ETHICS OF EVIL

Psychoanalytic Investigations

edited by

Ronald C. Naso and Jon Mills

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ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Robin McCoy Brooks, MA, TEP, is a Jungian psychoanalyst and clinical consultant in private practice in Seattle, Washington. She is one of the founding members of the New School for Analytical Psychology and an adjunct faculty member of Antioch University, Seattle. Robin is a recipient of the Neil Passariello Award (from the ASGPP) for her innovative group work with persons living with HIV/AIDS. Her written works reflect her interests in contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytical dimensions of ethics.

Aner Govrin, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice, Tel Aviv, and on the faculty of the Department of Hermeneutics at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. He is a director of an academic doctoral programme “Psychoanalysis and Hermeneutics” for mental health workers. He is a member of the Tel Aviv Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis. Govrin has published Between Abstinence and Seduction: The Analysis of American Psychoanalysis (2004, Dvir, in Hebrew), and Conversations with Michael Eigen (2007, Karnac), co-authored with Michael Eigen. His latest book, Conservative and Radical Perspectives on Psychoanalytic Knowledge: The Fascinated and the Disenchanted, is published by Routledge in 2016. Over the past years,
he has been working to develop a new moral psychology, an attachment approach to moral judgement that calls for a conceptual revolution in our understanding of morality.

Henry Zvi Lothane, MD, is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York City and a frequent presenter at Washington Square Institute. He is a distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, a member of the American and International Psychoanalytic Associations, and author of the definitive In Defense of Schreber: Soul Murder and Psychiatry (expanded version, Seelenmord und Psychiatrie zur Rehabilitierung Schrebers). Dr Lothane is also known for his historical research on the life and work of Sabina Spielrein, the latest is “Sabina Spielrein’s Siegfried and other myths: facts versus fictions”, International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 2016. He published papers on the methodology of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. In 2009, Dr Lothane created the concept of dramatology, and an entry in Wikipedia. He maintains a private practice of psychiatry, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis in Manhattan.

Dan Merkur, PhD, is a psychoanalyst in private practice in Toronto. He has taught religious studies at five universities and is currently on the teaching faculties of both the Toronto Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis and the Living Institute, a transpersonal psychotherapy school in Toronto. He has published fourteen books, including Unconscious Wisdom: A Superego Function in Dreams, Conscience and Inspiration (SUNY Press, 2001); Psychoanalytic Approaches to Myth (Routledge, 2005); Maimonides’ Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis (co-authored with David Bakan and David S. Weiss; SUNY Press, 2009); Explorations of the Psychoanalytic Mystics (Rodopi, 2010); Relating to God: Clinical Psychoanalysis, Spirituality, and Theism (Jason Aronson, 2013). His article, “The doubling of conscience in groups”, won the William Alanson White Institute, Committee on Prejudice, Annual Paper Prize in 2010.

Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP, is a philosopher, psychoanalyst, and psychologist. He is Professor of Psychology and Psychoanalysis at the Adler Graduate Professional School in Toronto and is the author of many works in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and psychology, includ-
ing thirteen other books. In 2006, 2011, and 2013 he was recognised with a Gradiva Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis in New York City for his scholarship, received a Significant Contribution to Canadian Psychology Award in 2008, a Goethe Award for best book in 2013, and the Otto Weininger Memorial Award for lifetime achievement in 2015 by the Section on Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Psychology of the Canadian Psychological Association. He runs a mental health corporation in Ontario, Canada.

Ronald C. Naso, PhD, ABPP, is a psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist in independent practice in Stamford, CT. He is currently a director and President-Elect of the American Board and Academy of Psychoanalysis as well as a former consultant and supervisor in the Internship and Postdoctoral Fellowship training programmes at the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut. The author of numerous papers on psychoanalytic topics and associate editor of Contemporary Psychoanalytic Studies, contributing editor of Division/Review and the Journal of Psychology and Clinical Psychiatry, his book entitled Hypocrisy Unmasked: Dissociation, Shame, and the Ethics of Inauthenticity was published by Jason Aronson in 2010.

Robert Prince, PhD, ABPP, is Past Co-chair of the Interpersonal Track of the NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, Past-President of Psychologist–Psychoanalyst Clinicians, and past Section Representative to the Board of Directors of the Division of Psychoanalysis of the APA. He is the author of The Legacy of the Holocaust, and editor of The Death of Psychoanalysis, and Trauma and Culture. He has also written over thirty articles and book chapters.
Introduction: Moralising evil

Ronald C. Naso and Jon Mills

Are we headed toward human extinction? All inhabited continents are engaged in military conflict, and there is no foreseeable end in sight. World superpowers, rogue nations, and international politics fuel existing warfare, leading to repetitive cycles of death, despair, transgenerational trauma, and systemic ruin. Global economies have been shattered, social infrastructures effaced, and entire ways of life destroyed. Whole communities have perished or have been displaced, historical traditions broken, established customs nullified, and cultural identities lost. Diasporas, mass-scale refugees, and the walking wounded scurry to neighbouring territories, often herded at their borders. Chaos, uprisings, and revolt over impoverishment, maltreatment, and retaliatory aggression lead to further warfare, civil disorder, violence, and crime.

At the individual level, developmental traumas and attachment pathology besiege the human being, hampering the ability to have healthy, loving relationships and to have empathy and compassion for others. Increasingly, normativity is tainted by pathos. Child abuse in its most odious forms is a primordial scab on humanity: it becomes the bedrock of suffering in every society where children are held hostage in emotional concentration camps by their parents or culture,
the very people who also are victims of abuse, oppression, and demoralisation. Here, the enemy lies within our family and community, cryptically threatening our sense of wellbeing and safety at home.

Disease, migrant prejudice, refugee influx, child slavery, gang violence, mass execution barbarian style, and the drop in black gold sustain our attention every night while watching the daily news. The world has become a very dangerous place. Whether admitted or not, we all live in fear of being assaulted, mugged, or raped, where road rage, bag-snatching, abduction, and home invasion are common occurrences. Anyone could be targeted or murdered for the change in their pockets; safety is sought in gated communities, rural isolation, or in owning weapons for self-protection. From random crime to gangs, the mafia, drug cartels, the sex trade industry, child soldiers, and human trafficking, no one is immune from danger.

When nuclear armament, bioterror, world overpopulation, major climate change disasters, global warming, mass-scale industrial pollution, water scarcity, food shortage, nanotechnology used for ill, and extreme economic disparity threaten universal security, what shall we expect next? The Internet has become a prominent global weapon: cyber spies and computer hacking can derail technical operations anywhere, which can endanger the safety of nations and kill people at whim. With the manipulation of a computer mouse, one can readily steal, obstruct, and infect information programmes with viruses that cripple corporations, banking systems, communication networks, and world economies. With the transnational price of oil plummeting, the fickle economic fluidity in the Eurozone, India, Brazil, North Africa, the USA, China, and Russia have felt the pinch of recession, and with the spread of the Taliban, Jihadist extremism, Boko Haram, and Islamic State militants such as ISIS and ISIL, the destabilisation of global security adds another layer of panic to a foundering world economy already worried about public safety.

The tribal warfare in Middle Eastern Islamdom is perhaps one of the greatest threats to global stability, where messianic holy wars are manufactured by psychopathic leaders in the name of God, affecting everything from air travel and tourism to border crossings, national security, counter-intelligence, and unbridled global surveillance. Racial uprising and social volatility in the USA, UK, South Africa, and Germany only reminds us that skin colour means something to a hating Other. And with religious chauvinism among Muslims,
Hindus, Christians, and Jews, radical fascism, tyranny, totalitarianism, and more beheadings are just around the corner. Christendom in America is interfering with civil liberty rights, conditioning how government should view education, morality, and private affairs, while autocrats in North Korea and Iran flex their muscles with nuclear testing, only adding to more vulnerability in global security and instability in foreign affairs.

Deregulation of industry and the push for privatisation of business under the auspices of free democracy, open markets, neoliberalism, and global capitalism only leads to systemic corruption, for without regulation and central oversight, every modality of dishonesty, exploitation, and vice will enjoy its swindling moment or else pay someone to find a legal loophole. “Banksters” and the mega-financial sectors have become too big to jail.

Our entrenched reliance on fossil fuels is slowing digging humanity a shallow grave. The burning of coal, whether in industrial manufacturing or to heat a home, is gradually suffocating the planet. The problem is so bad in India and China that it is difficult to breathe in Delhi and Beijing. Soot from wood stoves covers the roads of Kraków to the point that it feels like walking on a floor of oil. From hazards due to refining oil, fracking, tar sands extraction, natural gas leakage, pipeline distribution, transport accidents, off-line rig explosions, to runaway greenhouse effects, our ecosystems are deteriorating rapidly, hence threatening the sustainability of our natural resources and life on this planet. Glaciers and polar icecaps are melting, sea levels are rising, heat waves, droughts, bitter coldness, severe storms, torrential rains, floods, rising ocean temperatures, hurricanes, tsunamis, freshwater scarcity, and unpredictable weather phenomena that are so variegated throughout the world signal our changing global climate. All these issues leave us in a profound and compounded predicament of future survival. With the estimated statistical prediction of ten billion people by 2050, our lot in life hangs by a hair. As our world economies are in flux and tumult, hence threatening the availability, price, and affordability of basic human requirements for sustenance, such as water, food, shelter, and medicine, as well as education and valued commodities that nourish the physical, emotional, and spiritual lives of the masses, we are likely to be headed for disaster. But we dissociate these realities, because they are not happening to everyone at the same time and in the same place.
Yet, despite its haunting, inescapable presence, rarely is evil engaged as a moral issue within its own discourse. All too often, it is viewed exclusively from a particular psychological, cultural, and/or religious perspective. As an expression of Manichaeism, for example, evil reflects the darker side of the struggle against the good that defines the human condition. In doing evil, one instantiates a transcendental process; one comes face to face with the demonic, poised at any given moment to undermine God’s will. Evil’s discourse is embedded in an overarching religious narrative and moral order they establish.

Interestingly, contemporary psychological treatments of evil undermine any effort to moralise the concept. For many, this is regarded as an advance, allowing for a more detached, scientific approach to the problem of evil. The agent does not act on the basis of demonic forces or even out of a commitment to doing evil for evil’s sake, but, rather, out of a form of ignorance very much in keeping with Aristotle’s analysis of akrasia (άκρασια). It will be recalled that the akrate does wrong out of neither malevolence nor unbridled narcissism, but, rather, because he confusedly regards what brings him pleasure as the good. In its contemporary articulation, the agent acts on the basis of a psychological disorder that, in essence, deprives him of responsibility and, in turn, of the very property that defines evil: the freedom to choose otherwise. To act on the basis of psychic disturbance is the antithesis of freedom and choice. Thus conceptualised, evil is relegated to the expression of a psychiatric/medical disorder, vitiating any basis for moralising its various expressions.

Each of the chapters in Ethics of Evil resists the temptation to fall into preordained categories of understanding. Each refuses to remain in a state of perpetual astonishment or to avoid thinking about evil as a plurality. The reality of evil never has been more stark and undeniable, our resources for understanding seemingly inadequate to the task. Yet, somewhere between the demonic and insanity views lies the possibility of formulating evil as a unique discourse, one that not only reflects contemporary attitudes and beliefs but, perhaps more importantly, influences our perceptions and actions. To expose the ethical framework shared by evil’s diverse expressions is to grasp its impact on individual behaviour, character development, and the broader socio-political fabric of culture. It is to lay bare the distinctive properties of a discourse that has haunted civilisation from the beginning,
but whose newest iterations make its assault more intimate and inescapable than ever. This discourse necessarily encompasses the conflicting narratives of perpetration and victimacy, violence and moral condemnation.

In today’s world, where every form of transgression enjoys a psychological motive, rational justification, legal defence, and/or pastoral forgiveness, psychoanalysis stands alone in its ability to uncover the hidden motives that inform individual and social collective behaviour. Both in theory and practice, it bears witness to the impact of anonymity on the potential for perpetration, especially when others are experienced as faceless, disposable objects whose otherness is, at bottom, but a projection, displacement, and denial of our own interiority—in short, the evil within. In keeping with this perspective, Ethics of Evil rejects facile rationalisations of violence; it also rejects the idea that, as a concept, evil is inscrutable or animated by diabolical forces. Instead, it evaluates the moral framework in which evil is situated, providing a descriptive understanding of it as a plurality and a depth psychological perspective of the threat it poses our wellbeing and ways of life. In so doing, it also fashions and articulates an ethical stance that recognises the intrinsic link between human freedom and the potential for evil.

Freud envisioned human behaviour as a product of conflict and compromise, whether orientated toward good or evil. He very clearly recognised the Hobbesian nature of the common man, his readiness to exploit others to his own advantage. In this view, evil reflected the failure to recognise and tame the demands of the unconscious, of inclinations to control, dominate, and triumph over others in accordance with one’s selfish interests. Evil rejected the civilising forces of restraint and the values of care, sacrifice, and co-operation. But it also acknowledges that destruction and annihilation can never be eradicated because these are but one of two primary sources of whom we are.

Following Freud, psychoanalysis has continued to refrain from advancing a proselytising agendum, focusing instead on the motivations that inform individual and social collective behaviour. Yet, it would be inaccurate to claim that psychoanalysis is devoid of ethics. It is better regarded as a critique of prevailing ethical systems, exposing them as cultural inventions that are more closely related to myth than to truths that are readily universalised. Psychoanalysis replaces traditional ethical thinking with a specialised form of reflection, one
that recognises the irreconcilable forces stirring within man’s soul and the extent to which desire is forced to supplicate on the altar of civilisation’s demands. It does not matter how much desire consciously is relinquished in exchange for the security of communal life; in the unconscious, the pursuit of our darkest, disavowed, self- and species-undermining inclinations continues unrestrained. Its silence with respect to prescriptive ethics notwithstanding, psychoanalysis remains one of the most intellectually salient and incisive critiques of ethical life. The collection of essays in this volume speaks a different tongue: moralising evil becomes one of the most important agenda of our time.

When people feel abused and experience no sense of justice, it violates a universal ethical principle, one that is shattered with the realisation that there is no universal ethics, that is, no metaphysical dispensary of the “good and right” watching over them. From anarchy and ochlocracy to nihilism, the human animal becomes a machine of violence. Aggression begets aggression, a simple iteration as repetition compulsion. Tempestuous human relations lead to further social discord with no hope in view of reversing this predictable pattern. Furthermore, when enemies are no longer foreign, conflict is generated from within a society where economic and class discrepancy, racial division, religious prejudice, political injustices, and governmental exploitation of masses leads to protest, civil disobedience, riots, coups, revolutions, and insurgencies.

The problem of evil makes these global prophecies of fate all the more expeditious. Will humanity rouse itself to subvert its aggressive inclinations toward self-annihilation? Recognising the powerful forces that seem to be propelling us toward implosion, the question arises ever more urgently as to how ought we to live. What moral frameworks apply to the conundrums of evil? Can psychoanalysis contribute to peace?

Overview

Written by psychoanalysts internationally recognised for their scholarship, *Ethics of Evil* is unified by its focus on the unique discourse presented by the plurality of evil’s forms. It is divided into three sections. The first, entitled “How ought we to live?”, begins with Dr
Mills addressing the role of pathology and destruction in the process of civilisation and explores the degree to which the positive significance of the negative may inform new valuation practices that, in turn, improve human relations and world accord. Juxtaposed to psychoanalytic anthropology, Hegel’s dialectic becomes a logical model for examining the possibility of global amelioration of the pernicious forces that beset the fate of humankind. He argues that we must seriously question whether mankind’s aggressive essentialism will eventually lead to the end of the human race.

In Chapter Two, Dr Merkur offers a sustained enquiry into Freud’s moral theory, identifying two very different, perhaps incompatible, accounts. The first aligns immorality with sexual desire, equating the latter with that which is primitive and infantile. In this reading, morality is equated with consciousness, instinctual renunciation, and the subordination of self-interests to the best interests of the community. The emergence of Freud’s structural point of view, however, altered this perspective. In it, morality no longer is linked to instinctual renunciation alone, but rested on the establishment of psychological structures whose imperatives represented morality. Not only did Freud assign Eros now to the unconscious, but viewed it propelling people into relationships with others and with the larger group. This change in his thinking complicated Freud’s moral theory in so far as it provided a basis for moral action originating in either the superego or the id. In other words, the same instincts and ideals, operating unconsciously, were capable of inspiring both moral and immoral action. Dr Merkur develops the implications of these differences for the concept of evil.

In Chapter Three, Dr Govrin investigates the problem of evil from the perspective of the observer. Using research findings from the fledgling field of moral psychology, he argues that judgements of evil are not grounding in objective assessments of harm, but, rather, on interpretations of the relationship between aggressor and victim, all within the contexts or situations in which such events unfold. Disparities in the assessments of victim and victimiser are the norm rather than the exception, problematising evaluations of evil for witnesses. It is to this problematic that Dr Govrin turns his attention in the final section of this chapter.

The second section of this book is entitled “Clinical applications”. In Chapter Four, Robin McCoy Brooks discusses several key macro
cultural–historical and political processes that at once engender and conceal trauma. She argues that these processes embody ideologies that undermine critical reflection and create conditions that make trauma both unspeakable and unknowable. In her view, evil may arise through traumas induced by historically real events whose impact is dissociated and tacitly transmitted across generations. She describes her work with a woman in whom “real history” played a shaping role and was uncovered only by virtue of a contemporary event that reactivated the violent trauma of cultural–historical events in which she had unwittingly participated.

Chapter Five describes the treatment of a forty-five-year-old CFO whose embezzlement was discovered during the course of his psychoanalytic treatment. It focuses primarily on the motivations and meanings of his actions and how facilely they were rationalised in an otherwise moral individual. While dissociative defences operated powerfully in his transgressions, promoting attachment security as well as bringing about states of mind in which perpetration was not experienced as really real, Dr Naso argues that these same processes play an important role in integrity. Simply put, integrity often rests on a refusal to compromise, to entertain alternatives to one’s beliefs and obligations. Notwithstanding the importance of rational assessment, a closer examination of moral conduct suggests that integrity often depends on the dissociative suspension of deliberation, a process that renders one’s commitments non-negotiable.

The third and final section, “Applied studies”, begins with Dr Prince’s account of the diverse and evolving narratives of Holocaust survivors who have emigrated to the USA. In Chapter Six, he argues that their stories are unified only by virtue of beginning with a trauma of major historical significance. Both survivors and their children struggle with formulating their experiences and Dr Prince concerns himself with examining the implications of common myths and distortions with an eye toward the defences that underpin them. He argues that it is essential to consider the historical meaning and social context in which these narratives unfold, focusing particularly on the concept of moral injury as a vehicle of trauma as well as the key to contextualising its meaning and impact.

In the final chapter, Dr Lothane reflects on the storm of indignation ignited by Hannah Arendt’s (1963) classic text, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, among survivors on both sides of the Atlantic, including
such luminaries as the Holocaust historian Raoul Hilberg and the philosopher Gershom Sholem. Here, he revisits the historical furore generated by her concept of the “banality of evil” with a view to illuminating the nature of radical evil and aspects of Holocaust historiography. More than this, he identifies what he argues is the fatal flaw of a brilliant political and social philosopher whose books and charisma were a beacon of learning for countless scholars, students, and the educated masses.

Taken together, each of the chapters in *Ethics of Evil* displays a deep appreciation of evil as a global phenomenon, of its various and ever-changing expressions. In less than a generation’s time, we have witnessed the transformation of terrorism from co-ordinated attacks by military and paramilitary organisations to the far more frightening expression of ideologically driven violence perpetrated by disconnected cells of operatives as well as of alienated, disenfranchised lone wolves who find affirmation in the commission of the most savage acts.

Yet, the ideological perversity that characterises so much of contemporary violence also decisively establishes evil as an ethical stance or, perhaps better put, as a form of conduct underpinned by moral beliefs and attitudes that are worthy of identification and study in their own right. However much this stance reflects an inversion of the good, hence an undermining of prosocial and community values, it nevertheless may be characterised as an ethical system. Understanding evil as an inescapably human form of conduct motivated by ideological, social, historical, and psychological factors, we shall argue, is the prolegomena to formulating an effective response to its challenges.

But where do we begin? Conceiving evil might be just as moot as combating it, especially when certain pernicious actions are committed under utilitarian motives espousing the nobility of morality. The emphatic and recalcitrant ethical questions are whether evil is omnipresent, perspectival, and/or, conversely, becomes a meaningless proposition when we are all capable of it, yet are unprepared to acknowledge this as such. When people commit evil acts under the hubris of ethics, such as under political moral policy, does this not draw into question the very nature of evil? When we kill in order to protect, under self- and national defence, and to punish and avenge, as is done under state justice initiatives, are we not engaged in an
ethics of evil by our mere complicity and subservience to those suprastructures? Or is this merely natural law theory, an unpleasant consequence of inevitable human conflict? A nation kills innocents in order to safeguard its citizenry and eliminate threats through fatal pre-emptive strikes on others. These governmental policies and military practices are conditioned on an ethical fulcrum where might is the right of a nation besieged by alterity. When superordinate value is placed on one’s own people above others, national self-interest seeks to promote its sovereignty, strengthen its security, demonstrate its powers, deter opposition, and intimidate masses into conformity under the banner of a philosophy of right. While we might not be successful in offering a solution, this book is dedicated to inspiring one.
PART I

HOW OUGHT WE TO LIVE?
CHAPTER ONE

On the brink of extinction

Jon Mills

When Einstein (1932) approached Freud on behalf of the League of Nations and asked the question: “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the curse of war?” (Freud, 1933b, p. 199), Freud responded with reservation, suggesting that perhaps it may only be mitigated. This is the general tenor of his anthropological treatment of humanity: until base instinct (Trieb) is sufficiently harnessed and transformed in the service of reason, our world communities will continue to be plagued by the dark marauders of our own insidious nature. Why war?—because hate and violence are “a piece of unconquerable nature . . . a piece of our own psychical constitution” (Freud, 1930a, p. 86). With this dismal portrait of human relations, we might never come to throw our hatred down.

People are slaughtering one another all over the world in the name of religion, ethnic purity, and nationalism under the guise of freedom, justice, ethical duty, and social reform. Within the past few decades alone, contemporary ethno-political warfare has raged the strife-torn territories of the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, South and East Asia, Central America, Russia, and the Ukraine, where civilian populations are the primary targets of terror, marked by sadism and butchery, while women and children comprise a large percentage of the
incurred human rights’ atrocities. Those close to the front lines of ethnic and religious conflicts are oppressed by political violence, whether they are refugees who have lost their families in ethnic cleansing campaigns, or civilians who must dodge sniper fire every day to run to the market to fetch a loaf of bread. When the constancy of violence, terror, and war continue to saturate our daily consciousness, we can only anticipate where it will emerge next.

To what degree will our disparate cultures be able to rise above this mode of existence, where violence becomes the right of a community, either chosen or impugned? This is further compounded by the historical fact that brutality was the driving force behind the emergence of law, which still requires the use of violence to be enforced. Can actual force be replaced by the force of ideas, or are we condemned to the perversions of pathos? Given Freud’s (1932) ontological treatise on the structure of the psyche, “there is no use in trying to get rid of men’s aggressive inclinations” (p. 211), they are as natural as breathing; for we can never escape from the fact that our minds are primitive. Homo homini lupus est—“Man is a wolf to man.”

The history of the human race is forged on traumatisation, resentment, and the need for revenge, which preoccupies collective human consciousness and fuels pathological enactments. Aggression and violence directed toward others is part of human nature, an insidious derivative of our pathos. For the Greeks, to be human is to suffer, to be susceptible to pain (pathétos), to endure illness, in short, our accruing pathology. Our pathos might even become fused with desire, as in “antipathy,” a passion (pathēia) against (anti) another. Mental illness stems from this basic constituency of mind. This is why Freud (1916–1917) observed that we are all “neurotic” (p. 358), that is, ill, whereby the human aspect is saturated with anxiety, suffering, and despair—it is just a matter of degree. We are all deeply affected by our pathos to the point that what truly differentiates individuals and societies from one another is our level of functionality and adaptation to psychic pain. In other words, human pathology is normative throughout all cultures and all times. Being “normal” is merely another word for pathos.

Psychopathology (πάθος) is the essence of man, and it is from this standpoint that all else shall be measured. Desire precedes and supersedes reason, for primitive forces govern the psyche, which are arguably responsible as well for the exalted achievements of reason...
itself. Irrationality—pathos—is our primordial being, and it is from this ontological ground that all else materialises and makes itself known through various forms of human enactments. Reason always remains a tool, if not a slave, of desire.

Throughout this chapter, I endeavour to provide a speculative account of the future of humanity based on a discernible pattern of violence and exploitation of the Other that characterises human motivation and deed. I must confess that I can hardly do justice to this topic in the limited scope of this project, as it would take volumes to address. At best, I hope to frame the issue and the inherent problematics it poses, and certainly not pretend to offer any feasible solutions, for I am unable to resolve the dilemma. Instead, I am concerned with a narrow scope of questions that investigate whether our pathological propensities as a human race is likely to bring about our extinction, or whether we can transmogrify our destructive impulses through the relational negotiation of collective valuation practices that transcend our more primal constitutions. I hope the reader will forgive me for raising more conundrums rather than furnishing practical answers. Will the fate of civilisation succumb to sordid desire, inspiring our demise, or will human accord triumph in the end? The real issue involves: to what degree will the will toward violence be sublimated into the higher tiers of self-conscious ethical reflection that reason can afford?4 We are a world divided by race, religion, ethnicity, economics, politics, and culture, where strong emotional bonds fuel and sustain separation and difference among our communities. I do not wish to express platitudes, illusory ideals, or provide false hope—the evidence, the brute facticity of impoverishment, suffering, cruelty, and murder—points to the most archaic configurations of psychic development that permeate our valuation practices.

Within today’s multi-cultural world community, differences and prejudices continue to divide and polarise human relations into firm oppositions that become fortified within rigid group identifications that inform collectively shared value systems. What I mean by “prejudice” is that human beings are inclined toward the preferential self-expression of valuation based on self-interest and self-valuation. Ethnic, religious, cultural, and national identities are forged through prejudicial valuation practices that in some cases even legitimise heinous forms of injustice such as genocide, terrorism, human enslavement, and child trafficking. When collective identity is so firmly
established in bipolar relation to the Other, is it possible for such valuation practices to abate under the rubric of peace? Prejudice, hate, and violence are no more likely to disappear than the reality of the external world, therefore the question becomes one of amelioration.

The positive significance of the negative

As Hegel completed the final instalments of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Napoleon was outside the city walls of Jena ushering in a new age—history was being transformed once again by the revolutionary currents of the dialectic. The battle of Jena might be said to parallel the very negative character of the dialectic itself, as conflict and violence pave the path toward progression. The self-generative process of the dialectic could provide us with a logical model for addressing the problem of pathos, but, unlike Einstein’s bane of war, the dialectic might also be the boon for its solution, one that nevertheless retains its destructive features as it engages in combat against itself.

Both Hegel and Freud offer a view of the human condition that is characterised by destruction, negation, and conflict, yet it is paradoxical that such negativity also becomes an animating force behind the elevation of ethical self-consciousness. Like Spirit or Mind (*Geist*), which is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of its previous historical moments, psychic maturation is the sublimation (*Sublimierung*) of primitive mental processes. Although Hegel’s language might seem odd to modern readers, he is really attempting to describe what psychoanalysis refers to as the individual and collective psyche. Hegel and Freud would probably concede that through reason lies the hope that communities and cultures torn apart by discordant value practices can be united through collective ethical commitments. If humanity is to vanquish the pathology of base desire for the optimistic voluntarism enlightened by reason, it becomes important to understand how reason itself is the knight of desire designed to transform our pathologies.

We do not have to embrace Hegel’s entire philosophical system, which is neither necessary nor pragmatic, in order to appreciate how his logic of the dialectic has relevance for psychoanalytic thought. Through his *Logic*, Hegel may be instructive in examining the evolutionary development of history achieved through negation and
conquest in which further predictive possibilities for the future of humanity could be inferred. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* personifies the drama of world Spirit (or what we might contemporarily refer to as humanity) as the coming to presence of pure self-consciousness through the process of self-estrangement, identification, and self-recognition through the mediation of the other. World hero eventually achieves Truth, satiates the lack, and arrives at full self-actualisation only after traversing the arduous and protracted terrain of alienation through the vicissitudes of desire. Spirit—civilisation—is, therefore, a constant activity, pure unrest. “It is just this unrest that is the self” (Hegel, 1807, p. 12). Hegel refers here to the unrest of Aufhebung, as dialectical process continuously annulled, preserved, and transcended. Hegel’s logic of the dialectic involves a threefold process by which the lower relation becomes subsumed within the higher relation, at once being cancelled, surpassed, but retained. This pure activity of the dialectic is constantly evolving and redefining itself through such simultaneous movements, hence becoming the architecture—the ground—of Geist, our shared common humanity. And the driving force behind world history, behind the very process of the dialectic, is death and destruction.

Readers unfamiliar with Hegel will probably find his degree of abstraction overly abstruse and tedious, and his grand synthesis of everything has a grandiose tenor in ambition and level of generalisation. This is partly based on the metaphysics of his day where the most celebrated modern philosophers and German idealists were preoccupied with the relationship and unity of mind, nature, science, religion, ethics, and aesthetics. In the words of Derrida (1982), “Hegelianism represents the fulfillment of metaphysics, its end and accomplishment” (p. 73). It might be helpful to view Hegel’s project as an attempt to describe the fundamental processes of human thought and activity as the progressive development of cognition and culture. As the human race evolved, so did our capacity for domestic socialisation, civil obedience, ethical reflection, and rational thought. However, Hegel is primarily concerned with expatiating the universal while subordinating the particular; therefore, he is, first and foremost, interested in offering a philosophical system that applies to all people within all historical contingencies.

Hegel’s notion of mind, and that of all of history, encompasses a process in which a subject is opposed to an object and comes to find
itself in the object. This entails the mediation of its becoming other to itself, with the reflection out of otherness back to itself. The process of the development of the self and that of civilisation is, therefore, a process of differentiation and integration. For Hegel, Being is characterised by an undifferentiated matrix which undergoes differentiation in the dialectical process of Becoming that, in turn, integrates into its being that which was differentiated through its projection, reclaiming it and making it part of its internal structure. The outcome of the integration is once again differentiated then reintegrated; unification is always reunification. Therefore, spirit comes to be what it already is, the process of its own becoming.

Spirit as the striving for pure self-consciousness ascends towards an absolute understanding of itself and comes to a unity constituted by the bifurcation and rigid opposition that it generates from within itself. It is precisely through such opposition that consciousness brings itself into reunification. Thus, spirit, in its evolution, undergoes a violence at its own hands. By entering into opposition with itself, it raises this opposition to a higher unity and, thus, sublates it in a new structure. As each shape or content is confronted with radical opposition, each shape is made to collapse when its non-absolute form is exposed. Indeed, it is always driving the movement on from one shape to the next. Thus, the character of the dialectic is that of negativity and conflict; it is tempestuous, feral, and dynamic. Spirit as such is the source of its own negativity as inversion and destruction pave the way for its progression forward.

There is a necessity to the dialectic that informs the internal structures of the psyche; that is, there is a certain determinism to negation. The operation of such determinate negativity comes about through the collapse of each shape. As negation of a certain content takes place, it derives a certain content from the negation. Therefore, it links shapes into a necessary progression as each form turns into a new one. However, as each form is surpassed, the experience of its alteration is that of death, its end. But, for Hegel, death always leads to rebirth. The dialectic is, therefore, the oscillation between life and death, never separate from one another. For Hegel (1807), spirit is always “tarrying with the negative”—confronting Death, for to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength; . . . the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched.
by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. (p. 19)

As determinate negativity, spirit vanquishes itself as it destroys itself. It kills itself as it gives itself life. This is the "tremendous power of the negative" (p. 19), staring death straight in the face, converting it into the positive. It is precisely through such negativity that there is progression, destroying itself in the service of raising itself—the positive significance of the negative.

If the dialectic becomes a logical model in its application towards a global amelioration of psychopathology, then we must be able to logically demonstrate whether it has the potential to bear any fruit. We may appeal to historical facticities that trace the epigenesis of humankind and perhaps even come to the conclusion that, despite all the carnage and social decay, we have evolved into more a civil and enlightened species, even though human aggressivity and immorality captures the locus of our attention every day as a television screams examples. But a historical account alone carries less predictive value, for we have no means of being able to predict with much accuracy the future contingencies that will affect the teleological progression of human psychodynamics, hence contingencies that always inform the mediatory interventions mind assumes in each immediate shape it encounters. We might do better to stay on ontological ground, a ground that informs our collective anthropology, and we must be able to demonstrate the internal consistency and systematic coherency of the dialectic that Hegel's Logic affords.

The self, as well as the collective psyche, or what we might call the universal soul—psychic processes that belong to us all—is an epigenetic construct, thus a teleological movement that is a procreative, self-articulated, complex holism. As a self-generative telic will, cognition is free in its encounters with the contingencies of its reality, taking into account the exigencies of its environment and the novelties of immediate experience. Therefore, spirit is not pre-designed or predetermined towards a presupposed end, but, rather, its end is a transformed achievement—"the logical and ontological Alpha of the cosmos, but only after it has emerged as its logical and ontological Omega" (Findlay, 1971, p. 93). It emerges through the process of mediation and negotiation with the existential realities it confronts.
Our faith in the transcending power of mind over the combative regimens of world discord is acceptable only to the extent to which we believe in a progressive trend towards increased solidarity through collective self-conscious rationality. The level of psychic development Hegel points toward is hardly achieved by intellectuals, let alone the masses, for reason is often eclipsed by the primal lure of desire. If the facts of history and human nature do indeed lean towards a steady, progressive, self-conscious liberation of rational freedom, then to what degree is this the result of our aptitude to curb and sublimate our primitive proclivities for the ideals of conscience and the rational demands of a civil society? The promise of increased unity in the face of disharmony augers well for a collectively shared and constructive value system; however, the ostensive prevalence of global division and chaos saturated by prejudicial and physical conflicts could leave us with a less optimistic interpretation of the fate of humanity. The problem of destructiveness becomes the central task of our investigation, for, if Hegel is correct, it becomes the stallion of unification as it gallops towards the horizon of reason. However, if our aggressive trends continue to go unchecked, Freud’s admonition of the possible extinction of the human race carries foreboding merit. Our analysis of the positive significance of the negative will lead us to conclude whether a philosophically informed psychoanalysis may genuinely offer a contribution to peace.

**Psychoanalytic anthropology**

The primary significance of destruction is never so forceful as in Freud’s (1920g) postulation of the death drive (*Todestrieb*), the foundation that governs psychic development to which “the aim of all life is death” (p. 38). Negativity is always the base agitation of any organism, the destruction that constructs life, the purpose of which is to return to the original lost unity of its symbiotic state. The notion of original unity is instructive for our understanding of a principle of world harmony devoid of the more pathological instantiations of human aggression because, for both Freud and Hegel, consciousness emerges from an unconscious undifferentiated unity with its primordial nature. Just as Freud (1920g) speculates on how the organic arises from the inorganic (see pp. 36–39), as the general object
of anthropology, Hegel (1830) traces the dialectical emergence of the feeling soul from the abyss of its indeterminations; at first unseparated from its immediate universal simplicity, it then divides and rouses itself from its mere inward implicitness to explicit determinate being-for-self.9

For Hegel, spirit begins, like ego development for Freud,10 as an original undifferentiated unity that emerges from its immediate self-enclosed universality to its mediated determinate singularity. This is initiated through a dialectical process of internal division, self-externalisation, and introjection as the reincorporation of its projected qualities back into its interior. Through the complexities of mediation and sublation, mind achieves higher levels of unification until it arrives at a full integration of itself as a complex whole, uniting earlier finite shapes within its mature universality. The need for social order, unification, and harmony are motivational factors that inform the ideal of global tranquillity which human violence, hate, evil, and terrorism threaten to deteriorate, an ideal imbued with the residue of early symbiotic conditions.

The ego ensnared in the stage of primary narcissism (Freud, 1914c, p. 100), like spirit asleep in the undifferentiated abyss of its self-absorption (Hegel, 1830, § 408, Zusätze, 2), constitutes the psychological and ontological precursors for differentiation and development. To what degree do these conditions feature in our wish for higher degrees of unity, concord, and moral self-realisation? Are we to understand world spirit as “the universal brotherhood of man” (Harris, 1983, p. 411) that seeks absolute unity, or is this merely a wish to return to the “oceanic feeling”11 of symbiosis like a foetus in the peaceful sea of its mother’s womb? To what degree is this an illusion that preoccupies so many minds, like the parallel wish for union with God, the exalted father who shall make our home safe and free from our helplessness and pain (see Freud, 1927c, 1930a)? But whether these are fantasies or not, they represent moral ideals: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!”—don’t you dare assault my desire!

One would be hard pressed to find someone who would not value the ideal of peace, with communal harmony, accord, and co-operation marshalled in the service of social progression. Yet, the very nature of the need for progressive unification is also dialectically opposed to destructive and regressive inclinations that derive from earlier primitive shapes of our psychic constitution we seek to act out or recover
during conflict precipitated by opposition. If the desire for unification is a derivative of our original psychical ontology, then both progressive and regressive desires can be said to emanate from the same mental (symbiotic) configurations that might further serve the same aim. Both seek unity or peace of a different kind and in a different form: one through the attainment of higher integrated complexities, the other a wish to return to the warm blanket of its initial undifferentiated beginning—unity is, nevertheless, their goal. Here unity should be understood within the symbolic context of psychological integration, where strong affective bonds for concord, union, and amalgamation are achieved and internally experienced as a transcendent ideal. Following Hegel, this would require some integrative function that would attempt to bind or resolve opposition, or, for Freud, serve the pleasure principle through sublimation. But if the drive towards destruction is responsible for both progress and regress, growth and decay, then how are we to determine which one will advance and which one will succumb to the tyranny of the other? This brings into question how the nature of negativity and destruction influence the self-preservative drives in their quest for unification and mastery.

Freud (1923b) tells us of two competing forces in human nature: the will towards life and the will towards death, manifested as Eros, or libido, the sexual force responsible for erotic life, and its antithetical companion conceived under the drive towards destruction. This dual class of innate drives comprises those which seek to preserve and unite, and those which seek to kill and destroy, both giving rise to what may be characterised as our caring and aggressive propensities. “Neither of these drives are any less essential than the other; the phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both” (Freud, 1933b, p. 209). Furthermore, they scarcely operate in isolation, both borrowing from the resources of the other as an accompanied or alloyed counterpart, drawing a certain quota from the other side, which in turn modifies its aim or is even used to achieve its aim.

This union between life and death is the ontological fabric of the human mind to which all other dialectical polarities arise, including the universality of Love and Hate. Self-preservation is clearly an erotic impulse, but it must have aggression at its disposal in order to accomplish its task, just as, in love, the aggressive drive is utilised in order
to gain mastery and possession over an object that the attachment to it brings about. Although the self-preservative drives stand in stark opposition to destructive ones, the two are dialectical complementarities that reflect their confluence. Here, we have a similar structural dynamic of the Hegelian dialectic, with negativity begetting progression in the service of achieving higher aims. Just as Being is in opposition to Nothing, so are life and death, two sides of a symmetrical relation, their necessary unity.

Collective identity is based on the strength and intensity of emotional ties among its members and the mutual identification with shared valuation practices, thus giving rise to diversity, opposition, and prejudicial division between individuals, cohorts, cultures, societies, and nations. The greater discrepancies, such as race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and political affiliation that bring about more pronounced forms of prejudice and contempt, are not surprising. The increased enthusiasm in nationalism, religious identity, and separatism among our diverse peoples points toward the need to define ourselves in opposition to difference, rallying greater collective fellowship among its identified members, and thereby strengthening the cultural narcissism that hold societies together—all in the service of the self-preservative drives that align with similarity and cultural identification. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921c) underscores the universality of prejudice:

> Every time two families become connected by marriage, each of them thinks itself superior to or of better birth than the other. Of two neighbouring towns each is the other’s most jealous rival; every little canton looks down upon the others with contempt. Closely related races keep one another at arm’s length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese. We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured. (p. 101)

This is a profound observation that equally applies today: regardless of our era of diversity, multi-culturalism, tolerance for difference, interethnic, interfaith, interracial, and social pluralism, there is always a supra-signifier of judgement unconsciously operative based on the
identification of similarity and difference that infiltrates every form of prejudice and ideology. There is such a narcissism of even minor differences between individuals and cultures that the very sound of rap music blaring from an open car window could lead one so judgementally inclined to conclude that the true meaning of "culture" is to be found growing in the bottom of a test tube. We are further informed by scientists that we now have the empirical means by which to measure the degree and intensity of our disgust for minor differences by observing the pupil size of an individual. It is a universal biological fact that, regardless of light differences, our pupils dilate when we like something and become pinpricks when we perceive something to be repellent (see Morris, 1998). It is comforting to know that when uncertain about whether or not someone is friend or foe, all you have to do is look at the centre of his or her iris to determine if it is the size of a pinhead.

The nature of identification has its origins in early ego development whereby the child takes its parents as ideal objects who, along with their value systems, become internalised within personality formation and effect the germination of moral conscience as well as the capacities for love and hate. Whether personal or collective, identity is defined in opposition to difference and identification with similarity. But we also realise that identification is over-determined, multiply instantiated, and based on a plurality of forces and ambivalent attitudes that inform how the objects, content, form, valence, qualia, and intensity of identifications are constituted. This structural dynamic alone may be said to account for the need for division, uniqueness, and prejudicial self-preferences as opposed to others who stand in marked difference, but it also potentially explains the dialectical complementarities at play on other unconscious levels. Nevertheless, the confluence of destructive and self-preservative forces compounds the nature of identifications and social relations where desire justifies murder and reason is manipulated to assuage primal instinctual urges in the service of narcissistic pursuits.

There are such countless examples of the polarisation of values and ideals that stand in opposition to others that you could spend the rest of your life trying to catalogue them all. In many cases of group prejudice, valuation practices assume a form of collective identification based on a simple, rigid economy. Intolerance to difference that precipitates extreme forms of violence can be said to represent a
regression to our most primitive constitutions when bad (self)objects are regurgitated from the mouth as poisonous projections of evil and hatred that must be annihilated, that which Klein (1946) would refer to as the paranoid–schizoid position. In many cases, extreme prejudice is the product of pathological narcissism. Patriarchal value placed on male children over female children has historically led to infanticide that is still practised today in parts of China, India, Africa, and the Middle East. Since the Taliban took power of the government of Afghanistan, women have had to wear the burqa and have been beaten and stoned to death in public for not having the proper attire, even if this simply means not having a mesh cover the front of their eyes. After James Byrd Jr was dragged by his feet down a rural road from a chain secured to the back of a pickup truck until his right arm and head were literally torn from his torso just because he was black, the devastated town of Jaspers Texas was greeted three weeks later by a Ku Klux Klan rally. Genocide continues to rip through our world claiming innocent lives, from the Hutus’ massacre of the Tutsis in Rwanda, to the Serbs’ mass extermination of Bosnian Muslims, to the systematic slaughter in Kosovo, not to mention the recent plethora of killings initiated by the Arab Spring, which are still reigning in psychopathic Islamdom. While these are extreme cases, one need not look further than one’s own country to confirm the ethnic and patriotic narcissism that envelops us all.

Both Hegel and Freud stress the importance that civilisation is a process. But these aforementioned events hardly resemble the mores of a civilised culture as irrational fanaticism justifies barbarity broaching the brink of insanity. The primitive economy of rigid identification that justifies these extreme forms of savagery has at its disposal all the unbridled resources of the death drive turned outwards. The drive towards death is transformed into the destructive drive when it becomes projected to external objects. In this way, self-preservation is maintained by destroying extraneous threats as objects of hate are rendered impotent.

Hate, as a relation to objects, is older than love. It derives from the narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring of stimuli. As an expression of the reaction of unpleasure evoked by objects, it always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservative drives. (Freud, 1915c, p. 139).
Yet, self-preservation vs. pleasure induced in killing are two different inflections of narcissism. Sadism, the derivative of hate, is nowhere so evident as with the deranged techniques conceived and used to torture, maim, and murder millions of victims in the Holocaust, and in the killing fields under the Khmer Rouge government, as well as in the death camps created by Bosnian Serbs in the name of ethnic cleansing.

The Bosnian concentration camps were one of the most horrific human slaughterhouses, because the means of extermination were laborious and perverted, the aim of which was to produce the most excruciating amount of pain, mental anguish, and suffering possible (see Danner, 1997, pp. 55–56). Although it is illegitimate to make comparisons, the killing at Auschwitz was largely mechanised and bureaucratic, while the genocide at Omarska was emotional and personal, mainly depending upon the simple and intimate act of beating. These techniques were inefficient, time-consuming, and physically exhausting, yet they were habitually and systematically employed intentionally to demoralise and demolish, bringing warped pleasure to the guards and paramilitary units who, through their innovative means at devising methods of torture, could greatly bolster their prestige. The use of rape warfare on women—especially adolescents and children—is another example of the chilling psychological and sociological rationale for the deliberate and systematic means of weakening the opposition from within their own support systems by depleting their morale, ego defences, and will (see Allen, 1996). Here, we can see how reason is distorted under the dictatorship of psychopathic narcissism. It is in moments like these that one can hear the voice of Luther—die Hure Vernunft—“reason is the whore of humanity”. We can rationalise away anything, even our morality.

Is the death drive so intent on persecuting humankind that it will eventually bring us to ruin? The bleak forecast of the continual historical reign of terror by sick minds in positions of power and privilege might lead us to conclude rightfully that “men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved” (Freud, 1930a, p. 111; rather, they want to exploit, con, use, conquer, humiliate, torture, and kill. In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud (1930a) writes,

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in
mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human drive of aggression and self-destruction. . . . Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. (p. 145)

It may be argued that religion and ethnicity—including race—are the main reasons for divided group identifications, and this is inseparable from certain belief systems and valuation practices. Together, ethnicity and religion form the social value structures that become the macrocosm of any culture, which, furthermore, acquire personal and collective meaning that validates nations and keeps them together. Ethnic and religious identification is so strong that even between closely related ethnic and religious groups, rigid group identifications keep societies from embracing shared qualities simply because of minute differences that threaten cultural narcissism. When dispute over land continues to flare throughout Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism become more demarcated, with group identifications more virulently opposed.

The stronger the intensity of emotional bonds between people, the stronger the identifications become. Group identity fosters unity and progression, but it might also lead to discord and regression—the dynamic that fuels both peace and war. In my opinion, group identifications are responsible for the process and advance of civilisation as collective value systems govern the ideals of a community. As a general rule, any movement that encourages greater emotional attachment to others strongly militates against the loom of destruction, for love is the engendered ideal and the heart of conscience. When people are governed by empathy and conscience, reason is marshalled in service of justice and the pursuit of the ethical. This, too, requires an inversion of aggression that becomes the internal judge of conscience, where guilt and shame equally inform our moral choices, as does reason.

Take for example, two different cultural responses to involvement in the Second World War. Germany experiences a great deal of universal shame for their infamous role in history which fractured world order, yet they still acknowledge and remember their history, teach it
in the classroom, and maintain public museums, camps, and monuments, while the Japanese still live in collective denial of their involvement in the war. The official government policy does not recognise its historical atrocities or past war crimes, which are omitted from textbooks and prohibited from being taught in schools. Here, we have two responses to collective shame: acknowledgement with the educational concern that history should not repeat itself, and denial in the name of “saving face”. We shall not deviate far in saying that one is a healthy response of remorse to guilt and shame, while the other is an infantile attempt to maintain a cultural narcissism where the superiority of the Japanese race is inculcated in schoolchildren every day and institutionally solidified by national identity.

I use these previous examples arbitrarily as merely illustrative of particular instantiations of collective identification, yet they occur everywhere. Regardless of what examples we focus on, which always runs the danger of introducing ancillary distractions, whether they are distantly historical or more contemporary in world attention, the phenomena of collective identification equally applies to any culture or society throughout time. Although particularity is culturally relative and contingent upon the interaction between group relations and the social environs that inform collective identity, it also transpires within a greater universal process governing object relations. Here, it is important to stay focused on the universal rather than the particular, for the more crucial locus of our enquiry concerns human nature itself: that which is common to us all.

The end of the world

In this age of terrorism post 9/11, world anxiety becomes our number one preoccupation. When deranged minds are willing to sacrifice their own lives during the suicidal terrorist acts of committing murder, no one or nation is immune from threat. In the wake of such persistent anxiety, “unhappy and paranoid” becomes the epithet we shall apply to characterise collective humanity. Just as Freud’s seminal work, Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, described the unease, trepidation, and unhappiness within the culture of his day during the early rise of Hitler, we may justifiably conclude that the scale and ferocity of cross-cultural/interfaith/interethnic aggression has intensified and become much
worse since his time. The fantasy that men are inherently gentle creatures who are born good, free of dispositional sin, and untainted by primitive intent can no longer be sustained by critical reason. It is an empirical fact that, by all historiographical accounts of cultural anthropology, human civilisation has been forged on human conflict, attachment deficits in child-rearing practices, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, traumatisation, dehumanisation, and war. Given the historical progression of civilisation, what reasonable trajectory do we posit for the future of humanity?

The astrophysicist and cosmologist Brandon Carter (1983) has provided a mathematical formulation that predicts the probability of human extinction. Given that there are over seven billion people alive on this planet today, and that we are among the most people who have ever lived in the history of the human race, from a predictive statistical standpoint, it is speculated that there is an approximate 5% chance that we will expire within a couple hundred years and a 95% chance that complete human extinction will occur in approximately seven thousand years, with a possible degree of freedom extending this figure to just over nine thousand years. This is known as the “Doomsday Argument”. In other words, if all the humans alive today are in a random place in the human history timeline, then we are nearer to extinction than not.

While there are different versions of this scenario that vary in scope and formulation, including critiques, refutations, and rebuttals, philosopher John Lesley (1996) has championed this argument in his chilling speculations on the end of the world. One cannot entertain the actual risks of complete human annihilation based on such brute evidence without sinking into worrisome pessimism. Lesley draws alarming attention to the underestimated dangers that threaten human extinction, including the notion that we could become extinct fairly soon. Despite the recognised risks of natural disaster, including volcanic eruptions, the earth colliding with asteroids or comets, astronomical explosions like supernovae, galactic centre outbursts, and solar flares, or a complex breakdown of the earth’s biosphere, we are well aware that most of the immediate threats to the survival of the human race come from man. We damage our own ozone layer, dump toxins into our air, lands, and seas via mass industrial pollution, increase greenhouse effects that ruin our ecosystems, and introduce fatal viral diseases and new varieties of plague that infiltrate our continents. Soon
the world could become uninhabitable. From nuclear war to germ warfare, radiation poisoning, biological and chemical warfare, terrorism, criminality, technological manipulations such as genetic engineering disasters, food infections (e.g., salmonella bacteria), computer-initiated network malfunctions, Internet viruses, or techno-war that jeopardise human survival, and scientific hubris—such as biohacking, nanotechnology, or careless physics experimentations “at immensely high energies, [that] will upset a space-filling ‘scalar field’ and destroy the world” (Lesley, 1996, p. 1)—these are but a few very serious reasons not to dismiss the ubiquitous threat of world annihilation.

In our contemporary era of political and religious violence that legitimises the morality of war with the support of military science, our conflict of cultures begets and bears witness to increased human tragedy and traumatisation. There are pernicious threats associated with the subversive activities of fundamentalist religious groups that embrace ethical relativism and prescriptivism based on collective ideology just as there are repercussions from foolish decisions made by narcissistically grandiose politicians who hype up a country’s citizenry based upon an appeal to emotion in the pursuit of national self-interest. If we do not kill each other by destroying our environment through chemical, biological, and nuclear war, leading to loss of biodiversity, disease, disastrous climate change, greenhouse calamity, desertification, and pollution of our planet, then overpopulation will surely erode our environment and tax our natural resources to satisfy basic human needs, which will be likely to lead to mass panic, mayhem, and global warfare. When people have no grain to eat, the moral principle of human rights becomes a vacuous concept.

The ontology of prejudice

The polarity of human desire, the nature of personal and collective identifications, and the combative forces of social and cultural oppositions all operate within anthropological and ontological structures that give rise to civilisation and the historical manifestations of pathology. Civilisation, even more so than nature itself, is responsible for most of our malaise, but it is also responsible for our remarkable advances in education, technology, science, medicine, human rights, aesthetics, and moral conscientiousness that enhance the quality of
human life, most of which have occurred in our lifetime. Yet, along with these advances have also come the technology to extinguish the entire human race. This is especially disturbing when fanatical and paranoid minds have means and access to weapons of mass destruction. This places us in the precarious position of attempting to anticipate the possible fate of humanity, for the predictive validity of the progression of civilisation hinges on whether aggression will be restricted, displaced, inverted, and sublimated for higher rational, ethical, and aesthetic pursuits.

