has adopted or might adopt”.⁸ This capacity of evaluative reasoning is thus seen as emerging from the maturing of the ego, which in turn gives it the power to call the superego’s authority into doubt, to be disillusioned with the internalized parental values, and to be detached from parental influence all together.

But if this is granted, are we to say that practical reason is wholly a function of the ego and not of the superego anymore? At this point Velleman takes his second step—the final step—to defend the rational authority of the superego. Perhaps the seat of conscience needs to be relocated to the ego if the superego is merely the inner representative of some social norms that the parents happen to have. But Velleman finds it possible that the superego carries with it a truly moral perception, one which is not due to contingent social facts, and it is that a person is an end in itself. In this way, the maturing ego’s endorsement of this perception is just to be expected. But how does this perception arise in the first place? The answer is that the child gets it as a response to a value embodied in the good parents:

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, or practical good sense, by which their immediate self-

⁷ Ibid., p.141.

⁸ Ibid., p.148.

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 does not 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—as manifested in their loving care.⁹

This extremely interesting, though revisionary, account of the superego suggests a happy scenario of moral development which is yet to be considered by Freudians. Arguably, it has the merit of sparing the theory of superego morality from collapsing into a theory of ego morality, and it reclaims the rational authority of the superego by saying that the good parents set an example of what it is to treat another person as an end without regard to one's self-interest. Internalizing the parents is essential to the acquisition of practical reason: because of the child's love for the good parents, he internalizes their practical good sense; and because of what he learns from this good practical sense, his ego becomes capable of evaluative reasoning.

Notably, Velleman's account shares with other rationalist versions of Freudian theory an optimistic genealogy of morals, to the effect that a child is normally capable of developing a sense of value grounded on his rational capacities to see others as independent beings, and not on his infantile desire to gain pleasure.¹⁰ I shall, however, argue that such an optimism is hard to take as far as psychoanalytic theory is concerned. It trades on the presumptuous idea that once a child has acquired the ability to make conceptual judgments, the most archaic forms of mental states—wishes and phantasies—will *normally* lose hold of his moral and emotional life. That such an idea is problematic from the psychoanalytic perspective is a central theme of the works of Wollheim, Lear, Gardner, and

⁹ Ibid., p.154.

¹⁰ But note that this optimism is expressed differently in Cavell, Scheffler, and Deigh. Deigh tends to hold a rather moderate position that Freud has not succeeded in refuting rationalism, because he could not exclude the possibility that social upbringing plays a more important role than parenting in shaping the person's values. Scheffler's claim is even weaker than Deigh's: it says only that it is *possible* for a person's infantile desire for parental love to be forced into the background as his moral sense gets consolidated. Cavell's position is comparatively closer to Velleman's, in that she thinks that a person's developed ability to perceive other people as independent beings is a condition of mindedness.

Cottingham; and I shall not bother to repeat their arguments here.¹¹ What I hope to bring up in what follows, instead, is a *model* of the child which these works purport to illuminate, and which explains why the adult moral sense lacks the kind of autonomy that the rationalist attributes to it. To such a model I now turn.

2. The Pre-Rational Child

The main thrust of Velleman's argument, as we have seen, is that there needs to be a vicissitude in the child's development which enables him to evaluate the demands of the ego-ideal, making it possible that he fully endorses the value of humanity which he has long since internalized. A pre-condition of this development, though, is that the child already has a clear grasp of the distinction between an aggressor and an authority, which in turn explains the nature of guilt as a moral feeling. But this gives rise to a few questions that concern us presently: Do young children have these required conceptual and evaluative capacities at all? How do we know if their attitudes towards the parents are not clouded by the infantile frame of mind? And if they can clearly distinguish guilt from fear, is their emotional life comparable to that of adults?

