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Super-Ego after Freud: A Lesson not to Be Forgotten

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to retrace the evolution of the super-ego, in psychoanalysis and phenomenology, describing its effects on education, starting with the formation of individual morality. In the broadest sense, the reflection concerns not only the role that the family can play in this direction, but above all the contribution that schools can make to the formation of individual morality. The structuring of the super-ego is thus built up in the family system by being influenced by the socio-educational environment. The importance of a healthy structuring of the super-ego emerges in the increased risk of alteration of the intersubjective sphere, in cases of dysregulation of the super-ego, a process that is fundamental to psychotic disorder.

Keywords: education; socio-educational environment; super-ego.

INTRODUCTION

In 1914, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the high school he had attended as an adolescent, Freud wrote a short essay entitled “Zur Psychologie des Gymnasiasten”. Taking his cue from personal recollections, Freud dwelled on the *ambivalent* relationship that bound the high school pupil to the professors and underlined its importance for individual development, since this relationship occurred at the stage when “the child begins to come out of the nursery” and “discovers things that

undermine his original adoration for his father” (Freud, 1914, p. 480). The professor, in short, becomes for the high school student the substitute of the omniscient father, capable of arousing love and hate, criticism and veneration, in a confused mixture of affectionate and hostile impulses.

Freud’s reflection shows a stringent coherence provided, however, that it is contextualised in the historical period in which it takes place, in a period, that is, during which the father figure has a series of defined characteristics, starting from the one known to have passed into history as the main architect in the formation of the super-ego.

There is a vast scientific literature on the function of the super-ego and its relationship with the development of individual morality which, starting with Freud’s contribution, identifies a series of main stages that mark the history of this controversial category. The debate, of course, has come down to the present day and reinterprets the super-ego in the light of the profound changes that have affected society and the role of the family in recent years.

The aim of this paper is to retrace the evolution of the super-ego, describing its repercussions on education, starting from the formation of individual morality. In a broader sense, the reflection concerns not only the role that the family can play in this direction, but above all the contribution that schools can make to the formation of individual morality. Extrapolating the Freudian thesis, can the teacher – this is the key question of the essay – in some way represent the substitute of the omniscient father? The answer concerns not only the figure of the father in contemporary society, but above all the role that the teacher can play in contributing to the construction of individual morality.

1. STRUCTURING OF THE SUPER-EGO

Freud, in his search for a psychological science, introduced the “structural theory” in 1920 in his essay *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. This second topological coordinate divides the psychic apparatus into three psychic agencies: id, ego and super-ego; the intention is to measure the operations that unfold in the psychic sphere. The theorised mental functioning is based on the organism’s adaptation to the environment: from the drive core (id) there is an organised psychic agency (ego), responsible for surface psychic functions, such as perception and memory, and then in the course of development the super-ego is structured. This last psychic agency, in Freud’s sense, indicates that part of the mind that controls and modifies the antisocial instincts deriving from the id to adapt them to the demands

of the environment. Super-ego develops through the internalisation of values and moral norms first from the parents and then from the environment. The functions of the super-ego are defence and reward, and criticism and punishment (Lis, Stella, & Zavattini, 1999). The structural model encourages further research and investigation, in the following generations of psychoanalysts, inaugurating new meanings of the super-ego. If Freud theorised its structuring just before school age, when the child assimilates parental values and cultural customs, Klein (1963) places its origin at a very young age in association with parental punishment and identifies it as a *bad object - self introjected* due to a lack of maternal containment of the child's projective identifications; Fairbairn (1944) gave greater weight to object relations and refuted the concept of the death instinct by introducing the term *internal saboteur*; Otto Kernberg (1975) described various pathological formations of the super-ego, on the basis of which he differentiated between the various types of personality disorders; in conclusion we quote Bion who introduced the *ego-destructive super-ego* understood as "morals without morals" that dominate the psychotic part of the personality (Weiss, 2020).

The foundations for understanding psychopathology and psychosis in particular are laid. In 1932 Freud clearly defines the relationships between the psychic agencies and theorises the processes characterising psychotic disorder: the pleasure principle and the function of Ideal, fulfilled respectively by the id and the super-ego, deconstruct the function of conciliation of the ego that detaches itself from reality. The cause may be either the overpowering of the unconscious repressed on the conscious or the tormenting and pressing reality that pushes the ego to embrace only the unconscious drives. The needs of the species (id) and the needs of society (super-ego) therefore dissolve the ego by suppressing any space for mediation between the two conflicting forces generating psychosis (Galimberti, 2018). Since Freud, numerous scholars have contributed to the definition of the nature and role of the super-ego, and of the internal psychic conflicts, which determine the aetiology of psychotic symptoms. In this debate there are two models, the phenomenological and the psychoanalytical, between which the concept of the *experienced world* builds a bridge of reconciliation (Rossi Monti, 1999): although the first approach is based on *datum of awareness* and the second on unconscious mechanisms, both share the generative processes of psychosis and the objective to be pursued for healing.

2. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUPER-EGO: FROM THE ONSET OF PSYCHOSIS TO THE PROCESS OF MIRRORING IN THE OTHER

The concept, introduced by Freud, of the conflict between the super-ego and the ego, which produces a feeling of anguish with a destructive valence, is the fulcrum of Kleinian theorizing on evolutionary development. Precisely in the psychic dynamics traced by the psychoanalyst it is possible to identify the foundations for understanding psychosis.

In healthy psychic development the passage from the schizo-paranoid position to the depressive one determines a process of maturation of the super-ego breaking the vicious circle of heterodirected and self-directed destructiveness. Otherwise, the failure to develop the super-ego leads to the structuring of a dysfunctional psychic agency that colonises the mind, leading it towards a loss of contact with reality. The dominance of the super-ego prevents the balance with the experience of the world and attacks the emotional ties with the Other (De Masi, 2002). Klein considers the super-ego in this case as a *bad object - self introjected* in response to a lack of maternal care (Klein, 1940). The failure of the first object relations and the mother's refusal to accept the child's first projective identifications generate a super-ego that develops before the ego, opposing growth, vitality and infantile curiosity (Bion, 1959). The failure to regulate each other produces organismic anguish, which is why the sense of self becomes discontinuous.

A failed structuring of the super-ego is associated with an increased risk of psychopathologies, in particular Rosenfeld (1971) and Meltzer (1973) consider this process to be the origin of psychosis, perversion and narcissism. In the aetiology of psychosis, we observe a dysfunctional structuring of the three psychic agencies determined by a loss of integration and synthesis of the ego. This impairment thus originates from regression or fixation on the schizo-paranoid position in which the ego was not integrated but separated into settling nuclei.

The subject, however, reacts to the disintegration of the ego and brings into play *psychotic restitution* (positive and negative symptoms identified as signs of the illness) which is a constructive process that testifies to the tendency towards recovery (Freud, 1914). Restitution is the reorganisation of the ego and the super-ego in order to survive the psychic defeat and to give an internal coherence to the ego following a subjective logic far from that of common sense. Paradoxically, the mind survives precisely because of a lack of discrimination between subject and object, ego and non-ego (Bleger, 1970). The confusion between the inner and outer worlds is generated by the stationing in the schizo-paranoid phase that does not allow access to healthy and mature defence mechanisms aimed at relieving

anguish, and involves an intense and frequent use of primitive defences such as splitting, projective identification, projection and denial. The lack of ego integration thus structures a pathological self (Winnicott, 1960) that generates a *neoreality*. Freud and later psychoanalysts agreed with the theorisation of a conflict between environment and psychic processes, which generates a state of disintegration of the ego and a destructive domination of the super-ego. The resulting compromise for psychic survival is the formation of a subjective reality.

The super-ego in excess is incompatible with inter-human relations because the guilt in excess takes on the character of internal persecution by promoting acts of destruction. The blocking of the evolution towards the *benevolent super-ego* generates a distortion of reality replaced by fantasies that edify the delusional state. There is a destruction of the subject's communicative function, the loss of his capacity for self-observation, awareness of his mental processes and the possibility of managing his emotions. Consequently, the sense of reality and the balance of personal identity are compromised (De Masi, 2002).

This is the background to the phenomenological approach, whose field of research is no longer the unconscious but the datum of awareness. The aim is to study neo-reality, derived from psychotic restitution, which rejects natural evidence, leading the patient to construct subjective meanings that are not conventionally accepted. The object of study is therefore the patient's conscious psychic happening in order to recognise and understand him (Jaspers, 1959). This means starting from the patient's self-narrative to co-construct the *intersubjective space* that mediates differentiation from the Otherness of the Other. Re-founding the functional infant-caregiver relationship means repairing the affective deficiencies that have destructured the psychic agencies (Ballerini, 2011). The natural evidence, therefore the *common sense* of the everyday world, can be reconstructed in the intersubjectivity. The insufficiency in the *intra-subjective* construction of the Self corresponds to a problem in the *inter-subjective* construction.

