DEFENSES AND MORALITY:
Adam Smith, Sigmund Freud, and Contemporary Psychoanalysis

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In this paper we follow the development and transmission of moral learning from Adam Smith’s impartial spectator to Sigmund Freud’s superego and then to contemporary psychoanalysis. We argue that defenses are an integral component in the acquisition of any moral system. Elaborating on this argument, we assert that there is a progression from defensive systems that are “closed” to defensive systems that are “open,” as defined in a recent work by Novick and Novick. The former system is “static, avoids reality, and is characterized by power dynamics, sadomasochism, and omnipotent defense.” The latter, on the other hand, is a system that allows for “joy, creativity, spontaneity, love and it is attuned to reality.” Furthermore, while Smith and Freud’s systems are more one-person systems of defense, contemporary psychoanalysis has moved to more of a two-person system.

In this paper we analyze the development of a through line from the work of Adam Smith (1759) in his Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS) on the impartial spectator and morality, through Sigmund Freud’s work on the internalization of morality through the superego. This research revealed that defenses are an integral part of the acquisition and implementation of a moral system. We continue the analysis by following the development of morality in contemporary psychoanalysis, and the implications of this pro-

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gression. This examination brought to light the significant differences between open and closed systems of defenses (Novick & Novick, 2013). In particular we argue that Smith’s system of morality and defenses was a closed system. By a closed system we mean a system that “avoids reality and is characterized by power dynamics, sadomasochism, omnipotent defenses, and stasis” (Novick & Novick, 2013, p. 191). The opposite of the closed system is an open one, “attuned to reality and characterized by joy, love, competence and creativity. Adaptive self-regulation and self-protection stem from these factors” (Novick & Novick, 2013, p. 191). We continue the argument by showing that Freud makes significant progress toward an open system, and it is fully accounted for in the two-person system of contemporary psychoanalysis.

A premise that is essential to any discussion of the imposition of morality is that defenses are an integral part in the internalization of a moral structure, and one’s conscious relationship to those defenses ultimately plays a very important role in continuing moral and individual development. Indeed, that relationship seems to determine whether or not moral development can occur at all.

We argue that that Smith’s work in the mid-eighteenth century was a predecessor to Freud’s work in the early twentieth century. Their work in remarkably different ways shows that both Smith and Freud relied on defenses to develop their moral structures. We discuss the similarities and differences between Smith and Freud’s approaches. We then take account of a how the move from a one-person perspective to a two-person perspective on defenses and moral development has been articulated in the more contemporary psychoanalytic literature. We include a discussion of the evolving attitudes toward defenses as the development of psychoanalytic theory has moved forward, making strides in humanizing the more sadistic qualities (Freud, 1923) of the super-ego’s implementation of morality (Barnett, 2007), which are highlighted by the differences between more “open” and “closed” (Novick & Novick, 2013) defense systems.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the second section we discuss morality and the impartial spectator in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). The third section ad-
addresses Freud’s superego concept and morality. A comparison of the impartial spectator and the superego is provided in the fourth section. Next, we provide an overview of defenses in Smith’s TMS and in Freud’s works. The following section contains a discussion of superego, morality and defenses in contemporary psychoanalysis. The final section is a discussion.

MORALITY AND THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR IN ADAM SMITH

Morality

Adam Smith’s work begins with his foundational understanding about human interaction that he calls sympathy, upon which his moral system is based. According to Smith (1759), sympathy is “our fellow feeling with any passion whatever” (p.13). Sympathy is considered to be one of the principles of human nature. In Smith’s analysis this interest, or “sympathy,” is the process that allows us to build morality. In the sympathetic process, the spectator puts himself or herself in the actor’s situation and forms an idea of how the actor is affected in a given situation. Throughout the TMS this dynamic interaction between spectator and agent is used to illustrate the development of Smith’s moral structure.

Because we don’t have any immediate experience of what others feel, Smith says we put ourselves in the other’s situation through imagination. Smith emphasizes that one enters into another person’s situation rather than entering into another person’s feelings. This demands a measure of understanding, introduces an element of objectivity, and allows explanation of cases where “the spectator sympathizes with the actor even though the actor does not feel the emotions that the spectator thinks he does” (Griswold, 1999, pp. 88-89). The two spectacular examples provided for this by Smith are that we might sympathize with the dead or an insane person, even though such persons are not capable of feeling what the spectator does.

Fellow feeling, or sympathy, is closely linked to approval and disapproval, according to Smith. Approval and disapproval form the foundational basis for our sense of morality. Since we find
pleasure in such fellow feeling and its lack brings pain, that approval and disapproval are important sources of motivation. However, we can disapprove even if we sympathize. Thus Smith does not give a sympathetic view of all passions because we approve of other people’s sentiments to the extent we go along with them. Sympathy and approval are not the same thing. According to Griswold (2006), the possibility of ethical evaluation would not be possible if sympathy and approval were the same. It is also argued that the approval that the imaginative identification constitutes is only partial, which allows disapproval (Sugden, 2002).

The experience of two people feeling for each other’s experience is “mutual sympathy.” The correspondence of sentiments through mutual sympathy is another source of satisfaction. We are pleased even when we are able to feel sympathy for painful feelings of others. Mutual sympathy that brings pleasure is a foundational element of Smith’s moral structure.

In Smith’s understanding, the actor is continuously interacting with the spectator, putting himself or herself in the spectator’s perspective. The actor feels a relief when his or her own sentiments and the spectator’s are in concordance. This often leads the actor to lower the pitch of his or her emotions.

