*Canadian Journal of Philosophy (2026), 56: e1, 1–13*
doi:10.1017/can.2026.10119

SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

# Is "Good Enough" Good Enough?—Bringing Freud to Kant Without Anachronism

Barbara Herman

Philosophy, UCLA: University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA
Email: herman@humnet.ucla.edu

**Abstract**
Attempts have been made to naturalize Kant's account of the rational will and good willing by way of Freud's account of the superego. This paper argues that such efforts ignore the infantile legacy of the superego, although its origin story is nonetheless congenial to Kant's larger moral project. Some more speculative points of contact between Freud and Kant are then explored.

**Keywords:** good willing; superego; anxiety; guilt; moral motivation; moral development

Why bring Freud to Kant at all? For some, there's a seductive appeal to seeing what you get when you task Freud's complex, dynamic, empirically rich account of the human psyche with accommodating the austere moral ambition of the categorical imperative. Freud himself opens that door with the remark that the categorical imperative is the direct heir of the *Oedipus complex.*[1] However that inheritance is to be understood, given the difficulties that come with Kant's noumenal conditions on moral causality, trying to get something structurally kin to Kantian moral action arising from the Freudian superego is an opportunity it's been hard to forego. Although I believe such efforts miss their mark, the impulse to use Freud to vitalize parts of our philosophical tradition should not be neglected. Philosophers, both Kant-inclined and not, have good reason to take Freud's account of the human psyche seriously. The lexicon and structure of human psychology that many Anglo-American philosophers work with is bizarrely simple and inaccurate, even clumsy, good enough for some of the questions and dialectic of philosophical argument, but not nearly good enough for understanding how we come to do what we do and be who we are. I think this is true for most reasons theorists, post-Humean empiricists, and contemporary Kantians. Speaking only to the last group (in which I include myself), many Kantians often fly over the problem by hewing to his high rationalism in their accounts of rational and moral action, or willing, as sufficient to explicate the requirements on and conditions of moral action. The hazard here is mistaking the transcendental rational psychology of Kant's foundational arguments for *human* rational psychology, a mistake the historical Kant did not make. Careful readers of the *Anthropology*, the *Religion*, the 1780s history essays, and parts of the third *Critique*, see Kant grappling with complexities of human agency that have no place in foundational arguments but are essential to

[1]In "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (XIX, p. 167).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Inc. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

understanding the paradoxes of human action and moral culture. It is in that spirit that I think it worthwhile to attempt integrating psychoanalytic material into the Kantian project. Rather than being careless about the boundary between the theory of rational moral agency and anthropology, if we go with Kant's understanding of the problem, it is *not* interrogating that boundary that risks getting it wrong about what the terrain on both sides is supposed to show.

Although this paper is a discussion of Kant and Freud, the paper's title is a hat-tip to D.W. Winnicott's notion of the "good enough" mother. There's a lot of ink spilled about ideal and non-ideal theory. Winnicott offers a humane way of thinking about practical ideals. The kind of parenting a child gets matters enormously, yet in the real world of infants and adults, there's not one ideal, but only many flawed ways of managing the relationship that are "good enough" to sustain the health and growth of the vulnerable of the parties. Not an *ideal* ideal, but a standard you can live with.

## 1. Being Wary of the Superego's Role in Accounts of Moral Agency

The ideal I am ultimately interested in here is the Kantian notion of good willing—the formal idea of the human will determined by the moral law. Everyone familiar with Kant knows the drill: about motives and maxims, competing and cooperating desires, the objective standard of maxim assessment, and the rest. It suggests an ideal of purity in willing, one we can be pretty sure we do not meet. Such an ideal leaves two related questions in its wake. One is about how we are to respond to our failure ("work harder at your virtue" masks instead of answering the question). The other question is about whether in light of unavoidable failure, we might be mistaken in taking good willing as the Kantian ideal for moral action.

It is reasonable to think the problem arises because such an ideal is insensitive to what it's like to be a human being: rational and natural, disciplined and emotional, conceptually enmeshed in a culture, the product of hit-and-miss development. This is one stream of concern that leads to trying on the Freudian superego as the naturalized face of the autonomous rational will. As will become clear later, I am not hesitant about the idea of using Freudian structures to naturalize rationalist elements of moral agency. I am hesitant about what I take to be the moralizing of the Freudian superego and a related tendency to treat the emergent superego as separable from Freud's extended account of the dynamics and vicissitudes of human agency. A brief look at two serious attempts to advance the fortunes of the superego will show why.

In *Human Morality* (1992), Samuel Scheffler looks to Freud's developmental account of the superego as an example of an adequate psychological account of moral authority and motivation that is sensitive to what he calls the *resonance* of moral concerns (that they are "woven throughout the fabric of human emotion and motivation" 78) and the fragility of moral character (its "ready liability to disfigurations and deformities" 70). He deploys a sensitive account of Freud's origin story of superego and ego ideal, with emphasis on the complexity of development that would explain both resonance and fragility (through love and identification, on the one hand, and the strains of residual competing ideas and feelings—the detritus of development—on the other). The point of the account, however, is not to adopt Freudian theory, but to offer it as an example of a naturalistic account that allows for motivational heterogeneity. That is, the connection of Freud's ego ideal and its superego enforcer fills out Scheffler's notion of an "architecture of personality" that supports reasons for action directly, without appeal to some additional "moral" desire (including the desire to live up to one's ideal). The connection between ego-ideal and morality remains elusive, though Scheffler is attentive to the suggestive fact that morality possesses "features that elicit conferrals of authority across a very broad range of actual human personalities" (p. 96). It is assumed for purposes of the argument that the neurotogenic history of love and fear in Freud's developmental story can be smoothed out as the normal agent matures, replaced by cooler, more cognitively oriented motives. Some philosophically motivated wishful thinking, perhaps. We will return to this assumption later.

