What Psychoanalysis Can and Cannot Tell Us About Morality

Aftab, A. (2026). What Psychoanalysis Can and Cannot Tell Us About Morality. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2026.2744514

A commentary on: *Hartmann, H. (1960). Psychoanalysis and moral values. International Universities Press.*

Awais Aftab, MD
Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Cleveland, OH.
awaisaftab@gmail.com

Abstract:
Psychoanalysis and Moral Values (1960) was Hartmann's attempt to clarify what psychoanalysis can and cannot contribute to our understanding of morality. Its central thesis is that psychoanalysis gives us a psychological account of moral behavior (how moral values and the superego develop), but cannot by itself tell us what is morally right or wrong. Hartmann is also wary of equating "health" with "goodness." This conclusion remains persuasive, understood today as a specific application of the "is-ought problem." More intriguing is his claim that psychoanalysis can explain the ontogenesis of moral values, since subsequent research has largely displaced psychoanalysis as the central explanatory framework. Yet core insights remain alive within moral psychology: the internalization of moral values from relationships with caregivers, the influence of unconscious conflicts, the opacity of moral motivations, and moral behaviors as reaction formations. Undergoing intensive analytic work can improve the psychological conditions under which moral judgments are made, but the aim of psychoanalysis is psychological health, not morality.

Keywords: moral psychology; moral behavior; moral philosophy; psychodynamic psychotherapy; is-ought problem; superego

Consider a hypothetical scenario. A woman meets with a psychoanalyst for an initial consultation. Her main reason for seeking psychotherapy is, “I want to be a more ethical person. I realize that for much of my life I’ve acted in a selfish and self-centered manner. Can you help me become a more moral person?” When asked to clarify her conception of a moral person, she says, “Someone close to God, who follows God’s word, is an obedient daughter and obedient wife, a selfless mother, and one who is not vulnerable to temptation.” How might the analyst respond to her, and what should the therapist say about what, if anything, psychoanalytic psychotherapy can do for her in her pursuit?

The classical psychoanalytic answer to this would be that psychoanalysis is not primarily about morality or ethics; it is instead about a certain sort of mental freedom and self-knowledge. The analyst cannot promise any moral improvement whatsoever. They can, however, potentially help the person better understand what motivates their inquiry, why this inquiry has acquired a sense of urgency at this particular moment in life, and why they are drawn to these particular moral values.

Instead of giving an answer about the relationship between psychotherapy and morality, another analyst might focus on discussing the particular vision of morality she brings up. Her moral worldview appears centered around relationships to authority, whether it is God, father, husband, or children. Her own desires and judgments are not only absent, they seem to be a threat. Perhaps what she needs is less guilt and less obedience. Maybe she needs to embrace a degree of healthy selfishness that she has so far rejected.

And yet another analyst might say: psychoanalysis is indeed an ethical undertaking, and genuine concern for others is a developmental psychological achievement, while mere compliance with rules indicates something has gone awry. Psychoanalysis carries its own ethics. It values candor, preaches tolerance of ambivalence, a greater willingness to see one’s real desires. This ethic is not neutral towards patriarchal and religious ideas of obedience. So while the answer to whether psychoanalysis can help her be a better person is yes, the outcome won’t resemble her description of morality at all. It may, in fact, subvert it.

If you, dear reader, are a psychotherapist, how would you respond? In contemplating this clinical scenario, you are also contemplating an old question about the relationship between psychoanalysis and moral values, and one of the first comprehensive treatments of this question comes from Heinz Hartmann.

*

Heinz Hartmann was an Austrian-born psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, and was the leading theorist of ego psychology in the mid-20th century. *Psychoanalysis and Moral Values* is a short book by Hartmann, published in 1960, as an expanded version of a Freud Anniversary Lecture he gave in New York in 1959. It was an attempt to clarify what psychoanalysis can and cannot contribute to our understanding of morality. The central thesis of the book is that psychoanalysis gives us a psychological account of moral behavior (how moral values and the superego develop, etc.), but it cannot by itself tell us what is morally right or wrong.

As a theory of personality, psychoanalysis is, in Hartmann's view, well placed to explain the psychological origins of moral feelings and conflicts. It can do so, however, only by maintaining a separation between psychoanalytic practice and the personal moral worldview of the analyst. The analyst's role is to be a scientific student of morality. To determine how moral valuations arise and are maintained, and how they interact with other psychological processes. The analyst's role is not prescriptive, it is not to prescribe what ought to be value ultimately.

Hartmann reconstructs Freud's view on ethics using various scattered sources such as Freud's theoretical writings, letters, biographies, etc. Freud was not an ethicist and did not concern himself with building moral systems. However, he also saw morality as indispensable to the cohesion of civilization. Freud believed psychoanalysis to be a descriptive science which could, in theory, explain morality in psychological terms, but one that could not offer a moral vision itself. Per Hartmann, any analyst who treats psychoanalysis as a source of moral values is misreading Freud.

