

unconscious wisdom

a superego function in
dreams, conscience, and inspiration

dan merkur

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A Superego Function in Dreams, Conscience, and Inspiration

Dan Merkur

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*To my good friend Keith Haartman,
whose extensive conversations contributed significantly
to this project.*



*If it is really the super-ego which, in humour,
speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego,
this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn
about the nature of the super-ego.*

—Freud, “Humour” (1927b)

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Preface

Beginning with my first psychoanalytic writings, I have been explaining the evidence of religious experiences and, more generally, alternate states of consciousness in terms of positive superego functions. The prophetic words of the biblical God are manifestations of the prophet's conscience (Merkur, 1985). Visions are manifestations of conscience that have undergone symbolization in fashions consistent with the dream-work (Merkur 1985, 1989a). In trance states, conscious ego functions are repressed, and the unconscious superego assumes the executive function of the psyche (Merkur, 1984, 1988b). Mystical unions manifest ego ideals (Merkur 1989b, 1998, 1999); unitive thinking is also a versatile schema of everyday thinking (Merkur, 1999). The perceptions of miracles are projections of conscience onto fortuitous physical events (Merkur, 1999). Religious transformations are integrations of superego materials within the sense of self (Merkur, 1995–96, 1998, 1999).

In making my arguments, I have repeatedly encountered both psychoanalysts and students of religion for whom the very notion of positive superego functions is exotic, if not indeed a contradiction in terms. To deal with the communication problem, I eventually undertook an exhaustive review of the literature on the superego, out of which the present study emerged.

There turn out to be at least seven major different psychoanalytic models of the superego. Most psychoanalytic writers work with the formulations of Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and Rudolph M. Loewenstein, who were architects of the American school of psychoanalytic ego psychology. I work instead with the significantly different model of Freud.

There are two major differences between the classical and ego psychological models. Freud (1923a, p. 28) called the superego “a grade in the ego, a differentiation within the ego.” He credited the psychical agency with three functions: self-observation, conscience, and ego ideals. Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein (1946) denied that the superego has a capacity for rational moral reflection. They expressly denied that the superego engages in either self-observation or rational thought. Hartmann and Loewenstein (1962) clarified “that ‘reacting to something’ should not be construed to imply ‘knowing’ it” and they refused “to ascribe to the superego anything that could be termed ‘knowledge’” (p. 160). In effect, they denied the existence of conscience in any meaningful sense of the term.

Although Freud never did so, his model allowed Paul Schilder and Otto Kauders (1926) to speak of unconscious intelligence that the superego manifests in hypnosis. Extending the same theoretical model, this book argues that the superego routinely produces rational, intelligent reasoning, much of which is unconscious. When the unconscious reasoning is combined with the self-knowledge that the superego possesses through its access to the repressed (Freud, 1923a), unconscious wisdom results.

To make my case, I have argued the same theoretic point four different ways. Each chapter addresses a different phenomenon (dreams, judgments of conscience, creative inspirations, and metaphoric thinking), together with the history of psychoanalytic theorizing that has been devoted to it. In the first two cases I argue that phenomena generally acknowledged to be unconscious are wise; in the third, that a phenomenon known to be wise is indeed unconscious.

Together with *The Ecstatic Imagination* (Merkur, 1998) and *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (Merkur, 1999), the present volume forms a trilogy on the psychoanalysis of religious experiences. *Unconscious Wisdom* is the last of the three volumes to be published. However, the theories that it presents were developed before the other volumes were completed—indeed, before they could be completed successfully. *Unconscious Wisdom* may be read on its own as a study of dreams, conscience, and creative inspiration; but these phenomena are considered religious in most cultures the world over. A theory of religious experiences that fails to address them is necessarily incomplete—and very likely inadequate.

Introduction

In late antiquity, Jewish and Christian terms for “spirit” had two meanings. The terms denoted God’s manifest power in the world. They also denoted “that aspect of man’s nature which is most readily influenced by God and which is capable of taking upon itself ethical qualities of a definite nature” (Russell, 1964, p. 149). The first use of the terms pertained to the Holy Spirit; the other concerned a spirit whose indwelling within the body was believed to endow people with life (Levison, 1997). It was in the latter sense that spirit was considered the highest or noblest faculty of the human soul. Its possession was regarded as uniquely human. Nonhuman species were considered incapable of religiosity because their souls lacked spiritual faculties. Spirit was identical with intellect or reason in its natural functions, but spirit was also the faculty of the soul that received divine revelations. In some religious systems, spirit was even thought capable of divinization through its union or conjunction with the spirit of God (Rahman, 1958; Merlan, 1963; Fakhry, 1971; Blumenthal, 1977; Bland, 1982).

