

# **The Psychoanalysis of Perfectionism:**

## **Integrating Freud's Psychodynamic Theory into Logic-Based Therapy**

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**Abstract:** This paper sets the framework for a hybrid theory of Logic-Based Therapy and Psychoanalysis through an examination of Sigmund's Freud's theory of perfectionism.

Logic-based therapy (LBT) is a philosophically developed version of the first cognitive-behavior psychotherapy called rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT). It is distinguished from the latter by its systematic use of deductive logic to organize and evaluate clients' emotional and behavioral reasoning; its use of virtue theory to provide positive, forward-moving client goals; and its client-based selection of a myriad variety of philosophical perspectives to promote the latter client goals.<sup>1</sup>

The keynote of LBT is that people tend to upset themselves by deducing self-defeating, behavioral and emotional conclusions from irrational premises in chains of practical syllogisms. Among the most virulent forms of irrational premise is that of Demanding Perfection, which appears to be at the root of virtually all self-defeating, behavioral and emotional conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

Inasmuch as perfectionism figures prominently in the theory of LBT, this paper examines Freud's theory of perfectionism with an eye toward finding common threads between the two theories. This study yields some surprising, potentially useful results. The synergy between the two approaches appears to provide a new way of conceptualizing Freud's psychoanalysis. What seems to emerge from the integration of the two theories is nothing less than a proposal for a

hybrid, cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, and highly philosophical modality of psychoanalysis.

### **Freud's Theory of Perfectionism**

It is not uncommon to find perfectionists touting their perfectionism as a mark of excellence. However, Freud did not share this optimistic view, considering perfectionism instead to be a mental illness. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he stated:

Many of us will also find it hard to abandon our belief that in man himself there dwells an impulse towards perfection, which has brought him to his present heights of intellectual prowess and ethical sublimation, and from which it might be expected that his development into superman will be ensured. But I do not believe in the existence of such an inner impulse, and I see no way of preserving this pleasing illusion. The development of man up to now does not seem to me to need any explanation differing from that of animal development, and the restless striving towards further perfection which may be observed in a minority of human beings is easily explicable as the result of that repression of instinct upon which what is most valuable in human culture is built.<sup>3</sup>

So what is this explanation of “animal development” that accounts for “the development of man”? According to Freud, “all instincts have as their aim the reinstatement of an earlier condition.”<sup>4</sup> For example, cellular reproduction repeatedly produces copies of the same cells; and a lost organ is replaced by one exactly like it. When the environments of animals are disturbed, such as the migratory patterns of birds, they seek the same home elsewhere. Likewise, in human beings instinct is toward repetition. The instinct toward self-preservation seeks to

repeat the conditions of life—until they give way to death (the return to an inorganic state), which once again sets the conditions for life.

Viewed in this broad historical context, the instinct towards satisfaction in human beings is an instinct to repeatedly obtain the same pleasures over and over again. Thus, we seek sexual gratification, the pleasures of eating, excreting, etc. over and over again. However, this instinct toward repetitive satisfaction is constrained by the reality principle, which is itself aligned with the survival instinct. That is, in order to survive one must take heed of the restrictions of the external world. Thus, “Under the influence of the instinct of the ego for self-preservation it is replaced by the ‘reality principle’, which without giving up the intention of ultimately attaining pleasure yet demands and enforces the postponement of satisfaction, the renunciation of manifold possibilities of it, and the temporary endurance of ‘pain’ on the long and circuitous road to pleasure.”<sup>5</sup>

In the case of perfectionism, the individual (in his or her ego state) represses this instinct toward such repetitive satisfaction constrained by the reality principle, and instead demands “the excess of the satisfaction ...found.”<sup>6</sup> Without, therefore, “any prospect of being able to bring the process to a conclusion or to attain the goal,” the perfectionist suffers from “obsessional neurosis.”

### **Freud’s Psychodynamic Theory**

Freud’s Psychodynamic Theory is relevant here. According to Freud, the human psyche can be divided into id, ego, and superego. On this model, the ego keeps the human being in contact with reality in its effort to harmonize the demands of the id and superego. The id is the “dark,” “chaotic” pleasure-seeking principle of the psyche.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the superego is the moral voice that attempts to constrain the id so that it functions within the limits of moral and

other value restrictions,<sup>8</sup> and “represents demands of a restrictive and rejecting character.”<sup>9</sup> In the cases where the id seeks satisfaction in excess of what can be realistically found, the ego is hijacked by the id to do its bidding.