In Hartmann's analysis, moral behavior develops out of early relationships with adults, characterized by a tangle of emotions such as dependence and resentment, love and fear, and identification and resistance. Efforts to manage early sexual and aggressive impulses as well as the internalization of external imperatives from caregivers develop into superego. While Freudian theories provided a description of how moral behavior develops, the explanations do not say and do not determine what should be valued.

Hartmann is wary of equating "health" with "goodness," the false inference from "this is psychologically healthy" to "this is morally good." He recognized the potential of how talk of "healthy" functioning can acquire a covert moral character. For Hartmann, this is a recipe for philosophical confusion and furthermore, it can enable a subtle form of coercion in psychotherapy.

Can analysis lead to moral improvements in a person? Hartmann concedes that this is possible. There are routes from psychological health to ethical behavior. Through enhanced self-knowledge. Integration of previously suppressed or denied impulses and ideals. Better insight into motives and conflicts, such that moral code and actual conduct are brought into closer alignment. Psychoanalysis can produce a more integrated personality, one that is less vulnerable to problematic oscillations between rebellion and submission to authority figures. But Hartmann remains critical of the assumption that successful psychoanalysis *necessarily* improves moral behavior. The aims of psychoanalysis are clinical; any moral gains are indirect and these moral gains must not become the explicit goal of treatment.

*

Hartmann's conclusion is that psychoanalysis is a psychological science of moral behavior that can't itself yield a moral system. This conclusion remains true and is still persuasive. Today, it is understood more readily as a specific application of a more general thesis in philosophy, known as the "is-ought problem." This philosophical problem was famously articulated by David Hume, and while it continues to be actively debated by philosophers, the core point is now widely accepted. The core is that purely descriptive premises cannot by themselves entail a normative conclusion, *unless* some normative assumption has already been smuggled in (Sayre-McCord, 2023). In scientific practice, empirical inquiry is usually infused with values of one sort or another, making it difficult to state facts in isolation without values in the background. "Thick concepts" that combine values and facts (Väyrynen, 2025) also complicate this philosophical picture. Classical philosophical examples of thick concepts include character terms like *generous*, *cruel*, and *tactful*. *Health* is arguably a thick concept as it combines descriptions of physiological and psychological state of affairs with ideas of what is optimal and desirable.

I am more intrigued by Hartmann's claim that psychoanalysis can explain the ontogenesis of moral values and moral behavior. This is because subsequent scientific and psychological research on moral development has largely displaced psychoanalysis as the central explanatory framework and this raises the question of how much of Hartmann's claim still holds up.

Different theories of moral psychology emphasize different aspects of what are otherwise interconnected processes. Social Intuitionist model grounds moral judgments in intuitions that are then justified by post-hoc reasoning (Haidt, 2001). Dual-process theories describe

moral cognition through an interaction of automatic emotional responses and deliberative reasoning (Greene, 2007). Moral Foundations Theory suggests that moral reasoning utilizes multiple primary psychological systems, such as care vs harm, fairness vs cheating, loyalty vs betrayal, authority vs subversion, and sanctity vs degradation (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The theory has been used to argue that different political ideologies assign different weights to these foundations. Moral identity theory studies the relationship between morality and self-conceptualization, and describes how moral traits are incorporated into identity and how moral identity is displayed to others (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984).

Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning develops through hierarchical stages, from avoidance of punishment to universal ethical principles (1969, 1984). Turiel (1983) demonstrated that young children can distinguish moral rules from conventional rules, and they judge violations of moral rules more seriously than violations of other sorts. Attachment and empathy-based approaches show how secure attachment in early life facilitates the development of empathy and trust, which provides a basis for prosocial behaviors (Bowlby, 1969; Hoffman, 2000; Thompson, 1998). Care ethics (Gilligan, 1982) looks at moral reasoning through human relationships and responsibility rather than abstract considerations of justice. Social learning theory elaborates how moral values are acquired through mechanisms of social learning (e.g. observation, imitation, reinforcement) (Bandura, 1977, 1991).

How psychoanalysis has influenced moral psychology remains debated and contested. Kohlberg (1963) positioned his theory as being in opposition to psychoanalytic ideas. However, the early stages in his theory (punishment-obedience orientation) also reflect typical psychoanalytic concerns with authority and guilt. Bowlby (1969) was trained as a psychoanalyst and drew some inspiration from object relations theory while reacting to it. He was often criticized by his psychoanalytic contemporaries as not being faithful to psychoanalysis. Gilligan's care ethics also drew some inspiration from object relations. Kohut (1984) highlighted the central role empathy plays in human development, and Winnicott (1965) explored the role of mother-infant relationships in the development of moral concern and guilt.

Contemporary relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis see moral values as co-constructed in relationships and point out the role of unconscious processes in moral judgment. They highlight how trauma and disrupted attachment can distort moral development. It gives us a vocabulary to talk about complexity of moral emotions and emphasizes that mental life is complex and motives behind moral behavior are often

opaque and unclear, even to the person themselves. People can consciously hold egalitarian beliefs while unconsciously organizing their personal lives around the exercise of power. People can advocate for altruism while being motivated by unresolved guilt. People can adopt rigid moral standards as a defense against difficult-to-tolerate ambivalence.

