MOU RNING AND MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

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This article investigates what it would be to complete the project of ancient Greek ethics and provide a robust moral psychology. It considers Hans Loewald’s interpretation of the psychoanalytic conception of mourning; and argues that this provides a paradigm of what an adequate moral psychology might look like.

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The ancient Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—believed that psychology should not only explain human life, but should vindicate it. For them, human excellence (aretê) was a real possibility, and psychology ought to be for it. The excellent life, they thought, was a happy life, but such a life could never be understood merely in terms of an individual’s sense of satisfaction. The happy life intrinsically involved dignity and worth—and people can make mistakes about that. One aim of psychology would be to disabuse us of the misconceptions we might fall into about what happiness is, and then to promote a correct conception. Psychology would gain its worth and dignity via promoting something worthy and dignified, the happy, excellent human life. The philosophers also believed that this would help us understand, as it helped legitimate, good ways of living with others; that is, ethical life.

This outlook lends vibrancy to the somewhat tired phrase “moral psychology.” Rather than being an uncritical genus-term for emotions—guilt, shame, pride, humiliation—that are used to hold us in line, moral psychology becomes the name of a commitment to a rigorous and truthful account of the psyche that is itself trying to promote what it finds to be good about human being. Such an inquiry would be at once objective and subjective: objective in gathering the available evidence; subjective in the sense of helping to shape the psyche of the subject.¹

The promise and danger of such an approach are, not surprisingly, related. Promise flows from the open-endedness in our understanding of what moral psychology could be. We do not know ahead of time what kind of account of the human will illuminate what

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¹ This is a sense of subjective is Kierkegaard’s use and it stands at some distance from contemporary use of the term. See Kierkegaard (2009) and Lear (2003).
makes human being valuable. The danger is that the purported vindication will be illusory. The theory may not be sufficiently robust, and a desired conclusion is reached too quickly. This is the moment when a moral psychology collapses into moralizing psychology. And it opens the possibility of a less innocent failure: a motivated illusion of excellence and happiness that serves ideological purposes.

One might think that these problems are not our problems. For this account of moral psychology is distant from what goes on in contemporary academic departments of psychology. Still, there is an ethical and cultural question: To what extent should we treat this past as our past? If so, what would it be to do so?

One way to begin is to consider how this previous attempt to formulate a moral psychology faltered. My sense is that Plato and Aristotle’s moral psychologies relied on a conception of psychic integration that they could not sufficiently explain.

So, Socrates in the Republic famously argues that justice is not only a condition of social action, but is also the condition of psychological health. Psychic justice consists in the three parts of the psyche—reason, spirit (thumos), and appetite—working together harmoniously under reason’s rule. He claims too that this is the only possible solution to the problem of psychic integration. But although Socrates uses the concept of intrapsychic harmony, he cannot give a robust account of what it consists in.

Aristotle, for his part, isolates a nonrational part of the soul that in a way listens to reason (Aristotle, 1975, I.13, 1102b13–14). His moral psychology rests on making clear what that way is. He distinguishes the merely continent person who, overcoming conflict, manages to do the right thing, from the virtuous person who is able to do the virtuous act virtuously. This too is understood in terms of intrapsychic integration. In the virtuous person, the nonrational part of the soul is obedient to, listens better to, and speaks with the same voice as the rational part of the soul (I.13, 1102b25–28). Again Aristotle seems to be invoking a conception of obedience he does little to explain. He offers the analogy of the son who obeys his father; but thanks to the modern novel and Freud, we now take such obedience to be marked by ambivalence that neither party well understands. The idea that the nonrational soul should speak with the same voice as the rational soul is suggestive, but Aristotle leaves it at that.

In outlining the conditions of an adequate moral psychology, Bernard Williams (1995) wrote:

> A nonmoralized, or less moralized, psychology uses the categories of meaning, reasons and value, but leaves it open, or even problematical, in what way moral reasons and ethical values fit with other motives and desires, how far they express those other motives, and how far they are in conflict with them. Thucydides and (I believe) the tragedians, among the ancient writers had such a psychology; and so in the modern world, did Freud. (p. 202, my emphasis)

Freud did not set out to construct a moral psychology, he had no set of ethical virtues he was trying to vindicate, and thus the danger of a short-circuit into moralizing is diminished. He took ordinary people as they were; and his aim was to relieve their suffering, as well as reflect on what the suffering meant. He did have an overarching value that permeated his work—truthfulness, facing up to reality—but, in terms of the possibility of a moral psychology, this turned out to be an unexpected benefit. The practical manifestation of truthfulness in the minute-by-minute unfolding of the psychoanalytic situation was Freud’s “fundamental rule”: That analysands should try as best they can to speak

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2 For a discussion of the significance of this passage for psychoanalysis, see Lear (2014).
whatever comes into their mind without inhibition or censorship. It is astonishing what wealth of psychological insight has flowed from people trying (and failing) to follow such a simple rule.

