

CONSCIENCE AND SUPEREGO: A KEY DISTINCTION

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THE SUPEREGO first came to my attention when I did not know what to call it. The occasion was a relatively harmless instance: an Army officer and his wife, who were by virtue of their military status dispensed from Friday abstinence, told me how it had taken them almost a year to be able to eat meat on Friday without feeling somewhat guilty about this—in spite of their dispensation.

But another experience (which I shall take up later in this article) bared the vicious set of incisors this source of pseudo-moral guilt could have. I saw how this source of unconscious guilt could actually cripple a person; it could keep the individual from seeing the genuine values at stake—values which alone could creatively call the person beyond his present fixation and the destructive circle of defeat, depression, “repentance,” and further failures.

In this article I want to (1) briefly describe moral conscience; (2) then in some detail describe an entirely different but deceptively similar-looking reality: the superego; (3) finally reflect on a number of areas where recognition of the radical difference between genuine conscience and superego is extremely important and illuminating, where a failure to recognize this can do considerable harm.

Before beginning the discussion itself, it might be pointed out why the difference between conscience and superego has managed to escape much notice outside the circle of psychologists.¹ In a merely superficial consideration these two realities have functions which appear strikingly similar: both have been described as primarily nonverbal, preconceptual; commanding, prohibiting; accusing, approving; seeking reconciliation if norms are violated. This describes some superficial similarities between conscience and superego; the radical differences should become clear from what follows.

MORAL CONSCIENCE

These drastically brief remarks concern conscience as it functions in the situation of grave moral decision—core freedom. Any other use of the

¹There is certainly a growing number of theologians who recognize the distinction between the superego and genuine conscience, and the pastoral-practical implications of this distinction. My attention was first called to this distinction in a series of lectures on morality by Bruno Schüller in 1961. It should be noted in this context that not only theologians can be blind to certain dimensions of reality because of their specific and limited con-

term conscience should be considered as analogous to this primary meaning.²

If we can assume (1) that *the* moral action of man is love (the unity of the love of God and love of neighbor) and that this very action is, seen from the agent's point of view, the act of his own cocreation, his answering himself into abiding existence; and if we can assume (2) that this invitation to love occurs in ever deeper invitations, at not entirely predictable *kairoi* of God's loving initiative in each person's salvation history; and if we can assume (3) that this tridimensional "object" of man's freedom (God's self-offering; the created, personal other which mediates this divine initiative; the individual himself as offered possible abiding love) is primarily, though not necessarily exclusively, present to the agent's consciousness in a preconceptual manner of knowing (each dimension of this "object" in its own mode of preconceptual knowledge), then we can describe moral conscience as the preconceptual recognition of an absolute call to love and thereby to cocreate myself genuine future, or as the nonverbal insight into a radical invitation to love God in loving my neighbor and thereby become myself abiding love. This is a description of the positive, invitation aspect of *conscientia antecedens*, often described, less than ideally, as the command of conscience. The negative aspect, the prohibition of *conscientia antecedens*, can then be logically described as the preconceptually perceived ultimate futurelessness and absurdity of being invited to radically abiding growth in love and rejecting this invitation.

Conscientia consequens (a "good conscience"), in such a context, can be described as the preconceptually experienced harmony existing between the ultimate ground of reality, the created values, and that existence which I am, cocreated by my free act. A "bad conscience" can be described as the preconceptually experienced disharmony between the abiding futureless and futile existence that my freedom has caused in the very situation which invited me to cocreate myself abiding love.

In short, conscience is an insight into love; the call issued by the ultimate value and promise of love; the warning of the destructive power of

cerns. Some psychologists and psychiatrists fail to recognize that besides the superego there is also a genuine preconceptual recognition of moral values—conscience.

² Some further amplification of these remarks on conscience can be found in the following articles: K. Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore, 1969) 231–49; J. Glaser, "Transition between Grace and Sin," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 29 (1968) 260–74; "Authority, Connatural Knowledge, and the Spontaneous Judgment of the Faithful," *ibid.* 29 (1968) 742–51; "Man's Existence: Supernatural Partnership," *ibid.* 30 (1969) 473–88; "The Problem of Theoretical and Practical Moral Knowledge," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 161 (1969) 410–17.

indifference or hostility to this invitation; the peace (not self-satisfaction) that results from the creative *yès* to love; the disharmony and disintegration of existing as an abiding contradiction to this call of love which my whole being is made to answer affirmatively.

THE SUPEREGO

The superego deals not in the currency of extroverted love but in the introversion of *being lovable*. The dynamic of the superego springs from a frantic compulsion to experience oneself as lovable, not from the call to commit oneself in abiding love.

