Introduction

“Psychoanalysis has never claimed to provide a complete theory of human mentality in general.”¹ Freud wrote these words in 1914, shortly after his break with Jung. It is indeed true that he never concerned himself with developing an all-embracing system, but rather moved from the analysis of patients to areas of special attention: repression, dreams, the unconscious, sexuality and resistance. Sense of guilt also constituted an area of interest in his work. In his search for an explanation for and the origins of sense of guilt it appears that he did not attempt to construct a definitive theory here either. Despite returning repeatedly to this topic, Freud never wrote a systematic article about this feeling.² When touching upon sense of guilt, which he did often, he mapped it and indicated its connections to other psychic phenomena and with culture. His point of departure was the individual, and this is striking, not so much against the background of his interests and patient analyses, but because of the dominant tendencies in psychology and philosophy, inasmuch as these dealt with theorizing about man and mind. In the nineteenth century, science (and hence psychology, inasmuch as one may call it a science) tended towards system development which explained “everything”. *Psyche*, 1846, by Carl Gustav Carus, *Philosophie des Unbewußten* [Philosophy of the Unconscious], 1869, by Eduard von Hartmann, and also Wilhelm Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie* [Folk-Psychology], 1905-1920, are good examples of this. Accordingly Hartmann wrote in the introduction to his book that he saw it as his task to realize a synthesis of the great philosophical systems into a monistic unity.³ This romantic tradition of great systems built around an unambiguous principle did not fail to have its effect on psychoanalysis. Jung, Adler and later Rank, too, are in essence psychoanalysts who express this tradition of system construction and monism. Freud repeatedly distanced himself from these tendencies, not only because there is always an individual case to disprove any system, but also because he believed humans are fundamentally in conflict, because every analytic insight achieved appears also to cloak something else, and because the therapist is never in a position objectively to plumb the deepest emotional depths. Nevertheless, he is in a certain way very much in the tradition of the great theorists. Whether one considers Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* or Breasted’s *The Dawn of Conscience*, these are all comprehensive works which resonate in Freud’s work. Put another way, although he was certainly interested in “everything”, he did not explain it all by reducing it to a single principle. It

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² “Sigmund Freud never actually wrote a book dedicated entirely to guilt, but the various comments he made on the subject throughout his work make him the true initiator of the study of the sense of guilt and certainly the first person to approach the question systematically.” R. Speziale-Bagliacca, *Guilt, Revenge, Remorse and Responsibility after Freud*, Brunner-Routledge, Hove/New York, 2004, p.1.

would be better to say that he placed the unique individual before a background of changing and varied cultures and religions.

Freud does not describe systems but areas of attention. With the exception of *The Interpretation of Dreams* there is not one book which exhaustively explores a single phenomenon. This is why Freud preferred to speak about “fundaments”, “types”, “speculations”, “fantastic hypotheses” and “nuclear complexes” and used words like “fragment”, “project”, “outline”, “formulations”, “observations”, “notes” or “further remarks” in the titles of some of his works. He preferred to direct his attention to the victims (neurotics) of modern culture, to the decisive (small) events which changed history and the great men who were able to influence history.

My study on sense of guilt in Freud’s work is not intended to construct or reconstruct a conclusive theory. I am concerned in the first place with describing sense of guilt as an area of attention. My thesis is that sense of guilt is not a secondary theme which appears primarily in Freud’s later work but that in fact it plays a fundamental role in his earlier psychoanalytic work. It is via the analysis of sense of guilt that he came to understand the importance of repressed wishes and desires. It is via the analysis of sense of guilt that he discovered the Oedipus complex and the meaning of the ambivalence of love and hate. It appears to be an affect omnipresent in the tension between passions, desires and repressed feelings on the one hand and a censuring, accusatory morality on the other. Freud was not only able to research the nature and meaning of that repression via sense of guilt, but was also able to inquire after the origin of morality in both its individual and cultural guises.

In this study I map the attention Freud paid to sense of guilt and sketch the development of his thought on this issue and the meaning it has for other central topics in his oeuvre. This is not an exhaustive technical analysis, nor is it a clinical debate with Freud. Instead I shall emphasize Freud’s debates. We shall see that the great debates he had with students (Jung, Rank, Klein) were debates in which sense of guilt played a prominent role. His thinking about sense of guilt can largely be described by means of these debates. I shall also emphasize the important influences on Freud’s thinking and his use of others’ writings. These choices clearly demonstrate the importance of our field of inquiry. It is precisely this approach – Freud in debate – which enables us to perceive his thoughts on sense of guilt more clearly than we would were we to limit ourselves to his oeuvre alone. I believe this approach provides clarification of or corrections to many contributions to Freud studies which limit themselves to technical analyses of his work.