Freud, however, also recognizes a second form of perfectionism in which the superego controls the ego. According to Freud, the superego is, by its nature, predisposed toward perfectionism: He states,

The super-ego is the representative for us of every moral restriction, the advocate of a striving towards perfection-- it is, in short, as much as we have been able to grasp psychologically of what is described as the higher side of human life.<sup>10</sup>

Hence unless the ego can balance the perfectionistic demands of the superego with the reality principle, the ego will demand perfection in obedience to the superego.

### **Freud’s Two Types of Perfectionism**

In my recent book, *Making Peace with Imperfection*,<sup>11</sup> I have distinguished between ten types of perfectionism:

1. Achievement perfectionism
2. Approval perfectionism
3. Moral perfectionism
4. Control perfectionism
5. Expectation perfectionism
6. Ego-centered perfectionism

7. Treatment perfectionism
8. Existential perfectionism
9. Neatness perfectionism
10. Certainty perfectionism

Some of the types of perfectionism I have distinguished, namely those that demand perfect attainment of morality or a moral order can be referred to the superego whereas others that are more directly related to a self-serving desire may be referred to the id. In either case, there is obsessiveness about seeking a state of perfection that is impossible to attain.

The referrals that I believe would apply among the ten types of perfectionism I have distinguished are as follows:

### **1. Perfectionism Arising from the Superego**

- Moral Perfectionism (I must not do anything morally wrong)
- Treatment Perfectionism (Others must not do anything morally wrong to me)
- Existential Perfectionism (The world that *is* must include only what *should* be)

Each of the above three types of perfectionism “represents demands of a restrictive and rejecting character”; “striving towards perfection”; and a “higher side of life.” Existential perfectionism tends to have roots in religious indoctrination while Moral and Treatment perfectionisms tend to be a function of parental socialization. Thus, an existential perfectionist may lament how a good person can meet a cruel and merciless fate (no less at the hands of an all good, all powerful God); and a moral perfectionist may experience unremitting guilt for not having been entirely forthright with a close friend; while a treatment perfectionist on the

receiving end may exhibit unassailable, grudgeful outrage at having been treated in such a contemptible manner. According to Freud, each of these responses would, in principle, be entirely predictable, not unlike the responses deducible from the algorithms of a computer program, given fulfillment of certain antecedent conditions. In the human case, these algorithms would be the specific perfectionistic demands embedded in the superego through processes of socialization and enculturation.

Viewed in the light of LBT, the dysfunctionality of such superego perfectionism arises because, through the above processes of socialization and enculturation, the superego includes in its emotional reasoning an absolutistic, perfectionistic normative principle, from which it deduces self-defeating conclusions. By “emotional reasoning” LBT understands practical reasoning that generates and sustains emotions that include a cognitive component such as anxiety, anger, guilt, and depression.<sup>12</sup> For example, the emotional reasoning of each of the said forms of perfectionism would be along the following lines:

- Moral Perfectionism:

I must never do anything wrong; *therefore*, if I do something wrong, I am an unworthy or bad person.

- Treatment Perfectionism:

Others must not do anything wrong to me; *therefore*, if they do, they are rotten people.

- Existential Perfectionism:

The world that is must include only what should be; *therefore*, such things as sickness and loss of a love one must not happen; and, if they do happen, the world is not what it should be.

According to LBT, such practical inferences generate and sustain painful emotions such as intense anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, and indignation, thereby sustaining the dysfunctional relationship between the ego and superego rather than the former realistically resolving the conflict with the latter. For example, in the case of Moral Perfectionism, its emotional reasoning creates “moral anxiety”<sup>13</sup>; and when the antecedent condition of having done something wrong is (eventually) satisfied, it generates guilt.

## **2. Perfectionism Arising from the Id**

In contrast to superego perfectionism, the following forms of perfectionism seem more properly referred to the id than to the superego, for each of these are more narrowly focused on self-gratification and have less to do with morality or religion:

- Achievement Perfectionism (“I must perform perfectly”)
- Expectation Perfectionism (“Others must perform perfectly”)
- Approval Perfectionism (“I must get the approval of others”)
- Control Perfectionism (“I must be in control at all times”)
- Ego-centered Perfectionism (“Others must always agree with me”)
- Certainty Perfectionism (“I must always have certainty”)
- Neatness Perfectionism (“Things must be neat and orderly”)

The emotional reasoning of each of the above forms can generate and sustain “realistic anxiety”<sup>14</sup> as a result of deducing catastrophic conclusions from a major premise injected into the ego’s emotional reasoning by the id. This major premise is the demand for total satisfaction, or that beyond what is realistically possible. For example, in the case of control perfectionism, the emotional reasoning is along the following lines:

I must always be totally satisfied; therefore I must always be in total control (of the external world). Otherwise, I would not get what I must have (namely, total satisfaction), which would be *awful*.