To understand the superego, we have to begin there where every human being begins—as a child. The child is faced with a problem: he is a bundle of needs, desires, and impulses. They cannot all find satisfaction; very often the fulfilment of one excludes the satisfaction of another (e.g., if a child's desire to grab everything within reach is satisfied, he finds himself confronted with the displeasure and disapproval of his parents, i.e., with the frustration of another of his desires). These desires, needs, and impulses manifest a decided hierarchy of importance and power. Eicke indicates that opinions vary on *the* primary drive, but says that most psychologists seem to see the need to be loved, to enjoy approval and affection, as the strongest, most fundamental of these drives.³ He goes on to say that the child experiences disapproval, temporary withdrawal of love, as a kind of annihilation. Therefore this fear of punishment is not so much an aversion to physical pain as it is panic at the withdrawal of love. Freud has remarked that being loved is equivalent to life itself for the ego.⁴ In these terms the child experiences the disapproval of his parents as a mitigated withdrawal of life itself. In such a situation the child needs a means of so organizing and ordering his various desires that his main need, to be loved, does not get run over by the others. Since there is not yet enough mature psychic equipment at the child's disposal to handle this conflict, the problem is handled by a more primitive (i.e., less personal) mechanism. An instance of censorship forms on this prepersonal level; its function is to so regulate the conduct of the child that he does not lose the primary object of his desires: love, affection, and approval.⁵

One point should be made clear beyond all misunderstanding: the commands and prohibitions of the superego do not arise from any kind

³ Dieter Eicke, "Das Gewissen und das Über-Ich," in *Das Gewissen als Problem* (Darmstadt, 1966) p. 72; cf. also Albert Görres, *Methode und Erfahrung der Psychoanalyse* (Munich, 1965) pp. 166–72.

⁴ S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* 13 (London, 1940 ff.) 288.

⁵ Eicke, *op. cit.*, pp. 97 ff.; cf. also Görres, *op. cit.*

of perception of the intrinsic goodness or objectionableness of the action contemplated. *The* source of such commands and prohibitions can be described positively as the desire to be approved and loved or negatively as the fear of loss of such love and approval.⁶

Even this prepersonal instance of censorship manifests stages of development. It has been observed that during the first few years of a child's life the commands and prohibitions of parents are so identified with the parents themselves that the commands, as it were, leave the room with the parents. These norms are only really effective when the mother or father is actually present.⁷

But even during this time a process of internalization is taking place by which the orders of authority are assimilated in the child and eventually arise from within the child himself. This process involves the psychological mechanisms of introjection and identification.⁸ Eicke sums this up thus:

Through identification a value emerges, a value which I am for myself; but this is also a value according to which I must conduct myself. If I fail to act according to this norm, I experience fears and feelings of guilt; more exactly, fear of not being loved, of being abandoned or persecuted; feelings of not having done the right thing, of not having made myself lovable. As Freud says: "Consciousness of guilt was originally fear of punishment by parents; more exactly, fear of losing their love."⁹

Several things characterize this process of introjection. It is a spontaneous mechanism whose commands speak with a remarkable power (which we will discuss shortly). It is also striking how graphically (almost "photographically" at times) the authority figure takes up a place within the child himself, so that not only the content but also the very voice and formulation of this external person arises from within the child. Zulliger

⁶ Hans Zulliger, *Umgang mit dem kindlichen Gewissen* (Stuttgart, 1955) p. 30: "The primitive conscience is built on the basis of fear of punishment and a desire to earn love." Eicke, *op. cit.*, p. 79: "The superego has its source in the naked fear of retribution or withdrawal of love; its organizing function serves to protect the ego from the outside world." Melanie Klein, *Das Seelenleben des Kleinkindes und andere Beiträge zur Psychoanalyse* (Stuttgart, 1962) p. 140: "Experience of guilt is inextricably bound up with fear (more exactly, with a specific form of fear, namely, depressive fear); it drives one to reconciliation and reparation; it emerges in the first few months of an infant's life together with the early stages of the superego." Cf. also Görres, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁷ Felicitas Betz, "Entwicklungsstufen des kindlichen Gewissens," in *Beichte im Zwielicht* (Munich, 1966) p. 33.

⁸ Cf. Görres, *op. cit.*, p. 166; Eicke, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-80; Zulliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 63 ff.; Bertha Sommer, "Über neurotische Angst und Schuldgefühle," in Wilhelm Bitter, ed., *Angst und Schuld* (Stuttgart, 1959) p. 44.