It might at first seem odd to invoke Freud in the project of a moral psychology, because he is regularly brought in to debunk the Platonic-Aristotelian approach. Psychoanalysis is invoked to show that Aristotle’s distinction between virtue and mere continence is illusory. There are, it is said, so many conflicting voices within a person’s psyche—many of them unconscious—that the idea that they could all be “speaking with the same voice” is incredible. On this reading, we ought to abandon false images of psychic unity and think instead about how to get along without them. Moreover, on a familiar reading of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the world is not a place that is conducive to human happiness. And it is not the aim of civilization to facilitate it. Civilization may protect us against some of nature’s threats, but its aim is to keep us in line. It pressures us to be “productive members of society,” with no concern for the psychic costs to the individual. Civilization, on this outlook, is at the expense of our happiness.

This reception of Freud has become boilerplate—and one of the joys of Loewald’s writings is that he offers a different choice of inheritance. His reading of Freud opens the possibility of a fresh engagement with a broadly Aristotelian approach to moral psychology.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud identified mourning as melancholia’s uncanny twin. His concern was to illuminate melancholia, whose pathological workings were largely hidden from view. The strategy he hit upon was to do so by comparing it with ordinary, nonpathological mourning. “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 246). This was Freud’s route into the psychological structure of melancholia: “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically and, as it were, takes it as its object” (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 247). Freud was thus launched in his study of the superego, and of structural conflict inside the psyche.

Loewald (1989) reverses the locus of concern. If melancholia is the pathological condition of psychic discord, mourning at least offers the occasion for psychic integration and development. He introduces the idea of *degrees of internalization*, “suggesting that the introjects constituting the superego are more on the periphery of the ego system but are capable of mobility within the system and may thus merge into the ego proper and lose their superego character” (p. 257). He gives a simple example of “a son who increasingly becomes like a father after the father’s death. It is as though only then can he appropriate into his ego core given elements of his father’s character” (pp. 271–272). Before the father’s actual death, the father-figure functioned at a critical distance. And there was fluidity in whether the father was located in social space—in the person of the father—or whether he became an internal figure, instigating “self-criticism,” doubt, and guilt. The death of the father provided an occasion through mourning for psychic consolidation. The voice of the father is no longer set over against the ego, but is integrated into the maturing character of the son. Though work needs to be done to fill out the picture, it presents the possibility of a Freudian inheritance focused on psychic integration. The fact that this possibility emerges from an unanticipated location—the details of mourning—raises the hope that we might be on the track of a robust moral psychology.

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3 See e.g. Lacan (1992).
In effect, Loewald extends the concept of mourning to cover the major moments of psychological development. The human psyche, he stresses, is itself a psychological achievement, and its development consists in a series of losses and re formations:

The relinquishment of external objects and their internalization involves a process of separation, of loss and restitution in many ways similar to mourning (Loewald, 1989, p. 258).

The phrase “in many ways similar to” may suggest to a reader that Loewald is offering a useful analogy or metaphor. I do not think that is correct. In a metaphor, “a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d. online; my emphasis). But, as I understand him, Loewald is claiming that if we look at the psychodynamics of human development, we will see similarities to the paradigm so powerful as to justify us in thinking we are looking at genuine cases of mourning—though ones we have hitherto not recognized as such.

Loewald is offering an interpretation. We are invited to consider our experience (which includes our experience of others) under the concept mourning. Because Loewald is writing for analysts, the invitation is issued in the first instance to those who have already had their own analysis, and have experience analyzing others. For those who are addressed, the question then becomes: How compelling is it to see the transitional moments in human psychic development under the concept mourning?

