

ETHICS AS A PSYCHIC REGULATOR: ETHICAL COHERENCE, SELF-ESTEEM STABILITY AND COMPENSATORY SELF-REGULATION

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Abstract

This paper conceptualizes ethics not primarily as external moralism or social compliance, but as a psychic regulator that supports self-coherence, stable self-esteem, and psychological well-being. Building on psychoanalytic accounts of guilt, shame, and superego dynamics, and engaging with contemporary models of autonomy and self-regulation, we propose the construct of ethical coherence: the experienced alignment between one's actions, internal values, and self-representation. We argue that ethical coherence functions as a protective structure in the psychic economy by reducing unconscious guilt and shame-based self-attack, thereby weakening the need for compensatory strategies such as excessive validation-seeking, compulsive productivity, and addictive patterns of consumption or distraction. From a psychoanalytic perspective, ethically dissonant action may intensify persecutory moral configurations and generate residues that require repression, rationalization, or manic repair; in contrast, ethically coherent action consolidates ego continuity and supports more mature object relations. Developmentally, we distinguish authentic ethical functioning from mere compliance: when ethical positions are internally integrated rather than externally imposed, they tend to strengthen autonomy and reduce defensive dependency on external approval. Clinically and socially, this framework reframes ethics as a form of psychic hygiene - a preventive mode of psychological self-regulation that minimizes internal fragmentation and preserves psychological flexibility. We outline practical implications for assessment and intervention (e.g., exploring ethical dissonance as a source of diffuse guilt, rumination, and compulsive self-regulation) and propose testable hypotheses linking ethical coherence to self-esteem stability and reduced compensatory behaviors in contexts marked by acceleration and performativity.

Keywords: *Ethics, ethical coherence, self-esteem, guilt, self-regulation.*

1. Introduction

Ethics has traditionally been approached within moral philosophy as a normative system governing conduct and defining socially acceptable behavior. In psychological research, it is frequently operationalized through constructs such as moral reasoning, prosociality, or internalization of norms (Haidt, 2001; Kohlberg, 1984). While these approaches illuminate important aspects of moral development and social functioning, they tend to frame ethics primarily as a regulatory mechanism of interpersonal order rather than as a structural organizer of intrapsychic life.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, moral experience cannot be reduced to social conformity. Freud (1923/1961) conceptualized morality through the formation of the superego, an internal agency that both regulates behavior and generates guilt. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930/1961) further emphasized that guilt often persists independently of external punishment, suggesting that moral conflict operates fundamentally within the psychic economy. Moral transgression thus produces not only social consequences but internal destabilization.

Subsequent psychoanalytic developments expanded this view. Object relations theorists highlighted how internalized relational patterns shape moral self-evaluation and affect regulation (Fairbairn, 1952; Winnicott, 1965). Self-psychology further reframed ethical failures as threats to self-cohesion, linking shame and fragmentation to disruptions in value-consistent action (Kohut, 1971). Across these traditions, morality appears less as obedience to rules and more as a dimension of self-organization.

Contemporary motivational theories converge with this perspective in unexpected ways. Self-determination theory posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs, and that internalized values function differently depending on whether they are integrated or externally imposed (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When individuals act in accordance with self-endorsed values, psychological well-being increases; when behavior is externally controlled, defensive dependency and instability are more likely. This distinction parallels psychoanalytic differentiations between authentic integration and mere compliance (Winnicott, 1965).

Despite these convergences, ethics is rarely conceptualized explicitly as a regulatory structure within the psychic economy. Much of the literature treats guilt, shame, self-esteem, and self-regulation as separate constructs, without articulating how value-behavior alignment may function as an organizing axis that stabilizes them.

The present paper addresses this gap by proposing the construct of ethical coherence, defined as the experienced alignment between one's actions, internal values, and self-representation over time. We argue that ethical coherence operates as a protective configuration within the psychic economy. When behavior is consistent with internalized values, superego friction diminishes, unconscious guilt decreases, and self-esteem becomes less contingent on external validation (Baumeister et al., 2003). Conversely, ethical dissonance may intensify persecutory moral configurations, requiring compensatory regulatory strategies such as excessive productivity, validation-seeking, or addictive consumption.

By reframing ethics as a psychic regulator rather than merely a moral prescription, this framework integrates psychoanalytic accounts of superego dynamics with contemporary models of autonomy and self-regulation. Ethical coherence is proposed as a stabilizing axis linking value-behavior alignment to reduced guilt load, decreased compensatory regulation, and greater self-esteem stability, particularly under conditions of social acceleration and external evaluation.

2. Ethical coherence: Conceptual definition and theoretical delimitation

The construct of ethical coherence is introduced here as a structural configuration within the psychic economy. It refers to the sustained alignment between internalized values, enacted behavior, and narrative self-representation over time. Unlike episodic moral action, ethical coherence concerns continuity and structural integration.