⁹ Eicke, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

recounts the comment of the nineteenth-century Swiss author Rodolphe Toepffer: "For a long time I was unable to distinguish the inner voice of my conscience from *that of my teacher*. When my conscience spoke to me, I thought I saw it before me in a black cape, with a teacher's frown and glasses sitting on its nose."¹⁰

Allport brings a delightful and illuminating example which illustrates this process of introjection and the controlling influence it exercises:

I am indebted for this example to my colleague, Henry A. Murray. A three-year-old boy awoke at six in the morning and started his noisy play. The father, sleepy-eyed, went to the boy's room and sternly commanded him, "Get back into bed and don't you dare get up until seven o'clock." The boy obeyed. For a few minutes all was quiet, but soon there were strange sounds that led the father again to look into the room. The boy was in bed as ordered; but putting an arm over the edge, he jerked it back in saying, "Get back in there." Next a leg protruded, only to be roughly retracted with the warning, "You heard what I told you." Finally the boy rolled to the very edge of the bed and then roughly rolled back, sternly warning himself, "Not until seven o'clock!" We could not wish for a clearer instance of interiorizing the father's role as a means to self-control and socialized becoming.¹¹

The only exceptional thing about such an instance is that it happened to be observed by an adult, and by one who saw the psychological significance of the event. Zulliger offers numerous examples of the same phenomenon.¹²

The superego as discussed up to now could be characterized as having functions similar to those of what is traditionally known as *conscientia antecedens*: it commands and prohibits certain concrete possibilities in a given situation. The superego, however, also functions in a way similar to *conscientia consequens*: it accuses the offender, it condemns him when he fails to obey. The fury of the violated superego is described by Bergler: "The extent of the power yielded by the Frankenstein which is the superego is still largely unrealized. . . . Man's inhumanity to man is equaled only by man's inhumanity to himself."¹³

The reason for this violent reaction has already been touched upon. The superego must, on the psychological, subconscious level, provide for

¹⁰ Zulliger, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹¹ Gordon W. Allport, *Becoming* (New Haven, 1966) p. 70.

¹² Zulliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-45; Betz, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-39.

¹³ Edmund Bergler, *The Superego* (New York, 1952) p. x. A few pages earlier he says: "To get an approximate idea of the 'benevolence' of inner conscience, one has only to imagine the terms of the relationship between a dictator—any dictator—and an inmate of one of his concentration and extermination camps" (p. viii). Bergler is not given to understatement; but perhaps exaggeration in this question can serve as a needed corrective to emphasize something we have too long overlooked.

a person's being loved; it is the guardian of the individual's sense of value. We have already referred to Freud's statement that, for the ego, being loved is equivalent to life itself. Hence the violence of the offended superego arises from the panic of having lost one's right to be loved; on a primitive, psychological level he has "lost his life."¹⁴ The fact that this plays itself out on a nonconceptual level of consciousness in terms of panic, fear, and guilt feelings makes it all the more difficult to cope with, if one is armed only with the weapons of reason and conceptual reflection.

Zulliger spells out the guilt feelings produced by the superego in terms of isolation. "When a child does something wrong, disobeys a command, etc., he experiences a feeling of isolation."¹⁵ He feels that he is "bad" and isolated from those who are "good." Describing such guilt in terms of an experienced isolation helps us find a plausible and consistent explanation of several other phenomena closely connected with such guilt. There is no need here to recount the many examples offered by Zulliger, but by means of these examples several things are made clear: there is a powerful subconscious drive to re-create one's sense of belonging and being accepted by his community, of re-establishing the harmony and solidarity he has forfeited by his fault.

This drive to rejoin the "good" and thus regain one's sense of value, this drive to break out of the panic of isolation, can express itself in a variety of ways. Besides the direct approach of confessing to some authority figure and accepting punishment, there are various indirect ways of attempting to escape the tyranny of an offended superego. Zulliger enumerates three main indirect solutions. First, there is the unconscious betrayal of guilt. This drive to be found out (which is ultimately a drive to be reconciled), though conflicting with the conscious effort to escape detection, finds ways of exposing one's fault and in this way of indirectly confessing and ultimately being reconciled. Another substitute compensation takes the form of seeking punishment.¹⁶ The original misdeed against the norms of the superego is not itself confessed and punished. Rather, the individual provokes punishment through further misdeeds and through this punishment for further and distinct failures attempts to quiet his need for punishment for the original unpunished misdeed. Through a further and distinct misdeed (whose real goal is the reconciliation to follow) he attempts to break out of the isolation created by the

¹⁴ Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Zulliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 103 f., 108 f.

