

# TOWARDS AN ETHICAL RECONTEXTUALISATION OF FREUD'S THEORY OF PERSONALITY

Mojalefa LJ Koenane

Department of Philosophy, Practical & Systematic Theology, University of South Africa

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the possibilities of complementing Freud's theory of human nature with the doctrine of St Thomas Aquinas on the virtue of prudence (phronesis). The paper builds on the foundation laid down by Freud's theory of the id, the ego, and the superego in relation to moral behaviour. However, it takes a rather different approach to moral decision-making and behaviour, culminating in the author's creation of the concept of the moral-ego. What is being raised in this paper is a concern that Freud's theory reduces morality to the dictates of the superego.*

**Keywords:** *Id; ego; prudence; moral decision-making and behaviour; Thanatos; phronesis; superego.*

## INTRODUCTION

As a point of departure, it is necessary to mention the distinction between moral philosophy and moral psychology. For this purpose we turn to the differentiation of Composta (2000:1), who puts it thus: “[T]he purpose of moral philosophy is to understand life in depth and become moral.” He further maintains that moral life consists of the fact that it establishes morality, while moral science or psychology attempts to understand and explain moral behaviour. The argument of this article is that Freud's theory cannot be taken on face value as a way of life. It is proposed that we need to understand Freud's theory for what it was meant to be, namely a revolt against the then prevalent Victorian morality, which despised sex during his time. Freud's theory reduces the human source of motivation to sex. Hence, his theory of the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego* has influence on most people, even those who will not accept it as a way to explain morality. It is as if we forever feel that Freud's theories must be right. Although I am the first to concede that it was indeed right for the purposes Freud intended it for (that is, a psychological explanation) I argue that it has been wrongly interpreted by most theorists – more especially in psychology.

The basic teaching in Freud's theory is that human beings are sexually determined. It suggests that human sexuality is the motivating factor behind all human actions, including moral decision-making and behaviour. This is a psychological and not a philosophical explanation of moral behaviour. I argue that we need to break this spell and try to find a better alternative, or complement, and this article will be offering such an alternative.

Humankind asks questions about the world itself and about its own existence. It wants explanations of the meaning of life and answers regarding human actions or that which in psychology is generally referred to as human behaviour. Freud's theory of the human personality consists of three main components, the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego* (Ricoeur 1973:211). His theory is designed to account for mental illness (psyche as well as human behaviour in general) and when it is taken as an account of human nature, it appears untenable.

My argument can be likened to that of Christine A James in her article entitled: "Irrationality in philosophy and psychology: the moral implications of self-defeating behaviour" (James 1998:224-234). In this article, James writes: "... I will describe choking, and by analogy other forms of self-defeating behaviour, can be explained very well without appeal to a purely Freudian sub-consciousness or sub-agents' view of mind" (James 1998:224). James felt challenged to give an alternative view to understand self-defeating behaviour. She also sought a conception of "the mind", different from that espoused by Freud. For this she turned to Mark Johnston's notion of "mental tropisms". In the next section this article will present a brief account of Freud's theory of human personality and what this theory means for moral behaviour. Then the focus will shift to what I term the *moral-ego* as an alternative way to understand the self when confronted with the challenge to make a rational and moral decision.

The paper is structured as follows: after the above introduction I map out Freud's theory of the mind and move further to argue why in my opinion the theory is untenable. This is followed by St Thomas's theory of prudence. Using this theory, the paper will move on to explore my own theory of the *moral-ego*. The paper will argue why the idea of the *moral-ego* makes sense, rather than Freud's moral psychology. The article is concluded by explaining why this theory would be an alternative to Freud's theory of the mind.

## FREUD'S THEORY OF THE MIND

The human mind – according to Sigmund Freud – is divided into three parts, each of which plays a different role from others and has its own content. The three parts are the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*. According to Freud the *id* is primitive or naturally irrational, unconscious, universal and is characteristic of every one of us, that is, we are all born with the *id* drives. Put differently, for Freud we are influenced by unconscious forces, which express themselves in blind, causally determined responses. The *id* in Freud cannot be equated with morality in the sense that Freud eliminates rationality where the

*id*'s primitive drives are concerned. Thus, human actions in this case are unintelligible and without a purpose. The *id* is thought to be made up of natural biological instincts and urges situated in the unconscious mind, self-serving, impulsive and irrational. The *id* runs according to the pleasure principle (Spurling 1989:65). This means that the *id* will try to act on any pleasurable experience it conceives. Freud also believed that the *id* has a death instinct known as *Thanatos*. According to Freud *Thanatos* is a destructive urge and the source of aggression, in other words, *Thanatos* is deemed as a negative force, which must be subjected to reality check. According to Freud's theory, the *id* is morally explosive.