With regard to the question of the possibility of global amelioration of pathological enactments, the issue becomes one of degree. Since prehistory, culture has undergone an evolutionary process of becoming, which is responsible for what we have come to call civilisation, our evolved contemporary valuation practices. However, as Freud (1933b) observed, “uncultivated races and backward strata of the population are already multiplying more rapidly than highly cultivated ones” (p. 214). While there are many socioeconomic, political, and psychological reasons for this, they nevertheless obstruct the optimal transformation of our pathos.

Prejudice forms a basic constituency in our psychic constitutions, for we all pass judgements on others based on our preferential appraisal of what we value and are accustomed to find familiar and/or pleasing. The double edge of the dialectic (as negativity resulting in higher unity) exposes us to a dilemma, for the dialectic is the ontological dynamic underlying prejudice itself. Part of the problem facing us is that prejudice is ontologically constituted in the most rudimentary aspects of human consciousness. Like the nature of the dialectic, prejudice has both negative and positive valences. While violence and destruction are the instruments of prejudice, so, too, are caring and love. Prejudice is not merely a negative construct; prejudice defines our valuation practices, which are the Mecca of individual and communal life. Rather than conceive of prejudice as simply a pathological anomaly, prejudice is also responsible for our most revered ideals. As I have said elsewhere (Mills & Polanowski, 1997, pp. 11–13), prejudice in its essence is the preferential self-expression of valuation. All prejudicial disclosures express value preferences. Preferences are prejudicial because they signify discriminatory value judgements that are self-referential. Preference presupposes prejudice for preference typifies the priority of determinate valuation. To prefer is to value and
to value is to judge: judgements by nature are valuative. All judgements are imbued with value, which presupposes self-valuation and self-interest, because valuation is a particular form of subjective self-expression. Thus, valuation is prejudicial, for it involves a relation between difference and similarity that is necessarily self-referential. Every human being by nature is prejudiced; it is simply a matter of degree, and towards what particular object one’s prejudice is directed.

Prejudice is a neutral psychological predisposition that informs the ontology of human subjectivity. Prejudice is an elementary aspect of conscious and unconscious life that gives rise to the self, the nature of personal identification, individual and collective identity, culture, and shared value practices. Prejudice as valuation is, therefore, responsible for our shared ideals as well as the deviations of abnormality and perversion. In its ideal condition, prejudicial valuation informs our social mores and ethical practices. In its larger scope, ethics is the harvest of subjective universality. As such, selfhood and culture give rise to morality that is individualistic and interpersonally bound within a psychosocial matrix of negotiation and intersubjective validation. Value determinations, I suggest, are the result of interpersonal mediations and identifications with collective ideals and are, therefore, intersubjectively constructed and validated through the dialectical process of our social and cultural prejudices. Applying Hegel, the succession towards greater unity, co-operation, and peace among nations is progressively forged by the movement of the dialectic, as prejudice constantly gives rise to new and higher order forms of novelty and creative complexity. These existential complexities ontologically stand over and above individual practices, for they are mediated in the face of social and cultural interpersonal forces that negotiate and intersubjectively affirm collectively shared value systems and practices over others. As with the epigenesis of the self, the process of this negotiation rests on the nature of identification.

Ideals do not exist in a moral vacuum: they are created by the larger sociocultural milieu that becomes individually and idiosyncratically internalised throughout development; yet they are always open to change and transmutation. These early internalised ideals become the formative basis of a cohesive self and social structure, which remain in flux and unrest due to the dialectical unfolding of the nature of subjectivity and social relations. The parallel process of valuation in individual and collective development is constituted a priori within
the larger ontological structures that make worldhood possible. Such pre-established ontological conditions (as thrownness) provide the ideal objects of identification that are necessary for selfhood and for the emergence of values—yet they are always up for renegotiation. This emerging process of valuation gives rise to greater *aporiai* in selfhood, communal forces, socio-political drift, and international relations. However, the dialectical nature of prejudice that gives rise to civilisation leads to an internal ambivalence, a dilemma it fights within itself. In this sense, values can never be fixed truths or universal essences. Instead, they necessarily materialise out of prejudice, negation, and conflict. Acquiring new life in the wake of destruction, the death of particular values is preserved in the ashes of history, nostalgia, and desire. As humanity elevates itself to higher degrees of complexity, so do its ideals.

From this account, we may say that valuation inherently yearns for greater levels of unification and complexity. This would seem to suggest that the structurally constituted dynamic progression of the dialectic ensures that civilisation will remain ontologically predisposed to seek and maintain order, accord, and social progression while allowing a vast variance of novelty, freedom, and complexity to emerge. However, with complexity and freedom comes the inherent risk of individual and collective psychopathy and social regression that threatens the progressive unification and self-preservative acclivity towards holism. To what degree will progression win out over regression in the face of our contemporary ethnic and religious conflicts? In order to provide a more systematic and rigorously justified account of the constructive forces of civilisation within the destructive shapes of worldhood, we need to examine closely Hegel’s logic of the dialectic and determine if the positive significance of the negative will, in the end, vitiate the primitive propensities that compel human relations toward destructive acts.

*The logic of the dialectic*

One of the more interesting aspects of Hegel’s (1812) dialectic is the way in which a mediated dynamic forms a new immediate. This process not only informs the basic structure of his *Logic*, which may further be attributed to the general principle of *Aufhebung*, but this
process also provides the logical basis to account for the role of negativity within a progressive unitary drive. The process by which mediation collapses into a new immediate provides us with the logical model for the improvement of civilisation. It is precisely this logical model that provides the internal consistency to its specific application to the amelioration of pathology. As an architectonic process, spirit invigorates itself and breathes its own life as a self-determining generative activity that builds upon its successive shapes and layers that inform its appearances; therefore, collective mind constructs its own monolith. It is this internal consistency that provides us with a coherent account of the circular motion of the progressive drive towards higher manifestations of psychical, social, and cultural development.

Hegel's use of mediation within the movements of thought is properly advanced in the *Science of Logic* as well as the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (1817), which prefaces Hegel's anthropological and psychological treatment of Spirit. In the *Logic* (1812), Being moves into Nothing which then develops into Becoming, first as the “passing over” into nothing, second as the “vanishing” into being, and third as the “cessing-to-be”, or passing away of being and nothing into the “coming-to-be” of becoming. Becoming constitutes the mediated unity of “the unseparatedness of being and nothing” (§ C, 2, p. 105). Hegel shows how each mediation leads to a series of new immediates, which pass over and cease to be, as that which has passed over in its coming to be, until these mediations collapse into the determinate being of *Dasein*—its new immediate. Being is a simple concept while Becoming is a highly dynamic and complex process. Similarly, *Dasein*, or determinate being, is a simple immediacy to begin with, which becomes increasingly more complicated as it transitions into Essence and conceptual understanding. It is in this early shift from becoming to determinate being that you have a genuine sublation, albeit as a new immediate, spirit has a new beginning.

In Hegel's treatment of consciousness as pure thought represented by the *Logic*, as well as his treatment of world history in the *Phenomenology*, and the Anthropology and Psychology sections in the *Encyclopaedia*, spirit continues on this circular, albeit progressive, path, conquering each new opposition it encounters, hence elevating itself in the process. Each mediation leads to a new beginning, and spirit constantly finds itself confronting opposition and overcoming conflict as it is perennially engaged in the process of its own becoming. In the
Logic, the whole process is what is important as reason is eventually able to understand its operations as pure self-consciousness; however, in its moments, each mediation begets a new starting point that continually reinstitutes new obstacles and dialectical problems that need to be mediated, hence eliminated.

But thought always devolves or collapses back into the immediate. This dynamic is a fundamental structural constituent that offers systematic coherency to Hegel’s overall philosophy of spirit as well as its specific relevance to the problem at hand. Culture mediates opposition and conflict that it generates from within its own evolutionary process and attempts to resolve earlier problems unto which new immediacy emerges. Mediation is, therefore, an activity performed from within society and cultural forces that, in turn, make new experience possible. When disparate cultures and societies are taken together as a conglomerate with endless processes within overdetermined processes, the whole movement of civilisation itself becomes an ever-increasing logical synthesis.

Hegel envisions this general structural dynamic throughout all contexts of spirit, giving the movement of spirit its logical substance. Each immediacy has a new kind of claim that tests spirit’s past shapes, which, in turn, must be put into practice in the novel experiences it confronts. Spirit is faced with the tussle of having to take each new immediate and integrate it within its pre-existing internal structure, thus incorporating each novelty within its subsisting mediatory faculties. This structural dynamic takes into account the ubiquitous nature of contingency, for spirit is simply not just extending a part of itself as mediation that is already there; it has to incessantly vanquish each new experience it encounters in all of its freshly discovered and potentially unacquainted future environments. The ongoing process of confrontation is the burden of spirit’s odyssey, with each encounter signalling a spewing forth from the unconscious well of what it has already incorporated from its past, thus defining the emerging context for each new stage it confronts as unexpected reality.

*The infinite progress of the infinite regress*

Through the interaction of mediated immediacy, teleology becomes defined in each moment, with each immediacy being only a moment in
the process of civilisation. As spirit passes into new stages, it educates itself as it transforms itself, taking on new forms, expanding and incorporating larger aspects of its experience into its inner being. Preparing itself for its next confrontation, it guarantees there will always be a new stage. Because civilisation is the self-sublation—what might be not inappropriately called sublimation—of its earlier primitive activity, the logic of the dialectic provides us with a prototype for understanding the underlying functions and power of the negative that propels civilisation to overcome its increased oppositions, which it generates from within itself. Because civilisation generates division and opposition within itself, each new mediated immediacy allows for contingencies and complexities to operate within existing dynamic structures. This is the freedom of the power of the negative, for it might seek to operate within a destructive and regressive fashion rather than align with the upward current of human growth, social consciousness, tolerance, acceptance, and ethical progress. This further ensures that there will always be pathological forms of human activity: the thought that we could ever stop thinking in terms of difference such as ethnicity, religion, language, or race is simply an illusion.

Human beings will always seek separate unique identities (whether as individuals or as groups) in opposition to others based on the values they choose to identify with. This tendency further guarantees that nationalism, ethnic and religious identity, and separatist movements energised by rigid group identifications will never perish, for identity is what keeps people together; we may only hope that their pathological instantiations will abate and become marginalised to minor aberrations that fail to identify with greater collective global visions. But in all likelihood, we will see only spheres in the amelioration of pathos determined by contingent world events.

If we may offer a prediction of the future of civilisation based on Hegel’s logical model, then perhaps we will see many infinite progresses of many infinite regresses: in so far as civilisation climbs up the rungs of the ladder, it will also experience slippage, regression, and withdrawal back to earlier manifestations of its being. In this century, this explanation could be said to account, in part, for Hitler and the Holocaust, Stalin’s gulags and reign of butchery, Pol Pot’s killing fields, Saddam Hussein’s gassing of his own people, the genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, Milosevic’s relentless crusade of ethnic cleansing, the grisly “choppings” in Sierra Leone, and, more recently, the Rwanda
genocide and the terrorist attacks on the USA's Pentagon and World Trade Center. But, as evinced by Hegel's Logic, as well as our empirical social advancements, given the synthetic and upwardly mobile acclivity of the dialectic, as a rule, increased ascendance and social unification overreaches the regressive instantiation of annihilating forces.

Yet, with each destruction comes a new construction of mediated immediacies that give rise to new values and social ideals. Freud's contribution is invaluable to Hegel's position because, as they both maintain, negativity is the core constituent of life: death and destruction will not only be a universality in all possible future worlds, it is a necessary ontological dynamic that assures the upward progression of change, prosperity, and maturation—the very essence of the striving for our ideal possibility-for-Being.

With most of the world's continents engaged in some form of military conflict, it could be argued (at least theoretically) that the United Nations becomes an ethical paragon for global peace and unity, and with the fight for freedom, democracy, and human rights, social consciousness has made an advance. However, it has done so at the cost of condemning and displacing other cultural valuation practices that imperil international security, where might becomes the right of a community in the service of the collective whole. Collective identification has its limits even among nations with focused mutual goals, which further leads to resistance and stifling efforts at negotiation and diplomacy. Because each nation has loyalty to its own self-interests, an ethical diaspora is inevitable: cultural narcissism is highly recalcitrant to outside interference pressuring political reform. This may be observed by the fact that, despite indubitable knowledge of the slaughter and concentration camps in Bosnia, former President George Bush Sr and his administration was not about to send American troops to intercede, fearing the ghost of Vietnam, a repetition the Clinton administration faced, dogged by a country absorbed by its own concerns. It might further be said that the international community's failure to intervene appropriately in the Rwanda massacre as well as the question of ground troops surrounding the crisis in the former Yugoslavia reflects a collective preoccupation not to jeopardise uncritically the lives of its own citizens.

In these situations, collective identifications that sustain national identities ultimately serve self-preservative functions, for we are bound to identify more with our own kind than a stranger in a foreign
land. The brute fact is that we value our own over others: the general principle of human life becomes an abstraction when compared to the concrete social realities each country faces. This is particularly relevant when internal division and upheaval fractures the cohesion of a country’s infrastructures, such as the separatism movement in French Quebec, Canada and the omnipresence of discrimination and racism that torments the USA. When industrialised countries, such as the ones in North America, are unable to shelter and provide food and clothing for their own homeless populations who die every night on the streets, they find themselves in the conundrum of determining the most optimal means of disseminating their social resources. Value is ultimately prioritised under the rubric of a particular society’s self-interests, but this often encompasses wasteful concessions to popular prejudice. It is truly sad when the American public is more concerned about where the President’s penis has been rather than helping the needy through humanitarian aid. This is a fine example of Heidegger’s (1927) *das Man*, where the herd is lost in the corrupt falleness of idle talk and curiosity of “the they”.

The process of civilisation vacillates between dialectical moments of progress vs. regress as the process itself secures and mobilises an infinite progression with infinite points of regression. Following the logical coherency of the upward ascendance of the dialectic, we may further estimate that progress will surpass the regressive and destructive forces that tyrannise world accord. What is truly infinite about the evolution of humanity is the process itself. What we see is an infinite (universal) pattern, each side being contrary moments as each merges into the other. This pattern is genuinely infinite, for it is a self-maintaining process; each alteration collapses into a new moment, which is its being-for-self in its mediacy. By standing back and seeing the recurrent pattern within a new context, world spirit is enabled to effect the transition to a new immediacy that is truly sublated. Civilisation, like Spirit, is always faced with the relative novelty of each new shape. Yet, it approaches each new opposition not as a static antinomy doomed to stalemate, but, rather, as a self-contained pattern; the infinite generates new finites as a fundamental repetition of itself—a self-maintaining process that generates its own process as a dynamically self-articulated complex holism.

Hegel’s odyssey of spirit may be applicable to our understanding of the trek of culture and its march over the ever-increasing prolifera-
tion of human aggression. As our world confederations gain greater amity, consensus, and cohesion, the intersubjective negotiation of valuation gives rise to new novelties, complexities, and increased unity. But the more convoluted social realities become, destructive forces continue to grow in abundance. We may surmise that the insidiouslyness of human pathology will recede in certain pockets of communal affiliation but flow in others as the valences of power and prejudice undergo the vicissitudes of transformation. No longer is the standard of culture measured by whether or not one uses a bar of soap, but, rather, by the values we espouse in relation to others, especially the promise to keep our aggressions in check. Now our degree of civility is to be equated by the mutual agreement not to point our missiles at one another—quite an accomplishment for decades of fear and cold war! Yet, this existential reality underscores the fact that aggression will always play a part in our value practices and the ontological relations that comprise worldhood.

Whether in politics or business, advances in culture are due to the process of negotiation and mutual recognition, which leads to the mutual desire to understand, communicate value preferences, and support each other co-operatively despite vast differences that define our identities. The need for mutual recognition, validation, and affirmation of cultural values and worth leads to understanding; in turn, understanding leads to empathy and care. Despite the continuing tumultuous Middle-Eastern peace negotiations and the tenuous Irish settlement where rigid religious identifications ensure irreconcilable division, the process signals the human willingness to seek feasible solutions in the name of peace, which is itself a productive dialectical movement. Whether they advance in peaceful resolution through mutual negotiation remains a possibility only the future can command. However, given the current state of military conflict in the Middle East, where social chaos, lawlessness, mass trauma, civilian revolt, and religious fundamentalism, including messianic fanaticism fuelled by systemic hatred for the Other, where The End of Days is preceded by a prophetic apocalypse, it becomes a logical prediction that the Third World War is just around the corner.

When social and psychic conflict remains irresolute, the human species has the compulsion to repeat its traumas in the effort to resolve them. Not unlike Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, the compulsion towards control and mastery may be generally attributed to the
Aufhebung of cultures as civilisation becomes more integrative, refined, and balanced. But, as Freud points out, the repetition of destruction is a retrograde character of our species that must be harnessed and channelled into appropriate directions if we are to survive as a human race. It is in the austere face of violence and havoc that continue to pollute our globe where we can observe the pessimistic resonance of Freud’s dismal conclusion that offers us “no consolation”.

As long as people are deprived of the most basic needs that comprise human necessity, there will always be atypical suffering, seething envy, hate, and murder. And in the uncultivated masses that bleed world tranquillity, destruction and violence will be the primary instruments of human deed with each act of aggression begetting new aggression in order to combat it. With the perseverance of peace, perhaps this cycle will culminate in a more docile set of human relations. Through mutual dialogue and the open exchange of value preferences, new ideals, conventions, and policies will emerge, even though this might, in all likelihood, require the aggressive encroachment on societies and cultures that fail to develop shared global identifications.

Living in the end times

Hegel (1900) once said that human history is the “slaughterbench” (§ 27) of happiness—a progressive yet poignant achievement. But happy or not, happiness is nevertheless what we covet, what Aristotle (1962) called “the highest good attainable by action”, that is, “living well” and “doing well” (see Bk 1, § 4, 15). Some of us live well and some of us do well, but for most of the world population, happiness is a foreign reality. Ephemeral moments of pleasure are not happiness: they are not the eudaimonia Aristotle envisioned. Even the satisfaction of life’s simplest pleasures is often minimised, postponed, or held in abeyance for other desires that have not yet been actualised. Desire is such a complicated creature that it is responsible for generating our most detestable beastly attributes as well as our most cherished and exalted ideals. As being-in-relation-to-lack, desire seeks to assuage its anxiety, to go beyond its finite appearances and fill the hole, the lacunae in its being—simply the wish for wholeness that we call peace
The nature of value enquiry is a lived existential ordeal that must endure the gauntlet of anxiety and dread that pave the successive path towards the fulfilment of human ethos. It is this positive significance to the power of the negative that becomes the engine behind our moral prosperity even when the dark shadow of our aggressivity and destructive inclinations spreads over the sky like a black plague.

"Fundamental insight.—There is no pre-established harmony between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind", says Nietzsche (1878, p. 198). Harmony is made by humankind through the call of conscience and the puissance of reason—a rational passion. And, as Freud (1933a) tells us, the intellect . . . is among the powers which we may most expect to exercise a unifying influence on men – on men who are held together with such difficulty and whom it is therefore scarcely possible to rule . . . .

Our best hope for the future is that intellect – the scientific spirit, reason – may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man. (p. 171)

Is it such a utopian expectation to think that we can subordinate our pathological natures to the monarch of reason? Perhaps this is the true meaning of faith. For even if there are no emotional ties that exist between people, cultures, or nations, the bonds of reason conjoin us in mutual appreciation for the ought that dictates even our most irrational moments.

Having offered this optimistic gesture, we are still left with uncertainty, tenuousness, and platitudes. We are currently experiencing a crisis of liberal capitalism in North America and the UK, which has led to economic exploitation of the masses engineered by those who want to make obscene amounts of money quickly and unabashedly at others’ expense. The rest of the world, too, has its own financial crises, most recently as the USA and members of the European Union are in chaos over fiscal mismanagement with the added irritant of various central banks and China calling for economic reform. This has only been compounded by the fuel crisis destabilising markets all over the world. When there is the USA’s deregulation of financial institutions, with a conglomerate of powerful lawyers, politicians, economists, accountants, and lobbyists manipulating laws around the exchange of
commerce, taxation, and corporate profits, then citizens will naturally be enticed, taken advantage of, and swindled, partly because some people are gullible and/or unreflective—acting on unbridled wishfulfilment and whim—and partly because they are simply overburdened by so many demands and responsibilities within our stressful contemporary societies that the pleasure principle is sure to ring its bell. “We want relief! And be quick about it.”

As Slavoj Žižek points out, as have many reformed or neo-Marxists before him, such greed is generated by the seductive system of capitalism itself, which beckons only desire and personal self-indulgence. In Freudian terms, we think only about our own gratifications. The vulgar popular expression is: “Fuck everyone else! The only thing that matters is me.” This is a common sentiment. I further suggest this is a failure of value enquiry, a painful revelation about our collective moral psychology. We are destroying our planet, sullying and stealing natural commodities from impoverished countries that are sold off by corrupt government officials, hence causing new poverty and hunger, leading people to turn to rioting, looting, and killing because they have no rice or wheat, thereby generating social calamities that potentially have world-wide effects. When people are deprived of the basic necessities for human survival, it is illogical to reproach the outrage fuelling such desperate acts of aggression and social discord. “Would you want to be treated like an object that does not matter to the rest of the world?” That is rational conscience speaking. The object here is actually a unity of subjects—a collection of people who are exploited because the law says they can be. Remember that the law is what the people in political power determine to be the case. It can change at any time, contingent upon the instrumental functions that bring that about. When collective social systems facilitate ecological risk and allow world erosion to happen, we must critically target the ultimate sources of responsibility. In industrial countries, the populace clearly experiences such trickle-down effects when spikes in fuel prices immediately affect the cost of transportation and availability of food and produce. And when people in non-industrial or developing countries have no credit cards to rely on to offset their lack of capital or debt, it becomes a matter of life or death.

As our planet faces increasing desertification due to climate change, environmental pollution, and human spoilage, water wars are generating global concern and economic exploitation. The shortage
of drinking water compounded by corporate pollution is resulting in the poisoning of our water supplies. Industrial pollution is responsible for producing biologically contaminated water due to the mass dumping of chemicals, pesticides, rocket fuel, and pharmaceuticals discarded by large animal factories and sewage treatment plants. Furthermore, the capitalist privatisation of water leads to large-scale neglect of water systems by introducing contaminants that are directly hazardous to citizens, particularly those in disenfranchised nations. Exacerbated by a lack of proper sanitation, millions of people die each year due to water-borne diseases, primarily small children up to the age of five, and as many as one out of ten in India. Industry is always thinking about the “bottom line”—the cheapest way is the desired norm if you are a businessman. As long as capitalists control water supplies, they can exploit the rest of the world. It is understandable, under these circumstances, how large groups of peoples would succumb to squalid instinct where “Every man for himself!” is the bottom line. Living in squalor, without dignity or money, leads to perpetual insecurity, sorrow, bitterness, and the need for revenge. If this continues without global intervention, we can predictably foresee the eruption of mass social psychopathy, where disenfranchised countries become a breeding ground for death, depravity, and terrorism.

Žižek (2010) alerts us that the two principle dangers confronting our world today is unbridled capitalism and fundamentalist religious extremism (p. 131), which he believes is leading to an “apocalyptic zero-point.” But the real culprit he focuses on is the global capitalist system itself.

[The] “four riders of the apocalypse” are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. (p. x)

From “invisible” migrant workers deprived of all privileges and used as slave labour in order for us to have pound stores and cheap blue jeans, to “crazies” who announce their “irrational” intent of using a nuclear device or potent biological and chemical weapons, to a large degree the question of money is always looming in the background. Money motivates everything. We are erecting walls to keep our bordering countries out, and constructing walls within our own
nations like “gated communities” designed to protect us from “the criminal other”. “Love thy neighbour” is replaced with mistrust and fear, whereby the Other becomes a threat, source of envy, or persecutory object. Ignoring all warning signs, we are living in collective denial and omnipotent disavowal of our impending peril under the illusory fantasies of grandiose hubris sustained by hegemonic ideologies. “When will the next natural disaster occur? When will the next bomb go off, or plane fly into a building?” As Žižek (2010) puts it, “we know very well that this will happen at some point, but nevertheless cannot bring ourselves to really believe that it will” (pp. x–xi).

Despite the fact that reason tells us to stop the exploitation, corruption, indulgences in excess, and the destruction of our natural resources, we still want. Here, wanting becomes a perennial quandary. Human desire wants immediate satisfaction. Its popular motto is: “Fill the lack! Chop, Chop!” As a society, we often live in the moment. We want, and want more. This inner mantra becomes an incessant, insatiable whine. Restraint, compromise, and self-restriction become an unwelcome trespass. The reality principle is conveniently forgotten when urge, impulse, and caprice are beguiled by immediate objects of tantalising pleasure. And conscience becomes compartmentalised because the complexities of social order and world discord pose overwhelming impasses to pragmatic resolutions. Here, the collective psyche, in so far as it personifies the universal psychological dispositions inherent to humanity, remains in an ambivalent state of inner worry and unmediated conflict.

If we entertain the possibility of the doomsday argument, and that we might very well be living in the end times, then we are approaching a cataclysm that might no longer be preventable. Unlike Freud, who had an ambiguous air of sceptical guardedness, yet one with a pessimistic undercurrent, Hegel was more optimistic. I am not so sure we can readily amalgamate the two poles. Each represents a dialectical position and creates an almost insurmountable tension, what Žižek (2006) calls a “parallax gap”, which is a point of irreconcilable contradiction or antinomy where there is no discernible synthesis.17 Žižek (2010) points towards, in his words, a “pathetic case for communism” (p. 5) as a possible reference point for rectifying our world crises, but this suggestion violates human nature.18 As long as a macrosystem supports capitalist self-interest, human need and greed will gravitate towards self-pursuit over that of shared equality or the uniform
distribution of material wealth through financial egalitarianism. Such a condition, namely, global communism, would have to be superimposed on us by a supreme force, hence state intervention, even if it was for our own good. It is more plausible that we will increasingly seek modifications and amendments in neo-capitalism reflective of controlled or regulated democratic systems that institute structural improvements through refined checks and balances safeguarding shared collective interests valuing socialistic commitments. Short of a global centralised currency that is regulated, policed, and affects everyone, perhaps some transnational system of socialistic democracy will emerge in the future as a logical synthesis informing the sublation of humanity through natural compromise.

A more pessimistic outcome is that the dialectic would reach an implosive climax or irresolvable breaking point where we have a deadlock of oppositions that lead to snowballed eruptions within multiple social climates that contaminate the world scene with war, famine, and ecological disaster. Even if one pole eventually vanquishes the other, it would be at everyone’s expense. If we accept Žižek’s premise that unbridled liberal capitalism is a world nemesis bringing the end of days, then it would probably take a series of catastrophic global events before we are forced to curb its enthusiasm. This would necessitate a mass mobilisation of political, diplomatic, and economic reform. However, as long as there are political hegemones that drive world relations based on capitalist principles that, on the one hand, clamour, “We are all equal!” but, on the other hand, admonish, “You have to earn it. There are no free handouts!,” then I am afraid we will have to accept the premise of natural law theory, which is, what is natural to do is what is right to do (e.g., “It is not natural to give away your resources, for this is contrary to self-preservation and self-interest”, or “Others will have to work for it just like me”, or “We can’t take care of the whole world!”, and so on).19 We can equally imagine the inverse (another dialectic) if we were on the receiving end of exploitation and abuse—“It is natural to kill those who cause us suffering!” And here we return to the question of pathos. Some of us by necessity have to suffer more than others.

In order to envision salient global solutions, we need more than mere awareness or collective self-consciousness; we must be willing to give up what we are comfortable with in our immediate lives for the sake of the symbolic Other and act for a higher principle of valuation,
even if this realisation is simultaneously motivated by enlightened self-interest and/or self-preservation. I cannot see that happening any time soon. Perhaps the message itself is important enough to reiterate. However, if I were a betting man, I would say we are on the brink of extinction.

Notes


2. I realise that the antipode between normativity and pathology poses numerous definitional and epistemological problems, as does my attempt to obviate the issue by collapsing their differences into a universal category that would apply to all human beings. This is equally difficult when offering speculations on a collective psychopathology because we lack a clear referent or criteria on what exactly constitutes health and illness to begin with, which is likely to shift based on different cultural norms and social practices. I do not wish to engage this complex issue here, which deserves serious attention in another forum. I only ask the reader to entertain the notion that, although we might not agree about the hermeneutics, scope, and breadth of the phenomenology of pathology inherent in individual and collective social life, let alone the issue of the type or form and the degree of their instantiation, I wish to stay focused on the psychoanalytic premise that internal conflict is intrinsic to the human psyche and social relations, which manifests itself in both individuals and groups. A return to the ancient notion of pathos helps us to locate a common shared, lived experience where anxiety, despair, and emotional anguish are acknowledged as a universal ontological dimension to the development of civilisation and humanity. It is within the confines of this context that I wish to situate my arguments. Here, the question does not become whether there is a core of health in our subjective or collective strivings that stand in relation to our pathologies, only that any discussion of such pockets of health or flourishing is to be situated within the psychological predicament of our thrownness as being in relation to pathos.

3. Within this context, I specifically use the masculine gender to emphasise the notion that men are usually deemed to be the chief instruments of power, aggression, and violence, who have historically and primarily inflicted suffering on others over that of women. Here, I do
not wish to assign principle responsibility for collective prejudice and aggression to only one sex, only to highlight the particularly identified phenomenon of male dominance. However, an equally plausible case can be made for how women, the first and original love objects for both sexes (see Freud, 1940a, p. 188), and usually the crucial attachment figure that dominates the early child-rearing scene, can easily foist their personalities and will on their children, sometimes quite insidiously, to the degree that either gendered child is equally and potentially exposed to such power differentials. The cycle of relatedness from parents of both genders, further fortified within various familial and cultural practices, ensures that pathological accommodations and manifestations, which arise within each individual, have overdetermined sources. Just as females who are born within an oppressive patriarchy inevitably suffer in various ways, whether directly or indirectly, so do males who receive an austere maternal factor during their upbringing due to cyclical patterns of real or perceived modes of relatedness from parental authority. These patterns may, of course, become entrenched within personality structure and form the basis for a transgenerational transmission of developmental trauma that has cultural specificity, leading to further repetitions and pathological enactments. What is essential, hence necessary and non-accidental, is that the human species has an intimate relation to pathos that inevitably saturates our being.

4. Here, I am in agreement with Hegel’s (1807) architectonic dialectical trajectory that reason is a developmental achievement borne of conflict and negation, the poignant striving for self-consciousness. Ethical reflection becomes a necessary part of the sublation (Aufhebung) of reason despite the fact that it resonates within the feeling soul (Seele) and comprises our most basal desires and strivings, which Hegel (1830) nicely enumerates in the Anthropology section of his Philosophie des Geistes, which is Part 3 of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences. In other words, we do not have a clean bifurcation between desire, reason, and ethical self-consciousness, for they are unified within the synthetic strands of the dialectic as a complex holism.

5. I have attempted to show how Hegel’s logic and philosophical psychology are instrumental for advancing psychoanalytic thought. See The Unconscious Abyss: Hegel’s Anticipation of Psychoanalysis (Mills, 2002), where I discuss Hegel’s dialectical logic in the context of his unconscious ontology.
6. Hegel’s dialectic has historically been misinterpreted and grossly misrepresented by psychoanalysts and philosophers of science, most notably Karl Popper, to be a threefold relation of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. This dialectic was advanced by Fichte (1794) in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, which referred to the process of thought and judgement; thus, it is an imprecise and over-simplification of Hegel’s dialectic.

7. I would argue this claim could equally apply to the celebrated theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking, whose entire life project has been preoccupied with understanding every aspect of the universe propounded in his grand “theory of everything”.


9. See Hegel (1830), §§ 388–403. This process is also the logical model Hegel (1812) follows from his *Logic* in his anthropological description of the soul, where a universal determines itself into particulars, showing how each mediation forms a new immediate, which is the general thrust of the dialectic.

10. For both Hegel and Freud, the inchoate ego is originally encased in a unity and is, therefore, modally undifferentiated from external forces—the inner and outer are fused in a symbiotic organisation. Freud (1930a) informs us

    originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. (p. 68)

For Hegel, the natural soul moves from an undifferentiated unity to a differentiated determinate being; so, too, for Freud, ego boundaries gradually become more contrasted, constructed, and consolidated throughout its burgeoning activity. Freud notes that originally an infant is unable to distinguish between its own ego and the external world as the source of stimulation and sensation. But eventually the organism comes to discern its own internal sources of excitation, such as its bodily organs or somatic processes, from external sources of sensation, (e.g., mother’s touch, breast, etc.), that become set apart and integrated within ego organisation. It is not until this stage in ego formation that an object is set over against the ego as an existent entity that is outside of itself. Once the ego moves from primary to secondary narcissism, attachment to external cathected (love) objects
form the initial dynamics of object relations and character development.

11. See Freud (1930a, pp. 64–68) on the “oceanic feeling” in relation to religious sentiment and early ego development.

12. It may be argued that identity is largely the result of the identification process itself, which is influenced by myriad causal and overdetermined factors that are encountered throughout our life experiences and internalised within personality formation. Along with drives and their transformations, the nature of identification accounts for much of the intrapsychic motivations, intentions, desires, and conflicts that comprise psychical and social reality. Identity, whether personal or collective, is ultimately in the service of narcissism or self-interest, thereby affecting the ideals we espouse and the valuation practices we choose to identify with over others. Despite the overdetermination of identification, the values and mores individuals and societies adopt are fundamentally the result of the complexities of narcissistic object choice, the psychosocial functions they serve, and the evolutionary demands of the self-preservative drives.

13. This is not intended to be an ontologically reductive claim, only that consciousness and the complexifications of identity and culture are predicated on embodied biological forces that condition or influence the way in which identity, personality formation, and collective thought and behaviour are expressed.

14. This quotation is attributed to Martin Luther by E. M. Cioran (1998) in The Temptation to Exist. Also see “The last sermon in Wittenberg, 1546” (Luther, 1546):

    And what I say about the sin of lust, which everybody understands, applies also to reason; for the reason mocks and affronts God in spiritual things and has in it more hideous harlotry than any harlot. Here we have an idolater running after an idol, as the prophets say, under every green tree [cf. Jer. 2:20; I Kings 14:23], as a whorechaser runs after a harlot. That’s why the Scriptures call idolatry whoredom, while reason calls it wisdom and holiness. . . . Such wisdom of reason the prophets call whoredom. (pp. 374–375)

15. Here, I am referring to the Clinton–Lewinsky affair.

17. Žižek makes the proper locus of his philosophy the parallax gap, where there is a fundamental displacement of difference that poses an “irreducible obstacle to dialectics” based on a pure shift of perspective that can lead to no higher synthesis. See *The Parallax View* (2006, p. 4).

18. Freud criticises communism for its naïve philosophy of human nature based on a fantasy principle that ignores the instinctual basis of human aggression. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he argues that even if private property was not allowed by the state and material wealth was distributed generously among peoples, it would do nothing to eradicate our aggressive proclivities. He elaborates the fantasy that

> If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men. Since everyone’s needs would be satisfied, no one would have any reason to regard another as his enemy; all would willingly undertake the work that was necessary . . . [T]he psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion. . . . Aggression was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty, and it already shows itself in the nursery. (1930a, p. 118)

19. I would argue that it is “logical” to have government exercise some control, regulation, or oversight over capitalism based on utilitarian and socialistic commitments that improve the financial stability, social security, and quality of life of the populace, including those controlling the wealth, but it is not necessarily “instinctual”. What is instinctual or natural is to be concerned first and foremost with one’s own affairs, including securing resources for one’s immediate familial and communal priorities out of pragmatic necessity. We make decisions based primarily upon emotional unconscious factors—both innocent and prejudicial—that resonate within the deeply felt interior of our beings. These unconscious agentic processes, I argue, have an affective exuberance that is somatically absorbed within our embodied sentience that simultaneously, emotively, and semiotically interjects an overarching valuative tone. This naturally includes an amalgamation of the most innately intuitive, feeling, moral, and spiritual sentiments that coalesce within the personality, but also the most primitive, conflictual, agonising, and phantasmatic: I would
also argue much more so than cognition (see Mills, 2010). Even if we accept the evolutionary argument that memes—the cultural equivalent of genes—drive complex social systems through a replicatory process of mimesis, they would not be likely to extend past one’s immediate social milieu unless other contingencies or environs ingressed upon the motivation systems comprising such social organisations. In other words, we prefer to stay close to home. And sometimes, perhaps more than others, what is natural is not always good. Therefore, natural law or desire governing human nature and interpersonal relations must be subjected to developmental and educational forces that introduce critical analysis, ethical self-reflection, domestic gentrification, and collective valuation practices for the good of all.

References


CHAPTER TWO

The antinomy of morality in Freud

Dan Merkur

Freud claimed that psychoanalysis is a natural, biological procedure, does not enjoin any particular moral values, and, consequently, has no contributions to make on the topic of ethics: “It is unreasonable to expect science to produce a system of ethics—ethics are a kind of highway code for traffic among mankind” (Meng & Freud, 1963, p. 123; see also Hartmann, 1960; Meissner, 2003). “Psycho-analysis has no concern whatever with such judgements of value” (Freud, 1925d, p. 38). At the same time, Freud was far from morally indifferent. In correspondence on 8 July 1915 with the American neurologist James Jackson Putnam, Freud said of himself,

I consider myself a very moral human being, who can subscribe to the excellent maxim of Th. Vischer: What is moral is always self-evident. I believe that in a sense of justice and consideration for one’s fellow men, in discomfort at making others suffer or taking advantage of them, I can compete with the best men I have known. (Hale, 1971, p. 189)

Freud’s personal sense of morality informed rigorous standards of professional conduct that he advocated among psychoanalysts. His criterion of neutrality demanded analysts’ tolerance of their patients’
values and behaviour, and Freud did not entertain high expectations
of the morality of others. Freud (1933a, p. 61) called conscience “an
uneven and careless piece of work”, and he wrote to the Swiss pastor
and psychoanalyst Oscar Pfister,

I do not break my head very much about good and evil, but I have
found little that is “good” about human beings on the whole. In my
experience most of them are trash, no matter whether they publicly
subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine or to none at all. (Meng &
Freud, 1963, pp. 61–62)

Quite apart from the professional obligation that Freud made of
toleration, his psychoanalytic findings led him to advocate liberal
values that were, through the work of his followers, to transform the
relations of the sexes and the practices of child-rearing, education, and
jurisprudence throughout western civilisation. Freud took a relaxed
attitude to human sexuality and showed compassion for pathological
behaviours that had traditionally been punished for moral turpitude.
His critiques of the pathological features of traditional moralities
(Freud, 1908d, 1915b, 1930a; see also Menninger, 1973), together with
psychoanalysis’s failure to provide a substitute, have contributed to
the alarming proliferation of narcissism as a group ideal in western
culture (LaPiere, 1960; Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Erikson (1958)
lamented, “We must grudgingly admit that even as we were trying to
devise, with scientific determinism, a therapy for the few, we were led
to promote an ethical disease among the many” (p. 19).

The inconsistency in Freud’s positions, that psychoanalysis is
natural, biological, and amoral while its practice is, or ought to be,
ethical, is problematic. Philip Rieff titled his classic study of Freud: The
Mind of the Moralist (1961) in reflection of the contradiction within
Freud. Either his personal and professional ethics were bunkum, or
they were not, and if they were not, his inability to link his theories
with his conduct points to a deficiency in his theories (Pattison, 1984).
His moral theories were ideas that he thought, but not ideas that he
believed in or lived by. His remarks about morality were almost
always perfunctory, and he nowhere presented them in a systematic
way. His major statements about morality were clinical in focus; they
touched on moral theory or ethics chiefly in passing remarks and
occasional brief passages of digression. Freud always regarded his
psychoanalytic thinking as works in progress, “incomplete, like everything I do” (Pfeiffer, 1972, p. 28). Freud’s moral theories were no exception to the rule. A passing remark in Civilization and its Discontents, written in his final decade, acknowledged that, “The field of ethics . . . is so full of problems” (Freud, 1930a, p. 126).

Most discussions of Freud’s contributions to ethics are concerned to evaluate the inadvertent impact of psychoanalysis on morality. Wallace (1986), for example, argued,

The overarching theme of Freud’s relationship to ethics, and the source of its creative tension, was his attempt to apply a dispassionate scientific mode of investigation to matters that had hitherto been evaluated in moral terms and considered to be within the exclusive purview of philosophers and clerics. (p. 84)

My present concern, however, is not to evaluate Freud’s work from the standpoint of ethics, but to discuss his theories about morality as contributions to psychoanalysis.

Freud’s moral theory

In Studies on Hysteria (Freud (with Breuer), 1895d), Freud was sufficiently embedded in conventional moral categories that he described the act of repression, by which a hysteria begins, as “on the one hand an act of moral cowardice and on the other a defensive measure which is at the disposal of the ego” (p. 123). The conceptualisation of neurotic illness as moral cowardice was soon to disappear from Freud’s writings.

From The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a) onward, Freud portrayed evil as a misnomer. What was commonly called evil, he now maintained, was properly to be understood as non-moral and infantile.

We do not . . . call a child “bad”, we call him “naughty”; he is no more answerable for his evil deeds in our judgement than in the eyes of the law. And it is right that this should be so; for we may expect that, before the end of the period which we count as childhood, altruistic impulses and morality will awaken in the little egoist. . . . It is true, no doubt, that morality does not set in simultaneously all along the line and that the length of non-moral childhood varies in different
individuals. If this morality fails to develop, we like to talk of “degen-
eracy”, though what in fact faces us is an inhibition in development.
(Freud, 1900a, p. 251)

Freud invoked conventional moral discourse in a subversive manner when he addressed the immorality of dreams. “Is the ethical significance of suppressed wishes to be made light of—wishes which, just as they lead to dreams, may some day lead to other things?” (Freud, 1900a, p. 620). Arguing that a distinction be made between psychical and material reality, Freud urged that people accept their responsibility for the immorality of their dreams. We may acknowledge the immorality of our involuntary fantasies, he suggested, without judging them as we do our conscious actions.

There seems to be no justification for people’s reluctance in accepting responsibility for the immorality of their dreams. When the mode of functioning of the mental apparatus is rightly appreciated and the relation between the conscious and the unconscious understood, the greater part of what is ethically objectionable in our dream and phantasy lives will be found to disappear. (Freud, 1900a, p. 620)

In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901b), where Freud first drew attention to parapraxes (Freudian slips), a passing remark expressed another of his basic insights about morality. The unconscious contains and gives expression to the unwanted, in deference to what moral education calls desirable or “good”. “In healthy people, egoistic, jealous and hostile feelings and impulsions, on which the pressure of moral education weighs heavily, make frequent use of the pathway provided by parapraxes in order to find some expression” (p. 276).

In 1896, in an unpublished draft of “The neuroses of defence, Freud had suggested that “shame and morality are the repressing forces” (p. 221), but he did not publish the statement in the final version of the paper. Freud (1905d) reverted to the concept, however, in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, where he enumerated three “forces which act like dams upon sexual development – disgust, shame and morality” (p. 162, n. 2; see also pp. 164, 178). He attributed the origin of these forces to the developmental period of sexual latency.
It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow – disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals. (p. 177)

In “Character and anal erotism” (1908b), Freud repeated his theory, with the change that what he had earlier called forces he now identified specifically as reaction-formations.

During the period of life which may be called the period of “sexual latency” – i.e. from the completion of the fifth year to the first manifestation of puberty (round about the eleventh year) – reaction-formations, or counter-forces, such as shame, disgust and morality are created in the mind. (p. 171)

As examples of reaction-formations, he offered examples that toilet training produces. “These character-traits of orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy, which are so often prominent in people who were formerly anal erotics, are to be regarded as the first and most constant results of the sublimation of anal erotism” (p. 171).

In “Civilized’ sexual morality and modern nervous illness” (1908d), Freud discussed the implications for moral theory of his long-standing views on the sexual aetiology of neurosis. Speaking to a popular audience, not of unpleasure, trauma, and repression, but of civilisation and morality, Freud boldly claimed that conventional social standards make people neurotic.

The injurious influence of civilization reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilized peoples (or classes) through the “civilized” sexual morality prevalent in them.

The symptoms of these disorders (hysteria, obsessional neurosis, etc.) are psychogenic . . . They spring from the sexual needs of people who are unsatisfied and represent for them a kind of substitutive satisfaction. We must therefore view all factors which impair sexual life, suppress its activity or distort its aims as being pathogenic factors in the psychoneuroses as well. (Freud, 1908d, pp. 185, 186)

Freud (1908d) generalised that “our civilization is built up on the suppression of instincts” (p. 186).
For most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilization. All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victims to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good. (Freud, 1908d, p. 191)

In a case history, Freud remarked that he had had occasion to tell a patient that “the moral self was the conscious, the evil self was the unconscious” (Freud, 1909d, p. 177). For his readers, Freud qualified his statement, saying, “All of this is of course only true in the roughest way, but it serves as a first introduction to the subject” (p. 177, n. 1). Freud also offered the equally sweeping claim that reaction-formation governs the relations of consciousness and the repressed.

According to psycho-analytic theory, I told him, every fear corresponded to a former wish which was now repressed; we were therefore obliged to believe the exact contrary of what he had asserted. This would also fit in with another theoretical requirement, namely, that the unconscious must be the precise contrary of the conscious. (1909d, p. 180)

In *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913), Freud built on his concept of reaction-formation by speculating that “where there is prohibition there must be an underlying desire” (p. 70). “There is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired” (p. 69). Where Freud had earlier been content to argue clinically, from patients’ free associations that disclosed unconscious wishes that were contrary to consciously held values, he was now prepared to assume that all prohibitions presuppose conscious desires to a contrary effect. In offering this generalisation, Freud overstated his case. He neglected the plasticity of displacement and substitute formation (Freud, 1900a). Many bitterly contested prohibitions concern topics that are trivial in themselves. Prohibitions that are manifestly pretexts for power contests between people, or are otherwise symbolic, are not limited to reaction-formations.

Freud (1912–1913) concluded *Totem and Taboo* with the sweeping asserting that “mankind as a whole may have acquired its sense of guilt, the ultimate source of religion and morality, at the beginning of its history, in connection with the Oedipus complex” (p. 332). He
emphasised that religion originated in the fixation of the Oedipus complex. He did not explicitly remark, but his theories implied, that morality must, on the same showing, have originated in connection with its dissolution.

Freud’s moral theory led the American psychoanalyst Trigant Burrow to infer the logical corollary that “repression . . . is biologically a moral reaction” (1914, p. 123). In a paper that he delivered to a psychoanalytic congress in 1913, Burrow (1914) wrote,

With the reaction of repression we are dealing with a reaction that is moral . . . at the heart of the neurosis the essential situation is a moral revulsion.

This revulsion is directed unfailingly against the admission of primary, egoistic, organic, unconscious sexual trends. As we know, through psychoanalytic research, the different neuroses represent but varying outcomes of a fundamental effort of evasion, but the stimulus to such evasion, being essentially a reaction against prohibition, is based in every instance upon a primary, biological intuition of right and wrong. (p. 124)

Burrow had read Freud carefully and accurately. Freud did not respond to Burrow by name, but his next major paper, “On narcissism: an introduction” (1914c), raised two objections to Burrow’s idea that neuroses are symptoms of moral turpitude. Taking up Alfred Adler’s (1917) concept of “ego ideals” without acknowledging the intellectual debt, Freud explained that what governs repression is not a universal standard of morality, but only an ego ideal that varies from person to person, era to era, and culture to culture.

The same impressions, experiences, impulses and desires that one man indulges or at least works over consciously will be rejected with the utmost indignation by another, or even stifled before they enter consciousness. . . . We can say that the one man has set up an ideal in himself by which he measures his actual ego, while the other has formed no such ideal. (Freud, 1914c, pp. 93–94)

Freud also made the second point in “On narcissism” that the ideal is “a special psychical agency which performs the task of seeing that narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured and which, with this end in view, constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by
that ideal” (Freud, 1914c, p. 95). Ideal, self-observing, and judging the ego as its conscience, Freud’s concept had several of the features whose further elaboration would bring Freud to his superego concept.

With the concept of “a special psychical agency” available for further development, Freud allowed himself, in “Repression” (1915d), to acknowledge some problems with his concept of reaction-formation.

The ambivalence which has enabled repression through reaction-formation to take place is also the point at which the repressed succeeds in returning. The vanished affect comes back in its transformed shape as social anxiety, moral anxiety and unlimited self-reproaches; the rejected idea is replaced by a substitute by displacement, often a displacement on to something very small or indifferent. A tendency to a complete re-establishment of the repressed idea is as a rule unmistakably present. (Freud, 1915d, p. 157)

Clinically, reaction formations have the appearance not of categorical values, but of compromise formations. The claim of uncompromising, categorical values is assuredly typical, but it is a rationalisation, a fiction or illusion that conceals a very different state of affairs. Where, for example, anal character types pride themselves on fastidious order and cleanliness, close examination of their behaviour will show that they simultaneously produce mess and filth (Dundes, 1984). Because reaction formations fail to perform in the ostensible manner that is consciously claimed, reliance on reaction formations typically leads, as Freud stated, to “social anxiety, moral anxiety and unlimited self-reproaches”. At least some self-awareness occurs and awakens conscience to activity. The implication of the clinical data for Freud’s moral theory was self-evident. Morality cannot reasonably be attributed to reaction formation, as Freud had claimed in 1905–1908. Conscience sits in judgement of reaction formations, and must consequently be attributed to an independent agency.

When the First World War began, Freud was initially an enthusiastic, patriotic supporter of the war effort. The orgies of mechanised state murders soon brought him to his senses, however, sickening him with the horrors of pointless suffering and death. “Thoughts for the times on war and death” (1915b) was Freud’s most extended discussion of contemporary moral issues since his 1908 paper on “Civilized’ sexual morality”. Early in the article, Freud expressed his lifelong zeal
to take morality out of the hands of theologians and claim it for psychologists. "Our conscience is not the inflexible judge that ethical teachers declare it, but in its origin is 'social anxiety' and nothing else" (Freud, 1915b, p. 280). Repentance of his own former warmongering informed the statement.

A major claim of "Thoughts for the times" was Freud's categorical denial of metaphysical good and evil. Good and evil do not exist objectively, in nature. They are labels that society applies for society's reasons.

In reality, there is no such thing as "eradicating" evil. Psychological – or, more strictly speaking, psycho-analytic – investigation shows instead that the deepest essence of human nature consists of instinctual impulses which are of an elementary nature, which are similar in all men in which aim at the satisfaction of certain primal needs. These impulses in themselves are neither good nor bad. We classify them and their expressions in that way, according to their relation to the needs and demands of the human community. (Freud, 1915b, p. 281)

Freud concluded the paragraph with a further and, for present purposes, significantly different thought: "All the impulses which society condemns as evil – let us take as representative the selfish and the cruel ones – are of this primitive kind" (p. 281). The examples that Freud provided as illustrations of childhood development have a similarly binary structure.

These primitive impulses undergo a lengthy process of development before they are allowed to become active in the adult. They are inhibited, directed towards other aims and fields, become commingled, alter their objects, and are to some extent turned back upon their possessor. Reaction-formations against certain instincts take the deceptive form of a change in their content, as though egoism had changed into altruism, or cruelty into pity. (1915b, p. 281)

Implicit in Freud's choices of illustrative values is the opposition that he saw between the individual and the group. In his view, what is called good is so designated by the group because it serves the group. What is called evil instead serves the individual, as against the group.

Freud took the occasion to observe that because almost no one behaves in a manner fully in keeping with the virtues that society
asserts, almost everyone is a hypocrite. Ostensible good and ostensible evil, as defined by the social group, are not only misnomers; they are also fictions in the different sense of not being lived realities. People pay lip service to the fictitious values, while the values by which they live go unnamed and unspoken.

Anyone thus compelled to act continually in accordance with precepts which are not the expression of his instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means, and may objectively be described as a hypocrite, whether he is clearly aware of the incongruity or not. It is undeniable that our contemporary civilization favours the production of this form of hypocrisy to far-reaching modifications if people were to undertake to live in accordance with psychological truth. Thus there are very many more cultural hypocrites than truly civilized men – indeed, it is a debatable point whether a certain degree of cultural hypocrisy is not indispensable for the maintenance of civilization, because the susceptibility to culture which has hitherto been organized in the minds of present-day men would perhaps not prove sufficient for the task. On the other hand, the maintenance of civilization even on so dubious a basis offers the prospect of paving the way in each new generation for a more far-reaching transformation of instinct which shall be the vehicle of a better civilization. (Freud, 1915b, pp. 284–285)

Freud’s account of the transformation of instincts through the process of civilisation might be applied equally to the circumstance of psychotherapy.