¹⁶ Besides numerous examples offered by Zulliger, cf. also T. Reik, *Geständniszwang und Strafbedürfnis* (Vienna, 1925); P. Tournier, *Echtes und falsches Schuldgefühl* (Freiburg, 1967).

original misdeed. His subconscious goal is to have the second misdeed result in punishment-reconciliation and also take care of the original alienation. Finally, there is the indirect escape from isolation which takes the form of creating a new community where the individual will be accepted. This implies provoking others to deeds similar to his own. Instead of re-establishing harmony with the "good," he tends to create a group which will accept him with his misdeeds and even esteem him precisely on their account.¹⁷

Zulliger's description of the power of the superego in terms of flight from a feeling of acute alienation—an alienation from that group represented by the authority figures in his life, who have communicated what is expected of him if he wants to "belong"—helps us see how much the formal structure of the superego differs from conscience. Conscience is precisely the call of genuine value which can well call one to an extremely isolated position. Motivating an individual's activity on the basis of "acceptance" serves well the socialization and normalization of individuals to prevailing norms; but as a basis of Christian morality (in the mature sense of this word), which should be characterized by a creative thrust into the future, i.e., into the not-yet-ready-to-be-thought, its dynamics are strikingly inadequate. The superego performs well in the process of socialization—training one to function well within a given set of limits; it works well and adequately in toilet-training an infant or housebreaking a pup (both useful results, without which life would be far less pleasant), but its legitimate function deals with the more primitive levels of psychic life. Görres points out that the relationship between superego and id is not so much that of spirit to instinct or rider to horse; rather, it concerns the relationship between instinct and training. "The superego, in Freud's sense, is primarily a function of organization of the primitive levels of psychic life. This is supported by the fact that higher animals are said to have a superego when they have been trained."¹⁸

The superego is basically a principle of prepersonal censorship and control. This does not mean that it has no meaningful function for man. On the contrary, the role of the superego in the life of an infant is quite meaningful and necessary. It is a primitive stage on the way to the development of genuine conscience and value perception.¹⁹ Even in the life of a mature adult the superego is not superfluous. In certain sectors of life it provides for a conservation of psychic energy and ease of operation. Görres remarks: "When the superego is integrated into a mature conscience . . . it relieves an individual from having constantly to decide in

¹⁷ Zulliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-24.

¹⁸ Görres, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹⁹ Cf. Tournier, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

all those situations which are already legitimately decided by custom, taste, and convention 'what one should do' and 'what one should not do.'"²⁰

Psychologists are in agreement, however, that this organic development from the primitive and prepersonal censor of the infant to a mature and personal value perception does not automatically and infallibly take place. This means that the activity of superego in the average adult is not limited to the healthy and integrated function described above by Görres. In fact, Görres himself maintains that it is the task, not only of psychiatry but of education and pastoral practice as well, to reduce the influence of this childish censor more and more and thereby allow genuine value perception to grow.²¹

While it is true that the workings of the superego are generally discussed in the context of the child or the neurotic, Görres reminds us that the differences here between the neurotic and the "healthy" person are those of degree and not of kind.²² According to Odier and Tournier, there are two moral worlds existing in the normal person: a genuine moral world and a world of false or pseudo morality and religiosity.²³ Both of these authors have written extensively on this subject precisely to call attention to the existence and influence of this all too often overlooked world of childish morality in the life of the average adult.²⁴ Felicitas Betz points out that the struggle to grow up in this regard does not cease at the end of childhood or adolescence but confronts us with a lifelong battle. "The maturing of one's conscience is a task that takes a lifetime; it is with us far beyond the end of adolescence. For one who has been the object more of conscience training than conscience education, this task of arriving at mature conscience will be particularly difficult, if not impossible."²⁵

We might draw up some contrasting characteristics which exist be-

²⁰ Görres, *op. cit.*, p. 169. Odier also points out, besides the functions mentioned by Görres, that the superego acts as a censor in dreams, thereby preventing every dream from becoming a nightmare. This is no small service. Cf. Charles Odier, *Les deux sources conscience et inconsciente de la vie morale* (Neuchâtel, 1943) p. 28.

²¹ A. Görres, "Über-Ich," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 10 (2nd ed.; Freiburg, 1966) 437.

²² Görres, *Methode und Erfahrung*, p. 171.

²³ The very titles of their books indicate and emphasize this conviction; cf. notes 16 and 20 above.

²⁴ Melanie Klein, speaking of guilt as naked fear of rejection, says: "With a small child this is always the case; but even with many adults the only factor that changes is that the larger human society takes the place of the father or both parents" (*op. cit.*, p. 135, n. 22). Cf. also Eicke, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²⁵ Betz, "Entwicklungsstufen," p. 39. Cf. also Marc Oraison, *Was ist Sünde?* (Frankfurt/M., 1968) pp. 28, 63 f.; Odier, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Tournier, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

tween the superego and genuine conscience:

SUPEREGO

commands that an act be performed for approval, in order to make oneself lovable, accepted; fear of love-withdrawal is the basis

introverted: the thematic center is a sense of one's own value

static: does not grow, does not learn; cannot function creatively in a new situation; merely repeats a basic command

authority-figure-oriented: not a question of perceiving and responding to a value but of "obeying" authority's command "blindly"

