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***Freud's Problem of Identification***

As the theory of identification assumed increasing importance in Freud's work, it came to be a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory. Yet because the difficulties contained in Freud's views on this question have not, with the exception of Lacan, been properly appreciated, post-Freudian theory has employed a theoretical construct of questionable coherence.

Although Freud wavered over what was identified with in properly symbolic identification—speaking of identification with the father, with the mother, and sometimes of identification with both—clearly we can conclude from his subsequent realization that the Oedipal drama consists in a “turn toward the father” that it is the question of the father that is at issue in symbolic identification.

A second characteristic of this symbolic identification is that it is normative. The function of the father as possessor of the phallus, which is to regulate the desire of the mother as primordial omnipotent Other, brings about the formation of the ego ideal through acting as the support of the subject's identification.

In contrast to this, however, is the fact that the father also has a pathogenic function, playing a causal role as he does in the formation of neuroses. Lacan indicates this double function of being both pathogenic and normal in “The Neurotic's Individual Myth.”<sup>1</sup> There is of course nothing unusual in this. As psychoanalysis has discovered, it is typical for the one function to have both a normative and a pathological function. Furthermore, it is fairly unproblematic that this Oedipal father should be the subject of identification.

More significant is the fact that in Freud's work the normative function of the father tends gradually to give way to the pathological, and

that this occurs even as the notion of identification becomes more central to Freudian theory. Compare the father of Totem and Taboo and *Moses and Monotheism* with the father of the Oedipus complex, where rather than a father himself subject to the law, we encounter a father who is an exception to and lies outside the law. He is, to use Lacan's expression, the *père sévère*, the agent of a practice of castration he himself escapes from, whose *jouissance* is unlimited by any law transcendent to him. This father functions essentially as the dead father, for it is at his death that his sons, precisely through their identification with him, become bound to the law of prohibition that they will henceforth be perpetually subject to. Why, however, there should be identification here is more difficult to understand.

The development from the Oedipus complex to the myth of the father of *Totem and Taboo* and later of *Moses and Monotheism* is very striking indeed. At the outset the father's function is clearly to pacify, regulate, and sublimate the omnipotence of the figure of the mother, called by Freud “the obscure power of the feminine sex.” But by the end the father himself has assumed the power, obscurity, and cruelty of the omnipotence his function was supposed to dissipate in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

However, this development in Freud's views generates a theoretical difficulty. The link between this shift in Freud's view of the function of the father and identification and the ensuing difficulties for the theory can best be brought out by considering what Freud writes about identification and object loss. In *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud writes that object loss produces a regression and then an ego identification with the lost object. The consequence of this is that the repressed aggression that had been directed against the object is henceforth expressed as self-reproaches and directed against the ego. The shadow of the object, as Freud says, falls upon the ego. This is the mechanism of mourning.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Ego and the Id*, on the other hand, Freud gives an account of identification with the father which, as he himself points out, does not tally with what he says in *Mourning and Melancholia*. On this subsequent account, the dissolution of the Oedipus complex is accompanied by both the child's renunciation of the mother as object choice and a corresponding intensification of the identification with the father. This is unexpected because the theory leads us to expect the identification to be with the object renounced and not with the father as the agent of the "frustration" of the object.<sup>4</sup>

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A similar point can be made about the primal father of *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. The consequences for the sons of murdering the father of the primal horde are not the ones expected by the sons—principally access to a *jouissance* without limit—since no one accedes to the omnipotence of the vacated position. The prohibitions prior to the murder continue just as strongly afterwards because the sons agree upon them amongst themselves so that total and mutual destruction does not ensue. As Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism*: "Each individual renounced his ideal of acquiring his father's position for himself and of possessing his mother and sisters. Thus the taboo on incest and the injunction to exogamy came about."<sup>5</sup>