So, what legitimates the thought that transition through a developmental stage should be thought of in terms of mourning? First, if we try to capture the experience of the developing subject, Loewald (1989) thinks that we must recognize that “the psychological constitution of the ego and outer world go hand in hand” (p. 5). This means that psychological development (partially) consists in the ego giving up earlier forms of relating to objects. Care is needed in the vocabulary we choose to describe the situation. We inevitably use terms like “ego” or “self” for less differentiated forms of organization than the mature version. And because we are concerned with “objects” as they exist for a subject, the same holds true for objects. “It is important to recognize,” Loewald says, “that when we speak of object and ego at this [early] stage of development, these terms characterize the most primitive beginnings of the later structures thus designated” (p. 5). To take an example from early development, as the infant begins to experience mother’s breast as something distinct, something that can be absent even when need arises, the infant needs to learn to tolerate not only the disappointment, frustration, and rage that such recognition can provoke. She also needs to tolerate the loss of this form of experiencing “object.” There is a loss of the “primary-narcissistic breast” that had, until this developmental moment, been experienced as an appendage of the infantile ego. At every stage of development, Loewald thinks, there is a loss of objects—in the sense of the loss of a form of experiencing objects—that needs somehow to be addressed.

Second, loss of objects is compensated by an almost magical restitution. In straightforward cases of mourning the death of a loved one, there are conscious and rational modes of internalization: consolidating memories and emotions that have circulated around this person. But, following Freud, Loewald claims that there are also unconscious processes that inform these paradigm cases of mourning, and they shape psychic development. Through fantasies of introjection and identification, the “lost object” is taken into the psyche, where it takes up a new intrapsychic life. This is the irony of human development: The “acceptance of loss” in the external world is met with a corresponding recreation of the object in the internal world. This refiguration allows for more complex
relations with an emerging set of objects. Ironically, the internalization of an old form of relating to objects is the basis of a new form.

Finally, there is an internal link between developmental moments of mourning and mourning as that concept is generally understood. The former prepares us for the latter; and the latter is a repetition and recreation of the former. It is not simply that the different cases of mourning share certain marks and features. When the father actually dies and in mourning the son becomes more like him, this is a repetition and recreation of earlier internalizations at different developmental phases. No wonder the son has been able to mourn in this way: He has already had a lot of practice. It is mourning that prepares us to mourn.

Mourning is one way we recreate our past by making it present—sometimes as memory, sometimes as psychic structure. Following Freud, Loewald (1989) gives the name internalization for the family of “processes of transformation by which relationships and interactions between the individual psychic apparatus and its environment are changed into inner relationships and interactions within the psychic apparatus” (p. 262). The paradigm is the experience of eating. In eating, food is lost to us (as food) but takes up a different life inside us (perhaps as nourishment, as feelings of satiation, or of pains and bad feelings). From a psychoanalytic point of view, the infantile mind is constructed by that mind constructing an image of itself: Feeding at the breast and taking in the milk that now exists inside the psyche-soma. This is an important way in which representations of inside and outside are formed; and we do not have anything like a human mind without its capacity to represent itself in terms of what is inside it and what is outside.

But psychic digestion differs from ordinary digestion. Consider Aristotle’s nutritive soul: When we eat healthy food, the nutritive soul goes to work—and what we eat becomes us. The remainder is eliminated from us as waste. But what we eat psychically speaking becomes us with remainder. The introjected figure will be transformed to some extent by the digestive processes of fantasy, but the figure remains now inside us, sometimes to haunt us, sometimes to comfort us, sometimes to allow us the poetic experience of relating to an ancestor (Loewald, 1989, pp. 248–249). One of psychoanalysis’s deepest insights is that when we take in any teaching, the teacher comes along with it. And he or she tends to remain with us, personalizing what we have learned. This means that our present selves are constituted not merely by memories of the past, but by memorializations.

Now if mourning is a concept that characterizes psychic development as well as the death of a loved one, one ought to expect the instances to be linked by family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 2009). We cannot thus assume that a characteristic of mourning a death must be present in, say, a child’s mourning in the Oedipal phase. However, the paradigm case might give us clues by which we notice intimations in other cases that might otherwise have eluded us.