The *ego* on the other hand, in Freud's theory, directs behaviour by adjusting the *id* appetites to reality. Thus the *ego* functions as a reality principle. Consequently, human thinking, planning, problem solving and deciding on what course of action to take, are the main functions of the *ego*. In this theory, the *ego* is the mid-point between two exaggerated extremes – it mediates between the *id* and the *superego*. The *superego*, on the other hand, serves as a judge for immoral thoughts and actions carried out by the *ego*.

The *superego* imposes societal mores on an individual to the extent that if these dogmatic mores are disobeyed then the *superego* punishes the individual with guilt. Jones (1966) distinguishes between a bad moral conscience and the *superego*. According to Jones (1966:35) from a moral philosophical perspective, bad moral conscience is a consequence of a sincere moral guilt coming from a morally sincere individual. Put differently, according to Freud, the *superego* (which is the internalised father-figure) has overly excessive demands of morality (high moral standards) from human beings (Spurling 1989:78). According to Freud's theory guilt is nothing more than blind self-punishment. Freud's theory seems to suggest that morality can be reduced to the demands or dictates of the internalised divine figure in the form of the *superego*. This is absurd. Looking at Freud's theory, one thing becomes clear: every interpretation of human actions or behaviour is connected to a mode of social and moral life. Moral life demands moral decisions and actions from the human being as a whole. The point being made here is that the interaction of the three elements of personality as offered by Freud, may not be seen as three distinct elements fragmented from one another. The problem is that Freud's theory appears to go against this.

Freud's theory of the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego* compartmentalises the human being. Hence I argue that this theory is speculative since human beings cannot locate the *id*, *ego* and *superego*. Further, Freud's theory is mechanistic (there is no "moral sincerity") as Jones (1966:56) suggests. Because it assumes that human nature is inhabited by impersonal forces, his notion of consciousness is analogous to a box. Granted, Freud clearly formulated these theoretical constructs as a dynamic and integrated process. It seems to me that there is a similarity between Freud's approach to that of Plato<sup>1</sup> and Hegel. To draw the similarity between Freud and Plato, Olivier

---

1 Plato is credited with the triad theory of the three parts of the mind.

(2012:79-80) refers to Plato's analogy of the charioteer, the two horses one black and the other white. As Olivier, explains, the charioteer represents reason while the white horse represents the spirit and the black symbolises desires. Apparently, the black horse is unruly and usually out of control (Plato 1961:253d-e) – it could be likened to Freud's *id* with its primitiveness. In Hegel's philosophy of history, there are three different worlds of existence,<sup>2</sup> and these are: childhood of spirit; adolescence spirit; and major spirit. Furthermore, according to Hegel, the third stage in his triad is one of consciousness, which does not need mediation.<sup>3</sup> Using Hegel's triad as an analogy in this discourse, it becomes clear that unlike Freud, Hegel's third stage, that is, the "major spirit" is almost a mature stage of reflection (morality in the context of this current discourse). In Hegel's discourse, the first stage (childhood of spirit) is irrational and unreflective. We know which groups of people he believed belong to this "world"; these are the people he regarded as inferior in all aspects compared to those he considered belonging to the adolescence spirit and the major spirit.<sup>4</sup> This is exactly the same as the unconscious deeds that are accounted for through the *id* in Freud's theory.

I argue that what is radically flawed with Freud's theory is that he ignores the ethical dilemma and complexities which an individual is confronted with when making a moral choice, as is confirmed by Holt (1980). The reality of complexities in real situations of moral dilemma, which is overlooked by Freud, is acknowledged by Holt who writes: "Perhaps he [Freud] really failed to see that life is filled with legitimate moral dilemmas, situations in which one cannot simultaneously attain more than one ideal end and where logic or scientific information do not tell us which way to go" (Holt 1980:40). Holt further asserts that Freud and his followers believed that the discipline of psychoanalysis alone could afford "answers to human problems" (1980:41).

Looked at from a moral philosophical point of view, choosing "wrong" and thus acting in a non-moral way does not necessarily decipher as irrationality – this is still a choice and very much a rational one for that matter. In this way, we need to speak of the disconnected moral-self, where the mystery of being suggests that the individual who is moral is the same person who sometimes acts immorally. Therefore the *moral-ego* is a state and not so much how one chooses. The idea of the moral-self is better captured by Arendt (2003) reformulating Socrates thus: "Though I am one, I am two-in-one and there can be harmony or disharmony with the self... but I cannot walk away from myself..., if I do wrong, I am condemned to live together with a wrong-doer in unbearable intimacy" (Arendt 2003:90).