The phenomenological model, in line with the psychoanalytic theorisation of the onset of psychosis, proposes a concrete approach that starts from the contents of consciousness in order to reconstruct the lost psychic balance. According to this approach the disintegration of the ego and the paranoid dimension of the persecutor determine the failure of the ego in its movement towards the Other preventing the construction of the *natural self*. The psychotic subject therefore folds in on himself, replacing reality with hyper-reflexivity that perpetuates wandering in a world that is foreign to him (Ballerini & Di Petta, 2015). The healthy super-ego uses human nature's natural predisposition to sociality to produce a collective

consensus on a socially accepted order. The deconstruction of the super-ego, on the other hand, leads to a compromised identification with the Other and a destructive persecutory anguish. This interpretation is in line with the phenomenological interpretation according to which reality is only that imposed by the majority and the loss of this *foreknowledge* breaks the balance of the ego determining a reinvention of reality and an exclusion from human relations. In this regard, Di Petta writes: “Il folle disobbedisce allo spirito del tempo” (Di Petta, 2018, p. 162).

The *being with* of the therapist with the patient can repair the fracture of the ego accompanying the subject to the implicit rediscovery of his own identity. The process of *epochè* implemented by the therapist, understood as the loss of common sense, can generate a contact with the patient by mediating an encounter between *I and You* and thus inaugurating the construction of the *We* (Di Petta, 2018). The truth deprived of the *idios kosmos* (own world) can reopen to the *Mit-einandersein* (being-one-with-other) by reconnecting to reality. The instrument to lead the subject to the restructuring of psychic agencies is the understanding that gives him dignity and legitimacy (Stanghellini, 2008). The therapist performs the maternal functions by valuing and empathically welcoming the other, thus mediating a re-implementation of the evolutionary process of the ego and a restructuring of the super-ego. The mirroring of the sick person in the Other allows a re-appropriation of the self by redefining the boundaries of ego and non-ego, entering into a reciprocal relationship means “riconoscere l’esistenza degli altri in quanto esseri dotati di una mente sostanzialmente simile alla propria” (Stanghellini, 2008, p. 85). Returning to Klein’s initial vision, the therapeutic project outlined is reconciled with her objective of healing the patient by overcoming the schizo-paranoid position towards the depressive one: the subject splits ego and world and becomes aware of the impossibility of omnipotent control over the object, which is now perceived as more real and separate. The individual can take personal responsibility and perceive himself and the other as separate.

3. AT SCHOOL OF... SUPER-EGO

Structuring and de-structuring of the superego, with the enormous theoretical and psychopathological burden that they entail, allow us to introduce the reflection on the role that education could play in the processes of formation of the individual.

The real educational emergency that characterises the contemporary school, brings back to the centre of reflection the concepts of standards,

rules and procedures (D'Alonzo, 2017) to be used in the management of the class group, also as an initial moment of the formative pact. Rules, in particular, even by education professionals, have been the subject of several prejudices, among which the most typical can be summarised as follows:

- addressing the issue of rules, during teaching activities, necessarily implies a waste of time with respect to planned objectives and contents;
- discussing rules is completely pointless because pupils only respect them if they are threatened;
- pupils do not like teachers who enforce the rules.

However, the reality appears to be quite different, as a number of recent studies tend to show: in schools, the question of rules has now become so central that it has a profound effect on the classroom climate (Zobbi, 2021). And it could not be otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Especially in the light of the renewed perspective that sees, nowadays, the paternal figure on an equal footing with the mother in the process of bringing up children, the structuring of the super-ego takes on considerable value. In the society Freud had in mind, the father was essentially an absent figure from the growth path of children and the educational role was limited to a set of commands and punishments. The father model today is decidedly oriented towards the attachment relationship whose direct and indirect effects on the development of the individual are undeniable. The role of all members of the family and society in the structuring of the self and the pivotal role of the super-ego in the origin of mental disorders and discomforts was thus rediscovered.

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RIASSUNTO

Obiettivo del presente contributo è ripercorrere l'evoluzione del super-io, in ambito psicoanalitico e fenomenologico, descrivendone le ricadute, a partire dalla formazione della morale individuale, in campo educativo. La riflessione riguarda, in senso lato, non solo il ruolo che la famiglia può svolgere in questa direzione, ma soprattutto il contributo che la scuola può fornire nella formazione della morale individuale. La strutturazione del super-io si edifica quindi nel sistema-famiglia subendo le influenze dell'ambiente socio-educativo. L'importanza di una strutturazione sana del super-io emerge nell'aumento del rischio di alterazione della sfera intersoggettiva, nei casi di disregolazione del super-io, processo fondante il disturbo psicotico.

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