"atomized" units of activity are its object

past-oriented: primarily concerned with cleaning up the record with regard to past acts

urge to be punished and thereby earn reconciliation

rapid transition from severe isolation, guilt feelings, etc., to a sense of self-value accomplished by confessing to an authority figure

possible great disproportion between guilt experienced and the value in question; extent of guilt depends more on weight of authority figure and "volume" with which he speaks rather than density of the value in question

CONSCIENCE

invites to action, to love, and in this very act of other-directed commitment to cocreate self-value

extroverted: the thematic center is the value which invites; self-value is concomitant and secondary to this

dynamic: an awareness and sensitivity to value which develops and grows; a mind-set which can precisely function in a new situation

value-oriented: the value or disvalue is perceived and responded to, regardless of whether authority has commanded or not

individual acts are seen in their importance as a part of a larger process or pattern

future-oriented: creative; sees the past as having a future and helping to structure this future as a better future

sees the need to repair by structuring the future orientation toward the value in question (which includes making good past harms)

a sense of the gradual process of growth which characterizes all dimensions of genuine personal development

experience of guilt proportionate to the importance of the value in question, even though authority may never have addressed this specific value

In light of this less than exhaustive list of contrasts, it should be clear that failing to distinguish these two realities will cause considerable confusion. This confusion is multiplied if one has taken superego data and allowed it to be the weightier element in understanding man as *free*, pre-

cisely because it arises from the prepersonal, prefree dimension of an individual. The pastoral and ascetic practice which flows from such a superego-weighted interpretation of guilt, etc., will be to a great extent in radical conflict with man's genuine freedom.

In the following section I want to reflect on some areas where it seems to me we have been mistaken in drawing theological conclusions or in projecting conduct (pastoral, ascetic, sacramental) from data of the superego. These remarks vary in their importance and are less systematically developed than might be desirable; they must stand as the fragmentary reflections that are prompted by my present situation. Hopefully they will stimulate further reflection and application, which will be, among other things, corrective of the following remarks.

PROBLEM AREAS WHERE SUPEREGO IS PART OF PROBLEM

All the following reflections could be subsumed under one rubric: too much theory and practice in the Church arises from data whose source is the superego. Many problem areas which have emerged in the recent past can be traced to a failure to recognize the nature, presence, and power of the superego. This is not an accusation.²⁶ But given today's vantage point, this is a situation which can be overcome and should not be further tolerated.

Notion of God

Precisely because the voice of the superego is somehow cosmic, vast, and mysterious, arising as it does from the subconscious, it can easily be mistakenly called God's voice. This is true especially if our religious education trains us from childhood on to call this voice of the subconscious God's voice. This I see as the major danger of failing to distinguish conscience from superego. To associate the mystery of invitation, the absolute yes to man's future, the radical call to eternally abiding love—God—with the hot and cold, arbitrary tyrant of the superego is a matter of grave distortion. It reaches into the totality of a person's explicitly religious life and poisons every fresh spring of the Good News. Such a God deserves to die.

Gregory Baum's comments are much to the point on this question:

A second reason why the image of the God the punisher has flourished in the Christian and even post-Christian imagination is drawn from personal pathology.

²⁶ I am *not* interested in assigning blame or assessing negligence; I *am* interested in the lesson we should learn from this: theology should be the first discipline to have its mind blown by new discoveries in other fields; it dare not be a slow-learning and suspicious discipline, threatened by whatever findings other sciences discover because this new data reshuffles the traditional deck.

The idea of God as judge on a throne, meting out punishment, corresponds to a self-destructive trend of the human psyche. On a previous page we have mentioned man's primitive conscience or, as Freud called it, his superego. The person who is dominated by his superego—and no one is able to escape it altogether—has the accuser, judge, and tormentor all wrapt in one, built into his own psychic makeup. When such a person hears the Christian message with the accent on God the judge, he can project his superego on the divinity and then use religion as an instrument to subject himself to this court and, unknown to himself, to promote his own unconscious self-hatred. As we mentioned more than once in these pages, Jesus has come to save men from their superego. God is not punisher; God saves.²⁷

Age of Reason and Transition between Grace and Sin

The theological literature on the fundamental option has drastically revised the common Catholic ideas concerning the "age of reason" and the frequency with which the transition between grace-sin-grace-sin can occur.²⁸ The speculation of theologians like Rahner, Schüller, Metz, and Mondin has so radically changed the atmosphere in which speculation on core freedom takes place that one is puzzled how thoughts on the "age of reason" (emergence of core freedom) and the frequency of core decisions—which were common fare in moral theology until the recent past—were ever possible. How could we have really thought that ten-year-olds could sin seriously? Or what ever possessed us to think that we could move through serious sin and grace with the frequency that we change shirts?

One major reason why such thoughts were thinkable is surely because theology failed to recognize various kinds of guilt experience and release from this guilt. Theology simply accepted all guilt experience and its release as theological data, as data arising from man's freedom. The nature of superego guilt and its radical difference from genuine moral guilt went unrecognized.