The power of the individual is replaced by the power of community through this dynamic of seeking harmony between the actor’s and spectator’s emotions. Smith reasons that this kind of interaction is facilitated by mutual sympathy. Mutual sympathy, thus, is the source of the actor’s and the spectator’s search for harmony. The actor works hard to gain the approval of the spectator because of the pleasure of gaining approval. At the same time, the actor desires to avoid the pain of solitude that would come from disapproval. Due to his or her longing for the pleasure of sympathy, the spectator in turn works hard to approve the actor. Furthermore, because the actor’s emotions are related to a real situation and the spectator’s emotions are imaginary, the actor works harder in this process. According to Smith it is Nature that teaches spectators and actors to reach harmony. This harmonious world is the moral world.
The Impartial Spectator

As indicated earlier, spectatorship is an essential component of Smith’s moral structure. For Smith, the spectator judges the propriety or impropriety of an action that is suitable or unsuitable to the cause that has led to the agent’s action. “The spectators in question are normal fellow members of society” (Raphael, 2007, p. 16). Smith uses phrases such as “we,” or “everybody,” “every impartial spectator,” and “every human heart” when he speaks of spectatorship. The implication here is that ultimately we all carry spectatorship for each other.

Smith goes to great and detailed lengths to explicate the interactions of the spectator and actor. It is when he theorizes about the spectator’s effects on the agent that Smith begins to stress impartiality, and he makes clear value judgments about what are the “amiable and respectable virtues” (p. 29) that those judgments should be based upon. In particular he singles out the virtues of humanity and self-command, which together constitute the perfect human nature. Finally, it is on the basis of these “amiable and respectable virtues” that Smith structures the impartiality of the impartial spectator who judges the rightness or wrongness of character.

Imagination is crucial in Smith’s account of the impartial spectator. The impartial spectator is the creation of the agent’s imagination (e.g., see Broadie, 2006; Griswold, 2006; Raphael, 2007). Smith (1759) tells us the importance of social interactions in forming a view of ourselves:

> Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, with any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, than of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. . . . Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. (p. 129)

This quotation again highlights the importance of real spectators in forming the imagination about the impartial spectator. Conscience then is a social product. “The impartial spectator has normative force in part because it defines the moral point of view al-
ready latent in ordinary life. . . . Differently put, the impartial spectator is constitutive of the moral outlook” (Griswold, 2006, p. 39).

As noted by Raphael (2007), the actual spectators may judge differently than the impartial spectator. Conscience for Smith is not purely a reflection of social attitudes. Conscience sometimes goes against popular opinion. In a letter written to Sir Gilbert Elliot on October 10, 1759, Smith states, “You will observe that it is intended both to confirm my Doctrine that our judgments concerning our own conduct have always reference to the sentiments of some other being, and to shew that, notwithstanding this, real magnanimity and conscious virtue can support itself under the disapprobation of all mankind” (quoted in Raphael, 2007, p. 37).

Smith (1759) believed that conscience is initially a consequence of social approval and disapproval. At the same time he retained the view that the voice of God is superior to popular opinion:

The all-wise Author of Nature has . . . taught man to respect the sentiments and judgments of his brethren. . . . He has made man . . . the immediate judge of mankind; and has, in this respect, as in many others, created him after his own image, and appointed him his vice-gerent upon earth, to superintend the behaviour of his brethren. (p. 149)

FREUD’S SUPEREGO CONCEPT AND MORALITY

We should note that Freud was familiar with Adam Smith’s work, as he indicated in a letter he wrote to Silberstein in August 1879; he states, “I have some marvelous books to read . . . a great philosopher and wit, Adam Smith’s fundamental book on the wealth of nations . . .” (p. 174). We do not know if Freud read the Theory of Moral Sentiments, where the concept of the impartial spectator is developed; however, given that he read Smith’s later work on economics, it would not be surprising if he indeed had read Smith’s previous landmark work. Before we turn to a comparison between the concepts of the impartial spectator and the superego, we will present the most salient aspects of Freud’s superego and its development that are relevant for our undertaking.
Freud’s (1923) term superego was first used in the *Ego and the Id*, and came out of his sometimes-confusing conceptualizations on the topic in his earlier writings. The superego, according to the structural theory, has three interrelated functions: self-observation, the ego ideal, and conscience. Let us, however, first start with the development of his ideas on these themes, briefly summarizing the articles in a chronological order.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1913) discusses morality that is imposed by society. For example, he described the horror of incest. He also states that religion and morality find their genesis with the Oedipus complex. In this early description, morality is ascribed to social forces that can be learned, and not from internal developmental processes.

In “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud (1914) introduces the concept of “ego ideal” and the self-observing agency related to it. In this depiction he describes a mental agency that critically observes the mind by standing separate from it. He further endows this agency with the ability to both stand separately and hold the ideals and standards set by the parents. This is his earliest mention of an internal observing moral agency that forms the basis of what was ultimately described as the superego.

In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1917) goes on to expand his conceptualization of this critical agency stating that “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and as it were, takes it as its object. . . . What we are here becoming acquainted with is the agency commonly called ‘conscience’; we shall count it, along with the censorship of consciousness and reality-testing, among the major institutions of the ego” (p. 247).

Freud (1921, pp. 109–110) further expands and elaborates this line of thought in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, where he speaks of ego being divided into two parts. He states that one part comprises the conscious, which takes up a critical attitude towardsthe ego. The other agency, which he calls the “ego ideal,” functions to self-observe and constitutes moral conscience.

These writings lead up to what he ultimately described as the “superego” in his work “The Ego and the Id” (Freud, 1923). There
he refers to superego by stating that it “may be called the “ego ideal” or “super-ego” (p. 28). This articulates that the Oedipus complex has a special significance in the formation of superego. It was in this work that his well-known expression was first used: “The ego ideal is therefore the heir of the Oedipus complex” (p. 36). In this article he sees that behind the ego ideal lies an individual’s first identification, “his identification with the father in his own personal prehistory” (p. 31).