Understood against this background, self-awareness is not formed by compartmentalising oneself as Freud's theory suggests, but by becoming aware of the mystery of being human. As Nietzsche sums it up in the preface of *On the genealogy*

---

2 Aware of Hegel's controversial and annoying definition of his triad world of existence – this is not the place to enter into a discussion regarding his discourse.

3 The term used by Hegel is "unmediated".

4 For Hegel the Greek and Europeans are both superior to other groups he referred to as belonging to the childhood of spirit.

*of morality*: "...our thoughts, values, every 'yes', 'no', 'if' and 'but' grow from us with the same inevitability as fruits borne on the tree – all related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of one will, one health, one earth, one sun" (Acampora 2006:212). Jones (1966:35) expresses his trepidation about Freud's theory in the following manner: "Freud's theory of the *superego* is not a correct account of the phenomenon of moral conscience." As human beings, we do not react mechanically, as other animals do, to different situations. This is primarily what distinguishes us from other animals. In my view Freud's interpretation of the human act is too narrow to deal with questions of our moral life which, as I suggested, develops as a person's *moral-ego* grows in strength and maturity. At this developed stage an individual also develops what Jones refers to as "moral sincerity". Freud's interpretation ignores the complexities of the internal conflict in healthy subjects and reflects the disintegration which characterised the minds of his patients. It is therefore clear that such a conflict forms a part of the *moral-ego's* development of character. What I am claiming is that this model of a disintegrated mind has been accepted as a philosophical model of the mind. I suggest that Freud's theory of the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego* is problematic because it presents itself to most people as a way of life or a philosophical explanation of human behaviour. It is for this reason that Jones (1966:35) argues that "Freud's theory of the *superego* must be distinguished from the phenomena which constitute a bad moral conscience". I argue that this is not the case or at least should not be. Therefore, the content of a moral outlook cannot be understood in terms of completely dependent unintelligible parts of personality as suggested by Freud's theory of the mind. Further, in Holt (1980:38) Freud confirms that people's moral scruples are traits of the *superego*. This is exactly what MacIntyre rejects and calls the catastrophic state of contemporary moral philosophy for which he offers the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics as a way out of the current muddled situation (MacIntyre 1981:238). Also Holt (1980:38) – before MacIntyre – postulated that the world is in a "moral crisis". Writing from a psychologist's perspective, Holt puts it thus:

We have a serious need of a vital psychological understanding of moral thinking and behavior, one that is not limited to any particular kind of person but is very generally applicable. I believe that the survival of not only humankind but many other kinds of life on earth is in real and growing danger, and that we know much more about what must be done to fend off such danger than about how to get people to make the necessary changes in their behavior. In large part, such changes amount to self-restraint, self-control, the postponement of immediate pleasures and the giving up of familiar, easy comforts – the very objectives of a great part of morality. From this perspective, morality is a device of social control, an indispensable primary way in which societies have always prevented the breakdown of social order and their own eventual self-destruction (Holt 1980:39).

If we juxtapose Freud's *id* part of the mind and what is asserted by Holt above; we will understand that the unreasonable pleasure seeking demands must be put under control. He therefore believes that morality has a big role to play. In the next section, we turn to

the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas with a hope of redirecting Freud's notion of the human psyche (mind).

## ARISTOTELIAN-THOMISTIC THEORY OF PRUDENCE (PHRONESIS)

I intend to critique Freud's theory in the light of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical tradition. Freud's theory was challenged by philosophers who looked at this theory from a philosophical outlook. Jones asserts thus: "[M]oral philosophers can hardly afford to ignore a psychological theory which purports to explain the genesis of moral conscience in human beings" (1966:34). This paper does not intend to discredit Freud at all but to bring a different perspective to his theory of personality.