A striking example of this appears in Maritain's *Range of Reason*.²⁹ Maritain uses an excellent analysis of preconceptual knowledge of God to make a far from excellent explanation of why a child can engage his core freedom. At one point in his discussion of this question Maritain seems to reveal, at least in part, the source of his conviction that children can make core-freedom decisions. In what he seems to consider a phenome-

²⁷ Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York, 1970) pp. 223 f.

²⁸ Cf. the two articles mentioned in n. 2: "Transition" and "Man's Existence."

²⁹ J. Maritain, *Range of Reason* (New York, 1952) pp. 66 ff. For two other recent authors who share this basic viewpoint and for similar reasons, see Joseph Sikora, "Faith and the First Moral Choice," *Sciences ecclésiastiques*, May–September, 1965, pp. 327–37; Herman Reiners, *Grundintention und sittliches Tun* (Freiburg, 1966) esp. p. 26.

nological justification for his position he says:

Yet in some rare cases, the first act of freedom will never be forgotten, especially if the choice—however insignificant its object—through which the soul was introduced into moral life occurred rather late. In other cases there is a remembrance of some childish remorse, whose occasion was unimportant but whose intensity, out of proportion with its object, upset the soul and awakened its moral sense.³⁰

To one aware of the dimensions of an act of core freedom on the one hand, and familiar with the nature of the superego on the other, the data described by Maritain is clearly relegated to the area of the superego, not genuine freedom. This acceptance of all guilt data as genuine theological data—which Maritain reveals in the quoted passage—remained for moral theology a silent but functioning presupposition in its consideration of the “age of reason.” This error, coupled with an exaggerated conceptualistic model of conscience, helps explain in large part the now incredible conviction with which most of us grew up: children can commit serious sin.

The idea that an individual could sin seriously, repent only to sin seriously again, repent again—and this within a matter of days—also finds at least a partial explanation in the fact that superego guilt and its remission by an authority figure was mistaken for genuine moral guilt and its remission. A very common phenomenon, familiar to anyone who has done pastoral work with Catholic adolescents, certainly *seems* to support the theory that the transition between grace and serious sin can occur relatively frequently. We might describe this datum as the “storm and sunshine phenomenon.” It occurs especially in questions of sexual morality. The individual experiences severe guilt feelings after a failing against the sixth commandment: the storm phase. Upon confessing, he experiences a wonderful release from his guilt: the sunshine phase. Such a moving between storm and sunshine might well occur on a weekly basis. The guilt feelings involved represent very often the most severe experience of guilt the individual has ever known; the freeing from this guilt through confession is often the most intense experience of liberation.

Such an undeniable phenomenon seems to offer more than enough concrete evidence that an individual can fluctuate frequently between grace and serious sin. It can do this, however, only if we are ignorant of the nature of the superego; only if we overlook the fact that the area of sexuality is notoriously susceptible to the tyranny of the superego; and only if we fail to realize the vast dimensions of the transition between sin

³⁰ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

and grace. Because these very facts were not operative in reflection on core freedom (mortal sin), it is easy to understand why traditional moral theology and confessional practice took their theoretical and pastoral-practical categories from the superego-dominated data and found in such data unquestioned support for the conviction that the transition between grace and sin could occur with almost assembly-line frequency.

Diminishing Confessions

From the foregoing it is clear that at least some essential dimensions of confessional practice are based on the nature and laws of the superego and not of genuine freedom. It seems to me that these are not merely two exceptional, isolated instances, but two areas which are better seen as examples where confession's debt to the superego is more blatantly obvious. They are pocket-sized editions of what is true of confessional practice as a whole: it is, as traditionally realized, predominantly, though not exclusively, a service of the superego needs of individuals.

In traditional confession practice, therefore, we have an institution based on heavily-weighted nonfree (superego) data which purports to be an institutionalization but actually is a contradiction of genuine freedom. Now this genuine freedom and its categories of being, growing, etc., are not simply nonconscious, beyond all awareness; they are somehow present to man's awareness because of the essential relationship between freedom and knowledge. Hence we have an awareness, a consciousness "divided" against itself, contradicting itself on various levels. On the preconceptual level we have an awareness of the true nature and structure of freedom—its laws of growth, the "units" of core freedom, their duration and possible frequency, etc. On the conceptual level we have categories which attempt to represent this freedom but are actually derived to a great extent from the superego.

Since the categories drawn from the superego are far shallower, a much "thinner brew" (see the characteristics mentioned earlier), the person in question experiences present confessional practice as a trivialization of his genuine freedom. He experiences himself as dealing with the reality of his freedom—experienced preconceptually in its real depth, richness, laws of growth and engagement, etc.—in institutionalized categories derived from a far cheaper reality; hence the institutionalized categories are too cheap and too trivial for the reality to which they supposedly correspond and from which they supposedly derive.