In reviewing this sequence of development, Freud (1923) indicates that he considers the origin of the superego to be based on biological as well as historical factors. Specifically, he cites the “lengthy duration in man of his childhood helplessness and dependence . . . and the diphasic onset of man’s sexual life” (p. 35) as being major contributing factors in the strong establishment of the superego within the personality. He views conflicts between the ego and the ideal ultimately as being due to the contrast between the internal and external world. He then elaborates, “The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal” (Freud, 1923, p. 37).

In “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” Freud (1926) defines inhibition as a restriction, or a loss of an ego function. The inhibiting agency is either the superego or the ego. He states that the loss of the superego’s love threatens the ego, which may result in a sense of guilt and consequent self-punishment. He says ego can be distinguished from superego when there is a tension between them.

Some reflections on the nature of culture are introduced in “The Future of an Illusion” (Freud, 1927). He gives an account of what he later refers to as “the cultural superego.” According to him, development of civilization and human survival depend upon the abandonment of primitive instinctual wishes such as incest and cannibalism. In his description, the cultural superego helps enforce the rules of civilized behavior as well as being a coercive agency.

Freud (1930) discusses the superego at some length in Civilization and its Discontents. The main theme here is “the irremedia-
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ble antagonism” between the restrictions imposed upon “civilized” man and instinctual demands. He attributes a positive role to guilt in the growth of civilization. He also suggests that when the external authority is internalized we can speak of conscience and a conscious sense of guilt.

He views that the sense of guilt is produced by civilization. It is the most important problem of development. Humanity pays a price for the increased sense of guilt upon which the advance of civilization and increased consciousness depend. He clarifies the concepts of conscience and guilt by stating that the superego is a critical agency and the conscience is a function of that agency. Freud also considers the role of superego on the cultural development of a community. The cultural superego advances strict demands, as in the individual case. If disobeyed it sets off fear of conscience. An important demand here is ethics, which concerns the relationships among people.

Here Freud (1930) elaborates by arguing that a person’s instinctual aggressiveness is interjected, internalized, and directed toward his or her own ego. “There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as superego, and which now, in the form of ‘conscience’, is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals” (p. 123).

Indeed, in the New Introductory Lectures, Freud (1933) distinguishes a special agency in the ego he calls “conscience,” and he suggests that this agency should be kept independent. He continues: “. . . to suppose that conscience is one its functions and that self-observation, which is an essential preliminary to the judging activity of conscience, is another of them. And since when we recognize that something has a separate existence we give it a name of its own, from this time forward I will describe this agency in the ego as ‘super-ego’” (p. 60). He also distinguishes the superego from ego ideal. The former is the “vehicle” of the ideal that the ego measures itself against to strive toward perfection. Superego, on the other hand, is the enforcement agency.

Freud (1933) turns to “the higher side of human life” (p. 67). He notes that the superego is the source of all moral restric-
tions, striving for perfection. Parents and other authorities are crucial in its formation. He also notes that the superego helps in understanding social behavior, in that past values and traditions live on as the superego’s moral contents or “ideologies.”

In “An Outline of Psycho-analysis,” Freud (1938) further emphasizes that the long period of childhood and dependence on parents leads to prolonged parental influence on both the moral content and its enforcement. He once again calls the special agency that results from such a prolonged period of parental influence the superego. He continues to emphasize that those who substitute for parents, such as teachers and models in public life of admired social figures, become important in both moral content and the development of superego as the enforcing agent.

A COMPARISON OF THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AND THE SUPERECHO

Adam Smith did not develop a psychological theory of the depth of Freud’s work on the unconscious, or explicate the sexual drive. He also did not have the advantage of many years of clinical observation to understand the many implications of the internalization of parental, cultural, and larger collective influences, or the implications of transference and projection that can be intertwined with superego processes. That being said, several authors have pointed out certain foundational similarities between their two positions. We will review a few of these comparisons made by others and then draw some specific comparisons and contrasts of our own between these two seminal thinkers.

Raphael (2007) further states that Smith’s theory, particularly as it relates to the impartial spectator, bears a resemblance to Freud’s account of the superego. He comments, “This is similar to Smith’s view in taking conscience to be a second self built up in the mind as a reflection of the attitudes of outside persons” (p. 48).

The similarity of the two views is also highlighted in Brissenden (1969), who points out that even though Adam Smith did not have a concept of the unconscious or the primacy of the sexual drive, the sense of self in Adam Smith evolves out of the “dynamic
relationship between the instinctual drives of the individual and the moral attitudes of the society in which he finds himself, even though he sees this as a consciously directed process, as a process of learning the habit of ‘self-command’” (p. 949). As such, Brissenden indicates, Adam Smith anticipates Freud. Brissenden also sees the dynamic account of the impartial spectator that becomes incorporated in the agent’s developing personality as the basis for “the man within the breast,” as Smith refers to it. “This dynamic account of the origins of social conscience has a great deal in common with Freud’s notion of the development of super-ego” (p. 950).

Another similarity between Adam Smith and Freud is that Smith had an awareness of guilt, “and this awareness of guilt is related, to use the Freudian terminology, to “the tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego”” (Brissenden, 1969, p. 951). Brissenden (1969) also notes:

Freud sees in the formation of the super-ego and explanation of why moral attitudes customarily carry a religious sanction: of why man finds it necessary to invent a God to believe in. Adam Smith sees both an explanation of the origins of religious belief and a justification of its validity. In fact he argues that it is because the general rules of morality have a demonstrable influence and authority “that they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity.” (p. 950)

For Smith, moral laws are derived inductively from experience, and represent the will of Deity and we are obliged to obey them.

Smith and Freud each evolved their own perspectives about the nature of human interactions. There were some fundamental similarities that would allow us to consider that Smith’s work on the impartial spectator was a precursor to Freud’s development of the superego. It can be argued that while they held different perspectives, they are in fundamental agreement about the contents that went into their respective conceptualizations.