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that moral conflict becomes pathogenic when internalized demands remain dissociated from enacted conduct. Freud (1923/1961) described how the superego, as heir to parental authority and cultural prohibition, monitors the ego and generates guilt in response to perceived transgressions. Importantly, this guilt may persist even when no external punishment occurs (Freud, 1930/1961). The persistence of guilt reveals that morality operates within the internal regulatory system of the psyche.

Ethical coherence differs from mere superego compliance. Compliance may reduce anxiety temporarily but does not necessarily integrate values into the ego structure. Winnicott (1965) distinguished between adaptive submission and authentic integration, arguing that psychological maturity requires the emergence of action grounded in an internally appropriated self. Ethical coherence, in this sense, requires internal endorsement rather than reactive conformity.

Self-psychology further supports this distinction. Kohut (1971) demonstrated that self-cohesion depends on structural consistency. When individuals repeatedly act against deeply held values, fragmentation and shame intensify. Such misalignment weakens self-representation and increases vulnerability to narcissistic injury.

Contemporary motivational theory converges with these psychoanalytic insights. According to self-determination theory, values can be internalized at different levels, ranging from external regulation to integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Only when values are integrated into the self do they promote autonomy and psychological well-being. Ethical coherence corresponds to this integrated level of regulation, where behavior reflects endorsed commitments rather than external pressures.

2.1. Differentiation from adjacent constructs

To clarify its theoretical position, ethical coherence differs from adjacent constructs. Authenticity refers to subjective alignment with experience but does not necessarily entail moral accountability. Rogers' (1961) notion of congruence concerns consistency between self-concept and experience without specifying value-behavior alignment. Moral internalization may generate rule-following without narrative integration. Ethical coherence, in contrast, requires convergence between internalized value structures, enacted conduct, and narrative continuity. When these elements align, superego activation becomes modulatory rather than persecutory.

2.2. Ethical dissonance as structural instability

Conversely, ethical dissonance occurs when behavior systematically contradicts internalized commitments. This misalignment may activate superego aggression and generate unconscious guilt, even in the absence of conscious moral conflict (Freud, 1930/1961).

Such dissonance destabilizes ego cohesion and increases reliance on compensatory regulatory strategies. These strategies may manifest as excessive productivity, compulsive validation-seeking, addictive consumption, or chronic rumination — all attempts to restore internal equilibrium through external reinforcement.

Thus, ethical coherence may be understood as a structural moderator of superego intensity and guilt load within the psychic economy.

3. From ethical dissonance to compensatory self-regulation: A guilt-mediated mechanism

If ethical coherence functions as a stabilizing configuration within the psychic economy, its inverse—ethical dissonance—may produce regulatory instability. Ethical dissonance refers to the persistent misalignment between internalized values and enacted behavior. This misalignment is not merely cognitive inconsistency; from a psychoanalytic standpoint, it activates structural processes involving guilt, shame, and superego aggression.

Freud (1930/1961) emphasized that guilt may operate independently of conscious wrongdoing. The superego, as an internalized authority, can generate tension even when no transgression is consciously acknowledged. This suggests that ethical dissonance may function below the threshold of conscious awareness, producing diffuse discomfort rather than explicit moral conflict. External punishment may temporarily modulate guilt, yet when superego configurations remain persecutory, punitive experiences may intensify rather than resolve intrapsychic conflict.

Unconscious guilt often manifests indirectly. Rather than appearing as remorse, it may emerge as irritability, self-sabotage, compulsive activity, or heightened need for approval. These phenomena can be understood as regulatory attempts to neutralize internal tension (Freud, 1923/1961). The ego, confronted with superego pressure, seeks alternative pathways to restore equilibrium.

Object relations theory further clarifies this process. When internalized value-structures are violated, the individual may experience fragmentation of self-representation and increased shame (Kohut, 1971). Shame, unlike guilt, threatens the cohesion of the self. To counteract this threat, compensatory mechanisms become mobilized.

This process may be summarized as follows: ethical dissonance activates superego pressure, intensifies unconscious guilt and shame, destabilizes ego cohesion, and mobilizes compensatory self-regulation.

Such compensatory regulation may manifest in validation-seeking, overproductivity, addictive distraction, rumination, or defensive self-justification. These behaviors function as attempts to restore a threatened self-image through external reinforcement. However, because they do not address the underlying value-behavior misalignment, they tend to produce only temporary stabilization.

Empirical research on self-esteem supports this interpretation. Baumeister et al. (2003) demonstrated that unstable self-esteem is associated with defensive reactivity and compensatory patterns rather than genuine psychological resilience. When self-worth is contingent upon external validation, regulatory volatility increases.

In contrast, when behavior aligns with internalized values—ethical coherence—superego friction diminishes. The reduction of unconscious guilt load decreases the need for compensatory regulation. Ego continuity becomes less dependent on external metrics, and self-esteem stabilizes across contexts.

From a motivational perspective, self-determination theory distinguishes between externally regulated and integrated forms of behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Integrated regulation—where values are fully assimilated into the self—correlates with psychological well-being and reduced defensive functioning. Ethical coherence may be understood as a specific manifestation of such integration within the moral domain. Thus, ethical coherence functions not as moral rigidity but as structural stabilization. It reduces regulatory volatility by minimizing internal conflict at its source.