I am raising these questions because it is commonplace to point out that children are not like us both in terms of reason and passion. Perhaps as adults, our experience of guilt requires that we clearly understand what it is to be *punished*, and not just *threatened*. But will it be too much to ask of a very young child to have systematic mastery of the concepts of authority and punishment in order to experience guilt? If, from the perspective of the child, emotions like fear, guilt and admiration are differentiated by their conceptual contents, then most likely his emotional life is dependent on his *beliefs* about the objects around him, which can be either confirmed or falsified.¹² A bully is horrible but cannot be admired, if the child does not believe that the bully has anything good to admire. This line of

¹¹ See Wollheim (1984), especially chapter 7; Lear (1998), ch.5; Gardner (1993), especially chs.4-6; Cottingham (1998), ch.4. These writers generally take the view that psychoanalysis's most important achievement lies in its postulation of the unconscious motivational force consisting of "wish" and "phantasy", plus its implication of the role that irrationality plays in a person's life.

¹² Arguably, Velleman's analysis of guilt presupposes a *cognitivist* theory of emotion, one which takes *thought content* as an essential component of emotion. This theory appears fine when applied to the emotion of a person capable of propositional reflection on his own attitude, but less so if we move on to the case of very young children, whose conception of the world is more primitive than ours, and whose capacities for propositional thinking are very limited. For a general account of the cognitivist view, see Lyons (1980), ch.2. For an objection to it from the case of infantile emotions, see Deigh (2008), ch.3, especially pp.65-66.

thinking, which emphasizes on the centrality of beliefs in the child's emotional orientation, is at odds with the picture of infantile mind as suggested by psychoanalytic theory, and it risks describing it falsely *on the model of the adult's mind*. Or so I shall I argue.

To see more clearly what the present objection is about, let us consider an account of the infant's mind held by Kleinian theorists, which makes central use of the concept "phantasy".¹³ Assume that before a certain point of development, an infant is not capable of mastering the conceptual distinctions between various kinds of objects—call it a *pre-rational creature*. Such a creature is confronted with the task of representing and mastering its instinctual urges by "phantasy-making". It feels good or bad about the world in response to various instinctual tensions produced from within, and yet it sees no clear boundaries between internal and external reality. What it does, instead, is to imagine certain kinds of bodily occurrences, which both represent its desires and pacifies them. As Susan Isaacs puts it:

...when the child shows his desire for his mother's breast, he experiences this desire as a specific phantasy—"I want to suck the nipple". If desire is very intense (perhaps on account of anxiety), he is likely to feel: "I want to eat her all up." Perhaps to avert the repetition of loss of her, or for his pleasure, he may feel: "I want to keep her inside me." If he is feeling fond, he may have the phantasy: "I want to stroke her face, to pat and cuddle her." At other times, when he is frustrated or provoked, his impulses may be of an aggressive character; he will experience these as, *e.g.*; "I want to bite the breast; I want to tear her to bits."¹⁴

These examples suffice to show Isaacs's point that phantasy (qua "unconscious mental content") is the means by which the pre-rational child represents himself and the world. They also show that the child's representation is more or less *corporealized*, making his thought appear more or less bodily in outlook. And there are further interesting things to say about it:

¹³ "Phantasy" is commonly referred to as a kind of *unconscious* fantasy. Kleinians use the term to designate either (1) "the mental expression of instincts", (2) those unconscious mechanisms which serve a defensive function, or (3) some mental structures produced by some "internalized objects". Cf. Isaacs (1952), ch.3; Klein (1952); Segal (1974), ch.2.

¹⁴ Isaacs (1952), p.84.

Not merely do these phantasies appear and disappear according to changes in the instinctual urges stirred up by outer circumstance, they also exist together, side by side in the mind; just as in a dream, mutually exclusive wishes may exist and be expressed together.

Not only so: these early mental processes have an omnipotent character. Under the pressure of instinct tension, the child in his earliest days not only feels: “I want to”, but implicitly phantasies: “I am doing” this and that to the mother; “I *have* her inside me”, when he wants to. The wish and impulse, whether it be love and hate, libidinal or destructive, tends to be felt as actually fulfilling itself, whether with an external or an internal object. This is partly because of the overwhelmingness of his desires and feelings. In his earliest days, his own wishes and impulses fill the whole world at the time when they are felt.¹⁵