For instance, in the TMS Smith saw the impartial spectator as the arbitrator of cultural norms, which are taught within the family, and recognized that these values ultimately become internalized in the individual. Freud (1923) cited similar contents of culture that are translated through the family as the basis of the
superego. Further, they both emphasized the civilizing role of the culture that comes through others in the broader culture, which has the potential transform the otherwise adverse individual into one of its proponents. However, they would not agree on the origin of these cultural norms. As noted by Brissenden (1969), Smith sees the origin of these values as coming from God; we are his “vice-regents” and it as our moral duty to convey his will. Freud, on the other hand, took a much more pragmatic view of this matter, in that he saw cultural values and norms as a practical agreement that evolved through the development of civilization to keep us from doing great harm to one another. That being said, Smith and Freud had some common agreement about the sometimes overwhelming power of these internalized cultural and familial forces within people’s lives. Freud recognized the tremendous influence that the internalization of superego values had on an individual, and how this force within one’s life was often the impetus for humans to speculate and even postulate that these demands must come from a God, but not the other way around, as Smith proposed.

Smith proposed in the TMS a well-articulated understanding of human instinctual forces and their influence on human behavior. Smith’s understanding of the instincts is nowhere near the scope and elegance that Freud elaborately articulated over his many volumes, based on his understanding of the unconscious dynamics of instinctual forces within the personality; however, at base, both men agreed on their foundational importance. Further, both Smith and Freud recognized that the instincts were the basis of human action. Finally, they would have generally agreed that having any kind of a moral structure was a significant accomplishment in the face of instinctual drives, and because of the potential destructive quality of raw instinctual drives, such a moral structure was very important.

A major difference between Freud and Smith is that Smith did not have the benefit of Freud’s more secular and pragmatic view of the human condition. This led Freud to voice a more accepting and compassionate attitude toward the human struggle. He recognized that civilization had evolved consensual moral structures that were pragmatically necessary for social order, and
that these structures, which he came to conceptualize as the contents of the superego, were in conflict with the fundamental instinctual drives. He therefore had compassion for the struggle between moral demands and instincts because he recognized that no one was going to be in complete harmony with them. Freud’s more compassionate attitude makes room for an open understanding and acceptance of the need for defenses to deal with the guilt that people experience in falling short of superego demands. For instance, the need to rationalize one’s inability to live up to an ideal under difficult life circumstances is essential in the face of difficult if not impossible human struggles. On the other hand, Smith, because he believed that the dictates of the impartial spectator were ultimately the will of God, was left with what can be termed a more traditional religious struggle, in that if one were not to follow the moral prescriptions of the impartial spectator, this was analogous to disobeying God. Aside from his writings about mutual sympathy, compassion for moral shortcomings in the face of a deity is conspicuously absent from Smith’s work. This can be extremely onerous for the subject of such guilt. Various religious structures have different ways of dealing with such shortcomings; however, these are not a part of Smith’s conceptualization.

A second related and significant difference between Smith and Freud is that Smith did not have the benefit of Freud’s elaborate understanding of the unconscious. This difference makes itself clear in the application of moral structure to a person’s life. Smith saw the application of moral behavior as an act of “self-command”—you are either doing it properly or you are not. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the failure of self-command at a moral level was tantamount to disobeying a moral structure with the authority of a God. Freud, on the other hand, because of his understanding that moral structure was being imposed through the agency of the superego on one’s instinctual nature, recognized that defenses would be necessary to justify the need for morality to our consciousness or ego, as well as defenses that would allow us to rationalize and justify our inability to live up to those moral/superego demands. Indeed, Freud’s conscious inclusion of defenses makes for a different attitude toward one’s limitations.
in coming to terms with superego demands. Rather than seeing our limitations as failures in the face of some absolute authority, Freud saw the need for compassion, due to the fact that we struggle to come to terms with the ideals that are included in the superego. No doubt Freud’s practical work with patients led to his deep respect for the power of the superego within the individual, and the need to “soften” the more “sadistic” impact (Freud, 1923).

DEFENSES IN SMITH’S THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS AND IN FREUD

Smith

In this section we give some examples and discuss the defensive attitudes that are essential to develop the moral structure integral to Smith’s system (for a more thorough analysis of defenses in the TMS, see Özler & Gabrinetti, 2014).

Smith clearly acknowledged human emotions and their power to influence behavior. He went on to judge the “bodily passions,” such as sex and hunger, as being beneath one’s dignity when it came to expression. He saw “self-command” as the skill that a person needed to develop to come to terms with these “passions.” Although he does not name it as such, Smith through the use of “self-command” advocates for the repression of instinctual desire. He makes the point in several areas that “self-command” is threatened by unbridled passion, and often backs this up by pointing out that the nonexpression of these passions is pleasing to the impartial spectator “in almost every occasion.” Smith uses moralization and compartmentalization to rationalize the morality that he advocates.

Smith uses splitting as a defense maneuver when he talks about our senses not being informed when “our brother is on the rack.” Sympathy is presented as an intellectual analysis of the situation, since the emotional experience is split off. Smith rationalizes the repression of emotions as being very important to preserve social order. He explains that in order to gain the sympathy of the impartial spectator, the actor has to bring his or her emo-
tions down to a level that the impartial spectator can go along with. There is a bias of reason over emotion, which is accomplished by the splitting of thought or reason from affect, and the repression of affect.

Smith’s moral system has a hierarchy of values for which reward and punishment are deemed appropriate and rationalized. Smith affirms that we are prompted to punish when we feel resentment and prompted to reward when we feel gratitude. We are instrumental in rewarding and punishing. Consensual morality then gets practiced in the dominant culture and is reinforced by the active use of merit and demerit or rewards and punishments.

