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# Sigmund Freud's Allegories of Psychic Self-Discipline

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## Abstract

This essay places Sigmund Freud in a long tradition of allegorists who portray the psyche as self-disciplining. While Freud's writings on the ego, id, and superego are reminiscent of premodern allegories, Freud is considerably less willing than many of his predecessors to encourage *conscious* self-discipline. Though he conceived of the superego as a disciplinary agent, Freud believed that analysis often calls for "the slow demolition of the hostile superego." Psychoanalysis, in other words, entails a counter-confession: an intersubjective asceticism through which analyst and analysand discipline the discipliner within. The conclusion posits that the uncanny resemblance between Freud's allegories and those of his premodern predecessors presents us a pedagogical opportunity to teach our students the long history of psychological allegory and help them appreciate the dynamic complexity of both Freud's works and the archive of premodern allegory—bodies of writing that they often presuppose to be static, reductive, or irrelevant.

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This essay explores various instances where Freud employs allegory to describe his famous triad—the ego, id, and superego—and their dynamic interrelation. In so doing, it situates Freud in a long tradition of authors who portray the psyche as home to multiple agencies or figures, such as Conscience, Anima [soul], as well as various virtues and vices. Echoing pre-modern authors, such as Prudentius in the *Psychomachia*, Freud often describes these agencies in conflict, with some disciplining the others. Reading Freud in this tradition shows allegory's place in the history of psychology and helps us appreciate the idiosyncrasies of Freud's allegories, which were created for radically different ends from those of his premodern predecessors.

It also might help us address some of the related pedagogical challenges faced by teachers of allegory and teachers of psychoanalytic criticism. Indeed, teachers of allegorical literature are often at pains to convey to students the dynamism and complexity of a literary tradition that many students presuppose to be static and simple (Breen 2021; Zeeman 2020). At the same time, teachers invested in psychoanalytic criticism often find themselves correcting misconceptions about Freud and the field of literary criticism that he inspired, which they reductively conceive as little more than an exercise in endlessly reading texts as allegories of repressed erotic desire. Helping students recognize how Freud (occasionally) employs allegory as a formal means of advancing complex (and frequently convincing) claims about psychodynamics can help us convince them of the present-day viability of both Freudian thought and psychological allegory.

### Horses and Riders

I am hardly the first medievalist to identify Freud as an allegorist. Theodore L. Steinberg (2010), for example, posits that, “[i]d, ego, and superego are, in effect, allegorical figures that suited the time they were defined, just as [characters in *The Romance of the Rose* like] Fair Welcome or Shame suited the psychological needs of the Middle Ages” (71). While the characters from *The Romance of the Rose* that Steinberg mentions are loosely analogous to Freud's triad of agencies insofar as they represent psychic states, a better analogy can be found in the personified virtues and vices of Prudentius' *Psychomachia* and their allegorical descendants who populate texts that depict a struggle for psychic health in order to help their audience to cultivate a virtuous (and thus heaven-bound) psyche (Breen 2021, 107). It would be a mistake, however, to make too much of these analogies. After all, Freud's psychic agents are not personified virtues, and his writing on these agencies, while driven by a concern for promoting psychic wellbeing, is not designed to inspire psychic health in his readers, at least not as directly as Prudentius' *Psychomachia*. To be sure, Freud (1949a) occasionally makes his psychic agents into a simple allegory, as when he writes, early in *The Ego and the Id*, that “ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions” (30). As he develops these terms in this work and beyond, though, they take on a much more complex character, and Freud treats them less as allegorical figures than real figures that need to be described through allegory.

Instead of arguing that the ego, id, and superego are allegorical, I will focus on writings in which Freud employs allegory to elucidate the functions and interactions of his three psychic agents. In the 1920s, for example, Freud (1949a) twice likened the ego's relationship with the id to a horseback rider's relationship to a horse (30). Since the id is much more powerful than the ego, which is nevertheless

tasked with guiding the subject's actions, the ego, Freud writes, is like a comparatively weak human rider guiding a much stronger horse to a destination. While this analogy initially gestures toward a model of subjectivity according to which reason governs the passions, Freud's point in advancing the allegory turns out to be just the opposite. "Only too often," he laments, "there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go" (30). Just as the horse sometimes determines the rider's destination (in Freud's mind, at least), the rational ego often finds itself in the unideal situation of sheepishly pretending to set a course that is actually determined by the powerful, passionate id.