Such emotional reasoning (and, *mutatis mutandis*, that of the other forms of id perfectionism) demands what cannot realistically be provided by the external world. Consequently, it generates a sustained state of anxiety about total control (achievement, approval, certainty, etc.) that is impossible to attain.

### **Repression v. Suppression**

Freud believed that (id) perfectionism is present in a minority of human beings<sup>15</sup> and that it arises as a result of fixation in the anal stage (1 to 3 years) as a result of parental authorities failing to socialize, through toilet training, constraints on the id's desire to retain its excrement.<sup>16</sup> The goal of psychoanalysis was accordingly to overcome this fixation by delving into the individual's past to gain insight and awareness of the repressed events that caused the fixation.

In contrast, LBT does not conduct an excursion into the client's past in order to unbury an event hidden in the client's unconscious. It does not deny that this is possible or even sometimes curative. Therefore, its approach is not necessarily inconsistent with Freud's psychoanalysis. In fact, LBT may be seen as working within the framework of the Freudian psychodynamic theory to change the psychodynamics of the ego and superego to prevent the id and superego from continuing to hijack the ego, thus restoring or bringing harmony to the human psyche—that is, a state where the ego returns to seeking primary satisfaction, that is, satisfaction regulated by the reality principle; and the superego likewise cooperates with the ego to set realistic moral restrictions on the id.

According to Freud, the id works primarily on an unconscious level, having had its demands repressed by the ego.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, LBT uses the language of *suppression* to refer to premises in one's emotional reasoning that are not made explicit. These are premises needed to validate the reasoning. A mark that a premise has been suppressed is that the client will insist that the premise is true once it is made explicit by the therapist.<sup>18</sup> For example, the client might state, "It would be awful if she rejected me," and the therapist might ask, "So are you saying you must have her approval?" Here, the client may be emphatic about the necessity of the approval. In contrast, because a repressed belief has been buried by the ego in the unconscious precisely because it was threatening, any attempt to confront the client about a repressed premise would likely "strike nerve," that is, the client would vehemently deny the veracity of the premise. For example, asking a victim of childhood sexual abuse whether her father sexually molested her when she was a small child would almost invariably be met with angry dismissal.

In the case of id perfectionism, the presumably *repressed* premise, "I must always be totally satisfied" would predictably be quickly dismissed by most clients because a moment's reflection would show it to be unrealistic. However, LBT does not directly address the irrationality of this premise, but instead examines clients' suppressed premises entailed by it. Thus, in refuting the idea that one must always be in control, get others' approval, etc., it is, *ipso facto*, shown to be false that one must always be totally satisfied, since the latter entails a false statement. (One is not, nor can one be, always satisfied). Hence, by addressing the *suppressed* premise, it is possible to indirectly disempower this repressed premise. This is apparent inasmuch as many of my clients who have given up their suppressed perfectionistic demands have managed to avoid the emotional reasoning that had previously generated irrational emotions and self-defeating behavior.

## The Guiding Virtues of LBT

Further, instead of psychoanalysis aimed at uncovering the past, LBT introduces the *forward-looking* theory of guiding virtues<sup>19</sup> to affect the restoration of psychological harmony between the id, ego, and superego. This theory provides a realistic resolution of the conflict between the perfectionistic demands of the id that strives for perfect satisfaction, and the id's attempt to experience the same old satisfactions over-and-over again.

Virtues are themselves habits, which means that they involve repetition. However, in actualizing them, there is a form of satisfaction that is *sui generis*. As John Stuart Mill once famously quipped, it is better to be a Socrates satisfied than a satisfied pig. The point here, however, is not that it is better, but that it is distinct, and therefore increases the variation of satisfactions the realistically circumscribed id can enjoy.