Heidegger famously introduced the term being-toward-death to describe a manner of living: Namely, how Dasein comports itself to the possibility of the impossibility of it having any more possibilities. I do not here want to get into Heidegger exegesis. But in terms of our concern with mourning and its place in moral psychology, a debate has arisen about the meaning of Dasein that deserves our attention. On the familiar interpretation, Dasein is the being for whom the question of its being is a mode of its being. “This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of its possibilities of its being we shall denote by the term ‘Dasein’” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 27). Usually, Dasein is understood in terms of an individual human being, possessed of the capacities for inquiry and commitment. And of course, while being-toward-death pervades human life, our
self-conscious thinking about death—our own as well as our loved ones—does tend to be pronounced at times of death and mourning. And this is one manner of being-toward-death. But there is another notion of being-toward-death that flows from an alternative understanding of Dasein. In Dasein Disclosed (Haugeland, 2013), John Haugeland argues that by Dasein one should understand a living way of life (that contains within itself an understanding of its being). An individual human being is at best an instance or case of Dasein—who in authenticity may stand witness to the vibrancy or the morbidity of that way of life. The death of Dasein is then the breakdown in the intelligibility of the concepts internal to that way of life. While an investigator may theoretically grasp some aspects of that way of life, it has become unintelligible how one might realize those concepts in the living of a life. A culture breaks down via a breakdown in its own practical understanding of how to live. Authentic being-toward-death, on Haugeland’s account, consists in an individual’s taking responsibility for the death of a way of life. This comportment may be in place even when the form of life is vibrant. It is a responsibility one might bear, while never being called upon to exercise it.

So, now we have two distinct senses of being-toward-death, and we can see that it is precisely at the grave where these two meanings converge. One of the tasks of culture and religion is to provide—through rituals, myths, customs, and concepts—a structure of meanings that will help mourners through their grief and confusion. Part of what it is to be a mourner, I suspect, is to recognize, either explicitly or implicitly, that one is at the grief-stricken limits of one’s understanding. We have not just lost a loved one, we are threatened with being at a loss: about what to do, what to feel, what to think. We need help; and we need help with meaning. The customs and narratives of culture and religion are meant to meet that threat and provide a special kind of solace: One that provides meaning for what might otherwise be incomprehensible catastrophe.

We live in an historical period—summed up under the slogan “the death of God”—in which the possibility has become readily available for an individual to judge that a culture’s structures of meanings do not work for him. I remember my father telling me, after his mother’s death, that he no longer believed in God. I now think what he was getting at was not a loss of belief per se, but a breakdown in intelligibility. He knew how to go through the established motions of mourning, but the gestures were drained of significance for him. And yet, the fact that the rituals had gone dead did matter to him; and he felt the need to stand witness.

Here is a moment in ordinary life where the two forms of being-toward-death come together. And it is an occasion that raises an important question about the relation of mourning to separation and individuation. For, on the one hand, this would seem like a paradigmatic moment: My father, in mourning, separates himself from the culture in which he was brought up, and takes his own differentiated stand. On the other hand, we cannot tell simply by looking at this vignette whether it manifested any psychic integration at all. Perhaps it did; but perhaps my father was giving voice to a painful inability to grow from this experience; perhaps he felt threatened with disintegration. So, this case of mourning seems to suggest that we are dealing with two conceptions of “individuation”—one of psychic integration, and one of taking a stand with respect to social norms and customs. It would seem that mourning could be the occasion for one or the other or both

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4 I am using the term “myth” nonpejoratively to describe a fundamental and organizing narrative. By using the term I take no stand on whether the narrative is true or false.
or neither. But, then, what has happened to the idea that mourning is a developmental notion?

The ancient Greek project of moral psychology depended on grounding ethical life in psychological development. Our current investigation is motivated by a thought that Plato and Aristotle moved too quickly in their attempts to link the two, and that psychoanalysis might give us a more robust account. Loewald linked psychological development to mourning which, he suggested, bound internalization, psychic integration, separation, and individuation together. But now in considering an ordinary case of mourning, we see that there is reason to suspect that the individuation of separation (from established social roles) and the individuation of psychic integration might go off on separate tracks. And thus there is reason to wonder whether something analogous might happen in psychological development. That is, there are two moments of mourning in psychological development—separation (from a previous form of relating to objects) and internalization—and there is a question why internalization, if it should happen at all, would facilitate integration rather than an internal cacophony of voices?