The transformation of “bad” instincts is brought about by two factors working in the same direction, and internal and an external one. The internal factor consists in the influence exercised on the bad (let us say, the egoistic) instincts by erotism – that is, by the human need for love, taken in its widest sense. By the admixture of erotic components the egoistic instinct are transformed into social ones. We learn to value being loved as an advantage for which we are willing to sacrifice other advantages . . . Civilization has been attained through the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction, and it demands the same renunciation from each newcomer in turn. Throughout an individual’s life there is a constant replacement of external by internal compulsion. The influences of civilization cause an ever-increasing transformation of egoistic trends into altruistic and social ones by an admixture of erotic elements. (Freud, 1915b, p. 282)
By alllying the social with love, Freud neatly subverted his position of 1909 that “the moral self was the conscious, the evil self was the unconscious”. Freud instead co-ordinated his moral theory with drive theory, as it stood at the time. Freud’s discussion of psychological drives began in 1905 with his account of psychosexuality, with its psychic energy called *libido*, as the drive of the unconscious. In 1911, he added that self-preservation or narcissism is the drive of consciousness. These theories, which radically revised the Dionysian and Apollonian drives of Nietzsche’s philosophy, dovetailed with Freud’s treatment of the loving group as good, and selfishness as evil, but they reversed the valences of consciousness and the unconscious.

Freud had introduced the concept of *social drives* (the *Standard Edition* mistranslated “social instincts”) in 1911, when he suggested that social drives combine homosexual trends with self-preservation, resulting in group attachments.

After the stage of heterosexual object-choice has been reached, the homosexual tendencies are not, as might be supposed, done away with or brought to a stop; they are merely deflected from their sexual aim and applied to fresh uses. They now combine with portions of the ego-instincts and, as “attached” components, help to constitute the social instincts, thus contributing an erotic factor to friendship and comradeship, to *esprit de corps* and to the love of mankind in general. (Freud, 1911c, p. 61)

In *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913), Freud elaborated and amended his views on the resemblances of obsessional neurosis and religion (Freud, 1907b). He maintained that their differences arose exclusively from the drives at work in the two cases. Freud no longer contended that the drives responsible for religion were self-seeking and socially harmful. He instead invoked his concept of social drives.

*The fact which is characteristic of the neurosis is the preponderance of the sexual over the social instinctual elements.* The social instincts, however, are themselves derived from a combination of egoistic and erotic components into wholes of a special kind . . . If we analyse the instincts at work in the neuroses, we find that the determining influence in them is exercised by instinctual forces of sexual origin; the corresponding cultural formations, on the other hand, are based upon social instincts, originating from the combination of egoistic and erotic
elements. Sexual needs are not capable of uniting men in the same way as are the demands of self-preservation. Sexual satisfaction is essentially the private affair of each individual. (Freud, 1912–1913, pp. 73–74, original italics)

In 1915, in “Thoughts for the times”, Freud enlarged on the derivative character of social drives. His assertion that all morality traces ultimately to external coercion implied that social drives are not authentic, but are merely compromise formations that blend sexuality with egoism.

Freud continued “Thoughts for the times” with a methodological remark that asserted scientific materialism at the implicit expense of theology: “In the last resort it may be assumed that every internal compulsion which makes itself felt in the development of human beings was originally – that is, in the history of mankind – only an external one” (1915b, p. 282). In this way, Freud set the stage for a re-statement of his critique of civilised theory, shifted now from the sexual context of 1908 to the more generalised situation of 1915, when shell shock and other wartime neuroses were in the public mind.

Civilized society, which demands good conduct and does not trouble itself about the instinctual basis of this conduct, has thus won over to obedience a great many people who are not in this following their own natures. . . . They are consequently subject to an unceasing suppression of instinct, and . . . the result is seen in the reactive phenomena of neurotic disorders . . . Anyone thus compelled to act continually in accordance with precepts which are not the expression of his instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means, and may objectively be described as a hypocrite, whether he is clearly aware of the incongruity or not. (Freud, 1915b, p. 284)

In support of his thesis that morals are compromise formations, Freud adduced the complexity of their evaluation. Are actions good only when they issue from good intentions? Only when they result in good outcomes? (Freud, 1915b, p. 283). Again, is good only good when it is pure? Is it not more common for good intentions to be buttressed by material gains?

Upbringing and environment not only offer benefits in the way of love, but also employ other kinds of incentive, namely, rewards and punishments. In this way their effect may turn out to be that a person
who is subjected to their influence will choose to behave well in the cultural sense of the phrase, although no ennoblement of instinct, no transformation of egoistic into altruistic inclinations, has taken place in him. The result will, roughly speaking, be the same; only a particular concatenation of circumstances will reveal that one man always acts in a good way because his instinctual inclinations compel him to, and the other is good only in so far and for as long as such cultural behaviour is advantageous for his own selfish purposes. (Freud, 1915b, pp. 283–284)

In this passage, Freud again equated egoism and altruism with evil and good, respectively. Freud similarly equated egoism with evil in Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1916–1917), where he updated his discussion of the dream censorship and co-ordinated it with his moral theory.

The purposes against which the dream-censorship is directed must be described in the first instance from the point of view of that agency itself. If so, one can only say that they are invariably of a reprehensible nature, repulsive from the ethical, aesthetic and social point of view – matters of which one does not venture to think at all or thinks only with disgust. These wishes, which are censored and given a distorted expression in dreams, are first and foremost manifestations of an unbridled and ruthless egoism. The ego, freed from all ethical bonds, also finds itself at one with all the demands of sexual desire, even those which have long been condemned by our aesthetic upbringing and those which contradict all the requirements of moral restraint. (Freud, 1916–1917, p. 142)

In this passage, we see an early presentation of Freud’s structural hypothesis, that is, his tripartite model of the psyche. Instead of a binary opposition of the unconscious and the repressing, we have a triadic distinction of (1) the dream censorship, (2) the unconscious wishes and desire, and (3) the ego that allies itself with the latter.

Freud’s equation of egoism with evil reflected the values that he attributed to society and should by no means be treated as an indication of Freud’s own values. Another passage in Introductory Lectures reflected the amoral biologism that Freud had always espoused.

We have not only found that the material of the forgotten experiences of childhood is accessible to dreams, but we have also seen that the
mental life of children with all its characteristics, its egoism, its incestuous choice of love-objects, and so on, still persists in dreams – that is, in the unconscious, and that dreams carry us back every night to this infantile level. The fact is thus confirmed that what is unconscious in mental life is also what is infantile. The strange impression of there being so much evil in people begins to diminish. This frightful evil is simply the initial, primitive, infantile part of mental life, which we can find in actual operation in children, but which, in part, we overlook in them on account of their small size, and which in part we do not take seriously since we do not expect any high ethical standard from children. Since dreams regress to this level, they give the appearance of having brought to light the evil in us. (Freud, 1916–117, pp. 210–211, original italics)

In 1920, Freud reorganised his theory of drives. From 1911 onward, he had contrasted unconscious sexuality and conscious self-preservation. In 1920, he decided to count sexuality and self-preservation together as Eros, a drive to unity that serves life, and, as the opposing, inhibiting factor, he counterposed the death drive, which Wilhelm Stekel had named Thanatos. In the process, he abandoned all of his remarks from 1909 onward that had contrasted altruism with egoism. Egoism, formerly misnomered as evil, was now included within the good. What remained to be misnomered evil was aggression.

Freud’s small book, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921c), contributed to his moral theory in several ways. He re-examined the topic of social drives, making a simple but substantial error of circular reasoning that allowed him to achieve what he thought to be closure on the topic, so that he never again had occasion to pursue it. As Freud defined the problem, the unusual behaviour that people manifest in groups, crowds, and mobs might be considered manifestations of a social drive.

It is easy to regard the phenomena that appear under these special [group] conditions as being expressions of a special instinct that is not further reducible – the social instinct (“herd instinct”, “group mind”), which does not come to light in any other situations.

For his part, however, Freud was doubtful that the mere factor of numbers was “capable by itself of arousing in our mental life a new instinct that is otherwise not brought into play”. He consequently
proposed to investigate “two other possibilities: that the social instinct may not be a primitive one and insusceptible of dissection, and that it may be possible to discover the beginnings of its development in a narrower circle, such as that of the family” (Freud, 1921c, p. 70).

Freud argued that the phenomena of group, crowd, and mob behaviour do not require the postulation of drives other than Eros and the death drive. He credited Eros with the bonding of individuals in groups. “A group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world?” (Freud, 1921c, p. 92). At the same time, individuals in groups are bound by intense emotional ties in two different directions: towards each other, and towards the leadership of the group (p. 116). The leadership might consist of a person, but, in other cases, the leadership function was fulfilled by “an idea, an abstraction”, or even “a common tendency, a wish in which a number of people can have a share” (p. 100). In all events, the group members overvalue the leadership and treat it as an idealised love object (p. 116). Their common devotion to a single leadership elicits jealousy and envy, but these negative emotions undergo transformation into “social feeling” that consists of the group members’ identifications with each other (pp. 120–121). In this way, group bonding proceeded despite jealousy and envy. Freud updated his conceptualisation of social drives as compromises; the compromise, formerly between love and egoism, was now said to link Eros and aggression.

At the same time, Freud acknowledged that group processes bring about distinctive psychological reactions.

Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a group puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation. There are certain ideas and feelings which do not come into being, or do not transform themselves into acts except in the case of individuals forming a group. (Freud, 1921c, p. 73)

To account for the distinctive phenomena of group behaviour, Freud suggested that the identifications of group members with each
other are regressive processes. Instead of valuing each other as individuals, group members treat each other as mirrors of themselves. “Object-choice is turned back into identification” (1921c, p. 107). Freud conceptualised the process as a regression not only to developmentally earlier behaviour, but also to a circumstance “where the mechanisms of the unconscious are dominant” (p. 107). Freud’s theory of the intrinsic evil of the unconscious then came into play.

In a group the individual is brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The apparently new characteristics which he then displays are in fact the manifestation of this unconscious, in which all that is evil in the human mind is contained as a predisposition. We can find no difficulty in understanding the disappearance of conscience or of a sense of responsibility in these circumstances. (Freud, 1921c, p. 74)

The formulation dovetailed with Freud’s general moral theory, but it made nonsense of his line of research. In his earlier writings, social drives had been defined in a fashion that had included altruism and resulted in conscience. In Group Psychology, Freud instead discussed social drive as the group mentality that manifests in mobs. So defined, social drive was something unconscious that conscience ordinarily held in check. Social drives now had nothing whatever to do not only with altruism, but also with the mental agency that Freud (1914c) held responsible for conscience.

Freud also failed to realise that his disposal of the problem of social drives was completely nominalistic. His theorising had unwittingly been diverted from one problem to another. His impressive analysis of group psychology was beside the point of his previous discussions of social drives. The problem of social drives, ostensibly solved in Group Psychology, remained unsolved; and Freud treated it as unsolved in an encyclopedia article two years later, when he referred to social drives as compromises of Eros with resistances.

The social instincts belong to a class of instinctual impulses which need not be described as sublimated, though they are closely related to these. They have not abandoned their directly sexual aims, but they are held back by internal resistances from attaining them; they rest content with certain approximations to satisfaction and for that very reason lead to especially firm and permanent attachments between
human beings. To this class belong in particular the affectionate relations between parents and children, which were originally fully sexual, feelings of friendship, and the emotional ties in marriage which had their origin in sexual attraction. (Freud, 1923a, p. 258)

Freud here made no references to reaction formation and remarked only that social drives “need not be described as sublimated”. What, then, were they?

The limitations of his formulations notwithstanding, Freud’s reduction of social drives to mob psychology left him free, toward the end of Group Psychology, to consolidate his thinking about the ego ideal.

It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego, though never so relentlessly and so unjustifiably. On previous occasions we have been driven to the hypothesis that some such agency develops in our ego which may cut itself off from the rest of the ego and come into conflict with it. We have called it the “ego ideal”, and by way of functions we have ascribed to it self-observation, the moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression. We have said that it is the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego enjoyed self-sufficiency; 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, may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in the ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego. (Freud, 1921c, pp. 109–110)

In “On narcissism” (1914c), Freud had credited the ego ideal with three functions: self-observation, ideals, and conscience. In Group Psychology, the ego ideal had the additional functions of dream censorship and influencing repression. In both events, it had its origin in early childhood and was heir to primary narcissism in some unspecified manner.

To account for the suspension of morality in group psychology, Freud discussed the parallel circumstance when falling in love.

Contemporary with this “devotion” of the ego to the object . . . the functions allotted to the ego ideal entirely cease to operate. The criticism exercised by that agency is silent; everything that the object does
and asks for is right and blameless. Conscience has no application to anything that is done for the sake of the object; in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime. The whole situation can be completely summarized in a formula: The object has been put in the place of the ego ideal. (Freud, 1921c, p. 113, original italics)

People in a group all act as though they were in love with the group leader. They do so by putting the group leader in the place of their ego ideals, suspending criticism of him or her, and accepting the leader’s values uncritically as their own. This formulation brought Freud, for the first time, to an understanding of moral values that went beyond the opposition of selfishness and altruism. In considering the relations of group members with each other, Freud prioritised the value of equality.

Social justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well, or, what is the same thing, may not be able to ask for them. This demand for equality is the root of social conscience and the sense of duty. (Freud, 1921c, p. 120)

Reversing his claim in Totem and Taboo (1912–1913), where he had stressed that taboo and morality differed, Freud (1921c, p. 122) noted the parallels of his developed moral theory with his earlier account of taboo psychology.

In The Ego and the Id (1923b), where Freud introduced his superego concept, he also credited both the superego and the ego with unconscious extensions. The tripartite model had the advantage of accounting for circumstances in which conscience is unconscious. As long as Freud had attributed morality to consciousness, Freud had been confronted by the paradox of the ego repressing itself. Differentiating the superego from the ego removed the logical inconsistency.

The hysterical ego fends off a distressing perception with which the criticisms of its super-ego threaten it, in the same way in which it is in the habit of fending off an unendurable object-cathexis – by an act of repression. It is the ego, therefore, that is responsible for the sense of guilt remaining unconscious. We know that as a rule the ego carries out repressions in the service and at the behest of its super-ego; but this is a case in which it has turned the same weapon against its harsh taskmaster. (Freud, 1923b, pp. 51–52)
Repression often proceeds in the service of morality, but there are occasions when morality is repressed. These occasions prove that morality and repression are accomplished by separate psychical agencies, the superego and the ego, respectively. Because repression causes neurosis, Freud’s tripartite model of the psyche treated morality and neurosis as independent variables, as his binary model had been unable to do. Neurosis is a biological reaction and only sometimes a moral revulsion.

The superego concept of 1923 differed from the ego ideal concept of 1921 chiefly in two particulars. Freud had suggested that the ego ideal was heir to primary narcissism, which implied that it might originate as early as the toddler period. Freud instead dated the superego to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.

The broad general outcome of the sexual phase dominated by the Oedipus complex may, therefore, be taken to be the forming of a precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two [parental] 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. (Freud, 1923b, p. 34)

The two concepts differed secondly in the matter of complexity. The ego ideal was imagined to consist exclusively of positive goals, aspirations, and values. The superego had additionally a peculiar sort of negativity. Freud used the term “reaction-formation” to describe the negative feature, but the usage was loose and inexact.

The super-ego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: “You ought to be like this (like your father)”. It also comprises the prohibition: “You may not be like this (like your father) – that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative”. This double aspect of the ego ideal derives from the fact that the ego ideal had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is to that revolutionary event that it owes its existence. (Freud, 1923b, p. 34)

Defining reaction formation for technical purposes, Freud (1926d) suggested that the mechanism consists not merely of a reaction, but specifically of a denial that is coupled with a reversal or assertion of
its opposite. “The exaggerated degree and compulsive character of the affection . . . betray the fact that it is not the only one present but is continually on the alert to keep the opposite feeling under suppres-
sion” (p. 102). Weaning and toilet-training, for example, involve not only aversions for breast milk and bodily wastes, respectively, but emphatic desires for chewing food and cleanliness. The superego is not reducible, however, to a mechanism that consists of denial and reversal. Its prohibitions are oppositional but not necessarily opposite. In later discussions of superego formation, Freud (1927c, pp. 11–12, 1930a, pp. 125, 1933a, pp. 62, 109, 1939a, p. 117) wrote of the internal-
isation of the parental figures, without attempting to be more specific. The mechanism that he had in mind was not given a technical term until Sandor Ferenczi (1932, pp. 163–164) wrote of identification with the aggressor. Despite his falling out with Ferenczi, Freud (1940a, p. 205) wrote of identification in his final formulation.

Freud’s two references to the ego ideal, in the last sentence in the extract above, indicate that in 1923 he imagined that the ego ideal became the superego, acquiring additional contents, through its act of repressing the Oedipus complex.

Clearly the repression of the Oedipus complex was no easy task . . . The child . . . borrowed strength to do this, so to speak, from the father, and this loan was an extraordinary momentous act. The super-
ego retains the character of the father. (Freud, 1923b, p. 34)

Negative as well as positive, as the ego ideal was not, Freud’s superego concept accommodated the heart of Freud’s moral theory: “we have from the very beginning attributed the function of instigating repression to the moral and aesthetic trends in the ego” (Freud, 1923b, p. 34). The superego concept also tidily accounted for conscience. “The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt” (p. 37). The superego concept additionally had room for Freud’s findings in Group Psychology. “Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal” (p. 37).

In “A short account of psycho-analysis” (1924f), Freud affirmed his view that neurosis proceeds on aesthetic and moral criteria. His formulation for a popular audience made no reference to his superego concept.
Repression invariably proceeded from the sick person’s conscious personality (his ego) and took its stand on aesthetic and ethical motives; the impulses that were subjected to repression were those of selfishness and cruelty, which can be summed up in general as evil, but above all sexual wishful impulses, often of the crudest and most forbidden kind. Thus the symptoms were a substitute for forbidden satisfactions and the illness seemed to correspond to an incomplete subjugation of the immoral side of human beings. (1924f, p. 197)

“The economic problem of masochism” (1924c) was a clinical paper that touched only briefly on moral theory. In listing the influences that are internalised in the superego, Freud complained,

The last figure in the series that began with the parents is the dark power of Destiny which only the fewest of us are able to look upon as impersonal ... all who transfer the guidance of the world to Providence, to God, or to God and Nature, arouse a suspicion that they still look upon these ultimate and remotest powers as a parental couple, in a mythological sense, and believe themselves linked to them by libidinal ties. (p. 168)

Freud expressed himself similarly in correspondence with Oscar Pfister. “Ethics are not based on an external world order but on the inescapable exigencies of human cohabitation” (Meng & Freud, 1963, p. 129).

In criticising efforts to link morality to theology, Freud neglected to remark that people who perceive a moral order to the world are reacting to something quite real, but are erring in overestimating its extent. The superego within each individual has assuredly a collective effect in human affairs. People do engage in unconscious self-punishment that produces something very much like a moral social order. It is not a world order that is accomplished through divine intervention in human affairs, but a psychosocial process that impacts, individually and corporately, on humanity. Its governance by conscious and unconscious psychological principles is not always in keeping with the perfect governance that moralists and religionists would wish. It is not, however, an illusion, but a reality that continues to await appropriate scientific investigation.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923b) maintained, as he had since 1900, that the ego “exercises the censorship of dreams” (p. 17). Later
in the same year, however, and for the rest of his life, Freud (1923f, p. 262, 1933a, pp. 27–28) reallocated the dream censorship to the superego. Freud took the occasion to explain that he had been drawn to the puzzle of the dream censorship by the immorality of dreams, which had troubled him since he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

I started out from the strange, confused and senseless character of so many dreams, and hit upon the notion that dreams were bound to become like that because something was struggling for expression in them which was opposed by a resistance from other mental forces. In dreams hidden impulses were stirring which stood in contradiction to what might be called the dreamer’s official ethical and aesthetic creed; the dreamer was thus ashamed of these impulses, turned away from them and refused to acknowledge them in day-time, and if during the night he could not withhold expression of some kind from them, he submitted them to a “dream-distortion” which made the content of the dream appear confused and senseless. (Freud, 1923f, pp. 261–262)

Freud’s failure to revise his theories in the light of his superego concept as extensively as he might have done (Arlow & Brenner, 1964) will account for his effort to revalorise the term *reaction formation* at the cost of reducing the superego to the status of a defence mechanism: “conscience is a reaction-formation against the evil that is perceived in the id” (Freud, 1925i, p. 134). Not only was evil not truly evil, but good was emphatically not good.

“Morality being restriction of the instincts” (Freud, 1925e, p. 219), the unattainability of the social values caused even the best of people to be hypocrites.

On the whole, however, he is obliged to live psychologically beyond his means, while the unsatisfied claims of his instincts make him feel the demands of civilization as a constant pressure upon him. Thus society maintains a condition of *cultural hypocrisy* which is bound to be accompanied by a sense of insecurity and a necessity for guarding what is an undeniably precarious situation by forbidding criticism and discussion. This line of thought holds good for all the instinctual impulses, including, therefore, the egoistic ones. The question whether it applies to all possible forms of civilization, and not merely to those which have evolved hitherto, cannot be discussed here. (Freud, 1925e, p. 219)
In “The question of lay analysis”, Freud (1926e) restated his theory that the failure to conform to society’s moral requirements is the cause of neurosis. Society’s unreasonable demands make people crazy.

Mental health very much depends on the super-ego’s being normally developed – that is, on its having become sufficiently impersonal. And that is precisely what it is not in neurotics, whose Oedipus complex has not passed through the correct process of transformation. Their super-ego still confronts their ego as a strict father confronts a child; and their morality operates in a primitive fashion in that the ego gets itself punished by the super-ego. Illness is employed as an instrument for this “self-punishment”, and neurotics have to behave as though they were governed by a sense of guilt which, in order to be satisfied, needs to be punished by illness. (Freud, 1926e, p. 223)

Otto Fenichel (1928, p. 47) concluded: “Freud’s doctrine of repression virtually implied that a sort of guilt-feeling acted as a criterion for the decisions of the repressing faculty”.

The Future of an Illusion (1927c) was the first of three book-length applications of superego theory to cultural topics. Reference to reaction formation disappears in favour of the formula: “external coercion gradually becomes internalized; for a special mental agency, man’s super-ego, takes it over and include it among its commandments” (p. 11). Freud again emphasised that conformance to moral obligations generally consists of pragmatic compromises with society and is less commonly indicative of internalised moral convictions.

We observe with surprise and concern that a majority of people obey the cultural prohibitions on these points only under the pressure of external coercion—that is, only where that coercion can make itself effective and so long as it is to be feared. This is also true of what are known as the moral demands of civilization, which likewise apply to everyone. Most of one’s experiences of man’s moral untrustworthiness fall into this category. There are countless civilized people who would shrink from murder or incest but who do not deny themselves the satisfaction of their avarice, their aggressive urges or their sexual lusts, and who do not hesitate to injure other people by lies, fraud and calumny, so long as they can remain unpunished for it; and this, no doubt, has always been so through many ages of civilization. (Freud, 1927c, p. 11)
It might be useful to clarify Freud's observations by speaking of ego morality (Pattison, 1968) and contrasting it with superego morality. A moral idea may be internalised in a realistic or pragmatic way in the ego, but in an idealistic way in the superego. Psychopaths lack superego morality, but they are not legally insane because their ego morality is unimpaired.

In a study of religion, *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927c) took exception to the extension of moral laws beyond human society through their ascription to God and the universe.

The same moral laws which our civilizations have set up govern the whole universe as well, except that they are maintained by a supreme court of justice with incomparably more power and consistency. In the end all good is rewarded and all evil punished, if not actually in this form of life then in the later existences that begin after death. (Freud, 1927c, p. 19)

Freud dismissed the notion as an illusion.

It would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and the after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. (Freud, 1927c, p. 33)

A lecture by Wilhelm Reich, claiming that a Socialist restructuring of society could remove the external sources of neurosis, provoked Freud to compose *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930a). Freud claimed that neither pathogenic conflicts nor neurosis could be avoided.

Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as “right” in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as “brute force”. This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions. (Freud, 1930a, p. 95)
To these several sentences, which restated Freud’s position of 1908, he added another that strikes me as absurdly naive: “The first requisite of civilization, therefore, is that of justice—that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of an individual” (Freud, 1930a, p. 95). Freud’s fantasy of justice is, assuredly, a fiction that democracies promote, and that no society in human history has ever achieved. Justice may be a *desideratum*, but it is neither a necessity nor a historical achievement. Cultures constrain individuals within their social organisations whether they are just or tyrannical. The constraints may be unequal, but they exist. All that is certain are the constraints. “Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security” (Freud, 1930a, p. 115).

Rejecting the idea that morality has its basis in “an original, as it were natural, capacity to distinguish good from bad”, Freud insisted that morality is acquired through external coercion.

What is bad is often not at all what is injurious or dangerous to the ego; on the contrary, it may be something which is desirable and enjoyable to the ego. Here, therefore, there is an extraneous influence at work, and it is this that decides what is to be called good or bad. Since a person’s own feelings would not have led him along this path, he must have had a motive for submitting to this extraneous influence. Such a motive is easily discovered in his helplessness and his dependence on other people, and it can best be designated as fear of loss of love. If he loses the love of another person upon whom he is dependent, he also ceases to be protected from a variety of dangers . . . At the beginning, therefore, what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with loss of love . . .

In small children it can never be anything else, but in many adults, too, it has only changed to the extent that the place of the father or the two parents is taken by the larger human community. Consequently, such people habitually allow themselves to do any bad thing which promises them enjoyment, so long as they are sure that the authority will not know anything about it or cannot blame them for it; they are afraid only of being found out. (Freud, 1930a, pp. 124–25)

The internalisation of external moral authority within the psyche, through the establishment of the superego, completed Freud’s moral theory.
A great change takes place only when the authority is internalized through the establishment of a super-ego... At this point, too, the fear of being found out comes to an end; the distinction, moreover, between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from the super-ego, not even thoughts. It is true that the seriousness of the situation from a real point of view has passed away, for the new authority, the super-ego, has no motive that we know of for ill-treating the ego, with which it is intimately bound up; but genetic influence, which leads to the survival of what is past and has been surmounted, makes itself felt in the fact that fundamentally things remain as they were in the beginning. 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. (Freud, 1930a, p. 125)

In Freud’s view, an irrational burden of guilt was an inevitable consequence of the acquisition of the superego.

Originally, renunciation of instinct was the result of fear of an external authority: one renounced one’s satisfactions in order not to lose its love. If one has carried out this renunciation, one is, as it were, quits with the authority and no sense of guilt should remain. But with fear of the super-ego the case is different. Here, instinctual renunciation is not enough, for the wish persists and cannot be concealed from the super-ego. Thus, in spite of the renunciation that has been made, a sense of guilt comes about. (Freud, 1930a, p. 127)

The acquisition of a superego replaces a realistic fear of punishment that is contingent on objectionable deeds becoming known, with an imaginary fear of punishment that is active whether or not deeds become known.

In *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (1933a), Freud reverted to a clinical perspective on the superego. Continuing to treat morality and neurosis as independent variables, Freud (1933a, p. 18) allowed that the superego can motivate the ego’s work of repression, but cannot enforce it. By the same token, he replaced civilisation with its clinical representatives, the child’s parents, in restating his definition of evil.

At the beginning, therefore, what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with loss of love. For fear of that loss, one must avoid it.
This, too, is the reason why it makes little difference whether one has already done the bad thing or only intends to do it. In either case the danger only sets in if and when the authority discovers it, and in either case the authority would behave in the same way. (Freud, 1933a, p. 124)

After explaining that the superego internalises the danger of the loss of parental love, Freud disparaged morality through the remark, “This realistic anxiety is the precursor of the later moral anxiety” (Freud, 1933a, p. 62). Later in the same account of superego theory, Freud noted the non-existence of morality in the id: “The id of course knows no judgements of value: no good and evil, no morality” (p. 74). Consistent with these emphases of biological amorality, Freud drew attention yet again to religion’s extension of morality into a world order.

The child is brought up to a knowledge of his social duties by a system of loving rewards and punishments, he is taught that his security in life depends on his parents (and afterwards other people) loving him and on their being able to believe that he loves them. All these relations are afterwards introduced by men unaltered into their religion. Their parents’ prohibitions and demands persist within them as a moral conscience. With the help of the same system of rewards and punishments, God rules the world of man. The amount of protection and happy satisfaction assigned to an individual depends on his fulfilment of the ethical demands; his love of God and his consciousness of being loved by God are the foundations of the security with which he is armed against the dangers of the external world and of his human environment. (Freud, 1933a, p. 164)

An admirer of ethics and an opponent of religion, Freud urged that ethics not be made contingent on belief in God. “The ethical demands on which religion seeks to lay stress need, rather, to be given another basis; for they are indispensable to human society and it is dangerous to link obedience to them with religious faith” (Freud, 1933a, p. 168). Freud made the same point with greater eloquence in Moses and Monotheism (1939a).

Going back to ethics, we may say in conclusion that a part of its precepts are justified rationally by the necessity for delimiting the rights of society as against the individual, the rights of the individual
as against society and those of individuals as against one another. But what seems to us so grandiose above ethics, so mysterious and, in a mystical fashion, so self-evident, owes these characteristics to its connection with religion, its origin from the will of the father. (Freud, 1939a, p. 122).

The best part of ethics is rational. The portion that is irrational and mysterious arises through the over-extension of ethics into the domain of religion.

For over four decades, Freud contented himself with asserting that what was popularly regarded as morality or ethics was to be understood psychoanalytically as something very different, a series of deprivations that civilisation or, more precisely, the social group requires of the individual. He initially claimed that the deprivations were reaction formations that required behaviour that was precisely opposite to the unconscious wishes of the individual. Freud did not endorse the conclusion that neurosis is a moral reaction that represses the private pleasures of the individual. When he separated the ego and the superego, assigning repression to the ego but morality to the superego, neurosis remained tied to repression while morality became an independent variable. The concept of identification, by which parental imagos are internalised in the superego, made it superfluous to refer any longer to reaction formation.

Something was always missing, however, from Freud’s moral theory. When Freud argued in a parallel manner about religion, saying that what was popularly regarded as religion was to be understood psychoanalytically as nothing of the kind, he behaved in a consistent manner and presented himself to the world as an atheist. Freud’s theory of morality differed, however, in that it did not lead him to become an amoralist. He gave us a theory about what morality was not, but he did not tell us what morality was, as would have been necessary to explain why he continued to behave ethically.

Freud’s moral theory does not explain why anyone is ever moral. Why does our species conceptualise prosocial behaviour in moral categories? Neither Freud nor any subsequent psychoanalyst has ever proposed a coherent theory concerning the raison d’être of morality in human psychology. Why do we moralise our intentions and actions? Why are we not amoral? Freud nowhere addressed the quality of the moral that makes a moral decision distinctly moral as distinct from
obedient or aesthetic or sacred, or some other category of value. Freud’s theory of a contest of the private pleasure with the social pleasure validates the kind of amoral concern that Friedrich Nietzsche and Alfred Adler had for power dynamics, supermen, inferiority complexes, and the like. Freud’s moral theory is not an account, after all, of the private good in conflict with the social good, but only of pleasure with pleasure. Freud’s theory does not need to use terms like good or evil, because the subjective experiences of competition pertain to power dynamics and not to ethical qualities. Indeed, Freud’s theory of civilisation’s repression of the individual ought not to use terms like good and evil, because moral categories do not enter into his thinking. Even his passing references to “social justice” and “equality” (Freud, 1921c, p. 120), explained by him in terms of jealousy, have nothing discretely moral about them. At a minimum, Freud’s theory needs, for its completion, a piece of theory that would account for the transformation of power dynamics into moral issues, through the addition of the quality of the moral to the power conflicts that he described. Alternatively, Freud’s theory was more extensively wrong and cannot be salvaged through so minimal a change.

**Freud and Putnam on psychoanalysis and ethics**

Freud’s correspondence with the American neurologist James Jackson Putnam frequently discussed the relation of psychoanalysis and ethics. In late March, 1911, Putnam wrote to Freud, “I consider that no patient is really cured unless he becomes better and broader morally, and, conversely, I believe that a moral regeneration helps towards a removal of the symptoms” (Hale, 1971, p. 118). Putnam’s ambition not merely to make people better, but to make people better people, exceeded Freud’s ambitions for psychoanalysis. Putnam suggested that psychoanalysis needed to embrace voluntarism in order to accomplish the task. “We already utilize the will but we do this blindly and grudgingly and without quite believing in its existence. We ought to do it consciously and skilfully” (p. 118). Freud responded on 14 May 1911, with a precise delimitation of the scope of psychoanalysis.

You say that ΨA [psychoanalytic] experience shows you that whenever you want your patients to achieve complete recovery, you must
direct them toward sublimation, but that ΨA theory does not show you why you must do so. Here I must disagree. ΨA theory really does cover this. It teaches that a drive cannot be sublimated as long as it is repressed and that this is equally true for every component of a drive. Therefore, one must remove the repression by overcoming the resistances before achieving partial or complete sublimation. This is the goal of ΨA therapy and the way in which it serves every form of higher development.

If we are not satisfied with saying, “Be moral and philosophical,” it is because that is too cheap and has been said too often without being of any help. Our art consists in making it possible for people to be moral and to deal with their wishes philosophically. Sublimation, that is striving toward higher goals, is of course one of the best means of overcoming the urgency of our drives. But one can consider doing this only after ΨA work has lifted the repressions.

There are two reasons why we have said so little about sublimation. First, because it is irrelevant, and second because so many of the patients we really want to help are incapable of it. For the most part, these patients have inferior endowments and disproportionately strong drives. They would like to be better than they can be, yet this convulsive desire benefits neither themselves nor society. It is therefore more humane to establish this principle: “Be as moral as you can honestly be and do not strive for an ethical perfection for which you are not destined.” Whoever is capable of sublimation will turn to it inevitably as soon as he is free of his neurosis. Those who are not capable of this at least will become more natural and more honest . . .

We still know too little about the human soul. Only when this knowledge is greater, will we learn what is practicable in the field of ethics, and what we can do in the way of education without doing harm. (Hale, 1971, pp. 121–122)

Two years later, on 13 November 1913, Freud confided: “That ΨA has not made the analysts themselves better, nobler or of stronger character remains a disappointment for me. Perhaps I was wrong to expect it” (Hale, 1971, pp. 163–164). On 30 March 1914, Freud added,

I quite agree with you that ΨA treatment should find a place among the methods whose aim is to bring about the highest ethical and intellectual development of the individual. Our difference is of a purely practical nature. It is confined to the fact that I do not wish to entrust this further development to the psychoanalyst. (p. 170)
Freud attributed the problem to resistance in analysts, who themselves are far removed from the ideal which you demand of them. As soon as they are entrusted with the task of leading the patient toward sublimation, they hasten away from the arduous tasks of ΨA as quickly as they can so that they can take up the much more comfortable and satisfactory duties of the teacher and the paragon of virtue. (p. 171)

Freud also acknowledged the shortcomings of psychoanalysis in his time.

ΨA as a science itself is not even half complete; not to speak of the fact that it does not yet penetrate the individual deeply enough. 'The great ethical element in ΨA work is truth and again truth and this should suffice for most people. Courage and truth are what they are mostly deficient'. (p. 171)

A year later, on 19 May 1915, Putnam suggested that the ethical failings of analysts, who had themselves undergone analysis, was due to a neglect of ideals in their training analyses.

If one inquires . . . why the analysis did not succeed in eradicating all the infantile tendencies which stood between them and the best sublimation of which they were capable, a part of the answer must be, I think, that those by whom the analysis was conducted had not themselves realized what the final goal was which these infantile fixations had prevented them (their temporary patients) from reaching. (Hale, 1971, p. 186)

Freud responded on 8 July 1915 that he did not himself believe in the external, objective reality of ideals of perfection. Neither did he believe that the subjective, psychic reality of ideals required the sort of philosophical assumptions that Putnam was prepared to make. Freud asserted,

Privately, I'm convinced that if one had the means to study the sublimations of instinct as thoroughly as their repressions, one would come upon quite natural psychological explanations, and you could do without your benevolent assumption. (p. 190)
Freud gave public airing to his dialogue with Putnam in a preface that he wrote for a posthumous collection of Putnam’s (1921) psychoanalytic writings. Freud there took the occasion to explain where and why he had drawn the line between psychoanalysis and spirituality.

It is not to be wondered at that a mind with such pre-eminently ethical and philosophical tendencies as Putnam’s should have desired, after he had plunged deep into psycho-analysis, to establish the closest relation between it and the aims which lay nearest his heart. But his enthusiasm, so admirable in a man of his advanced age, did not succeed in carrying others along with him. Younger people remained cooler. It was especially Ferenczi who expressed the opposite view. The decisive reason for the rejection of Putnam’s proposals was the doubt as to which of the countless philosophical systems should be accepted, since they all seemed to rest on an equally insecure basis, and since everything had up till then been sacrificed for the sake of the relative certainty of the results of psycho-analysis. It seemed more prudent to wait, and to discover whether a particular attitude towards life might be forced upon us with all the weight of necessity by analytical investigation itself. (Putnam, 1921, p. iv)

Freud against himself

Beginning with Freud’s detailed re-examination of the foundations of his thinking, in Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1916–1917), he began to remark on aspects of morality that were inconsistent with his moral theory. Freud was not always aware that his observations were inconsistent with his theory, and he regularly attempted to minimise their importance. The observations can, nevertheless, be treated as evidence in support of a different moral theory.

In Introductory Lectures, in a passage that denies metaphysical reality to evil, Freud remarked, for example, that he was in “close approximation to some well-known Socratic doctrines, according to which even vices are based on ignorance” (Freud, 1916–1917, p. 280). He also embraced the obverse, the implicit association of knowledge with virtue, when he claimed that psychoanalytic treatment had moral benefits.

We tell ourselves that anyone who has succeeded in educating himself to truth about himself is permanently defended against the danger of
immorality, even though his standard of morality may differ in some respect from that which is customary in society. (Freud, 1916–1917, p. 434)

Freud (1913b, p. 330, 1940a, p. 175) elsewhere called psychoanalysis an “after-education” of patients that compensates for the inadequacy of the educations they had received earlier in life. Here, he explained that a successful psychoanalysis provides a defence against immorality. In making these remarks, Freud failed to appreciate that Socratic thought, and the philosophic tradition that descended from him, was profoundly ethical, regarded good and evil as realities, and did not cite the causes of evil as reason to deny evil’s reality. By placing psychoanalysis in the Socratic tradition—an idea earliest proposed, to my knowledge, by Otto Rank at a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1906—Freud contradicted the amoral premise of his moral theory.

Freud’s anomalous statements increased in frequency after he had attained his superego concept. In “The economic problem of masochism”, Freud (1924c) found occasion to remark,

One might expect that if a man knows that he is in the habit of avoiding the commission of acts of aggression that are undesirable from a cultural standpoint he will for that reason have a good conscience and will watch over his ego less suspiciously. The situation is usually presented as though ethical requirements were the primary thing and the renunciation of instinct followed from them. This leaves the origin of the ethical sense unexplained. Actually, it seems to be the other way about. The first instinctual renunciation is enforced by external powers, and it is only this which creates the ethical sense, which expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of instinct. (p. 170)

Perhaps because Freud was here struggling with the problem of why social coercion is ever disguised as morality, he allowed himself to formulate an idea that was utterly inconsistent with his oft-repeated claims that morality is forced on people through the coercion of society. Here, he amended his claim that instinctual renunciation is forced on people through the coercion of society. Because the social rewards of instinctual renunciation are pleasurable, the pleasure-seeking behaviour is internalised, but morality is not. Freud did not carry his
thought through to its conclusion, that because morality must then be a misnomer or rationalisation for instinctual renunciation, he had again left “the origin of the ethical sense unexplained”. The lapse in Freud’s logicality may be noted. He had allowed himself to recognise that an internal process, pre-existing the superego, takes advantage of the social coercion to which he had been attributing morality, but he could not bring himself to construct an adequate formulation of the idea.

In “Some additional notes on dream-interpretation as a whole” (Freud, 1925i), he again displayed a lapse in logic when addressing moral theory. He stated that he began his reasoning about morality with “the distressing fact that the unbridled content of dreams is so often at odds with the moral sense of the dreamer” (p. 131). Although the manifest content was sometimes an immoral façade (p. 131), it generally was not.

Others of them – and, it must be admitted, the majority – really mean what they say and have undergone no distortion from the censorship. They are an expression of immoral, incestuous and perverse impulses or of murderous and sadistic lusts. The dreamer reacts to many of these dreams by waking up in a fright, in which case the situation is no longer obscure to us. The censorship has neglected its task, this has been noticed too late, and the generation of anxiety is a substitute for the distortion that has been omitted. In still other instances of such dreams, even that expression of affect is absent. The objectionable matter is carried along by the height of the sexual excitement that has been reached during sleep, or it is viewed with the same tolerance with which even a waking person can regard a fit of rage, an angry mood or the indulgence in cruel phantasies. (Freud, 1925i, p. 132)

Further data made the moral complexity of dreams still more puzzling. Through the interpretations of dreams, Freud found that

the majority of dreams – innocent dreams, dreams without affect and anxiety-dreams – are revealed, when the distortions of the censorship have been undone, as the fulfilments of immoral – egoistic, sadistic, perverse or incestuous – wishful impulses” (p. 132). These several realisations led Freud to the concept of the dream censorship, but he never satisfactorily explained the variations in the activities of the dream censorship. He recognised the extraordinary strength of the dream censorship.
The dream-censorship can not only express itself in distortions and the generation of anxiety, but can go so far as to blot out the immoral subject-matter completely and replace it by something else that serves as an atonement, though it allows one to see what lies behind. (1925i, pp. 132–133)

His idea that the dream censorship sometimes fails in strength, or in attentiveness, plainly did not satisfy him. Otherwise, he would not have kept puzzling over the criteria that govern the dream censorship and led him to the concept of the superego. The dream censorship’s apparent lapses must always be credited with a purpose, but the purpose eluded Freud’s understanding. Neither did he provide meaningful insight into the fact that some manifestly immoral dreams are disturbing, whereas others are not.

In this instance, I suggest, Freud’s moral theory was inconsistent with a correct understanding of his data. The solution to Freud’s conundrum is to be found in Freud’s (1927) article “On humour”, in which he credited the superego with the capacity for ironic self-deprecation. In my own clinical experience, manifestly immoral dreams are either disturbing, and, consequently, consistent with the dreamer’s waking ethics, or they are not disturbing, either because the dreamer’s conscious values are similarly immoral or else—and this is the alternative that Freud missed—their immorality is symbolic. When immorality is manifest but not latent, the unconscious is moral in a manner that Freud refused to acknowledge. Freud’s hermeneutic assumption that every dream is a wish fulfilment is appropriate to the id’s contributions to dreams “from below”, but often proves overly simple when dealing with the superego’s contributions to dreams “from above”. Immoral dreams whose immorality is only symbolic may be constructed by the superego to evade the ego’s repression barrier by recourse to irony or satire. The dreams seem to comply with the ego’s requirement that they avoid traumatic materials, but the dreamwork is subversive. An emotionally disturbing but moral sexual circumstance, for example, can be symbolised, through the displacement of the idea of emotional disturbance, as flagrant promiscuity that ought to be disturbing, but because the latent content is not equally immoral, the dream does not trouble sleep.

In the same short article on dream interpretation, Freud (1925i) also mentioned a genuine conundrum in his moral theory: the acuteness of conscience in highly moral people.
It is a remarkable fact that the more moral he is the more sensitive is his “conscience”. It is just as though we could say that the healthier a man is, the more liable he is to contagions and to the effects of injuries. This is no doubt because conscience itself is a reaction-formation against the evil that is perceived in the id. The more strongly the latter is suppressed, the more active is the conscience. (Freud, 1925i, p. 134)

Once again, the apparent problem is an artefact of Freud’s theory. Morality is like every other refined taste. Practice makes perfect. Creative personalities in every field of the arts become more demanding as they become more experienced, capable, and expert. The lingering effect of Freud’s early formulation of morality as a reaction formation kept him from fully exploring his later conceptualisation of morality as a sublimation. He repeatedly claimed that sublimation conforms to a person’s ethics when, I suggest, the evidence tends to suggest the reverse relationship. Sublimation is the general phenomenon, and ethics is a notable subcategory.

The idea that morality is a subcategory of sublimation has implications for studies of moral development. Freud did not address the topic of moral development. He imagined a child who was pre-moral internalising a superego and, with it, a conscience, upon the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. Morality was an all-or-nothing affair. A person had either embraced society’s moral demands, or had not. The considerable developmental literature by Piaget (1965), Kohlberg (1963, 1964, 1976, 1986), Duska and Whelan (1975), and many others (Bloom, 2013; Gibbs, 2010; Gilligan, 1982; Killen & Smetana, 2014), tracing the shifts and nuances of a child’s growth in morality, all tends to a very different effect than Freud’s simplistic notion of the internalisation of external coercion, all at once, at the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.

Thinking in terms of a child’s growth in the capacity to internalise external coercion is not as productive, I suggest, as thinking in terms of a person’s growth in the capacity to sublimate. Consider, for example, Freud’s discussion of the love commandment in Civilization and its Discontents (1930a). Once again, Freud was led into self-contradictions by the constraints of his moral theory.

A small minority are enabled by their constitution to find happiness, in spite of everything, along the path of love. But far-reaching mental changes in the function of love are necessary before this can happen.
These people make themselves independent of their object’s acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved on to loving; they protect themselves against the loss of the object by directing their love, not to single objects but to all men alike; and they avoid the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual aims and transforming the instinct into an impulse with an inhibited aim. What they bring about in themselves in this way is a state of evenly suspended, steadfast, affectionate feeling, which has little external resemblance any more to the stormy agitations of genital love, from which it is nevertheless derived. Perhaps St. Francis of Assisi went furthest in thus exploiting love for benefit of an inner feeling of happiness. Moreover, what we have recognized as one of the techniques for fulfilling the pleasure principle has often been brought into connection with religion; this connection may lie in the remote regions where the distinction between the ego and objects or between objects themselves is neglected. According to one ethical view, whose deeper motivation will become clear to us presently, this readiness for a universal love of mankind and the world represents the highest standpoint which man can reach. Even at this early stage of the discussion I should like to bring forward my two main objections to this view. A love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value, by doing an injustice to its object; and secondly, not all men are worthy of love. (Freud, 1930a, pp. 101–102)

Wallwork (1982) noted that Freud drew on normative ethical assumptions, concerning justice and worth, in criticising the love commandment. Freud argued not from amorality, but from moral values that he asserted as his own. I would add that the final clause in this passage, “not all men are worthy of love”, was not only a value judgement that pretended normalcy or objectivity; the particular value attested to a limitation of Freud’s character. In making love contingent on worth, the statement presupposes that love is intrinsically conditional, and that the attainment of unconditional love, whether as a parent or as a mystic, is neither desirable nor realistic. Freud’s position took for granted two unearned assumptions. If altruism is a case of reaction formation, extreme altruism would conceal an equally extreme, unconscious hatred; but if altruism is a case of sublimation, extreme love is simply a maximal sublimation, a genuine and authentic maximisation of human love. In the latter event, all that Freud was saying was that he, personally, was incapable of unconditional love. Freud’s second unearned assumption was a matter that his
biographers have, almost without exception, chosen not to mention. Sandor Ferenczi’s *Clinical Diary* (1988) contains the discretely phrased passing remark: “... my analyst (by his own admission of a narcissistic nature)” (p. 62). Given that Freud admitted to Ferenczi his self-diagnosis as a narcissist, shall we not treat his rejection of the love commandment as symptomatic behaviour?

Erich Fromm (1939, 1956) rightly commented that Freud misunderstood the biblical commandment. For Freud, love was a zero-sum game. Use some libido here, and you have less libido left to use elsewhere. But, in reality, love comes with loving. It is a win–win circumstance. In whatever measure one loves oneself, one is able to love others, and in whatever measure one despises others, one comes to despise oneself.

Freud’s moral theory and his various formulations that were inconsistent with it differed in their basic philosophical assumptions. According to Freud’s moral theory, good and evil are misnomers, fictions, or illusions, for which reason the psychology of good and evil consists of the psychological manufacture and projection of moral illusions. Freud’s inconsistent remarks instead express a moral realism. Good and evil are real quiddities, and the psychology of good and evil consists of the psychological capacities to recognise the objectively existing reality of good and evil. To be self-consistent, a psychological theory of good and evil must commit one way or the other, either to illusion or to reality. Freud’s theory was not self-consistent, however. He espoused an amoral theory but an ethical professional life, and moral realism intruded repeatedly in his theoretic statements, such as the return of the repressed.

*Civilization and its Discontents* (1930a), a book-length treatment of his moral theory, contains a great many lapses into moral realism. Wallwork (2005, p. 287) noted, for example, that Freud (1930a, p. 76) regarded happiness as the goal of human life, approximating Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia*, “bliss, felicity, happiness”. Wallwork rightly appreciated that “[i]n identifying ‘happiness’ as the *summum bonum*, Freud is in agreement with the mainstream of the Western moral tradition from Aristotle through Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and J. S. Mill”.

In a brief passage that is too easily overlooked, Freud quietly reversed his earlier views that located the interests of civilisation and social organisation in consciousness, and conceptualised unconscious
sexuality as socially defined, ostensible evil. Freud implicitly jettisoned these constructs when he allowed Eros, the unconscious drive to make two into one, responsible for all social processes of group bonding.

Civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has to happen, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this. These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to one another. Necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together. (Freud, 1930a, p. 122; see also pp. 139–141)

These few sentences radically altered Freud’s moral theory. His concept of the unconscious had grown beyond blind pleasure seeking to include the love that binds people together into communities. Far from the “civilized morality” that opposed the unconscious, the morality of Eros constituted an inborn, unconscious foundation for all conscious moralities. In this passage, Freud sided with civilisation and not, as elsewhere, with the individual. At the same time, Freud did not work through this insight by revising the remainder of his moral theory in its light. He announced his new formulation and then proceeded, as far as possible, to carry on his habitual manner.

The possibility of a new paradigm—or perhaps a remembrance of Putnam’s views—appeared briefly in a passage that credited morality with a psychotherapeutic effect.

People have at all times set the greatest value on ethics, as though they expected that it in particular would produce especially important results. And it does in fact deal with the subject which can easily be recognized as the sorest spot in every civilization. Ethics is thus to be regarded as a therapeutic attempt—as an endeavour to achieve, by means of a command of the super-ego, something which has so far not been achieved by means of any other cultural activities. (Freud, 1930a, p. 142)

Freud’s literary trope, his extension of the term psychotherapy to the practice and pedagogy of ethics, entertained the fantasy of a clinical practice that made people better people. Freud briefly allowed himself to entertain the fantasy. He saw aggression as “the greatest hindrance
to civilization” and consequently reverted to the topic of “what is probably the most recent of the cultural commands of the super-ego, the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself” (p. 142). He had already rejected the love commandment as unrealistic, now he reconsidered it as a prophylactic against aggression.

The commandment, “Love thy neighbour as thyself”, is the strongest defence against human aggressiveness and an excellent example of the unpsychological proceedings of the cultural super-ego. The commandment is impossible to fulfil; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not get rid of the difficulty. (Freud, 1930a, p. 143)

At the same time, Freud dismissed entirely the possibility of developing a system of ethics on scientific criteria. “‘Natural’ ethics, as it is called, has nothing to offer ... except the narcissistic satisfaction of being able to think oneself better than others” (Freud, 1930a, p. 143).

The Oedipus complex and the biblical Decalogue

The Oedipus complex refers, at an empirical level, to the fact that most people throughout the world feel guilt and obligation towards their parents and are inhibited at the prospect of incest. In many cases, cultures have laws that require filial piety and/or prohibit incest, but most people everywhere have strong feelings to the same effect, without requiring the prompting of legal institutions. The further fact that a portion of the population feels precisely the contrary, so that some people practise incest and/or commit violence towards their parents, is contradictory at the manifest level. To psychoanalytic thinking, however, the contradiction exists only on the surface and indicates a need to postulate a latent or unconscious factor that is able to resolve the apparent discrepancy in a unifying theory. Freud’s theory derived its name from Sophocles’ play, Oedipus Rex, in which the legendary king of Thebes discovered that he had unwittingly murdered his biological father, Laius, and married his biological mother, Jocasta. Freud suggested that the play had its basis in the emotional lives of boys between the ages, approximately, of four and five and a half years.
At a very early age the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother’s breast... the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until [around age four] the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent... An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. (Freud, 1923b, pp. 31–32)

The corresponding complex in girls, which Carl Jung named after the classical character of Elektra, reverses the sexes, with heterosexual girls having sexual desire for their fathers, together with ambivalence towards their mothers, whom they regard as rivals. When the Oedipus and Elektra complexes are outgrown, approximately in the second half of the sixth year, precisely the opposite feelings come into play. Heterosexual boys develop a sexual aversion to their mothers, and guilt over their hostilities to their fathers, while girls become averse to their fathers, and guilty towards their mothers.