Among St. Paul’s enduring achievements was his concept of “the law of the spirit of life” (Rom 8:2). He asserted that “the law is spiritual” (Rom 7:14) and he maintained that conscience conforms with it.

When Gentiles, who do not possess the [Mosaic] law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting

thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom 2:14–16).

By “the law of the spirit of life,” Paul referred explicitly to the human spirit, as distinct from the Holy Spirit. Paul’s concept of the law of the spirit pertained to a natural function of the human mind that governs the judgments of conscience.

According to religious thinkers such as Philo, Paul, and Maimonides, this natural function of the mind can be educated, trained, and built up through exercise, as may any other natural endowment; and its proper development is a condition of prophecy (Heschel, 1996, pp. 104–12). The native endowment is an aptitude, as are musical, artistic, and mathematical inclinations. Its transformation into an ability or talent requires education and practice. The three thinkers recommended differing practices of spiritual direction. They agreed, however, that as long as the human spirit is inadequately cultivated, it comprehends prophecy imperfectly, contaminates grace with fantasies of the mind’s invention, and so corrupts truthful revelations into false prophecies during the very process of their reception.

The mental function that late antique and medieval thinkers termed “spirit” is, I suggest, what Freud (1914) initially termed “conscience” and later (1923a) named *das Überich*, “the superego.” Consider, for example, the following self-report by an American Jew of an experience that she induced through Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

Early on in my mindfulness meditation practice, I spent several weeks in intensive retreat in a monastery in Massachusetts. In the weeks just before that retreat, the entire country had followed the story of a young child with leukemia whose parents, dedicated to alternative healing, had refused to accept conventional treatment for him. The child died. Since childhood leukemia has a high cure rate with modern medicines, I was very upset about what I considered the parents’ “attachment to New Age views.” I was more than upset; I was mad. “How could they do this?” I thought. I was infuriated, by extension, at everything that I associated with “New Age.” I was mad at newsletters and magazines and books and diet regimens and health food

stores—I was mad at anything I felt had colluded in forming these parents’ attachment to a view I thought had cost the child his life. I also felt righteous in my anger, since I was, at that time, a vegetarian, a yoga teacher, and a meditation practitioner, and I thought I had made my choices wisely, while other people’s narrow-mindedness and rigidity were giving my choices a bad name.

I arrived at the retreat troubled by my anger. It continued for days in spite of my attempts to develop composure. I’m fairly sure that the level of my anger was probably also sustained by my fear about what I considered inadequate parenting. At that time, I had young children of my own, and the idea that parents might be so trapped by views that they could make decisions that had such dire consequences frightened me. Every time I remembered the story, my mind filled with anger and indignation and, finally, resentment that these parents, strangers to me, had “destroyed my retreat by their behavior.” I felt so burdened that I prayed, “May I be *free* from this painful anger,” asking that no reminder of the incident would arise in my mind to trigger another attack of anger.

One afternoon, sitting quietly, in a moment in which my mind was completely resting, an entirely new thought arose: “Those parents must be in terrible pain!” And then: “How are they going to live with themselves?” I was startled to find that my anger had disappeared. I still believed the refusal of medicine was a wrong choice, but I felt sad instead of mad and, at last, compassionate. “What if I made a terrible mistake—even a well-intentioned terrible mistake—with my children? I couldn’t bear it.”

At the moment of my change of heart, I was so grateful that I didn’t think about how or why it had happened. I was just glad to have been set free. It felt like a miracle. I later discovered it is really not a miracle. It’s the grace of mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation does not change life. It changes the heart’s capacity to accept it. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating, not by beating it into submission, but by developing wisdom (Boorstein, 1997, pp. 115–17).

The Buddhist practice of “mindfulness” (*satipatthana*) or “insight” (*vipasyana*) meditation consists of a systematic effort to detach from the contents of one’s consciousness, to observe their occurrence

without engagement in their contents, and so to become mindful of the full phenomenology of consciousness (Kornfield, 1977, 1979; Brown & Engler, 1984). In the present instance, the practice of mindfulness led to a detachment, not from consciousness as a whole, but from self-involvement. The meditator's guilt and fear of inadequacies as a parent had been aroused by a news story, only to be displaced as intense anger at the people in the story. Where psychoanalytic insights would have intensified self-involvement by focusing on the ego and the inadequacies of its defenses against its feelings of guilt, the mindfulness meditations sought simply to let go of the ego in entirety (see Epstein, 1988).