The naturalistic school of thought to which Freud subscribed, holds the view that the universe does not need a supernatural being. The naturalistic school of thought further denies freedom, purpose and transcendent destiny. In axiology, naturalism manifests itself as an attempt to reduce ethics to natural events, physical facts and matters which can be settled empirically, that is, by applying methods of natural sciences (Gonsalves 1985:205). But this need not be the case, particularly when we consider the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of *phronesis*, or what in Aristotle is referred to as the virtue of practical wisdom. Here we consider also Aristotle's allusion to the virtue of temperance. I believe these are the two elements which are lacking in Freud's theory. To understand the significance of the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in Aristotle's writings, we begin with one of the classical definitions of man, which he gives, namely that "man is a rational animal" – as such man's actions and decisions must be dominated by reasoning. Aristotle further articulates that moral virtues are those which focus on an individual's ability to make the right choices. Further, for him, practical wisdom makes it possible for a person to control his/her desires and conduct – in this way moral virtue refers to how one's character is formed. Moral virtue refers to practical decisions people make in the presence of moral struggle. By his own admission Freud asserts that the *id* is irrational and seeks pleasure (Gay 1997:126; Cordon 2005:86). Consequently, if one understands Freud's theory correctly with regard to the instinctive drives of the *id*, a person allows the human desires to dominate reason – this according to Aristotle's psychology is unhealthy. Aristotle was convinced that when we allow our desires to dominate our rationality (reason), this would eventually lead to an unhealthy imbalance and a tendency to act irrationally (Jones 1966). We have seen how both the *id* and the *superego* can be a deficiency and excess; they both represent two points of extreme. For example, according to Freud in Ricoeur (1970:280), the *superego* is portrayed as the aggressor in instances where a human being has given in to pleasure instincts. In order to clearly understand Aristotle's doctrine of the mean we refer to his own way of expressing it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1992), Book II, Chapter 6, 1106b-36:

Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, that is, the mean relative to us, being determined by a rational principle and by the principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean; with regard to what is best and right, an extreme.

In other words, virtue is a habit of choosing the mean at our disposal. St Thomas in (*Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 59, a. 1) (Pegis 1960) puts it: "Virtue is a habit of choosing the mean appointed by reason as a prudent man would appoint it." Therefore, this paper argues that the better way to deal with these exaggerations (that is, excess and deficiency) is through the use of *phronesis*. Clearly *phronesis* can counter the exaggerated desires of the *id* and the excessive demands of the *superego* by bringing in moderation and shaping the character (*moral-ego*) of the moral agent. This scheme is different from that provided by Freud with regard to the relation and the interaction between the three elements of personality.

According to MacIntyre (1981) today's moral philosophy is in a "catastrophic" state. He writes: "We now live in a world in which the language and the appearance of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part, destroyed" (MacIntyre 1981:5). In modern society, the individual is no longer defined according to societal roles as he or she was in the past. MacIntyre believes it is only possible for an individual to live life in a particular way if morality is anchored in a community or tradition. Current moral theory is mixed with emotivism, which is the belief that moral judgements (having no independent, objective rational basis against which they can be adjudicated) are purely expressions of individuals' preferences and dislikes: "Emotivism rests upon the claim that every attempt whether past or present to provide a rational justification for an objective morality has in fact failed" (MacIntyre 1981:19).

The related notions of subjectivism and relativism become prevalent in moral theory since the moral consensus (within community or tradition) needed to make objectively grounded value judgements, has long since gone. The "interminable" character of today's moral debate is proof of the fact that modern moral philosophy is barren, that is, it cannot offer any rational justification against which we can measure our moral claims and, therefore, cannot significantly contribute to moral practice. Without a communal backing, virtue is now whatever we choose it to be. In older tradition virtues were not just chosen and rejected like last year's fashion, but were rather lived by a community that gave them life and meaning.

For Aristotle, virtue is closely intertwined with feelings or passion as well as actions. Aristotle asserts: "If the virtues are concerned with actions and feelings, therefore every feeling and every action is always accompanied with pleasures and pains" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1992:1104b, 14-16). Thus, in the Aristotelian tradition, which St

Thomas Aquinas adopted with modification, moral goodness is a result of habituation, not something one is naturally born with it. Thus, the irrational *id* with its pleasure seeking desire can be controlled by repeated actions which form character. Therefore, in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, as in other moral philosophical theories, every act entails a decision or a choice on the part of a moral agent. This kind of theory must penetrate what some believe to be moral psychology, particularly the Freudian psychological theory of the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*. It is in this regard I suggest that the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of *phronesis* can offer new meaning and philosophical interpretation to Freud's theory. A great deal of St Thomas's philosophy is based on Aristotle, but it is Aristotle rethought and synthesised by a great thinker. It is necessary to begin by defining what prudence means for St Thomas. He derives his definition of prudence from Aristotle, which reads as follows: "Prudence is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things which are good and bad for mankind" (Copleston 1962:125).

St Thomas's definition is a modified and shortened version of Aristotle. For St Thomas, "prudence is right reason applied to action" (*Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 57) (Pegis 1960). For both Aristotle and St Thomas action refers to human moral acts only (Copleston 1962:125). My understanding is that this refers to actions that are deliberate and voluntary. This includes acts of kindness, political actions of the government and legislation and moral duty imposed by reason on every individual.