Given the ineptness of the ego as a horseback rider, it is unsurprising that Freud himself was not fond of riding horses. Reflecting on a dream in which he rides a horse, he remarks that, in his waking life, he only ever did so once and did not much care for the experience (Freud 1913, 194). Perhaps, then, Freud's allegory stems less from his experience than from his reading. Indeed, Freud's horse and rider reside in a tradition of equestrian allegory stretching back through the Middle Ages and into antiquity. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Plato (2009) likens the soul to a chariot whose driver struggles to govern two horses: one vicious, the other virtuous (29–31). Only by disciplining the vicious horse through corporal punishment is the charioteer able to proceed in an orderly fashion (38). Plato's allegory is both descriptive and prescriptive: by representing the soul as a self-disciplining entity it demands deliberate self-disciplinary asceticism from an audience hoping to cultivate a stable soul.

Though he rarely cites Plato, Freud may have been thinking about Plato's tripartite soul-chariot when developing his own psychic triad. He was certainly *not* thinking about the Middle English devotional texts *Pore Caitiff* (2019, 184–90) and *Dives and Pauper* (1976–80, X.v.68–70), which promote self-discipline by advancing a chivalric allegory in which the soul is embodied as a knight astride a horse representing the body. Like Plato's chariot allegory, these medieval allegories explicitly demand that the rational rider discipline a passionate horse. In the Middle English devotional manuals, the instruments of discipline are two spurs: love and fear. By advancing their equestrian analogy, these allegories, like Plato's, are prescriptive: they mandate that, just as a rider hoping to determine his course must spur his horse, the rational self must discipline the corporal self by conjuring emotions like love and fear in an effort to guide the soul to heaven.

Freud's analogy is notably less prescriptive and more descriptive than its premodern predecessors. While all of these analogies acknowledge the possibility that a horse can disobey the rider, only Freud's lacks a clear-cut injunction that the rational agency disciplines the passionate agency. Freud makes no mention of the spurs and riding crops brandished, for example, by the Wife of Bath as she is visualized in the Ellesmere manuscript. Though he describes the situation in which the id-horse determines the path as "not precisely ideal," he does not directly enjoin the ego to do violence in an effort to tame the id (Freud 1949a, 30). It is worth noting, however, that Freud's horse and rider appear again in his New Introductory Lecture on "Dissecting the Personality," which ends with his famous sentence: "where id was, shall ego be" (Freud 1990, 99). Often taken as a declaration that the purpose of psychoanalysis is to strengthen ego and weaken id, the sentence expresses a psychic manifest destiny in which the ego colonizes the territory initially occupied by the id. While this sentence, in conjunction with Freud's earlier allegory, implies that psychoanalysis strives to make the ego a better horseback rider (or a larger rider atop a smaller horse), Freud does not use allegory to represent (and thus advocate) the ego doing disciplinary violence to the id. Whether or not he was aware of the premodern

psychological allegories his horse and rider recall, he differs from them in not mandating conscious self-discipline, perhaps because he believed the ego should be strengthened through therapy, rather than saddled with administering psychic discipline.

### Disciplining the Discipliner

Although he does not explicitly mandate that the ego-rider discipline the id-horse, Freud was keenly interested in psychic discipline—the province of the superego (Weiss 2020). Freud (1949a) initially describes the superego as a lasting product of the Oedipus Complex's resolution: a lingering injunction to follow the father's ideals alongside an equally lasting prohibition on impinging on the father's prerogative (45). Although it originates as part of the ego, the superego is an agent of internalized authority, originally parental, and subsequently an accretion of multiple internalized authority figures (Freud 1949b, 3–4). For Freud (1949b), however, the superego is not so much an internalized representation of parents and authority figures as an internalized representation of their superegos and therefore a conduit through which the values of civilization are enforced (4). The formation of the superego, then, allows for socially constructed morality to embed itself into the psyche across generations. Hence, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1960) personifies the superego as a “garrison in a conquered city” (105). Here, the superego, rather than the ego, becomes a colonizer: a representative of a foreign realm tasked with enforcing that realm's laws in the conquered psyche.

