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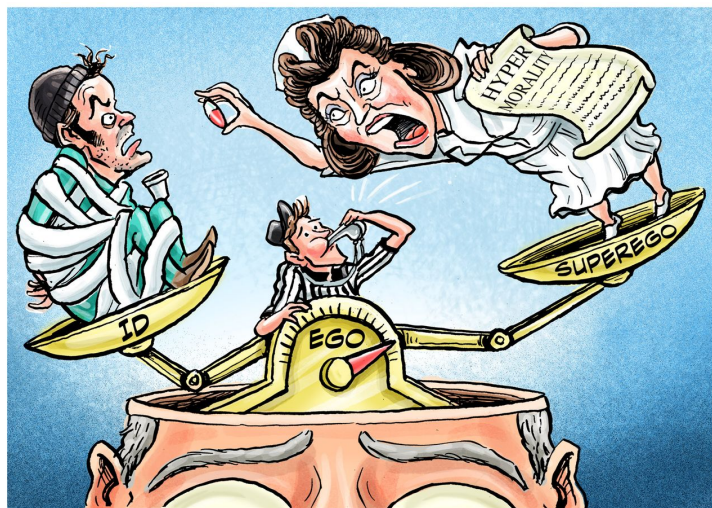
OPINIONCOMMENTARY

Freud Explains Cancel Culture

The superego is the woke part of the psyche. It's moralistic, but it isn't necessarily moral.

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2:53 pm ET



There sure is a lot of moralism going around. Censorship, condemnation, excommunication, demands for apologies. There are even spontaneous chants of “Shame! Shame! Shame!” directed at the villain of the moment. I recently saw an ad for a psychology workshop that argued outright that people from “privileged” groups should “hurt” and “feel shame.” People are guilt-tripped for using disposable straws, liking a canceled song or speaking “ableist” words.

How did we descend from the libertine culture of the 1960s—“if it feels good, do it”—into a pit of endless shame?

Ask Sigmund Freud. He divided the psyche into three parts: the id (unconscious drives), the ego (the conscious self) and the superego (the site of moral ideals, inhibitions and shame). Freud saw mental health as the result of balance—being aware of feelings as they come and go, but not letting any one part of the psyche become too dominant.

A large amount of mental illness is attributed to an overactive superego. Cycles of harsh self-criticism can induce depression or push people toward drugs or alcohol. Inhibitions around things like cleanliness or public speaking can underlie anxiety disorders. Rigid prohibitions can contribute to sexual dysfunctions and eating disorders. Judgments, righteous anger and control can lead to

interpersonal problems.

Some psychoanalysts argue that the superego, in its purest form, is linked to a “death drive,” which seeks to regulate all thoughts and feelings down to zero. This is the suffocating aspect of Nurse Ratched in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Fully internalized, it’s the logic of suicide.

The superego isn’t always ethical. Someone could feel intense shame for having something stuck in his teeth during a date and no guilt at all about cheating on his taxes. The superego is often irrational, though its pronouncements can feel as if they come from on high.

The superego is often linked to father figures. In the Oedipal drama of early childhood, a son supposedly identifies with his father to internalize rules and ideals to live up to. Freud, like Plato, thought the parts of the psyche paralleled strata of society. The ego resembles a society’s leaders, the id is like the masses, and the superego is most like the police or other bodies that enforce rules—bureaucrats, censors, corporate HR. The leaders (the ego) have to manage the selfish desires (id) and the moral idealism (superego) that drive society. They do so by gratifying them somewhat and directing them toward productive goals, but not letting either entity seize control because both tend to be shortsighted.

How does all this fit into the transformation of the 1960s counterculture? In the 1960s, many figures on the left tried to abolish the superego (some consciously, others less deliberately), and this goal seeped into the entire counterculture. It wasn’t only the overthrow of “the patriarchy,” an anti-father ethos, or the shifting of sexual mores, but a deeper attempt to overthrow rules and gratify desire.

Obviously it didn’t work. Selfish desires are too destructive. Children need discipline; societies need laws. New rules emerged—rules that were somehow still opposed to the old rules but attempted to perform the same functions. The result is a patchwork morality that’s harsh in some places, absent in others and ultimately incoherent. If excessive sexuality is causing trauma and exploitation, rather than curtailing sexuality, activists demonize masculinity, deny the differences between the sexes, and eliminate due process.

Hypermorality is now everywhere. “Implicit bias” training attempts to purify the unconscious of forbidden thoughts. There are the extreme inhibitions of safety culture and the use of ostracization to target heretics. Then, there are grandiose moral ideals. Zero carbon. Zero gun crime. Zero pedestrian deaths. Zero tolerance.

There’s also the misattunement of moralization. Criminals get compassion while police are vilified. There’s sometimes more judgment of people who don’t wear a mask than of people who rob stores. Insults directed at white people or men are seen as the epitome of justice and wisdom, while even unconscious bias against other groups is seen as unforgivable.

What happens to a society when the leadership is overpowered by a dysfunctional superego? Unachievable and grandiose ideals lead it astray. Narrow goals that hit moral notes override wise leadership. People lose sight of the big picture, of social cohesion and the need for humility, pragmatism and tolerance.

As the superego bears down too heavily, symptoms can emerge: paranoia, loss of reality, odd behaviors, despair. Eventually, as the over-pressurization of moralism intensifies, the desires of the masses erupt. A monstrous id emerges to topple the monstrous superego. This response is unlikely to be well-organized. More likely it will be impulsive, awkward and strange—a paroxysm of forbidden desires, gratifying but destructive.

The only hope is a new ego that can rein in the dysfunctional superego. This requires leadership that can speak directly about the costs of excessive morality and uneven standards and let people be people, with the diverse desires they have, under fair, pragmatic rules.

Hypermorality is seductive because it seems, well, virtuous. But in practice it dampens spontaneity, joy and ease, and it often has hateful overtones. It can make relationships cold, bitter and formal. It wastes enormous amounts of energy, and it makes society less fun. The id is the source of humor, creativity and inspiration. The superego is stiff and dull.

More to the point, hypermorality often worsens the problems it aims to address. Think of people who constantly criticize themselves for being socially awkward, making themselves more awkward. Or think of someone who tries a severe diet only to become more attached to junk food. Prolonged Covid lockdowns can increase excess deaths, aggressive “antiracism” can aggravate racial tension, and intrusive forms of social coercion, however well-meaning, can provoke hostile reactions.

One doesn't have to agree with all Freud's claims to see value in his perspective, but many of his points are shared by others in history. Lao Tzu wrote in the Tao Te Ching, “Try to make people happy and you make them miserable. Try to make people moral and you make them evil.” Societies require a light touch. They need a limited superego attuned to the most important wrongs, one that holistically considers costs and benefits of rules and is gentle enough to let us be human. It's good advice for individuals too.

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