We may add to this that moral actions also include being indifferent, that is, refraining from acting when circumstances may demand an action. An example would be a mother refraining from action when witnessing sexual abuse of her child by the father. The *id* of such a father with its *Thanatos* drives would be so strong that this man's *superego* could be considered dead, or the *ego* in him fails to sublimate or repress his desires to molest his child. Suppose that the father had managed to kill his *superego*, that nothing of it is left and that he was driven so forcefully by the *id* drive, with its primitive pleasure appetites, that he does not believe that what he did was wrong. By silencing the *superego*, he has already committed a moral act. The point here is: 1. He has "killed" the *superego* (the conscience); 2. We do not know what he would have thought had his *superego* been intact. All we can be sure of is that without conscience there is no moral guilt, without which everything goes. The problem we have to contend with here, is that on the one hand (for Freud) an individual feels guilty for not allowing the primitive (wild) desires to be gratified, while in contrast the Aristotelian wisdom suggests that it is when one chooses wrongly, that one feels guilty.

However, we are surely unwilling to accept that kind of reasoning. Our unwillingness suggests that there exist some universal values on which all people (or at least all reasonable people) would agree. If we assume that there are no universal values and that the *superego* is relative to cultural or religious background, then we must also agree that the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (in South Africa) was unnecessary and had no basis to require accountability from people

who were involved in crimes against humanity perpetrated under apartheid. Indeed, the very notion of crime would lose all meaning. Our conduct as human beings is largely motivated by wants, desires and natural drives, but all of these are channelled or guided by prudence. Prudence as a determining principle of human conduct differs from the natural law, instincts or natural drives. We cannot paralyse our natural drives but we are free to choose our principles.

Another example of support for moral responsibility is to be found in the context of past gross human rights violations. Typically, this conjures up images of a Nuremberg Tribunal and in South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (also abbreviated as TRC). Both the Nuremberg Trial and the TRC confirm that a person can be held responsible for his/her conduct. These two bodies were based on an assumption of the existence of freedom and some kind of universal idea of right and wrong. A useful definition of moral guilt which will be considered for the purpose of this paper is that of Jaspers (1971):

The question of the individual analysing himself is that [which] we call the moral one ..... The morally guilty are those who are capable of penance, the ones who knew, or could know, and yet walked in ways which self-analysis reveals to them as culpable error – whether conveniently closing their eyes to events or permitting themselves to be intoxicated, seduced or bought with personal advantages, or obeying from fear (Jaspers 1971:41).

In Kritz (1995:208) Massey gives a clearer understanding of moral guilt by stating that moral responsibility for actions or omission (failure to act) is to interrogate the actor/doer or at least try to determine the blameworthiness of the moral agent. The dominant idea behind the notion of *moral-ego* implies that the moral agent must account for his/her conduct, particularly in those instances where he/she could have acted differently. Jaspers maintains that the determination of moral guilt belongs to the individual and his/her conscience (1971:41).

The question of rape or child molestation can sometimes be confusing. The confusion could be caused by a lack of understanding that the act of rape is not and must not be equated to the sexual desire between two consenting adults. Rape, by contrast, is the use of power; an act of physical violence aimed at sexual gratification. Sex with a minor and without consent is not sex but rape. This is a moral judgement censuring the carnal contact as wrong. The moral judgement does not lie in the *superego* but in the *moral-ego*. The sexual abuse of a child by its father is therefore a morally reprehensible act.

Within the alternative framework I am proposing, my understanding of St Thomas's theory of the virtue of prudence is that the three Freudian elements of personality cannot account for moral decision-making and behaviour. Using St Thomas's theory correctly, one can conclude that there is only the *ego* (the self or the conscience-self). This conscience-self for St Thomas, contains the virtue of prudence that is the ability to deliberate and reason properly and thus act accordingly. Doing or choosing otherwise is

an example of a miscalculation on the part of the individual. Let us turn to the following example.

A is confronted with a situation in which she is called upon to stop sexual abuse of her daughter by her husband. A then chooses not to do a thing about this incident (take note that this is a deliberate action). Consequently, the perpetrator continues to molest the child. The helpless child hopes the mother or somebody will do something to rescue her. The child is not aware that the mother witnessed the abuse first hand. The child reports the abuse to the mother, who warns the child not to say any such thing again. There is conflict in the child. The mother pretends she never witnessed or had any knowledge of such an act. The bottom line is that she does nothing to prevent this from happening again. The child feels betrayed not only by the father but by the mother as well.

