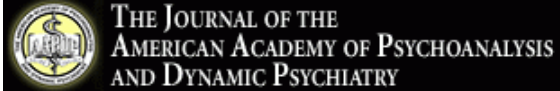


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## The Psychoanalytic Treatment of the Performing Artist: Superego Aspects

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In this article I intend to trace the usual developmental path of the superego and compare it with that of the performing artist in order to highlight the factors responsible for shaping the harsh and rigid superego often found in these individuals. In addition, I intend to point out the effects of such superego on the person's life.

The training of the performing artist is a most demanding one. It is one of the few professions where training starts early in life, that is latency age, and stays with the individual throughout his professional life. Such training requires dedication, discipline, and deprivation. The superego plays a major role in helping the person achieve the goal of becoming a first rate performing artist. It is my opinion that the development of a strong superego is of utmost importance in bringing about the discipline, in maintaining the deprivation and in suppressing the sexual drive in order to devote the required time to perfect the practice of art.

The material for the article is derived from the psychoanalytic treatment of fourteen professional musicians ranging in age from 22 to 33 years. The group included nine female and five male musicians. The instruments played consisted of six woodwind, seven string, and one voice. Therefore, the comments concerning the developmental path of the superego pertain to the musician. However, it is my impression that these findings may very well apply to other professions requiring similar rigorous and prolonged training starting in early latency.

At the beginning and at the end of treatment, each one of the fourteen patients was evaluated and scored according to the adaptive balance

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test developed at Columbia University Psychoanalytic Center for Training and Research by Dr. A. Karush et al. The guilt balance, which measures superego functioning, was used. All patients scored -3 except for two that scored -4. At the end of the treatment all patients scored -2. A description of the -3 score in the guilt balance reads as follows:

The intensity of guilt varies from moderate to intermittently severe. Feelings of dissatisfaction are not only chronic but periodically reach the severity of depressive episodes which impair function although they are not usually incapacitating. In addition to such conscious expressions of unworthiness, repressed feelings of guilt can be inferred from the self devaluation and depreciation of achievements as well as from repetitive self-defeating self-punitive behavior. These patterns pervade most areas of behavior and may be accompanied by extensive inhibition of assertion. Object attachments tend to be characterized by painful submissiveness. Pleasurable pursuits are markedly inhibited. Anticipation of pleasure or success generally evokes so much unconscious guilt and anxiety that pleasure is grossly impaired. Success is often sabotaged but effective functioning is possible in some areas. Other derivatives of repressed guilt may appear as hypochondriacal preoccupations, free floating anxiety, phobic avoidance, although such reactions are not totally incapacitating.

There are two aspects to the superego: the conscience and the ego ideal. Some psychoanalytic writers, such as Jacobson and Sandler, classify the ego ideal separately from the superego and refer to it as the ideal self. It seems to me that failure to attain acceptable ego ideal levels creates guilt and the superego attempts to repair by resorting to punitive measures. In that sense both ego ideal and conscience are closely connected and seem to belong to one functional entity.

The development of the conscience, or the punitive aspects of the superego, starts very early in life. Physiological birth is followed immediately by the psychological birth of the infant. The first four weeks are referred to as the autistic stage. The second four weeks are the narcissistic stage and this is followed by separation and individuation, which is often referred to as the hatching stage. The child goes through the four stages of separation and individuation, brilliantly outlined by Margaret Mahler: (1) the stage of differentiation lasts through the 4th and 6th month of life; (2) the practicing stage starts after the 6th month and lasts through the 16th month; (3) the rapprochement stage covers the 16th through the 36th month of life; (4) object constancy is achieved sometime between the 36th month and the oedipal stage.

Piaget, somewhat more concerned with the development of the knowledge of the existence of objects outside of oneself, described the achievement of object permanence by the 24th month of life. By

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object permanence, Piaget refers to the child's awareness of the existence of an object separate from and independent of himself.

In describing the development of the superego, it should be pointed out that the superego as a structure does not come into being until the resolution of the oedipal conflict. However, the genetic determinants of the superego that go into the formation of its content and characterize the particular person, begin early in life. The mother-child relationship exerts its influence immediately at birth. The child's ego learns to cope with drive discharge in accordance with the environmental influences and values exerted by the mother. These preoedipal regulators are harsh, rigid, and punitive and are experienced by the child as even more powerful than the intensity of his own drives that have all the untamed and violent characteristics of the id. These external controls are attached to objects and part-objects, usually connected with the mothering person, and in time are incorporated to become part of his inner controls.