4 In much literature on Freud sense of guilt is only treated in the context of the Oedipus complex which only became a central topic in Freud’s writings from *Totem and Taboo* onwards, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s. An example of can be found in Grinberg’s study on guilt and depression, one of the few studies that explicitly concerns sense of guilt in Freudian (and Kleinian) thought. His study starts of with an exegesis of *Totem and Taboo*; earlier writings on sense of guilt are hardly elaborated upon. L. Grinberg, *Guilt and Depression*, Karnac Books, New York/London, 1992.

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Introduction

Why write a book on Freud’s thoughts on sense of guilt? The most obvious reason is this: there is no recent study of sense of guilt in Freud’s work. In the past it has been mainly theologians who have addressed this issue in his work, but this never really led to a comprehensive, descriptive study. The psychoanalytic literature also lacks a study of this kind. It is thus high time that this subject was examined in detail.

The second reason has to do with my own research to date. In my dissertation on the formation of conscience in early seventeenth-century orthodox Calvinism guilt was a prominent topic. It was clear that Puritanism time and time again emphasized people’s sin or guilt. Sinfulness as guilt was something to be understood in order to consequently be avoided by focusing on redemption and salvation. In this way guilt not only has a fundamental, but also an enigmatic character. The determination of sin and guilt was thus different than in the Roman Catholic tradition where sins and feelings of guilt were differentiated much more clearly into many (major and minor) violations, and ideas were consequently judged and handled in a different way. A study of the various forms of guilt and how they are handled became more and more urgent.

There is another good reason to take sense of guilt as a subject for investigation. As we shall see, Freud conducted various debates during his life in which sense of guilt played a role. The debate with the London School (Klein and others) at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s is of particular interest here. That debate is, after all, also the beginning of what is now known as the Anglo-Saxon tradition. One might say that the French psychoanalytic school, following Jacques Lacan, built upon Freud’s position in that debate. Recent years have seen the French tradition gain ground in the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world. This has naturally led to discussions and misunderstandings. It is thus good to focus once again on the debate between Freud and the London School, not to demonstrate Freud’s points (right or wrong), but principally in order to show where the agreements and differences in perception lie and the background against which they arose.

This book is entitled *A Dark Trace. Sigmund Freud on the Sense of Guilt*. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud cites *Oedipus Rex* when he writes that the tragedy tells the story of Oedipus’ quest for the cause of Thebe’s suffering: he follows die dunkle Spur der alten Schuld, he reads the dark trace of an ancient guilt, in order to eventually discover that the search leads to his own acts (and desires). Freud occasionally spoke thereafter about the search for the origins of sense of guilt as tracking a “dark trace”. I am following that trace, which begins with Freud’s intuition of an oppressive morality at loggerheads with the passions, a tension which manifests itself in self-reproach. Cutting across self-analyses, case histories and cultural studies, the dark trace ends in the history of the Jewish religion.

Fundamental to this work are Freud’s texts, as they appeared in the *Standard Edition*. The use of the *Standard Edition* instead of the original German texts (*Gesammelte Werke*) causes some technical problems. Most importantly, the
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distinction between *Schuldbewußtsein* and *Schuldgefühl* is erased as both words are translated with “sense of guilt”. Only occasionally, James Strachey translates these words explicitly as “consciousness of guilt” and “feeling of guilt”. His reason for translating both *Schuldbewußtsein* and *Schuldgefühl* as “sense of guilt” is that “they are synonyms apart from their literal meaning”. Although our study will show that *Schuldbewußtsein* and *Schuldgefühl* are to be related with specific theoretical developments and reformulations Strachey’s choice can be defended. There is indeed no clear theoretical distinction between *Schuldbewußtsein* and *Schuldgefühl*. Hence, because of the necessary references to the *Standard Edition* I will refer to both terms as “sense of guilt”. When required I will indicate whether we are dealing with “consciousness of guilt” or “feeling of guilt”. Other technical problems will be addressed in footnotes.

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