His system has a linear and rational standpoint and is achieved by the use of a complex series of rationalizations. These rationalizations are supported by deference to the wishes of a deity. In places it appears that Smith has made a grandiose identification with the deity in order to complete this task. Ultimately, the instincts are subdued, and they are put in the control of his rational morality under the authority of God.

An important part of this moral system is kindness. Smith (1759) declares that “kindness is the parent of kindness” (p. 265) and asserts that Nature has formed men for mutual kindness. This virtue comes from a universal benevolence that knows no bounds and is interwoven with a Divine Creator. “The idea of that divine Being whose benevolence and wisdom have from all eternity contrived and conducted the immense machine of the universe so as at all times to produce the greatest possible quality of happiness is certainly of all the objects of human contemplation by far the most sublime” (p. 278). This perfectionistic ideal in Smith’s hierarchy is supported by his reference to deity. It is a fundamental defensive position in his moral structure.

Virtue is skillfully and intellectually incorporated into his system. Smith moralizes the hierarchy of virtuous acts and then rationalizes the hierarchy by his appeal to a deity. For example, kindness is a valued expression of feeling and emotion, while anger and pain are not. Also, “self-command” is an important structural component of virtue. As used by Smith, it dictates the most obsessive compartmentalizing of human interactions and impulse. As a result of this view, spontaneous and intuitive human
actions are also put in a devalued position. In addition, individual feeling states are devalued in favor of consensually approved attitudes and actions.

In viewing Smith’s theory from the viewpoint of the work of Kohlberg (1976) on moral development, we note that Smith’s conceptual organization of moral development does not include levels of understanding that include the larger conceptual frame of social order, and does not include moving on to a more autonomous or principled moral behavior involving a “social-contract and universal-ethical principles” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 55). These levels of moral development involve a greater awareness of larger and more relative levels of social interaction. Smith’s conceptualization of moral development seems to fall within Kohlberg’s conventional level of moral development, at stage three, where “good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 55). Smith’s moral structure would not include the kind of self-reflection that would allow for the acknowledgment of personal shortcomings and the recognition of the defensive attitudes that would allow for self-acceptance.

Given that Smith’s moral development does not include reflection upon defensive adaptive behavior, this leads us to consider what level of defensiveness is generally operating in his system. While we have included numerous defensive positions used by Smith (1759), it is clear that his general system of morality is governed by the “approbation” of the impartial spectator. This general attitude falls into what Cramer (2006) refers to as the primary defense of denial. This particular way of using denial involves the construction of a personal fantasy, or in this case an idealized structure that is put in place of reality: “The individual’s involvement in this fantasy rivals the perception of reality and replaces it in significant portions of her experience. These fantasies may also be imposed on reality with an insistence that other people agree with the fantasy and ignore reality” (Cramer, 2006, p. 45).

The examples of defenses provided here are necessary to show how Smith built his moral structure. This defensive system necessarily excludes certain life experience and eliminates cer-
tain aspects of human involvement. Individual uniqueness and its development seem to fall outside of his moral structure. Smith’s defense system is a “closed” defense system, instead of an “open” defense system (using Novick & Novick’s [2013] terminology). This is a significant distinction. He constructs an elaborate moral structure that relies on the consent of the “impartial spectator”; however, it is closed to examining the defenses that would allow for individual and unique experience. It necessarily eliminates realities that fall outside of its structure and confines the individual to a limited scope within that structure. Novick and Novick state the contrast well: “One system, the open system, is attuned to reality and characterized by joy, love, competence and creativity. Adaptive self-regulation and self-protection stem from these factors. The other, the closed system, avoids reality and is characterized by power dynamics, sadomasochism, omnipotent defenses and stasis” (p. 191). Smith’s intended goal might not have been a closed system as described by Novick and Novick (2013), but lacking a mechanism to examine its defensive structure, this is the unintended consequence.

Freud’s Use of Defenses in Superego Development

In contrast to Smith, Freud talks openly about defenses and their integral role in superego development. In that respect, his awareness of the need for defensiveness puts him at a distinct advantage in relation to Smith. In particular, Freud is able to discuss the implications and the dynamics of defensive processes and how bringing these contents to consciousness mediates their negative effect and at least liberates the individual from carrying the defensive conflict unconsciously.

In his landmark article, “The Ego and the Id,” Freud (1923) lays out the foundation of his understanding of the three-part system of personality, which now includes the superego. With the introduction of the superego, which in this paper is also referred to as the ego ideal, Freud talks about the mechanisms that are necessary for its development to take place. He starts out by discussing early object-cathexes and their resolution. As the significant objects within a child are let go of as objects for direct ca-
thexis, an internalization of their representations occurs within the child and leaves a trace upon the child’s character. In particular, Freud (1923) refers to at least three specific defenses that are necessary for the development of the superego. First, for the child to let go of his primary object cathexis requires an “abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualization—a kind of sublimation therefore” (p. 30). Second, as the nascent superego develops and encounters the oedipal conflict, the boy gives up his primary focus upon the mother in favor of identification with the father and identification with the masculine. Third, from this point Freud describes about the necessity to repress the oedipal struggle in order to move on with his development. This repression is further consolidated with a reaction formation toward both of his previous edipal desires: first, renouncing the desire for mother, and then renouncing the murderous fantasies toward the father.

The foundational understanding for Freud in relation to the superego is that the “ego-ideal [super-ego] is the heir to the Oedipus complex” (Freud, 1923, p. 48) All of Freud’s writing about the superego presumes the oedipal struggle has been achieved. This allows for individuals to make a strong attachment to the primary parents, and to experience the ambivalence of love and hate that manifests in relation to them as primary objects.