In short, the three special features of phantasy are its *corporeality*, *alogicalness*, and *omnipotence*. A mind which is wholly dominated by phantasies is merely a hypothetical one; and we know very well infants start to gain a vague sense of reality as soon as they are in contact with the world. But for our purposes, such a hypothesis is useful to the extent that it indicates the pre-rational child’s typically bizarre means of self-representation, plus the magical function of phantasy as a vehicle of *defence*: it magically reduces the child’s mental pain by an imaginative act of keeping or destroying the loved or hated breast; and in imagining so, it is for him as if he were really making a physical change to it. Furthermore, phantasy serves as the very process by which psychological structures are formed. It is not so much that the self is realistically divided in the id, the ego, and the superego. Rather, it is the child who phantasizes himself being divided up. The splitting of his self becomes possible, as phantasy enables him to imagine his situation from different perspectives. He could, for example, imagine an impersonal id in himself, and so view his tormenting instincts as something alien. He could also imagine eating up a parent (or the breast) and keeping her in his body, and hence confronting himself with a superego. Accordingly, it is the unconscious mental activity of phantasing which gives life to the superego.

Velleman need not deny the role of phantasy in the very formation of the superego—and he can have little reason for doing so qua a serious reader of Freud. But he might respond to the Kleinian account by asking: “Even if phantasy is

¹⁵ Ibid.

irrational as such, can its impact be attenuated by the child's rational capacities as he grows up, so much so that the mature superego is free from phantasy's intervention?" Kleinians' answer to this is "No", because phantasy is on their view not a one-off event in life. Once an object is phantasized to be orally incorporated, the person will form a disposition to phantasize other things subsequent to the oral incorporation. He now imagines that the object is in his body, doing this or that to him from within. It is in this sense that we may say that the superego is an "internal object", like someone residing in the body of the person.¹⁶ And he will continue to imagine the object in an unconscious manner even when he is said to be a fully rational person. Against Velleman's view of moral development, thus, the Kleinian account says that the maintenance of the superego structure requires the continuous work of phantasy, and, *a fortiori*, of infantile irrationality.

3. The Authenticity Problem

What we have now are two models of superego development: (1) the Kantian model which traces its origin to the infant's desires and phantasies, but explains its present outlook with reference to the older child's capacities for rational judgment; and (2) the Kleinian model which explains both the origin and the present condition of the superego in terms of phantasy. Offhand, it is hard to tell what empirical evidence will render one model more acceptable than another, and perhaps more work on developmental psychology is needed for an answer. I believe, on the other hand, there are important conceptual issues which confront the Kantian model. I shall presently explain what these issues are, and then suggest in the rest of the essay why I think the Kleinian model is in a better position to handle them.

My main worry with the Kantian model, to begin with, concerns a puzzle about people's non-reflective moral attitudes, which I call "the authenticity problem". Briefly put, the problem is that our well-developed moral attitudes are characteristically irresponsive to the challenge from moral arguments, so much so that even when we consciously acknowledge that those attitudes are rationally ungrounded, we in fact will not be motivated to change. This problem arises because we ordinarily appeal to our intuition to decide what is right or wrong, and the strategy goes well until a point where we are demanded to give explicit reasons why we believe so. It may well be that we have unconscious and strong enough reasons for our moral beliefs all along. The challenge is, on the other hand, that the

¹⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between the internal object and the dispositional character of phantasy, see Wollheim (1993), ch.3, especially pp.52-54.

test of critical judgment requires us to make these reasons conscious, so as to be comprehensible by a potential audience. In this case, we become surprised that there are lots of potential considerations which speak against our convictions, and we can no longer appeal directly to our conscience *as the final judge of the matter*. Maybe our conscience is not as authoritative as we think. How can we tell? Worse than this, our final practical judgment may either confirm or refute what our conscience says. In the former case, we still have to worry whether we are rationalizing our bias, or just making up arguments to fit what we already believe. In the latter case, we may admit that our internalized values are false, but still unconsciously believe in them. In either case, we have no way to tell whether we are *true to ourselves*, both in terms of reason and passion.