In his paper in 1924 entitled "The Economic Principle in Masochism," Freud, in discussing the preoedipal roots of the superego stated that, "It—the superego—originated through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the libidinal impulses in the id, i.e., the two parents. Now the superego has retained the essential features of the introjected persons, namely, their power, their severity, their tendency to watch and to punish." These objects and part-objects which are introjected but lacking incorporation seem to exist as foreign objects. Drive regulation is essentially maintained by fear of detection. As identification proceeds and gels, the child goes through the oedipal conflict, the superego is established, and the fear of detection is transformed into the fear of inescapable punishment. Following identification and internalization, there gradually develop and evolve a maturation and mellowing of the superego. To accomplish this task, the child has to be able to develop distancing and the ability to test the external objects. The second separation-individuation process that commences in early adolescence becomes one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence concerned with the formation of the superego. In this connection, Freud, in the same paper on masochism, wrote: "The course of childhood development leads to an ever increasing detachment from the parents and their personal significance for the superego recedes into the background. The imagos they leave behind are then linked to the influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes whose figures need no longer be introjected by an ego which has become more resistant."

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Concomitant with the start of the second separation-individuation phase, the stage of formal thinking sets in. According to Piaget, concrete thinking develops in latency. The stage of formal thinking begins in early adolescence and it is at this point that abstract thinking makes its appearance. With the ability of abstract concept formation, thinking takes on a whole new dimension. This is the stage wherein the mental apparatus organizes multiple variables and relates them to one another. It is as if the person has discovered a new structure capable of doing different things. The awareness that possibility may be more important than actuality occurs. One sees the developing capacity to think of hypotheses, of truth and beauty, of values, of being and nothingness. With the emergence of this capacity, there develops the attachment of different values to part-objects and the introjection of these part-objects together with attached values. Thus we see a process of incorporating, adding, shaping and creating an ego ideal that is a composite picture and is unique to the individual.

It is my contention that the superego of the professional musician has two hurdles to overcome during its development. The first hurdle is the structuring of an internalized conscience. The second hurdle is the establishment of a unique ego ideal.

Let me now sketch the developmental profile of the professional musician and illustrate it with a clinical case. This profile is a composite picture derived at through the study of the fourteen patients mentioned.

For various reasons, one of the children is selected as the talented one within the family. This selection is usually made by the mother, who intuitively identifies the talented child. Once the child is labeled, his life becomes dominated by the constant presence of at least two adults. A great deal of attention is focused on the development of his talent. The finances of the family are allocated in such a manner as to meet his training needs first. Usually intense training begins sometime between the ages of 5 and 8. Every sacrifice is made toward that end. All available time, effort, and money is allocated to his development. Often the family moves from one part of the country to another in order for him to take lessons from an outstanding teacher. The presence of the hovering mother makes separation difficult. The adolescent period is marked by the continued presence of the parent with the addition of a highly respected teacher who also becomes a constant in his life. Sexual interest is actively inhibited. Romantic involvement is almost nonexistent because of lack of opportunity as well as overt and covert discouragement. The adolescent years are characterized by limited contact with peers as well as with other adults. Even though the person comes in contact with other

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teachers, the dominant adult remains the music teacher. Often there is a change of music teachers at midadolescence and perhaps again in early adulthood.

To illustrate these points, I would like to present the following clinical case.

Ms. V. is a 29-year-old musician, who started treatment because of difficulties with her boyfriend and because of an underlying dysphoria that influenced her performance adversely. She complained of feeling low and having no desire to practice.

The patient was born in a large city on the northeastern coast of the United States. She is the older of two daughters and her parents are first-generation Americans, children of Polish immigrants. V.'s mother is a school teacher who is ambitious and chronically dissatisfied. The mother felt she had married below her status to a man whom she considered a nobody, and could not provide her with enough money to enable her to pursue the development of her own talents. She felt forced to teach in a high school to provide for the household needs. V.'s father is a gentle, caring person who views himself as a failure. He had tried his hand at several businesses and had failed at all of them. V. loves her father with a love that is heavily accented with pity and dominated by a desire to "fix" what is wrong with her father so that everything will be alright. Early in life V. was identified by the mother as being very much like herself, i.e., bright and talented. V. became

her mother's confidante. Her earliest memory, dating to the age of four, consists of her mother coming into her room at night to tuck her in and spending hours with her crying and complaining about V.'s father.