Freud (1923) often points to the fundamental struggle between primary drives and the need for repression. The primary drives are for sexual and sexually derived pleasures on the one hand, and the need for repression in the face of the parental prohibitions against sexual and aggressive acting out on the other. One of the by-products of this struggle is guilt. Guilt is the conscious experience of the struggle between primary needs and repression, that is, the love for the father and the desire to kill him. Guilt is the result of that ambivalence and resultant conflict. Freud also spoke of the ongoing need for sublimation to redirect instinctual desires into work, art, or other creative compromise.

Both Freud (1923) and, later, Strachey (1934) discuss the need to “soften” or mediate the superego’s overwhelming effect on the ego, which unchecked brings about the formation of un-
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conscious defensive positions. The basic understanding that both brought to light is that these superego contents are usually primitive, and are often poorly adapted to reality due to the fact that they were initially adopted in an unreflective way. The psychoanalytic process works to slowly bring these contents and their resistances/defenses to consciousness, mediated by the analyst, “softening” the superego’s capacity to further catalyze unconscious conflicts.

There have been substantial advances in knowledge in relation to both superego processes and the interconnecting defenses that are a part of superego processes since the time of Freud. We briefly outline the through line that has continued from the early work of Smith to Freud and through more contemporary writers, while keeping any eye on the fundamental forms that were pioneered by these two important theorists. In addition, we also look at the understanding that was endemic in Freud’s work: that psychoanalysis provides the potential for greater consciousness of one’s superego and defensive structure and takes one’s defensive attitude from a more “closed” system to a more “open” system (Novick & Novick, 2013). In other words, as an individual moves from a more “closed” system, or personal attitude, the more compassionate and flexible he or she becomes in relation to life’s functioning. In this way psychoanalysis, starting with Freud and moving through more contemporary views, has sponsored the potential evolution of moral/superego development beyond more “conventional” levels of moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). The more open attitude toward defenses sponsored by psychoanalysis and its development have allowed the potential for what Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) referred to as “Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled” (p. 55) levels of moral development. These levels allow for conscience to be based on both social/contractual well-being as well as on the ability to reflect upon universal human values and their application of “justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and the respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 55). This more open defensive attitude allows an individual to incorporate new experiences and structures throughout the life span.
Superego and Morality

The ongoing development of theory within psychoanalysis has also continued the expansion of more comprehensive understandings of the superego as a vehicle for morality. We review some of the historic trends that have advanced the understanding of superego development and its role in transmitting morality.

Anna Freud (1937) commented on superego development by following up on her father’s work, and like him postulates that superego formation is only possible after the resolution of the Oedipus complex. She also brought new light to the repression/resistance work of her father relative to superego conflicts. Her ground-breaking work (A. Freud, 1936) was pivotal in shaping the modern view toward defenses as integral and important to personality, and not just resistances. This paper elaborates on that position, pointing out that defenses are necessary for a person to come to terms with the superego’s implementation of a moral structure.

Psychoanalytic thought from the time of Anna Freud moved toward object relations, which emphasized the “human relationship,” the psychological importance of the “self,” and the desire for the “self” to make contact with the “other” (Barnett, 2007). This perspective sees the development of the self as coming about through interaction with another, in contrast to the classical view that the object (other) is simply the aim of a biological drive. The emphasis here is on the relationship between the ego and its internalized objects, though classical concepts such as conflict and anxiety were still retained. Melanie Klein (1930, 1933) focuses on an internal world of objects and unconscious phantasy. She concludes that a primitive form of superego was present in the first year of life, which consisted of part objects, suggesting that the Oedipus complex had early roots.

In the post-Kleinian tradition, Wilfred Bion (2000) was particularly interested in the “moral impulse.” Bion took the initial discussions by Freud and, later, Klein and extended them, suggesting that the moral impulse is extremely primitive. He aims to
show that this early morality could become perverted and employed against the self. He links the extremely primitive nature of the early superego with severe pathology. He thought it is important to distinguish this primitive superego from more sophisticated, more developed, and rational systems of morality. Bion’s work offers that these primitive object relations, which are part of an equally primitive superego function, can only be mediated as a result of a long and careful analysis of these contents, slowly rendering them to consciousness and to the potential for a more rational and humane morality.

Ronald Fairbairn developed a comprehensive object relations theory independent of drives, in which he argued that the infant is object seeking rather than pleasure seeking. He was critical of the classical theory with regard to superego and the Oedipus complex, yet he developed the terms internal saboteur and, later, moral defense. In his theory of endo-psychic structure, he focuses on what he refers to as the “the internal saboteur.” Even though it largely corresponds to the superego, in function it is an ego structure, not an internal object. It is also a compound of the superego and its associated “object.” However, Fairbairn retains the superego concept to account for the internal saboteur and a sense of guilt. In Fairbairn’s approach, the ego ideal establishes the basis of moral values in the inner world. He wrote, “The superego is built in layers corresponding to stages in Oedipal development. It also revealed that the nucleus of superego is pregenital in origin, [and] belongs to an oral level” (Fairbairn, 1931, p. 221). Fairbairn’s understanding lends support to the contention that the less conscious and integrated the moral system, the more it acts as a defense system in and of itself. Conversely, the more conscious the moral system, the less it resembles a defense system and the more it represents a moral structure that is a function of the ego.

Winnicott’s concept of superego drew from Freud, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein, and it was also strikingly different. In his seminal writing “The Innate Morality of the Baby” (Winnicott, 1964, pp. 106–107), he articulates an internalization of superego development that appears more comprehensive and attuned to subtleties. He goes beyond the simple notion that we learn our
moral structure from our family, and articulates the integration of moral capacity from preoedipal development on through the oedipal struggle. Similar to Bion, Winnicott sees morality as innate. He expresses that this understanding is crucial for those whose role it is to facilitate the emergence of a human being. As the child experiences guilt, there is a growing capacity to feel a sense of responsibility.