David Velleman's "A Rational Superego" (1999) was to be part of a larger project of reconciling Kant's moral psychology with Freud's theory of moral development. The attraction of the pursuit is in the idea that "Freud's theory of the superego provides a valuable psychological model for various aspects of the Categorical Imperative, if not for its rational force" (pp. 531–32). And perhaps that loss can be shown not to be essential. In addition to the combined work of ego-ideal and superego, Velleman sees in Freud a way of understanding self-legislation: "Our ability to exercise moral authority over ourselves is…explained by the familiar psychological process of internalizing other people" (p. 531). He also sees in Freud's emphasis on the experience of loving and being loved as the driver of moral development, the key to naturalizing Kantian theory, arguing that: "[l]ove is our introduction to the fact that we are not alone in the world; and morality as formulated by Kant is our practical response to that fact" (p. 532). The plausibility of joining the two theories this way depends, Velleman argues, on finding in Freud materials that (a) show that the internalized ideal and object of love is personhood as rational nature, and (b), explain how the threat from the superego results in guilt and inherently moral feeling, not just fear of an inner aggressor. Velleman finds Freud's (inadequate) answer in the introjection of not just an idealization of the admired parent as critic, but also as the two-step of criticism followed by punishment to explain the moral anxiety in the face of the superego's monitoring of the ego's failures to realize a self-imposed ego-ideal (pp. 542–43). But, Velleman argues, introjection does not get to an ego-ideal unless there is more than admiration for the parent; there has to be a *valuing* of the parent as a way the ego strives to be. Velleman concludes that what Freud gets wrong is the way he understands love "as a morally formative emotion" (p. 545). Neither narcissistic love for the self nor identificatory love for an other explains "how love endows its object with the sort of authority that, when inherited by the superego, would make it an object of moral anxiety" (pp. 550–-51).

Velleman's solution is to amplify Freud's suggestions that the ego develops as an independent evaluative faculty that can support or challenge the authority of the superego, which then cannot play the role of ultimate normative or moral authority. Added to the original introjection of the loved parent is the ego's appreciation of parental love as a response to the child as an end in himself. This, he argues, would provide an object to be emulated that carries genuine moral authority (p. 557). If this emendation of the ego's role can be incorporated into the superego's view of the self (or the enhanced self just takes over the work of the superego), then one or the other can play the moral role of an authoritative ego ideal.

Whether the view that Velleman offers is connectable to scattered passages in Freud's corpus can be debated. As is the story about love's object on which Velleman relies. The deeper Freud-related issue is whether something of value is lost in the moralizing of Freud's view. If the superego is just a developmentally primitive form of conscience jettisoned along the way as the ego takes over the setting of moral value and regulation, it looks more like a legacy object, a curiosity, on the order of the human embryo's tail. What is unlikely is that a superego formed by introjected first love objects to compensate for wounded narcissism is a thing that can just take on or defer to different values, being responsive in its assessments to *their* structure, rather than the structure of the ideas and attachments through which the superego is formed, as a functionally distinct part of the ego.[2]

On the other hand, the superego *does* introduce a kind of self-imposed authority; it motivates in a distinctive way; it provokes guilt and activates conscience. But, as I'll try to show, if looked at carefully, the superego is not a credible candidate for doing Kantian work. The tendency to over-

[2]In recent work, Beatrice Longuenesse asks a slightly different question: whether Freud's causal-developmental account can generate the unconditional normative constraint essential to Kant's idea of duty. Looking at the Oedipus complex and its resolution through the development of the superego, she conjectures that as superego directives come to be expressed in words, it's at least not impossible to arrive at unconditional imperatives with moral content. But she then leaves to the side the emotional storm leading to the superego and its potential effect on the anxiety that is the precursor to moral motivation. And then there is Freud's contention that morality is not the only value-source connected to normative unconditionality. See Longuenesse (2017, chapter 8).

moralize the superego ignores the fact that it is, at bottom and always, an infantile mechanism.[3] Looking within the Freudian account of the human psyche for objective, principled, rational morality is something Freud would diagnose as the pursuit of an illusion. So if we are to bring Freud to Kant, the loci of connection must be different.

## 2. Positioning Freud and Kant for a Conversation

Traditional Kantian theory has little to say about human development in any sphere. Traditional Freudian theory looks at morality *merely* as a set of (typically oppressive) norms and strictures as lived in a given society. Of course, their questions are different. Kant's is about the possibility conditions for moral principle, as a kind of rational principle, to be a determining ground for human action. The investigation is conceptual; the material examined is an abstract capacity that gives ideal form to the human will. Freud's questions are about the developmental history and system effects of an emergent capacity to self-regulate in light of an ideal. The investigation is empirical; the material examined is the psychic condition of persons in whom the capacity reveals itself in developmental misfirings and illness. If you are a philosophical fan of form and matter, they can seem to ask for each other.