If integration occurs, I suspect it is because it is promoted. If we look at the three human dramas that Loewald wants to link under the concept mourning—response to death, human development, and psychoanalytic treatment—we see that they are each enveloped in human caring activities that aim to shape and influence what is happening. In human development, there is parenting; with death there is a culture’s customs and rituals; in psychoanalysis there is the caring direction of psychoanalytic technique, as embodied in the analyst and his work. All three of these activities have in common that—in different ways, and with different levels of self-conscious awareness—they grapple with the same problem: how to integrate the nonrational soul into thoughtful, self-conscious life. I want to suggest that there is a conceptual issue here: that it is internal to our understanding of mourning that it is not simply a dyadic relation between mourner and mourned, but that it also includes a mourning environment that facilitates the mourning process (more or less well). This mourning environment will typically include fellow mourners, or companions along with established customs, rituals, and activities. It is a task of moral psychology to determine what a good mourning environment consists in.

If there is such a thing as living well for human beings it must, as Plato and Aristotle saw, somehow integrate the activities of the nonrational soul. How might we do that well? At some level of understanding, this is a problem we have been grappling with since the beginning of civilization. Moral psychology is an attempt to craft an answer at a heightened level of self-conscious awareness, and so allow for justification and critique. But we should expect there to be activities that facilitate integration throughout the dramas of life.

So, the death of a loved one is expected to stir up powerful emotions and fantasies, and mourning is structured as a period of withdrawal from the ordinary demands of life. It is not unlike going to sleep in order to dream, or lying down on a couch in order to associate: the culture’s customs and rituals create a space where the nonrational soul can express itself, but in a containing environment. If the death of a loved one is an occasion for unconscious fantasy, the rituals of mourning—prayers, chants, wakes—help shape fantasy in the direction of integration. All the while, the emotions, daydreams, and memories are being woven in to self-conscious thought. In myriad ways, the mourning environment facilitates integration.

In the case of individual human development, Loewald speaks of the infant as born into a differentiated field of caring, in which the parents reflect back to the infant his own
development, at higher levels of integration. Good parenting has internal to it, however intuitive and emotion-laden, a conception of what good parenting consists of. This is a constitutive element of the parents’ higher level of differentiation. Parents grasp that they need to facilitate a process of growing-up, one which includes difficult periods, moments of separation and loss, but all, one hopes, ultimately in the service of human flourishing. Loewald’s introduction of the concept mourning need not be seen merely as a theoretical contribution to our understanding of the process, but as a practical offering for parents: a concept that might help them better understand and direct their efforts. As such, it would be a contribution to moral psychology.

Loewald is, of course, writing primarily for psychoanalysts. His introduction of mourning is meant to facilitate a movement of self-conscious awareness in the analyst of what he or she is doing. In effect, Loewald locates psychoanalysis as a middle term, linking two great moments of human life, childhood development and the adult mourning of a dead parent. Psychoanalysis becomes a repetition and recreation of the former, and an uncanny anticipation of the latter. Like classic mourning, psychoanalysis provides a space in which a person retreats from the ordinary demands of daily life. It is a space that, through its own unusual rituals, encourages the nonrational soul to express itself; and yet it is also a space that envelops those expressions in speech aimed at self-conscious awareness. At the same time, analysis is a repetition and recreation of childhood development, its losses and separations, victories and defeats.

Think of what a transformation in the self-conception of the analyst the introduction of the concept mourning brings about. Gone is the image of the dispassionate scientist, or the detective searching the evidence for a disguised wish. The analyst becomes an unusual companion to the bereaved: helping the analysand to face loss—to reexperience it in its complexity and emotional intensity—as well as to reorganize it. The analyst becomes someone who can bear the mourning of another. As in parenting, as in classic mourning, this essentially involves containing and guiding the flow of unconscious mental activity. Mourning is an occasion of psychic integration precisely because its task is to facilitate it. This is the practical significance of the introduction of mourning as the concept through which we understand psychoanalytic activity. From at least the time of Plato we have understood that human happiness depends on psychic integration; but it took the painstaking work of psychoanalysis to show how such integration depends on passing successfully through mourning.