Freud conceptualised the transformation of incest and parricide, both formerly desirable, to become abhorrent as the third basic renunciation of childhood. Weaning involves the renunciation of breast-feeding; toilet training involves the renunciation of bodily wastes. The resolution of the Oedipus and Elektra complexes involves a renunciation of the parents as sexual objects, which continues the biologically driven process of socialising children. “The super-ego is the heir of the Oedipus complex and represents the ethical standards of mankind” (Freud, 1925d, p. 59). “In normal, or, it is better to say, in ideal cases, the Oedipus complex exists no longer, even in the unconscious; the super-ego has become its heir” (Freud, 1925j, p. 257; see also Freud, 1940a, p. 205). Having renounced sexual desire and jealousy within the nuclear family, children are free to apply the same sexual interests elsewhere.

Freud presented his ideas about the Oedipus and Elektra complexes in terms of natural, biologically driven child development. Weaning, toilet training, and the discouragement of incestuous and
parricidal fantasies are topics of children’s education, but both the topics and their timing are responsive to spontaneous, biologically driven maturation processes. To support his theory that the Oedipus complex was natural and biological, and not merely a cultural construct, Freud (1912–1913) speculated elaborately about a primal horde and primal crime in the evolution of our species. The anthropologist A. L. Kroeber (1920) assessed Freud’s narrative as a just-so story. Róheim (1934, pp. 177, 186), the first anthropologist who was also a clinical psychoanalyst, recognised that Freud’s theory was self-contradictory. For the brothers of the primal horde to have felt remorse for the primal crime of murdering their father, they must already have had a capacity for morality. The theory cannot then explain how morality first came into being.

In “Thoughts for the times on war and death” (1915b), Freud brought the abhorrence of parricide into connection with the biblical prohibition of murder, while drawing attention to the variety of cultural forms to which the prohibition might pertain.

What came into existence beside the dead body of the loved one was not only the doctrine of the soul, the belief in immortality and the powerful source of man’s sense of guilt, but also the earliest ethical commandments. The first and most important prohibition made by the awakening conscience was: “Thou shalt not kill”. It was required in relation to dead people who are loved, as a reaction against the satisfaction of the hatred hidden behind the grief for them; and it was gradually extended to strangers who were not loved, and finally even to enemies. (Freud, 1915b, p. 295)

Here, I suggest, is a further passage where Freud’s contradictory impulses struggled for dominance. It was casuistic for Freud to deny that moral values are inborn on the grounds that the values may be sublimated in different ways. For forty years, he insisted that morality is forced on individuals by their societies. Here, in a rare passage where he admitted that morality is not exclusively external, but has powerful internal foundations, he attempted to trivialise his embarrassing admission by remarking on cultural differences in the manifestation of the internal imperatives. Freud’s assumption that morality originates externally and is internalised coincided with ideas about reaction formations and an all-or-nothing approach to moral values. Both the Oedipus complex and the complexity and gradual accomplishment of
moral development oblige us, however, to be less dismissive than Freud of the inborn component of morality. And when we allow that morality is not a reaction formation but a sublimation, we must expect that single internal imperatives will sublimate variously.

What Freud did not say, what has always been implicit in psychoanalysis and yet has remained unsaid, is that the successful resolution of the Oedipus and Elektra complexes brings each child to the psychological nucleus not only of the prohibition of murder, but fully of five of the ten laws of Moses. Upon the waning of the Oedipus or Elektra complex, the child feels towards the parents what the biblical Decalogue prescribes as proper conduct in human society. The child now knows, as internalised emotional attitudes, the desires that the biblical author formulated in the following laws:

Honour your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12).
You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13)—your parent, or anyone else.
You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14)—when you are a parent.
You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15)—your parent’s spouse, or anyone or anything else.
You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour’s (Exodus 20:17)—your parent being, by definition, the closest among your neighbours.

These five laws of the Decalogue have an intuitive appeal, are felt to be self-evident as moral truths, because they sublimate healthy resolutions of the Oedipus and Elektra complexes. Psychologically healthy human beings, who have reached the age of resolving the Oedipus and Elektra complexes, around five and a half years, are moral by nature, and five laws of the Decalogue happen to articulate culturally congenial expressions of the moral standards that are natural for our species. The biblical laws apply to humanity as general moral principles, standards of conduct within the nuclear family that arise spontaneously in the course of healthy development. Where the biblical law goes beyond its biological foundations is in translating values applicable to the family into values applicable to all of humanity (Mahon, 1991). Other cultural formulations may instead apply the
moral imperatives to ingroups of divergent definition. Moral values everywhere pertain to the ingroup. Every child begins with an ingroup of two: the baby and the mother. Later in infancy, this ingroup enlarges to become the nuclear family. The ingroup becomes co-extensive with the larger community around age six, and might grow to embrace all humanity at puberty. Moral obligations may be restricted to members of one’s own clan, class, or culture, or, conversely, extended beyond the human species to selected further species, or all animal life, all life, or even all existence.

Concluding reflections

Freud’s moral theories were aimed, above all, at taking ethics out of the hands of theologians and philosophers and to claim the topic for medical science. He aimed also at eliminating appeals to metaphysics and the supernatural by providing secular accounts of the natural, biological character of morality. Freud advocated demanding professional ethics for psychoanalysts that included expectation of, and tolerance for, moral failings in patients. His moral theories were predicated on his clinical observations. Neurotics were not evil; they were infantile. Dreams are frequently immoral; they express wishes that people repress, among other reasons, out of guilt, shame, and disgust at their immorality. Not only does conventional sexual morality, Freud wrote in 1908, induce neurosis through the excessiveness of its demands; but, he added in 1930, civilised behaviour requires a suppression of self-seeking in deference to group cohesion. This suppression condemns civilised people to intrapsychic conflicts that could, and often do, reach the intensity of psychopathology.

Rejecting the inference that neurosis is reactive to an objectively existing morality, Freud emphasised that values differ from person to person. A discrete psychic agency, that Freud variously termed conscience (1914c), the ego ideal (1921c), and the superego (1923b), deploys subjectively variable ideals in its judgements of the ego. Freud initially proposed that values were attained through reaction formation, that is, through renunciations of infantile values that were subsequently repressed. Later on, he tended instead to attribute value formation to sublimations of instinct—a mechanism that he never articulated in detail. In the 1910s, Freud equated egoism and altruism
with evil and good, respectively, and he suggested that social drives blend sexuality with egoism. Egoism is infantile and not at all evil in any metaphysical sense. When Freud reorganised his drive theories in 1920, he allocated egoism to Eros and remaindered only aggression to be misnomered as evil.

Freud’s introduction of the structural hypothesis in 1923 meant that he no longer had to allocate morality to consciousness, or make consciousness responsible for repressing immorality to the unconscious. Morality was, instead, allocated to the superego, which produced both waking conscience and the unconscious dream censorship. The id and the ego might each be moral or immoral, depending on the issue in question. Freud argued that the superego acquires its standards of good and evil chiefly through identifications with the values of parents. The unconscious self-punishment that the superego dispenses similarly conforms to societal standards, as the latter are mediated by the parents. Because religion imagines God or the gods on the models of parents, religion fantasises a moral world order, but the belief is illusory. The superego might be moral, but the world is not.

Freud’s theories of the psychology of morality reflected the concerns of a clinician who addressed moral issues as they arose at intervals in the course of his analytic work. Morality was not a topic to which he devoted systematic study. As a result, his remarks on morality included several observations that were inconsistent with the major trends of his theorising. Freud claimed that psychoanalysis protected people against immorality, even though psychoanalytic standards of morality differed from the conventional. His close study of immorality in dreams led him into quandary, and he was also unable to account for the strict consciences that highly ethical people suffer. His account of the love commandment misconstrued the biblical text by interpolating a zero-sum game, and his late attribution of civilisation to Eros contradicted most of what he had been arguing for decades. If ethics are forced on human beings by our needs for social cohesion, Eros must be counted on the side of good, and not on that of evil. Freud’s claim that the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” has its unconscious source in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex similarly broke with the main trend of his theories on morality, by tracing virtue to the unconscious.

Freud’s anomalous remarks are to be preferred, I suggest, to the major trend of his moral theorising. Fully half of the biblical
Decalogue, and not the prohibition of murder alone, can be seen as sublimations of Oedipal values. Falsification of the major trend of Freud’s moral theories is readily available clinically. Any psychoanalysis that is pursued to the point of dissolving the Oedipus complex brings the patient to a moral transformation. The clinical attainment of the depressive position of Melanie Klein, or the capacity for concern of D. W. Winnicott, like Jung’s approach to the personal unconscious, or shadow, depends on the analytic removal of inhibitions that permit the internal sources of moral imperatives to resume their arrested development, accomplishing the sublimations that Freud, in correspondence with Putnam, claimed was beyond the reach of psychoanalysis. Moral transformation was, indeed, beyond the reach of the symptom analysis that Freud practised. However, it has not been beyond the reach of character analysis since the late 1920s.

References


Throughout its history, moral psychology has paid little attention to the subject of evil. None of the key theories in contemporary moral psychology places the concept of evil at the centre of its moral thinking or even discusses it in any significant way. This is perhaps attributable to a justified wariness of using terms whose provenance is theological.

Moral psychology centred its thinking on how human morality has evolved through natural selection but ignored the darker sides of the human species (Boehm, 2012; Shermer, 2004). These accounts focused on how human beings emerge from barbarism and a purely animal existence to something resembling a civilised society.

This line of thought claims that many important components of moral psychology, the sense of fairness, for example, are comparable to psychological systems in other primates (Brosnan & De Waal, 2002, 2003). Other accounts searched for one big overarching principle of moral judgement (such as emotions, cognitions and emotions, culture, intuitions, character, moral grammar). Since evil acts seem to be too extreme and beyond the realm of rational explanation, it did not feed into these models and was perhaps perceived as part of another
irrational and unpredictable world that is beyond the realm of scientific moral psychology.

One of the few phenomena linked to evil to have gained attention in moral psychology is psychopathy. As a population apparently capable of making moral judgements but not at all motivated by them, psychopaths present an obvious challenge to those who believe that our moral judgement is based on cognition (Schroeder et al., 2010).

The fact that evil is studied only in relation to a deviant and unusual pathology shows the extent to which the preoccupation with evil has been marginalised. This is so despite the fact that in the reality of our lives moral failures identified as evil occur on a daily basis through the acts of ordinary people. The tendency to overlook evil represents moral psychology’s preference to be attracted to abstract philosophical problems: the Heinz Dilemma (Kohlberg, 1981), the trolley cases (Hauser et al., 2007), a brother and sister who agree to have sex (Haidt, 2001), situations that do not reflect real life dilemmas but, rather, demonstrate an important problem in a specific theory within moral psychology.

The research in moral psychology that does look into the subject of evil (Staub, 1989; Zimbardo, 2007) is isolated from the major theories of the discipline and does not at all link evil to the big picture of moral psychology. For the most part, such research focuses on the question of what it is that makes a person evil and what separates evil people from those who are regarded as merely “bad”. Zimbardo, for example, in his Stanford prison experiment, used very sophisticated methods of simulation. He showed that situations can have a more powerful influence over our behaviour than most people appreciate and few recognise.

According to Zimbardo (2007),

Good people can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways. They can also be led to act in irrational, stupid, self-destructive, antisocial, and mindless ways when they are immersed in “total situations” that impact human nature in ways that challenge our sense of the stability and consistency of individual personality, of character, and of morality. (p. 211)

The researches carried out by Zimbardo and others succeed in characterising acts of evil, but do not broach the question of the perception of evil.
Psychology’s approach to researching the perception of evil should, in my view, follow the same rules observed in its investigation of any other categorisation process. In much the same way as moral psychologists research how people perceive subjects such as cause and blame, culpability, intent, and moral character, there is a need to investigate how people perceive evil. The fact that a psychological phenomena is charged with religious, social, and political meaning, and that it is “observer dependent”, does not need to impair the importance of the research. One of my aims is to raise the study of evil to a level similar to that of other phenomena usually studied by moral psychologists.

The perception of evil in psychology has to be researched primarily because, despite the confusion and controversy among philosophers about its usage (see Calder, 2013; Formosa, 2013), the term is still widely employed. Today, it is mostly used by philosophers and social psychologists to emphasise the gravity of a crime, trading on the term’s aura of religious finality. The meaning of “evil” has become increasingly unclear even though the differences between the various definitions of the term have narrowed. None the less, the word has proved to be an immutable part of our moral lexicon.

What can possibly explain the survival of the use of this term? There are a number of explanations for this. I believe that the term evil represents a personal and special form of moral judgement. As I shall show, an act of evil possesses a particular quality that is not to be found to any significant extent in acts of common wrongdoing. This leads us to a key question that I will attempt to answer: what lies behind our perceptual experience of evil that makes the moral failure so appalling in our eyes that we term it “evil”?

There are four sections to the chapter. In the first section, I present several existing definitions of evil in psychology and philosophy and explain the problems arising from these definitions and why they are hard pressed to characterise the essential nature of evil. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to link the perception of evil to moral judgement in general. Therefore, in the second section, I briefly present a new moral psychology (Govrin, 2014a,b) outlining what the decisive factors are in the making of moral judgements. In the third section, I rely on this theory to show that an experience of evil can only be formed in an observer’s mind if certain conditions are present. In the fourth section, I show that there is an inherent gap between the
experience of the observer and that of the perpetrator. I argue that the observer is almost always mistaken in his attributions of a certain state of mind to the perpetrator. I discuss the philosophical and cultural significance of this gap in the final part of the chapter.

The inherent difficulty in defining acts of evil

The main problem surrounding the definitions of evil is that there is something elusive, something partial, that makes it difficult to comprehend the true nature of evil. The definitions are plagued by three problems. First, they are circular and employ adjectives that describe the emotional impact of evil, but not its essence; second, many of the definitions are quantitative, so that evil is described as an act of enormous gravity or extremely wrong; other definitions are partial and do not capture the gestalt of the concept.

Using adjectives without describing the essence

According to Eve Garrard (2002), “evil acts are not just very bad or wrongful acts, but rather ones possessing some especially horrific quality” (p. 321).

Geoffrey Scarre (2012) thinks that the “peculiar nastiness of an act rather than the amount of harm it causes” can be sufficient for judging an act to be evil (p. 75).


One can see from these citations that the adjectives used relate to different aspects of the observer’s emotional experience of evil. Shock and horror refer to the impact of the act on the observer. Indeed, evil can be associated with both the intent and the impact of the deed. For example, the “nastiness” of the act is connected to the intent of the perpetrator. “Nasty” is defined in the dictionary as morally filthy, obscene, indecent. However, there is no real clarity as to what it is about evil that is nasty. “Horrific” is defined as something dreadful, shocking, or awful. These are words that indeed describe the perceptual experience of the observer. However, what it is that the observer is reacting to that “horrifies” him remains undefined. As is the case
with other definitions, what is missing is the psychological mechanism that functions in the observer’s mind that leads him to sense these feelings.

Describing evil

In trying to describe evil, the philosopher John Kekes (1988) defines it by combining quantitative and qualitative descriptive terms. Here, I want to discuss the usage of quantitative terms in Kelkes’s definition:

For an act to be evil it must have a certain weightiness to it. This weightiness comes primarily from the magnitude of the harm desired. The harm must be so serious that it interferes with a person’s ability to function as a fully-fledged agent. (p. 53)

Likewise, Formosa (2013) offers yet another definition of evil. “Evil acts”, Formosa claims,

have extreme moral gravity and are condemned in terms of our strongest moral language because they are acts that involve perpetrators who are morally responsible for acting very badly and inflicting very significant harms on victims. (p. 16)

The employment of quantitative terms leads to a similar set of problems, as does the use of adjectives. For example, it portrays evil as, “very very bad” without pointing to the array of circumstances and conditions that arouse the experience of evil. In these definitions, evil is described as something extreme, with the metaphor used indicating something that is “weighty”. The adjective “weighty” does not carry any implication of wrongdoing. It merely emphasises the importance and far-reaching consequences of an issue, whether these are good or bad. More important than this is that although weightiness is part of the experience of evil, it does not explain the true nature of the phenomenon. What is it that is so enormously weighty that leads us to define it as evil? As Calder (2013) argues, “If evil is just very wrong we can do without the term ‘evil.’ We can say everything we need to say using terms such as ‘very wrong’ or ‘very very wrong’” (p. 172).
Partial definitions

Some definitions centre on significant harm suffered by the victim, some on the aggressor’s responsibility and desire to inflict harm, while other definitions are concerned with the merger of the two. The latter definitions are particularly common. Formosa (2013), for example, states that

an evil act is an act of wrongdoing (1) which the perpetrator of the act is morally responsible for (2) one or more others suffering what would usually be regarded as very significant harm (including life-ending and significantly autonomy impairing harms), and (3) where we judge in terms of the presence of all the relevant factors (including deliberativeness, reprehensibility of the motive, and the degree, type, and gratuitousness of the inflicted harm) that the perpetrator acted very badly. (Formosa, 2013, p. 245)

This definition includes many characteristics of evil that relate to the responsibility of the aggressor, the gravity of the harm inflicted, and the motives of the aggressor (as was the case in the previous definitions). However, it would seem that, rather than capturing the gestalt of evil, the definition merely describes its separate component parts. This is evident from the fact that, in the final analysis, Formosa’s definition resorts to the formulation “the perpetrator behaved very badly”. Again, we see a return to quantitative explanations and synonyms to encapsulate the nature of evil. This is because, in my view, the sum of the parts describes various characteristics of evil but not its essence.

I shall leave the discussion of why it is so difficult to describe the nature of evil to a later stage of the chapter, because that question is linked to the nature of moral judgement. At this stage, it is appropriate to ask what a satisfactory definition of evil has to include.

According to Pennington (2014), if we are to explain an incident we must identify the cause of that event in terms of relevant mechanisms that led to its occurrence. In other words, an explanation needs to include a specific sequence of causal events that inevitably leads to a particular outcome. In Google, the term “mechanism” is defined as (1) a system of parts working together in a machine; a piece of machinery; (2) a natural or established process by which something takes place or is brought about. This second definition is more relevant to psychology. In terms of giving an explanation of an incident, the best
way is to pinpoint a mechanism that tells us why and how a particu-
lar outcome occurred.

In this chapter, I wish to offer a new definition of evil. The central
argument that I develop throughout is that the understanding of evil
has to be attained through a wider mastery of the ins and outs of
moral judgement. I shall show that evil is not only defined by the
intention of the aggressor and his wickedness, or the magnitude of
the harm done. All of these are isolated and quite separate parts of the
rich and complex gestalt that is linked to the relations between aggres-
sor and victim.

At the centre of the perception of evil is an observer’s evaluation
of the relations between victim and perpetrator. This makes evil a
private and special occurrence of perceived moral failure. In order to
understand this particular judgement, one has to start with a certain
model that describes the way in which the observer makes moral
judgements in general. The definition of evil I offer here is a deriva-
tive of the attachment approach to moral judgement, which I now
describe in brief. For a more detailed description of the model see
Govrin (2014a,b).

A new moral psychology: the attachment
approach to moral judgement

Recent research in moral psychology has produced strong evidence to
suggest that moral judgement is intuitive and is accomplished by a
rapid, automatic, and unconscious psychological process (Damasio,
1994; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2000; Shweder &
Haidt, 1994).

There is, however, considerable disagreement and confusion as to
what moral intuitions are and how they work: what exactly are the
underlying cognitive processes of these judgements that “operate
quickly effortlessly and automatically, such that the outcome but not
the process is accessible to consciousness?” (Haidt, 2001, p. 818). How
are moral situations represented in our minds? What cognitive
processes intuitively glue together different moral situations into one
category?

According to the attachment approach to moral judgement, the
patterns of people’s moral intuitions actually follow fairly straight-
forwardly from internally represented principles or rules acquired in infancy. My assumption is that moral judgement is a complex cognitive achievement that might rely on a set of building block systems that appear early on in human ontogeny and phylogeny. In this, I follow twenty years of infant research, according to which the knowledge accumulated during the first year of life forms the foundation on which later learning, including language acquisition, counting, object categorisation, social relations, and other complex cognitive skills, rest (Ensink & Mayes, 2010; Mandler & McDonough, 1998; Starkey & Cooper, 1980; Wynn, 1990). According to this view,

in order to understand humans’ most complex cognitive skills, we should take a broad view and study not only adults who have mastered the skills and children who are acquiring them but also human infants and other animals. Although no young child or nonhuman animal possess these skills, both exhibit many of the cognitive systems that serve as their building blocks. (Spelke, 2000, p. 1233)

The idea that our moral sense is essentially connected to early ties of dependency between the child and his or her carer is not new. It was proposed by John Bowlby’s attachment theory and Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care. Both theories emphasise the importance to moral development of the early relations between mother and infant (Bowlby, 1944, 1953, 1958, 1980; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan & Wiggins, 1987). However, the ideas of attachment theory and ethics of care have not received the centrality in moral psychology appropriate to their importance.

I suggest that advances in our understanding of the nature of moral judgement and the way affect organises the mind in the first year of life offer us the opportunity to create closer ties between Bowlby’s theory of attachment, ethics of care, and moral psychology, all of which were previously considered as situated in separate domains.

I use evidence from research in moral psychology, infant research, and categorisation, and then look at moral situations from a phenomenological perspective to show patterns and regularities. This integrated approach suggests that there is a universal, innate, deep structure that appears uniformly in the formation of almost all moral judgements, indicating early origins. This deep structure bears the mark of the infant–carer dyad as the nucleus that is still present in the way adults represent moral situations.
Over the past decade, neuroscientific data has been collated from experiments involving both humans and animals (e.g., Francis et al., 2003; Meaney & Szyf, 2005; Parker & Nelson, 2005; Teicher et al., 2002). Although this data remains somewhat controversial (e.g., Green, 2000; Wolff, 1996), it appears to show the significant influence of early childhood experiences on the development of the brain and, consequently, its profound impact on social and emotional development.

Over the past twenty years, as infant research has become increasingly more sophisticated and complex, it has become clearer to researchers that infants possess a much more intricate and far richer knowledge of the world than had previously been assumed.

According to Hamlin (2013a,b), a large body of work suggests that preverbal infants interpret agents’ object directed actions in terms of their goal-relevant traits, suggesting that at least some forms of mentalizing are present from early on in development. By the age of 3–5 months, infants pay more attention to events demonstrating mentalistic changes (changing one’s mind) over physical changes (changing one’s motion; see Woodward & Needham, 2009, for review).

In the moral domain, studies found that babies have an intrinsic moral foundation: the ability and readiness to judge what others do, a certain sense of justice, and an intuitive response to meanness. In several studies (Hamlin et al., 2007, 2010, 2011), infant participants between the ages of 6–10 months were shown a simulated three-dimensional geometric puppet show in which geometric-shaped objects were used to role-play “helping/hindering situations”. The helper, a yellow square, assisted the circle up the hill; a red triangle (the hinderer), pushed the circle down the hill. Following the infants’ observation of the geometric puppets, the experimenter put the helper and hinderer on a tray and took them to the child. The researchers recorded which of the two the child reached for, theorising that what an infant of that age would reach for would be a reliable pointer to what he wants. The experiment revealed that six- and ten-month-old infants consider an individual’s behaviour towards others when assessing that individual as either attractive or, alternatively, aversive. In other words, infants showed a clear preference for an individual who was being helpful to someone else as opposed to one who placed obstacles in the path of another person. Moreover, the studies show that the participating infants preferred a helpful individual to one who stood on the sidelines and the latter to one who was obstructive.
These experiments and many others (see Hamlin, 2013a,b; Hamlin et al., 2007, 2011, 2013) show that infants have a certain type of knowledge that enables them to both distinguish between proper and improper behaviour and understand social relationships on a basic level.

However, the experiments tell us very little about the procedures or moral principles that infants learn, how they encode a moral situation, and to what representations they compare it.

Maternal care is the probable stimulus that allows for an adult moral mechanism to develop. My assumption is that, in precisely the same way as an infant born with innate linguistic faculties will only learn to speak if he grows up in the presence of people who speak to him, he will develop moral faculties only if, in his experience, someone else responds to his needs, takes care of him, and protects him at some level.

Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that expectations of social relations emerge in the first months of life through infant–carer interactions. Beebe and Lachmann (2002) opine that, in the same way that infants categorise faces, shapes, objects, colours, and animals, they also form schemas or categories of interpersonal interactions (see Beebe & Lachmann, 1988; Beebe & Stern, 1977; Stern, 1985). A principle called ongoing regulations between mother and infant (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002), provides the most basic rule for organising representations. The predictable ongoing regulations in mother–infant interactions create expectancies that organise the infant’s experience. The neonate detects contingencies, expected relationships between his own behaviour and the environment’s reaction to it. An infant develops an ability to anticipate when something is likely to happen and an expectation that what he does has consequences. Thus, a remarkable set of pre-symbolic representational capacities exists in an infant’s first year (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Stern, 1985). The infant can sense whether or not the carer is acting contingently and can determine whether behaviour patterns are similar or different. The infant develops expectations of these patterns, remembers them, and categorises them.

What is important to emphasise here is that in the early stages of life infants do not learn at the level of content. They learn procedures, patterns of interaction, and a shared system of rules for maintaining the management of joint actions in the first year of life. (See,
for example, Bakeman & Brown, 1977; Bruner, 1977, 1983; Cohn & Tronick, 1989; Stern, 1985, 2002; Tronick, 1989.)

What can moral situations tell us about their deep essence?

In order to establish the link between early infancy and the acquisition of basic moral faculties, we must be capable of defining: (1) the appropriate stimulus that is likely to lead to the learning of the proper processes by which we exercise moral judgement and (2) the deep structures that are common to the entire range of moral situations, including the link between those structures and the initial stimulus that made moral learning possible.

How can these assertions be tested?

There is no direct evidence to explain the way in which infants learn moral principles, just as there is no direct evidence of the way in which infants learn the deep structures of language. Therefore, we must discover the deep structures of moral situations and then look into the way in which these are linked to the first year of life.

The goal is to posit the most minimal toolkit that can still account for various moral judgements and situations.

The dyad superiority effect of moral situations: Gray’s findings

The features of moral situations to be discussed are simple and obvious. It will quickly become apparent that, paradoxically, due to their basic, simple, and intuitive nature, these features are virtually invisible to the naked eye. As a result, we hardly notice them or give them much thought.

We will want to understand what characteristics different moral situations have in common. How do people recognise moral situations and notice regularities within them? What are these regularities? How are moral situations represented in our minds? What kind of categorisation do we use when processing a moral judgement?

What, then, is the most invisible and yet the most salient characteristic of a moral situation? The fundamental unit of moral situations
is the dyad. I term this phenomenon the *dyad superiority effect* of moral situations. Essentially, this means that moral situations are mentally represented as two parties in conflict.

We have strong support for the dyadic nature of moral situations. A series of studies by Gray (Gray et al., 2012) showed that moral judgements do not depend merely on the superficial properties of moral events, but also on how those events are mentally represented. Gray conducted a large-scale survey that investigated specific links between mind perception and morality. Respondents evaluated both the mental capacities of diverse targets (e.g., adult humans, babies, animals, God) and their moral standing (Gray et al., 2007). In particular, participants assessed whether target entities deserved moral rights and whether they possessed moral responsibility. One of Gray’s most important findings is that moral judgment is rooted in a cognitive template of two perceived minds—a moral dyad of an intentional agent and a suffering moral patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009). According to Gray, the essence of morality is the perceived interaction between minds.

Agency qualifies entities as moral agents, those who are capable of doing good or evil, whereas experience qualifies entities as moral patients, those who are capable of benefiting from good or suffering from evil. Adult humans usually possess both agency and patience and can, therefore, be both blamed for evil and suffer from it. A puppy, according to Gray, is a mere moral patient; we seek to protect him from harm but do not blame him for injustice.

Gray posits that despite the variety of moral transgressions, the moral dyad not only integrates across various moral transgressions, but also serves as a working model for understanding the moral world. This dyadic template fits the majority of moral situations because mind perception is as flexible as moral judgement itself.

In Gray’s view since the essence of morality is captured by the combination of harmful intent and painful experience acts committed by agents with greater intent, and which result in more suffering, it should be judged as more immoral.

Following Gray, I suggest that a dyadic structure is the most general trait of moral situations. A dyad is present in the background of every moral situation, regardless of whether it involves many parties, or a group (several individuals, large groups, or even nation states).
Second, the bedrock of most moral judgements is an observer gazing at a dyad. The word “observer” is, in a sense, misleading, because people make moral judgements both as observers and as participants. I use the word “observer” only for demonstrative purposes. At this stage, I am interested in understanding what leads us to judge theft or medical negligence as a wrongful act rather than in the way in which the thief or his victim judge the situation. This also resembles the experiments of infant’s moral judgement (Hamlin et al., 2007, 2010), in which infants were observers. Thus, within a basic moral judgement situation, three sides are involved: two conflicting parties (a dyad) and an observer.2

O relates to the following dyad: A → C
O Observer
A Perceived wrongdoer
C Perceived victim
→ Behaviour, Harm done, Overall attitude of A to C

Difficult moral situations are those in which more than one dyad is involved. Take, for example, the moral dilemma of whether a state has the right to bomb civilian neighbourhoods in a neighbouring state from which militants have fired rockets into its territory, killing civilians? This example shows that the complex social reality provides us with moral dilemmas that are manifestly more complex than is a simple dyadic component. Thus, the process of reaching a judgement involves deciding on the party you side with. In order for a judgement to be made, one of the dyads has to succeed in capturing the observer’s mind while the other is discarded.

However, dealing with these dilemmas can only be accomplished by breaking down their complexity into simple sub-dyads.

I suggest that the process of construing a dyad when presented with social information about conflict probably occurs at a very early stage in the processing of information, that several pieces of information relating to each party can be evaluated simultaneously, and that the basic process is fast, unintentional, efficient, and occurs outside awareness.
Decoding moral situations

Given the enormous amount of data that exists in relation to any given moral dyad, how do we organise the information for a particular perceived dyad? How do we extract a judgement from the basic features of A, C, and \( \rightarrow \)? The key underlying thesis that I will present is that the most informative features of moral judgements—intent, free will, and controllability—are underpinned by a more profound feature: our knowledge about infants (or children) and adults.

We have an affective and cognitive mechanism that is very sensitive to the distinctions between child-like and adult-like traits. As we shall see, these traits provide us with a great deal of information that enables us to understand others.

The same parameters that are crucial to the attribution of responsibility for a wrongdoing (intentionality, controllability, and free will), are those that are crucial to the distinction between children and adults.

I suggest that we represent each of the parties (A, C) in ways that are comparable to our representation of Children and Adults. All our efforts are geared to construct the reality of the moral situation in terms of an adult–child dyad. Judgements placing the parties on the child–adult spectrum come to mind quickly and effortlessly, seemingly popping out of nowhere, without much conscious awareness of their origins or the manner of their formation.

Dyads and moral judgement

The basic idea is that non-conscious judgements of a dyad are formed automatically, effortless, ubiquitously, and rapidly, before any conscious processing has taken place. In generating a non-conscious moral judgement, we perform two mental operations:

1. Evaluating the child-like and the adult-like characteristics of each party and deciding, if we are able to, which of the parties matches an adult schema and which a child schema. As we shall see, the most salient feature that differentiates between children and adults is dependency.
2. Evaluating the relationship between the adult and child-like parties in terms of \( (\rightarrow) \), where \( \rightarrow \) is the symbol for the harm done and the overall relation of the independent \textit{vis-a-vis} the dependent in a particular dyad. In other words, we do not only have schemas for children and adults, but also possess a schema for the dyadic relation centred on our knowledge of adult obligations to children. So, the moral judgement is much more than evaluating the harm done. It is the evaluation of the overall attitude of A to C based on our prior expectations of how adults should treat children.

The detection of child-like and adult-like characteristics is not entirely rational and not always relevant. For example, a number of experiments (Berry & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1985) indicate that baby-faced people are less likely to lose their case than people considered to have a mature face (Berry & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1988; Zebrowitz & McDonald, 1991). However, this influence also appears to depend on the nature of the offence. A baby-faced defendant will be considered less likely to have committed an offence intentionally, and more likely to have committed an offence by negligence than a defendant with a mature face.

The evaluation of child-like and adult-like characteristics in a particular moral situation is observer relative. The same person in a particular dyad might be construed as A by one person and as C by another. In fact, construing the parties as C or A is the dominant act of moral judgement. If party X matches an adult schema (A) and party Y matches a child schema (C) it means that we think X has done harm to Y and that we sympathise with C and condemn A. But this is only true for an observer that perceives X as adult-like and Y as child-like. So, child-like and adult-like schemas are not just cognitive assessments of traits; they incorporate our emotions, judgements, and actions towards the parties.

While the decision as to which party is C or A is highly subjective, the general traits within us that are associated with children and those associated with adults are constant and universal. That is to say, our schemas for dependents and independents are the basic building blocks of a universal morality. These schemas are used differently among different cultures and peoples and yet one cannot construct a moral judgement without them.
Even if we match each party to adult and child schemas, the judgement remains incomplete. We do not simply compare the two parties individually and decide which one is more helpless, needier, or more powerful. Our judgment depends on something much more profound. It is linked to the nature of the dyadic relations. Just as we have different schemas for adults and children, so we have a schema for the dyadic relations between them.

The general idea is that moral judgement involves computing child-like and adult-like characteristics. This process is almost reflex-like: it is fast in operation and automated so that, for instance, one cannot help taking into account the child-like face of an adult, the young age of a thief, or the unintended harm of an accidental killing.

This model raises numerous questions as to the nature of morality. Thus, for example, morality is typically thought of as a developmental achievement, not something innate. Hence, it requires socialisation and self-consciousness, neither of which is possessed by infants. Indeed, without laws to guide it, the individual psychological mechanism that is part of every person’s makeup cannot be a good basis for reaching moral judgements. Although the mechanism of breaking down the moral situation into its constituent parts of carer/infant is universal, the substantive decision is culture dependent and subjective. This is exactly where moral laws are important. In the absence of this human ability to establish abstract laws, there would probably be an anarchic situation in which the moral mechanism as described would be activated arbitrarily in line with the individual interests and needs of every single person (Govrin, 2014b).

The perception of evil according to the attachment approach to moral judgement

We have, thus, seen that at the heart of moral judgement there is the observer’s perception of the dyadic relations. Moral failures are viewed as being linked first and foremost to an evaluation of dyadic relations: the wrongdoer violates the observer’s expectations as to how he behaved (or misbehaved) towards a child-like party.
From this perspective, moral dilemmas are the very reverse of the perception of evil. Moral dilemmas are quandaries that are hard to decide on. These are situations in which the observer does not have a clear or immediate gut feeling as to the question of blame and responsibility. For example, is it morally right to use torture to extract information from terrorists that might save lives? Is the death penalty an appropriate means of punishment? Were the allies wrong to bomb tens of thousands of citizens in the German city of Dresden at the end of the Second World War? These moral dilemmas are difficult to decide on because, in certain respects, both sides can be viewed as weak, vulnerable, and child-like and, at the same time, as strong, independent, and malevolent. Thus, for example, there is the terrorist who injured innocent people and is, therefore, identified as A. However, after he is caught and is held in prison by armed guards, he appears at that moment to be vulnerable, helpless, weak, and, therefore, might be perceived as C. The murderer, who is condemned to death in one of the states in the USA where such punishment is still allowed, was responsible for shocking acts of criminality. But, having been caught, he is now incarcerated in conditions of captivity which make him appear to be weak and defenceless, while his captors (the state) seem strong and in control. The citizens of Dresden were guiltless, but are identified with the Nazi regime that committed horrific crimes against humanity as a whole and the Jews in particular.

Situations in which the observer perceives evil are the reverse of these dilemmas. In such situations, there is no hesitation. Instead, there is instantaneous and intense gut feeling. Take, for example, the cases of children who have been sexually abused by a stranger. Victims are often perceived as the “mirror” or “binary opposite” (McEvoy & McConnachie, 2012: pp. 527–528; Rock, 1998, p. 195) of the perpetrators. In child molestation, what Rock (1998, p. 195) terms the “indissoluble dialectic” is predicated on the young, “innocent”, and unsuspecting target who represents the “antithesis” (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 31, cited in Rock, 1998) of the older, adult, predatory male “monster” who was previously unknown to him.

Thus, one of the characteristics of evil is the binarity and polarity between the two sides. How does this binarity influence the observer’s perception of the dyadic relations?

In order for the observer to perceive evil, a number of conditions relating to the gestalt between the party recognised as adult and the
party identified as child have to exist. The first condition for the perception of evil is that the observer identify an extreme asymmetry between two parties, the victim and the perpetrator. In every case in which the observer identifies evil, the dependent is perceived as weak, helpless, defenceless, needy, and, at times, innocent. The perpetrator, on the other hand, is always perceived as strong and all-powerful. The extreme asymmetry in the estimate of the relative strengths may be attributable to dimensions connected to armed/unarmed, adult/child, vulnerable/invulnerable, weak/strong, trusting/ensnaring, etc.

However, unequal relations are not a sufficient reason to arouse the experience of evil. We could easily imagine situations in which someone powerful caused the death of an innocent human being in a non-evil and non-blameworthy way.

The second necessary condition that needs to exist for an observer to discern evil is linked to a certain perceived quality in the way in which the perpetrator relates to the victim’s dependency and vulnerability.

From the perspective of the observer, the perpetrator recognised the extreme signs of dependency displayed by the dependent—helplessness, weakness—and, despite these signs (and sometimes because of them), he knowingly and intentionally harms him. In other words, to the observer it seems that the perpetrator is viewing the dependent in the same way as he is doing—as a weak human being (or group). As a result, the entire array of expectations according to which one must not harm the dependent and weak simply collapses.

Thus, evil is not fundamentally in the act itself, or in the gravity of the damage done, but is, rather, to be found in the perceived relation of the aggressor to the victim’s vulnerability and weakness in particular, and towards those who are needy and dependent in general. What appears to the observer to have happened is that the perpetrator has become a monster and lost his likeness to man. This is because the vulnerable and helpless arouse in the perpetrator a desire for death and killing, or murderous wrath, instead of feelings of compassion and sympathy.

In fact, the two conditions I referred to—extreme asymmetry between the perpetrator and the victim and the position adopted by the perpetrator vis-à-vis vulnerability and neediness—are linked, the one influencing the other. Let us say that the perpetrator was responsible for a horrific act. However, suppose that he is thought to have
done so because of some weakness or vulnerability and not because of an intentional desire to hurt the weak and the needy. That being the case, the act would not be considered evil and the asymmetry between the sides would be less extreme because there would be a certain understanding by us of the motives that led the perpetrator to act in the way he did. This would be so, for example, if the horrific act was committed by a patient who was schizophrenic, or by a drunkard, or by someone who was, initially at least, clearly provoked by the victim. Since the stipulation of asymmetry between the sides is not met, we will not suggest that the perpetrator was indifferent to the victim's weakness or, out of pure malice, intended to harm the victim simply because he was weak.

Why evil is hard to define

We are close to encountering a different and no less important point about the essence of evil—and moral judgement generally—which explains why evil is so difficult to define. Like other phenomenon connected to perception, evil is formed by a whole gestalt. This is similar to Rawls’ idea of reflective equilibrium (1971), which describes a state of balance or coherence among a set of beliefs arrived at by a process of deliberative mutual adjustment among general principles and particular judgements.

Connectionism is a neural model that can explain how this process occurs

Dynamical systems, such as recurrent connectionist networks or the human brain, are powerful in their ability to integrate many real-time sources of information. In a recurrent connectionist network, there are a number of nodes with connections that can be positive (excitatory) or negative (inhibitory). Positive links connect certain nodes with others so that, as one of the nodes becomes more excited, the node's excitation increases the excitation of the other nodes. By the same token, as one such node becomes less excited or receives negative excitation, the others receive less excitation. Positive and negative cycles constantly circulate the network until it finally settles into a relatively
steady state. In the perception of evil actions, outcomes, intent, the state of mind of both parties are all taken into account in determining the moral judgement.

For example, if Jon killed David unintentionally, even though the result is severe and shocking, the lack of intent inhibits a perception of evil. On the other hand, a case in which a teacher humiliated a six-year-old child in front of the entire class can be perceived as evil because the entire network and its nodes are extremely excited. In fact, in acts of evil that is precisely what occurs—an extreme excitation of the entire network: there is a clear intent, a dreadful outcome, an extreme asymmetry between the parties, and the perpetrator is seemingly oblivious to the victim’s child-like aspects. There is a kind of chain reaction across the nodes; one excites the other, and a snowballing of factors leads to a decisive verdict. This is the inverse of the process of judgement in moral dilemmas (such as harsh methods of interrogation of terrorists) in which the system finds it hard to achieve a stable state because of the tension between the different nodes. The difficulty of defining evil stems from the fact that most definitions favour one component of the perception that cannot stand alone unless we refer to the gestalt perception of the entire relations.

Since a change in any one of the parts (intent, responsibility, asymmetry, serious harm, an observer’s strong emotional response) leads to a change in the overall perception of evil, it is difficult to describe the phenomenon by limiting attention to only one specific part. The two conditions I have described as required for the perception of evil—asymmetry of force and the state of mind of the perpetrator vis-à-vis the victim’s dependency—can be seen as the most informative components of the network.

Todd Calder (2002) cites an apt example that can demonstrate this point: an agent torturing a person and causing her significant harm in order to reveal the location of a group of children she has kidnapped who are suffering more than she would suffer by being tortured. But suppose that the torturer’s reason for tormenting the kidnapper is the satisfaction of his sadistic pleasure rather than locating the abducted children. Calder thinks that “we would like to call his act of sadistic torture evil even if we are consequentialist and don’t think it is wrong” (p. 52).

In my view, the case is more complex. According to the model I have described, the perception of evil is simultaneously triggered and
suppressed. The part that is triggered is linked to the sadistic pleasure the torturer gets from tormenting his victim. This strengthens the perception of evil. The inhibitory part is linked to the fact that the kidnapper/victim abducted innocent children and should be punished for that.

Thus, the perception of evil surfaces and is blocked at one and the same time. This will certainly make the observer hesitate before reaching a judgement. In so far as the two conditions which, as previously mentioned, need to exist for an act to be perceived as evil, we can say that there is an extreme asymmetry between the kidnapper and the torturer but that is weakened by the asymmetry between the kidnapper and the abducted children. Additionally, Calder hints that the mental stance of the torturer towards the kidnapper is linked to her vulnerability and not to the children. But it is hard to accept this. It would seem more logical to say that the torturer’s mental stance is connected to the terrible act committed by the kidnapper. If so, we would conclude that the torturer’s actions were not prompted by the kidnapper’s dependence/child-like characteristics, but, rather, by the horrendous act she committed.

Omission bias

The finding that many people would never harm those whom they recognise as needy or weak is reinforced by research that shows that when someone is perceived as dependent (defenceless, vulnerable, etc.) it is more difficult to carry out an act that is intended to knowingly and intentionally harm him. For most people this is a red line that should not be crossed under any circumstances. This tendency remains strong even when the result of not harming is graver than the harm inflicted would have been. One work of research undertaken in this area of study is linked to a phenomenon termed “omission bias”.

When it comes to moral violations, there is a tendency for people to be more willing to violate a moral code by omission rather than commission (DeScioli et al., 2011). Hindus in India, for example, are, for the most part, opposed to the slaughter of cows. Yet, people from within that very same community tolerate the death of cows from starvation (Fox, 2003). The omission bias has been tested in the laboratory.
When asked to imagine a situation in which a choice had to be made between re-routing a vehicle loaded with essential foodstuffs from a village with just a few starving inhabitants to a much larger village in which people were on the verge of starvation, participants in the laboratory experiment opted to do nothing despite the fact that this would lead to a far larger number of deaths (Ritov & Baron, 1999). This kind of omission bias is observable in a variety of situations including decisions involving the distribution of medicines known to be a likely cause of death (Anderson, 2003; Cohen & Pauker, 1994; Meszaros et al., 1996).

Deciding by not deciding resembles the way in which people make moral judgements about other people’s choices. Thus, a decision not to carry out an action, which was deemed to be wrongful, is judged less severely than is a decision to deliberately participate in a wrongful act (Anderson, 2003; Baron & Ritov, 2004; Cushman et al., 2006; Hauser, 2006). So, for example, it is thought that a person who uses a poison to harm his victim has committed a greater wrong than someone who fails to administer an antidote to that victim even when the decision-maker’s intentions and the outcomes are carefully controlled (Cushman et al., 2006).

Take, for example, the trolley cases. In these thought experiments, we are typically asked to compare two scenarios. In both, a trolley is heading towards five people who have been tied down to the tracks. You are not close enough to free them, but you can save them. In one scenario you can do this by pushing a person off a footbridge into the trolley’s path, killing him and causing the trolley to stop. In the other scenario, you can save the five by pulling a lever that switches the trolley to another track where you know that one person is tied down, instead of five. Many people have the intuition that it is morally impermissible to intervene in the first case and morally permissible to intervene in the second (Mikhail, 2000). Pushing someone in front of a trolley seems wrong, but diverting a trolley away from five people towards one is deemed to be right.

This phenomenon shows that the moment an observer recognises an innocent victim, he adopts a behavioural and emotional stance towards the dependent the result of which is a refusal to directly harm him, even if this course of inaction in fact harms other human beings. In such circumstances, the recognition of a person’s innocence prevents him from being harmed.
Thus, the power of an evil act to shock and trouble us stems not only from the serious hurt inflicted and the awful violence employed, but also from the aggressor’s perceived state of mind and his apparent indifference to the vulnerability and dependency of a fellow human being.

Let us examine two moral failures in order to analyse the differences between them as they relate to the phenomenon of evil: Stephen de Wijze (2002) draws on his intuitions in two examples he cites to support his claim that “enormous suffering” is neither sufficient (an uncontentious claim) nor necessary (a more contentious claim) for an act to count as evil. His two examples are: “1. A person who kills his/her spouse and lover in a fit of jealousy. 2. The Nazi who humiliates a religious Jew by forcing him to spit or urinate on the Torah and other holy artifacts” (p. 219). De Wijze’s intuitions are that the first act is wrong but not evil, whereas the second is evil.

In both cases a strong side harmed a weak side. Yet, many will certainly identify themselves with de Wijze’s intuition that only the case of the Nazi can be considered as “evil”. The first case involves a person who has been betrayed and reacted in a disproportionate and terrible way to the wrong inflicted upon him.

Let us look at these cases from the perspective of the attachment approach to moral judgement and the two conditions required for the perception of evil. As said, the first condition requires the existence of extreme asymmetry between the sides. In the case of the violent husband, it might well be that the betrayed partner is stronger than the unfaithful wife. However, there was no extreme asymmetry of power between the two because the perpetrator is also wounded by the betrayal and can also be viewed as weak. From the perspective of the observer, the fact that the husband is deeply hurt makes his mind accessible. The observer does not agree with, and is even shocked by, the husband’s horrific crime. Yet, the observer is capable of understanding the reasoning behind it. The husband’s hurt alters the moral judgement because it prevents what would otherwise have been a polarisation between him and his victims. On the other hand, when compared to the weak Jew, the Nazi can only be viewed as extremely powerful. There is no suggestion that the Nazi humiliated the Jew due to some weakness or vulnerability in him. The observer loses the Nazi’s perspective. It is impossible for him to read his mind.
The core of the second condition is the perpetrator’s approach to the victim’s dependence. When the husband killed his wife and her lover, he did not look at two vulnerable and helpless human beings. He probably saw two people who had hurt his deepest feelings. The husband’s action, grave as it was, does not involve an act of brutality or cruelty towards weak and needy people that typifies acts of evil. The Nazi, on the other hand, faces a weak, defenceless human being. Since the Nazi’s mind is inaccessible to the observer, he connects the deed to the Nazi’s stance in relation to the Jew’s vulnerability.

*Types of evil according to the dyadic relations*

One kind of evil occurs when the perpetrator fails to identify a victim’s weakness, dependency, and vulnerability as perceived by the observer. Instead, the perpetrator perceives negative features in his victim and harms him precisely because of those characteristics. However, these features are not recognised by the observer. Sometimes, the perpetrator perceives his victim as dangerous, while there are other cases in which the victim is dehumanised by ideological definitions and indoctrination.

This type of evil is characteristic of the murder of Jews in the holocaust and crimes against humanity during a war such as the massacre of civilians or acts of terror directed against non-combatants. From the observer’s point of view, these acts are asymmetrical in the extreme and cross a red line which cause the observer intense emotional upset. He feels that the actions of the perpetrator are insensible and he ceases to be in contact with the mind of the perpetrator. He totally loses his ability to understand the perpetrator’s motives and becomes wholly identified with the vulnerability and child-like qualities of the victim.

The Mỹ Lai Massacre on 16 March 1968 during the Vietnam War that resulted in the killing of between 347 and 504 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians is an apt example of the importance of the attitude of the perpetrator towards the victim. The massacre was committed by US army soldiers. Among the leaders of the assault was Lieutenant William Calley. One of the main shooters, along with Calley himself, was Private First Class Paul Meadlo. The differences between the two men can shed light on the understanding of evil. The story is told by Seymour Hersh, who wrote extensively on the
massacre in the late 1960s. Recently, Hersh returned to the scene of the crime to write a piece for The New Yorker (30 March, 2015). He described what had happened at the massacre:

*William L. Calley:* “At Calley’s order, Meadlo and others had fired round after round into the ditch and tossed in a few grenades. Then came a high-pitched whining, which grew louder as a two or three-year-old boy, covered with mud and blood crawled his way among the bodies and scrambled toward the rice paddy. Calley saw what was happening, ran after the child, dragged him back to the ditch, threw him in and shot him.

*Paul Meadlo:* “there was official testimony showing that he had in fact been extremely distressed by Calley’s order. After being told by Calley to ‘take care of this group’, one soldier recounted, Meadlo and a fellow soldier ‘were actually playing with the kids, telling the people where to sit down and giving the kids candy’. When Calley returned and said that he wanted them dead the soldier said that ‘Meadlo just looked at him like he couldn’t believe it. He says, “Waste them?” ’. When Calley said ‘yes’, another soldier testified, Meadlo and Calley ‘opened up and started firing’. But then Meadlo ‘started to cry’. The morning after the massacre, Meadlo stepped on a land mine while on a routine patrol, and his right foot was blown off. While waiting to be evacuated to a field hospital by helicopter, he condemned Calley. ‘God will punish you for what you made me do’.

The legal distinction between Calley and Meadlo stems from the fact Calley gave an order, which Meadlo obeyed. However, from the observer’s perspective it would appear that the matter is far more complex.”

The event demonstrates how important the perpetrator’s view of the victims really is in estimating the extent of evil. Despite the fact that both perpetrators had committed terrible acts and harmed innocent people, their view of the victims is very different. Calley killed with joy while Meadlo was seriously agonised by the killing spree and suffered a great deal of mental distress. Many will judge Calley’s action in the light of the directness, the blatancy, and the enthusiasm with which he shot his victims. Meadlo’s is an altogether different story. It would seem he and the observer have much in common, since Meadlo, like the observer, is utterly shaken by his own actions. Like the observer, he, too, is enraged by Calley’s actions. It might well be
that this will help many observers to be less shaken by Meadlo’s deeds. The observer and Meadlo share a common belief that one must not hurt innocent people and that the image of man’s humanity to man must be preserved. In Meadlo’s case, as in other instances, the act alone does not tell the whole story. We need to know the perpetrator’s thoughts about the crime he has committed. In knowing this, we can clearly see the enormous difference between the two murderers. The horrifying aspect of an act of evil is the fact that it is accompanied by an attitude that cuts the ground from under such a fundamental and common human perception that, we assume, is shared by us all. In its absence, the action becomes not only a moral failure of the first order, but also a deed lacking any logic or explanation, one of the central characteristics of an evil act.

In a second and especially difficult type of act in which the observer identifies evil, a further dimension is added to the dyad. In such cases, the perpetrator professes to be the victim’s saviour, as a result of which the dependent comes to trust him completely. This often happens in cases of serial murder, rape, or the sexual abuse of children. In such cases in particular, the age of the alleged victim is, in many instances, an intrinsic factor in forming both the public’s and the legislator’s view of a child’s status as a victim and his utter vulnerability (McAlinden, 2014). The almost universally accepted view that children are inherently vulnerable leads to the conclusion that, simply by virtue of their age or legal status, children are innocents or above reproach (Furedi, 2013). This distinction reinforces the disparity of power between the two sides. Moreover, emphasising the innocence of the victim increases the perception of the guilt and perverseness of the perpetrator. As Tilly argues in relation to perpetrators, “the younger the victim, the greater the blame” (Tilly, 2008, p. 95). This distinction between victim and perpetrator is now enshrined in law, particularly through legislation defining the age of consent, which Tilly describes as an “echo chamber for conversations about credit and blame” (Tilly, 2008, p. 35).