In the discussion that follows, I treat Freud as, among other things, a philosopher. Indeed, I view Freud's absence from the pantheon of 20th-century philosophers as a puzzle we might need Freud to diagnose. Reading his work systematically and with care, it is plain that Freud does what philosophers do. His questions are about the nature of human nature. His methods are both data-driven and theoretically speculative (like Newton, he's a "natural philosopher'). He posits psychological kinds and structures (unconscious, preconscious, conscious; id, ego, superego) that he argues are necessary to explain disease and its symptoms as impairments relative to some proper function. And, following the science, he revises his constructs as new data is reported and confirmed. He is open to being wrong; aware that other factors than the ones he is committed to will emerge as important (e.g., he is hopeful that pharmacology will someday mitigate depression, a disorder frustratingly resistant to his methods). He is aware and attentive to the problem of the vulnerability of psychoanalysis to confirmation bias (and builds guardrails in the training of analysts). But his is not the only science that theorizes about what cannot be independently confirmed (that is, not by methods that might be co-defining what they claim to find). The explanations he gives have enhanced and transformed our understanding of what it is to be human. And, sure sign, he vigorously and often denies being a philosopher. While the development of psychoanalytic theory since Freud is extensive and important, his work remains the tree that supports the branches.

Without doubt, Freud was wrong about many things, and closed-minded about others. He ignored features of infant life that later psychoanalysts showed had determining influence on psychic outcomes; he doubled down on boys and men as the archetype of the human, treating female psychology as a struggle to cope with not being male, not having a penis; he was captive to the values of a fin de siècle social world; and so on. This sort of thing is not philosophically newsworthy. Most philosophers in the canon got lots of important things wrong and yet we still learn from them. It *is* noteworthy that Freudian theory is not homophobic; indeed Freud was insistent and easy about recognizing human bisexuality (the scandal around Freud's work was about the idea of infant and early childhood sexuality[4]). And although he spawned an expensive and time-consuming therapeutic practice, when looking at the misery in the aftermath of World War I, he argued that as

[3]This is a point Jonathan Lear emphasizes as he shifts the focus of moral development to the developing ego in chapter six of his *Freud* (2005).

[4]A response, as he put it "… in the world of the puritanical and the posh and the purely hypocritical" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* XVIII, p. 51).

psychoanalysis matured, and if it was widely accepted in a world with a conscience, there should be free psychoanalysis for the masses, with methods adjusted to these circumstances.[5]

Turning back now to the central question, I want to offer a brief biographical sketch of the Freudian superego *in situ* to show why it cannot be adapted to do Kantian moral work either about moral motivation or moral authority. Once that's behind us, I will go on to suggest that the same material looked at in a different way might help secure the place in Kantian moral theory for the "good enough" moral agent. Concluding, I will touch on some other moments of Kantian theory that are especially ripe for Freudian amendment and extension.

## 3. A Brief Look at Freud's Story of Us from Birth to Guilt

It's not news to parents, but it tends to be a blind spot for philosophers of our moral nature, that beginnings matter. Even Aristotle, ever attentive to growth and change, starts his *Ethics* with adolescent boys (already winners in the Athenian social lottery). Freud starts with birth, the moment of transition from organic integration (of fetus and gestator) to the social-biological dependence that lays the foundation for the long march to reproductive maturity. Early stages of development not only lay the ground for later ones, but they can also have ongoing, sometimes shape-shifting effects on resulting structures and abilities. Methodologically, patterns of symptoms that hinder social and sexual maturity, and that resist physical explanation, shed light on the nature and function of psychic structures.

Like the fetus, the newborn is radically dependent; unlike the fetus, it has to work cooperatively to be fed. If all goes well, mouth and breast become reciprocal sites of pleasure. The infant (or the infant-caretaker dyad—there's an ontological issue here) also has to negotiate the contingency of need-satisfaction. In some order, it gains a first object of desire—its food source—learns to signal need, and finds that it can itself be a source of need satisfaction (thumb-to-mouth). In its primitive phantasy, it can *be* the breast. This small set of relations initiates the differentiation of instinct-primed life that sets the table, so to speak, for the emergence of psychic structures that manage it. There is already a lot that can go well or badly.

In Freud's mature view, the human psyche has three parts—id, ego, and superego. Id names a reservoir of energy-connected ("cathected") representations of instinctual drives (drives that, though physical, can initiate and affect mentation, only sometimes reaching conscious thought and feeling). Ego and superego are functional differentiations of the id that meet developmental needs. The ego is the emergent site of agency and consciousness; its primary task is navigating between perception of external reality and instinctual demand. Its resources are partly agential (it can direct intentional action), and partly mechanisms of defense targeting disruptions from the id.[6] Original ego content is formed by mechanisms of attachment and identification (what the ego wants to have or be), as well as ongoing management of incompatible or unruly desires. In a caricature: Loving X and identifying with Y who is perceived as disapproving of loving X, the ego

[5]Freud says: "You know that our therapeutic activities are not very far-reaching. There are only a handful of us, and even by working very hard each one can devote himself in a year to only a small number of patients. Compared to the vast amount of neurotic misery which there is in the world, and perhaps need not be, the quantity we can do away with is almost negligible. ….