4. Self-esteem stability as a structural consequence of ethical coherence

If ethical dissonance increases regulatory volatility through guilt-mediated destabilization, ethical coherence may produce the opposite effect: structural stabilization of self-esteem.

Self-esteem has long been conceptualized as a global evaluation of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). However, subsequent research has demonstrated that the stability of self-esteem is more predictive of psychological adjustment than its absolute level (Kernis, 2003). High but unstable self-esteem is often associated with defensiveness, aggression, and contingent validation-seeking (Baumeister et al., 2003). In contrast, stable self-esteem reflects a more consolidated self-structure.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, self-esteem stability corresponds to reduced oscillation in ego cohesion. When superego activation is excessive, fluctuations in self-representation intensify. Guilt and shame function as destabilizing affects, introducing discontinuities in self-experience (Freud, 1930/1961; Kohut, 1971).

Ethical coherence stabilizes self-esteem by reducing superego tension (Freud, 1923/1961), reinforcing narrative continuity (McAdams & McLean, 2013), and decreasing contingency on external approval (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Self-evaluation becomes anchored in structural alignment rather than fluctuating feedback.

Within self-determination theory, integrated regulation—where values are fully assimilated—correlates with greater psychological well-being and resilience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Ethical coherence may be understood as a domain-specific form of integrated regulation within the moral sphere.

Thus, we propose that self-esteem stability is not merely a byproduct of positive self-appraisal, but a structural outcome of reduced intrapsychic conflict.

4.1. Ethical coherence as structural buffer in contexts of acceleration

In contexts marked by performative pressure and constant evaluation, self-worth becomes increasingly contingent on visibility and productivity (Baumeister et al., 2003). Ethical coherence may function as a stabilizing buffer by grounding self-evaluation in value-consistent action rather than external metrics. Under conditions of social acceleration, such internal anchoring reduces regulatory volatility and preserves psychic continuity.

5. Hypotheses and operationalization

The previous sections conceptualized ethical coherence as a structural regulator linking value-behavior alignment to reduced guilt load, diminished compensatory regulation, and increased self-esteem stability. To render this framework empirically testable, ethical coherence may be operationalized as the degree of alignment between internalized personal values, enacted behavior, and narrative self-consistency across time. This alignment may be assessed through discrepancy indices between endorsed core values and recent behavioral reports, adapted integrated regulation measures derived from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and narrative coherence coding procedures examining value-action consistency in autobiographical accounts (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Ethical dissonance, correspondingly, may be defined as persistent discrepancy between internal commitments and enacted conduct rather than isolated moral lapses.

The model yields three central hypotheses. First (H1), ethical coherence will be positively associated with self-esteem stability, operationalized as lower intra-individual variability across repeated administrations of self-esteem measures (Rosenberg, 1965), independent of mean self-esteem level. Prior research indicates that unstable self-esteem predicts defensiveness and compensatory reactivity (Baumeister et al., 2003; Kernis, 2003); ethical coherence is expected to reduce such volatility by minimizing intrapsychic conflict.

Second (H2), the association between ethical dissonance and compensatory self-regulation will be mediated by guilt and shame proneness. Guilt may be assessed through validated measures such as the GASP scale (Cohen et al., 2011), while compensatory behaviors may be indexed through indicators of excessive validation-seeking, compulsive productivity, addictive consumption, or rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). This mediation model directly tests the proposed structural sequence in which value-behavior misalignment activates superego pressure, intensifies guilt, and increases reliance on compensatory strategies.

Third (H3), ethical coherence will moderate the relationship between exposure to evaluative or performative contexts and psychological distress. Under experimentally induced social evaluation or performance feedback conditions, individuals with lower ethical coherence are expected to show greater self-esteem fluctuation and compensatory tendencies, whereas those with higher ethical coherence should demonstrate reduced reactivity. Such moderation effects would indicate that ethical coherence functions as a stabilizing buffer in environments characterized by heightened external evaluation.

The model is empirically falsifiable insofar as ethical coherence may fail to predict stability, guilt may not mediate the proposed associations, or moderation effects may not emerge under evaluative stress.

By specifying measurable constructs and directional predictions, the framework advances from conceptual proposal to testable theory.

6. Conclusion: Ethics as psychic hygiene in clinical and social contexts

This paper reconceptualized ethics as a structural regulator within the psychic economy. Ethical coherence—defined as sustained alignment between internalized values and enacted behavior—reduces superego tension, lowers unconscious guilt load, and stabilizes self-esteem. Rather than functioning primarily as moral prescription, ethics may operate as a form of psychic hygiene that preserves internal continuity and minimizes fragmentation.

Clinically, ethical dissonance may underlie diffuse guilt, rumination, and compensatory overregulation, suggesting value-behavior alignment as a relevant intervention axis. Socially, in contexts characterized by acceleration and performativity, ethical coherence may serve as a stabilizing anchor that reduces dependency on fluctuating external validation.

Ethics, in this formulation, becomes not a demand for perfection but a structural resource for psychic integration and resilience.

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