The experience of this "misfit" is recognized, not necessarily in a reflexively formulated way, but in the depth of consciousness. It is, then, no wonder that a person reacts in a corresponding way; a person simply

finds himself, in an unplanned and unarticulated way, distancing himself from the practice of confession.

This means that the phenomenon of diminishing confessions is, at least in part, a healthy recognition of the misfit existing between genuine freedom and a system of categories—institutionalized in the traditional practice of confession—derived to a great extent from the superego. Therefore this phenomenon, far from being regrettable, is a sign of health and insight. It cannot be reversed by mere rhetoric; the very nature of genuine freedom does not prompt us to attempt to reverse it. The more nuanced understanding of man's freedom does, however, prompt us to find more adequate forms for the sacrament of penance. Finding these new forms—be they communal and/or "private"—does demand that we recognize the reality of the superego for what it is and thereby avoid merely creating forms of serving the infantile needs of the superego in a new way.

Superego Can Blind to Genuine Value

In discussing some of the pastoral implication of the foregoing pages, I have often heard the comment: "Maybe an individual needs the dynamics of the superego to help himself avoid doing what he really wants to avoid, but cannot—e.g., masturbation. If we take this away, we may be robbing him of a real help."

Several observations on such a comment. First, there is the question of what such "support" is doing to his whole conception of God and his life of partnership with God. Second, the superego is far more infallible as a tormentor of failure than as a source of effective motivation. Hence the question: What is such support doing to his own self-concept? More often than not the superego will be ineffective in overcoming the urge to masturbate; but it will, with inexorable certainty, provide a self-devouring gloom following such an act. The disproportionate guilt will set up the very situation which immerses the individual in even deeper depressions, sense of failure and frustration, fixation on this matter, etc.; in short, the very situation which is most conducive to further masturbation.

Finally, the superego orientation can quite effectively block off the ultimate values at stake. The superego handles individual acts; it demands that these past actions be "confessed" to an authority figure and thereby erased. Such a frame of reference keeps the individual from seeing the larger and more important *process*, which is always the nature of genuine human growth. Instead of experiencing the individual acts precisely as part of a future-oriented growth process, concerned with values that of their inherent power call to growth, the center of attention is focused on righting past wrongs, seen as atomized units.

A counselor told me of a case in which a happily married man with several children had been plagued by masturbation for fifteen years. During these fifteen years he had dutifully gone the route of weekly confession, Communion, etc. The counselor told him to stop thinking of this in terms of serious sin, to go to Communion every Sunday and to confession every six weeks. He tried to help him see his introversion in terms of his own sexual maturity, in terms of his relationship to his wife and children. Within several months this fifteen-year-old "plague" simply vanished from his life. By refusing to follow a pattern of pastoral practice based on the dynamics of the superego, this counselor was able to unlock a logjam of fifteen years; by refusing to deal with the superego as if it were conscience, he freed the genuine values at stake; he allowed them to speak and call the person beyond his present lesser stage of sexual integration. We can pay rent to the superego but the house never becomes our own possession.

The same is true especially in questions of premarital sex. Fostering the mortal sin-grace horizon and plugging it into the confession-Communion-sin network can keep the person from doing the most important thing of all: honestly looking at the delicate, nuanced, process-structured values which are involved; and it is only by becoming increasingly sensitive to these values that one can be helped, through good and bad experience, to continue to grow. Allowing the superego to dominate this pattern of conduct, to atomize the acts, to deal with their guilt and its release in terms of past serious offenses against God which are set right by some authority figure can be the very manner of dealing with the problem which keeps the operative values from ever emerging and calling creatively to further growth.

Departures from Active Ministry and Religious Life

Understanding the superego also sheds some light on the phenomenon of increasing departures from the active ministry and religious life—a phenomenon badly in need of illumination from whatever source we can find. Understanding the superego helps us see a very positive side of this phenomenon—which does not mean that it is solely a positive reality or that such a consideration provides the only or primary horizon for understanding this extremely complex reality.³¹ But I am convinced that the superego and its dynamics are involved to a considerable extent in this complex process.

³¹I have attempted to explore another thin slice of this question from another point of view in the article "Anonymous Priesthood," *Commonweal* 93, no. 11 (Dec. 11, 1970) 271-74.