A's moral judgement is unreasonable according to St Thomas. Indeed, A's reasoning is no better than that of the child-molester; in fact, it is worse. Not doing anything or being indifferent is in itself an act, but an act of omission. One can therefore distinguish between two elements: an act of commission and one of omission. In the light of this example one can understand what both Aristotle and St Thomas mean when they say: "Prudence is the virtue by means of which human beings choose and command their acts" (Westberg 1994:144). The Aristotelian definition of prudence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1992) reads thus: "Prudence is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things which are good and bad for man" (Book 6, Chapter 5, 1140b). St Thomas on the other hand, distinguishes four cardinal virtues which together constitute a unity.

- Prudence
- Justice
- Courage
- Temperance.

The purpose here, however, is to focus solely on the virtue of practical wisdom or prudence. Suffice it to say that these four virtues are inseparable yet nonetheless distinct. St Thomas further argues that prudence among these has a unique function in the sense that it gives to others their form, fixing them through reason as habits of character, that is, as sources of voluntary and deliberate acts rather than accidental or unformed inclinations (Wyllie 1965). Accordingly to this perspective, *phronesis* is characteristically a virtue of humankind's natural reason. Returning to our example, and applying it to St Thomas's conception of *phronesis*, it becomes obvious that what A did by not acting positively or doing anything to prevent the abuse of a child, is an unreasonable act. In the same way, for A to pretend she is unaware of the situation that called upon her to act and not be indifferent, is in the mind of the child, and any reasonable person, morally wrong. Hence, A is also an unreasonable person. This is because wherever there are human acts, if such acts are good, then St Thomas would

say prudence is also present in those who performed these good acts. On the other hand, wherever human acts fail to perform something good, there prudence is lacking. With regard to the acts of A in our example we can thus conclude that the virtue of practical wisdom was lacking. However, the Freudian theory would have it that the *id* with its primitive drives is uncompromising in its demands for pleasure to an irrational extent. And it is at this stage, Freud suggests, that conflict arises between the primitive demands of the *id* and the sometimes over-strict control of the *superego*. Freud further suggests that the two must be reconciled by the *ego*. This is not how St Thomas would argue. Applying the doctrine of prudence, Freud's notion of personality is thus flawed. There is no such thing as parts called the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*. The so-called *id* is sublimated or over-powered by the virtue of prudence where it is possible for a person to be reasonable. It is the unified *moral-self* that is in conflict with itself, namely at having to make a choice between options of different moral values. The virtue of practical wisdom (that is, *phronesis*) accordingly, is not one "part" of the self, in conflict with another "part" but rather a value to guide the unified moral agent, not some (other) agent within this agent – or against it (over as Freud would have it drawing on the *superego* and the *id* respectively). This value, moreover, is able to be assimilated by the moral agent as a virtuous enrichment of character, as he/she matures through repeatedly having to make moral decisions along life's way.

Let me summarise St Thomas's conception of prudence: reason is perfected in the knowledge of truth and right reason regulates right action. This implies that prudence must be able to discern that which is right and thus do the right thing. Since ethics is concerned with what ought to be done as well as with what is and can be done, I find St Thomas's theory of *phronesis* enlightening. For ethical deliberations then, practical wisdom (where it exists) directs human action into something good and right, whereas where prudence is lacking, human actions are misdirected. In this way what we find in St Thomas is that prudence (*phronesis*) or practical rationality/reason translates knowledge of truth into action. In our example, the knowledge of truth for A would be to make sure that she stops the abusive behaviour somehow or reports it in order for the perpetrator to be stopped. Such acts cannot be seen as moral, no matter who the agent or whatever the circumstances may be. Again, the knowledge of the truth for A is that if you witness or know about crime being committed you are obliged to do the right thing by seeking ways to bring it to an end. In our example, A, lacked practical reasoning or *phronesis*, as St Thomas would suggest, that is, by acting reasonably to ensure the abuse is stopped.

St Thomas further suggests that prudence as a virtue is not all that is required for someone's actions to be good. In other words, *phronesis* is not the only moral guide to our actions. He maintains that the will is the motivating force and must also be taken into account when judging the morality of the act (Wyllie 1965:9). Therefore, a good action for St Thomas, as for Aristotle, is a combination of two things: right reason (which directs our actions) and rectitude of the will. Here I believe St Thomas is in a

sense a deontologist because he sets up a condition under which the virtue of prudence (practical reasoning) can be judged. Let me simplify once more.