What then emerged into consciousness was a creative solution to the problem of the underlying guilt. Through anger, the guilt had been displaced from the meditator to the parents in the news story, and it was in its displaced form that the guilt was forgiven in a moment of empathy and compassion for the parents in the news. The empathy was apparently experienced as an inspiration. It was unanticipated—"an entirely new thought arose"—and its emotional effect was startling.

Once the guilt was forgiven, the need for its displacement collapsed. The meditator was able to own the guilt and think consciously about a possible failing in her own acts as a parent. She was also consciously grateful for her release from anger—and from guilt.

Like the sense of moral responsibility, the sense of moral forgiveness is a function of judgment that is popularly ascribed to "conscience," but that psychoanalysis ascribes to the superego. Although some psychoanalytic writers treat the superego and ego ideal as separate psychical agencies, I find logical necessity in Freud's (1914; 1923; 1933) ascription of self-observation, ego ideals, and judgments of conscience to a single agency. To issue in judgments of conscience, the psyche must do three things. It must observe the ego. It must possess values, and it must apply those values as ideal standards against which it measures the ego.

When spiritual experiences do not manifest conscience, they manifest another of the superego's functions. Consider the following self-report of a unitive experience that was induced through psychedelic drug use.

Over the past eight months, and very intermittently, I've been experiencing something like a "presence"—a spiritual

“fullness” or “outswelling of the spirit.” . . . The zenith, thus far, of this Experience, occurred while I was on magazine-assignment in Amsterdam, this past November. I had partaken of some chemicals (but, truth be known, that is not an atypical occurrence with me, and the quantity of medications were in no way substantial enough to have produced the effect that I am about to put succinctly before you):

As I lay back on my cot, there was a way in which I could simultaneously relax my vision and gaze into a mirror across the room and have the light directly above the mirror refract back into my eyes . . . and

it
was
as
if
the
world
fell
away

But not—just—that. Suddenly, there was an energy component to the Experience—not just a buzzing or a humming, but a driving, all-consuming Energy. The world fell away, and suddenly I found myself in what I can only call “an energy chamber,” whereupon my brain, the physical mass of my brain, felt as if it were connected to the Great Cosmic Overmind.

“I” was privy to All-Knowledge.

But that wasn’t all, either. Just as suddenly, there came a spiritual infusion, which literally took my breath away. I understood then, that the Mind is one thing, and that the Spirit is another. What rushed through me and filled me and continued to fill me for some three hours, was simply Bliss.

The Energy that I felt—in that Energy Chamber—was my own. This is crucial. I was given a look at my own Life Force—and in this energy chamber, I saw several of my faces, corresponding to “me” at different ages.

That is what it was, an Energy Chamber, wherein the Energy was mine own (as if, I were being “told”: “You are enough. This is it, & Now is All there is”).

I remember that I was comforted to no end, knowing that the Path I was on, have been on (am on? . . . not too

sure now) is/was the Right One (for me). (Prior to going to Amsterdam, doing this article, I had struggled much with “Am I living the Life I should be living?”)

There came a point in this Experience, where I was prompted to ask: “Who am I?”

And the reply that came, fairly put me on my knees, weeping, for a good forty minutes. Bawling, actually. (At one point, I was sure I was going to wake up the whole hotel, and I became kind of embarrassed, and I think that is when It went away.) What came, in response to my query, was this: “You are a holy man.”

And I Understood, intrinsically, what it meant to be Holy. And I was, then.

This was in November of last year. I knew not where to turn; I told very few persons about this Happening. I felt as if I were Supposed to be Doing something, but knowing not what, or in what direction, I continued on my present course (which is the marketing of a first-novel of mine, along with teaching Creative Writing at U of _____).

Lately, I have been plagued by dreams involving my (still-living) parents. There is much tension between us (my brand of prose—satire/black humor—does not sit well with them) and I feel that unless some real and meaningful resolution is found, that I will forever be in a Limbo land. . . .

Two tarot card readers and one shaman have all three said, in their report of my Condition: “You are on the brink of a transformative Awakening, which will bring to you money, will involve you in politics, and will ask of you greatly your Leadership skills; but something holds you back; you are holding yourself back,” or words to that effect.

That is the long of it. Now, months away from that Experience, I do not know how to regain that sense of Rightness and Bliss. Will it come (back) to me? Is it wrong to seek it in the first place? Or, alternately, now that I have had the Experience, should I quit my bitching & live the life of a “holy man” (I assume that means, one dedicated to helping/aiding others, as opposed to a striving after fame & material success. . . . But, here again, I don’t—know—that, for me. Maybe the T_____ of letters, the social satirist, the black comedian, is—precisely—what is necessary, here, in the waning hours of the 20th century. . . . Maybe I—am—doing vital service toward the ushering in of an Enlightenment of some stripe . . . & if I believe that, I run the risk of