First, I want to consider a striking example which Zulliger provides and which at first blush might seem to have little to do with departures from ministry and religious life. He recounts an incident that happened when he was a counselor at a boys' camp.³² He was in charge of a small group of boys camping out together. One of the boys reported to Zulliger that money had been taken from his tent. Since a campfire and games had been planned for that same evening, Zulliger decided to include the Indian "swallow ordeal," never suspecting how well it would work. He explained to the boys gathered in the circle of light around the campfire that money had been taken and that the American Indians had a way of uncovering a thief in such a situation. They passed a cup of water around; each one had to take a big swallow of the water; the man who could not swallow the water was the thief. Then Zulliger proceeded with the "game," expecting no results. The cup moved smoothly, the whole group watching as each boy took the cup, filled his mouth, and swallowed. At one point a boy filled his mouth and struggled to swallow, only to choke on the water and spit it out. Zulliger made nothing of this at the time. After the games, when the boys were getting ready to bed down for the night, the boy who had almost strangled came to Zulliger, produced the stolen money, admitted he had stolen it, and asked to be forgiven and punished.

What does this example "prove"? First, it has its full weight only in the context of the many other examples Zulliger offers. Seen by itself, it could strike the reader as a fantastic coincidence; seen in the fuller context, it is a striking example of several characteristics of the superego: (1) its surprising power over an individual, touching even his ability to swallow; (2) the ratio that exists between this power to control an individual and the isolation of the social "accepting" group from a larger context.

In this example the power of the superego touches the delicate process of swallowing normally. As we have seen, the force of the superego can also affect the delicate process of seeing, perceiving, knowing.³³ Hence it can demand conduct, punish for disobedience by inducing guilt feelings, and at the same time suppress the very insight which could and should contradict and correct such tyranny.

Further, the power to influence the individual is in direct proportion to how much the immediate context of acceptance represents "all of reality." The more a person is cut off and isolated from a larger context, the more powerful will be the influence of the small and limited world

³² Zulliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 76 ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 138 f.

which acts as the point of reference for guilt and isolation to produce such guilt experiences.

Apply this to the question of departures from ministry and religious life. When we reflect on the "world" in which those presently departing grew up (seminaries, novitiates, houses of study), we realize that these houses constituted "all of reality," an island of the "really-real" for those living there. Isolated from a larger context in principle and practice, they were institutionalized models of the campfire far from home on a dark night. So they had the power of hydraulically multiplied force to introject values; they could produce intense guilt over trivialities; they could control conduct with the subtleties of a raised eyebrow or a slightly chilled greeting.

As long as this "campfire isolation" can be maintained, the degree to which the superego operates can go unchallenged by the larger context of reality and can go unnoticed by those under its influence. But once this narrowly circumscribed context opens to a larger horizon, the misfit between superego demands-punishments and the genuine values at stake emerges in one's consciousness. As we saw in the case of confession, this misfit need not be conceptually articulated; it can remain a nonverbal but deeply intellectual experience of disproportion, discomfort, etc.

Using this frame of reference to understand departures from ministry and religious life, I would say that many, not all, are simply freeing themselves from a superego-dominated way of life. They are growing in genuine value perception and find that they never really embraced the values in question and cannot bring it off now. They find themselves in the situation of others who left the religious way of life at earlier stages, or of those who never entered such a way of life because they recognized that this particular incarnation of Christian values was not what God wanted of them. So they depart. In so far as this is the heart of many departures, we as Christians can only rejoice in the event. It must be affirmed, encouraged, and fostered, just as any other discovery of God's will is the object of our benevolence and beneficence.

Some other priests and religious grow beyond this superego-dominated conduct and in this very process encounter the real values in question and embrace them freely. This particular variation of liberation from the superego is likewise the flowering of genuine Christian freedom; it must also be affirmed, encouraged, and fostered. It should not be mistakenly assumed, however, that the difference between the prior group (those who leave) and the latter group (those who grow to freely accept this particular concrete form of Christian life) is a question of good will. The difference is simply that the prior group are freed from the superego to find their true Christian vocation "in the world"; the latter group are freed

from the superego to find their specific Christian vocation, now freely embraced, in their *de facto* state.

The two poles considered here were presented as chemically pure alternatives. It should be clear that they never exist in such undiluted form; the concrete cases will always be a mixture of these various elements. But if this is kept in mind, the foregoing should provide help in understanding some aspects of the question considered. And it should reveal one frame of reference as clearly inadequate: that which would analyze the problem solely in terms of good or bad will, fidelity or infidelity. Understanding the superego shows such a limited set of categories to be a vast oversimplification which can serve neither truth nor Christian freedom. It also helps us realize how much we have to avoid any educational structures which produce conduct by superego rather than decisions of freedom.

Several points discussed in the third and final section of this article have been one-sided; they left many complexities of each question untouched. My goal was to call attention to a dimension of man whose roots can appear to be man's freedom but whose actual source is a compulsion to be accepted and lovable. To make this point with emphasis, many qualifications were deliberately omitted.

This article is meant to be a service to freedom, a service which does not relieve a man of all burdens, but hopes to locate the pain where it should be and where it can function creatively: in the context of love—the goal, reward, and best name of all freedom.