- The first condition is that the intention of the will must be directed towards the good.
- The second condition is that the deliberation of reason must direct man's choice to do the right act (Wyllie 1965:9).

The act in this case is the means to further the good intentions of the will. We therefore have a situation of the means justifying the end and the end forming an integral part of the means. The fulfilment of the second of these conditions presupposes the first. In other words, prudence knows, understands and judges, whereas the will desires, chooses and commands. Both powers pervade man's moral life and all individual acts within that life. In other words, the act of the will begins with the intention of its goal. For the act to be good, the will must be good.

Our natural reactions to ethical situations depend on our ability to reason and apply that reason to real problems. In other words, according to St Thomas (and Aristotle), in every moral sense our actions depend on our ability to reason well and be prudent about the situations that confront us. To be able to make a moral decision about what is right and appropriate we must have the ability to fit things together and to recognise what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. The use of our rational faculties is what I am calling for in order to cope with the moral dilemmas that confront us on a daily basis. *Phronesis* can assist us in our moral and other daily processes. Therefore, it is of vital importance to have one's priorities right. To order priorities right, we need to discover what principle pertains to a given situation. Such a fundamental principle or set of principles is the most basic assumption one makes about everything one does. Indeed, it characterises a person as the kind of person he or she is.

For me three elements constitute an act:

1. Knowledge (that what one is doing is right or wrong).
2. The freedom to act and to will (choice and planning).
3. Completion of the act (whether successful or not).

In my opinion, the three elements include both the virtue of prudence and the intention of the will. For St Thomas, in order for the act to be considered good or ethical, the will must also be good (Wyllie 1965:34). A combination of these three elements constitutes the basis for deciding whether an act is ethical or not. I am therefore arguing that if any one of these elements is missing, it becomes difficult to ascertain the presence of prudence. What the above elements require is for individuals to have what Gonsalves (1985:59) refers to as "prudential certainty". Prudential certainty suggests that there comes a time when an individual is not sure or is in doubt about what must be done, that is, has an ethical dilemma. This suggests that prudential certainty is never absolute; it is always a matter of degree. Therefore, prudential certainty cautions against acting with

a doubtful mind. Should the necessity to act arise, then one must choose the lesser evil, but as a principle, one should avoid acting with a doubtful mind.

## THE MORAL-SELF

In order to understand what I have coined as the term *moral-self*, we will now examine Freud's concept of human psychology in the context of ethics. For Freud the human personality consists of three morally determinate systems: the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*. This is where I differ from Freud; there is only one personality structure, the *moral-ego*, which contains both the ability to do good and the capacity to succumb to our bad appetites, hence the *moral-self*.

Let us explore the meaning of the term *moral-self*. Clearly, it is derived from the Freudian understanding of the *ego* or the self; however, the term as used here, refers to the conscious moral being. I agree with Freud that a child is an *amoral being* in that every child is born without a set of morals. But one may ask, if this is the case, from whence do we derive our moral being? The Freudian *id* makes a person do things that later on that same person feels guilty about; whereas the child does not feel guilty no matter how unethical it behaves because the *moral-ego* is still dormant – only later will it awake to what we regard as moral reality. My theory is as follows: In the early stages of development, the child is selfish not because of the *Thanatos*, as Freud suggests, but because the child is not yet at the stage where it can prudently decide or choose the right course of action (that is, there is a total lack of prudence). However, as the child develops, the *moral-ego* also develops in such a way that gradually the child who was once selfish, now becomes aware of moral reality, which dictates what is regarded as acceptable and what is not acceptable. Note that nobody has yet told the child that being selfish is morally unacceptable.

In Freud's theory, the *superego* punishes the *id* when the *id* obeys the primitive pleasure drive by making one feel guilty (Strachey, Strachey & Tyson 1986:162). In addition, Freud seems to believe that being moral and having a conscience is undesirable (Jones 1966:41) and drives one to becoming neurotic. In other words, for him the more moral an individual is; the more he/she becomes guilty. There is no logic here, first, if the *id* is *amoral*, there is no way a person can feel guilty about anything. Secondly, the reverse is true – bad conscience becomes a fact where the choice was an immoral one. For Freud, therefore the function of the psychoanalytic therapy was mainly to ensure that the *ego* is completely free from the oppressive demands of the *superego*. According to Jones (1966:45) the fear of the *superego* is what Freud referred to as moral anxiety. In my ethical theory, what Freud refers to as the *superego*, is actually, the *moral-ego* in its maturity realising that we could have chosen better had we allowed practical wisdom to direct our actions. I therefore argue for a reinterpretation of Freud's theory, namely: bringing together the *id* and the *superego* aspects of human personality in such a way that the *ego (self)* constitutes the *moral-ego*. In his endeavour to address the problem of

the unconscious with regard to the moral behaviour of the repressed mind, MacIntyre (2004:12) maintains that the *ego* of the rational agent is of paramount importance in terms of how the moral agent acts, irrespective of whether the action is bad or good, moral or immoral. He further argues that in order for the individual to be rational, three conditions are required:

- A rational agent must be aware of reasons and motives but the moral agent must also be undeceived about such reasons and motives.
- A rational agent must have a conception of his/her good; put differently, the individual must articulate in a clear manner what constitutes success or failure in achieving his/her good.
- A rational agent must be able to order and transform her or his desires; in simple terms one cannot allow the desires of the *id* to control or dominate him/her as discussed earlier.

The third and the final condition of the rational agent (MacIntyre 2004) clearly suggests that a practical rational agent is one whose actions are guided by *phronesis* – an individual who is able to exercise reasoning in deciding or allowing his/her desires to influence his/her actions. In this way, the Aristotelian *phronesis* suggests that an individual who has a *moral-ego* is one whose action is determined by rationality.

## CONCLUSION

My ethical recontextualisation of Freud integrates the three aspects (*id*, *ego*, *superego*) in such a way that our moral acts express our inner character. I therefore suggest that these components of our personalities could be reconciled into one, but retain an element of tension precisely when we are confronted with the need to choose between one act and another. I have argued that these integrated components together constitute the *moral-ego*.

This paper is more concerned about things we do (acts of commission) and things we fail to do (omissions) as in the example of the indifferent mother (moral philosophy). It was noted that prudence, which is concerned with the right means, presupposes good intentions with respect to end results. This leads us to the notion of the means justifying the end. It was concluded that prudence is lacking whenever our acts come short of doing the right thing (whatever that may be).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acampora, CD. (Ed). 2006. *Nietzsche's On the genealogy of morals: critical essays*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Arendt, H. 2003. *Responsibility and judgement*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Aristotle. 1992. *Nicomachean ethics* (trans WD. Ross). New York: The Modern Library.

- Composta, D. 2000. *Moral philosophy and social ethics*. Bangalore: Urbanian University Press.
- Copleston, F. 1962. *A history of philosophy: Albert the Great to Duns Scotus*. New York: Image Books.
- Cordon, LA. 2005. *Popular psychology: an encyclopaedia*. Greenwood: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Gay, VP. 1997. Interpretation interminable: agonistics in psychoanalysis. In *Agonistics: arenas of creative contest*. J. Lungstrum & E. Sauer (Eds). New York: State University of New York.
- Gonsalves, MA. 1985. *Fagothey's Right and reason: ethics in theory and practice*. Toronto: Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing.
- Holt, RR. 1980. Freud's impact on modern morality. *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol 10(2):38-45.
- James, CA. 1998. Irrationality in philosophy and psychology: the moral implications of self-defeating behaviour. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol 5(2):224-234.
- Jaspers, K. 1971. Differentiation of German guilt. In Morris, H. (Ed), *Guilt and shame*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Jones, DH. 1966. Freud's theory of moral conscience. *Philosophy*, Vol 41(155):34-57.
- Kritz, NJ. (Ed). 1995. *Transitional justice*. Vol 1. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, Indianapolis: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 2004. *The unconscious: a conceptual analysis*. Revised Edition. New York & London: Routledge.
- Massey, SJ. 1995. Individual responsibility for assisting the Nazis in persecuting civilians. In Kritz, NJ. (Ed). *Transitional justice*. Vol 1. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Olivier, B. 2012. Heidegger, Plato, Freud, Nietzsche: the 'soul' and the question of human finitude. *Phronimon: Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities*. Vol 13(1):77-98.
- Pegis. AC. (Ed). 1960. *Summa Theologica: basic writings of St Thomas Aquinas*. New York.
- Plato. 1961. *Phaedrus*. In *the collected dialogues of Plato*. Edited by Hamilton, E. & Cairns, H. Princeton University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1970. *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation* (trans D. Savage). New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Spurling, L. (Ed). 1989. *Sigmund Freud: critical assessment*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Strachey, J., Strachey, A. & Tyson, A. 1986. *The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press & Institute of Psycho-analysis.
- Westberg, D. 1994. *Practical reason: Aristotle, action and prudence in Aquinas*. Oxford University Press.
- Wyllie, RH. 1965. *Virtue ethics in St Thomas*. Unpublished thesis submitted for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.