The authenticity problem can be interestingly applied to Velleman's story of the ego ideal. On his account, the love of humanity manifests itself in the parents' caring and unselfish attitude toward the child. When internalized, this love gives rise to a moral ideal that guides the person's conduct in life. We need not dispute the possibility of such a pattern of good parenting. What seems the problem is, given that all this is true in a person's life history, how is he to *judge with confidence* that his parents' devoting attitude is an expression of their capacity to take another person as an end? Although he knows that his parents loved him, he may ask himself these questions:

How might I know that my parents loved me because I was *a* child, and not because I was *their* child? How might I tell if their love to me was not an expression of their wishes to be loved by their parents? Did I falsely perceive their love as unconditional when it was not?

Confusions and doubts of these kinds are not enough to falsify the idea that at least some cases of parental love are genuinely unselfish and are grounded in a respect for humanity. But they leave the person restless in thinking whether *his* so-called love of humanity is not a product of self-misrepresentation. What he lacks, in effect, is a meta-knowledge—a knowledge about the nature of his moral knowledge (if he has any). And the lack of this meta-knowledge is not a matter of intellectual incapacity, but a sign of weak character.¹⁷

¹⁷ Klein has a detailed description of the relationship between a person's capacity for love and his moral character. Such a character, she argues, necessarily is built on the unconscious perception of the parent-child relationship that the person once experienced. See Klein (1937) on this point.

Imagine further, if the person judges that no certain answers can ever be made to these questions from the intellectual point of view. Is he to give up his superego altogether? It is just unlikely that he can exercise rational control over himself in this manner. To be sure, people as a rule find it hard to give up their internalized values even in the face of the challenge of rational arguments, and this suggests that there is a kind of *involuntariness* involved in the maintenance of the moral self. The appeal to reason thus does not help to solve the problem of authenticity.

4. The Loving Superego

Given the above mentioned difficulties, the idea of a rational superego may seem doubtful as far as the phenomenology of value is concerned. But suppose we give it up, and see the superego as a mere product of phantasy in the light of the Kleinian model. We may now have a better idea how rationalized biases come about. We may also explain why rational reflections alone will not move us to do the right thing. The morally inauthentic person, we want to say, simply lacks the right kind of phantasies behind his attitude and motivation.

By contrast, consider the image of the ego-ideal as a loving mother who supports me when I am doing what she admires. When I phantasize being such a child that the loving mother praises, what I am performing is, to borrow the idea of Wollheim, *an internal drama in which I take on the roles of both the dramatist, the actor, and the audience.*¹⁸ I plot the story, play the character of the beloved child, and get emotionally touched in viewing the performance. The internal drama is so effectively performed that its characters give me the feelings of praise and support, and also a sense of self-esteem. For this reason, there is something special to say about our stubbornness to hold on to our loving relationship with the parents. The idea is that a good character in our imagined drama just cannot disappoint us, as it is not an external object but our own creation. We cannot help treating our internal ideal as wholly ideal, even if we know that our real parents are not like it. And our motivation to model on that ideal is a natural outcome of being engaged in the narrative of a good mother-child relationship.

Perhaps such an irrational superego is not a thing to be afraid of. A superego which grounds itself in the phantasy of the good parent is certainly different from one grounded in the phantasy of prosecution. It makes a lot of difference if a person's moral motivation is constituted by the benign support of the ego ideal,

¹⁸ Wollheim uses the idea of "internal drama" to characterize the concept "iconic imagination", of which phantasy is a species. See Wollheim (1984), ch.3.

instead of the harsh criticism of a sadistic conscience. One thing good about our stubbornness to phantasize the good parents is that it keeps producing harmless illusions which enhance our lives. We become more hopeful persons and tend to see the world with favour. This may not be a very rational thing to do, but its consequence can be positive. And such an implication should be no surprise if we take Freud to be a naturalist, whose task is to explain the moral in non-moral and psychological terms, so as to represent our values to ourselves without distortion.¹⁹ On his view, it will not harm if the explanation implies that we are less rational than we used to think. But through an adequate description of the structure of human irrationality, such a moral naturalist advises us not to fall victim of being too confident of the authority of morality.

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¹⁹ For such a conception of ‘moral naturalism’, see Wollheim (1980), pp.320-321.

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