Now let us assume that by some kind of organization we succeeded in increasing our numbers to an extent sufficient for treating a considerable mass of the population. On the other hand, it is possible to foresee that at some time or other the conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery; and that the neuroses threaten public health no less than tuberculosis, and can be left as little as the latter to the impotent care of individual members of the community. When this happens, institutions or out-patient clinics will be started, to which analytically trained physicians will be appointed, so that men who would otherwise give way to drink, women who have nearly succumbed under their burden of privations, children for whom there is no choice but between running wild or neurosis, may be made capable, by analysis, of resistance and of efficient work. Such treatments will be free …." ("Advances in Psychoanalytic Therapy" XVII, p. 167).

[6]The big five defenses are repression, displacement, redirection, identification, sublimation.

can try to repress feelings for X, or generate a phantasy that X is dangerous and must be avoided, or displace its erotic interest in X onto shoes or hats associated with X. A new pattern of response is set; tensions are reduced. All without conscious awareness, even as the path taken imposes significant cost to health or well-being.

The superego too is a resultant of this kind of process. It separates off from the ego, while drawing on both original instinct-drive sources and repressed material in the id, meeting a need to resolve a set of unavoidable conditions of internal conflict that force the ego of the young child to make some fateful adjustments—aka, resolving the *Oedipus complex*.

What we think of as *the Oedipus complex* is an intentional simplification. Less worked out is what Freud calls the "complete" *Oedipus complex* that has ambivalent, positive and negative outcomes, reflecting the differing landscape of bisexuality in children, both boys and girls.[7] Whatever the configuration of the reproductive and socializing unit, the complex will form. Love and authority are not natural allies. The resolution of the complex (freeing loving from the shadow of a threat) is the key to liberating human energies from instinctual determination.

For expositional and temperamental reasons, Freud focused on the simplified complex affecting the simplified boy. It starts with object-attachment to the mother and identification with the father (who provides an ego-ideal, with content suited to a three-year-old). Both attachment and identification are primitive relationships that only become clearly distinguished from each other as development proceeds. Freud says:

> For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the *Oedipus complex* originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile coloring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother.[8]

Not a stable or secure situation. To effect the repression necessary to dissolve the *Oedipus complex*, the infantile ego fortifies itself by a further act of identification, erecting the hostile father within itself as the father it longs to be. This is the primitive superego.

Again, we should be careful not to over-think what's going on. These are happenings, not intentional actions or decisions, in kind not different from the behavior of a duckling becoming affectively attached to the robotic arm that feeds it.

In describing the outcome, Freud introduces what seems to be a puzzling ambivalence, or even a contradiction in the precepts issued by the new superego.[9] He says this:

> [The resulting]…modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego ideal or superego …. The superego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: 'You *ought to be* like this (like your father).' It also comprises the prohibition: 'You *may not be* like this (like your father) – that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.[10]

It appears that the superego's directive is of the form: You ought to X *and* you may not X. Not a good look for a moral imperative. However, reading carefully, something more complex is going on here.

[7] *The Ego and the Superego* (XIX, p. 33).
[8] *The Ego and the Superego* (XIX, p. 32).
[9] Francey Russsell (2025) takes these issues to instead raise a deep problem for morality about ambivalence (pp. 1077–1078).
[10] *The Ego and the Superego* (XIX, p. 34).

Recall, we are starting with a young child's small set of object attachments and identifications, under pressure from two directions: its own desires and feared parental hostility to them. In wanting exactly what is being prohibited, the child can either collapse (regress) or the ego can use its meagre defensive resources to quiet things down. Exactly because it lacks the power to "just say no" to the feared parent, the ego has to find a "yes" it can live with.[11] By identifying with (internalizing) the parent as an external threat, the ego can in the parent's voice say no to the desire and it be a yes for its new sense of self.[12] This is the reaction formation. The anxiety-inducing, affect-laden idea of the external parent becomes the internal superego—a part of the ego now endowed *by the ego* with power to condemn its pursuit of objects of desire. The parent now identified with *is* the hostile parent protecting their prerogative. Replacing one parent image with another changes the ego ideal and with it the structure of the ego. It is a gain in safety for the ego; it is also a self-alienating loss in coming to treat its own desires as an imagined punitive parent would treat them. So understood, there is no contradiction in the superego's address to the ego.

There is, however, a surprise about where *guilt* enters into the resolution of the *Oedipus complex*—it is anticipatory, not reactive to wrongdoing as such. Freud says: "Guilty conscience originates as fear of parental punishment, or rather—to put it more accurately—fear of losing the parents' love."[13] The condition for the formation of a conscience is that you want what's forbidden and it's forbidden because *you* want it. Your wanting puts you in your own deficit. This puts guilt prior to the deed (or intention; for the infant these are the same) and makes it personal. The child comes to own the threat; guilt signals that the threat is deserved. The pattern of self-regulation that comes with the resolution of the *Oedipus complex* thus makes guilt the ego's normative baseline.[14]

Of course, the emergence of the superego is not all bad. The self-imposed repression of forbidden desire opens the ego to other affectionate bonds, and later on, to non-incestuous erotic relations. It also frees energy for the developmentally essential work of latency. The *content* of a maturing superego can be influenced by extra-familial identifications and socially endorsed, even rational norms. However, the shift in content does not imply or require a shift in form. That remains beholden to an infantile defense mechanism anchored in owned guilt, carrying a morally arbitrary degree of harshness.[15]

## 4. The Misfit of Freudian Guilt with Kantian Moral Agency

Guilt is the phenomenological face of *moral anxiety*: a forward-looking signal of danger, the affective state of an ego vulnerable to a perceived danger from within.[16] Anxiety in general signals a danger situation the ego is not prepared to meet. External world danger triggers fight or flight. In the face of neurotic anxiety, the ego resorts to techniques of defense—say, using jokes or compulsive flattery to deflect upsurges of erotic desire—thereby "restricting its own organization and …

[11]This looks like a first encounter with bullying.

