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Oedipus and Obliscorn

In the epoch of the internet and social media age, there exists the concept of “Cancel Culture” in which a large group of people, typically young Twitter (X) users, attempt to digitally disparage and shun someone (“the Transgressor”) who has committed a social faux pas or norm break in their community. An interesting part of this phenomenon is the norm that there is an expectation for individuals in the community (and any associated communities) to join in on the extreme criticism. This is expected regardless of whether the individual agrees there is any justification for the criticism of the “transgressor.” Further, the individual is expected to participate even if care they do not care at all about the transgression or the transgressor. In this paper, I will argue that Freud’s genealogies of guilt (primarily found in Chapter 7 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*) explain the origin of this norm; this obligation norm will be referred to as “obliscorn” (obligatory doling of public scorn towards the transgressor). First, I will state the presupposition, then I will analyze Freud’s work and the usage of his genealogy to explain obliscorn.

I will be using Freud’s theory of the primal aggression that needs to be released for society to properly function (Freud, Ch. 5) as a presupposition for condensing the scope of the paper. This concept easily explains the initial lashing out of the accuser towards the transgressor as they (allegedly) broke a norm— from the theory, an act of aggression is expected. To continue to explain obliscorn, we must inspect the origin of guilt.

With this claim for the need for release of aggression, Freud identifies that one of the directions the aggression often goes is “sent back to where it came from… the ego,” (49). The aggression is then a form of tension between the commanding, harsh super-ego and the ego (49). This is what he describes to be guilt. Intuitively, the feeling comes from ‘doing something bad’ or ‘intending to do something bad’ but this is unhelpful— a further explanation is necessary for application. A ‘bad thing’ is dictated by the fear of the loss of love from an authority (50). The guilt of *not* following obliscorn, as it is a ‘good’ thing (explained in the subsequent paragraph), forces our individual to obey. Once a community member displays an act of aggression towards a transgressor, our individual must follow suit to avoid losing love. However, if this is all on the internet in decentralized, huge communities, why would our individual fear a loss of love? This brings us to our next point, the fear and concept of an authority.

In an offline community, there are many *physically distinct* people who all propose their separate ideas. On Twitter, while they may have user handles, all information comes from the same feed, the same application, the same device. In your hand, there is a singular flow of constant extreme ideas and beratement. As Freud argues, the super-ego gets developed by identification with parents (or similar authority figures) and community norms (49-51). I argue that for many young people, Twitter has become a perverted form of authority figure as it is filled with communal norms and patterns to observe, it often heavily critiques individuals upon interaction with the platform, and it is distributed as one source (as if it came from *one* person’s mouth); this parallels the role that parents and community leaders serve during development. As such, our individuals have a stunted development that gives Twitter communities control of them as one of the authorities in their life— Freud argues that “the authority is internalized through the establishment of the super-ego” (50). As their authority, Twitter teaches our individual what is bad and what is good: obliscorn is therefore good. Further, rejection by Twitter is a rejection by authority and if you do not comply, you will be hated too: the loss of love.

There is still a missing piece to explain obliscorn. According to our current analysis, adhering to obliscorn should not cause guilt. Our individual should know that it must be good as they are obeying their super-ego and their authority figure (Twitter). However, whether or not our individual agrees they still often feel some guilt from the action of adhering to obliscorn.

Freud’s “Oedipus complex [of] the killing of the father by the brothers banded together,” explains this residual guilt experienced by our individual (55). Our individual desires the love of the mother: Twitter. Twitter, through obliscorn, demands hatred and instills aggression in our individual and points it towards the father: the alleged transgressor. However, the transgressor is still a member of the community— our individual still wants their love. (Though not required, any perceived innocence would simply add to this desire). According to Freud, “[the brothers’] hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression [and] their love came to the fore in the remorse of the deed,” (56). The pain our individual feels is that the death of the father, ‘canceling’ the transgressor, is irreversible, and they can never again receive his love. The residual guilt that our individual feels is explained by this “ambivalence of feeling towards the father,” (56).

To conclude, the adherence to and intricacies of the norm of obliscorn, the obligation to join in on the canceling an alleged transgressor on Twitter, can be explained through Sigmund Freud’s genealogy of guilt. Initially, aggression is ‘returned to sender,’ which causes guilt. Guilt is caused by fear of the loss of love from authority, and fear of the super-ego. Obliscorn, as a good thing, must be obeyed as to not experience the guilt of keeping aggression to oneself. Obliscorn is a good thing since Twitter is the teaching authority and helps create the personal super-ego. And finally, the residual guilt associated with obliscorn is caused by the Oedipusian killing of the father and the associated ambivalence of feelings. With the genealogy of Obliscorn dialed in, we can proceed to study future norms. Particularly, I propose that the useless apology that follows the cancellation of the Transgressor must be examined.

Bibliography

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents: A Norton Critical Edition*. Edited by Samuel Moyn, translated by James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.