Unlike the id, the superego is, for Freud (1990), capable of loving the ego or chastising it (76–78). Although he saw a certain amount of chastisement as natural and necessary, he came to see an excessively critical superego as the root of the melancholiac's depressive episodes and a diminished superego as leading to the manic episodes that occur in what we now call bipolar disorder (75–76). He also hints that the neuroses themselves are brought about by a hyper-functioning superego (Freud 1949b, 39). In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he even attributes the malaise of modern life, despite all of its technological wonders, to an excess of guilt brought about by the superego's overzealous chastisement of our egos (Freud 1960, 97). Instead of incorporating the superego into his horse and rider allegory, Freud (1949a) subsequently advances a new allegory in which the ego becomes “a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego” (82–83). A far cry from Plato's charioteer or the soul-knight of Middle English Christian allegory, Freud's ego is stuck in an absurdly elaborate condition of servitude. He shifts restlessly from micro-allegory to micro-allegory in an attempt to describe the ego's unenviable predicament: the ego is “a frontier-creature” who “tries to mediate between the world and the id,” only to suddenly become like “the physician during an analytic treatment [insofar as] it offers itself ... as a libidinal object to the id, and aims at attaching the id's libido to itself;” but this physician quickly becomes “a submissive slave who courts his master's love;” and then a “sycophantic, opportunist and lying ... politician who sees the truth but wants to keep his place in popular favor” (83). By likening the ego's situation to a series of recognizable social relationships, Freud elucidates its anxiety-fraught function of mediating between id, superego, and external world. The fact that the ego's allegorical identity is so mercurial reflects the immense difficulty of its situation—it cannot be one person but constantly shifts identities to accommodate its several masters.

Freud repeatedly states that the superego is synonymous with conscience. As Paul Strohm (2011) demonstrates, Freud's superego is rooted in an Augustinian tradition of representing conscience as a voice muttering within (66). For Strohm, Freud (like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche) advances a more jaundiced view of conscience than his premodern predecessors, though he is not completely admonitory in his assessments of superego's psychosocial function (59–72). When read as an allegory, the superego can certainly look like the personifications of conscience in poems like William Langland's late fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman*. As we have already seen, though, many premodern allegories of self-disciplining subjectivity do not so much embody a single psychic agent responsible for dispensing discipline (a cop in your head) as they mandate that an ego-like figure deliberately administer a process of self-discipline through which the psyche is brought into accord with socially prescribed mandates. Take, for example, a juridical allegory contained in one of Augustine's (1994) sermons on repentance, which builds on Paul's dictum, "if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged by God" (1 Cor. 11.31), to argue that those who would take Paul's advice should imagine themselves as judge in a psychic courtroom in which Thought serves as prosecutor, Conscience as witness, and Fear as jailer (10: 125–26). In Augustine's allegory, which was translated into Middle English at least twice (*Ancrene Wisse* 2000, 5.94–106; *Dives and Pauper* 1976–80, VIII.xiii, 29–35), Conscience is one agent playing a role in a complex process of juridical self-discipline involving several other psychic agents. Augustine makes no claim that Conscience will automatically dispense discipline and offers his juridical allegory as a tool with which its audience can deliberately discipline themselves.

Comparing Augustine's allegory of self-discipline to Freud's reveals an extremely important difference between Freud and many of his premodern predecessors: his goal is not to instill in his audience a self-disciplining mode of subjectivity. While he saw the painful guilt inspired by the superego as the price humanity must pay to curb our inherent aggression, Freud believed that analysis could mitigate the pain caused by an overly severe superego. The ego, on the other hand, is not a disciplinarian, but the hyper-disciplined protagonist of Freud's allegorical drama. Indeed, the aforementioned flurry of personifications with which Freud describes the ego's absurd servitude makes us sympathize with this "poor creature." Rather than telling the ego to perform flesh-chastising jolts of fear, Freud develops a method for alleviating the excessive fear heaped upon the ego by its many discipliners.

By making the ego subject to the superego, Freud departed (knowingly or not) from the tradition of encouraging the rational self to dispense discipline, instead representing the ego as subject to several internal and external discipliners. Of course, in doing so, he participated (knowingly or not) in another tradition according to which conscience is not only a prospective force preventing immoral behavior before it occurs, but also a retrospective force, punishing immoral behavior that has already occurred. As Strohm (2011) points out, Augustine's *Confessions* and Shakespeare's *Richard III* both portray conscience meting out retrospective retribution (66), but neither does so in order to help their audience curb conscience's chastisements. As we have seen, Freud attributed a variety of psychopathologies to an overly severe superego (and a few to an overly permissive one). By making the superego a psychic agency, rather than a disciplinary task that an ego must fulfil, Freud opened the possibility that the ego, working in concert with the analyst, might be able to cure the aforementioned group of ailments by disciplining the very agent of internalized authority that arose to discipline it.