Winnicott (1965, pp. 73–82) later uses the concept of “concern” in place of “guilt.” In the child’s mind there are two aspects of the mother: the mother as the person who wards off the unpredictable and the mother as object that satisfies the infant’s urgent needs. When the object mother and the environment mother come together in the infant’s mind, concern develops. Winnicott describes the development of a mature healthy superego as a gradual process, along with the development of capacity for concern. In a healthy development process, the infant introjects a preoedipal, maternal superego that is connected to the capacity for concern. The infant’s ego employs certain controlling forces in the development of guilt. Winnicott calls this superego. He puts an emphasis on the social context in regard to the development of true morality.

Barnett (2007) fundamentally argues that the superego remains a valuable concept. It provides insight and understanding in the promotion of civilized values and morality. The superego, according to Barnett, is closely related to the morality of the society in which an individual lives. He bases these conclusions on a paper by Rickman (1951), who asserts that moral function is a combination of social and biological functions. The infant has a great need for a stabilizer, and an important component of this is the protective and moral function. Moral function can be understood as an external source and an individual’s adaptation of his or her biological endowment to the cultural environment. Rickman contends, “The growth of moral function [is] the change from dogmatism to exploration and choice; from sudden, all or none explosive responses in situations involving moral choice in graduated controlled responses; from reflex or reactive actions to consideration; from automatism to love” (quoted in Barnett, 2007, p. 152).

In “Why It Is Good to Be Good,” Riker (2010) describes the
grounds for moral life based on Kohutian concepts. According to Riker, an individual is good when he or she is characterized by moral virtues, concern for the welfare of others, and a willingness to be just and fair toward other human beings. The self psychological explanation of morality is based on integrity, the need to engage in emphatic reciprocity, the need to develop moral virtues, and a need to expand ideals into ethical universals. It is by acknowledging its dependence and vulnerability that the self becomes ethical, not because it identifies itself with universal values. It is crucial for the development of self that we surround ourselves with people who can perform self-object functions throughout life. Self-object reciprocity requires that someone is willing to emphatically care for others as he or she expects them to do so toward him or her. Furthermore, Riker argues, more “aliveness” of the soul is dependent upon one’s character and emphatic disposition in all situations. The person then is not dependent upon circumstances to determine who he or she is.

LaFollette (1995) argues that morality and personal relationships are supportive in two ways: (1) Close personal relationships give us the knowledge and the motivation to develop impartial moral habits, and (2) intimacy flourishes in an environment that impartially recognizes the needs and interests of all. Close personal relationships are grist for the moral mill, and they empower us to act morally. We learn to identify with the interests of others through interacting with them. If we develop empathy toward our friends, we will be likely to generalize it to others. We learn to respond to the interests of acquaintances and even strangers since empathy is nonspecific.

Honneth (1995) also argues that morality develops through interacting with others. More specifically, mutual recognition is necessary for the reproduction of social life. Emotional concern that comes from familiar relationships of love and friendship, approval that is associated with solidarity, and legal recognition are three distinct forms of recognition. In this way, morality grows out of these interactions in which we have recognition and mutual regard.

As can be seen, these practitioners and theorists allow their subjects a greater sense of agency than Smith might have ever
imagined. Indeed, as we move from Smith to Freud there is a greater openness that comes as a result of the conscious inclusion of defensive processes in the internalization of moral structure. As the work has continued to develop in psychoanalytic thought, it has greatly expanded the conceptual framework of both Smith and Freud, who saw the need for morality based on the necessity to mediate the instincts. The more contemporary views on development have expanded to include a greater degree of ego autonomy, a greater influence of object relations, and the expansion of a self that allows for a greater degree of human capacity and flexibility than Smith or perhaps even Freud might have imagined.

Defenses in Contemporary Psychoanalysis

Early theorizing about defenses emphasized the “intrapsychic” mechanisms of the individual on managing conflict, and were initially conceptualized as resistances. The understanding of the importance and necessity of defenses have evolved significantly from this original position.

As mentioned in the previous section, Anna Freud’s (1936) work was truly groundbreaking in that she was the first to articulate the necessity for defenses and saw them as integral to human development and character. Her work served to take defenses out of the previously exclusive realm of resistances. Resistances were viewed as something negative that needed to be overcome in analysis because they held back development. Anna Freud reconceptualized them as being important to development. Brenner (1982) offered a further revision of the classical Freudian approach toward defenses. He pointed out that anything could be regarded as defensive when it functions to reduce anxiety or to drive tensions away. Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein (1964) viewed defenses as ego functions to cope with external reality and drive demands. Shafer (1968) focused on delineating the dynamic properties of the ego. He emphasized that defenses can express undesirable impulses that allow gratification and at the same time underscored that defenses attempt to block the expression of undesirable content.

An important shift in the analysis of defenses has been in view-
ing defenses as a set of relational and cognitive processes that emphasize the “interpersonal” context in the use of defenses. (See Cooper, 1989, for a review of “two-person” analysis of defenses, and Eagle, 2011, on the shift to contemporary psychoanalysis.) Winnicott (1965), by stating that a baby does not exist without others, viewed defenses as adaptations to traumatic environmental failure, differentiating this from defense organized against expression of impulses. This perspective no longer viewed the individual as a closed system.

Modell (1975) suggested that defenses were organized in situations of empathic failure, leading to falling back on the self and avoidance of expression of needs toward others. Thus he emphasized a “two-person” theory of defense. Kohut (1984) highlighted that defensive structures were attempts to protect an enfeebled self. He pointed out that defenses were often organized against failures of selfobjects. His formulations were in line with those of Fairbairn (1952), Winnicott (1965), Guntrip (1969), and Modell (1975), emphasizing that self might need to be protected in its state of vulnerability. He minimized the importance of instinctual drives and process, deviating from Modell. Sandler (1976) asserted that defenses are manifested interpersonally. Kernberg (1975) viewed defensive organization as operating both in object relations contexts and in intrapsychic contexts. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) and Mitchell (1998) described reciprocal process in which the patient and the therapist affect one another, using the notion of intersubjectivity. In this view defenses are organized as a part of mutual regulation and influence. Novick and Novick (2001) emphasized that a “two-person” focus on the therapeutic relationship and the forms of interaction between patients and the therapist could be combined with a classical “one-person” focus on the patient’s defenses.