Further, and most importantly, virtues are aspirations, not perfectionistic demands. While they set idealistic goals to aim at, they do not demand that the goals be realized. It is rather the striving to reach higher and higher levels of actualization, without limit, that provides the inherent gratification. Thus, excellence does not mean perfection. You are inspired to reach for the stars, but the ego in concert with the principle of reality constantly reminds you that you do not *have to* land on them; and this rational message is internalized by the virtue seeker—realizing that it is okay, indeed human, to make mistakes, not always have the approval of others, act inappropriately, and so forth. Here lies a new, enlightened ego that works within the principle of reality to satisfy the id within the constraints of the superego.

Thus, the functional ego strives to satisfy the perfectionist id by seeking satisfaction in striving for perfection without demanding its actualization, and accordingly guides it to gain satisfaction through its aspirations. Similarly, the ego satisfies the superego that demands perfect

morals, treatment, or existential bliss by striving toward this ideal without demanding its attainment.

This may seem to suggest that Freud viewed the superego as an advocate of virtue because it is “the advocate of a striving towards perfection.”<sup>20</sup> However, this inference would be a *non-sequitur*. As “the representative...of every moral restriction”<sup>21</sup> it appears to be absolutistic. For example, the superego demands complete honesty, total beneficence, total fairness, etc. However, this would not be the same as striving toward virtue, which perceives demanding total propriety as unrealistic.

In contrast, the moral premises of virtue-based reasoning contain an explicit *ceteris paribus* clause (“I should be honest, *ceteris paribus*”) thus allowing for extenuating circumstances (“Telling the truth in this case could do more harm than good”). As such, the minor premises of such reasoning consider the context in which the moral principle is applied to determine if it appropriately applies in the context at hand.

The *positive*, forward-moving thinking involved in seeking virtue (for example, living authentically as a gay person) also contrasts the superego’s thinking, which is negative, critical, and attempts to restrict or prohibit certain conduct (for example, proscribing socially unacceptable sexual activity such as homosexuality in an openly homophobic society).

As such, it appears that virtue-based reasoning falls to the *ego* to perform in concert with the principle of reality. In this function, it is here where the ego can guide the id to repeat realistic satisfactions and thus to form stable habits. It is here where the superego’s demands are adjusted to accommodate realistic restrictions on human emotion and behavior, albeit imperfectly and within context.

## **The Guiding Virtues as Counters to Cardinal Fallacies**

LBT identifies a group of cardinal fallacies, each of which having its own guiding virtue that counteracts it.<sup>22</sup> From a Freudian perspective, cardinal fallacies are irrational or misguided ways in which the ego deals with reality when it encounters conflicts between id and superego. Specifically, Demanding Perfection is a primary cardinal fallacy. It is primary because the other cardinal fallacies tend to be deduced from it.<sup>23</sup> For example, in Moral Perfectionism, Treatment Perfectionism, and Existential Perfectionism, the ego deduces Damnation of itself, another person, or the world (respectively) according to whether the object in question fails to meet a perfectionistic demand. (For example, if I fail to be totally honest, then I'm a bad person.)

The guiding virtue of Damnation is Respect (for self, others, and the world). This virtue:

Transcends the tendency to rate reality, including human reality, as utterly worthless or totally bad and instead looks for goodness and dignity. Global respect avoids rating the whole according to the part and looks favorably on the larger cosmic picture. Self-respect involves unconditional, self-acceptance based on a deep philosophical understanding of human worth and dignity. Respect for others consistently extends this profound respect for unconditional human worth and dignity to other human beings.<sup>24</sup>

In id perfectionism, the ego deduces awfulizing, which is an absolutistic negative judgment about an event or the consequences of an event. The guiding virtue of awfulizing is, in turn, Courage, which LBT defines as “Confronting adversity without under- or overestimating the danger. It means fearing things to the extent that it is reasonable to fear them and, in the face of danger, acting according to the merits of the situation.”<sup>25</sup> In Freudian terms this means ego constraint of id-based fear in accordance with the reality principle.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all eleven of the cardinal fallacies and their respective guiding virtues, it is noteworthy that the guiding virtues form an interlocking network of aspirations. For example, being authentic requires courage, which requires self-control. This means that working on one virtue is in a sense to be working on all the others.