To be sure, it would be up to Freud's followers to articulate the clinical logistics involved in accomplishing this, but Freud (1949b) advances some suggestions and warnings about how an analyst might attempt to "bring about the slow demolition of the hostile superego" in the summative book on which he was working at the time of his death: *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (46). In a chapter on "The Technique of Psychoanalysis," Freud employs a military allegory to describe the analyst's position vis-à-vis the analysand's ego, superego, and id. The ego is like a person immersed in "a civil war" against enemies representing "the instinctual demands of the id and the conscientious demands of the super-ego" (36). In these desperate conditions, the analyst and analysand "form a pact": "The sick ego promises us the most complete candor . . . we assure the patient of the strictest discretion and place at his service our experience in interpreting material that has been influenced by the unconscious. Our knowledge is to make up for his ignorance and to give his ego back its mastery over lost provinces of his mental life" (36). Again, the purpose of analysis is to strengthen the ego and thereby mitigate the suffering inflicted by both superego and id, which are often allied (35–36). But the question remains, how, exactly, does the analyst weaken the superego's influence?

Freud's answer (still nascent at the time of his death) lies in the phenomenon of transference. Despite the fact that the superego is largely formed in infancy and therefore most deeply affected by our early impression of caregivers, Freud (1949b) suggests that the analyst might take advantage of transference to occupy the place of the superego knowingly and effect a therapeutic "after-education of the neurotic" (39). Immediately after announcing this therapeutic possibility, however, Freud furnishes a grave warning: "However much the analyst may be tempted to become a teacher, model and ideal for other people and to create men in his own image, he should not forget that that is not his task in the analytic relationship . . . In all his attempts at improving and educating the patient the analyst should respect his individuality" (39). Freud cautions the analyst against occupying the place of the analysand's superego to shape the ego, rather than strengthen it. The analyst can temporarily unseat the overly harsh superego in order to strengthen the beleaguered ego, but they must avoid compromising the analysand's individuality while occupying this powerful position.

Of course, Freud never calls to extricate the super-ego entirely. One must wait for the injunction of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2000) to "[d]estroy [. . .] the puppet of the superego" (342), or the radical protest slogan "get rid of the cop in your head" for such a call to un-discipline subjectivity (Althusser 2014, 178). Though he does not demand self-discipline, Freud does not disavow the ascetic project of deliberate self-building. Instead, he invents a sort of counter-confession—an intersubjective asceticism through which the analyst and analysand collaborate in an effort to discipline the overzealous discipliner within.

### Teaching Dynamics

While it is fruitful to place Freud in a long tradition of psychological allegory, there would be something perverse in concluding this essay with a simple call to historicize Freud, given the wealth of psychoanalytic criticism that emphasizes writing's capacity to shape human experience across vast spatiotemporal distances (Trigg 2016; Fradenburg 2002). In addition to historicizing Freud, we must continue Freud's project of questioning: 1) whether we are host to a socially constructed superego; 2) if we are, when we should strengthen, weaken, destroy, educate, or ignore the garrison within the

conquered city of our mind; and 3) what forms of intersubjective asceticism might we employ (or develop) to do so?

A fair amount of attention has been paid to these questions. Mark Edmondson (2023), for example, holds that college students are particularly likely to have harsh, overactive superegos, which often makes them bored, depressed, and/or anxious. For Edmondson, many find relief from their “bitterly moralistic” superegos by displacing the superego’s harsh scrutiny from their egos to the world, making them self-righteous and ultimately unhappy. While I find Edmondson’s suggestion that we live in “[a]n era of oppressive, superego morality” somewhat reductive, I wholeheartedly agree with his argument that introducing students to the concept of the superego and empowering them to assess its value and validity can equip them with an interpretive frame through which to consider whether they consider themselves inherently self-disciplining subjects and whether they want to be. Should students accept the existence (or allegorical use-value) of the superego, they can deliberately examine its role in their day-to-day lives and develop strategies for transforming it (or the ego’s relation to it) if necessary.