[12]And, as a consolation prize, there's a safer affectionate attachment allowed to the mother.

[13]"On Narcissism: An Introduction" (XIV, p. 102).

[14]*Civilization and its Discontents* (XXI, p. 136).

[15]There is hope that in the course of development the ego will eventually take over the work of moral self-regulation, drawing eventually on a principle-based ego-ideal. As Freud puts it at the end of New Introductory Lecture XXXI (The Dissection of the Psychical Personality), the therapeutic effect of psychoanalysis is "to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the superego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be. It is a work of culture – not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee" (XXII, p. 80). So a decreasing but permanent vulnerability to heavy weather.

[16]Anxiety is marked by an adrenalin rush that heightens heart-rate and breathing. Freud, partly following Otto Rank, speculated that the anxiety-response originated in the functional needs of human birth which is then repeated as the signaling response mechanism to the perception of different danger situations. Its occasions are three-fold. "If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety: realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the superego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id" (Ibid., XXII, p. 78).

acquiescing in the formation of symptoms in exchange for having impaired the drive."[17] Moral anxiety is different. Our developmentally normal (and necessary) attachments pitch us onto the path of a primitive dread that authorizes the power of the superego. The strictures that come with modern civilization in turn make this moral anxiety an abiding condition.[18] Freud describes it this way:

> Drive renunciation now no longer has a completely liberating effect; virtuous continence is no longer rewarded with the assurance of love. A threatened external unhappiness – loss of love and punishment on the part of the external authority – has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt.[19]

If moral motivation remains connected to guilt avoidance, to averting an existential threat, it is hard to see the ego-superego structure as a possible naturalization of the Kantian autonomous will. It *is* a condition good enough to get us to pay our taxes or keep promises or recycle. Maybe if the standards of duty aren't too arduous, and one's instinctual life not too unruly, the superego's demands can align with the ego's identity: one just is a reliable promise-keeper, good citizen, or exemplary recycler. However, on the Freudian account, the history of *why* I am the way I am, the material my virtue emerged from, what it might be hiding—these things cast shade on my good character and the possibility that I (or anyone) could act on a pure moral motive.[20]

This is not Freud's version of Kant's *Groundwork* caution about the "dear self," and not (or not yet) a skepticism about the value of moral action. Freud's primary concern is about our relation to morality as a whole, to the effect on us of *accepting* the idea that we must subordinate our instinctual life to the demands of morality while at the same time we cannot avoid resisting such a demand. *This* resonates with Kant.

## 5. A Freudian Encounter with Kant's Later Account of Human Moral Agency

Though we can have no duty to act from the motive of duty, we *can* have a duty to make ourselves more receptive to morality—to engage in the discipline of virtue, a struggle without end. The limits of these efforts, and the anxiety that is the lot of the morally aspiring agent, are at the heart of the first two books of Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason.* Kant cannot explain how we are to make the moral principle our fundamental principle since it involves an incomprehensible supersensible deed of affording the moral law authoritative priority over the principle of self-love.[21] Our efforts to become more virtuous, while praiseworthy, cannot bridge *that* gap. Worse for us, our natural condition is tainted by a "propensity to evil"—a permanent susceptibility to mangling the order of practical principles even as we are aware and concerned with getting the order right. This is a reasonable source of moral anxiety, even for the best of us. This fact of human nature—that we are

[17] *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (XX, pp. 155–156).

[18] Some moral anxiety shows in symptom formation that takes on a moral caste: excessive demonstrations of rectitude; flagellating self-examination; moral paranoia. The sorts of things Kant describes as moral enthusiasm, or moral fanaticism—ways of being so obsessed with being moral that one loses touch with the value of the activities morality is supposed to inform.

For Freud, virtue itself can be a source of moral anxiety: the more virtuous a person is, the more their conscience distrusts their behavior, the more guilt they feel. As a result, "virtue forfeits some part of its promised reward; the docile and continent ego does not enjoy the trust of its mentor, and strives in vain, it would seem, to acquire it" (*Civilization and its Discontents* XXI, p. 126). Tying self-regard to the judgment of the superego, one's nice character is never "good enough".

[19] *Civilization and its Discontents* (XXI, p. 128).

[20] While the *possibility* of acting solely "from duty"—making the moral law one's principle of volition—is necessary to Kant's argument for the practical authority of morality, it does not follow that a "pure motive" is a realistic goal for us. However, acting on heteronomous principles that makes conformity to duty conditional on its serving our interests is an avoidable moral failure.