This is not simply a momentary recognition of the dependence of the victim prior to the crime or a failure to recognise the humanity and dependency of the victim. In such cases, relations between perpetrator and victim are established well before the crime is committed. The perpetrator’s objective is to encourage his victim to trust him and then to blatantly and aggressively violate this expectation of trust. To the
observer, it seems that the perpetrator takes particular pleasure in the total collapse of the dyad and acts in a malicious and intentional way to undermine it.

In the eyes of the observer, an evil act of this type goes through three stages. In the first stage, the independent identifies the dependent. In the second stage, the perpetrator lures the dependent into a dyadic relation of independent–dependent with all the trust and expectations associated with such relations. In the third stage, the victim is harmed, constituting a blatant and grave violation of the dependent’s expectations. Generally speaking, the perpetrator will harm the dependent at the height of their relations of trust and closeness.

In Bollas’ writing (1995), the biblical story of Eve and the serpent is presented in terms of seduction and temptation. The serpent (the “evil” side) puts up a front of “goodness” and gains the other’s trust. Bollas notes that medieval philosophy is replete with tales of powerful tempters and temptresses breaking the resolve of weak and helpless subjects. In such mythologies, the Devil commonly appears initially in the guise of a benevolent figure. The message of such tales was intended to warn of the need to be always vigilant because the Devil was liable to appear on the scene at any moment in response to a human cry for help.

In Bollas’ view, genocide represents the twentieth century’s ultimate crime. Bollas sees the serial killer as personifying this crime. The serial killer, he argues, is a “genocidal being” who murders his victims and does so in a way that dehumanises them. The perpetrator, thus, becomes the architect of pointless deaths that taint the very idea of life and its loss.

Indeed, the case history of many of the twentieth century’s most notorious serial killers shows that they plotted their crimes by befriending the victims, earning their trust (and, therefore, power over them), finally using that power and the helplessness of the other to carry out their heinous plans. The actions of four infamous serial killers exemplify this pattern: one, Ted Bundy, initially presented himself to the victim as a person in need, unlike the common tempter, who tends to offer the potential victim some kind of assistance. John Reginald Christie murdered at least eight women, including his wife, Ethel. He feigned muteness and partial blindness as a ploy to gain sympathy while at the same time offering various kinds of assistance to his victims. One of his first victims was invited back to his apartment with the promise that he would cure her bronchitis, instead of which she
was gassed to death. The “Milwaukee cannibal”, Jeffrey Dahmer, invited his victims to his house, promising them money, drinks, and his company in return for their agreement to be photographed. The serial killer Dennis Nilsen murdered at least twelve men and boys, typically lured to his house by offers of alcohol and/or shelter. After his conviction, as if recognising the evil of his crime, Nilsen wrote:

There is honour in killing the enemy
There is glory in a fighting, bloody end.
But violent extirpation
On a sacred trust
To squeeze the very life from a friend?

(Masters, 1995)

Of course, the sacred trust referred to by Nilsen is at the very heart of human relations. It is especially so in moments when a needy individual is offered assistance and accepts it because he trusts the other. It is what Erik Erikson termed “basic trust”. In cases where help is offered by a stranger, the trust is so elemental that it resembles the trust of a child in its parents. As Bollas notes, no prior thought is given, no questions asked, no assumptions made. To the victim, the killer appears to be no more than a part of an environment of trust as a result of which he sees no signs of possible danger, which might have led him to defend himself. In offering assistance to the needy person, the perpetrator is taking advantage of a fundamental trust that stems from the child’s unquestioning relations with its immediate surroundings. As Bollas puts it,

The shocking harm erupting in the midst of a benign texture of the real is deeply disturbing, and it preys upon a certain kind of fear we have that is so great we cannot even experience it as fear: a dread that reality will cease to support us in safety and will do us harm. (1995, p. 191)

The observer feels, “I can’t believe this happened, is happening, that such things can be” (Eigen, 2007). “Something is wrong and I cannot go on as if nothing has happened.”

The observer’s mistake

It might be said that the observer and the perpetrator are looking at two entirely different objects. The observer “weaves” the narrative of
evil according to which the strong party has recognised the dependency of the weak side and was completely aware of the victim’s dependency. Despite this, and sometimes because of it, he hurt him in a terrible way. However, from the perspective of the perpetrator, the picture is totally different. There is an essential dissonance between much of the constructed identity of victim and offender in crimes defined as evil and the actual identity of the perpetrator and the lived experience of the victim. For example, it is very rare for a perpetrator to see an innocent, child-like, and vulnerable object facing him. Roy Baumeister’s book, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (1997), is almost entirely devoted to the way in which actions that are labelled as evil are understood by the perpetrators. One of the conclusions of the book is that the perpetrators themselves often believe they were entirely, or almost entirely, justified in their response to their victim’s perceived attack. According to Baumeister, such beliefs contain important grains of truth. The commonly accepted concept of evil is clear-cut: malicious sadistic perpetrators on one side and wholly innocent victims on the other. Although it is true that some acts of perceived evil conform to this conventional image, the fact is that violence is frequently the outcome of an escalation in relations between two sides. In this mutually driven aggravation, it could well be that the perpetrator’s claim of provocation is, to an extent, grounded in reality.

Basing his viewpoint on a great deal of research, Baumeister shows that it is common for people who commit violent acts to blame the victim in some way for their behaviour. They continue to do so even when any independent observer would come to the conclusion that there had been no provocation of any significance from the side of the victim. Yet, from the perpetrator’s perspective, he was simply responding to an attack by the alleged victim.

Referring to the Nazis, Baumeister argues that those involved in the most heinous forms of violence did not think they were engaged in acts of evil. At most, they were conflicted between what they saw as irreconcilable obligations. There is no evidence to support the view that large numbers of people had adopted the belief that acts of evil could be seen in a positive light.

In support of his position, Baumeister cites a number of studies that found that violent people tend to view the actions of others as attacks on them even when no one else would see it that way. One
study investigated emotionally disturbed boys at a residential treatment centre. They were first grouped along a continuum based on the extent to which they engaged in inappropriate aggressive behaviour, such as arbitrarily hitting another who was just sitting there. The boys were then shown a random selection of photographs in which people were engaged in various forms of social intercourse and asked to describe what they were looking at. Those known to be among the most aggressive in the group tended to describe acts of aggression and hostility when there was no evidence of that in the photographs. Common pleasantries between people were seen as attempts by one side to aggressively dominate the other.

Perpetrators, Baumeister claims, tend not to see things in the absolutist terms which legislators and sometimes the victims themselves are seemingly so fond of. The perpetrators’ view of things is complex and capable of different interpretations. They might be prepared to admit that there is something wrong in what they did but, at the same time, claim that their actions were influenced by external factors, including elements they simply had no control over. In other cases, there is no such admission and the perpetrator views his action as having been entirely justified. Ironically, according to Baumeister, many perpetrators see themselves as victims. In what they tell others, in their memories of the event, and quite probably even in their attempt to be honest with themselves, there are many who see themselves as having been treated unfairly and, therefore, deserving of sympathy and support.

Joel Norris’s book, Serial Killers (1989), reveals that many of the most violent individuals of modern times were indeed themselves abused and mistreated early in their lives over prolonged periods of time and considered themselves to be victims.

To be sure, there are some cases in which wholly innocent victims are attacked by predatory and vicious individuals, but such cases of extreme asymmetry are relatively rare.

Thus, we see that the observer’s assumptions are mostly mistaken. As noted, the observer assumes that the perpetrator had no reason to act in the way he did. To the observer, the sheer incomprehensibility and utter outrageousness of the perpetrator’s action seems arbitrary, gratuitous, and random. If so, why say that the observer is mistaken about most of his assumptions? Is it not possible that we are talking about two different perspectives, that of the observer and that
of the perpetrator, each of whom has a differing interpretation of what took place?

In my view, it is correct and appropriate to talk of the observer’s mistaken perception. It is important to remember that the observer’s perception of evil relies on his assumptions about what is going on in the perpetrator’s mind. It might be that the observer’s identification with the victim and the extent of his shock at what had happened was so great that the perpetrator’s version of events ceased to be accessible to him. Having lost communication with the perpetrator’s mind, the motives of the perpetrator appear to the observer as senseless. To the observer, it seems that the perpetrator was either acting in an intentionally sadistic way with a desire to harm, or that his actions were a display of moral indifference.

Since we know that most instances of moral failures, even if they are extremely grave, are not driven simply by the desire for sadistic pleasure, we cannot escape concluding that the observer’s assumptions were mistaken. Thus, whatever is judged as being evil is only apparently so.

If that is the case, are we supposed to abandon our intuitions in relation to evil? If so, how are we to distinguish between good and evil without the help of these intuitions? The fact that the perceiver of evil is wrong because he relies on a distorted perception of the victim–perpetrator relations does not mean that the moral principles he relies on are wrong. The difficulties I have pointed to in relation to the perception of evil show that the fragility of this perception casts doubt on its usage in reaching reliable moral judgements. Perhaps the problem could be solved if we were to attempt to incorporate a judgement that makes the perpetrator’s mind more accessible.

In fact, this is true of every moral judgement. Instead of being impressed by the quality of the dyad, we have to consider various other views and the arguments that might be given in support of them. The perspective of the observer focuses on witnessing. But is it not the case that all sides to the triad (observer, perpetrator, and victim) witness the incident simultaneously? Does this not mean that any definition or condition of evil is perspectival? This might ring true but, nevertheless, we should not resort to a nihilist view. So far, I have not referred to the moral principles (such as Kant’s categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle). If we unconsciously and intuitively engage in computing each party’s child-like and adult-like features
and compare the adult-like party's behaviour to our former expectations, we are not employing moral principles. Moral principles make no reference to particular people, places, or times. Yet, moral computation is greatly influenced by these considerations. How, then, do we determine what is right and what is wrong? According to the proposed theory, our only guide to moral right and moral wrong is our innate detection system of child-like and adult-like features and our prior expectations of adults. So, even if there are indeed moral principles, they are not part of the knowledge on which we based our moral judgement.

One way to tackle this problem is to posit that general moral principles, such as those suggested by Rawls and Kant, enable us to rise above the subjective dyad. Turning the moral mechanism into a universal law enables us to protect the weak and prevent moral injustices, independently of the emotional mechanism that links an individual to a particular dyad.

In other words, moral principles employ the same parameters to moral judgement as does the dyadic construal. They merely introduce additional cognitions that had not previously been taken into account. Whereas the "natural" psychological mechanism identifies people as child-like on the basis of resemblance and membership of that same group, the moral principles compel us to ignore this component and relate to all suffering people as child-like. They might be used as constraints that inhibit personal preference, cultural bias, or any other kind of subjective factors besides the parameters of the general dyadic rules.

It might very well be that moral principles will also enable us to avoid being pressured by a perception of evil triggered by the two conditions I have outlined, allowing the circumstances—the perpetrator's traumatic past and even the responsibility of the victim—to be taken into account. Therefore, we have to scrutinise carefully the circumstances of every instance of evil. In making a targeted and conscious effort to reach into the perpetrator's mind, we must try to examine his motives, needs, and feelings at the moment in time when he committed his allegedly evil act. In doing this, we will almost certainly recognise an individual who thought his life was in danger and we might think that he exaggerated the extent of the danger. We will gain a better understanding as to why the victim threatened him and see if what he did was in proportion to the threat he felt. This
effort will result in our seeing a more balanced and less polarised and binary dyad. When we succeed in understanding the perpetrator’s mind, we will be able to reach a moral judgement based on a great deal more data and not merely on our gut feelings. That is to say that moral judgement, and, in particular, a judgement concerning evil, requires us to suspend our intuitive response and our tendency to construct a polarised dyad in favour of an attempt to examine the situation from as many perspectives as possible. This kind of scrutiny is not always possible because we frequently operate in the immediate aftermath of horrific events that determine our judgement. However, in other instances, the attempt to enter the perpetrator’s mind will lead us to a different perception of the moral reality.

In the perception of evil, the moral principles demand that the perceiver should not only pay attention to the polarisation between the parties but take into account the broadest possible picture and expand his moral consciousness.

Evil acts often have an apocalyptic quality about them. The perceiver presumes that the answer to the question “Why did it happen?” is beyond the reach of normal human knowledge. Undoubtedly, there are many cases in which taking the perpetrator’s perspective into account will be futile. There are evil acts that we are simply unable to understand. Perhaps we do not even have to try.

The perception of evil is part of our humanity. The shock we feel in the face of someone intentionally harming the weak and needy is linked to our desire to protect them as well as the compassion and concern we feel towards them. I am not suggesting that we have to defy our natural inclination to judge acts as evil or that morality is relative. Instead, I have tried to show that our perception of evil is based on our biases, the very thing we need to be wary of.

Notes

1. Universal Moral Grammar (Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2007); Moral Foundation Theory (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Haidt, 2007); Relation Regulation Theory (Rai & Fiske, 2011); The character view of morality (Alicke, 2000; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011), and the theory suggesting that moral moral judgments are driven by two core factors—affective reactions and cognitive processes (Greene, 2007; Nichols, 2002).
2. Given the observer’s role, we could say that a triad rather than a dyad is at the centre of moral judgement. In fact, the dyad itself has no significance unless an observer represents it in his mind and lends it meaning. My preference in using the term dyad rather than triad stems from the fact that, in infant development, dyad is a much more primary and archaic term than is triad. I believe some representations of a dyad exist within the infant before agency and a sense of awareness.

References


PART II

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS
CHAPTER FOUR

The intergenerational transmission of the catastrophic effects of real world history expressed through the analytic subject

Robin McCoy Brooks

... by madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.

(Foucault, 1988, p. 288)

Introduction

The lingering effects of catastrophe with its unshakable demands upon the subject remain a central concern in psychoanalysis. However, while psychoanalysis has long recognised the relevance of the individual's personal historical situation and experience and the role of après coup (Nachträglichkeit) in elaborating the enigmatic core of subjectivity and its traumas, it has shown less interest in the wider contexts of a patient's life. These include macro processes such as history, culture, technology, politics and economics, and local-social factors. The utter realness of historical processes has an impact on both patient and analyst in a web of intersecting worlds. If one sees the transference as a profound ethical obligation and demand, we are
required to give ourselves over to these multiple dimensions in our practice. The psychoanalyst needs to be open to, and curious about, the movements of world history, history in all its terrifying realness in which we are all tragically enmeshed (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 257–258).

This knowledge of “the real”, in Lacanian terms, exposes us to a basic condition of radical negativity, of primal lack and absence that reverberates at the core of subjectivity and through which an ethics of singularity can gain a foothold (Lacan, 1992, pp. 101–129; Ruti, 2012, pp. 189–215). It is only by thus extending the horizon of the analyst’s mind, and of the analytic process, that we can even begin to grasp the broader conditions of “creaturely life” (Santner, 2006).

Each of us is a psychic Petri dish containing what is estranged from real world history in our every day social discourses. Ideology (including psychoanalytic theory) serves to maintain a certain distance from collective or individual encounters with radical negativity in order to avoid a kind of constitutive madness that is fundamental to subjectification. Theory, estranged from its contents becomes the epitome of the kind of “negative knowledge” that Theodore Adorno’s philosophy embraces. Engaging such negative knowledge is an insurance policy against the deadening claims inherent in any unifying dogmatic tradition. Adorno locates the idea of lingering negative knowledge at the centre of his thesis of “negative dialectics” by stating, “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder; they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” (1966, pp. 5).

In other words, the traumatic remainders of ideological thought are the intrinsic contradictions to that thought, or, put another way, “reasons own excess” (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 63). Subjectivity must repeatedly wrestle with its own radical core of negativity to work dialectically with the tension between what is thought and unthought in relation to social discourses that might or might not attempt to serve singularity. Indeed, the constant tension between subject and its own “others” (world and psychical processes) is what gives rise to a singular mind and a capacity to think critically while among others. From this perspective, theory becomes the “bearer of collective responsibility” (Rozmarin, 2011, p. 345) by means of critical thought that is “measured by the extremity that eludes the concept” (Adorno, 1966, p. 365). What is not conceived (uncritically held) becomes estranged in the individual and remains other to the utopian gaze and vulnerable to societal processes of elimination (genocide,
ethnic cleansing, exile), marginalisation (of otherness—queer, disabled, etc.), and/or disempowerment (slavery) (Shuster, 2010, p. 231). Ladson Hinton (2011, p. 380) comments further on this deadly tendency by stating,

> When the ideal is unity, there is always the tendency to abject those who are cast as preventing the achievement of Utopia. The horror of genocide is a prism that magnifies the all-too-human tendency to eliminate the troubling “other”, whom we blame for disrupting our personal or social worlds.

By embracing a plurality of approaches from other disciplines that are also struggling with what remains in shadow, I explore how subjectivity is linked to macro-level factors. Therefore, in addition to psychoanalytic thought, I also draw upon intellectual traditions such as philosophy, anthropology, history, cultural memory, and genocide studies to wrestle with estranged (real) world processes that manifest themselves clinically. Through the later work of Walter Benjamin, I explore historical reverberations of genocide that are enigmatically lodged in the world’s fabric today. I investigate the link between macro and micro processes of world history with the concept of *après-coup* (interpreted from Jean Laplanche) and the intrapsychic conflicts intrinsic to the drives themselves (following Adrian Johnston).

I supplement the theoretical discussion with a historiographical case illustration that cuts across the socio–psychological–historical and geographical fault lines of three continents. The analyst is an American who lived in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the patient is someone who remembers her participation in Arab racism while living in Israel as a child. The patient’s catastrophic excess deeply affects the analyst. The gap between thought and life is confused. Whose thought? Whose life? The past is present and the undead materialise. Flash memories of the rubble and empty silence return and the physical and metaphysical remainders of the mass destruction take up residence in the analyst, who was not yet born when the world was at war.

**Subjectivity as an idiom of cultural distress**

After the death of Hegel in 1831, German philosophy and its dominant...
hold on traditional western thought (history, science, culture, being) had already been thrown into an identity crisis prior to the world wars leading to the collapse of German Idealism and a subsequent “rebirth” of metaphysics as ontology. With Hegel, reality was viewed as organically unified in the context of an absolute system and teleologically conceived. What had been perceived as German cultural uniformity began to be destabilised through the rise of science (positivism) and realism (empirical sciences) and the disciplines began to differentiate themselves from heretofore complete systematic interpretations of reality. A general crisis of European civility ultimately revealed itself in the two world wars, particularly with the founding of the Third Reich in 1933. The intellectual alienation from the unifying concepts of Hegel’s system opened up a vacuum from which a conceptual transformation of history, science, and philosophy could occur and psychoanalysis could emerge. The devastation following the Second World War, along with the irrefutable potential for nuclear annihilation, produced generations of intellectual thought that demanded a radically revision of ethics (Adorno, 2006; Arendt, 1977; Benjamin, 1968; Heidegger, 1949; Lacan, 1992). The ideal (ideology) of universal history and the hope for teleological progression or epistemological/theological redemption totally collapsed.

By the turn of the twentieth century, “critical” opposition to Hegel’s absolute idealism was well under way through the works of Karl Marx and the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School, to name a few. The Frankfurt School (also known as the Institute for Social Research) was founded in 1923, rallying around the desire to create a new kind of critical analysis of modern society that did not exclude Marx or Hegel from its thinking but, rather, saw itself as their heir (Wiggershaus, 2007). The investigation of the phenomenon of enslavement to ideology and developing a means to critique it was a major preoccupation of the Frankfurt School. This desire was driven initially by a concern about the factors that contributed to the rise of Nazism in the first half of the century, such as the alienating social conditions inherent in a bourgeois–capitalist society and the experience of social alienation of the Jews of any class. They held that the present state of knowledge could not adequately address their concerns about the connection between the economic life of a society and the psychic development of the individual who is embedded in culture. Their project organised their enquiries through an infusion of philosophy
with the sciences to include sociology, economics, history, and psychology/psychoanalysis. The group grounded their critique on a conceptual requalification of Hegel’s dialectical method already established by Marx’s revision of Hegel’s view of history into what today would be called a social constructivist perspective. It was epitomised by statements such as, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1970, p. 21). Marx (in 1859) implied that the individual was socially contextualised, just as societies are constituted by the various levels of social structure, economic base, and ideology (Althusser, 1994, pp. 104–105).10

Walter Benjamin responded strongly to claims that western culture could be advanced by creative destruction (i.e., universal historicism), arguing that such theories manifested the jaundiced perspective of the victors, who retrospectively reinterpreted history to justify their own actions, all the while stepping “over those who are lying prostrate” (1968, p. 256). Instead, he urgently directed the historian’s retroactive empathy be directed towards the oppressed, thereby forcing the perpetrator collective (or nation) to face its hypocrisy. Benjamin’s prescient desire eventually bore fruit with the emergence of post-war “genocide” studies that would include anthropological–historical–sociological investigations into the variety of “subject positions” that emerged during and after the Second World War. This was the conceptual birth of the politics of memory in post-genocidal contexts. The term genocide, authored by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, did not even come into public recognition until the United Nations ratified the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948 (Lemkin, 2014).

In more recent times, Slavoj Žižek, guided by Derrida, described the task of critiquing ideology today as an approach that also calls to attention the way the frame itself is part of the framed content (“il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (there is no outside the text)) (Žižek, 1994a, p. 8; Derrida, 1997, p. 158). From this view, there is no “outside” of context or aspect of our being in the world that escapes having influential effects on subjectification. Along those lines, Heidegger had the insight that there is no demarcation between our concepts and the lives we live, so we are left with the challenge of living and thinking without a theoretical meta-ground (Lear, 2000). Our embeddedness within collectives is a source of both social belonging and hegemonic
control. While social norms coercively regulate the terms of our belonging, so do they open up our worldly possibilities within these constraints that give rise to singularity.\textsuperscript{11}

Since the collapse of ideology and the emergence of its critique, we have been held captive by the ever-present spectacle of the “eschatological event”, a phenomenon that replaces and exposes the lack of a theoretical meta-ground. In the past, teleological accounts of the future (German Idealism) had claimed that socio-political events and structures were governed by the developmental emergence of whole nations (persons, peoples, etc.). This strongly contrasted with the prospects of sudden, disruptive eschatological events that cannot be accounted for.\textsuperscript{12} From this perspective, Jacques Lacan, over the course of his lifetime, conceptualised and deepened his notion of the Real in relation to the Symbolic and Imaginary domains of human experience.\textsuperscript{13} The real is that psychical realm of reality that is marked by its utter unintelligibility. As such, it is the repository for the excess of experience that cannot be understood, fantasised, articulated, or otherwise signified. Encounters with the real are always traumatic and remain crucial in our formation as subjects, leaving disorientating and enigmatic traces that mark the very core of our being.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, it is through these traumatic encounters with the real that the drives are activated, eventually manifesting après-coup events that can be retroactively understood somewhat. Later, I argue that the estranged effects of real world history can make themselves known initially through the animation of the drives and in the analytic couple through the clinical transference (fantasy), symbolisation, and the emergence of après-coup events.

Such traumatic engagement with the real opens up possible spaces for the ethics of singularity by paradoxically driving the subject’s relation to objects in his or her world. The desecration of humanity revealed in the eschatological event of real world history arouses the foundational lack in the core of the singular subject and becomes a kind of “call to being” (Miller, 1999, p. 18). In this way, an event in real world history becomes the meeting place between the subject’s drive and culture and is both a function of, and condition for, the possibility of singularity. As a result, post-traumatic subjectivity, after Auschwitz, is an “idiom of cultural distress” that is the outcome of traumatic encounters with what has become estranged from knowledge in real world processes (including history) (Hinton & Lewis-Fernández, 2010).\textsuperscript{15}
Walter Benjamin’s historiographical perspective

Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968) was the last completed text of his intellectual legacy. Following his untimely death, Benjamin entrusted his friend and distant cousin Hannah Arendt and her husband (Heinrich Blücher) with the manuscripts, which they later carried with them on their own precarious emigration to the USA. *Theses* is commonly considered to be a critique of Western modernity’s valorisation of the Enlightenment, expressing the view that visions of future utopias are often used as a justifications for present actions (Hoy, 2012; Löwy, 2005; Witte, 1997). Kant and Hegel are key philosophical architects of a historicism that privileges a utopian picture of the arduous advancement of human self-consciousness within a unified whole. Benjamin explicitly critiques such notions in the collective realm (fascism, socialism) because they rely on a teleological account of the emergence of social and political structures under the rubric of “progress”. But the underbelly of his critique drops below the political realm into a philosophical discourse on the precariousness of losing touch with heterogeneity (singularity, otherness) when it is embedded in the many. Furthermore, he offers a perspective of subjectification that demands that one penetrate and be penetrated by a sense of historic absence (radical negativity) to find out what wants to be known. That is, one discovers its lost possibilities through retroactively suffering its reality. There is little place in models of progressive historicism for the “precariousness” of such lost others (Butler, 2010). Benjamin departs radically from the historicism of his age, from Jewish messianic tradition, and even from the doctrines of the Frankfurt school with which he was affiliated. Ironically and admiringly, Arendt wrote, “The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*” [unlike anything else] (1968, p. 155).

Events of real world history that are retroactively experienced by the subject, according to Benjamin, cannot be described as self-contained moments encapsulated in one unified linear experience, like rosary beads on a string (1968, p. 263). He sought to undermine the traditional view of objective time by offering a temporal model (or index) of the present (time of the now) that was determined through the retroactive force of an eschatological historic event (1968, p. 263). When encountered, these catastrophic events cannot be accounted for...
within the individual's personal experience, and neither have they
been adequately addressed in the historical narratives generated in
the collective. In this sense, Benjamin's perspective of time theoreti-
cally foreshadows Lacan's register of the real through a more explicit
extension of a psychical realm that is the repository of unintelligible
remainder (excess) of real world history that includes and exceeds
personal history. An encounter with historic catastrophe and its tra-
umas reminds us of the foundationless nature of our existence and
remains crucial to our formation as post-traumatic subjects. To embell-
ish Benjamin's iconoclastic historicism, I turn to his text of Thesis IX
(1968, pp. 257–258):

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as
though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly
contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, and his wings
are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is
turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees
one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage
and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken
the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is
blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such
violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irre-
sistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while
the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we
call progress.

An angel is thrown into a moment of horror from a past that
encapsulates him within a bubble that is outside of, and yet paralysed
by, the flow of time. The pile of mounting “wreckage” and “the dead”
hurled at his feet graphically depict the tormenting catastrophe that
weighs him down to the earth. Temporal flow is disrupted by the raw
truth of horror that “fixedly” holds the Angel in its terrible gaze. This
“radical translocation”²⁰ from an illusory present to an irrevocably
smashed past produces a seemingly hopeless desire to “make whole”
what has been ruined. Suddenly, the witness is violently propelled
back into a present temporality (or future to come) that bears a shock-
ing resonance with the horror of the past. The Angelus Novus does not
yet turn his awareness to the direction of the present reality that is
forcefully calling him because his gaze is fixed on a past and endless
destruction that engages him at a somatic level.
The power of such a traumatising reality deeply challenges old presuppositions. We can feel the recursive movement of the Hegelian Aufhebung where the subject (angel of history) steps backwards and "goes under . . . into the deeper timeless ground that was there all along (in its real historical sense) but had not been seen" (Giegerich et al., 2005, pp. 6–7). In so doing, it engages the process of psychological decomposition—a continual churning of prima materia (prime matter) where formlessness (the unthought) becomes form (thought).

An atemporal quality of the unexpected penetrates the scene, one that is not confined to a given period of time or historical event. Benjamin’s messianic moment is motivated by a past enslavement in world history that has been disavowed. He allows for a radicalising sensitivity towards an other(s) reality whose only connection to me is through the shared precariousness of being human. That is, the utter reality of a past enslavement might allow the angel of history to reinterpret the present and inform a present action that could alter a future that is informed by what is estranged from the past. My reading of Benjamin (although he eschewed Heidegger) is that his conception of time is one that incorporates our concerns in our everyday world (the ontic) with the ontological grasp of being that concerns what we care about. Additionally, Benjamin’s conception of the messianic moment anticipates the post-phenomenological perspective of Emmanuel Levinas, who extended the range of what could concretely constitute human experience by introducing sensible responsibility for the other person into the continuum of time and being. This Levinas referred to as the "ethical relation" (Brooks, 2013a, p. 83; Levinas, 2008, p. 111). Benjamin’s range of human experience that rouses the ethical relation (although he did not call it that) extended to any catastrophic event in world history where there exists an absence of ultimate foundations or metaphysical ground. Such an atemporal absence, emptiness, or void lies at the core of the Lacanian subject and reverberates with a particular phenomenal catastrophe across time revealing a moment of truth. This absence can be seen as the "vanishing mediator between nature and culture" (Žižek, 1994b). In other words, the radical negativity of the void inherent in the subject’s core and experienced somatically in catastrophic historical events serves as a vector between the subject and its world. It is here that the ethical dimension, or the possibility for subjectification, opens up within the madness and disorientation that ensue.
Benjamin’s picture of a paralysed gaze into the past abandons the view of futurity altogether, except perhaps through a weak Messianic possibility. He states, “Like every generation that proceeds, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (1968, p. 254). The vehicle through which the past might make its claim is in “now time”, or what Benjamin also refers to as the “Messianic cessation” [of time], through which real history is made present. In explication, Benjamin states, “for every second of [present] time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (p. 264). In these passages, he vividly describes Messianic “time” as the experience of waiting for the Messiah to come, not in redemption for the past, because that is too late. It is not a passive waiting, but involves the process of taking in (being penetrated by) what had heretofore not been seen (while being under one’s nose) until temporality was finally disrupted. Taking in the world in its utter real-ness is what opens up the ethical dimension of the “weak Messianic” possibility.

Jacques Derrida does not impose an actual human Messiah on Benjamin’s Thesis, but attaches messianicity to a disruption of temporality rather than the shattering of a historicity that is based on a utopian telos (Derrida, 1999, p. 250; Hoy, 2012, p. 164). In other words, historicity that is informed by the reality of ongoing and often meaningless unpredictable catastrophes will call for the Benjaminian mandate of acting now as opposed to a view which bases action on a predictable and progressive future (Hoy, 2012). Judith Butler, following Derrida, views the Benjaminian messianic force as the disruption of time itself, where something flashes up from a “forgotten history of the oppressed” to be reconfigured at a moment of (Heideggarian) thrownness (Butler, 2012, pp. 105–104). What we are waiting for, according to Butler, is not an actual Messiah, but a possibility of what “might enter” from (I add) the ruins of a foundation (Butler, 2012, p. 103, Derrida, 2002).25 Past oppressions cannot be redeemed in situ but only through the weak Messianic retroactive gaze, and it is here that we may find precarious access to a moment of collective and individual truth through the singular eyes of the historian. Truth that erupts, or flashes up, radically repudiates consensual or traditional social norms that have been estranged or not “previously counted” (Badiou, 2001, pp. 133–134). In such moments, the subject can begin to translate particularity into some kind of universality, one that levels
distinctions between others by recognising what is common among ourselves as peoples over time but, at the same time, does not disallow what remains irreparably separate (Ruti, 2013).

History, in this sense, is the history of the many who cohabit the earth, revealing their own idiocy to themselves in moments of historical individual truth. Benjamin’s philosophy of history is an egalitarian notion that preserves the inclusive nature of plural cohabitation whose historical oppressions are transmitted via the trans-“temporal index” across time to anyone endowed with a “weak Messianic power”, no matter what one’s socio-political affiliation might be (Benjamin, 1968, p. 254). That is, the revelation of the truth-event and the subject’s fidelity to it (working through) highlights the insignificance of “difference” and is, therefore, applicable to all persons (Ruti, 2012, p. 197). From this perspective, historic trauma (not exclusive to an individual’s personal life or multi-generational kinship) is made known through moments of truth that flash up retroactively through the individual (angel of history, weak Messiah power, anthropological historian). As such, it enters the purview of psychoanalysis. How these processes may enter the psychoanalytic realm, our patients, and ourselves, is the topic of the following sections.

Absence, Trieb, and après-coup

From the beginning, the traumatic effects of mass destruction on subjectivity have captured the attention of psychoanalytic theory. Over the course of Freud’s life, we can follow with fascination his unravelling of the relationship between the internal trauma caused by the subject’s own drive, the externally determined trauma that is accidental (war, injury, etc.), and the psychological elaboration of both through fantasy. Freud situated intrapsychic activity and its ongoing self-forming determinations as the genesis of subjectivity at the heart of mental life.

In contrast, Lacan reversed Freudian intrapsychic subjectivising by positing the real as the determining basis for the human subject. Lacan’s real shifted subjectification from an intrapsychic ontological bubble to an ontology that has no ground due its boundless psychic externality (Mills, 2014b, p. 98). In such a view, the subject is a fantasy of self-relation that is determined from psychical external sources, or a “big Other”. Big Other can manifest through cultural, linguistic, and
semiotic expressions that are embedded in the real. In its various dimensions, the big Other is a dynamic process that is ever-present within our everyday, socially scripted codes of behaviour, and is revealed in the cracks of the virtual symbolic matrix that structures reality for us (Brooks, 2013b; Mills, 2014b). The ethical dimension of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to recognise our enslavement to these psychical external sources while accepting our particular fate as individuals. This can only happen, if we remain in touch with the irreducible enigmatic kernel of the real at the core of our symptoms (*sinthome*) while continually choosing to accept responsibility for the reality of our lives. By relocating the locus of subjective symbolic identity to the real (with its other interlocking imaginary and symbolic registers), Lacan, and post-Lacanian theoreticians have given us a broader theoretical basis from which to understand the effects of historical and trans-historical trauma on individual subjectification across time.26

Before proceeding to drive theory and *après-coup*, I shall sketch out historian Dominick LaCapra’s crucial distinction between loss (historical) and absence (trans-historical) within the sociocultural dimensions of genocide.27 While it is impossible to rigidly demarcate a line between loss and absence in post traumatic situations because of the correspondences between both, LaCapra makes a distinction that will assist us in recognising their correspondences to drive theory.28 LaCapra situates loss on the historical level as something that is the consequence of specific events and can, therefore, be related to a fixed temporal realm (past, present, and future). Historical loss in a post-trauma context calls for mourning on the collective level that, in turn, requires a critique of socio-political processes so that failures of these systems can be acknowledged and responsibility taken (LaCapra, 2001, p. 65). There is a direct correlation between a society’s (and its interrelated political, economic, social and cultural processes) ability to critique its failures and for the individuals within that society to mourn. It is now generally accepted among historians of collective memory that collective and individual memories are social constructions (remember Marx) and that what is remembered is dominated by the discourses created by “elites and counter-elites” of a society who advance their agendas through these processes (Lebow et al., 2006).29 Madness ensues when an individual’s experience of loss or the effects of absence is disconnected from the spirit of mainstream public
discourse in the polity, the media, literature, academia, and education (including psychoanalytic institutes!).

Absence, on the macro level, is instrumental to the formation of the subject. In the trans-historical sense, absence is not an event confined to a given period of time, but refers to the lack of a foundational ground for experiences for which there are no ultimate solutions (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 48, 58). The consequent arrest of libido (life force) is present not only in the face of post-genocidal contexts, but other forms of collective traumatic encounter (weather events, global economic distress, health plagues (such as HIV disease), etc.). The effects of such experiences are well documented. Structural macro changes in the socio–political–economic realms during and after wars are examples of historical traumas where the role of excessive transgression might exceed a society's capacity to come to terms with itself. That is because the ideology holding a society together becomes ineffective in its groundlessness, or its absence of ground becomes grossly evident in the face of continuing mass murder, destruction of infrastructure, civil unrest, and so on.

Hannah Arendt described one extreme example of a lack of collective ground in the “inner emigration” phenomenon that occurred in Germany prior to, and during, the Second World War among German Jews because of escalating persecution. The emigrants Arendt was referring to were German–Jewish citizens who had not really emigrated but behaved (congruently) as if they “no longer belonged to the country . . . and had withdrawn into a form of exile, a shift from the world and its public space” (Arendt, 1968, p. 19). Such a subject is no longer living in the world (in the Heideggarian sense). My life and what is happening to me (excessive transgression against a people) exceeds my conceptualising (symbolising) capacity and impairs my ability to think and respond. Comparative studies looking broadly at the collective effects of trauma, including and beyond the Holocaust, in other parts of the world have described its consistent and well-known cultural or transnational features such as prolonged silence, a phenomenology of coldness, profound indifference, and the negation of pain over decades.

**Trieb**

Absence is foundational to forming the Lacanian subject. The
enigmatic core of subjectivity is inaugurated through the traumatic intrusion of the big “Other” into the subject’s original seamless reality (being on going) from birth. This crucial and originary event affords the subject with its first experience of irreducible separateness from something “other” than itself. This decisive cleavage exposes the subject to the void (lack) between the subject and its primal object (das Ding). This and subsequent experiences of “no-thing-ness” eventually forms an enigmatic core in the subject. What is most interior within the enigmatic kernel is the residue of the pre-symbolic real that from conception is fundamental to the primal relationship with the big Other. Lacan refers to the emptiness at the centre of the real as being neither exterior nor intimate but both as “extimacy” (extimité) (Lacan, 1992, pp. 130, 139). This undigested remainder drives the subject with an enigmatic desire to fill the gap constituted by the original division and defines the very core of our reality that animated through the drives. An encounter with the real will activate existential anxiety in the divided subject that is already decentred and incoherent to itself. The drives are activated and in turn stimulate fantasies (of reunion with the “lost” object) and/or generate symbolic investments (ideals, values, systems of representation) in the world.

Because the subject can never directly access this place that is empty or absent, he or she is continually existentially plagued by a margin of discontent. Absence cannot be overcome or eliminated, indeed, there is no working through with absence, no mourning, or hope for a redemptive future because an absence is not a lost object as there was no-thing to begin with (LaCapra, 2001, p. 57; Žižek, 2006). From this perspective, the nothingness at the core of all beings is the groundless ground that connects all of us. Absence can only be worked through in the sense that “one may learn better to live with it” (LaCapra, 2001, p. 65) through a singularising discourse of sublimation, even though the subject will never attain its aim (reunion with the Thing). In my view, sublimation has more to do with the enlivening possibilities that open up if the subject has the capacity to stay in a kind of dialectical discourse with itself without bursting into flames. While subjectification is an anxiety-ridden and frenzied attempt to reabsorb the void revealed when something “goes terribly wrong”, it also unveils our ontological incompleteness (Brooks, 2013b). Exposure to this “traumatic truth” potentially increases our inability to disinvest ourselves in utopian meanings. A crisis of ideological obsolescence is
what drives the sublimating effort that consists of the felt necessity (somatic urgency) to create new ideals (or objects) by elevating new objects to the “dignity of the Thing” (Lacan, 1992, p. 112).

Žižek and Daly contend that the only way to cope with the kernel of “monstrosity” of absolute negativity that is revealed “when something goes terribly wrong” is through symbolisation (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 65). Working through the libidinal tension that is activated in the face of ultimate disempowerment (absence) in post-Hegelian models of mind relies on a subject’s increasing mastery of dialectically mediating these tensions (taming the beast vs. the breast, and sublimating from this reality informed by truth moments), which is the purview of psychoanalysis.

Extending it from Lacanian metapsychology, Adrian Johnston has elucidated his own version of drive theory. He describes the dynamics that activate the accumulation and distribution of the subject’s libidinal economy when faced with his or her own foundational emptiness. Johnston’s perspective of the drive is one that is strongly linked to temporality, and is split between two axes: the axis of iteration (drive source and pressure) and an axis of alteration (object-directed) (Johnston, 2005). Inherent within the noumenal axis of iteration (also associated with the Freudian “death drive”) is the already constant and impossible pressure to seek oneness with a primordial lost, displaced, or imagined drive object (Lacanian das Ding, or Laplanchian “source object”). This fantasy is stimulated by the subject’s exposure to primal lack provoked by the enigmatic kernel of the real at the core of subjectivity. Think of the death drive as a psychic first responder to a destabilising crisis whose reflexive and deeply unconscious “directive” is to turn inward and seek an originary oneness with the big Other to avoid annihilation at any cost. The irony is that this movement towards the fantasy of safety and permanence is basically a move against life and towards a stasis, and, ultimately, death.

This animation of the death drive, according to Johnston, can reverberate through two versions of superego—not one, as Freud envisioned. Johnston situates the germinal prototype of the superego at the beginning of life (this is a crucial distinction) and as an expression of the source drives alone. These demands arising from the germinal superego manifest with drive (not desire) that is generated from an unconditional demand for gratification and a turn backwards towards primal beginnings (Johnston, 2005, p. 297).
This germinal version of superego foreshadows the later Freudian version that develops in the relations of the older child with authority and is associated with disempowerment (traditionally associated with the Oedipal situation). This later superego manifestation is expressed through desire, associated with the axis of alteration, and is partly contingent on broader social, cultural, and/or historical processes. While being an introjected representative of these external authorities, the later structured superego is also a representative of the real manifesting as a castrating force (the prohibitory other) seemingly outside of one's control. This nuanced two-tiered depiction of the Lacanian superego allows for the subject to have multiple dimensions of response to environmental impingements: the command to return to a hopeless iteration of the earliest experiences of gratification at any cost, no matter how perverse or traumatic, or thrust by a desire that is immersed in the conflict between the subject and an external authoritarian negating force (big Other).

Drive and superego are intrinsically split between two axes, and this is the source of human discontent as neither can ultimately be satisfied. The aim of Johnston's axis of alteration (roughly analogous to Kant's phenomenal realm) is a mediated response to iterative drive pressure to recover the lost object (or ground). Alteration is the temporalised half of the drive and is constituted by ideational representations of the drive (Lacanian sinthome, Freudian Vorstellungen, Jungian archetype, and the effects of après-coup). An axis of alteration response to impingement will activate a desire to recover the lost/erased object (“awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” in the Benjaminian sense). The subject’s capacity to symbolise is crucial in the working through an opening to primordial lack (sublation) without activating death drive consumption and stasis (a flight towards a fantasy of oneness and endless repetition towards that end). Hence, the possibility of “translation” or “retranslation” may occur when the subject assumes his identification with the sinthome (Žižek, 1993, p. 60) and domesticates its kernel of monstrosity through symbolisation (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 65). This process is reminiscent of Benjamin’s yielding to the world’s utter realness that opens the ethical dimension of the weak Messianic possibility.

Johnston describes the diachronic tension between ahistorical and temporal reality played out in the drive when the individual has encountered the real. Sympathetic to Hegelian dialectics, Johnston
(2005, p. 330) theoretically casts the axis of alteration’s response to the impossible demand of the death drive in this engrossing process summary:

Dialectic results from the incompatibility between the axis of iteration’s impossible demand for an eternal return of *jouissance* and the temporalized axis of alterations’ attempted *Aufhebung* of this demand for a repetition of the past within the context of the present—a sublation that, unlike Hegel, always leaves a remainder in terms of the ineliminable margin of dissatisfaction plaguing the libidinal subject.

This constant tension between the regressive capitulation to seek what we can never find (the return towards instinct) and the desire that propels us into the temporal realm of material reality constantly challenges singularity and is a continual source of disruption to the libidinal economy in all of us, although individually uniquely expressed. The individual’s response is dependent upon a capacity to dialectically mediate radical negativity over time. How these effects inscribe themselves in the constellating subject and emerge within the analytic treatment is also dependent upon the analyst’s capacity to bear the extra-ontologicality of extimacy so that a moment of truth might enter, be born, and allowed to reverberate in the transference for later transcription (symbolisation).

Johnston is very clear that he does not directly consider the socio-historical aspects surrounding the manifestations of the drives (2005, p. 154). While he acknowledges that specific “cultural forms” obviously intervene in the dialectical tension played out in the axes of alteration and iteration, his project does not identify or elaborate on these processes. I am arguing that personhood can only be understood by extending the mind’s horizon to real world processes and events within real world history on macro, local, and intrapsychic dimensions as they interface with the drives. Specifically, I have identified the cultural form of absence as it may make itself known on the collective and individual level in post-genocidal contexts experientially when animated through the drives, but also through the manifestation of *après-coup* events where they can be translated, detranslated, and retranslated in analysis.
Après-coup

Freud’s first use of the term Nachträglichkeit (deferred action, roughly translated) is located in the “Project for a scientific psychology” (1895) and figures in various letters to Wilhelm Fleiss (most notably 21 September 1897, letter 69 in Volume 1 of the Standard Edition, pp. 259–260). His initial use of the term was associated with the idea that a traumatic experience is deposited in the unconscious via repression and could be reactivated later through a second event, even years later. In this process, the past trauma is re-experienced in the light of the present one. The difference in sexual development between the different ages when events are re-experienced was crucial to Freud. Developing adolescent sexuality, for instance, can lend a new intensity to earlier childhood happenings. Such affect-laden events might deal a decentring blow, or coup, to the ego’s sense of control. This can provoke great anxiety and a sense of the uncanny (the unheimlich), as both Freud and Heidegger called it. The ego no longer feels heimlich, or “at home”, in its customary world. Freud’s original intent in focusing on these phenomena was to support his theory of infant trauma, but later he became more preoccupied with the phenomenology of repressed memory, its tendency to compulsively return in an interrelated formation of symptoms and the “reconciliation” of memory recovery in the working through of it in the patient’s treatment.

Jung, on the other hand, favoured a notion of retrospective fantasising that privileged the examination of emergent phenomena as relevant to the present neurotic attitude of the patient while disfavouring what he repeatedly referred to as Freud’s infantilisation or deterministic attitude toward the past. He was opposed to what he considered was Freud’s mechanistic focus on aetiological interpretation alone and considered his own theory and practice to be more imminently conceived and teleologically driven. He was apparently not aware of Freud’s more discrete efforts to conceptually address the division between linear determinism and retroactive constructivism (Nachträglichkeit).

According to Jean Laplanche, in 1953 Lacan reintroduced Freud’s term in psychoanalytic literature as après-coup (afterwardness) (Laplanche, 1999, p. 260). Laplanche examined the broader implications of Lacan’s interpretation, which recognised both the infant traumatic origins underlying Freud’s genesis of the term and the relevancy
of the immediacy of emerging phenomena in the analysis (1999). He did not conflate Jung’s retroactive (proceeding from the present to the past) hermeneutic conception with Freud’s deterministic conception (proceeding from the past to the future) but used both while introducing two other crucial elements that are relevant to my argument that real world historic processes can also make a claim on the subject through *après-coup* phenomena. First, Laplanche introduced the relational unconscious through the (m)other to the infant. Unconscious messages are exchanged and implanted by the mother in the helpless subject from birth and are provoked through transference in life and/or analysis throughout life). These enigmatic elements eventually form a core “internal foreign body”—a sort of “alien inside of me, put inside me by an alien”—contributing to the traumatic experiences of primal lack (void) that are repressed (1999, p. 65). Laplanche called these drive-activating elements “source objects,” because they served to stimulate endless fantasy, both destructive and creative throughout life (Laplanche, 1999). Second, included in his reformulation of *après-coup*, Laplanche also developed a model of translation–detranslation and retranslation that emphasised the trace of retroactive enigmatic elements of the source objects that were implanted by the other, the other who is prior to the subject. His method of hermeneutic translation focused on the “message” as opposed to the traditional Freudian “interpretative” method because he viewed the latter to be analyst and phenomena centred *vs.* “message” centred (1999, pp. 138–165, 2011, pp. 115–138).35

I am suggesting that traumatic messages are not only implanted in the subject by the (m)other in the primal relationship regarding the individual’s history (to include transgenerational processes), but are also implanted by the estranged and dissociated demands of individuals (to hear my address) revealed in singular encounters with real world processes including world history. We are all completely vulnerable to these processes and do not have a choice as to how or when or why a demand from the other penetrates our everyday reality. These moments of forgotten world history flash up and somatically penetrate the subject, revealing a particular phenomenal catastrophe across time. This somatic revelation is experienced through a vector of absence that reverberates in the core of the subject and its world. Just as the subject’s personal repressed past can make its claim through the transference and *après-coup* events, so can events of real
world history renew or activate the traumatic scene of originary lack that, in turn, will activate the drives. The subject’s capacity to intervene in the dialectical tensions borne by the drives (that are activated by absence) and translate–detranslate–retranslate the enigmatic messages revealed to him or her through this powerful après-coup event is the purview of psychoanalysis.

I will now turn to a historiographical case illustration whose psychoactivity cuts across the socio-psychological–historical realms of three continents with two participants: an American analyst who lived in post-war Germany as a small child in the 1950s and an Israeli patient who lived as a child amid anti-Arab racism within the tensions of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Because of the constraints of space, I focus primarily on aspects of the analytic relationship that elucidate the major themes of this chapter. In so doing, I must also acknowledge the loss of singularity that is inevitable in case illustrations, and extend my gratitude to “Anna” for her willingness to allow me the selective use of our work together for my own purposes.

Case illustration

After several years of analysis, the patient, Anna, began to draw large graphite renderings of the single face of flowers. I speculated that the phase of analysis we were entering at this juncture was one that would allow her to not only create, but to create safely from under a veil. By this, I mean that the first several years of analysis were almost entirely focused on whether she could take me in, whether I was worthy of trust, or, later, whether I could sufficiently bear her vulnerability and dependency on me. The idiom of her distress was a tyrannical (“superegoic”) force within her that she had named Stalin during a “failed analysis” years ago. This force was directed towards neutralising any life-giving relationship or any enlivening dimension of self that was motivated by a need for gratification from another. The kinds of libidinal activities in which she could engage without arousing the ferocity of Stalin’s murderous admonitions against her (or the other) are difficult to describe because of their fundamental ambivalence. She could, for example, be good, but not too good. She could generate creative ideas within her profession, but she could not appreciate or talk about them and certainly not enjoy acknowledgements of her
achievements. She could engage erotically in her primary relationships, but she could not remain erotically interested in her partner over time. It was beginning to appear that when she unexpectedly encountered a trace of das Ding in activities such as these, her super-ego would neutralise her enthusiasm. It was as if her engagements could blossom, but they could not bear sustaining fruit. Consequently, Anna remained in a chronic state of anxiety and dissatisfaction in her life and in her relationships. She thought that the one exception was her fanatical devotion to her son, whom she could only love. Lately, however, she had begun to resent his periodic needs for her and, for the first time, how that competed with her increasing desire to draw. Her artwork had suddenly become a fanatical activity. Anna clearly appeared to be deeply engaged in the dialectical process of stepping backwards and going under, sustained by an internally driven necessity whose outcome she could not know and did not even care to know.

At one point, she brought several of her drawings into my office. They were magnificent in their size and technique. I was viscerally pulled into them. Many hand strokes had gone into the careful rendering of each section, and the process itself felt reverential. I enquired into the genus of one drawing that Anna said was a hibiscus—an indigenous flowering bush in Israel, her childhood home. With this revelation, I had the sensation of lightening in the room and that both of us were approaching another enigmatic node. The hibiscus is also the national religious symbol (rose of Sharon: Song of Songs), a fact that she did not relay initially. This association inaugurated small pieces of conversation regarding her Israeli roots. She and her family emigrated to Israel in 1971 when she was seven, and she returned to the USA in 1989 following the death of her parents. She had no context for their emigration, but later discovered that her father had been persecuted for some indiscretion and took flight with his family to Israel for safety.

As things developed in the analysis, she began to include the images of fighter jets in the borders of some of her drawings. She commented off-handedly on this. My enquiry into this development was fruitless and Anna insisted that she was being influenced by her young son’s interest in fighter jets. Anna’s capacity to slip in and out of her use of Hebrew (another encounter with das Ding through the mother tongue?) was a prominent unspoken presence, and the
association to having been raised in Israel only emerged after she spoke of the hibiscus drawing. Another link to her Jewish heritage was through the occasional mention of physical symptoms related to her Ashkenazi heritage that was emerging in mid-life. However, she evinced no curiosity about those roots.

I had not yet become curious about Anna’s real history, remaining contained within the spell of my more conventional analytic superego. I was focused more on the remnants of familial material that were beginning to emerge with regard to Anna’s profound sense of alienation, despite being surrounded by others. I was beginning to formulate a picture of an intellectually gifted and precocious child who had been emotionally neglected. She had developed serious persecutory anxiety and dread that emanated from a germinal and tyrannical superego that undermined any experience of embodiment with crushing, shaming admonishments. Her childhood was punctuated with many incidents of active rebelling against this deadening drive that was constantly threatening to embalm her. Embalming, in this case, can be seen as a self-deadening escape from the primal emotions (need, trust, belonging, etc.) that needed to be experienced.