Contemporary psychoanalysis has expanded the conceptualization of defense to accommodate the growth and development of theory and practice. As the work has come to make the interpersonal process and the self more the focus of practice, the understanding of the defensive process have been modified. “Defense” has therefore come to include not only the use of defenses to come to terms with needs that arise from primary drives, but
also includes the defenses from the affects that arise from interpersonal interactions and primary self organizations.

DISCUSSION

Smith saw the development and transmission of morality as coming through the family and being a reflection of the community and the culture. Foundationally, he saw that humans were endowed by nature with a desire to do what would be approved of through mutual sympathy. Smith’s structures (virtue, propriety, merit, duty) are applications of his fundamental moral structure and, though not stated on his part, his defense system. In his thoughtful and meticulous way he masterfully wove together these structures to create a logic-tight system of morality and behavior. A strength of Smith’s rational approach is that it is internally consistent, linear, follows logical rules, and conceptually accounts for a great deal of behavior and details. He accomplished this by deferring to a majority collective view of human action based on the external need for interaction with others, which is mediated by the “approbation” of others.

Smith recognized that moral structure was being imposed upon human instinctual nature. He did not, however, account for how difficulties in this implementation might be mediated. His rational approach did not have the benefit of understanding the unconscious defenses that are necessarily a part of the imposition of a moral structure upon instinctual life, relying rather on the “approbation” of others that leads to guilt to keep oneself in line. Further, his reliance on “self-command” to carry out the prevailing cultural morality does not make room for individual differences, creativity, change, dynamism, and spontaneity because there is no consciousness brought to bear on the defensive structure that an individual needs to employ in order to comply with this structure. Without the compassion that is born out of the acceptance that one’s instinctual and human differences do not seamlessly adapt to such external structures, there is no flexibility and acceptance of human circumstance or difference. “It would be hard for Smith to fully account for individuals who ‘march to
their own drummer’ such as: Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Einstein, and Freud, all of whom were able to go in their own direction, sometimes at great peril and at the risk of great disapprobation by the dominate culture, without seeing them as deviant rather than creative and generative” (Özler & Gabrinetti, 2014, p. 27).

Freud began in the same vein as Smith in that he observed that moral structure was passed on through the family. Similar to Smith, he also saw cultural values and morals coming through the family. Freud also recognized that moral structure was being imposed on instinctual nature; however, because of his clinical experience he had a much more compassionate relationship to human limitations and guilt, and saw the need to “soften” the harsh and sometimes sadistic superego’s application of moral demands.

An important by-product of the psychoanalytic process that comes to light in this discussion are the differences between conscious and unconscious defenses. Psychoanalytic theory and technique across all schools of psychoanalysis in each their own way make conscious those defenses that are used to protect us. As Novick and Novick (2013) point out, the difference between “open” and “closed” systems of defense is the difference between being “attuned to reality” and “avoiding reality.” In this process of making conscious, we are able to create a certain degree of freedom and flexibility. When an individual has a conscious awareness of a defensive process that may be limiting, he or she is in the position to make a choice, particularly if the defense is no longer necessary to the person’s well-being. On the other hand, if the defense is still important to an individual’s current psychic integrity, psychoanalysis allows for both an understanding of and compassion for its current use. This stands in marked contrast to a more closed system, such as that represented by Smith or any other system that seeks to implement a moral code without consciously considering the human struggle that it engenders.

The attitude toward the superego went through significant evolution with the work of Anna Freud (1936). Her contributions to the understanding of the defenses specifically allowed for a
more sympathetic view. Her work broadened and operationalized Freud’s original formulations and attitudes with regard to defenses. This effort emphasized the positive use of defenses and took defense out of the exclusive realm of resistances. This attitude has been integrated into the general fabric of psychoanalytic theory and has made a significant contribution to a more empathetic and greatly expanded view of defenses and the acceptance of human limitation. More recently, the work of Cooper (1989) looked at more contemporary views of defense and pointed out their utility within a variety of psychoanalytic theorists. Germaine to the current discussion, he illustrated the adaptive use of defenses across theories, regardless of what is being defended against within the various theoretical perspectives.

This larger view of the human process and condition has evolved from a more fixed attitude toward human limitation and morality, as represented by Smith’s ground-breaking work. The work has evolved through Freud’s recognitions and the explanation of the superego to incorporate a greater empathy toward human limitation. This attitude has continued to develop in current psychoanalytic theory and allows for a level of creativity, spontaneity, and imagination that more accurately reflects the infinite adaptability of the human condition.

NOTES

1. Freud (1930) makes an analogous statement. “We shall always consider other people’s distress objectively—that is to place ourselves, with our own wants and sensibilities, in their conditions, and then to examine what occasions we should find in them for experiencing happiness or unhappiness” (p. 89).

2. Freud (1930) makes an analogous statement. “The replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive stop of civilization” (p. 95). “The characteristic features of civilization remains to be assessed: the manner in which the relations of men to one another, their social relationships, are regulated…” (pp. 94–95).

3. Freud (1930) asserts, “The community, too, evolves a super-ego under whose influence cultural development proceeds” (p. 141). “The cultural super-ego has developed its ideals and set up its demands. Among the latter, those which deal with the relations of human beings to one another are comprised under the heading of ethics” (p. 142). The spectator is an introject of the approval and disapproval that occurs as the result of human interaction. It is similar to the Freudian notion of “super-ego” (Freud, 1930).
REFERENCES