Count no man happy until he has mourned. If we think of a happy life as a complete life, and now we realize that such a life must contain significant periods of mourning within it—not as necessary antecedents to that life, but as essential, constituent moments of that life—we arrive at an unusual view of human happiness and its possibilities. But this is the kind of unanticipated result that a robust moral psychology ought to be able to deliver. The philosophical tradition has long been familiar with a conception of humans as finite, dependent, rational animals. Psychoanalysis reveals that this shows up psychologically as mourning. Mourning may be evaded or denied, but even as such it lies at the center of our being. Freud taught us that infantile fantasies tend toward omnipotence, and Loewald developed the thought that this occurs because the infant lacks firm boundaries between self and other, as well as between wish and reality. Over and over again, psychoanalysis finds that such fantasies are alive in adults, structuring their experience in ways they do not understand. If we are ever truly to experience ourselves as finite and dependent—that is, to grasp first-personally and self-consciously who we are—we must find appropriate ways to bid farewell to these distorting images. Loewald (1989) memorably said that in analysis, “the ghosts of the unconscious are laid and led to rest as
ancestors whose power is taken over and transformed into the newer intensity of present life” (p. 249). We might add that these ghosts tend toward infinite independence: parental figures who can overwhelm us with guilt; or narcissistic figures that distort our sense of who we are and diminish the reality of others. We need to mourn them because they need to die; and we need to move on. In analysis, the analysand learns how to take responsibility for their death and burial—which is actually the death and burial of their omnipotence. And this opens the possibility for a more creative imaginative life, populated by more nuanced, and less overwhelming ancestor figures.

It is an astonishing fact about the human mind that its capacity for imaginatively representing its own activity actually structures the mind. So, for example, to imagine a critical voice is part of what it is to have a punishing superego. As those voices fade away, poof!: There goes the superego. In this way, mourning facilitates psychic integration. So, mourning has its own efficacy and, I want to suggest, this efficacy is enhanced when the mourning becomes self-consciously grasped as such. When we understand ourselves as mourners we become more active in taking up memories, grasping our dreams as something to be worked on, and so on. That is, self-consciously understanding ourselves as mourners can itself integrate our souls. This then becomes an important way of living up to the Socratic injunction to know oneself: It is in knowing oneself as a mourner one integrates one’s psyche; and we thus constitute ourselves by our own activity of self-understanding. This is a form of truthfulness—and it is difficult to see how one could come by it in any other way.

I would like to conclude with a comment about religious belief. In his essay on internalization, Loewald (1989) makes a passing remark:

The death of a love object, or the more or less permanent separation from a love object, is the occasion for mourning and for internalization . . . It seems significant that with the advent of Christianity, initiating the greatest intensification of internalization in Western civilization, the death of God as incarnated in Christ moves into the center of religious experience. Christ is not only the ultimate love object, which the believer loses as an external object and regains by identification with Him as an ego ideal. He is, in His passion and sacrificial death, the exemplification of complete internalization and sublimation of all earthly relationships and needs. But to pursue these thoughts would lead us far afield into unexplored psychological country (p. 260, my emphasis).

But if Christianity is “the greatest intensification of internalization in Western civilization,” how could it be that exploring this in an essay on internalization would be taking us “far afield,” and into “unexplored psychological country?” The question is whether this is far afield because it has been made to be far afield.

As is well known, Freud (1927/1975a) dismissed religious belief as illusion, the product of infantile wishes (pp. 5–56). This had a chilling effect on the psychoanalytic profession as a whole. At the time Loewald was writing, institutes would reject applicants for training who openly professed religious conviction; and analytic thinking in this area, with a few notable exceptions, was confined to this Freudian rut. As a result, we remain impoverished when it comes to psychoanalytic insight into religious experience. And yet, when one looks back on Freud’s argument with the benefit of hindsight, it is striking how brittle it is. Freud emphasizes the infantile-wishful dimension of religious experience, but then psychoanalysis teaches that there are wishful layers in all creative human endeavors. He would never use such an insight to undermine the claims of art. And when it came to art, Freud focused on humankind’s greatest achievements, but when it came to religion he focused on its most common and run-down expression. “The whole thing,” he said, “is so
patently infantile . . . that it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life” (Freud, 1930/1975b, p. 74; my emphasis). But if what we are here dealing with is patently infantile, why is psychoanalysis needed to understand it? And why is Freud here dealing with the mass of mankind, as opposed to the greatest achievements of religious thought and practice? Even thoughtful defenses of religious belief were dismissed by him as “pitiful rearguard actions” (Freud, 1930/1975b, p. 74). It seems to me that Freud was himself in the grip of a wishful Enlightenment fantasy—an illusion of the future—in which the inexorable march of reason, “our God Logos”, overcomes religious superstition “with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth.”