[21] It is hard to avoid seeing some of the mystery of the Kantian supersensible reappearing in the dark recesses of the Freudian unconscious.

by nature a source of moral danger to ourselves—implies that there is no point of view for us where we are not guilty. Kant's resolution in the *Religion* is through an appeal to grace, a divine gift imputing to us the goodness we strive for, freeing us from seeing our "physical sufferings, sacrifices, and mortifications of self-love" as punishments, as signs of guilt (*Rel* 6, p. 83). The message is: If we strive *and* we believe, we will not be anxious.[22]

Freud agrees that moral anxiety has to do with unavoidable guilt. But he has an explanation that a more naturalized Kantian theory could welcome. The worrisome propensities are not in the register of evil or in noumenal metaphysics. They are developmental residues, primitive elements of the superego's anxiety, an anticipation of guilt as a response to an unmeetable demand (presenting as a kind of original sin for our species). Although essential to the formation of the superego, the residues produce tension in adult moral ideation. We are not able to do what we want to do or as we want to do it, or become who we aim to be. Where Kant sends us to God for release of anxiety, Freud sends us to a psychoanalyst. One of the primary tasks of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice is to disassemble some of the chaotic residues of early superego formation, interpret and dissolve as much as possible related neurotic symptoms through the mechanism of transference, and by bringing unconscious material to consciousness, make it susceptible to disciplined judgment and reformatory work. Overall, the aim is to create an environment suited to the reorienting of the superego in a more realistic, less repressive, less self-alienating way.[23] In lieu of faith, the anxious and troubled agent gains in self-understanding and a healthier ego-syntonic self-ordering. In its way, a more enlightenment-friendly outcome.

For all that, there is a case to be made that even with sophisticated therapeutic work, moral anxiety retains the role of signaling danger, with fear of a loss that we have to own (and so the avoidance of guilt) as a motive. This feels about as unKantian as you can get—until we remember Kant's characterization in the second *Critique* of respect for law as "connected with fear or at least apprehension of transgressing it" (*KpV* 5, p. 82). The danger Kant identifies in this stretch of text is that we might like or even love what morality requires of us. Moral enthusiasm is a vice. Virtue *just is* the moral disposition in conflict (*KpV* 5, p. 84); respect for the moral law humbles, "strik[ing] down all arrogance" (*KpV* 5, p. 86). If we wanted a theory of the natural person that fits this, that can illuminate the more complex and darker part of the Kantian program, turning to Freud can help. We could then say: it is not only our rational nature that is "made for morality"—our empirical nature ***is*** "good enough," even if never as good as we might mistakenly think is possible. An *ideal* ideal would be a threat to our moral vocation.

Granted, this is not the piece of Kant that the recent turn to Freud aimed to naturalize. If the Kant-Freud question is whether the superego is fit to stand in for the capacity to act from the pure motive of duty, it is pretty clear that the answer is "no". The mechanism of internalized self-alienation in the erection of the superego captures some of the phenomenology of Kantian autonomy, of the moral "ought" (among others), but it is not a model of autonomous self-legislation. The superego is neither a moral nor a rational power, though it is a necessary condition for our being moral and rational.

A more creative engagement with Freud might involve a reconsideration of what made anyone saddle Kant with a moral purity view in the first place. It seems to appear in the *Groundwork's* analysis of the concept of good willing made through a distillation of the impure compound of right actions and all sorts of motives. But the moral distillate is *not* the pure motive of a holy will, but "respect for law"—an addition to the human motivational repertoire of liking and loving, tinged with a little fear. Here Kant and Freud would seem to agree.

[22]This opens onto another story about human morality as an ethical-teleology: the idea of a common human project that has the aim of bringing moral order to nature, bringing the happiness principle inside morality.

[23]*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (XX, p. 154).

## 6. Competing and Converging Teleologies

To this point, my discussion of Freud has been focused on the negative task of keeping separate the idea of the superego (its origin and function) from the Kantian power of autonomous moral agency. In this last section, I want to widen the area of investigation by bringing some of the outer reaches of Freud's account of the self into productive contact with often under-valued parts of Kant's moral theory, broadly understood.

First the Freud. The origin point for Freud's philosophy of self is its history in our animal nature as a product of evolution. For the human species, even if ontogeny does not fully recapitulate phylogeny, deep history leaves traces. Early species history does not just drop away, like a rocket stage; it continues to influence what we turn out to be like: our powers, along with their vulnerabilities, combine in ways that both burden and enhance human lives, drawing at times from ancient and experiential sources not easily accessed in armchair introspection. Freud sees us as an animal with a three-dimensional history: a species history, a cultural or social history, and a personal history, each dimension influencing what we know and can do as we come into our conscious life. Not all dimensions are called on for explanations of every action or affect, but they all inform the structure or framework of explanation.

The telic goal of this historical process is the formation of unburdened, reality-centered agency. *More or less* unburdened; *more or less* reality-centered.[24] Our capacity to be rational or to be moral is emergent in this process, not a fixed feature like the heart, but also no accident. This emergence belongs first to the species, coming with, though not entirely caused by, the arrival of language and abstraction. And then there is latency. Whatever the evolutionary explanation of the long period that divides the early expressions of human sexuality from reproductive fitness, Freud sees it as the essential enabler of the differences in kind that came to mark the human psyche as we know it. It provides developmentally quiet time for the child to coordinate the elements of its tripartite structure, creating space for rule-following character to form, as well as planting the seeds for the later development of a reflective and critical kind of practical agency suited to the arrival of *Kultur*.[25]

While examination of psychoanalytic case studies was the primary material for Freud's theorizing, he also sought a kind of confirmation of the three-dimensional history in somewhat speculative accounts of evolutionary anthropology. For example, he begins *Totem and Taboo* with the question why primitive peoples studied by anthropologists, as well as the historical record of early hominids, all give evidence to their securing with "the most scrupulous care and the most painful severity the aim of avoiding incestuous sexual relations. Indeed, their whole social organization seems to serve that purpose or to have been brought into relation with its attainment."[26] Freud's focus is not on the origin of such a broad prohibition. The almost universal care taken to prevent incest is for him evidence that the sexual urge is recognized as a threat across the species' biological history, making the efforts to control it a shaping force in the species' development, either through natural selection or some more Lamarckian social process. Like any such process, it is messy, bringing with it end-irrelevant structures and goals, plus some useful spandrels. The complex result is deep in what it is to be human.