The reference to the son's identification with the father, contained in this passage about the son's ideal of acquiring his father's position, makes it clear that an answer to the question how in this myth the incest taboo arises should be sought in terms of an identification with the father and not merely in terms of a vaguely sociological theory of a social contract between equals. Further, Freud also attributes a crucial role in the setting up of prohibitions to the son's love for the primal father: "[The primal father] forced [the sons] into abstinence and consequently into the emotional ties with him and with one another which could arise out of those of their impulsions that were inhibited in their sexual aim."<sup>6</sup> What is striking about this passage is that it stands in sharp contrast to the views Freud expresses elsewhere on aim-inhibited drives that lead to tenderness and empathy in object relations. He claims that the renunciation of direct sexual satisfaction with an object leads to idealization of the object and to the appearance of a relation of tenderness with it, whereas the actual vehicle of the frustration draws the subject's hatred and aggression upon himself.<sup>7</sup> However, here again as before "forced abstinence" produces an emotional tie with the agent in a way that runs counter to what the theory of identification has led us to expect.

What is striking about all this is that it is precisely identification with the father that does not fit the mechanism of identification described in *Mourning and Melancholia*.<sup>8</sup> So what is going on here? It is not easy to say. However, part of the answer lies in the distinction, which

Lacan is not alone in making, between the superego and the ego ideal and part lies in the important distinction between the Name-of-the-Father, i.e., the symbolic father, and imaginary figures of the father. As the identification with the father is the result of the paternal metaphor, this is an identification with the symbolic father. The ego

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ideal is that "precipitate" of the internalization of the law that Freud describes in *Totem and Taboo*.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the superego is closely related to guilt and transgression of the law. In *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse* Lacan discusses Freud's famous paradox of conscience.<sup>10</sup> This is his claim that "[t]he more virtuous a man is, the more severe and distrustful is [the superego's] behavior, so that ultimately it is precisely those people who have carried saintliness furthest who reproach themselves with the worst sinfulness."<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, then, we have the symbolic father who unites rather than opposes desire to the Law, on the other the imaginary "obscene and ferocious figure" of the father, the privative father who incurs the aggression of the subject through frustrating his drive satisfactions.

Of course, to introduce these distinctions explains very little, or at least *would* explain very little, were it not for the fact that the ramifications of these views not only extend very deep into the theory, but also go a long way towards clarifying some difficult clinical questions, such as, for instance, the issue of Freud's pessimism, expressed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, over the chance of bringing a cure to a successful end. Following Freud, Lacan maintains that the aggression engendered by frustration of an object is linked to the castrating father, whereas others, e.g., Jones and Klein and indeed most of the British School, attempt to derive it from elsewhere. However, it was this view that led Freud to such pessimistic conclusions over successful treatment. But once the distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary is appreciated, and once the aggression is no longer directly linked to the internalization of the law, there is no longer any theoretical warrant to the grim fatalism of Freud's later work.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," trans. Martha Noel Evans, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 48 (1979): 405-25.
2. This point is made and developed by Serge Cottet in his *Freud et le désir du psychanalyste* (Paris: Navarin, 1982), 157-64.
3. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 14, 243-58.
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, *Standard Edition*, 19: 28-39.
5. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, *Standard Edition*, 23: 82.
6. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Standard Edition*, 18: 24; my emphasis.

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7. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Standard Edition*, 21: 102ff.

8. Lacan says, "Love relates to the father by virtue of the father's being the vehicle of castration. This is what Freud proposes in *Totem and Taboo*. It is insofar as the sons are deprived of women that they love the father—a bewildering remark that is sanctioned by the insight of a Freud." *Le séminaire*, 23 (1975-76); *Le sinthome*, published in *Ornicar?* 11 (1977): 7.
9. See Lacan, *Le séminaire*, Livre 1 (1953-54), *Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 184.
10. See *Le Séminaire*, Livre 7, *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), chaps. 14, 15.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Standard Edition*, 21: 125-26.
12. It is obvious that many issues raised here require further discussion. Some are further discussed in my "The Function of the Father in Psychoanalysis," *Australian Journal of Psychotherapy* 5, no. 1 (1987), forthcoming.