

# Dialogue with Freud on the origin of morality

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Does morality start with the instauration of certain taboos, as proposed by Freud? If the incest taboo has been formulated to stop human beings from attacking each other, did it serve its purpose? This paper's idea developed from the above questions, which arose from our reading of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. We trust that potential readers will approach this text with an attitude of *benevolent scepticism*.

In 'The return of totemism in childhood,' a chapter in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud said: 'The two taboos of totemism with which the morality of man begins...'

The first question that arises is whether the human morality does begin with the instauration of taboos. And expanding the question: do the other living species not have a moral system?

The term *morality* derives from Latin: **mos**, custom, same as the Greek for 'ethics' ([\[1\]](#)) – hence the indistinct use of 'ethics' and 'morality.' As said by Cicero (*De Fato*, I, 1), because it relates to character, called in Greek *ethos*, while we usually term that part of philosophy "the study of character" but the suitable course is to add to the Latin language by giving this subject the name of 'moral science'".

If we understand by morality the customs and traditions of a particular group, there must have been a morality before the instauration of the totemic system – and between non-human living species too. All living being grows in a community, with others, and develops specific forms of relating to them. Much later than the Greeks, the first Christian philosophers made morality depend on religious principles.

Freud continues:

...are psychologically not of equal value. One of them, the sparing of the totem animal, rests entirely upon emotional motives; the father had been removed and nothing in reality could make up for this. But the other, the incest prohibition, had, besides, a strong practical foundation. Sexual need does not unite men; it separates them. Though the brothers had joined forces in order to overcome the father, each was the other's rival among the women. Each one wanted to have them all to himself like the father, and in the fight of each against the other the new organization would have perished. For there was no longer any one stronger than all the rest who could have successfully assumed the role of the father. Thus there was nothing left for the brothers, if they wanted to live together, but to erect the incest prohibition—perhaps after many difficult experiences—through which they all equally renounced the women whom they desired, and on account of whom they had removed the father in the first place.

'Practical' is that which is appropriate to a transaction or business, that which is effective in praxis [\[2\]](#). Practical refers to 'practicalities' and is concerned with 'themes,' understood as 'human themes' in general. The practice differs from the theory, but this does not mean that practical knowledge is not possible. According to Aristotle, there are three classes of knowledge: theoretical, practical, and poetic. The second has action as its object, especially moral action (which, for Aristotle, is also 'politics'). The third has production as its object. It is possible to say that practical knowledge is not a

science, but 'practical wisdom,' whose end is to achieve the common good and happiness for each one of the individuals in the community. 'Practical wisdom' concerns the individual, while 'political wisdom' concerns the community. The difference between 'practical' and 'theoretical' in Aristotle is not categorical: there 'practical principles' and 'theoretical principles.' For Kant, 'practical' (which is identical to 'moral') is related to all that suits the free will – understood as the free will of a specific desire, regardless of sensitive impulses. This desire is determined by reason, and it is up to 'practical reason' to determine what should be a rational, 'moral' conduct.

If Kant's categorical imperative is based on rational principles, we ask ourselves: where is the totemism? If a principle contains practical importance – i.e., if it is important to achieve the common good according to Aristotle – and it follows free will according to Kant, why should the interdiction of the incest be a taboo? A practical end has no reason to be repressed; if it is repressed, it is a taboo. The taboo, like a symptom, is a transaction between a repressed desire and repression.

In the end of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud repeats that ethics was partially founded on the objective necessities of the fraternal society and on the expiations demanded by the consciousness of guilt. But he soon clarifies that because of important cultural changes that have taken place throughout the history of humanity, the democratic equality between brothers could not be sustained. The totemic father had been elevated to the category of gods until, in Christianity, the son is sacrificed. The son himself becomes a god and, simultaneously, *there is the production of the total renouncement of the woman – for whom the sons had initially revolted against the father*. The son's religion replaces that of the father. This is, thus, where the end, practical in its origins, becomes a taboo.

Did the interdiction of the incest serve to the purpose of uniting humanity? The practical end would have to lead to peace between human beings – undeniable that with the existence of peace there is also libido. We agree with Arnaldo Rascovsky: the parricide keeps being performed, displaced into filicide, when we send our sons to war. Is then the incest taboo justified?

The history of the circumstances that led to the institution of taboos and that have determined that they are genetically transmitted deserves to be discussed. Morality is an expression of libido that later will become Eros. If within the primitive horde only aggression had predominated, the human species would not have survived. Alongside aggression – necessary for the transformation of nature and adequate for the species' survival – the self-preservation and sexual instincts are those which performed specific actions to achieve survival. Taboos should be replaced by ethic principles sustained by the reality principle.

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[1] Based on José Ferrater Mora's Philosophical Dictionary.

[2] Based on the abovementioned dictionary.