As noted above, Freud holds that each of us inherits and repeats parts of the three-dimensional history. The emergence of the ego and then the superego are not self-inventing acts. Ego and superego are born in the species' bio-history and born again in the individual psyche. Culture and

[24] Those qualifications are the terrain of psychoanalytic insight and intervention.

[25] The tensions of early development (around attachment and authority) thus have to be resolved in a way that make the dependence on adults in the long latency period stable. For us, the means to this is in the resolution of the *Oedipus complex*. Other species also have long latency periods. In the African elephant, to take an interesting example, the tension between emergent sexuality and dominance is resolved through a matriarchal multi-generational social structure and the exile of sexually active bulls.

[26] *Totem and Taboo* (XIII, pp. 3–6).

personal history shape these emergent elements just the way the stuff in an animal's environment (say, changes in the availability of types of food) shapes the living bio-individuals. In this light, we should think of the superego's functional role as parallel to that of the pecking order among hens. It is a first principle of social organization. But because the human bio-history is distinctive, so are the potentials that are thereby unlocked.

About the emergent moral capacity, we should say that what the theorized elements of development provide is no more the source of lived morality (moral content) than terrestrial physics is the source of architecture. There is nonetheless a dependence relation—about both content and feasibility. Although the arrival of the superego, the housing for conscience-affect, does not predetermine moral (or social) norms, its specific history may dispose persons towards certain normative structures—perhaps affecting their sense of fairness or ideas of dessert or tolerance for loss—and consequently how easily moral demands sit in their lives. Inside the developmental form, there is space for a lot of contingency—personal, familial, cultural—some salutary, some not. Individual pathology is not the only kind of negative outcome. Some ideals of being moral may be unrealistic for us, either because they ultimately undermine the practical capacity they depend on, or because they are directed only at the individual without intentional support from social structures. Freud regarded the obvious misfit between the ideal of equality and the modern institution of private property an obvious example of this.[27]

I think much of this is friendly to Kant's project. We might conjecture on Kant's behalf that, whether by accident or evolutionary design or some pressure from a teleologically directed force of nature, the possibility of a living being in nature having a moral character depends on something like Freud's three-dimensional history of the self. Such a view could support the idea of our empirical nature being "good enough" for the work of human moral agency. Indeed, the second "step of reason" in Kant's allegorical and ironic "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" offers a like-minded conjecture (*Conj.* 8, pp. 112–113). The biblical fig leaf, which withdrew from the senses the immediate object of the sexual instinct, showed "consciousness of some dominion of reason over impulse" for ideal aims. By affording dominion over sexual impulse, it initiates the sequence of transitions from stimulus to refusal to the ability to adopt good conduct to gain approval "through the concealment of that which could incite low esteem." This other-directed propriety (*sittsamkeit*) gives "the first hint toward the formation of the human being as a moral creature" (*Ibid.*) Kant describes it as Freud might: a small beginning that is epoch making. Finding the moment in the trials of infant sexuality was not an insight available to Kant, but finding it in an idea of species emergence was.[28]

To be sure, Freud does not see either practical reason or morality holding pride of place in the resolution of the tensions endemic to the human condition. But even for Freud they do work that the self, however conflicted, depends on. Together, the two modes of the hypothetical imperative offer counsel and guidance for accommodating our needs and inclinations to the natural social world we inhabit. Part of the work of moral content, the substance of our self-and other-regarding duties, is to manage the stresses and temptations afflicting agential maturity and independence in an often-unfriendly social environment. Fittingly, Kant's diagnostic approach to the vices we are vulnerable to appeals to pathologies such as projection and displacement that call for a Freud to explain.[29]

Having gone this far, I want to risk pressing the advantage for Kantian theory adopting something like the Freudian three-dimensional account in a direction one would not have expected. I think Freud offers valuable resources, consistent with core Kantian commitments, to address some

[27]See, for example, *Civilization and its Discontents* (XXI, p. 113).

[28]Kant did not have Darwin, but an idea of evolution pervades his anthropological thinking.

[29]See, for examples, his accounts of vices of the self as an animal being and his discussion of ingratitude in *The Doctrine of Virtue* (MM 6, pp. 422–428, 459).

plain facts of moral pluralism that have long seemed out of Kantian theory's reach.[30] This may seem doubly odd since classical Freudian theory has often been criticized for offering a theory of the human psyche that was in too many ways a reflection of bourgeois Viennese mores. No doubt it was; indeed, it could do no other. The data-source could only express itself with the language and imagery of its time and place. However, that's not reason to conclude that Freud's foundational inferences about the deep structure of the human psyche were similarly limited. At that level, what we are given is an idea of human psychical development dependent on the resolution of an unavoidable tension between affective, sexually saturated attachment and a perceived related loci of threat, a resolution that has to be managed using infantile tools in a young child's imaginary of time and place. The emergent inner authority structure, dependent on what Freud calls the superego, born of repression, anxiety, and identification, will realign the psychic elements, preparing the child for its life in a social world with the real others they are to live among. Creating functional space in the psyche for self-regulation, the superego secures the possibility of moral authority, *without* dictating moral content.[31] The range of possible moral content has to fit with, even if it would reform, the found range of psychic and social configurations. Not all happy families are alike. And while virtue may be its own reward, it is not on its own a solution to the contradictions social and political life may present.