What do we know about the effects of undergoing psychoanalysis on moral judgment and behavior? In terms of clinical studies, we know surprisingly little. While there is an abundant literature on the efficacy of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic psychotherapies, studies have not systematically studied moral behavior as an outcome. What we can say with some confidence is that long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy is associated with improvements in personality functioning (De Maat, et al, 2009; Lindfors, et al. 2015; Leichsenring et al, 2023). Personality pathology involves impairments in self and interpersonal functioning, including unstable or exploitative value systems and difficulties with guilt and responsibility. While we cannot really say anything confidently about whether psychoanalysis improves moral judgment and behavior, undergoing intensive analytic/psychodynamic work can improve the psychological conditions under which moral judgments are made. Psychoanalytic treatment can nudge a rigid or fragmented psyche towards more integration and self-reflection, strengthening the patient's capacity for mentalization and affect regulation. Those changes can, in principle, reduce impulsive or retaliatory behavior, decrease covert exploitation, and soothe self-sacrificing "moral" enactments that are driven by unconscious guilt. Undergoing psychoanalysis can foster a more coherent and humane conscience and thereby tilt moral judgment and behavior in a prosocial direction, but Hartmann is correct that psychoanalysis cannot be pursued as a moral treatment. The aim of psychoanalysis is psychological health, not morality, and any moral benefits are secondary to that.

Hartmann got the conclusions right in 1960, although anyone producing a similar work today would have to focus more on the relationship between moral psychology and moral values. Moral psychology as a scientific discipline can explain how we develop our moral sense without telling us what's morally correct. While cognitive psychology, social psychology, evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience have now replaced psychoanalysis as the primary lens for understanding moral development, core insights from psychoanalysis remain important to our contemporary understanding. The internalization of moral values from relationships with caregivers, the influence of unconscious conflicts, the opacity of moral motivations, and moral behaviors as reaction formations are insights that remain alive within moral psychology. Psychoanalysis brings a

unique attitude of respect for the idiographic developmental complexity of the moral self that distinguishes it from other disciplines and ensures its continued relevance.

***

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Nicole Nelson for her valuable editorial input during the preparation of this manuscript.

Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Confidentiality Acknowledgement
Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymization policy.

Notes on contributor
Awais Aftab, M.D., is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University and a psychiatrist at Southwest General in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the editor of a volume of interviews, *Conversations in Critical Psychiatry* (Oxford University Press, 2024). He writes online on his substack blog and newsletter *Psychiatry at the Margins* (https://www.psychiatrymargins.com/).

References:

Aquino, K., & Reed, A., II. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(6), 1423-1440.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognitive theory of moral thought and action. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development: Vol. 1. Theory* (pp. 45-103). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Blasi, A. (1984). Moral identity: Its role in moral functioning. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior, and moral development* (pp. 128-139). Wiley.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

De Maat, S., De Jonghe, F., Schoevers, R., & Dekker, J. (2009). The effectiveness of long-term psychoanalytic therapy: A systematic review of empirical studies. *Harvard review of psychiatry*, *17*(1), 1-23.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.

Greene, J. D. (2007). Why are VMPFC patients more utilitarian? A dual-process theory of moral judgment explains. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 11*(8), 322-323.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 47*, 55-130.

Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review, 108*(4), 814-834.

Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus, 133*(4), 55-66.

Hoffman, M. L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice*. Cambridge University Press.

Kohlberg, L. (1963). The development of children's orientations toward a moral order: I. Sequence in the development of moral thought. *Vita Humana, 6*(1-2), 11-33.

Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (pp. 347-480). Rand McNally.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development*. Harper & Row.

Kohut, H. (1984). *How does analysis cure?* University of Chicago Press.

Leichsenring, F., Abbass, A., Heim, N., Keefe, J. R., Kisely, S., Luyten, P., ... & Steinert, C. (2023). The status of psychodynamic psychotherapy as an empirically supported treatment for common mental disorders–an umbrella review based on updated criteria. *World Psychiatry*, *22*(2), 286-304.

Lindfors, O., Knekt, P., Heinonen, E., Härkänen, T., Virtala, E., & Helsinki Psychotherapy Study Group. (2015). The effectiveness of short-and long-term psychotherapy on personality functioning during a 5-year follow-up. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *173*, 31-38.

Sayre-McCord, G. (2023). Metaethics. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/metaethics/ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Thompson, R. A. (1998). Early sociopersonality development. In W. Damon & N. Eisenberg (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 25-104). Wiley.

Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and convention*. Cambridge University Press.

Väyrynen, P. (2025). Thick ethical concepts. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/thick-ethical-concepts/

Winnicott, D. W. (1965). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment*. International Universities Press.