The moral philosopher J. David Velleman (1999) goes a step further than Edmondson, arguing that the superego can and should be deliberately endowed with moral convictions developed in the domain of philosophy, such as Kant’s categorical imperative (55–58). Where both Edmondson and Velleman allow for the possibility of the ego developing non-pathological relation to the superego, Todd McGowan (2019) makes the more radical argument that, “[c]ontrary to the popular reading of the superego, authentic moral action requires a rejection of the superego’s imperatives, not obedience to them.” Although McGowan does not dwell on the pedagogical implications of his theory of the superego, those educators who accept his understanding would likely feel compelled to encourage their students to disobey the ostensibly moral demands of their superegos, which, McGowan argues, are always libidinous and often immoral.

Though these scholars have fruitfully addressed the question of what we should do with our superegos, urgent questions about the pedagogical implications of Freud’s structural model remain unanswered. For example, if we accept Freud’s idea that our psyches necessarily contain an accretion of internalized authority-figures that disciplines us from within, we might well consider the extent to which our teachers, mentors, and advisors continue to dispense discipline in our heads. Or, to be more strictly Freudian, we might wonder whether we have inherited the superegos of our mentors (who inherited the superegos of their mentors) in a deep-historical process through which our discipline’s moral commitments (and delusions) are maintained. Those lucky enough to have had kind and constructive mentors might well cherish the ways their voices continue to administer gentle discipline from within, even when the mentors themselves are absent. But what about those students who have been trained by abusive mentors? As Micah Goodrich (2020) movingly argues, the act of lodging a complaint about a “toxic mentor” enables an abused mentee to “confront blurred and abused lines of consent,” but doing so forces the victim of abuse to “relive [their] toxicities once again” (306). If it is essential that we make institutional room for complaint, it is much less certain that a teacher would necessarily do well in attempting to redress the painful lessons of previous teachers. And, yet, it is hard to do nothing when a student is obviously suffering elongated abuse from a superego that draws power from the memory of cruel words uttered by a toxic mentor. How can such a superego be ethically weakened? Should it be disciplined, or entirely destroyed? What institutional conditions would be

conducive to bringing about “the slow demolition of the hostile superego” (Freud 1949b, 46)? Should mentors of previously abused students adopt the analyst’s strategy of temporarily occupying the position of their mentees’ superego in an effort to strengthen their ego and mitigate some of the harm caused by earlier toxic mentors whose insults remain accreted on the student’s scholarly superego?

Whether or not we accept the existence of the Freudian superego, we, as educators, need to think about how our voices will echo in the minds of our students throughout their lives. Should we facilitate or resist the process through which an internal critic might capitalize on memories of our voices? Should we teach students to strengthen, weaken, reject, the internal agents of self-discipline? How can literature be marshalled to such tasks? In response to the last question, we might consider how the allegories discussed in this essay might be used in the classroom. One might, for example, assign Plato’s chariot allegory, the chivalric allegory in *Dives and Pauper*, and Freud’s horse-and-rider allegory, asking students to assess their various psychological implications before encouraging them to discuss which allegory best approximates their understanding of subjectivity. One might ask students to consider how our long and violent history of domesticating horses underwrites this allegorical tradition and then to evaluate its ethical stakes. Teaching the allegorical sections of these texts in isolation, however, risks perpetuating a reductive view of allegory (or a view of allegory as reductive). Indeed, like Freud’s *Ego and Id*, a text like *Dives and Pauper* mixes allegory with myriad other types of writing with an aim of helping its audience model a healthy psyche and eschew unhealthy psychic states. Another (admittedly more time-consuming) approach would be to teach the entirety of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* alongside the entirety of *The Ego and the Id*; such a pairing would leave students with a full (albeit a potentially resentful) appreciation of both texts’ dynamic complexity, and provide many opportunities to compare Langland’s famously complex Conscience and Freud’s superego in class discussion and writing assignments. Finally, one might even task students with composing their own allegorical narrative portraying a dynamic psyche (with or without discipline; with or without horses). Doing so would not only enrich their understanding of allegory’s enduring place in the history of psychology, but would also empower them to follow Freud in capturing the variegated dynamism of the mind through allegory. As premodernists with the benefit of psychoanalytic theory, we are well-equipped to convince students that, even today, allegory remains a viable and powerful tool for describing psychodynamics.

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