The Superego, or why Yes means No

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The superego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy!

--Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX

If the primary function of the Superego is to impose limits and restrictions, why does Jacques Lacan, the controversial French analyst who proclaimed himself true heir to Freud’s legacy, posit that its injunction is “Enjoy”? Shouldn’t it rather be “No” or “Stop” or “Yield”?

Although Lacan has been accused of reworking Freud beyond recognition, I claim that when it comes to the Superego he remains thoroughly Freudian. Lacan lays bare the insidious strategy of the Superego: enjoyment loses its pleasurable dimension once it becomes an injunction. The subject is kept from “wrong” action not through demands for abstinence, but through forced enjoyment. This can be debilitating not only for the subject, but for its relation to the Other: enjoyment becomes a burden that has to be displaced to an Other who can accomplish the duty of jouissance for us.

We know that the Superego, following the conventional Freudian definition, is an internalized authority that bombards us with unreasonable ethical demands. It is the enemy of enjoyment; it is that which drains the pleasure out of indulgence. It is a cruel inner voice that reminds us that we are too fat, too wasteful, too lazy, too perverse.

Consistent with the metaphorics used in psychoanalysis, the Superego is represented in popular accounts as a whisper in our heads that brings to our attention moments of excess and failure. Despite its unimposing form, it can be psychologically crippling. Freud thought of the Superego as a sadistic judge with a single virtue, that of consistency: it never fails to issue a guilty verdict.

Part of the Superego’s function is to berate us for a failure that is “inbuilt”: it points to the gap that separates our pathetic reality from our perfect image of the self, the Ego-Ideal. Formed by early narcissistic love and untainted by flaws, the Ego-Ideal can only be perceived once the subject is made aware of its “lack”, which in turn can only be perceived once the subject recognizes the existence of an Other and the dependence on that Other. The Superego constantly ensures we are aware of the distance between what we are and what we would like to be, and scolds us whenever we deviate from our Ideal in the pursuit of pleasure.

Freud’s characterization of the Superego as a paternal figure, ubiquitous throughout our culture, seems to be at odds with Lacan’s concept of jouissance. Why does Lacan claim that the Superego demands that we pursue enjoyment, if it runs contrary to its primary function of prohibiting pleasure? It might appear that Lacan is suggesting that the Superego’s mechanism has evolved historically, that the psychic economy of the human subject has been recalibrated to suit the
postmodern condition. But rather than a faithful “return to Freud,” this would be a revision of Freud’s vision of an ahistorical psyche.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek, the (in)famous “Elvis of cultural theory” and self-professed dogmatic Lacanian, provides an apropos example that reconciles the two thinkers. Zizek contrasts the “classic” totalitarian father with the tolerant and permissive “postmodern” father. The totalitarian father says, “You will have to visit your grandmother whether you like or not. It’s an order!” while the postmodern father says, “You don’t have to visit your grandmother if you don’t like to, because you should only go if you really want to.”

What’s the difference? It’s certainly not a matter of “good” and “bad” parenting. Far from it! The classic and postmodern fathers differ merely in method; their objectives (and often the results) are the same. Whereas the former issues a direct, openly threatening mandate, the latter achieves the same effect through subtlety. “Not only do you have to visit your grandmother,” the postmodern father intimates, “but you have to like it!”

The postmodern father is not the antithesis of the totalitarian father, but rather his reincarnation. Far from being an agent of pleasure, the paternal Superego and its Lacanian injunction to “Enjoy!” drains the pleasurable content from enjoyment.

What is the effect of the Superego’s project to render enjoyment unenjoyable? Think about a time when you were forced to go on a vacation with your family. As you frantically try to keep up with the itinerary in the hope of maximizing the pleasure of the experience, you secretly long for the quiet and uneventful passivity of home. You can’t help but fantasize about lounging on the couch with a good book. Perhaps you become jealous of another vacationer or local, who appears to have achieved the state of relaxation you so desire.

When enjoyment becomes a duty it becomes a burden. To achieve stasis and relief, the subject must share the burden of forced enjoyment; that excess jouissance is displaced to an Other who can enjoy it for us. However, once it has been displaced, it no longer appears as a burden. The fickle subject, seeing an Other who can enjoy what it could not, is caught between the oppression of jouissance and desire for it.

Needless to say, this facilitates and sustains a strange relation with the Other, known in psychoanalysis as ambivalence. On the one hand, the Other is the repository of excess pleasure of which we want to rid ourselves, but on the other hand, we see the Other as usurping pleasure that is rightfully ours. Ambivalence is rendered clear in the “logic of racism,” for the idea of the theft of enjoyment animates much of its discourse: “They are lazy, but they have more fun than we do because they live off our hard work!” Thus, to a subject under the auspices of Superego, the Other is seen as both a necessary and unwanted presence.

Lacan has not revised or embellished the Freudian Superego, he has explained its primary mechanism. The Superego is a force for unreasonable ethical demands, which acts through enjoyment rather than prohibition; we must displace this pleasure or face psychic imbalance, but we become jealous of the Other on whom we displace it. What do we do then? How are we to think about ethical relations if the displacement of excess pleasure to the Other fuels our mutual antagonism?

I suggest that rather than seeing the Other as a reservoir for enjoyment which we cannot enjoy, what we should displace upon the Other is our constitutive lack – the fundamental incompleteness of our being – as a means to coming to terms with our insatiable desire for the Ego-Ideal. This gesture has a precise, technical term in psychoanalysis: it is called love.
Notes


ii Ibid.


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