### **Uplifting Philosophies for Overcoming Id and Superego Perfectionism**

Clearly, the guiding virtues provide idealistic goals toward which to strive. To promote this aspiration, LBT introduces uplifting philosophies.<sup>26</sup> Here, LBT draws from the rich history of East and West to provide philosophies that fit diverse types of superegos. For example, some individuals with superegos with strong religious leanings, say heavy Christian indoctrination, may find Thomistic philosophy helpful in aspiring toward greater self-respect. (“I am an imperfect imprint of the divine light.”), whereas an individual raised in a secular culture may prefer Nietzsche (“I am an autonomous creator of my own values”); while a Buddhist superego would be at home with Buddhist philosophy (“All reality is impermanent so letting go instead of clinging to reality avoids needless suffering in the end.”) Indeed, attempting to feed religious philosophies to an atheistic superego, or conversely, is more likely to exacerbate the tension between ego and superego rather than to reconcile it. Like psychoanalysis, LBT seeks to reconcile such conflicts, not perpetuate them.

Similarly, uplifting philosophies can be tailored to the specific types of id perfectionism. Thus, an ego driven by its id to seek the approval of others to vindicate its own worthiness may benefit from Stoic counsel to stick with things it can control such as its own ideas and actions, instead of the ideas or actions of others. Or, an id-driven ego that demands that others share its own perspectives may benefit from the Cartesian idea of a solipsistic universe in which one is trapped inside one’s own circle of ideas unable to receive ideas from the external world,

including those of others. Or, an id-driven ego that demands certainty before acting may benefit from the Humean idea that nothing is certain, not even the existence of the external world or our own bodies. Thus, we are already instinctually inclined to believe things that are not certain and couldn't live a single day if we didn't.

### **Applying Uplifting Philosophies**

In its last stage, LBT stresses application of such uplifting philosophies by changing cognitions and behavior to accommodate them.<sup>27</sup> From a Freudian perspective, this is the crux of the harmonizing process in psychoanalysis—the point at which the id, ego, and superego resonate with the principle of reality.

In the case of id and superego perfectionism, this process is successful when it begins to build rational habits instead of perfectionistic ones spiraling out of control by a demanding id and/or superego. Such change requires practice. This practice, over time, builds ego strength. The latter amounts to the willpower to make and sustain constructive change in the psychodynamics of the human psyche. Freud's psychodynamic theory provides a useful model for construing the nature of such change.

### **Conclusion**

Not only is Freud's psychodynamic theory compatible with LBT; there appears to be a powerful synergy between the two theories, which are mutually supportive. The salient interlocking relationships between the two approaches, as discussed herein, suggests a new psychodynamic theory of LBT or, alternatively, a new, innovative, cognitive-behavioral form of psychoanalysis. More research and development are now indicated in exploring the practical applications as well as conceptual implications of this emerging, hybrid theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot D Cohen, *Logic-Based Therapy and Everyday Emotions: A Case-Based Approach* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Elliot D Cohen, *Making Peace with Imperfection: Discover Your Perfectionism Type, End the Cycle of Criticism, and Embrace Self-Acceptance* (Oakland, CA: Impact, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C.J.M. Hubback (London: The International Psycho-Analytic, Press). Retrieved online from [https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud\\_beyond\\_the\\_pleasure\\_principle.pdf](https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud_beyond_the_pleasure_principle.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, S. (1933). "Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychological Personality." Trans. J. Strachey. Retrieved from [https://www.davidson-eng.net/uploads/1/1/9/3/119332629/the\\_dissection\\_of\\_the\\_psychical\\_personality.pdf](https://www.davidson-eng.net/uploads/1/1/9/3/119332629/the_dissection_of_the_psychical_personality.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>10</sup> Freud, "Dissection of the Psychological Personality."

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *Making Peace with Imperfection*.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Logic-Based Therapy and Everyday Emotions*.

<sup>13</sup> Freud, "Dissection of the Psychological Personality."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See note 2.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Winter, *Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism* (Downersgrove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), pp. 118-119.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, "Dissection of the Psychological Personality."

<sup>18</sup> Elliot D. Cohen, "Critical Thinking, Not Head Shrinking," in Peter Raabe, Ed., *Philosophical Counseling and the Unconscious* (Amherst, NY: Trivium Publications, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, *Logic-Based Therapy and Everyday Emotions*.

<sup>20</sup> See note 10.

<sup>21</sup> See note 10.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, *Logic-Based Therapy and Everyday Emotions*

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<sup>23</sup> Cohen, *Making Peace with Imperfection*.

<sup>24</sup> Elliot D. Cohen, "Logic-Based Therapy to Go: A step-by-step primer on how LBT can work for you Posted Mar 19, 2014," *Psychology Today*, March 19, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, *Logic-Based Therapy and Everyday Emotions*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.