Musical training started at the age of seven. She was considered to be very talented and her mother totally immersed herself in the development of V.'s talent, identifying with V. The mother saw in V. the fulfillment of her own wishes and hopes for herself. There would be many nights spent together, daydreaming and planning V.'s success and their future together. At the age of twelve, V. was advised to seek another teacher. After careful and painstaking research, the best teacher was found in New York City. A big portion of the family income was allotted to this venture so V. and her mother could travel to New York City once weekly. V. had virtually no friends. All her time was consumed by school work, music, and travel. The only outsider in her life was her teacher, whom everyone worshipped. V. developed an intense attachment to him. He became her love object as well as her ego ideal. He was an achiever and so was she. Rewards were directly connected to achievement and failure was equated with his abandonment.

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V. would not allow herself even the most mundane pleasure without having completed the required hours of practice.

At the age of 18, V. moved to New York City to attend music college. The move away from her mother was a very significant one for both mother and daughter. The telephone lines were substituted for the umbilical cord and the bills were astronomical. V.'s relationship with her teacher became even more intense. They would gossip about different teachers and students. At the age of twenty, she got involved with a fellow music student and started living with him. The relationship was a difficult one from the very beginning. She could not give emotionally to the relationship or to him. Her drive to achieve and her belief that with achievement everything would come to her was so strong that she neglected him, even though she wanted to keep him. They stayed together for four years. It was towards the end of the fourth year that she sought treatment.

In discussing the treatment of V., I will try to limit my remarks to issues relevant to the superego.

From the very beginning of her analysis, V. was an excellent student and not a patient. She cooperated fully and willingly. She was on time, remembered her dreams, reported them faithfully, and even paid her bills on time. In short, it was almost impossible to find anything wrong in this perfect student-teacher relationship that she structured. She cast me in the role of a teacher and started asking for instructions and guidelines. It was then that we started having difficulties. She complained bitterly that she did not know what I wanted, therefore, how could I expect her to do a good job. Her next move was to read instructions in my comments. For example: during one of her sessions, she discussed at length her difficulty in spending money for clothing that is not necessary, meaning that it was not required for a recital. I commented on her difficulty in indulging in pleasure without getting permission from authority. At the next session, she started by saying, "When I was going home from our last session, I said to myself, 'V. see what Dr. B. is telling you. He is telling you to go and buy that dress.'"

As her analysis progressed, two other issues related to superego functioning arose. She told me that she talked to herself and addressed herself by her first name in a rather strict tone of voice and chastised herself, that this habit was especially prominent when she was practicing. Then somewhat sheepishly, she admitted that practicing was an extremely difficult task. She enjoyed playing but not practicing, which was of utmost importance in retaining her professional standing.

I probed her resistance to practicing. It was as if I touched a very sensitive wound. She blurted out angrily, "Everybody wants me to

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do things. They want me to practice every day. My mother wants me to go home every weekend. You want me to come here three times a week. Why doesn't everyone leave me alone?" Although V. had gone to great lengths in selecting me as her analyst and she herself was paying the bills, she had instituted a twist. I had become the one who was making a demand on her. It was no longer her wish. Her analysis was no longer something that she wanted, but it had become something that she was doing for me. One could sense a struggle between herself and a demanding part within her, somewhat separate from her, which she labeled as "they." It was as if one part of her superego had stayed apart and had not been fully integrated.

A good portion of the work for the next eight months was devoted to obtaining a grasp of who the "they" were, what the emotional meaning of this was, and how she used it in her daily life. V. would undertake an activity on her own. Within a short period of time, she would start experiencing it as a demand as if it were required by another. That particular activity, though initially pleasurable, would be experienced as a chore. It was as if V. could not do anything for herself. The presence of another person was a dominant factor which stayed within her as a foreign object. V. viewed the activity as something that was demanded of her. There seemed to be a lack of integration of the introjected object into her superego with a resultant poor development in her self-rewarding system. Her values remained attached to objects which were in a sense outside of herself and were thus experienced by her as "they."

Six months into her analysis, her boyfriend left her. He had raised the question as to what would happen if she were to get a job in California. She was shocked that success did not mean the realization of all her wishes. Her whole belief system was shaken. She became angry with him but continued her auditions and maintained her beliefs. She associated his wanting to leave with being turned down at an important audition. She was certain in a visceral "gut feeling" way that failing the audition was what had made him leave her. For V. the connection between her poor performance and the loss of his love was so clear that it left no doubt in her mind that the breakup was her fault. She was no good. She referred to him as the brightest, the most talented, and the most sought after person. His loss resulted in intense grief, bordering on depression. Her difficulty in practicing took on an additional quality, a feeling of "What's the use? There is no one to appreciate it."