Around this time, I attended an Anselm Kiefer exhibit in San Francisco entitled “Heaven and Earth”. Kiefer is a German artist who was born in Germany in 1945. This exhibition included some drawings from his private collection along with a number of massive wall length panels and structures that were collected for a thematic survey of his work. I was probably drawn to Kiefer because I had lived in post-war Germany as a very small child in the mid-1950s, returning to the USA in the later 1960s. I felt an affinity for the country. I was not prepared for my strong bodily reaction to his work. I cannot specify which pieces were psycho-activating. It was the whole body of work, often monochromatically ruinous, that entered into me and reverberates to this day. I left the museum in a daze, even leaving my jacket behind. Walking back to my hotel, I experienced what I can only understand to be flashback memories of rubble, dark landscapes, and disorientation. Heretofore, my childhood memories of living in Germany had held a kind, unchallenged, illusory grace of living in the “old world”. My parents are dead, so I talked with my siblings about my response. That evoked a number of conversations that, in turn, sparked a serious anthropological enquiry into my own unmetabolised experiences of living in Europe during the immediate post-
war period. I discovered a small photograph album belonging to my father containing images he had taken in 1945 when he was an infantry private in Germany. The first image was of a number of dead bodies lying on the ground, some clothed in the striped material of concentration camp inmates. American troops, including my father, who took the photograph, are standing on the perimeter looking at the horror. Another photo shows the remains of charred dead bodies and is labelled “crematorium”. There were many pictures of ruined buildings, the rubble of a devastated Berlin, refugees on foot, all reaffirming my own earlier resonances with Kiefer’s images that had evoked my affective–sensuous and preverbal memories. At that time, Europe still remained a “savaged continent” (Lowe, 2012).

I do not imagine that my own personal psychological process of opening up to the horrors of the Second World War evoked a concurrent deepening of Anna’s expressive creative process. Instead, my heightened awareness of the utter horror of genocide, of war, and of mass destruction awakened my visceral curiosity about the macro-level historical processes of Anna’s life, of her ancestors, and of their reverberations in her life today. Around this time, Anna’s art took another more dramatic turn and I felt freer to articulate my own curiosity about various aspects of her process and work. While her drawings continued to be massive and meticulously rendered, she dramatically shifted to human forms. The objects of her paintings were now women in various tender poses “draped in sheets” that looked very much like Arab women veiled in burkas. She noted this relationship, but was more interested in her developing technique in a creative process that had taken on a frenzied focus once more. Lacan elaborates to some length on the function of the veil (1992). He stated, “If the Thing were not fundamentally veiled, we wouldn’t be in the kind of relationship to it that obliges us, as the whole of psychic life is obliged, to encircle it or bypass it in order to conceive it” (p. 118). From this perspective, Anna’s drawings can, thus, be viewed as sublimated objects raised “to the dignity of the Thing” (p. 112) or a way of creatively working through the originary absence of it through the rendering of veiled women. The vehicle of sublimation is the laborious repetition of strokes, each one creating a new and more profoundly engaging dimension of the figure (Ruti, 2012, p. 136). The compulsion to repeat demonstrated in her meticulous renderings in multiple drawings with similar themes did not appear to be a movement to ensure
her survival (axis of iteration) but seemed to enigmatically reach beyond it, but to what? The women in the drawings were intimately touching each other’s faces and looking into each other’s eyes. Anna was unable to elaborate on this development. Instead, she focused on the pragmatic details of dressing the models, posing them and her experience of drawing them. Staging her models was a very intimate and a crucial aspect of her work. She was pulled into the entire process and everything else in life seemed less vital or engaging.

Eventually, the veil lifted and Anna spontaneously made the link that the women over whom she was so tenderly labouring were Palestinian Arabs. This revealed a terrible personal shame that she had long been harbouring outside her awareness. It clearly appeared that her artistic process, starting with the rendering of hibiscus to now, was a creative response to après-coup revelations as they were meted out to her through her drawing. This realisation became more formally concretised in language when she was asked to exhibit her work and present a talk about it in a public forum. Anna’s talk centred on her awakening to her own uncritically held hatefulness towards “Arabic people”. Her talk described her frequent experiences of terror when the air-raid sirens would alert her and others to retreat to the bomb shelter during the Yom Kippur War when she was ten. She described the solemn ritual of watching the announcer on the television relay the names of the dead with regularity. The message that Arabs were cowardly animals without respect for human life was also communicated explicitly by educational officials, the media, and passively expressed in the hateful mannerisms of her social group towards Arabic people on the street and in public life. The State of Israel was established in 1948, only three years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. The Holocaust plays a central role in the life of its inhabitants, its government’s policies of state, cultural norms, education, and political decision making (Cohen, 2010). The birth of Israel, as is well known, occurred in the context of a war of survival against indescribable persecution against the Jews in the European continent and against the local Arab inhabitants who already occupied the same lands. This conflict tragically exists to this day, one that Anna refers to along with her very personal acknowledgment of participating in hateful racism herself. Nevertheless, Anna was emboldened to reach beyond the hypnotic inducements of socio-political ideology to her own truth reality, thus diversifying her character and rendering racial difference
as insignificant in a manner that did not subsume the Arab into the Jew, but recognised both as human, although different.

Power remains central to the politics of memory and in how memory is collectively framed. Anthropologist Alexander Laban Hinton elaborates on this notion regarding the politics of memory when genocide is central, stating,

... some groups have the means—often through the control of government and media—to assert their genocidal imaginary and suppress that of others, even as this genocidal imaginary may be contested and resisted through local protests, ritual, personal remembrance, a lingering sense of wounding, and even silences that refuse to instantiate official narratives. (2009, p. 11)

Anna’s drawing can be seen as a dialectical process that engaged the dissociated remainder of the violence in which she had unwittingly participated on both the subjective and cultural levels. As the veil lifted, the remainder symbolically emerged on canvas through a creative struggle. Anna’s fierce commitment to wrestle with, rather than evade, her drive tensions so that she could yield to symbolisation (the Lacanian sinthome) is the ethical dimension of subjectivity and the core of the psychoanalytic project. Such a yielding opened the weak Messianic possibility and eventual memory of her participation in collective hate (that which had been estranged). Symbolisation, in this sense, is not the mindless production of uncritically held images, and neither is it a generation of mythical narratives that attempt to reclaim what is lacking to fill up our exposures to the absence at the core of subjectivity. It is a process that works with the image and thinks it through so that what is available to knowledge is made known (Giegerich, 1999; Heller, 2006). Anna had to struggle with her own constitutive madness in the form of symbolisation (a more mature superego function generated by the axis of alteration), against “Stalin’s” (germinal superego activated by the axis of iteration) admonitions to disengage from this struggle and remain mindless. The domestication of Stalin and the symbols Anna produced was a way of living with radical negativity vs. disassociating from it (Žižek & Daly 2004, p. 65). The dialectical movement to engage the negativity of a collective and personal breakdown of meaning (or thought) first emerged symptomatically in a chronic state of dissatisfaction and the symptoms of genetic illness. Later, Anna’s idioms of distress
manifested through symbolic drive representations and the creative process of working through the effects of après-coup.

As yet, Anna has shown no penetrating curiosity about the historical societal trauma that indelibly destroyed her ancestral community in Russia, compelling her people to emigrate to the USA almost a century ago. Stalin, the real dictator, was well known for his anti-Semitism and reputation for being one of the most ruthless leaders in history and he ruled the homelands of Anna’s ancestors. Because of pogroms, her paternal grandfather immigrated to the USA from a village south of Minsk, Belarus, prior to the Second World War. Minsk was the site of one of the largest Jewish Ghettos in the Second World War, where thousands were killed with only a handful surviving. About eighty per cent of the city was destroyed during the war, and the Jewish population in the area was reduced from thirteen per cent to 0.6% (Lowe, 2012). Anna does not know much about her paternal grandmother, except that she was an Eastern European Jew. Her maternal grandmother and grandfather were also from somewhere in Eastern Europe, probably Poland. In the USA, all four grandparents spoke Yiddish at home. Her father’s parents did not speak English.

Spectral shards of Stalin continue to emerge in a life deprived of a sustaining engagement with her ethnicity. The erasure of symbolic ethnic identity leaves her without a sense of historic continuity, except in the estranged excess of unintelligible negative knowledge and its persecutory remainder. This remainder is played out in the superego structure of Stalin that is lodged in the vortex between personal and impersonal mythic history. Domesticating Stalin might take a more eccentric and unpredictable course with what has been fundamentally smashed and irretrievable in Anna’s world history. As such, the death drive is a necessary provocateur that activates the constant dialectical tension between the regressive capitulation to seek what we can never find and the desire that propels us towards the possibilities of singularity in relation to the timeless realities of hegemonic power. Anna was able to translate her particularity by looking into the veiled symbolic face of the Arab whom she blindly hated in response to the context-specific and multi-dimensional void of her own particular circumstances. In the course of her drawing, she began to recognise what is common in herself and as a human being among others without rejecting what remains irremediably separate.
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Notes

1. Wolfgang Giegerich made a similar statement: “The world in its utter realness needs to be included in psychology” (2008, p. 26).

2. Emmanuel Levinas, the post-Heidegger phenomenologist, asserted a pre-cognitive heteronymous relation towards the other person that involved a primal unknowability and responsibility (Brooks, 2013a). For Levinas, the primal relation to the command of the other was the nexus of ethics and of subjectification.

3. Henceforth, my use of the term “real” (lower case “r”) will be an incorporation of the Lacanian notion of the Real, a crucial extension of the unconscious that Lacan develops particularly in his later work, and one that I elaborate on throughout.

4. One thinks here of Hannah Arendt’s arguments for human plurality as the basic condition of both action and speech into a political ontology (the polis) that did not view the subject as an isolated mind, but as embedded in a web of actions and words with others (Arendt, 1958, pp. 175–247).

5. Contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of the effects of trauma on Holocaust survivors has expanded to include the transgenerational effects on descendants of victims over time (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004; Rozmarin, 2011; Sharf, 2007; Winship & Knowles, 1996). Post-war second and third generation German psychoanalysts and psychoanalysts of German descent have written about the dynamics of shame and guilt within their profession of having a Nazi past (Frie, 2012). Davoine and Gaudillière advocate a process that engages the patient’s symptoms of madness from a transgenerational (via blood lines) perspective, an approach that has only recently become more mainstream in contemporary psychoanalytic thought. However, the experience of virtual secondary witness in the field of historical and societal trauma is generally less discussed in psychoanalytic literature, although it becomes a focus here. A secondary witness might not have directly experienced the Gulag, Holocaust, Hiroshima, or other sites of trauma. He or she might not be a descendant of first-hand
witnesses (victim, perpetrator, the dead, bystander, occupier, conquered, etc.), and yet be strongly affected by the effects of mass catastrophes that tear open the socio-political fabric. These are communal fault lines that cut across continents and decades and are present in a kind of virtual latency waiting to manifest itself. If the forces within various societal structures (promoting ideological certainty, moving on, etc.) enforce a narrative that represses the recognition of profound trauma, then a repressive madness often ensues.

6. There are too many factors to elaborate on here except for in the broadest of brush strokes. See Schnädelbach (1984) for an exquisite and erudite rendering of many dimensions of historic influence that led to the demise of German Idealism that are beyond the scope of this chapter. Turning to Hegel, Žižek, who is sympathetic to Hegel in his theoretical post-Lacanian enterprise, stated, “even the most fanatical partisan of Hegel cannot deny that something changed after Hegel, that a new era of thought began which can no longer be accounted for in Hegelian terms of absolute conceptual mediation” (Žižek, 2012, p. 236). See also Herbert Schnädelbach’s Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933 (1984) and David Couzens Hoy’s The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality (2012).

7. Hegel’s system was not entirely disregarded. Eventually, in the first half of the twentieth century, French phenomenologists (after Husserl’s inauguration of his approach) began to conceive of Hegel as the filial ancestor of the phenomenological method (including Alexender Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, Jean Whal, Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre). Hegel’s philosophy has been influential to a number of contemporary philosophers, such as Charles Taylor, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, Slavoj Žižek, and Jon Mills, to name a few.

8. There are many others, of course, who address the break from epistemology, but I place these authors in the foreground due to their placement (proximity to the First and Second World Wars) in history and their influence on me in the writing of this chapter. Jacques-Alain Miller noted in the back of Lacan’s Ecrits (2004, p. 358) that Lacanian epistemology

... marks, in my sense, psychoanalysis’ position in the epistemological break, insofar as the subject foreclosed from science returns the impossible of his discourse through the Freudian field. There is, therefore, but one ideology Lacan theorizes: that of the modern
age, that is, the paranoiac subject of scientific civilization, whose imaginary is theorized by a warped psychology in the service of free enterprise.

9. Theorists most commonly associated with the Frankfurt School, or the Institute for Social Research, are Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse. Walter Benjamin was loosely affiliated with the Institute until his death. Because of Nazi persecution, many of these theorists emigrated to the USA (under the hospitality of Columbia University in New York) until after the war. Their work is considered to be the original source of the discipline of critical theory. Adorno, Arendt, and Gerhard Scholem were responsible for the posthumous publication of his work and letters. Arendt referred to Adorno as Benjamin’s “first and only disciple” (Arendt, 1968, p. 2).

10. Put another way, for Althusser, subjectivity and ideology are inextricably bound.

11. Singularity, as I am generally using it, is associated with post-Lacanian thought and refers to the truth of the subject (the individual subjected to cultural hegemonies) and to what undermines a naïve faith in the legitimacy of the big Other (in all of its socio-cultural antagonisms) (Ruti, 2012, p. 226).

12. Philosopher David Couzens Hoy provides a uniquely lucid discussion on competing theoretical notions of temporality (Kant, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Gadamer, Sartre, Bourdieu, Foucault, Bergson, Deleuze, Žižek, and Derrida) and its import on subjectification. His salient chapter (4) “The times they are a-changin’: on the future” specifically explores the themes of teleology and eschatology in a philosophical vein (Hoy, 2012).

13. It is not possible to fully elaborate on the tripartite structure of psychical reality fundamental to Lacan’s conception of the real here, other than to highlight that each held equal significance in his later work. Lacan positioned the Imaginary (fantasy), Symbolic (language and representation), and real as knotted together in a living process that informed the singularity of the subject through traumatic encounters with the real. See Mills (2014b) and Žižek (2007) for lively introductory discussions on Lacan’s theory.

14. Eric Santner (2001), in his reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig, elegantly describes how the “nothingness of revelation” (taken from Scholem in a letter to Benjamin), or the “excess of validity over meaning”, so profoundly effects the formation of the subject in its
boundedness to fundamental fantasy and primal desire (pp. 31–45). Later, I discuss Laplanche and Johnston’s post-Lacanian perspectives on how this traumatic colonisation of alterity effects the libidinal economy of the drives and memory (après-coup).

15. I first noted the term “post-Traumatic Subject” in an article written Slavoj Žižek (2008). The term “idiom of distress” has become popularised in the past decade in its application of the cross-fertilisation of psychiatric and anthropological studies on the confluence of culture and trauma. See Hollan (2004), Hinton and Lewis-Fernández (2010). Following the collapse of communism, the concentration site of Auschwitz became the master signifier for the “Europeanization of Holocaust consciousness,” and has since become an idiom for post-genocidal distress (Stone, 2010, p.104).

16. This text was composed approximately a year prior to Benjamin’s untimely death in 1940 following the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Hitler and Stalin that presaged the onset of the Second World War, the immediate fall of France and threat to Britain. Accordingly, Benjamin, already a German–Jewish refugee living in Paris, obtained an American visa and fled France illegally en route to Spain with other refugees. After precariously hiking a trail over the Pyrenees with a heart condition, he was turned back by border guards because he lacked a French exit visa. He was to be interned in a French camp the following morning, but was allowed to stay in temporary custody in a hotel in town (Port Bou). It is speculated that Benjamin took his own life with an overdose of morphine tablets (Löwy, 2005). A year later, the Final Solution was instigated.

17. On this scenario, Arendt’s biographer recounts, “While they waited for their ship in Lisbon, the Blüchers read Benjamin’s “Thesis” [on the Philosophy of History] aloud to each other and to the refugees who gathered around them and debated the meaning of his moment to moment messianic hope” (Young-Bruehl, 1982, p. 162).

18. Historical studies today, particularly those influenced by Hayden White’s meta-philosophy of history call into question the possibility of a unified overarching narrative that purports to make sense of the events of history as a whole. Instead, the “new history” becomes a sort of anthropological historiography of individuals and their intersecting worlds of local, sociocultural contexts and macro-level processes (Ankersmit et al., 2009; Domańska, 1998). See Butler’s classic and moving introductory essay, “Precarious life, grievable life”, found in Frames of War (2010) as a keen example of interdisciplinary scholarship (philosophy, critical theory, philosophy of history) that
focuses on socio-political processes of “framing” war that disavow particularity, precariousness (to include sanctioned mourning), and the material realities of violence and mass destruction.

19. Arendt described Benjamin’s work as more metaphorical than allegorical. The allegory, she stated, “must be explained before it can become meaningful”, while the metaphor, since Homer, “establishes a connection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy and requires no interpretation” (1968, pp. 165–166). What fascinated Benjamin, Arendt speculated, was “never an idea, it was always a phenomenon . . . the wonder of appearance—was always at the center of his concerns” (1968, p. 164). Arendt uses the terms, phenomenon and appearance interchangeably. These complex statements from a Heideggarian and Kantian scholar (the former with whom she studied while he was writing Being and Time) require brief exploration. Early Heidegger clearly distinguishes the phenomenon as signifying “That which shows itself in itself, the manifest” (1927/2001 H 28). Later in the same sequence, Heidegger refers to appearance (which he equates with “semblance”) as “that which looks like what it is not” (or a not showing itself) (1927/2001 H 29). Heidegger does not conflate phenomena with appearance, as Arendt appears to be doing in her statement about Benjamin’s fascination. From this we can speculate that, since she knew Heidegger’s work, she was probably stating that Benjamin was interested in both the manifest and its appearance, especially since the unconcealment of truth (or A-lethia, in Heidegger’s parlance) occurred within the ontological dimension of the clearing—a perspective that Heidegger viewed as a primal phenomenon that undulated back and forth between distortions and unconcealment (Brooks, 2011, p. 507; Heidegger, 1927/2001, H 13, H 188). Total clarity in the clearing could never be achieved—as Dasein is “equiprimordial both in the truth and in untruth” (1927/2001: H 223). Viewed in this light, Benjamin’s philosophical position challenges the “weak messianic historian” to be empathically moved by the estranged remainders of humanity’s abrogation as they undulate in and out of unconcealment. While Benjamin was vehemently opposed to Heidegger’s work, Arendt’s perception of his fascination with truth, in this sense remains plausible in the present context. See Mills (2014a) for a rigorous discussion on Heidegger’s view of truth and its crucial relevance to psychoanalysis.

20. This term “radical dislocation” is used by Wolfgang Giegerich (2008, p. 12) in a slightly different context, yet one that is relevant here. He states,
we have to go through the whole process of entering psychology mentally from scratch, time and again in each particular instance of our endeavoring to do psychology . . . The entrance into psychology does not have the character of a transition, but of a radical translocation, transplantation.

21. The Hegelian term Aufhebung, or sublation, is commonly misunderstood as a union of opposites presented in situations of dynamic tension. Instead, sublation is a threefold recursive process starting from a position (of unthought thought) that is cancelled or negated, retained and “decomposed”, and, last, elevated to a new level retaining all of its foundational elements. It is not a constructive syntheses but, instead, a dynamic process (as Giegerich states it) of “stepping backwards and going under, rather than a utopian waiting for a resolution” (Giegerich et al., 2005, p. 7). Also, see Mills (2002) for a similar explication of the sublation process and its application to psychoanalysis.

22. Jung became fascinated with the medieval practice of alchemy as a metaphor for psychological process of individuation. Prima materia, in this sense, was the “unconscious seed” or “self” that potentially bridged the opposing noumenal and phenomenal realms of the mind into a kind of unifying wholeness with all of humanity (Jung, 1953[1944]). Here, I am using the term in the context of an eschatological notion of subjectification vs. Jung’s teleological foundationalist notion of individuation. While Jung’s model of the psyche (like post-Lacanian thinkers Žižek and Johnston) found theoretical inspiration from German Idealist theory in their mutual use of Kant’s split subject (and boundary concept), their projects are epistemologically incompatible. Both Žižek and Jung’s elegant extension of Kant’s boundary concept share basic elements with the crucial exception of the sources of tension that purportedly ignite the mind’s emergence. Jung’s subjectivising epicentre was the Unus Mundus, also located in an all-encompassing “boundless” psyche “out there” (communicating itself through the psychoid archetypes) and did not account for sources of signification deriving from personal unconscious processes (fantasies, dream material, transference phenomenon, nachträglich shifts in temporality, etc.) or those that emerge in relationship to organicity (the role of the drives, instincts, neurological diversities, physical suffering, etc.). See Brooks (2011, 2013b) for full discussion.
23. Elsewhere, I have, at length, discussed a comparison and contrast of Heidegger’s and Levinas’s conceptions of temporality and its subjectifying import (Brooks, 2013a).

24. Graves and Hodge cite Bernard Shaw at such a trans-historical scene depicting loss of the sacred:

I stand mid-way between youth and age like a man who has missed his train: too late for the last one and too early for the next . . . I have no Bible, no creed: the war has shot both out of my hands . . . I am ignorant: I have lost my nerve and am intimidated; all I know is that I must find the way of life for myself and all of us, or we shall surely parish . . .—Bernard Shaw. (Graves & Hodge, 1994, p. 191)

25. Benjamin’s conception of history is based on a “constructive principle” that is situated at the epicentre of catastrophe, not unlike Heidegger’s clearing, Derrida’s notion of spectrality, the Badiouian event, the extra-ontologicality of the Levinasian il y a, the Kantian boundary concept, the Jungian psychoid, and the Lacanian extimité—all opening up dimensions of alterity, nothingness, or absence in the radical dislocation of the flow of time.

26. Traditional psychoanalysis is future orientated (teleological) and blind to the symptoms of trauma that demand historical context beyond Oedipal and infant configurations. By teleological, I refer to the philosophical doctrine that purports an aim toward some end of what is deemed “good” depending on the particular tradition of psychoanalysis. For Jung, what was deemed good was the teleological trajectory of individuation, while the transformation of the pleasure principle by the ego was Freud’s aim (Brooks, 2013a; Jung, 1928, par. 239; Wallwork, 1991, p. 122). See Jonathan Lear’s innovative and contemporary view of teleology in his article “Technique and final cause in psychoanalysis: four ways of looking at one moment” (2009) and another rich discussion about the outdatedness of teleology in Freud in Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life (2000).

27. One of the distinguishing qualities of LaCapra’s work as a historiographer is that he is sympathetic to psychoanalysis and particularly to Lacan.

28. For example, on the subjective level, one could sustain a loss—say, the death of a child—and this could in turn evoke the experience of primal lack (or absence) that I discuss below.
29. See Hinton (2002), Hinton and O’Neill (2009), Kansteiner (2006), and Bell (2010) for a rich variety of macro- and micro-level scholarship (anthropological, historical, and cultural memory) that examines the expanding fields of global post-trauma memory and genocide after 1945.

30. Psychoanalytic interpretations of genocide have been met with rising criticism among memory studies academics, even those who are sympathetic to its use. Inherent to the use of a critical theory that focuses on subject effects is the danger of relativising collective processes by projecting individual psychology to them as well as the danger of obliterating historical specificity (Caruth, 1996; Kansteiner, 2002; Lu, 2013). Another challenge has to do with navigating the threshold between individual and collective memory and an inherent danger of conflating the theoretical and methodological distinctions between individuals and societies (Kansteiner, 2002). Taking account of what is interpreted, distorted, and memory’s relation to history remains a challenge to the various disciplines interested in genocide. The position I hold in this chapter adheres to the general aim of psychoanalysis, that of working closely with individual experience, yet also acknowledges the macrospheric dimensions of subjectification that are always already at play in the lingering effects of catastrophe.

31. A number of intellectuals have attempted to understand the social-political justification for terror and the mass murder—an astonishing trend that Paul Berman claims developed since the French Revolution, rising to a zenith in eastern and western Europe (to include Soviet Russia) and Asia (Korea, Japan, China) in the first half of the twentieth century and still finds brutal expression today around the globe (Berman, 2004).

32. Lacan, in his lectures on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959–1960), picks up the theme of creation ex nihilo following Heidegger’s meditations on creation about a vase and the void it holds (Heidegger, “The Thing”, 1971, pp. 164–184, and Lacan, 1992, p. 120). Crucial to our discussion here, Lacan relocates creation (or sublation) from nothingness from the purview of God (out there) into a “coextensive” relationship with the “Thing” that he situates at the centre of the real (1992, pp. 119–123). The Lacanian “Thing” is unknowable, beyond signification, and is circled by the drives. Das Ding is correlated from Kant’s concept of ding-an-sich (thing-in-itself), the concept referring to the non-phenomenal source (noumenal) of all intuitions. See William Eggington’s expansive discussion regarding Heidegger and
Sartre’s crucial influence on Lacan in his formulation of the ethical dimension of nothingness at the core of subjectivity (Egginton, 2006, pp. 29–74).

33. Post-Lacanian views of singularisation abound and a study of this topic alone is a separate project (see Critchley, 2007; Johnston, 2008; Ruti, 2012).

34. I thank Ladson Hinton III for underscoring the importance of this point (personal conversation, August 2014).

35. For a thorough introduction to the theory and practice of Laplanche, I recommend Scarfone (2013) and Hinton (2009).

36. Adorno characterised the superego as operating under the spell of social power where one is acting within the ideology of one’s tradition without being curious about its remainder (2006). See also Rozmarin’s fascinating critique of psychoanalysis through the lenses of Foucault and Adorno (2011).


38. I was also reminded of the occasion that occurred in a tiny hamlet outside of Heidelberg in the mid 1950s. My three-year-old brother suddenly broke away from my mother’s hand and ran into the middle of the cobblestoned street. His tiny body became perversely animated as he began to hyperbolically goosestep down the street, exclaiming “Heil Hitler” at the top of lungs until my embarrassed parent swept him away. How does this happen? I can only speculate that my brother was responding to the remainder of the lingering effects of catastrophe and his discharge (as opposed to going mad) mirrored back what was repressed.

References

THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CATASTROPHIC EFFECTS


CHAPTER FIVE

For the love of money: dissociation, crime, and the challenges of ethical life

Ronald C. Naso

Jim was the chief financial officer of a non-profit organisation serving underprivileged children. Under his leadership, the organisation had grown from a small clinic operating out of the basement of a local church to an institution with a staff of over 200 and an operating budget in the multi-millions. Jim was credited with making much of this happen. Single-handedly, he had raised an enormous amount of money for the agency. He felt enormous pressure to sustain what he had created and suffered a variety of stress related symptoms as a result. Most recently, he found it nearly impossible to concentrate on his work.

Especially interesting was the contrast between Jim’s self-perception and how others saw him. He was palpably insecure and quick to feel shame. By his own admission, he was ill-suited to a leadership role because he was indecisive and took criticism very personally. He dreaded the unavoidable conflict and tension inherent in a leadership role. Initially, the treatment focused on his struggle to balance family commitments and the demands of a stressful career. Specifically, it identified the core fantasy that success would undo life-long insecurities and the stress of functioning consistently at a high level.
I knew that something was wrong when Jim phoned me unexpectedly one afternoon. I was saddened, but not surprised, to hear that he was likely to lose his job. After all, this was commonplace since the economic downturn in 2008. However, I was shocked to learn that he had embezzled a large sum of money from his agency and was facing criminal prosecution. His offer to repay these funds had been rejected and the story would soon go public. He sat slumped over on my couch, face in hands, contemplating the prospect of telling his wife and children that their father was probably going to jail and that their lives would be ruined.

This chapter describes the psychoanalytic psychotherapy of a forty-five-year-old man seen twice weekly for more than five years. It focuses particularly on material that emerged during the fourth year of his treatment when his crime was discovered. Why did he steal from an agency he had devoted his entire professional life to building? Why did he violate standards he appeared to respect in other areas of his life? Why did he deceive in circumstances where honesty was equally possible? In responding to these questions, I shall contextualise Jim’s criminal behaviour. He was a man who honoured his commitments, especially those involving his family and career. He possessed moral motives and generally comported himself in accordance with them.

The question as to why Jim acted as he did takes on new urgency when one considers how easily otherwise moral individuals engage in evil. This phenomenon is the rule rather than the exception in wartime. However, even outside of sanctioned military action, ideologically driven violence and corporate malfeasance confronts us globally and at every turn. One is mistaken to regard these actions as rare and perpetrated only by monstrous individuals. Terrorism, genocide, violence, and white-collar, non-violent crimes of all kinds are daily occurrences, making it difficult to reduce the psychology of perpetration solely to individual pathology. Better put, explanations relying solely on individual psychopathology, whatever its aetiology, simply miss the mark.

For this reason, I focus on an offender who was not overtly antisocial. As far as I could tell, he was a devoted husband and father and, for most of his career, handled his work ethically and responsibly. Rather than presenting with antisocial personality disorder, Jim’s personality more closely resembled that of the vulnerable narcissist (Wink, 1991). Empathic and attuned to the needs of others, all that I
knew about him suggested that he was the antithesis of someone likely to offend. Yet, psychoanalytic exploration revealed an inner life animated by disavowed, entitled expectations. Inwardly, Jim was immured in a cycle of inauthenticity and shame. Moral motives were present, but selectively dissociated. His vulnerability to dissociation under conformity pressures was key to understanding his character. Conformity, or at least its appearance, promoted attachment security and elicited the mirroring that was so important to him.

I shall argue that the findings from Jim’s treatment provide a broadened view of integrity. Rather than a fixed trait or structure, integrity is dynamic and malleable. It is best regarded as a process encompassing both self-directed and unconscious elements. For this reason, moral behaviour is never a straightforward product of rational deliberation and/or character, but almost always depends on unconscious processes that thwart further deliberation and lead to a refusal to relinquish core beliefs and commitments when faced with adversity. The paradox of integrity is that it involves openness and closure, tolerance and intolerance to alternatives and new possibilities. It is never reducible completely the content of moral deliberations, or to attitudes and traits laid down in early life. Rather, it is the product of a dynamic process that necessitates the reworking of these influences and structures in the light of new learning, balancing adaptation with choices that accord with one’s ethical identity.

An unlikely criminal

White-collar criminals are singularly adept at exploiting opportunities for monetary success that cannot be achieved legitimately. Not only do they desire financial success, but often insist on achieving it in a relatively short span of time. Rarely satisfied with their achievements, they are excessively self-centred, grandiose, and attention-seeking, willingly placing their personal goals ahead of moral standards. When news of a massive fraud perpetrated by Enron became public in 2001, two of the main protagonists, Ken Lay and Jeff Skilling, were described during their trials as “arrogant and controlling from start to finish” (Barrionuevo, p. 13). They were actively self-enhancing, grandiose, vindictive, aggressive, exhibitionistic, and exploitive—quintessentially narcissistic. Their pursuit of power, success, wealth,
and admiration blinded them to others’ perceptions, so long as they got what they wanted.

Recent research utilises a variation of Merton’s (1938) general strain theory (GST) to explain white-collar crime. While the original assumption of this theory has been sharply criticised,1 Agnew (2001) broadened the range of motives encompassed by GST to include the inability to achieve success legitimately. Specifically, he identified “the failure to achieve core goals that are not the result of conventional socialization” (p. 343) as a key motivator and, in so doing, provided a way of understanding actions that rely on deception rather than violence (Green, 2006) as well as on selective rather than indiscriminate norm violations. Threats to financial security, lifestyle (Lodi-Smith & Jimerts, 2007) and professional failure (Wheeler, 1992) are particularly compatible with Agnew’s understanding of white-collar crime, activating dysphoric emotions that are relieved by transgression. In this context, financial motives betoken a subjective experience of wanting or needing more than one has.

Because white-collar crime requires opportunity, specifically, circumstances in which detection is unlikely, it is hypothesised that offenders recognise, but do not honour ethical principles (Benson & Kerley, 2000; Weisburd & Waring, 2001). For most of their lives, they may have followed the rules and comported with norms, their behaviour indistinguishable from those who never offend. However, their security threatened, they opportunistically try to advance themselves. It is, therefore, more accurate to describe their value systems as flawed rather than non-existent; they possess moral motives, but chose expediency over integrity, facilitating various rationalisations of their transgressions (Gross, 1978; Ross, 1977).

Jim was shy, humble, even self-effacing. Crippled by indecisiveness, he was more comfortable finding consensus, working hard never to offend anyone. Winning others’ approval was a core concern and critical to his inner sense of wellbeing. He wanted nothing more than to do his job with as little conflict as possible and return home to the safety of his family. However, he felt enormous pressure to make money, to maintain the lifestyle to which his family had grown accustomed. He had private school tuitions to pay for his two sons and a wife with rather extravagant tastes.

Given his subdued presentation and the prominent role played by shame in his personality, it was surprising to learn that he felt special.
Rather than consciously entertained, his grandiosity was preconscious and unformulated. Nevertheless, it was an abiding presence whose roots could be traced to early childhood. To be sure, Jim did not feel superior to others. He felt threatened and diminished by them and, for this reason, constantly sought approval. Yet, small successes activated a deep and comforting sense of specialness. He confided this fantasy embarrassedly at first; later he did so with some amusement, poking fun at himself. In a paradigm case of unconscious compromise, however, his humility masked the shadow of a grandiose self that nurtured him in the absence of real accomplishment. Over time, this core fantasy largely dissociated, he experienced his shame-vulnerable self as real.

Similar to the shy (Cooper, 1998), covert (Akhtar, 1989, 2000), diffident (Hunt, 1995), oblivious (Gabard, 1989), or vulnerable (Wink, 1991) narcissist, Jim appeared neither self-absorbed nor arrogant. He was diffident, caring, and kind. Most important to him was to avoid criticism and to pursue mirroring in the most subtle, inconspicuous ways.

For example, whenever possible, Jim credited others for the agency’s success. When grants or donations were secured under his guidance, he always credited his staff when reporting to his board of directors. It is easy to imagine the shocked expressions on the faces of board members when Jim’s role in these achievements was perspicuous. Invariably, his comments would elicit comments like, “Jim was unbelievable”, or “This would never have happened without Jim.” Uncomfortable about being in the spotlight, Jim secretly was pleased. He never sought praise overtly, but instead pre-reflectively deployed strategies likely to elicit it. It did not hurt matters that he had a reputation for generosity.

Unlike the grandiose narcissist, who is demanding and devalues those he cannot control, the vulnerable narcissist assiduously extirpates any trace of grandiosity from his or her presentation. Grandiosity is driven underground as it were, as are those aspects of self that are linked to it, making it impossibly uncomfortable to pursue the spotlight directly. Rather than publicising accomplishments, even when they are genuine, like Jim, the vulnerable narcissist is solicitous and self-effacing. He is more comfortable embarrassedly accepting others’ praise than appearing in any way to be pursuing it.

One reason the vulnerable narcissist so effectively deceives others is that he remains unknown to himself. It is as if he assumes a role or
persona that permits him to deceive with sincerity. He pursues admiration and positive regard covertly, moulding himself in the image of what he imagines will be desirable and, above all else, avoiding conflict and controversy. Yet, more than anything, he wishes to remain hidden; he reveals only those aspects of self that can be avowed without depression and shame. It is the latter rather than rage that emerge under circumstances of unexpected exposure.

Guilt experience rests precisely on integration of one’s values and commitments with personal identity as a whole. So, completely driven by external affirmation, the vulnerable narcissist often behaves morally because it is the least costly way to be perceived as moral. Shame rather than guilt regulates his behaviour. He prefers the privacy of fantasy to real world accomplishment; in the former, the inevitable evidence of his imperfections can be facilely discounted.

**Rationalisation and moral disengagement**

Rather than bespeaking immorality, Jim’s value system illustrated what Freud described as splitting, as long as this term is understood to reflect Jim’s inner construction of norms, rules, and values. Disavowal and dissociation brought about circumstances in which moral implications were ignored or misinterpreted. But, as recognised by Freud, this defence never is entirely successful.

Whatever the ego does in its efforts of defence, whether it seeks to disavow a portion of the real external world or whether it seeks to reject an instinctual demand from the internal world, its success is never complete and unqualified. The outcome always lies in two contrary attitudes, of which the defeated, weaker one, no less than the other, leads to psychical complications. (1940a, p. 204)

While several investigators have investigated this idea in the context of perversion (e.g., Arlow, 1971), only a handful have examined it implications for integrity (Grossman, 1993; Rangell, 1980; Renik, 1992). For Rangell, effective superego functioning depends less on inhibitory control than it does on the rational mediation of conflicts between rules and desires as well as among competing obligations, commitments, and norms. The latter concept highlights the lack of
uniformity among our beliefs and values, an aporia within which creativity and choice may operate.

Rangell’s ideas imply that the vulnerable narcissist sometimes deceives others and himself without brazenly disregarding moral standards. They underscore the conditionality of ethical principles—depending on context and opportunity, the same principles may lead to very different actions. Ambiguity allows the narcissist to deny, rationalise, or narrow his perception so that uncomfortable truths no longer are experienced as really real. Dissociation strips values and obligations of their moral force, engendering states of mind that have been described as a “perverse attitude toward reality” (Grossman, 1993, p. 422). It diminishes salience and, ultimately, agency, allowing offenders to take refuge in untested beliefs.

Rangell regards compromises of integrity as unconscious compromises among identifications, ideals, obligations, and desires. Integrity does not follow directly from a logical ordering of beliefs and attitudes; it is not established once and for all. Rather, it emerges from one’s choices and relies on the continuous reworking and renegotiation of prior compromises in the process of adaptation. Adaptation, in turn, requires one to remain open to life’s ever-changing circumstances, both interpersonal and cultural.

Most important about Rangell’s thinking about integrity is its recognition of moral development and vulnerability to influence or corruption continues throughout the lifespan. Conscience never is established once and for all; consolidation surely is not complete with the resolution of the Oedipus complex. External influences may reinforce or destabilise existing values and beliefs. If it were the case that character as laid down in early life determined one’s choices completely, subsequent influences would have little effect. Rangell underscores the powerful impact of post-Oedipal influences, thus offering a dynamic concept of integrity that encompasses ever-present possibilities and limitations for choice. These conflicts and tensions make learning, personal growth, and therapeutic change possible.

These ideas reveal an inherent conflict within prevailing conceptions of moral choice. Philosophers from Socrates to Kant have aligned the virtues of knowledge and duty. For example, Aristotle’s concept of akrasia rested on the subject’s misinterpretation of the good. In effect, the akrates acted out of ignorance, on the basis of dissociating what he otherwise knows. By contrast, Kant aligned moral choice with the
rational evaluation of duty and obligation. It was his view that one is bound by imperatives that can be universalised. What both perspectives share is a belief that the good can be known and that this knowledge inspires moral behaviour. Reflection and critical evaluation, therefore, ought to promote ethical action. However, the evidence suggests that the relationship between moral judgement and moral choice is at best a modest one (Blasi, 1980; Kohlberg & Candee, 1984). Critical to moral action is the willingness to bring one's behaviour in line with the product of one's deliberation.

Case material

Jim had worked for many years to build the agency that he headed. He worked long hours running its day-to-day operations as well as searching for sources of additional funding. By all accounts, he was very good at his job and transformed the agency into a highly respected regional service provider.

With respect to his personal finances, however, Jim struggled to make ends meet. He felt enormous pressure to maintain a lifestyle that permitted his children to attend an elite independent day school and for his wife to remain home as a homemaker. While he accepted this responsibility without complaint, he felt grossly underpaid and exploited, believing his compensation would be far greater in the private sector.

Adding to his stress was his wife's addiction. Joan had enjoyed "partying" when the couple met in college, but her recreational drug use soon became a lifelong struggle with addiction. Although she had refrained from drug use for most of their marriage, the past five years had been particularly difficult. She drank heavily and was addicted to oxycontin. She participated sporadically in treatment, doing well for periods of time, only to relapse after several months.

Supporting periods of addiction was an expensive proposition. Over the course of the past five years, Joan effectively drained the family's financial resources. Their credit card debt was astronomical, their mortgage three months in arrears as creditors clamoured for their money.

Jim did not intend to embezzle money from the agency he cared so much about. Indeed, the first time it happened, the thought of
establishing a shell account occurred to him only on his way to the bank with a $500 donation. Soon, however, he was diverting large sums of money that never appeared on the agency’s ledgers; in effect, these funds did not exist, but were used to keep Jim afloat financially.

Jim knew he was doing wrong, but rationalised his actions in terms of having no choice. “If I don’t do something, we’ll go under. I’ll lose my house, my family—everything.” In other words, Jim increasingly viewed embezzlement as a feasible means of alleviating financial strain. Over time, this practice became routine. Jim treated these deposits into his private account as periodic bonuses. He said nothing to his wife about what he was doing as he urged her repeatedly to get help. When she finally agreed to enter rehabilitation for an extended stay, the cost to Jim was $50,000. He did not have this kind of money. There seemed to Jim that there was no other (honest) way to provide for his wife and family.

In the beginning, Jim had been extremely careful about his actions. He thought to himself, “God, just let me get away with this one more time and I swear this will be the end of it.” But, as financial pressures continued, it was yet another promise he had no intention of keeping. In the end, Jim had grown so brazen that he allowed his assistant to make bank deposits, confident that his ruse was undetectable.

Once exposed, Jim did not deny his actions in treatment, but explained that he had no choice. He could not remove his children from the school they loved, or deny necessary treatment to his wife. He did not want to steal, but faced a choice between undesirable alternatives. Deception was preferable to the sacrifices of moral action. His focus narrowed to the balance in his current account and how much more money he needed to make ends meet. He insisted that his actions were not hurting anyone and that the agency was so well endowed that services were never jeopardised. Denial facilitated malfeasance. It was as if he was free to act as he wished, so long as the agency remained open.

With a full criminal investigation under way, Jim initially spoke detachedly of his actions as if they were events from the distant past. He said, “I can’t believe how stupid I was . . . I would never do anything like that again”, or “I don’t know what I was thinking.” He wanted to preserve his view of himself as a good, moral person. I said to Jim that, however much his actions made no sense to him, “one does not put oneself in such jeopardy without good reasons for doing
so.” I added, “These reasons are hard to think about because they expose parts of you that you don’t want to know. You want to forget or to keep them hidden.” A stance of relative neutrality permitted Jim gradually to speak more insightfully about his rationalisations, especially with regard to his catastrophic thinking about what would happen if he had not taken the money. He acknowledged that the simplest solution would have been to confront his wife’s addiction and its impact on their family directly. As events unfolded in real time, he did not have the courage to do so. This “weakness,” as he experienced it, was linked in his mind to how he had always been treated by his parents as if he could do no wrong. Doing no wrong also meant never having to face the uncomfortable consequences of his choices. “In my parents’ eyes, I could do anything and everything. They thought I was perfect. As good as this felt, it was also something I had to hide so people wouldn’t hate me. I felt deeply in my heart that it was wrong to regard myself as better than anyone else.” However much this perception sustained him preconsciously, Jim recognised that it must be hidden from view. He wanted to believe it, but knew it was absurd. Were it otherwise, the threat posed by detection or acknowledgement of his grandiose self would have been inconsequential. But, he experienced his specialness in the same way he experienced himself—as fundamentally fraudulent. He settled for the immediacy of feeling liked and suffered terribly when unable to elicit mirroring experiences. At such moments, he felt worthless; he was a “nothing”. Anonymity and inner isolation was the only alternative.

Despite never fully believing it, the hidden fantasy of being special sustained Jim as long as it remained unformulated. Real accomplishment was desirable, but unnecessary. For this reason, as much as he wanted to believe it, Jim intuitively appreciated the danger of testing this fantasy. To make his specialness really real required a level of commitment that was unsustainable. He simply did not have that level of motivation, and neither could he maintain that level of effort. He sheepishly acknowledged that he really did not work that hard. As he became less involved with the daily operations of the agency and more focused on fundraising, he spent most of his time networking with potential donors and napping in his office. He took solace in occasional accomplishments that kept the fantasy quietly alive, which also served to excuse him from further effort. He learnt over time to manage disparities between achievement and effort by creating the
appearance of conscientiousness, cultivating the persona of doing more and being better than he was. When activated, he might be incredibly productive, especially if the failure to do so might attract the attention of his board. But this level of effort was the exception rather than the rule.

It was far easier to identify Jim’s avoidance and dissimulation than the enactment in which we rather quickly became embroiled. That he experienced me alternately as an admiring and benevolent friend, dedicated to helping him, and a condemning parent likely to abandon him, was readily apparent. More difficult was recognising the kernel of truth in these perceptions. I disapproved of his actions and his facile rationalisation of them. As I reflected on their impact, seeking a way to clarify and confront the notion that they caused no serious harm, I struggled with discordant feelings of empathy for Jim as the victim of parental idolisation and his wife’s addiction, recognition of his resentment, and anger with his indifference to the harm inflicted on community he served. This was not a victimless crime. These feelings provided important clues to his disavowed resentment, anger, and pervasive sense of entitlement. Bringing these motives into the therapeutic dialogue non-judgementally was essential to helping him. Without awareness of his roles as victim and victimiser, he was unlikely to avoid reoffending.

Initially, I focused on the immediate costs of Jim’s actions. I worried that doing otherwise would be interpreted as tacit approval of his behaviour. In one particularly memorable exchange, I responded to Jim’s insistence that he had caused no harm by tactfully suggesting that he had ignored the real costs of what he had done. Using the information he provided over the preceding months, I said, “By your own accounting, you’ve embezzled more than $200,000, money earmarked for children and their families. How is that not serious harm?”

I did not question the reality of his financial problems, or the sincerity of his intention to replace what he had taken. Rather, I questioned the perception that he had no choice, reinterpreting it as his inability to imagine alternatives that did not resurrect what had been disavowed. These alternatives created unbearable tension and deception deleted them all. From his perspective, he was doing only what was necessary to rid himself of anxiety and to help his family. He failed to discern the aggression implicit in his manipulation of donors and betrayal of the population he was bound ethically to serve.
Gradually, Jim acknowledged that his behaviour was inexcusable and that he had taken the easy way out. He had acted expeditiously rather than on the basis of his beliefs and values. He rationalised his actions and clung to the hope that he could transgress without consequences. Only with his perverse attitude toward reality laid bare did he experience the affects against which his rationalisations so effectively insulated him.

Jim hoped that contrition would elicit my forgiveness and concern, even love. In his less guarded moments, however, I observed an unmistakable sense of pride as he described his scheme. He wanted approval of his antisociality, of his unabashed greed and disowned hostility. He wanted an accomplice, a self-object who loved him despite his flaws. The alternative was to feel utterly despicable and worthless. Not only had he deceived me for several years by withholding information, but fantasised that I might privately admire him. Given how facilely Jim discounted implications, I shared my concern that he had not yet told me the entire story. He was also the treasurer of his church and of a local youth sports organisation. While aware of moral and legal implications, I believed that it was therapeutically vital to approach these issues in an enquiring rather than moralising way. To do otherwise would be likely to evoke immediate conformity to what he perceived as my expectations, foreclosing opportunities to explore and, ultimately, confront the linkages between deception, irresponsibility, and self-cohesion. In short, it probably would have encouraged him to lie.

What ensued was a retelling of Jim’s life on the basis of a different perspective on the past. Previously, he had described his childhood as a happy one: He was popular and seemed always to be the centre of attention. Imagining that he might one day be a musician or professional athlete, he enjoyed performing before audiences, supremely confident that he would be seen as he saw himself. Now, he added one crucial fact. Early in middle school, he formed a band with four of his friends that gained a degree of local fame. On one occasion, the band decided to enter into a “band battle” hosted by the local high school. Jim assumed his band would win. As it turned out, he was not disturbed so much by the fact that they failed to take first place as he was by the winning band’s lead singer–guitarist. He remembered clearly the young man’s sonorous voice as he belted out his lyrics and performed a solo that Jim could only dream of emulating. He watched
the girls dancing in front of the stage, literally swooning at the feet of this teenager, feeling completely outdone, his confidence shattered, and an inexplicable, dislocating sense of shame. Jim quit the band the next day and never picked up his guitar again. It still sat in its case, unopened for over thirty years.

Importantly, Jim was not confused about his feelings, but resolute about never doing anything that might be perceived as attention-seeking again. He refused to expose himself in this way and risk humiliation. The bubble of childhood grandiosity burst, there was no going back. He entered adolescence without the swagger of his childhood years. Whereas he had once felt that no aspiration was too lofty, he now felt vulnerable and diminished. He devoted all his efforts to covering up aspirations of any kind for fear he would be ridiculed. After a time, they were no longer experienced as psychologically real.

"Covering up" became a rich metaphor in the therapeutic narrative, connecting his current behaviour with a family legacy of deception born of shame avoidance. Whereas Jim had described his parents’ lack of formal education with a certain pride, certainly as a source of motivation, these feelings could not have been further from the truth. After struggling for years with a variety of jobs, his father finally found work in a building management company in a major city. Jim could see how making money for the first time completely transformed his father, making him feel special and important. Only later did Jim discover the reasons behind the family’s change in lifestyle.

Phil (Jim’s father) was a high school graduate who had no patience for college coursework. He was fun loving and a magnet for people, always ready with fantastic tales and humorous anecdotes. Jim was puzzled by the fact that his father had not completed his first semester at college, but never really questioned the man he idealised. It did not disturb him that his father had, for periods of time, waited on tables and worked as a day labourer before landing a job in building management. His father seemed happy. Jim ignored the rumours of an affair between his father and an attractive neighbour. People naturally gravitated to his father and he was just a friendly guy.

It was only when Phil was charged, along with forty other co-conspirators, in a huge kickback scheme that Jim understood the sudden improvement in his family’s lifestyle years earlier. His father had accepted bribes from a number of construction companies in exchange for contracts and other considerations. Jim was a college
student at the time, and his vision of his father was shattered. He loved and admired his father because he was the “smartest, funniest, and coolest” Dad anyone could have. How much money he earned meant nothing to Jim. Neither father nor son ever spoke of what had happened. Phil could say nothing more than that he had made a “terrible mistake”; immobilised by his father’s shame, Jim could not bring himself to ask a single question. He was more disappointed than enraged. Sadly, for father, like son, fraudulence was preferable to struggling with uncomfortable realities.

The metaphor of “covering up” yielded still more clinical data about Jim’s relationship with his mother, bringing forth linkages to attachment insecurity and self-defeating, deceptive behaviour. Whereas his father was ebullient and irrepressible, Jim’s mother, Angela, was a depressed, lifeless woman. Her parents had no aspirations for their daughters, other than to find jobs after high school and, soon thereafter, husbands. Without apology or apparent guilt, they rationalised their decision to pay for their son’s college education on the basis of limited financial resources. They had “no choice”. Angela worked part-time in a mailroom during high school and was hired full time upon graduation. High school sweethearts, she and Phil married soon after graduation. Once pregnant, Angela left her job to be a full-time homemaker.

Angela grew increasingly phobic, suffering frequent panic attacks that prevented her from venturing outside the apartment. Jim increasingly felt himself to be a burden to her and that any expression of need depleted and angered her. Clearly, she was a woman with a limited capacity for caring, forcing Jim to take care of himself at an early age. He remembered vividly sitting at home after school, feeling as if he were a burden to his mother, who was limited in her capacity to nurture him, waiting for his father to return from work and regale him with stories of the day’s adventures. He noticed the distance in his parents’ relationship, but pushed it out of his mind, only occasionally glimpsing the uncomfortable truth that it was his special bond with his father that held the marriage together. Only later did Jim notice his mother’s neediness and frailty, how little she had to give either to him or to his father. The image emblazoned in his memory was of his mother planted on the living room couch, chain-smoking cigarettes while riveted to the television. He resented his mother’s indifference and self-absorption, but was too consumed by guilt at the time to
entertain this feeling consciously. He did not want the responsibility of filling the void in his parents’ relationship but he was forced into this role. He needed to be the “good son” who never did anything to disappoint his parents. His life was a balancing act dedicated to preserving a parental idealisation and maintaining family equilibrium, unfortunately at the expense of being the person he wanted to be. It was possible to gratify wishes only secretly, so they did not activate attachment insecurity or guilt. Guilt about his misdemeanours and shame at their discovery were acceptable costs to break free of the impossible strictures of his life. *Maybe it was acceptable to lie and deceive, even those with whom one is closest, so long as it did no serious harm.*

**Discussion**

Although he steadfastly denied any further transgressions, I cannot be sure about what Jim did and did not do—an anxiety for which I found no comfortable solution. Living with uncertainty is perhaps the most challenging aspect of working with offenders, especially those whose position provides ample opportunities to work without oversight. One cannot completely trust what is said, no matter how sincere; one never can assume being in possession of the truth. The psychoanalyst achieves little by remaining silent about the shadow this casts over the treatment relationship. Its meanings and implications must be tactfully explored and clarified with particular attention paid to dishonesty in the transference. This stance accords with Grossman’s insight about how completely disavowal deletes salience and any appreciation of moral implications. It underpins states of mind that have been variously described as dissociative, hypnoid (Janet, 1889), somnambulistic (Sullivan, 1972), and psychosomnic (Stein, 2007). Disavowal promotes states of mind in which reality testing is maintained, but value testing is not; moral reckoning suffers when reality assumes an as-if quality.