With that in mind, once we take on the idea that Kantian duties manage the conditions that tax or threaten our standing and healthy function as agents-in-the-world with emergent rational capacities and acculturated instinctual lives, we can take the next step. A Kantian assessment of, say, non-European and non-hegemonic ideas of integrity, honesty in speech, property, duties to the poor, should not be asking whether a local principle of action is consistent with the freedom of all (without regard to time, place, structures of social and economic life). The right question is whether the local moral structures serve the challenges of mine and thine, truthfulness, attachment and identity, as they arise, consistent with the demands of human rational nature and the health of moral subjects *in situ*, as it were. Some will, and some will not. Given differences in geography, history and culture, there need not and likely could not be across the board universal moral solutions.[32]

None of this undermines the aspiration of objective moral value central to the Kantian project. It rather recognizes the complexity of the condition that must be in place for such value to be realized. So, whatever the social form, the threat of incest must be met. But the positive rules and duties with respect to who can marry or procreate or inherit do not follow neatly and should be articulated in a psychically as well as a morally defensible and sustainable direction. Although there's no more here than a suggestion of a direction, it's enough to show the value for the Kantian's taking Freud on board: once we let the full complexity of "good enough" empirical human nature in, it can be true both that pluralism is inevitable and that morality is not ultimately relative or indeterminate.[33]

It is understandable that the dark experience of a world war coupled with the increasing strains of modern capitalism fueled Freud's pessimism about what morality could accomplish. Freud saw the emphasis on individual moral agency as a late-in-the-species and ambivalently healthy development (here he stands with Nietzsche). It calls for skill in self-representation and critical self-reflection, self-discipline and instinctual sacrifice. Freud is not at all sure this is a good thing, or even

[30]I do not mean to suggest that there have been no interesting attempts to address this issue. I note the work of Marie Newhouse (2016) and Katrin Flikschuh (2018) as just two important examples. My aim here is to point to the importance of psycho-social development to the *content* of diverse duties as a way of acknowledging that they are not just permissible moral options.

[31]This is true of the functional role of the categorical imperative as well, but that's a claim for another time.

[32]Some moral contents—norms of truthfulness, for example—are closer to the rational bone than others.

[33]A Freud-influenced understanding of the structure of the empirical moral capacity should also affect some of our expectations about moral reform. Change is not the condition the empirical system that interprets and applies moral or evaluative requirements is designed for. This is a reason for humility, not a recommendation for leaving things as they are.

a tolerable thing, for the human being. He is all too aware that some of the glories of civilization live in the shade of its horrors. But given the reign of emergent ideals, there is no alternative to pressing on with the task of civilization. It is hard not to be reminded here of Kant's acknowledgment in the *Idea for a Universal History* that for all the achievements of human culture, we cannot say ahead of time that the outcome will not be a "hell of ills" (*Idea* 8, p. 25). In the face of this real possibility, Kant offers a proleptic prescription: that it is (has to be?) rational to believe that nature's aim for humanity includes a progressive moral possibility, an aim that "may be promoted by the very idea of it" (*Idea* 8, p. 26). So there they stand, side by side, shoulders to the wheel.

## 7. Conclusion

If there's a lesson to be taken from these less familiar points of contact between Freud and Kant it is the opposite of replacing parts of one theory with the parts of the other. The aim is to align their spheres of insight in ways that enable them to cross over, so that each can extend and deepen the other, sometimes providing guardrails for the other's tendency to excess, sometimes lining up behind shared goals, sometimes just acknowledging how very hard what we cannot but try to do may be.

**Barbara Herman** is Griffin Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Law at UCLA. She is the author of several books, most recently The Moral Habitat (OUP, 2021) and numerous articles on topics in Kantian ethics, moral psychology, and political philosophy.

## References

References to *Freud* are to volume and page of the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (ed. James Strachey), The Hogarth Press (1957).

References to Kant are to volume and page of the Akademie edition of Kant's works, using the translations from the Cambridge Edition of Kant's Work (Cambridge University Press). Abbreviations: *KpV* for *The Critique of Practical Reason*, *Rel* for *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, Conj* for "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," *Idea* for "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View".

Flikschuh, Katrin. (2018). Kant's contextualism. *Kantian Review*, 23(4), 555–579. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415418000407

Lear, Jonathan. (2005). *Freud*. Routledge.

Longuenesse, Béatrice. (2017). *I, Me, Mine: Back to Kant, and back again*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199665761.001.0001

Newhouse, Marie. (2016). Two types of legal wrongdoing. *Legal Theory*, 22(1), 59–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1352325216000112

Russell, Francey. (2025). Authority and ambivalence: On Kant, Freud, and moral psychology. *Mind*, 134(536), 1068–1092. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzaf036

Scheffler, Samuel. (1992). *Human morality*. Oxford University Press.

Velleman, David. (1999). A rational superego. *Philosophical Review*, 108(4), 529–558. https://doi.org/10.2307/2998287

**Cite this article:** Herman, B. 2026. Is "Good Enough" Good Enough?—Bringing Freud to Kant Without Anachronism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 56: e1, 1–13, doi:10.1017/can.2026.10119