About eight months later, she auditioned for a first chair position in a major symphonic orchestra. Her teacher was one of the members of the jury. She did well and the decision was between herself and

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another musician. For internal political reasons, of which she was aware, her teacher apparently did not support her and the other person got the position. She became markedly depressed and furious with him. In her ruminations she would relapse into fantasies that she should have "soared high above everyone else" and then he could not but love her.

At this point in her analysis, a major change in her superego structure came about, which she tested out within the transference setting. She brought up her feelings for me and talked about the constancy of my caring for her and her growing awareness of it. Despite her failures, i.e., her boyfriend leaving her and her failing the audition, I continued to care and continued to "put up" with her. She described her sessions with me as being for herself and that achievement was something she was doing for herself. She started talking of feeling warm and comfortable and described it as a relaxation of muscle tone.

At a later session, she was describing a disappointment with a date she had. She was asked out to dinner by a well-known musician, a star. She was very happy and was looking forward to it. The night before the date, she was performing and noticed him in the audience. After the performance she received a note from him canceling the date. Her immediate association was "He heard me play. I did not do well, therefore, he does not want to see me." She related this incident to me, paused and then said: "I did well. There is ample evidence for that" and then proceeded to reevaluate the situation.

## Discussion

The superego plays a major role in the training of the performing artist. It helps in the development of the person's talent and in the process extracts a heavy toll from the emotional life of the individual. Both aspects of the superego, i.e., the conscience as well as the ego ideal suffer in their development. It is my contention that the progression of one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence, namely, the second separation-individuation phase, is impaired in the artist. V.'s history gives a clear example of this. V. maintained a very harsh, rigid, and punitive superego. Any transgression of the set limits was severely punished. In her latency and early adolescence, V. was constantly surrounded by her mother and teacher. Consequently, the distancing necessary to achieve introjection and integration of her parental imagos into her conscience was not possible for her. The punitive, chastising part of her superego maintained its separateness and stayed as if external to her. The maladaptive aspects of such

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developments are illustrated in V.'s handling of pleasure. V. began by seeking pleasure, by starting to do something that was for her and in her own interests. After a while a change is introduced. She starts to view the activity as something that is being forced upon her. Something that the other person is demanding. As a result the activity loses its pleasurable component and assumes all the characteristics of a chore. V. demonstrated doing just that in her analysis, with her music lessons, her practice, her shopping for dresses, and her tennis lessons. Fortunately she was able to eroticize her instrument and emote, thus taking pleasure by playing. Such erotization helped her musicianship. Her difficulties in practicing were more than compensated for by her playing the instrument for fun. She would play for hours and derive intense pleasure from her instrument and the musical achievement. She described her experience as all encompassing and exhausting. On the other hand, her sexual life was very inhibited and she was anorgasmic. Pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, produced intense guilt. V. was extremely awkward in social settings, blushed easily and felt paralyzed. The only pleasure she could allow herself was the one experienced as a reward for achievement.

V.'s ego ideal was limited in its scope to the few people she admired, i.e., her music teachers. V. had no opportunity to explore, to find and assimilate values attached to objects different from her mother and teacher. With the beginning of abstract thinking in early adolescence values come into the life of the person. Different values are explored in relation to different objects in one's life. Specific values are attached to objects that one comes into contact with. These part-object introjects are very important in the synthesis of the ego ideal. V.'s major value system revolved around musical achievement which would lead directly to acquiring love, care and self-esteem. In short she had a poorly developed self-rewarding system. The only thing that would merit or be rewarded was musical achievement. Failure on the other hand could have catastrophic effects.

## Summary

This article highlights the crucial role of the superego in the development of the professional musician. The developmental path of the superego is outlined, given the nature of the training and the restrictions put on the emotional life of the person.

There are two major areas of concern. The first has to do with the persistence of a severe, rigid, and punitive conscience. It is postulated that this difficulty centers around the second separation-individuation

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phase of adolescence. The possible causes for this developmental lag are discussed. The second has to do with the ego ideal. The ego ideal is limited to and patterned after the two significant adults in the lives of such individuals. It suffers in growth and scope because of

the lack of value systems incorporated from different significant adults. The self-rewarding system is constricted and limited to achievement. The possible genetic factors as well as the effect of such development on the life of the person have been discussed. Finally these points are illustrated by presenting the case of Ms. V.

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