Dissociation linked Jim’s entitled expectations, attachment insecurity, guilt, and vulnerability to transgression. His father’s moral flexibility and mother’s depressed unavailability allowed him to conclude (both consciously and unconsciously) that it was permissible to break the rules. The latter point requires clarification. Jim’s belief that transgressions were permissible was not unconscious; he did not embezzle
without awareness of what he was doing, especially of its impermissibility. Rather, this knowledge receded into the background, rarely consciously entertained. Primary in his mind was the pressure of paying bills and of getting the best level of care for his wife. He felt stuck between doing the right thing and doing what he “must”, so long as he was not likely to be detected. His actions reflected a moral compromise that never required clear formulation. What remained unconscious and unknown was the connection between this belief and his identification with his father. Cheating trumped shame for Jim as it had done for his father: it was acceptable as long as it did not threaten attachment bonds and family solidarity. It also allowed Jim unconsciously to remain loyal to his parents. Ironically, there was a family legacy of utilising deception to avoid shame and to elicit mirroring from significant others, for Jim, an experience vital to self-continuity and comfort. Mirroring quieted attachment insecurity and guilt. Ultimately, these strategies were self-undermining, as much the product of unconscious compromise as an expression of narcissism.

I have been careful throughout this chapter to differentiate Jim’s presentation from that of NPD proper. He was not arrogant, parasitic, or sensation seeking; neither was he sexually promiscuous, drug and alcohol dependent, or, for most of his life, overtly antisocial. Rather, Jim’s narcissistic needs were a source of inner conflict and shame. Specifically, his needs for mirroring and external affirmation coexisted alongside an authentic concern for others. Indeed, admiration made him uncomfortable and caused him to shy away from the spotlight. Consciously, he wanted above all else to be liked; he desired a continuous flow of positive regard, to be perceived as a “good guy”. He readily would have exchanged this feeling for the money he embezzled and the consequences he now faced.

In Jim’s mind, his wife’s addiction and his failure to deal with it more forcefully was his undoing. However, the lack of oversight at the agency created opportunities to deceive without detection. He had felt powerless to confront his wife, to present her with an ultimatum in the same way that he found it impossible to take stands contrary to others’ expectations all of his life; he could not risk any rupture in his sense of relational security. It was in this context that embezzlement became a feasible option. Fraudulence allowed him to pay his bills and reduce the unbearable stress he felt financially; it also allowed him to continue to enjoy the prestige of heading a high profile agency.
He lived an impossible dilemma: to live or be loved. He could not envision living a life that afforded both possibilities.

These dynamics emerged in full force only by virtue of unforeseen circumstances—an enquiry from a donor handled by his assistant while Jim was on vacation. One unmonitored enquiry was all it took to expose his ruse. Because of the amount of money involved, Jim could not make immediate repayment and the board, after weighing the risks of discouraging future donations, took the unprecedented step of pursuing criminal prosecution.

The resistance of evil

There is a growing trend among psychoanalytic investigators to align perpetration with trauma. Studies of violent perpetrators in particular identify a high incidence of early childhood trauma. Stein (2007) for example asserts that violence is “...the inevitable outcome of severely damaging early interpersonal relationships” (p. 38). She proposes that evil is nurtured in conditions of dissociation, reasoning that violent offenders are more vulnerable to this defensive stance because of their early experiences. The persistence of dissociated states also makes those characterologically vulnerable to them more likely to engage in violent enactments.

Stein’s argument departs significantly from mainstream forensic thinking in so far as it criticises the thesis that violent action expresses impulses no longer satisfied within the offender’s elaborate fantasy life. It is as if the pressures that cannot be contained within fantasy life push through into reality. Stein, importantly, notices that the problem is not that such individuals possess too much imagination, but, rather, that these capacities are impoverished. Empirical data fortifies the claim of limited imagination; it suggests as well that defective reflective and symbolising capacities catalyse affect states into intolerable tension that can be discharged only through violent action. Such enactments express dissociated victimisation, communicating unthinkable trauma through disclaimed action. The real legacy of abuse is a lust for attachment rather than for sexual gratification. The perversity of this pursuit destroys the possibility of stable, mutual relatedness.

To support her thesis, Stein marshals evidence from the narratives of violent offenders. One sadistic killer recounted his crimes in the
following way: “I knew what happened when I woke up but I did not know if it happened for real or was imagined” (p. 97). Here, Stein sees dissociation preventing any assimilation of his thoughts and deeds within a narrative of the self that can be avowed. This failure of verbal representation increases the likelihood of enactment or, as Stein poetically asserts, finding expression through “the comforting pulse of gesture” (p. 25).

Yet, while the role of trauma might well be significant for violent offenders, other investigators caution us against moving too quickly from hypotheses to explanations of evil. Evil is plurality rather a phenomenon reducible to a single essence or cause (Bernstein, 2002). Many factors are relevant to perpetration, from the dissociated motives, beliefs, and perceptions to interpersonal, familial, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions. What inclines one toward perpetration and, especially, to a particular variant of evil, is simply beyond our present understanding. Why? At least in part because, as Sartre (1966) so evocatively noted, we are condemned to freedom. Freedom means never fully knowing why an agent acts or fails to act in a particular way. We may say that a rational agent ought to do A based on all available knowledge relevant to why agents typically do A given condition C. But this is a probabilistic inference that only goes so far. Freedom and choice preclude certitude.

The problem of evil, especially in its contemporary articulations, has to do precisely with our ineradicable freedom. What, for Kant, immunised man from the diabolical brings it about that he is always free to elect which imperatives to follow and which to abandon. In endeavouring to explain why one endorses or rejects a categorical imperative, why one acts one way rather than another, we are left in the unenviable position of being unable reliably to predict specific outcomes from antecedent conditions. It is more often the case that various outcomes are possible and none can be stipulated in advance with certitude. Action, immoral or otherwise, lacks coherence and comprehensibility.

While not entirely new, white-collar crime warrants inclusion within a contemporary understanding of evil because its iterations continue to evolve along with the expansion of electronic communication and the globalisation of the economy. Billions of dollars are exchanged instantaneously by keystrokes executed from virtually anywhere in the world. And, for all of the positive effects on
commerce and the ability to communicate vital information, it continuously creates new opportunities for those who fail to honour the implicit ethical code upon which such commerce and intercommunication is possible.

**Conclusion**

White-collar crime is a complex, context-sensitive response to work and financial stressors that relies on deception. Although it occurs disproportionately in overtly narcissistic or antisocial individuals, most ethical violations are committed by individuals far less brazen, reckless, and character disordered. Because their violations are less spectacular, often occurring in practice areas that require specialised education and knowledge, these individuals rarely come to the attention of the criminal justice system. That they are products of limited imagination in no way diminishes their significance.

The material from Jim’s treatment provides data about one type of white-collar offender whose psychopathology differs from the malignant narcissist or psychopath who present with borderline personality organisation. Kernberg (2007) rightly describes such individuals as incapable of maintaining social honesty or moral commitments, forming loving attachments, and appreciating the devastating impact of their actions. Some of the most disturbed of these individuals may be said to inhabit, psychologically speaking, an anal universe (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985), a term used to describe an inner world in which all values have been abolished. Freed from normative restraints or concerns about how their behaviour is evaluated, such individuals are concerned only with evading detection and punishment. Their appreciation of values and norms is purely instrumental—one needs to know the rules and reality requirements surrounding one’s actions in order more effectively to get what one wants.

The vulnerable narcissist lies, cheats, and steals selectively, usually when his or her financial security is threatened. While this threat might ultimately be more imagined than real, it is almost always a necessary condition of offending. He otherwise appears to live a normal life and inspires trust rather than suspicion in both colleagues and loved ones. As a group, white-collar criminals share a facility for rationalisation and deception. Although less topical in contemporary
psychoanalytic theorising, rationalisation remains a powerful defensive process, one whose role in offending is primary. If it does nothing else, Milgram’s famous work on obedience to authority demonstrates the range of egregious actions one is capable of when they can be rationalised and responsibility for them transferred to another.

Jim’s life was guided by values to a significant degree, but also by a vulnerability to dissociation that precluded their full integration within his personality. The result was a unique combination of sincerity and a capacity for deception. He preferred truthfulness but, when threatened, he no longer felt obligated to behave ethically. Morality was compromised by anxiety; key perceptions, events, and meanings were discounted.

While integrity rests solidly on character and on those beliefs, attitudes, and inclinations that comprise individual identity, it is not reducible to these factors, especially as they appeared originally in early life. Rather, integrity emerges from a continuous process of reworking earlier experiences as well as external influences of all kinds in one’s ongoing effort at adaptation. It simultaneously reflects continuity and rupture as well as openness and resistance to influences, both internal and external. It is at once a quest and an achievement. It is for this reason that dissociation is never completely the enemy of integrity. While the case material from Jim’s treatment illustrates the untoward consequences of pathological dissociation, it does not follow that the capacities for reflection and deliberation ensure integrity. Contrary to Socratic wisdom, integrity requires more than the knowledge of the good; it sometimes involves a refusal to do anything other than what one believes to be right, a refusal, that is, to engage in further deliberation. In this way, dissociation may lead to action that is both compassionate and creative.

This perspective has much in common with a post-Aristotelian ethics of virtue, one that enjoys new relevance as we witness the emergence of an ethos that values wealth above all else. Disavowal undermines the capacities for reflection and moral deliberation because, in a sense, it leaves the individual with nothing to deliberate about. If accumulating wealth harms others, so be it!—a chilling reminder of dissociating operating at the social–cultural level.

From a psychodynamic perspective, it is essential to examine the domains, settings, and structures of inner life as well as the broad array of influences that promote moral flexibility. The psychoanalytic
method is sensitive to the dynamics of ethical violation, focusing on how perpetration reconciles conflicts between the forces of self-interest and conscience. To be sure, the capacities for reason and reflection play an essential role in moral action, but these capacities always are set against the influence of early attachment figures and the cultivation of abilities that permit irreconcilable forces to be consciously entertained and refashioned, creating opportunities for synergy between old and new.

Note

1. GST assumes that the poor are disproportionately at risk for offending because of their inability to acquire wealth.

References


PART III

APPLIED STUDIES
CHAPTER SIX

Past imperfect: historical trauma and its transmission

Robert Prince

“Has such a thing happened in your days, Or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, And let your children tell their children, and their children another generation”

(Joel, 1:2)

It is contrary to my aims to provide a coherent account of “trauma” and its transmission across generations. Rather, in providing an account of the representation of Holocaust survivors in the USA over the past seventy years, I hope to create a reflective space for the important concepts, historical trauma, its transmission, and its witnessing, all of which are in danger of becoming monuments to memory, that is, clichés. Pervading this chapter is a concept of the epistemology of trauma, which has at its core the observation that massive human inflicted suffering overwhelms the mind and subverts knowing. At any given time, contingencies initiate a tropism and then adhesion to a particular idea that privileges a particular of multiple alternative narratives. The new established wisdom (or the wisdom we would like to establish) thorough commemorative or memorial acts might, at first glance, seem written in stone, while over
time might turn out to have the substance of wind, blowing in different directions in different seasons. I (Prince, 1998) have used the word myths to describe attributions to the mental functioning of Holocaust survivors and the historian Peter Hayes (2013) has used the same word, myths, to characterise attributions in the historical record.

A coherent account of Holocaust survivors in the USA is a seductive fantasy, one I (Prince, 1985) held over forty years ago in my initial attempts to describe distinct patterns of survivor parent–child communication and relationship and the consequent outcomes in children of survivors. The implication of independence of subject, context, and observer leads to wishful certainty. In reality, there are blurred boundaries, different components and competing, evolving narratives of the survivor. Some begin with the assumption that the liberation of the camps created a worldwide wave of horror and remorse. In contrast, General George Patton was contemptuous, describing the survivors as “lower than animals”. There has been a trajectory over the years from images of “walking corpses” and “human wreckage” to a secular version of the tsadik speaking with privileged voice and authority to later innuendos of Jews greedily trying to corner the market, as they always have, but this time for suffering.

There are different models of Holocaust representation. Daniel Libeskind (2003) addresses the Holocaust by asking, “How does one pass on some truth about what it all really means?” (p. 45). He builds into the Jewish Museum in Berlin what he calls “voids”, paradoxical representations in space of emptiness that evokes the dizzying sense of what by all rights should be there and is profoundly missing.

In terms of history, is the Holocaust a unique and unprecedented Novum? One that changes our conceptions of the world and what is possible or imaginable? Is it a narrow Jewish problem or one central to human history and identity, just as relevant to all people, the six million and five million more non-Jewish victims? Or, does it conform to the conception of one of Alan Bennett’s (2004) History Boys, “One (expletive) thing after another?” Alan Minz (2001), in his exemplary Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in the United States, contrasts two models of Holocaust representation, the “Exceptionalist” and the “Constructivist”. The Holocaust narrative is assumed to be constant; instead, it develops and evolves over time, turning on the particular needs of a given time. Referring to its enormity, Tony Judt (2005) writes, “Impossible to remember as it truly was, [the Holocaust]
is inherently vulnerable to being remembered as it wasn’t” (p. 830). My personal narrative of the Holocaust has changed; over the years I have discarded or modified assumptions, and still do so now.

When we refer to the Holocaust, we engage in a dissociated condensation of roles, circumstances, and stories. We conflate multiple perspectives, survivor, witness, bystander, and varying degrees of experience and involvement, to say nothing of boundaries. A principle of physics is that the observed is intertwined with the observer. When we ask, “What has been transmitted, we are neglecting to ask, “Who is the subject?” “What are we studying?” The event? Those who lived or those who died? The perpetrators? The bystanders? There is a complex set of interconnected moving parts, causes and effects, propelled forward through time, with events defined by afterwardness, Nachträglichkeit. Past events are understood only by current conditions. History is always in the present. The interaction of the story of the Holocaust interacts with national narratives and imperatives. Even the dead, as Walter Benjamin reportedly said, are not safe from politics. However, I will make it a little easier by also looking ahead: as the old Soviet joke goes, the past is even less predictable then the future.

We have different responses to the story based on their own stories. I almost wish to say that I cannot tell you about survivors and children of survivors in America because there is no independent subject. There is no Holocaust without context and witness, without the recognition that all along the timeline of horrific events, the overwhelming impulse of survivors was to tell a story, where their first act upon liberation was to construct makeshift memorials in the camps and then to flood the world with memoirs that were met with the attribution that they chose silence. Without the witness, the survivors, coming from the complete destruction of the world that no longer existed, were faced with only a void.

Some narratives have survivors received more or less well in America, that they achieved great success, displaying heroic resilience, or that they were wracked by psychiatric illness, consumed by survivor guilt in their new country, that they succumbed to their losses and rages or, in a testimony to human endurance, were able to rebuild their lives, that they were totally devoted to their children or were too damaged to relate to their children, re-enacted bizarre rituals in the home, or that they prevented their children from separating,
expecting their children to replace all that they had lost, that they flooded their children with trauma in word and deed, and, above all, there was a *conspiracy of silence*, survivors did not tell and their children did not ask; their children more or less complied with the task assigned them.

Which is true? It might depend on which professional lens we look through: the historical, psychiatric, or sociological, to say nothing of the political. It also might depend on when along the timeline we ask. The question, which is true?, is complex; the answer simultaneously calls on the accumulated wisdom and perspectives of the various professions and risks the distortions inherent in each one. Different communities of interpretation process what is seen and each of these communities have a vested interested in sustaining particular views (Talbott, 1997). Henry Krystal (1995) observes that survivors “look better” to sociologists than psychiatrists. The very concept of *trauma* is deeply rooted in a web of social constructs (Mosse, 2000).

How one knows and how one not knows is the formidable challenge of encountering personal and historical trauma. Thus, inevitably, there are contradictions in our attributions to the generations of the Holocaust; it would be an error to avoid them, we will understand more if we can tolerate them and accept as irreducible that knowing is destabilising and disorientating. Trauma and extreme suffering involves limits of conceptualisation, empathy, and representation. There is tremendous emotional pressure to protect our basic beliefs: in humanity, psychoanalysis, and in ourselves. As in psychotherapy, countertransference will determine what we hear and our ability to hear. As a result, there is a great deal of distortion, oversimplification, failures of empathy, use of clichéd or trite language, creation of false equivalencies, creation of myths, all of which reflect defences against Holocaust knowledge.

Extremity leads to a confusion of observation and interpretation. Thus, for example, survivor parents often are pathologised for withholding the details of their persecution from their offspring, an observation interpreted as an inability to relate to them. It is rarely interpreted as a representative of a loving and protective orientation in the service of sparing the child from trauma. Consideration of how best to tell the Holocaust to children has become a speciality for educators and writers of children’s literature but the dilemmas pathologised in the home are dignified as “professional” when addressed in an
academic setting. An example of the ambiguity of interpretation is regarding forgetting as “dissociation” and tied to the core of illness, in contrast to being adaptive and conforming to Nietzsche’s dictum, “It is not possible to live without forgetting”, and still another is the paranoid tendencies attributed to survivors as pathological by the psychiatrist but reinterpreted by the anthropologist as a learnt, adaptive, and constructive response to a dangerous world (Diamond, 2012).

The provocative and extreme nature of Holocaust related observations leads to overgeneralisations and conclusions based on what the researchers call “sampling error”. Because the examples are so powerful, they stand out and the single case is confused with the whole. Judith Kestenberg (1998), who is one of the great psychoanalytic pioneers of the Holocaust, gives extreme instances of the mechanism she identifies as transposition: a survivor father going to sadistic lengths to “harden” his child or a mother threatening to put her child’s head in an oven and turn on the gas if she misbehaved. The affectively compelling character of each instance, easily related to historical imagery, leads to a universalisation; while having collective references, these are, in fact, not patterns, but unique instances that require understanding in a multi-layered context. Finally, projective mechanisms always complicate consideration of atrocity. Thus, perpetrators never fail to position themselves as first victims. The term conspiracy of silence used to describe survivor families was, and has continued to be, a more apt description of the pact between perpetrators and bystanders on the world stage.

Comprehending the complexity of America’s reception of the remnants of European Jewry, initially called “refugees” and only much later dignified as “survivors”, benefits from comparison to other countries. The narrative of a particular country and its political needs will have an effect on the survivors and their children. Indeed, as a thought experiment, we might wonder what it would mean if we found no differences between the various places Jews found themselves after the Holocaust. James Young (1993) describes Holocaust Memorials worldwide and how they reflect national identity and political realities. Further, these are not static but evolve, sometimes dramatically over time, from memorials to “anti-memorials”. Repeatedly, we see an interplay of survival narratives and national identity, which shape reception, and also adaptation of survivors who had been sundered from their own moorings.
Understanding the response to the Holocaust in America has to take into consideration American identity, the evolution of Jewish identity in America, post-war economic conditions, the Cold War preoccupation with Communism and the Soviet Union, domestic protest movements, the influence in America of cultural media such as television and film, evolving political leverage of the organised American Jewish community, US policy towards Israel and the Arab world in the Cold War context, and the significant cultural events that unfolded after the ambivalent welcome offered to the immigrants by America as a whole, to say nothing of interrelations of diverse Jewish groups, and also by Jewish Americans for whom “not standing out” had been an important part of their adaptation.

Before, and even during, the Second World War, anti-Semitism was extensive in the USA, an ideal of a “melting pot” conflicting with extremely strong nativist sentiments that, in 1924, had resulted in severe quotas on immigration. Between 1933 and 1945, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s State Department shamefully froze legally available openings, while over one million Europeans were trying to flee persecution. In 1945, Truman, after the extermination of a staggering two thirds of the European Jewish population, loosened immigration restrictions, resulting in 28,000 of the three million total surviving European Jews being admitted to the USA. The Displaced Persons Act of 1949 resulted in 68,000 additional entry visas and other sources give 140,000 as the number of refugees admitted between 1945 and 1952 (Diner, 2004; Genizi, 1993; US Memorial Holocaust Museum, 2014). Having no home to return to, their former communities obliterated, many of them had spent up to seven years in displaced person camps, some of them in appalling conditions in or next to former concentration camps, in some cases housed alongside former perpetrators whom they perceived as receiving better treatment from anti-Semitic authorities. The immigrants had an average age of twenty-nine, more men than women. Many of them had married impulsively and had children, hasty to recreate something in the ashes.

The overwhelming political agenda in the immediate post-war period in the USA was to respond to the threat of Communism and a strong Germany was perceived as a crucial ally. Thus, after the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, whatever interest there was in the survivor—some of whom were distrusted as possible Red sympathisers—was far subordinate to rebuilding Germany. There is
disagreement among historians about the American Jewish reception of the refugees (Cohen, 2007; Diner, 2003, 2009; Fermaglich, 2008). One view is that, although disorganised and without a central institutional platform, Jewish groups made attempts to support them, to memorialise the Holocaust. An emergency law also expanded sponsorship, previously available to families who were already in America, to mostly Jewish social service agencies. These are reported to have had only bare resources and also offered minimal support as they dispersed survivors, in small numbers, to wherever there were jobs. The search for employment was paramount to survival in the USA; survivors faced the harsh challenges of all immigrants. There was a new language and culture. If they spoke English, their accents were not trusted and they faced resentment as they competed for jobs, especially those at high skill levels, including medicine, law, and scholarship. Many found employment at far lower skill levels than they had previously.

Records from these agencies paint a picture of a fragile, traumatised group. The survivors were ill; they complained of headaches, skin rashes, backaches, depression, dizziness, nightmares, and nervousness. However, their vulnerable state was contradicted by the prevalence of inspiring public relations stories of quick success in America. In the USA, survivors married each other, with the exception of the few child survivors, and the hidden children who were just as likely to marry Americans.

Those who had distant relatives in the USA, whom they had never met before, reported they offered only grudging welcome and support, financial and emotional. There was insufficient medical care and total lack of attention to psychological trauma. Anecdotal accounts suggested bitterness about the lack of help from distant families and the sponsoring agencies. There was even more bitterness because their reception included disbelief about what they had been through and not being asked about the fate of their relatives. They had starved to the point of death and were told about the Americans’ own wartime hardships, insufficient sugar and rationed meat. They needed to talk about the horrors. They had brought to America a promise to tell what happened, as a religious commemorative obligation, many of them avowing that the overwhelming need to bear witness drove their survival. No one wanted to listen; they were encouraged to leave their bad memories in the past and form new lives. They were warned
that if they talked about their traumas, they would be shunned. They were asked questions that reflected a sometimes bizarre lack of comprehension and, worse, they were asked painful and accusatory questions such as: What did you do to survive? Why didn’t you fight back? Some found themselves alone and isolated in a strange country with strange customs. All struggled with a dislocation from the lives and cultural references they had been born into, which was devastating all on its own.

Finding little support, many decided they had only themselves to depend on and showed remarkable resourcefulness. Some did not succeed and remained impoverished, but a common refrain was of coming to American shores “with nothing” and managing to build an affluent and successful life, providing for their children and sending them to the best colleges. They gravitated to each other, formed Landsmanschaften, which inevitably were devoted to discussing among each other their experiences and, occasionally drinking some schnapps, laughing, and enjoying each other’s company.

The trajectory of America’s image of the survivor represents a remarkable transformation. Over the course of seventy years they went from being refugees, emblems of victimhood, a shameful, stigmatised role with a moral taint, to being survivors, possessors of privileged knowledge that conferred special authority, their position transformed, in Minz’s (2001) words, from silence to salience.

The “Americanisation of the Holocaust” has taken place in zigzag steps over seventy years and is illustrated by the vicissitudes of the Diary of Anne Frank (Frank & Pressler, 1947; Rosenfeld, 2004; Sicher, 2000). Published in English in 1952, it was adapted for the stage and became a hit Broadway production in 1956 and film version in 1959 (directed by George Stevens). It is an exemplar of the uses to which prevailing cultural needs puts the Holocaust (Ozick, 1997; Rosenfeld, 2011). There was an initial battle over the play’s production between a portrayal of innocent affirmation of goodness and a darker version of humanity. The American rendition transformed the story of destruction to one of redemption, uplift, and triumph, clichés of endurance and testimonies to the human spirit. No Nazis appear on stage; Anne is left de-sexualised, de-Judaised, hostility edited out of her saintly personality, and her death at Bergen-Belsen of typhus is so elided with her disembodied voice “I believe people are good at heart” wafting over the stage that the audience can leave the theatre denying her fate.
If the Diary was the vision to which the survivor was expected to conform, Elie Wiesel’s Night (1960) marks a radical inflection. Presenting for mass view the realities of the concentration camp, his representation of a spiritual crisis arguably did as much as anything to begin the transformation of the image of the survivor. The major point here is that the evolving cultural image was the mirror those 140,000 refugees who had made it to America had to look into, to find themselves, and it shaped the Holocaust’s long-term effects. Night, originally an 865 page long work, was first published in 1956 in Yiddish. Its publication in English in 1960, reduced to 116 pages, with the rage left behind in the Yiddish version, portrayed the torment of the Job-like suffering of the human soul. There is a scene in which a hospitalised Wiesel describes pulling himself up from what surely is a deathbed, looking in a mirror, and seeing a gaunt figure that he does not recognise. Without thinking, he smashes the glass with his fist, thus contributing a metaphor for the transformation of the survivor.

Coinciding with the English publication of Night were other cultural milestones. One was the film Exodus (directed by Otto Preminger, 1960), based on the novel by bestselling author Leon Uris, who introduced a Holocaust survivor in a heroic role. As important was the 1961 televised trial of Eichmann, whose abduction by Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, from Argentina caused considerable controversy but, in the wake of the Sinai war, advanced a new Jewish, if not Holocaust, identity. Gideon Hausner, the Israeli Attorney General, made a fateful decision to prosecute the Holocaust as much as Eichmann (Lipstadt, 2011). For the first time, survivors, who came from all over the world, called as witnesses, had their testimony heard: it was a pivotal moment in Holocaust history and survivor experience.

The 1961 film Judgment at Nuremberg (directed by Stanley Kramer)—its release coincident with the Eichmann trial—also represents a step towards Holocaust consciousness in America, via a focus on the triumph of the American justice. There is never one storyline. Some reviewers castigated Judgment for showing historical footage of the concentration camps in the context of the Cold War and America’s new alliances as “re-opening old wounds”. They were referring to American–German relations.

Although by 1995 there would be hundreds of institutions teaching about the Holocaust, in 1960 there were very few, perhaps only one. In 1961, Raul Hilberg’s now classic Destruction of European Jewry
was published, subsidised by a survivor family, by a small press with cheap paper and binding. The film *The Pawnbroker* (directed by Sidney Lumet) was released in 1965. Its protagonist, Sol Nazerman, in contrast to Anne Frank, is armoured in isolation and bitterness. *The Pawnbroker*, a study of the life of one Holocaust survivor, supports the notion of a life defined entirely by rupture, only at the end offering a glimpse, using Christian iconography, of redemption through suffering. For the most part, reviewers greeted *The Pawnbroker* as bearing the self-evident conception of the survivor as broken. But at least they were paying attention.

In 1968, Arthur Morse’s *While Six Million Died* (Kenworthy, 1968) condemned American wartime apathy. General Telford Taylor, cited by Kenworthy in the *New York Times* book review, makes a extraordinarily profound psychoanalytic point when he notes the facts of genocide were basically known but somehow just not registered. As Geoffrey Hartman (1996) notes, history departments tended to regard the Holocaust as a “Jewish affair”, but that was beginning to change. According to Hezser (2002), probably the most significant developments in this regard were Israel’s victories in the Six-Day War (1967, June 5–10) and the Yom Kippur War (1973, October 6–25): “the image of Jews as military heroes worked to efface the stereotype of weak and passive victims” (p. 145).

By the early and mid 1970s, there was an emergence of Holocaust consciousness driven by the second generation; the children of the refugees were beginning to come of age. They initiated and participated in an exploration of the Holocaust with a heretofore absent empathy. I look at my own doctoral dissertation, *The Legacy of the Holocaust: Psychohistorical Themes in the Second Generation*, begun in 1972, as representing the initial swell of what would become a wave of children of survivors insisting on bearing witness. My attempts to have the book published initially resulted in a significant collection of letters of rejection, from both publishers and agents. When a reason was given, it was that there would be very little interest in the subject. By 1977, Helen Epstein’s *New York Times* magazine article, “Heirs to the Holocaust” and subsequent book *Children of the Holocaust* (1978) became another milestone. In 1985, an academic publisher solicited my own book (Prince, 1985).

At the end of the 1970s, the television mini-series *The Holocaust* served the continuing increase of Holocaust awareness. The Holocaust
was beginning to become the subject of scholarship. Hartman (1996) remarks that the desire to testify came at a specific moment in the lives of these men and women when they were well established in the USA, had families, and their own children were becoming parents in their turn. The Fortunoff Video Archive was established at Yale University in 1981 and although it had a shoestring budget, became the source of groundbreaking scholarship.

The Holocaust became fully Americanised with the museum in Washington DC, situated virtually on the iconic Mall. Announced by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, its origins were inspired by politics. It would take fifteen years to build, amid contentiousness about its aims and design. The museum represented state-sponsored memory. According to Rosenfeld (2001), it was designed both to serve as a proud memorial and to address contemporary social agendas and universal themes.

The Washington DC Holocaust Museum opened in 1993, the same year as Schindler’s List (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1993), which, as Alan Minz, citing Lawrence Langer, observed, satisfies the American trait of avoiding “abiding the unremittingly tragic and the American urge to find redemptive meaning” (Minz, 2001, p. 153). Praised, like the earlier television mini-series, for succeeding in imparting Holocaust awareness, it was also criticised for bringing to the Holocaust sentimental and melodramatic conventions of popular entertainment.

By the end of the century, there was a reaction to the discovery of the Holocaust. In 1999, Peter Novick’s The Holocaust in American Life made the claim that increasing interest in the Holocaust from the late 1970s had, by the 1990s, come to dominate American Jewish identity. Novick argued that the emergence of a “Holocaust consciousness” came about as a result of a series of choices made by Jewish American leaders in the face of fears of Jewish assimilation. He regarded focus on the Holocaust as intended to foster Jewish ethnic solidarity. Seeing the Holocaust as having become “the central symbol of Jewish identity” (p. 14), Novick was vehement in his opposition to victimhood having this role. His arguments, while extensively critiqued, had credibility because of his status as a historian. Unfortunately, they also stoked more tendentious arguments by more problematic figures with more problematic motives. Soon, attacks on a “Holocaust Industry”, with implications of exploitation and political manipulation, metastasised. Other groups pursued a bizarre competition for who had
suffered most, with Jews traduced for again trying to corner the market. Still, Holocaust consciousness and comparisons were also used to galvanise a reluctant polity on behalf of victims of an unending stream of worldwide atrocities, democides, and genocides.

On the one hand, America was the best and safest place and time in history to be a Jew. Many children of survivors found comfort in universality and a left-of-centre humanism, which then caused cognitive dissonance and confusion with the reversal of left and right with regard to the Middle East and the interpenetration of anti-Semitism into anti-Zionistic politics. Despite the predominant ethos of assimilation, accusations of over-sensitivity to anti-Semitism and the appearance of “death to the Jews” graffiti and swastikas stimulated the most ready associations available: the Holocaust.

Two trends seem to characterise the most recent years. One is an increase in the literature of witnessing (Wieviorka, 2006). The importance of the act of bearing witnesses is privileged, but in a curious way “post memory” (Hirsch, 2001; Sicher, 2000), has emerged as a subject, and the experience of witness threatens to supersede the survivor. The second trend, both complementary and contradictory, is a narrowing of interest in something, dismissed in that it took place seventy years ago.

How can we describe survivors and their generations in America? I think the best answer is by being mindful of how unique they are by telling their unique stories, using Clifford Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick description”, that is, each particular characteristic understood in the context of a life story over evolving time. Efforts to generalise about survivors are thwarted by an incredible range of variables: life before persecution, specificity of experience, hiding, passing, conditions of concentration camp internment, physical suffering, losses of family, iconic experiences, and, for those who kept alive with an iconic purpose, ability to fulfil it. Other variables affecting the characteristics of survivors include conditions of life post liberation, renewed persecution, opportunities, disappointments, and the same vicissitudes of fortune that determined survival.

After the initial period of neglect (Prince, 2009), the psychiatric attention compensated with the formulation of a “survivor syndrome”, which included the disabling symptoms of the entire Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: depression, paranoia, anxiety, etc. Survivors as parents began to be characterised as depleted, defective
in their ability to parent, almost predatory in exploitation of their children for their own needs, on the one hand too damaged to nurture and on the other hand living vicariously through their children. Pejorative attributions, in the earliest days, were privileged. Not surprisingly, survivors resented this portrait: I have a memory of attending one of the earliest “Gatherings” of survivors, in 1979, which had a mixed professional and survivor audience, and the outrage directed against the professionals.

While being duly cautious about generalisation, we can hazard some very broad observations. One is that survivors tended to see their lives as divided into three parts, life before persecution, the years of persecution, and the years after it. While many attributed their survival to chance, others attributed it to single-minded preoccupation with a purpose, most frequently to be reunited with a loved one or to fulfilling a Hamlet-like deathbed scene, to tell their story. They faced the challenge of initial disinterest in their imperative to tell. There was bitterness, they retreated into silence, found others who shared their experience, but years later flocked to opportunities to record their testimony for posterity.

I have the most poignant image of one woman I interviewed for the Yale Testimony Project, as fragile as the most delicate crystal. She insisted on being interviewed in defiance of her psychiatrist and family, who were convinced she would suffer a psychiatric collapse. Their relief when she made it through to the follow-up was palpable, as was her sense of a mission accomplished. It still needs to be pointed out that the need to testify was not universal. One woman whom I saw in treatment for many years did not want to talk specifically about her experiences, but I certainly noted it was also important to her to know of my personal connection to the Holocaust, one which she quickly guessed. Another woman I treated for a prolonged period wanted to focus on her current family conflicts but, when these were resolved, she asked me to help her create an oral history to leave for her grandchildren, but one that spared them particularly painful details. I interviewed her with a tape recorder running that was stopped periodically as we discussed whether or not to include a particular scene.

Their desire to testify carries with it an intense conflict between remembering and forgetting (see Prince, 2009). Inscribed on the walls of Yad Vashem are the words of the Hassidic Master, Baal Shem Tov,
“Memory is redemption”. Trauma specialists divide into two factions: that PTSD is a disorder of too little or too much, a scarcity or an excess of memory; that it has to be recovered from the nether reaches of dissociation and integrated or, as Applefeld warns, “Anyone who underwent the Holocaust will be as wary of memory as of fire. It was impossible to live after the Holocaust except by silencing memory” (quoted by Hartman, 1996, p. 154). Commemoration, the most controlled form of memory, has, according to Eelco Runia (2007), become the prime historical phenomenon of our time. Memorialisation can create its own canon. Some therapists insist that integration of memory is the basis of recovery, while others advocate techniques to erase memory, most recently at the level of the brain. Survivors’ descriptions have recurrent themes of a certain kind of dissociated reality. A component of the desire to testify is to validate personal reality. Geoffrey Hartman (1996) quotes Hans Jonas, “I saw but I do not believe it. . . . At Auschwitz more was real than was possible” (p. 88). Aron Appelfeld (1993) wrote, “Everything that happened was so inconceivable that the witness seemed like a fabricator even to himself” (pp. 31–32). Charlotte Delbo (1990) described her simultaneously living in two worlds, the present and the world of Auschwitz.

Henry Krystal (1995), himself a camp survivor, whose Viennese psychoanalyst never asked him about what he had endured, felt that survivors had learnt to “live with a lot of pain” (p. 90). He had some pessimism, based on long-term psychiatric follow-ups of a large number of survivors who had consulted him for reparations claims. He is particularly pessimistic about the long-term ravages of persecution. Krystal paints a grim picture, describing an enduring bitterness, persistent paranoia, near “pseudo-dementia, constriction in imagination, individuals so hurt, so deeply wounded beyond the possibility of recovery through grieving, that they constrict their mental functions, and function as if they were partly demented” (p. 92). Krystal believes that tolerating loss might have an absolute limit, “that there may be a threshold beyond which one cannot grieve”, and there is a “mental economy, some balance of . . . welfare emotions” that alters the “integrative apparatus” (p. 84). Extrapolating from Krystal’s formulation only emphasises the importance of “life after”, but even this optimism is confronted by Primo Levi’s (1965a,b) statement that there was nothing so good or pure that can black out the past. Levi had devoted himself to teaching about the Holocaust but stopped
because he believed, based on the questions he was asked, that he was not understood. Many believe his death in 1987 was not an accident, but suicide.

The portrayals of survivors by other researchers range from very badly damaged to remarkable and heroic, having a capacity to transform rage and loss into entrepreneurial productivity and creative accomplishment. Robert Krell (1997) distinguishes between younger and older survivors. The children often did not see themselves as true survivors, having survived the war in some kind of protected settings. Many did not recall their first language or have any memory of their parents. Krell portrays their tremendous strength and resilience, high levels of achievement, and usefulness to society. Interestingly, he finds that survivors attributed external contingencies to their survival, while non-survivor controls attributed inner psychological strength to survival. Peter Suedfeld’s (2001) findings contrasted with the belief that the earlier the trauma, the more irremediable psychic damage was done. In the group he studied, all exceptionally high achievers, he found traits of independence, self-reliance, and high value placed on work and education. They were very connected to their families, emphasising importance of love and caring, and seemed to be good and loving parents. He also found them to be sceptical and have little faith in the benevolence of others.

I should add a few comments about survival guilt. Because I think “guilt” is one of the “myths” and often more of a projection of the witness, I am tempted to limit myself to the response of survivors to social service workers: essentially, “What the hell do we have to be guilty about?” (Rabinowitz, 1976). Certainly, guilt has been manifested in mournful comments made by survivors, such as “It was the good ones who died”, and it certainly does emerge as a theme in treatment. How could it not, given the privileged place of guilt in the conception of the person, but close examination sometimes reveals that, for the survivors, it is exaggerated and shifted from attachment and longing.

Survivors’ attitudes in their relationships with their children is also a central subject. Judith Kestenberg (2000) has said that one of the greatest of all the cruelties of the Nazis was the attack on a culture for which parenting had the highest value and deepest roots, of the ability to protect the children. It is widely held that survivor parents often identify their children with murdered relatives, parents, siblings for
whom, in accordance with Jewish tradition, they might be named. Parents have an investment in their children’s successes, tempered with a desire to hold them close in a dangerous world and coming from a culture that emphasized family to one that promoted separation. Alongside their wish for their children’s success was sometimes a belief that anonymity, keeping their heads down, was an ingredient of self-protection. Again, as with all generalizations, caution and moderation is necessary even as we understand that children represented to survivors an opportunity for renewal and hope. There was also, therefore, a strong impetus to protect them from pain and avoid transmitting anguish. Finally, there was a reverse dependence on them as native speakers of the language and interpreters of the culture.

As they aged, an enthusiasm developed in survivors for participation in oral history testimony projects. They were also invited to talk in schools and synagogues. A theme unfolded in parents and their children of recapturing the past, of repair and return via what Foer (2003), in Everything is Illuminated, ironically dubbed “heritage tours” to the destroyed communities of Europe.

When, beginning in 1974, I began presenting my study of children of survivors, the response to what I still think is my most important conclusion, their individuality and distinctiveness from one another, was first, disappointment with the “insufficiency” of such a finding, and second, an eager leap to the conclusion that having survivor parents had no effect. I had difficulty transmitting the idea that the Holocaust was of such magnitude that it required a variety of ongoing adaptations to a multitude of factors privileging the entwinement of history and even the earliest family relationships.

How have survivor parents communicated their experience? The short answer is: in every different way at every different level of communication, emotional and linguistic, via patterns of eye contact in infancy and hearing nightmares and being told stories and at every different time in their lives. Survivor parents have been psychologically critiqued with multiple attributions. They have been accused of silence and they have been accused of flooding their children. In fact, the tone of their communication ranges from fully conscious to implicit, from haranguing to hesitant, revealing to secretive, protective to injunctive, repetitious to new information revealed slowly over a lifespan.

Children have a sense of always having known about their parents’ survivorhood. This, along with an intention to pass on that
knowledge to their own children, is the only concrete traits children of survivors have in common. The following are direct descriptions from young adults about this sense of always having known:

...as long as I can remember, I feel like she’s been telling them. When I could understand, that’s when she started telling.

Even before I was aware because of Hebrew school. Also it would be mentioned. People would come over, I’d say where do you know them? They’d say “I know them from the concentration camp.” So I had an awareness that my parents have been in this place, concentration camp, whatever it was.

You’re sort of born with it, it’s always around. I felt it by the year I said candles. And I did ask. (What?) Where is my grandmother? ... “she died, she was killed ...” I was a kid. Why was she killed mommy? “She was Jewish.” And that’s how it started.

I remember being seven when I found out that I had a brother or maybe had a brother. It was some talk of some guy, he was my father’s son. I’d say it was before that, I’d say it was very early.

I don’t think it was till later, I don’t remember. I think I do just because I remember my aunt had a number on her and I remember asking about it. I asked them, how come she doesn’t have a family? How come I don’t have grandparents?

How did parents communicate?

My father said I could never really be happy unless I knew what happened. Really as soon as I was able to understand, he’d tell me.

It was like pulling teeth, when I was younger I’d ask. The answer would be “it’s not nice”.

My mother does, my father doesn’t, won’t, talk about the concentration camp at all whereas my mother has told many stories.

It just keeps being added sentence by sentence.

They didn’t hide it from us, they would just talk about bits and pieces, they talk about it very infrequently when they do talk about it, it’s in the most romantic glorified versions. [What you mean?] Oh how Daddy saved me here and how Daddy saved me there and how we were always in good straits and how I was always a lady in the concentration camp, that kind of thing.
Nothing to eat come no food, no I can’t. There’s no story.

To me it seems unreal how can somebody come into your home, take you away, I mean come in, say, come on let’s go, I can’t believe that so I’d ask how they did, he’d say, “What do you mean! How did they come in! They’d say, pick up and tomorrow you were dead.”

There is again a wide range of the specific information told to their children. Some emphasised life before the Holocaust, ranging from a “Garden of Eden” populated by idealised figures who have been lost forever to a harsh world in which life was defined by poverty and constant struggle. They talked about benign worlds of aristocratic privilege, the grace of the cities, or of culture and traditions. They described the respect people had for each other and their responsibilities and successes as they achieved a good life. They talked about their own parents in usually loving but occasionally harsh terms, or they talked about illness, anti-Semitism, lack of opportunity, the unavailability of education due to poverty, and the necessity of extremely hard work. Some talked about atrocities: beatings, people burned alive in barns, but the details never approached the overwhelming horror of the images made available in films and books. Some of the themes in their stories included denial of culpability and affirmation of virtue. They told stories of heroism: for example, assuming someone’s identity in order to take a beating for that person because that person was too weak to endure it. The experience of loss was condensed into the terse description “they took him away”; there were bare references to just seeing a loved one shot or marched to the gas chamber. There were brief images of cruelty or violence.

Some of the themes involved the capriciousness of life and death; the portrayal of chance is the prime detriment of life and death. Parents described accidental circumstances that saved them, sometimes of a kindly disposed guard telling them to lie, to say that they were older, or had a certain skill. A few told iconic stories: for example a mother, once a musician, describes a horror she had by stating she had not felt afraid until she entered the camp and a guard smashed her only possession, her violin.

The responses to hearing the stories were of similarly wide range. These included: dissociation, horror, having nightmares, reactions of guilt for not wanting to hear or having an easier life, more feeling that they should be “nicer” to their parents, anger at the world, anger at
parents for burdening them, having conscious fantasies drawing on any aspect of life before and during, for example, putting themselves or imagining themselves as “potentially in that situation”. They reported intimidation by the parents’ past, their insistence on education and dedication to their own work. Finally, they reacted with admiration for the parents’ strengths. Sometimes, these exchanges took place in moments of special closeness.

How did these members of the second generation turn out? It is often said that they have had terrible trouble with separation and individualization, but, although separation is often a prominent issue in therapy, there is no evidence of measurable differences from a non-second generational cohort. It is uncanny that a great many psychotherapists, physicians, social scientists, and human rights advocates turn out to be children of survivors. But even though a sublimation of the desire to heal their parents can readily be inferred, there seems to be a wide range in their conscious interest in the Holocaust as a subject or attribution to it as a major influence in their lives. Still, many have become artists and writers of considerable distinction who explore Holocaust themes. Of particular note is that their art pushes boundaries. As Lawrence Langer (1975) observes, “To establish an order of reality in which the unimaginable becomes imaginatively acceptable exceeds the capacities of an art entirely devoted to verisimilitude” (p. 43).

Their beliefs, political affiliations, and affiliation with Judaism also span a wide range, as does their expression of vulnerability to anti-Semitism, although when they do express it, they find the threat of genocide credible. Some express strong pro-Israel attitudes, but it is extremely noteworthy that they are much more likely than expected to be critical of Israeli politics and supportive of Palestinian rights. The many personality traits, that might be expected to be influenced by historical imagery is mediated through relationships with parents but, and this is the point, not in a systematic or uniform way. They seem to share not common attributes, but a web of related conflicts, which they struggle with idiosyncratically.

The children of the children, the third generation, have been, for over a decade, in the position of their parents. Some have the attitude that it’s time to “get over it”, while for others—some observing apparent disinterest in their second generation parents—it has skipped a generation. These, having conflicts with their parents, which are different from their parents’ issues with the first generation, have
formed close alliances with grandparents whom they see, as does the
culture, in more heroic terms than their parents did. In some cases,
more is revealed to the grandchildren than the children. Some have
joined their parents as well as grandparents who are physically able,
on heritage tours to Eastern Europe, writing doctoral dissertations
about the third generation and forming 3G groups. Like their parents,
they have explored the Holocaust through art and also joined healing
professions. Although “Holocaust consciousness” varies greatly in
both the second and third generations, and that includes both the
sample I studied in 1972 (Prince, 1985) and contemporary observa-
tions—from a well respected professional who publicly avows that the
Holocaust is always with him, preoccupying him every single day, to
those who deny it to a similar extreme—my main conclusion was that,
with the exception of two traits to be discussed below, what children
of survivors have in common is they unconsciously internalise histor-
ical imagery mediated by the survivor generations’ particular experi-
ences and the culture around them as an organising principle of
identity which can then be observed in the form of its contemporary
enactment.

Consideration of the generational effects of historical trauma from
the perspective of identity creates a triangle with culture at the base.
Catherine Merridale (2000) writes,

> Just as individuals cope with pain in a variety of ways, so it seems that
> societies in turn sanction and encourage culturally specific and widely
different collective responses. . . . Thus, Russia encourages a value of
> endurance and sacrifice for the group, devaluing the individual self
> and interpreting egocentricism and selfish personal weakness. (p. 40)

Winter (2000), in a review of the history of war trauma, attributes
different cultural attitudes to attributions of shell shock, physical
causality (e.g., proximity to the explosion) attributions of defects in
the soldier, gender, feminisation, racial inferiority, and connection to
concepts of nationalistic striving and will. In his study of the sequelae
of cultural devastation among the Crow Indians, Jonathan Lear (2007)
describes the function of culture as providing a telos: life unfolds as
culture provides purpose. Runia (2007) uses the term “sublime” for
historical events of the magnitude of the Holocaust because they
represent a radical discontinuity, previous frameworks for under-
standing being destroyed. Where Lear asserts that culture is what
defines humans, Runia sees culture as arising from “burying the dead”: that is, founded on trauma.

The concept of trauma has evolved from just punishment, trauma as something that makes sense of the world, in a world governed by theodicy (Neiman, 2002), to a reflection of moral cowardice and feminine weakness, to, most recently, its medicalised place in the psychiatric literature. Jonathan Shay (2002, 2010, 2011), in proposing the term “moral injury” as an alternative to “trauma”, has been an eloquent critic, arguing forcefully that trauma is not a malady, disease, disorder, sickness, or illness but an “injury”: one which has its origins in “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al., 2009). As Ronald Naso (2015) puts it,

we’re used to thinking about trauma primarily as “ego-destabilizing” as it were—the person’s inability to cope with threats to his survival, with reality circumstances that leave him powerless—rather than the destabilizing effects of betrayal on deeply held, core moral beliefs that can be just as destabilizing.

These beliefs define the self and are key to personal identity.

Once “trauma” is inextricably linked to its damage to systems of cultural values, the notion of transmission that has recently become extremely popular, along with its sibling, witnessing, naturally flows from it. Erikson’s earlier description transmission reflects a cultural perspective. He wrote,

The subtler methods by which children are induced to accept historical or actual people as prototypes of good and evil have hardly been studied. Minute displays of emotion such as affection, pride, anger, guilt, anxiety, sexual tension (rather than the words used, the meanings intended, or the philosophy implied) transmit to the human child the outlines of what really counts in his world, i.e., the variables of his group’s space–time and the perspectives of its life plan. (Erikson, 1946, p. 359)

However, more recently, emphasis on transmission, a great deal of it emerging from the Holocaust literature, has risked a narrower view of transmission with the connotation of a troubled legacy from the traumatised to their offspring, the survivor syndrome paired with a
parallel child of survivor syndrome. Trauma has the connotation of a communicable disease, damaged parents passing along their wounds. The children suffer from “second hand smoke” (Rosenbaum, 1999). The idea of transmission requires caution about a false equivalence of the directly experienced and experience once removed. There is a meretricious blurring of boundaries between witness and witnessed. Marianne Hirsch (2001) explored what she called “post-memory”, commenting on *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991), and concluded that Spiegelman’s life is dominated by memories that are not his own. Gubar (2003) chooses the subtitle, *Remembering What One Never Knew*” for her book, *Poetry after Auschwitz*, which is an exploration of Adorno’s injunction regarding the terms in which the Holocaust could be discussed. If the current enthusiasm for transmission and witnessing is in any part a guilty reaction formation to initial neglect and avoidance of taking testimony from the refugee, there is a “return of the suppressed” in it threatening to supersede the survivor. It also blurs the assertion of the unknowability of the extreme suffering of an Other, no matter how sympathetic the witness, which serves as a common subtext in the literature of survivorhood. The more recent accounts of the resentment of war-scarred soldiers of misguided attempts to bear “witness” (Klinkenborg, 2015) should serve as cautions. In some of these narratives, bitterness seems to emerge from attempts to hijack individual memory for the purpose of larger collective memories that distort horror into heroism.

An alternative to the concept of trauma as transmitted is to consider it as “embedded” in overlapping networks, personal, familial, and cultural. Thus, children of survivors come to know their parents’ trauma through their own experiences of immigrant parents who have a different “native” language, of not having grandparents, extended families, or national heritages. The parents’ nightmare less “transmits” the parents’ trauma than it is the child’s direct experience in the child’s own context. Thinking of trauma as embedded rather than transmitted turns witnessing into something more active than passive; it emphasises the participation of all as historical actors in their respective and multiple roles.

With a view of transmission as “embedded”, it is possible to understand the two discrete traits of children of survivors which stand out so dramatically because they are the only two of the multiple ones explored (Prince, 1985) that defy the individuality and uniqueness of
each person and are held in common. When children of survivors universally say they “always knew” their parents were survivors and “intend to pass on knowledge” to their own children, they are not claiming that they have been traumatised and plan to pass on trauma, but are asserting possession of a heritage, however tragic, that is an important component of their identity. Finally, regarding trauma as embedded has implications for healing, as Shay (2011) has called for a “communalization” of treatment. This embedded perspective turns it from a pathologising agent, like infection, into an attribute of the world that requires adaptation and focuses on the group, not the individual.

In this chapter, I have tried to trace shifting and evolving cultural representations of the survivor in the USA and make a connection to the survivor’s post-Holocaust experience. While it would be tendentious to assert that individual post-trauma suffering can be dissolved in culture, to attribute the sequelae of personal suffering to all that comes after, and equally presumptuous to imply that any loss can be compensated by cultural recognition (while most exegetists are quick to remind us that Job’s losses were restored, none, to my knowledge, wonders how his slain sons can be replaced with new ones, no matter how much joy they bring in their own right), it is no less benighted to deny the trajectory of the effects of trauma as overlapping with society’s representation. Although often confused, individual and collective memory are different.

Historical trauma has a complex relationship with objective time. As the representations of the Holocaust have unfolded in the past seventy years, there remains an eternal present-ness to suffering: Delbo (1990) speaks for survivors when she describes living in the here and now while simultaneously side by side with Auschwitz. We have, as therapists, an ideology of overcoming trauma, which Hartman (1996) addresses when he writes, “it takes a particular kind of courage not to overcome the past but to live with it still” (p. 66). Claude Lanzman (1995) famously refused to include past footage in his magnum opus, *Shoah*, insisting on including only current interviews. Imre Kertesz in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (2002) for the novel with the timeless title *Fateless*, says,

One can only write a black novel about Auschwitz, or—you should excuse the expression—a cheap serial, which begins in Auschwitz and
is still not over. By which I mean that nothing has happened since Auschwitz that could reverse or refute Auschwitz. In my writings the Holocaust could never be present in the past tense. (Italics added)

Kertesz goes on to say of the future,

What I discovered in Auschwitz is the human condition, the end point of a great adventure, where the European traveler arrived after his two-thousand-year-old moral and cultural history. Now the only thing to reflect on is where we go from here.