I have no interest in analyzing Freud, but overall this approach looks to me like a manic denial of mourning. It is beyond question that there has been a massive transformation in the form of life in Europe over the past 200 years. I think we still lack a proper understanding of what has happened. At the time of Freud’s writing, the nations of Europe took themselves to be Christian—though there were thinkers just prior to Freud, notably Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, who claimed that religious belief had degenerated into hollowed-out hypocrisy. By now, Europe is overwhelmingly atheist, agnostic, and secular (with the exception of non-Christian immigrants). It is significant, I think, that such a massive change in the form of life should be greeted with such historical triumphalism.

In this context, Loewald’s comment takes on importance. It is as though he was gesturing in a direction that, until his writing, had been refused. It is also significant that Loewald did not include in his collected papers an essay he published in the Journal of Pastoral Care in 1953: “Psychoanalysis and Modern Views on Human Existence and Religious Experience.” It is thus much less well known than his other writings. He begins by saying that analysands that have any attitude to religion at all tend to fall into two groups. One group tends to express profound disinterest in, even contempt for religious belief, and they tend to assume Loewald shares their view. The other group has positive feelings, but tend not to want to talk about them as they assume that Loewald does not share them, or that he would even disapprove of their view. So both sides assume that the analyst disapproves of religion. And they also share “a defensive attitude toward their childhood religion.” Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the views expressed by Loewald’s analysands were typical of the time. Let us also assume that analysts of that day typically thought it appropriate to adopt Freud’s attitude toward religious belief. The upshot would be that analysts unwittingly cut themselves off from a wealth of material about religious experience. Loewald (1953) seems to assume as much: “Psychoanalysis, I believe, is as yet in no position to provide anything approaching an adequate psychological understanding of such highly integrated human functions as are reached and manifested in the genuine religious experience and thought of Christianity” (p. 8).

Loewald criticizes Freud for being “one-sided,” focusing on human helplessness and the wish for an all-powerful protector, while ignoring basic experiences of trust, oneness, and belonging, also crucial to religious experience (p. 9). And Loewald turns an important point Freud makes against him. In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud argues that modern man has become estranged from himself. Loewald suggests that Freud’s critique of religious belief unnecessarily contributes to that estrangement (p. 13).

All of this suggests that if psychoanalysis is to live up to its promise of being a moral psychology—one which contributes as it comes to understand what it is to lead a full, rich, meaningful human life—it must find ways to mourn Freud’s legacy, and move on. Even now, we are only at the beginning of such a process.

Just before he died, Hans Loewald said to me that he hoped that there would never be any Loewaldians. I have been thinking about that remark on and off ever since; and by now I can recognize three layers of meaning. At the time, I thought that he was expressing an ironic but earnest wish that his writings not be misappropriated. Loewald devoted his life to promoting individuation, in himself and in those around him—analysands, family, friends, and colleagues. It would be a cruel fate if his legacy were a “Loewaldian school”—with its own “Loewaldian” beliefs and methods. Part of what it is to be a Loewaldian is to recognize that there could never be any such thing. This is not a matter of being coy. The point is that the appropriate way to “follow Loewald” is to develop a mind of one’s own.

Later, I began to wonder whether he was trying to guide my own internalizations. We both knew that he was about to die. Perhaps he was trying to help me avoid establishing an overly idealized internal figure. He did not want his memory to become a source of rigidity or slavishness in me.

But now that I have come to reflect on the religious dimension of Loewald’s life, I have come to wonder whether the impossibility of becoming a Loewaldian does not also flow from intense privacy lying at the heart of Loewald’s commitments. If a private and personal relation to God was at the center of Loewald’s existence, then, of course, the only Loewaldian there could ever be is Loewald himself. Anyone else’s attempt to be a Loewaldian would thus manifest a huge misunderstanding of his life. Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue these thoughts, but I hope I have said enough to make it plausible that an adequate moral psychology would be one that enabled us to do just that.

Loewald once prefaced a talk at his institute by saying that he hoped his remarks would shed a little darkness on the subject. I would like to end this talk in fond memory of that aspiration.

References


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