The desire to preserve memory of the Holocaust, to say nothing of finding redemptive meaning, is opposed by the deepest resistances. The first, as reflected by the initial response to the refugee, was silence. Indeed, this refusal seems to be the first step of every response to every mass atrocity: not believe it.

The very first question I was asked the very first time I gave a talk about children survivors at a psychiatric meeting, in 1975, at a time when the literature was virtually non-existent, was: didn’t I think the subject was exhausted? Today, I overhear people looking at the programme at professional meetings, “Oh no! Not another paper about the Holocaust!” There is no question that Holocaust fatigue has set in. There is a question if it was ever absent.

The Holocaust in America, characterised as going from silence to salience in the first fifty years, has arguably now gone on to relativism. Yehuda Bauer (2006) uses the term flattened to describe the application of the Holocaust indiscriminately to other atrocities. Hartman (1996) warns of a “simplification of memory” serving an “anti-memory”, leading to the artificial closure of “solacing fictions” and “forgetful ritualization” (p. 11).

Samantha Power (2007), in her tour de force, A Problem From Hell: America in the Age of Genocide, painfully documents the ongoing repetition of silenced testimony and neglect of suffering as she shows the Holocaust simultaneously invoked as the emblem of evil and then a standard that paradoxically forestalled intervention in subsequent genocides. Power specifically addresses moral injury represented by the Holocaust and the ambivalent struggle to restore moral order.

The conflict between defence and the imperative to find redemptive meaning is intrinsic to massive historic trauma. I have tried to elucidate the complicated context for the representation of Holocaust
survivors in America and communicate it as dynamic and changing, rather than static. The evolving representation, like Elie Wiesel rejecting what he sees in the mirror at the end of Night, corresponds to transformations in the survivors. Seventy years later, the last of the survivors are dying out and as their individual memories “fade away” (Winter, 2000, p. 10), they are replaced by a collective memory, the representation of which will, in future generations, be the crucible for our moral injury.

References


CHAPTER SEVEN

The lie of the banality of evil: Hannah Arendt’s fatal flaw

Henry Zvi Lothane

The renowned Jewish–German–American cultural, political, and social philosopher, Hannah Arendt, made many outstanding contributions to political theory. A major work is her 1951 book, The Origins of Totalitarianism, in which she expounded on Immanuel Kant’s notion of radical evil. In 1963, she became notorious with the publication of her book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. How could a woman who was so wise in 1951 turn out to be so wrong in 1963, when her previous reportage in the New Yorker became a bestseller (1965)?

The idea of evil

By a quirk, evil backwards reads live, the fundamental contrast and conflict between what preserves life and what destroys life. Evil is also destructive to life as a moral and social enterprise: it defines the difference between good and bad, virtue and vice, sinful, right and wrong, legal and criminal, and, last but not least, healthy or sick. Down the millennia, mankind has endeavoured to grasp the universal emotional essence of evil (Lothane, 2011, 2012, 2014a,b, 2016). However, from the
perspective of the existence of individuals and communities, evil is what evil does, as expressed by Shakespeare, “The evil that men do lives after them”, and Milton, “Evils which our own misdeeds have wrought” (Webster’s, 1951). Evil is also an emotional and cognitive judgement stemming from conscience and a sense of social responsibility of what is good or bad. Evil has been a major theme in the mythologies of primitive cultures, in China, Egypt, India, and Persia, in the Hammurabi Code, the Bible, and in Homer. In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are commanded not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which Christianity defined as original sin and the cause of the Fall of mankind, a doctrine that shaped European religious and secular philosophies. In the Hebrew and Christian religious and philosophical theodicies, good is an attribute of God and evil, defined as the absence of good, is placed at mankind’s doorstep. This was also the opinion of Kant in his formulation of radical evil.

Arendt invoked Kant’s idea of radical evil in her 1966[1951] discussion of the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet forced-labour camps. In the horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald

... it becomes clear that things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction and therapy. (p. 446)

Hence, the discomfiture of common sense, which asks: What crimes must these people have committed in order to suffer so inhumanly? Hence, also, the absolute innocence of the victims. Hence finally the grotesque haphazardness with which concentration camp victims were chosen in the perfected terror state: such “punishment” can, with equal justice and injustice, be inflicted on anyone. (p. 447)

The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses ... Suddenly and unexpectedly ... hundreds of thousands of human beings [were made] homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, ... millions economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment ... The Rights of man ... lost all validity. ... The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person
in man . . . by placing the concentration camp outside the normal penal system and the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty. (p. 447)

Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal. When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friend or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in some sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family—how is one to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. (p. 452)

Arendt had expressed these sentiments in 1948.

The Nazi creation of Hell upon earth might have been inspired by centuries of Christian obsession with the horrors of Hell in official church doctrine, religious art depicting mountains of corpses, or Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*. Arendt’s hell simile was both apt and compelling. How disappointing, then, was her subsequent abrogation of the notion of radical evil in a letter to Gershom Scholem:

> You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of “radical evil.” It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never “radical,” that it is only extreme and that it possessed neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay to waste the whole world *precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface*. It is “thought-defying,” as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality”. (Arendt 2007, p. 470, quoted in Bernstein, 2014, my italics)

Scholem, eminent scholar of Judaism and mysticism, broke with Arendt over her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, first published as reportage in the *New Yorker* magazine. War criminal Adolf Eichmann was briefly mentioned by her in 1966[1951], in connection with the activities of the Nazi Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage (Institute for the study of the Jewish question) and “Himmler’s special Gestapo department for the liquidation (not merely the study) of the Jewish question, which was headed by Eichmann” (p. 402, my italics). In Jerusalem, Eichmann was convicted
of, and hanged for, his role in the liquidation of European Jewry as chief organiser of mass deportations of Jews to the killing centres in Poland. Prominent Jews like Gershom Scholem and the Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg (1999) were outraged by Arendt’s phrase in the subtitle, banality of evil, for evil is not banal, that is, commonplace or platitudinous, or trite, and neither was Eichmann himself. Others were on her side, most recently R. J. Bernstein (2014), a former colleague of Arendt’s at the New School in New York, who thinks Arendt was “badly misunderstood” (p. 93). I strongly disagree: she was not misunderstood; she had made a dreadful mistake.

Dangers of mythologising?

After the Soviets freed the inmates of Auschwitz and Majdanek, the Americans and the British liberated the remaining camps by 8 May 1945, discovering additional mounds of corpses and clusters of living corpses of malnourished and sick inmates. In November of that year began the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders. In 1946, Arendt wrote this to her former teacher, Karl Jaspers, “Your definition of Nazi policy as a crime ("criminal guilt") strikes me as questionable . . . that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes no punishment is enough” (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992, p. 54; my italics). Jaspers’ definition was both wrong and contradicted the legal premises of the Nuremberg court that tried and convicted Nazi murderers for crimes against humanity. In his response, Jaspers was not altogether comfortable with [her] view and denounced “greatness” as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the demonic element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that’s what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror. (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992, p. 64, my italics)

Arendt wrote back:

I realize completely that . . . I come dangerously close to that “satanic greatness” that I, like you, totally reject. But still, there is difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people
who... built factories to produce corpses. One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologise the horrible... (Bernstein, 2014)

Why were they quibbling about Nazi guilt? And why is there a need to combat using mythological and poetic imaginings and metaphors (Hell, Satan, Evil) to convey the horror of the Holocaust? Jaspers was doubly wrong: Nazi crimes were neither banal or trivial nor bacterial epidemics: they were hellish, horrendous, heinous, hate-filled, and evil crimes against humanity: genocide of the Jewish people and other ethnic groups or socially persecuted minorities, such as homosexuals and political opponents, and a destruction of the Jewish cultural heritage on an unprecedented industrial scale. On a personal level, how could Jaspers, in good faith, prate about banality when he and his Jewish wife lived under the Nazis, thus facing the threat of being deported to a concentration camp? On a factual level, how could he, this otherwise esteemed philosopher, compare premeditated genocide, an act of mankind, with nations wiped out by bacterial epidemics, an act of nature? Equally deplorable was Arendt’s converting the bacterial into a fungus simile in the aforementioned letter to Scholem.

Ironically, similar analogies were drawn by Hitler (1925) in his infamous Mein Kampf. Moving from Linz to Vienna, Hitler was repelled by the conglomeration of races which the capital showed him, repelled by this whole mixture of Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Serbs, and Croats, and everywhere, the eternal mushroom of humanity—Jews and more Jews.

To me the giant city seemed the embodiment of racial desecration... The Jew was always a parasite in the body of other peoples... His spreading is a typical phenomenon for all parasites; he always seeks a new feeding ground for his race. (V. I I, XI, electronic version)

I do not know if Jaspers or Arendt read Mein Kampf, and neither am I suggesting that in their remarks Jaspers and Arendt were as anti-Semitic as Hitler, but I do reject the biological simile with utmost indignation, and, not the least, because, as a survivor of the Second World War, for me Hitler has been the most demonic, evil leader that ever lived, more sinister—if there is room for comparison—than Stalin, who masterminded the Gulag, executions, and genocide of...
Russian and Ukrainian peoples. To characterise these two dictators as satanic is not mythologising, but a way of conveying the evil they committed, and it has the advantage of avoiding an even greater sin, that of pathologising, that is, explaining, evil as a mental disorder rather than comprehending their ideologies, policies, and criminal acts.

_The man who did not know what he was doing_

The fallacious Arendt–Jaspers exchange spawned a bigger falsehood in 1963 (Arendt, 1965) when Arendt borrowed Jaspers’ term “banality” and inserted it into the subtitle of her book, which truly should have been more on Eichmann’s actions as a Nazi war criminal and less a report about his appearance and behaviour in the Jerusalem court, as perceived by Arendt. With this subjective approach to Eichmann, Arendt retreated from upholding Kant’s concept of radical, or man-made, evil: that moral corruption of character is radical, that is, the root, or radical, cause of evil deeds. Armed with her new reasons, Arendt (1965) argued as follows:

> When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was no Iago and no Macbeth, and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all . . . He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. (pp. 287, my italics)

Arendt confused objective historical facts with subjective literary fancies. It was _jejune_ to compare the real Eichmann with _fictional_ Shakespeare characters like Iago, a jealous husband, or Macbeth, a regicidal aristocrat, both tragic, not evil, heroes, or even the villainous Richard III—what does this have to do with Eichmann and his role in the Holocaust? This amounted to a defence of Eichmann: he should have hired her, had he read this, to be his lawyer during the trial. For Arendt, who only spent a few weeks at the trial, the allegedly “strictly factual level” was the nebbish who did not know how to think, not the actual SS officer Eichmann in a uniform with SS insignia, the
subordinate of exterminators Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich, who deported Jews to their death in Auschwitz, among them about 400,000 Hungarian and Czech Jews during the last year of the war (Čvančara, 2004). More to the point, it was preposterous of Arendt to conclude that Eichmann “never realized what he was doing”—give me a break! The historical fact is that Obersturmbannführer (a military rank in the SS equivalent to lieutenant colonel) Eichmann, as representative of the SS, participated in the 1942 Wannsee Conference that finalised the orders for the Final Solution, the extermination of the Jews in Europe. During the trial, chief prosecutor Gideon Hausner asked Eichmann, “Were you an Obersturmbannführer or an office girl?” (Noam Ordan, personal communication). According to Second World War historian and Nazi hunter Professor Wolfgang Eckart, Director of the Institute of the History of Medicine at Heidelberg University and my sponsor during my guest professorship there,

Eichmann knew about everything in detail from the beginning. He wrote down the minutes of the Wannsee-Conference. And he did not just sit a desk: he traveled to the death camps and saw the extermination installations with his own eyes. Eichmann had the odor of gas in his nose and the taste of the poison on his tongue as he kept signing the deportation orders piled up on his desk. (email of 29 May 2013)

The website Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College shows an undated statement by Arendt:

In response to my essay on “Misreading ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’,” I have been asked repeatedly how to access the Sassen papers, the more than 1,300 pages of memoir and interview transcripts that Eichmann produced while he was in Argentina. The first answer is simple: Read the two issues of Life magazine from November 28 and December 5, 1960 in which a large chunk of these interviews are excerpted.

Sassen was a Dutch Nazi who interviewed Eichmann in Argentina in 1955. Sassen is mentioned repeatedly in her book (1965) without any quotes from the interviews. The first excerpt is Eichmann’s reaction to witnessing the murder of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen firing squads:

I watched the last group of Jews undress, down to their shirts. They walked the last 100 or 200 yards—they were not driven—then they
jumped into the pit. It was impressive to see them all jumping into the pit without offering any resistance whatsoever. Then the men of the squad banged away into the pit with their rifles and machine pistols. Why did that scene linger so long in my memory? Perhaps because I had children myself. And there were children in that pit. I saw a woman hold a child of a year or two into the air, pleading. At that moment all I wanted to say was, “Don’t shoot, hand over the child . . .” Then the child was hit. I was so close that later I found bits of brains splattered on my long leather coat. My driver helped me remove them. Then we returned to Berlin. (Berkowitz, www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=11112)

*Life Magazine* excerpts end with a transcription and translation of Eichmann’s final outburst when, fed up with Sassen’s attempt to deny the Holocaust or to diminish it, he bursts out in a fit of self-justification,

But to sum it all up, I must say that I regret nothing. Adolf Hitler may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German army to *Führer* of a people of almost 80 million. I never met him personally, but his success alone proves to me that I should subordinate myself to this man. He was somehow so supremely capable that the people recognized him. And so with that justification I recognized him joyfully, and I still defend him.

I will not humble myself or repent in any way. I could do it too cheaply in today’s climate of opinion. It would be too easy to pretend that I had turned suddenly from a Saul to a Paul. No, I must say truthfully that if we had killed all the 10 million Jews that Himmler’s statisticians originally listed in 1933, I would say, “Good, we have destroyed an enemy.” But here I do not mean wiping them out entirely. That would not be proper—and we carried on a proper war. (Berkowitz, www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=11112)

Eichmann was not the lowly paper pusher who did not know what he was doing. As a faithful Nazi, Eichmann would have studied Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to become both a careerist and an ardent follower of that ideology. Eichmann was banal, not the ideology he served with great zeal. In 1999, Hilberg gave an interview to the German newspaper *Die Welt* in which he stated:
Eichmann was not banal. This was no banal person but a member of the SS. Arendt misled half the world with her so-called “banality of evil”. Neither the actions nor the man Eichmann were banal. Hegel had already warned us not to observe world historical figures from the perspective of their servants. That is what philosopher Hannah Arendt has overlooked in Eichmann. Neither was he a case of blind obedience. He did not follow every order, as he had argued. He was still so zealous in 1944 that he continued to deport Jews when he no longer had to. At the trial, he represented the entire Nazi bureaucracy’s work of destruction, which included countless collaborators. (translated for this edition)

On Arendt’s own showing, the Nazis ruled a state that was “totalitarian and criminal” (Arendt, 1965, p. 68), with a new constitution of 1937 in which the disenfranchisement of the Jews was written into law, a state whose economy was based on slave labour, expropriation, and plunder, with an army that conquered and subjugated most of Europe, causing uprooting, starvation, torture, and massacres of civilians, suffering and misery to millions of men, women, and children, including the Germans themselves as the army was being defeated on both fronts. The Nazified Wehrmacht (army) and the SS warlords and their collaborators, the civil servants, the scientists, were not devoid of the ability to think, plan, organise, and execute Hitler’s ambition of world domination and extermination of Jews, gypsies, Jehovah’s witnesses, and regime opponents: they knew what they were doing.

The Holocaust historian who understood it best was Raul Hilberg (1985[1961]) who had complained that Arendt plagiarised his work and his major thesis that Hitler did not do it alone, as he stated in 1988:

Speer was once asked, “How did you know when Hitler made a decision?” . . . At first there were the laws. Then there were decrees implementing laws. Then a law was made there should be new laws. Then there were orders and directives written down but still published in ministerial gazettes. There was government by announcement: orders appeared in the newspapers. Then there were only the hidden orders—the instructions that were not published, that were given within the bureaucracy, that were oral. And finally there were no orders at all. Everybody knew what he had to do. (Woodruff & Wilmer, 1988, p. 103)
Arendt has bollixed up her own argument, “he never realized what he was doing”, by a detailed account of Eichmann’s activities in Chapter IX of her book and by quoting the books of Hilberg (1961) and Léon Poliakov (1951), citing the latter’s book in 1966 (p. 505) and its German translation in 1965 (p. 302). In Poliakov (1951) we read, on 30 July 1941 Heydrich was ordered “to take all the preparatory measures required for the final solution of the Jewish question in the European territories under German control” . . . In fact, the power to carry this out was given to Adolf Eichmann . . . Heydrich authorises Eichmann to put into operation the first deportation trains: it is no longer a matter of evacuation but of imminent extermination. (pp. 130–131, translated for this edition)

Thus, the final solution already had been put into operation prior to the 1942 Wannsee Conference, during which, as interpreted by Arendt, Eichmann “sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt” (p. 114). According to Arendt, again—who was he “to have his own thoughts in the matter?” (Arendt, 1965, p. 114). However, according to Poliakov, under Heydrich as chief of RSHA (Head Office for Reich Security),

Eichmann as chief of Office IV-B-4 [a subsection RSHA], is the true architect of the “final solution”, at least as far as the first part of the process is concerned, the numbers of the Jews to be arrested and transported to extermination sites . . . Eichmann was informed about everything and played an active role in exterminations wherever they took place. As chief of bureau IV-B he was specifically in charge of organisation and negotiations that this involved in all the [Nazi-occupied] European countries, with the exception of Germany and Poland, that were the direct responsibility of Himmler and Heydrich. (pp. 161–162, translated for this edition)

so also noted by Arendt (1965, p. 84).

The guilt of the innocent

On the one hand, Arendt stated in the aforementioned Chapter IX, “Duties of a law-abiding citizen”, that, feeling like Pontius Pilate,
[Eichmann believed] this was the way things were . . . based on the Führer’s order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his duty . . . he not only obeyed orders, he obeyed the law. . . . [And] he declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to the Kantian definition of duty. This was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant’s moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man’s faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience. (1965, pp. 135–136)

More confusion in Arendt’s thinking: while appearing to offer excuses for Eichmann, she also had it right this time by exposing Eichmann’s duplicitous stratagem and, in my opinion, nullifying the banality defence.

On the other hand, in stark contrast to the aforementioned statements about the absolute innocence of the victims of 1966, Arendt (1965) was critical of the co-operation of the Jewish Councils with Eichmann and of the actions of the Jewish leader of the Łódź Ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski. The latter and his men “informed Eichmann [them] how many Jews were needed to fill each train, and they made out the list of deportees” (p. 115). Were they collaborators and traitors, like the Norwegian Quisling? According to Margrit Wreschner, survivor of Theresienstadt, rabbi Benjamin Murmelstein, who worked with Eichmann in Vienna and was later the head of the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt, was a traitor (personal communication). It was a great tragedy of the Jews everywhere. Should their members have committed suicide en masse, like the ancient defenders of Massada?

As told by Arendt,

The Jewish Councils of Elders were informed by Eichmann or his men of how many Jews were needed to fill each train, and they made out the list of deportees. The Jews registered, filled out innumerable forms, answered pages and pages of questionnaires regarding their property so that it could be seized more easily. They then assembled at the collection points and boarded the trains. The few who tried to hide or to escape were rounded up by a special Jewish police force. As far as Eichmann could see, no one protested, no one refused to cooperate. (p. 115).

We know how the Jewish officials felt when they became the instruments of murder—like captains “whose ships were about to sink and
succeeded in bringing them safe to port by casting overboard a great part of their precious cargo”; like saviours, who “with a hundred victims save a thousand people, with a thousand ten thousand.” The truth was even more gruesome. Dr. [Rudolf Israel] Kastner in Hungary, for instance, saved exactly 1,684 people with approximately 476,000 victims. (p. 118)

Arendt was right about Kastner: in exchange for money, gold, and diamonds, he struck a deal with Eichmann to save his chosen privileged Jews while sacrificing the rest by failing to warn them that their so-called “resettlement” was a deportation to the gas chambers. At his trial in Jerusalem in 1955, he was convicted for “having sold his soul to the devil” (p. 348). In 1957, Kastner was fatally wounded by a Jewish right-wing group member. Whether all members of the Jewish Councils should have been judged as harshly as Kastner has been a subject of bitter debates.

Arendt also branded Rumkowski:

We know the physiognomies of the Jewish leaders during the Nazi period very well; they ranged from Chaim Rumkowski, Eldest of the Jews in Łódz [sic], called Chaim I, who issued currency notes bearing his signature and postage stamps engraved with his portrait, and who drove around in a broken-down horse-drawn carriage; through Leo Baeck, scholarly, mild-mannered, highly educated, who believed Jewish policemen would be more “more gentle and helpful” and would “make the ordeal easier” (p. 119); to finally a few who committed suicide—like dam Czerniakow, chairman of the Warsaw Jewish Council . . . who must have still remembered the rabbinical saying: “Let them kill you, but don’t cross the line”. (p. 119)

And here is what the eminent scholar of the Holocaust, Martin Gilbert (1985) had to say about Rumkowski: “Chaim Rumkowski was convinced that he could keep the ghetto in productive work and thus preserve life, and that he could find work for all the surviving 100,000 inhabitants” (p. 348). In fact, since the industrial site he organised and maintained provided a vital service to the Nazi war effort, the Jews were not deported at first. In 1942,

Rumkowski had been ordered to deport “some twenty thousand Jews”, he told a meeting of Jews in the ghetto. The Germans told him that if he refused, “we shall do it ourselves”. Rumkowski added: “I
have to perform this bloody operation myself; I simply must cut off the limbs to save the body. I have to take away children, because others will also be taken.” The days of those who were sick were also numbered. “Deliver me the sick ones,” Rumkowski asked, “and it may be possible to save the healthy ones instead.” An eye-witness, Oscar Singer, recalled the sequel: “Horror seizes the crowd. ‘Why do the Nazis want our children?’ Pandemonium broke out in the ghetto. But Rumkowski knew he had to deliver, ‘I love children as much as you do,’ he cried hysterically; ‘still I fear we must surrender the children as a sacrificial offering in order to save the collective, because should the Germans take matters into their own hands . . .’” Rumkowski spoke “with a broken heart”, Singer added, “he who was a ‘Father’ to thousands of orphans”. (Gilbert, 1985, p. 448)

The Łódź ghetto lasted two years longer than the Warsaw ghetto, but eventually its inhabitants were deported to the gas chambers of Auschwitz:

By the end of August 1944, sixty-seven thousand Jews had been deported from the Lodz ghetto to Birkenau. Among them, Chaim Rumkowski, “King of the Jews” of the Lodz ghetto, their protector and their mentor, was deported with his family, and perished in the gas chamber together with more than sixty thousand other Jews from the ghetto over which he exercised so much control and, as he believed, protection. (Gilbert, 1985, p. 722)

On 19 January 1945, 877 survivors, twelve of whom were children, of the more than 204,000 former ghetto inmates, were liberated by the Soviet Army. All told, 10,000 of the Jews who were detained in the Łódź ghetto survived the war. Many felt they lived thanks to Rumkowski. Judge not that ye be not judged.

_Sigmund Freud on evil_

In 1921, Freud shifted from an intrapersonal psychology to an interpersonal psychology: “in the individual mental life someone else is invariably involved, as model, an object, as a helper or an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology . . . is at the same time social psychology as well” (1921c, p. 69) and reaffirmed it in 1933: “Sociology, dealing as it does with the behaviour of people in society,
cannot be anything but applied psychology. Strictly speaking there are only two sciences: psychology, pure and applied, and natural science” (1933a, p. 179). Sociologist Gustave Le Bon, Freud’s main inspiration for the new focus on mass psychology, was quoted by Freud as follows:

the individual forming part of a crowd acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts, which, had he been alone, he would perforce kept under restraint . . . a crowd being anonymous [so that ] the sentiment of responsibility disappears entirely. The second cause [is] contagion . . . classed among phenomena of a hypnotic order . . . A third cause is . . . suggestibility. . . . Isolated, a person may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian — that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings. (Le Bon, 1897, pp. 9–12; Freud, 1921c, pp. 74, 77, my italic)

Instincts in Le Bon refer not to Freud’s instinctual, that is, libidinal, impulses, but life’s emotions, or passions: the person’s craving for love and suffering as a result of frustration of love, resulting in anger and hate; the hunger for influence and power over others; the ability of emotions to overpower reason and responsibility (Lothane, 2016). Such emotions were stirred up by the bond of attachment, love, and obedience between the led and the leader and can be exploited by leaders both democratic and demagogic to propel masses to war (Lothane, 2006), as happened both in 1914 and 1939.

The so-called Spirit of 1914, the mass war euphoria in Germany, whipped up by Emperor Wilhelm and the German political parties, was an overwhelming mass phenomenon. This was mirrored by the euphoria among the French as well. Similarly, in 1939, Hitler’s dream of world conquest began as a romance between the Führer and the masses in an ecstatic, orgiastic love embrace, the illusion of being loved by the Führer, the common bonds of identification among adherents old and young, men and women, the young abandoning parental values to follow the Führer, who used all the modern paraphernalia, torch-lit military parades and impassioned theatrical speeches, to produce visceral excitement and enthusiasm among the masses. Moreover, hundreds of university professors and thousands of students enthusiastically took the oath of allegiance to the Führer
in these mass meetings. Le Bon’s and Freud’s observations and insights provide an understanding of the phenomenon of emotional contagion, of a transfer of feelings and emotions, of the hypnotic, trance-like state of consciousness created by mass enthusiasm, from a group of two to masses of thousands, from a folie à deux to a folie à millions (Lothane, 2016).

In 1915, overwhelmed by the First World War, Freud compared its “immediate evils” with “the evils of other times”:

In the confusion of wartime in which we are caught up . . . we cannot but feel that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possession of humanity . . . the mental distress felt by the non-combatants . . . is the disillusionment which this war evoked, and the altered attitude towards death which this – like every other war – has forced upon us . . . [w]e condemn war both in its means and ends and long for the cessation of all wars . . . We had expected that the great world-dominating nations of white race upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen . . . would succeed in discovering another way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interest (pp. 275–276). The war in which we had refused to believe broke out and it brought disillusionment . . . more bloody and more destructive because of the enormously increased perfection of weapons of attack and defence . . . it disregards all the restrictions known as International law . . . the distinction between civil and military sections of the population . . . tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way. It cuts all the common bonds between the contending peoples, and threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make the renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come. . . . Indeed, one of the great civilized nations is so universally unpopular [as to] exclude it from the civilized community as “barbaric”, although it has long proved its fitness by the magnificent contributions which it has made. . . . A belligerent state permits itself every such misdeed, every act of violence, as would disgrace the individual. It makes use against the enemy not only of the accepted ruses de guerre [hoaxes of war], but of deliberate lying and deception as well. (Freud, 1915b, pp. 278–279, second italics mine)

The great nation Hitler was referring to is Germany. Freud wrote about das Böse, evil in the singular, apparently unafraid of mythological or philosophical ideas. Aware of the illusion that befalls “pious souls who would like to believe that our nature is remote from any
contact with what is evil and base” (1915b, p. 295), Freud intended to show

instead that the deepest essence of human nature consists of impulses which are of an elementary nature, which are similar in all men and which aim at the satisfaction of certain primal needs. These impulses in themselves are neither good nor bad. We classify them and their expressions in that way, according to the needs and demands of the human community. It must be granted that all the impulses which society condemns as evil—let us take as representative the selfish and cruel ones—are of this primitive kind. (1915b, p. 281, my italics)

He added in 1916,

The war broke out and robbed the world of . . . our admiration for many philosophers and artists and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed for ever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. . . . It robbed us of the very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. (Freud, 1916a, p. 307, my italics)

The 1915–1916 passages pose a serious question: how can Freud explain the existence of the evil misdeeds of war by theorising about the essence of elementary impulses of selfishness and cruelty and without connecting them to deeds of aggression and anger? How can one square the quasi-Nietzschean idea of the impulses being beyond good and evil but, at the same time, claim that they are also barbaric and a colossal violation of ethics and law? More importantly: can individual psychology of instincts, be it as defined by Le Bon or by Freud, explain the social psychology of a state? In the individual, such impulses may be

inhibited, directed towards other aims and fields, alter their objects . . . [utilize] reaction formation . . . as though egoism had changed into altruism or pity . . . facilitated by . . . ambivalence of feeling . . . [such that] intense love and intense hatred are so often found in the same person. (1915b, p. 281)
Clearly, psychoanalytic theory as applied to the person is powerless to regulate politics of, and policies performed with, the powers of the state, its economy, its laws and institutions of enforcement: for example, the police and the military. In short, powerful interests and innate instincts are the real wellsprings of state power and action and the state, unlike the individual, has no innate impulses and no defences, no conscience and no guilt: the state practices Realpolitik, that is, power politics of deception, coercion, and war, it is not beyond, as Freud said about impulses, but above good and evil: it overrides morality and truthfulness to prosecute war and other interests. Freud must be supplemented by reading the 1513 book *The Prince*, by Niccolo Machiavelli, as well as the 1651 book *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, by Thomas Hobbes.

The impact of the First World War continued to affect Freud’s ideas after 1916 (Lothane, 2011):

Five years later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920) put forward the newly discovered theory of the death instinct, for which Freud found inspiration in the 1912 paper by Sabina Spielrein. Contrasted with life instincts, represented by Eros, the new instinct was popularized by gracing it with the names of another Greek divinity, Thanatos (death), although the word *Thanatos* was never used by Freud himself. As he admitted, his theory was a “speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilections” (p. 24), “as a basis for our metapsychological speculations” (p. 30). He speculated further: “We started out from the great opposition between the life and death instincts. Now object-love itself presents us with a second example of a similar polarity – that between love (or affection) and hate (or aggressiveness): if only we could succeed in relating these two polarities to each other and in deriving one from the other! (Freud, 1920, p. 53) If such an assumption as this is permissible, then we have met the demand that we should produce an example of a death instinct – though, it is true, a displaced one. But this way of looking at things is very far from being easy to grasp and creates a positively mystical impression. It looks suspiciously as though we were trying to find a way out of a highly embarrassing situation at any price” (p. 54). It does look suspicious: The suggested bridge between cosmology and psychology and cosmology and sociology is a tenuous one, and
cosmic forces are not the same as dramas of love and aggression that take place between people in love or among peoples at war. (condensed, pp. 274–276, my italics)

Moreover, the most important speculation that posed the question was Freud’s confusing senescence, a biological fact, with a mythological death instinct. However, in spite of all these confused speculations, Freud’s recognition of aggressiveness, unmentioned in 1915–1916, was an important advance for psychology and sociology, further elaborated in chapters IV and V of The Ego and the Id (1923b).

The last word about evil comes in the 1933 “Why war?”, an exchange between two pacifists: Freud and Albert Einstein. Einstein writes about the current “menace of war” (1933b, p. 199), the problem of “law and might” (p. 200), and his concern “about psychoses of hate and destructiveness” (p. 201). In response, Freud lectures about power and violence in the individual and the collective and refers to wars of conquest, “some such as [were] waged by the Mongols and the Turks, have brought nothing but evil” (p. 207). Neither says a word about Hitler or the growing influence of his political party. In conclusion, Freud counsels Einstein how to overcome the evil of war:

Our mythological theory of instincts makes it easy for us to find a formula for indirect methods of combating war. If willingness to engage in war is an effect of the destructive instinct, the most obvious plan will be to bring Eros, its antagonist, into play against it. Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war. These ties may be of two kinds. In the first place, they may be relations resembling those towards a love object, though without having a sexual aim. There is no need for psycho-analysis to be ashamed to speak of love in this connection, for religion itself uses the same words: “Thou shalt love the neighbour as thyself”. This, however, is more easily said than done. The second kind of emotional tie is by means of identification. Whatever leads men to share important interests produces this community of feeling, these identifications. And the structure of human society is to a large extent based on them. (1933b, p. 212)

Remembering the evil of the Mongols and the Turks, both genocidal, is either just history or a veiled warning about the gathering storm in Germany. With the memory of “barbaric” Germany’s evil of 1915
and his prediction of “a legacy of embitterment that will make the renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come”, it is surprising that Freud did not overtly connect the dots or publish any follow-up to this exchange between Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 and his leaving Vienna in 1938, especially in view of what he and his daughter Anna personally experienced with the Nazis there (Lothane, 2001). Dying three weeks after the Second World War began on 1 September 1939, Freud was spared the horrors of the Holocaust—which brings us back to radical evil.

**Buber on the radical evil of the lie**

Martin Buber dealt with the problem of the lie and lying in 1952: The lie is the specific evil which man has introduced into nature . . . the lie is our very own invention, different in kind from every deceit that animals can produce. A lie was possible only after a creature, man, was capable of conceiving the being of truth. It was possible only as directed against the conceived truth. In a lie, the spirit practices treason against itself (p. 7).

In order to understand this passage fully, it is necessary to keep in mind Buber’s definition of evil:

It is usual to think of good and evil as two poles, two opposite directions, two arms of a signpost pointing to right and left . . . we must begin by doing away with this convention and recognizing the fundamental dissimilarity between the two in nature, structure and dynamics within human reality . . . Evil, though concretely presented to extraspective vision also, in its actions and effects, its attitudes and behavior, is presented in its essential state to our introspection only; and only our self-knowledge—[and ] our knowledge of others—is capable of stating what happens when we do evil. . . . It follows from the foregoing that [the person] must now be aware of the *existent actuality* of evil as evil (pp. 121–122), [of] the biographically decisive beginnings of evil and good (p. 124), [of] a “radical evil” . . . because what man finds in himself is willed. (p. 140, my italics)

These ideas had also been expressed by the Stoics and the Evangelists: “But let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (Matthew 5:37); “The
truth will set you free” (John 8:32); “If any man is able to convince me that I do not think or act right, I will gladly change; for I seek the truth, by which no man was ever injured. But he is injured who abides in error and ignorance” (Marcus Aurelius). Lying is a willed, chosen, evil, truth-destroying action and Hitler and Goebbels and the other Nazis were past masters at it.

The arch fiendish liar was Hitler himself who said this about the Jews in Mein Kampf:

The Jew is and remains a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider area. Wherever he establishes himself the people who grant him hospitality are bound to be bled to death sooner or later. To mask his tactics and fool his victims, he talks of the equality of all men; but in reality his aim is to enslave and thereby annihilate the non-Jewish races. The black-haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, satanically glaring at and spying on the unsuspicuous girl who he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood and removing her from the bosom of her own people. The Aryan is the Prometheus of mankind, a conqueror [who] subjugated inferior races. He not only remained master but he also advanced civilization: should he be forced to disappear, human culture will vanish and the world will become a desert. (condensed, quoted in Poliakov, 1971, pp. 1–2)

Hitler lied as follows on 30 January 1939 in a speech to the Reichstag after he seized power and became dictator of Nazi Germany:

Today I want to be a prophet again. Should the international finance-Jewry in Europe and elsewhere succeed in plunging the nations once again into a world war, then the result will not be the bolshevization of the globe and the victory of the Jewry but the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe. (Lehrer, 2000)

This was no prophecy: it was a declaration of his planned extermination of the Jews. According to Poliakov (1951), his chief helper in realising this plan was Hitler’s virulently anti-Semitic and lying propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels.

Goebbels wrote in his diary:

With regard to the Jewish Question, the Führer is determined to make a clean sweep of it. He prophesied that, if they brought about another
world war, they would experience their annihilation. That was no empty talk. The annihilation of Jewry must be the necessary consequence. The question is to be viewed without any sentimentality. We’re not there to have sympathy with the Jews, but only sympathy with our own German people. If the German people has again now sacrificed around 160,000 dead in the eastern campaign, the originators of this bloody conflict will have to pay for it with their lives. (Browning, 2004)

In 1965, Arendt noted that

During the war, the lie most effective with the whole of the German people was the slogan of “the battle of destiny for the German people,” coined by Hitler or by Goebbels, which made self-deception easier on three counts: it suggested, first, that the war was no war; second, that it was started by destiny and not by Germany; and, third, that it was a matter of life and death for the Germans, who must annihilate their enemies or be annihilated. (p. 52, my italics)

Wrong again: “battle of destiny” were the words of Walther von Brauchitsch, the general who conquered Poland and France, ordering his commanders to suppress all criticism of Nazi racial policies (Browning, 2004, p. 76). Besides, even if Hitler ever said this, the words would count as a euphemism, since Hitler accused the Jews, his sworn enemies, not destiny, of starting the Second World War. Eichmann lied, too. And so did Arendt, or deceived herself, in characterising Eichmann as banal.

Buber’s book published in 1947 contains two essays: the first, “The question to the single one”, Buber says in his 1945 Foreword, “appeared in Germany in 1936—astonishingly, since it attacks the life-basis of totalitarianism” (p. vii). The second, “What is man?”, was published in Palestine in 1938. Both essays dealt with the problem of lies and truth in the life of the individual and the collective. It is wrong, Buber held in 1936, to view the State in place of historical State. A government cannot ward off the
being collectivized. . . . Primacy is ascribed to a collectivity. . . . The collectivity becomes what really exists, the person become derivatory. . . . Thereby the immeasurable value which constitutes man is imperilled. . . . The truth has become questionable through being politicized. (pp. 80, 81)

Buber expanded this argument in 1938 in his lectures at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Here, Buber was critical of Nietzsche's vision of man as “merely the herd animal” (1947, p. 154), as a philosopher “who undertook with passionate earnestness to explain man in terms of the animal world; the specific problem of man does not thereby fade out, but has become more visible than ever” (p. 155). He was also critical of Heidegger's central misunderstanding, that

man can become whole in virtue of a relation to himself [rather than] in virtue of a relation to another self. . . . Heidegger’s “existence” is monological [not dialogical in character]. And monologue may certainly disguise itself ingeniously for a while as dialogue – Heidegger's man can no longer say Thou . . . who knows a real life only in communication with himself. In mere solicitude man remains essentially with himself, even if he is moved with extreme pity; in action and help he inclines towards the other, but . . . he does not expect any real mutuality . . . he “is concerned with the other”, but he is not anxious for the other to be concerned with him. (pp. 168—170)

Buber's message is:

The fundamental human existence is man with man. . . . Language is only a sign and a means for it . . . It is rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular other being, in order to communicate with it . . . in the sphere of “between” . . . by no longer localizing the relation between human beings, as is customary, either within individual souls or in a general world which embraces and determines them but in the actual fact between them. (p. 203)

To lie means to know the truth and wilfully to distort it. Freud rarely wrote about lying as a conscious interpersonal action: lying as action melted away in various defences, mostly unconscious, of repression, denial, disavowal. Therein lies an important lesson for the
practice of psychoanalytic psychotherapy offered by dramatology. Whenever we are confronted by a patient who distorts, dissembles, pretends, is insincere, or simply lies, we need to confront him/her with the enactment of a lie. Both patient and therapist will grow from such a confrontation (Lothane, 2014a).

Back to radical evil: war as breakdown of politics

The theme of this section is a condensation of Kant and Robin Collingwood’s 1942 *The New Leviathan*. Oxford philosophy professor Collingwood (born 1889) is, for me, the most original and profound thinker and reader of Freud. He began writing this book “immediately after the outbreak of the present war [Second World War]; when first it became evident that we did not know what we were fighting for, and that our leaders were unable or unwilling to tell us” and completed it “in great part not (as Hegel boasted) during the cannonade of Jena, but during the bombardment of London” (pp. iv–v), dying a year later.

Preparatory to making the case against war, Collingwood defined two ways of handling an argument: eristically or dialectically:

What Plato calls an eristic discussion is one in which each party tries to prove that he was right and the other wrong. . . . The essence of dialectical discussion is to discuss in the hope that both parties in the discussion are right, and that this discovery puts an end to the debate. Where they “agree to differ”, as the saying is, there is nothing on which they have really agreed (pp. 181–182)

With this distinction in mind, Collingwood noted,

The earliest human communities of which we know seem not to have waged war . . . But cases of non-agreement in external politics must have begun to be handled eristically; a tradition we still inherit . . . War has been called a *continuation of policy* (p. 240), the dictum of Prussian general von Clausewitz,

“War is the continuation of *Politis* [also meaning policy] by other means]” . . . There is always an element of force even in the life of a society. Since policy in social life and policy in internal politics agree in being dialectical, an extension of policy in the external sphere
would be dialectical, too. It would aim at the thing which in external politics is parallel to law and order in internal politics and to harmony in social life. This is called peace. Where policy has hitherto been dialectical, war is a continuation of policy only in the sense in which death is a continuation of life, or a breakdown of a machine is a continuation of its smooth running. War is a breakdown of policy. Why does such a breakdown occur? (pp. 233–234)

He went on to enumerate three reasons:

The first reason is: because men charged with the conduct of external politics are confronted with a problem they cannot solve. . . . Not because the problem is insoluble in itself; no problem is; but because they have approached it in the wrong way . . . (the second reason) because the internal condition of the body politic is unsound; a frequent cause of war. . . . Ill governed bodies politic tend to be warlike . . . If you can’t keep your subjects quiet, says the Tyrant’s Handbook, make war . . . . So we come to the third: because the rulers are at loggerheads. . . . The ultimate cause of war is disharmony among rulers. . . . Herr Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 was at once followed by German rearmament. On 12 November 1936 the Prime Minister Mr. Baldwin defended himself in the House of Commons for not having long ago informed the House of this fact, explained the threat that it involved, and called for counter-rearmament. (pp. 235–236)

We know the rest of this horrendous history: the ignominy of the 1938 Munich agreement signed by Britain, France, and Italy to let Hitler annex parts of Czechoslovakia, a prelude to annexation of Austria and invasion of Poland in 1939, the start of the Second World War, a repetition of similar disharmony among the ruling nations of Europe in the years that led to the outbreak of the First World War.

While unaware of Freud anonymously calling Germany “barbaric”, Collingwood addressed the nature of barbarism:

By barbarism I mean hostility to civilization . . . abstract substantives in “-ism”, denoting an act of imitation . . . concrete substantives in “-ist” denoting an imitator . . . [e.g.,] the word “scapegoatism” [the] “tendency to treat people like, or make them into, scapegoats”, as Nazis treat Jews or as Russians treat kulaks. (pp. 342–343)

Collingwood went on to make this distinction:
A civilized man . . . can work can work unconsciously at promoting civilization. . . . Barbarism can never be in this sense unconscious. The barbarist . . . cannot afford to forget what it is he is trying to bring about . . . not anything positive, but something negative, the destruction of civilization; and he must remember, if not what civilization is, at least what the destruction of civilization is. . . . A community fighting against civilization must work very hard not only at fighting but at thinking what they are fighting against. . . . But it is a very dangerous position . . . the belligerent is . . . cutting his own throat. . . . He scores at the beginning of his career . . . He has one advantage over his victims, and only one: their unpreparedness . . . the barbarist plays a losing game . . . any victory makes his defeat in the long run more probable . . . the criticism of war as waged by the barbarist. (pp. 346–349)

Collingwood then focused on “German barbarism as it is happening now”:

The barbarism of a German does not seem to be innate [but] a reaction to a peculiar situation at a certain time. It is as if something had happened corporately to the German . . . endowing them with a peculiar kind of bumptiousness. It is arguable that Germans have always been what may be called bad neighbors . . . It exhibited itself in the age of Bismarck in the third quarter of the nineteenth century . . . at first despite the opposition of a great deal that was civilized in the country, at last sweeping away the opposition in a flood. (pp. 375–376)

Likewise, during the Weimar Republic,

And what is there between these two times? . . . Oblivion; unconsciousness; an interval in which your head is lost. This the Nazi theory, expounded by Nazi psychologists. What the Nazis call thinking with your blood, . . . as if it were a new and revolutionary idea, which it could be for a generation slavishly taught, in sheer defiance of Locke to think exclusively with their brains . . . Therein lies the whole difference between thinking like a sane man and thinking like a Nazi. (pp. 376–377)

Insanity has long served as a favourite metaphor to express horror at the brutality and the ideology that feeds it (Lothane, 1997). Collingwood’s, however, was a sociological analysis in which insanity served as a symbol for the
the good old German religion of herd-worship . . . an immemorial condition of the German people [due to] insufficient civilization . . . a defect where more civilization was needed . . . that incivility . . . exaggerated to the point of a mania. (pp. 384–385)

and “the German hatred of freedom” (p. 275), “the self-adoration of the ‘blond beast’, the *Te Deum* of the ‘will to power’, both in Nietzsche and in Karl Marx (pp. 276–277). He referred to the “Yahoo herd” and quoted “Dr. Trotter’s Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War [and] Tarde’s *Les Lois de l’imitation*” (p. 240) (also cited in Lothane, 2006).

The first German barbarism manifested itself during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 when, during the siege of Paris, the Prussian Army bombarded the civilian population and scientific institutions or engaged in acts of violent retribution against civilians “that learned to call them ‘les sales Boches’” (p. 384). This was the first instance of modern war as total war, relevant to the aforementioned remarks of Freud about the First World War and what was to come in the Second World War. Strangely, Collingwood remained silent about his own experiences in the First World War, even though he was the sole survivor of his unit, or that war’s barbarist aspects. He did not live to learn about the evils of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Lothane, 2014b).

_Eternal peace_

In 1795, Kant defined eternal, or perpetual, peace

objectively, in theory, there is no quarrel between morals and politics. But subjectively, in the self-seeking tendencies of men, a disagreement in principle exists and may always survive, the evil principle in our own nature, far more dangerous, mendacious (*lügenhaft*), treacherous and yet sophistical, which puts forward the weakness in human nature as a justification for every transgression. [But] as both are equally wrongly disposed to one another, they are thus destroyed in war. This mutual destruction stops short at the point of extermination, so that there are always enough of the race left to keep this game going on through all the ages, and a far-off posterity may take warning by them. Politics in the real sense cannot take a step forward without first paying homage
to the principles of morals. And, although politics, *per se*, is a difficult art, in its union with morals no art is required. Right must be held sacred by man, however great the cost and sacrifice to the ruling power. Here is no half-and-half course. We cannot devise a happy medium between right and expediency, a right pragmatically conditioned. But all politics must bend the knee to the principle of right, and may, in that way, hope to reach, although slowly perhaps, a level whence it may shine upon men for all time. (Kant, 1903, condensed, pp. 180–183, first italics mine)

Kant is realistic about the evil of war but is he idealistic and naïve regarding morals in politics? In 1813, in his anti-Napoleonic manifesto, the Swiss–French political philosopher Benjamin Constant argued the case for pacifism:

A government that would nowadays push a European nation into war would be committing a gross and disastrous anachronism . . . an arid glory. Instead of such glory one should prefer pleasure over triumph, plunder. (1992, p. 61, translated for this edition)

Like war, covetous “usurpation is force neither modified nor mitigated by nothing. It is of necessity stamped by the individuality of the usurper, by an opposition to all preceding interests, must be in a perpetual state of defiance and hostility” (p. 106, translated for this edition), more “deplorable than the most absolute despotism” (p. 115), which “cannot be tolerated in our civilized times” (p. 118, translated for this edition). The remedy for usurpation is the enjoyment of liberty, assured by a body politic that upholds the rights of the person; it is a fight against tyranny. The remedy is promoting an international spirit of community, of liberal commerce, of collaboration instead of conflict, war, and pillage. Constant’s analysis of totalitarianism was not mentioned by Arendt and Poliakov, but is pertinent to the latter’s 1987 analysis of Stalinism, Hitlerism, Maoism, not to mention Pol Pot, Rwanda, or Srebrenica.

Stalin, Hitler, and Mao are gone, but we still live in a world of perpetual warfare as predicted in George Orwell’s dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a globalised world in which the superpowers live in peace and prosperity while fomenting local wars in the periphery of their empires. In addition to the greed to usurp oil, gas, and other of nature’s bounties and hold needy nations hostage, let alone the still
ever-present danger of a thermonuclear war, the current wars are also fed by religious fanaticism: “Of 1,723 armed conflicts documented in the three-volume “Encyclopedia of Wars,” only less than 7 per cent involved a religious cause” (Eagan, 2014, p. A19 ). Only less than seven per cent? Eagan mentioned Boko Haram, but can we discount Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Africa, and, last but not least, Saudi Arabia? The news is filled daily with stories of murder, mayhem, and misery, but can we abandon faith and give up hope of humanity achieving peace and happiness?

_Coda: is there a just war?_

Whereas patriots, politicians, and warmongers have imbued war with the attributes of glory and honour, pacifists Kant, Freud, Einstein, and Collingwood saw it as barbarity and evil. A theory of just war was promulgated by Harvard moral philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) and discussed by British political philosopher Howard Williams (2012). Rawls’ 1971 _A Theory of Justice_, which was hailed as the most important work in moral philosophy since the end of the Second World War, as well as one of the primary texts in political philosophy, was dubbed Rawlsianism, and argued that the most reasonable principles of justice are those that everyone would accept and agree from a fair position. I read only Williams, and will quote him to react to these ideas.

From the perspective of justice, few will deny that Imperial Germany conducted an unjust and barbarous war in neutral Belgium in 1914 and that Nazi Germany did the same in the countries it conquered in the Second World War, let alone the criminal war of destruction on defenceless Jews, or that the Soviet Union and the Allies led a just, defensive war of destroying the Nazi invaders, while the Nazis, not surprisingly, believed that their war was just and pleaded not guilty when tried for their war crimes in Nuremberg in 1945. That same year, the United Nations was established to fulfil the dream of the prophet Isaiah: “beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more” (2:4). Not only did we witness, over the years, the many injustices of the Cold War, but we were also confronted with questions as to how just was the war in Viet Nam, or the Russian
interventions in Eastern Europe and in Afghanistan, and, and last but not least, the two American wars in Iraq, whose nefarious unintended consequences are playing out now. While the evil of war and racism in former Yugoslavia were overcome with help from President Clinton (who also conferred the National Medal of the Humanities on Rawls) and the Czechs and the Slovaks were able to separate peacefully, we now have the war in Ukraine and war in the toughest war zone in the world barring none, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Williams did not discuss the two World Wars or the Holocaust and, while citing the great German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) misunderstanding the irony of Kant’s idea of a “just enemy”, he failed to mention that Schmitt collaborated with Hitler’s regime as an architect of the 1937 Nazi Constitution. Williams opined that

since Rawls strongly emphasizes that . . . his political philosophy begins from certain facts of political life in contemporary North America and Europe [he] treads a fine line between Kantianism and Hegelianism [and] with his just war theory steps over more into the Hegelian than the Kantian realm. (p. 165)

elaborating further in an interview online (Marshall, 2013). Williams noted that Hegel “prioritizes the nation state as the focus of political loyalty of individuals” (p. 8) and that his “presumption that the outbreak of war is not always something evil, and good can come out of it, is also implicit in the work of contemporary just war theorists” (p. 143).

The apotheosis of the Nazi State was inspired by Hegel as stated in the Nazified version of a well-known German philosophical dictionary:

The self-conscious moral substance is the State; it is the rational, divine will that has so organized itself. Its Constitution is the heart of justice. The State realizes the idea of the highest freedom on earth, it is God on earth, and therefore it has the highest right against the individual for whom it is the highest duty to be a member of the State and totally to sacrifice himself to it. (Entry “Hegel, G. W. F.”, Schmidt, 1934)

What was good for the Kaiser turned out to be just as good for Hitler and Stalin, or any other dictatorship.

I side with Kant’s pacifism and pleading for eternal peace to be achieved by dialogue and negotiations (Lothane, 2006), as acutely exemplified by the futility of the current war in Gaza.
Erich Kahler (1885–1970), Jewish professor of German and Comparative Literature who taught at Cornell and Princeton, wrote his original essay on Jews among the nations while still in Europe and published it in 1936 in neutral Switzerland, when the Nazi persecution of German Jews was in full swing. It is probably forgotten today: a different book with the same title was published in 1967. While aware that “In Germany today Jews are subjected to the wildest attacks” (1936, p. 11, translated for this edition), he identified with the humanism of Goethe, who cited Goethe’s dictum: “Germany is nothing, but the Germans are much, they should be dispersed all over the globe, like the Jews to bring out the good in them” (Kahler, 1967, p. 112, translated for this edition). He nevertheless pleaded that, for Jews and Germans alike, “peace is vitally important—for both, even though at present the Germans do not want to hear of it. . . . Moreover, both essentially share the task of achieving peace” (1936, p. 132, translated for this edition), “in such a feeling of a missionary job, in the final purpose of this mission, there is an accord between Germans and Jews” (p. 140, translated for this edition, original emphasis). Kahler’s wish was realised in the Germany that arose from the ashes after 1945, today a strong ally of Israel. It should be an inspiration to all warring nations today.

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