

## GRADES OF EGO-DIFFERENTIATION

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Not long after Freud first published his systematization of psychic structure in terms of the Ego, the Super-ego and the Id, a tendency manifested itself amongst psycho-analytic writers, to convert what had been of necessity a fluid presentation into a more rigid and refractory medium. Moreover, in their exposition of this concept of tripartite psychic structure some writers had recourse to terms which, although suggestive enough in themselves, evaded the more disciplined usages of academic statement. One might quote for example phrases such as that coined by Alexander of a 'secret alliance' between Id and Super-ego, or again, the statement that a psychic formation can be 'Id- syntonic'. Useful as such phrases may be for purposes of description, they are unsatisfactory in many other respects: they tend to gloss over the difficulties of a precise statement of mechanism and may ultimately give rise to theoretical misconceptions, particularly in the minds of students. Thus we are left to form our own opinion whether this 'secret alliance' can be contained within the more familiar concept of 'regression', and if so, whether we can or must postulate some degree of Id organization in order to express the idea of regression to some common point in development or to some common functional reaction.

Another rather slipshod usage, due in all probability to some anthropomorphizing tendency, is that whereby we speak of severe

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<sup>1</sup> Read before the Eleventh International Psycho-Analytical Congress at Oxford, July 27, 1929.

Super-egos, imperious Ids and helpless Egos. Here again the idea of mechanism, of the control and regulation of instinctual tensions, gives place to a more or less lax descriptive process, one which, in the case of the Id, is totally alien to the conception of the impersonal. As usual Freud himself was the first to foresee this danger: in his original essay he warned us that from the topographical point of view, although the Id and Ego systems could be illustrated by a conventional diagram, a system such as that of the Super-ego did not lend itself to diagrammatic representation; and again he entered a mild caveat against taking abstractions too seriously when (in *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*) he warned us against regarding the mental systems as armed camps. It may be profitable therefore to review the existing structural conceptions to see to what extent their manifest advantages are offset by certain difficulties in formulation.

The first step in such a review is to consider *what advantages are actually obtained by the formulation of an Id concept*. To begin with, the concept of the Id made an end once and for all with the confusion arising from the use of the same term (i.e. unconscious) to designate a special mental system and a characteristic applicable to two out of three mental systems. It enabled us not only to distinguish between the old *ucs* and the unconscious components of the Ego but between the 'repressed' and the remainder of the *ucs* system. Further, it clarified the position of what up to then had been called the Ego instincts, a somewhat urgent matter since, as Mitchell<sup>2</sup> has pointed out, the use of the term Ego instinct had become somewhat precarious after the separation of the Ego libido, and more so after the self-preservative instincts were assigned to the Eros group. Indeed, whatever view one might hold as to the clinical usefulness of postulating Life and Death instincts, it was impossible to make theoretical use of these postulates, without formulating the concept of an instinct reservoir such as the Id. Naturally once the Id concept had been established, the ego was necessarily reduced to the status of a regulating institution, formed originally on a reactive pattern, with a capacity for exploiting perceptual function and an adequate sensitiveness to affective danger signals. Incidentally it may be noted that the modern concept of the Ego is in the deterministic sense as impersonal as that of the Id itself. Finally the concept of an Id matrix provided an asylum for the preservation of phylogenetic imprints

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<sup>2</sup> *Problems in Psycho-pathology*, London (Kegan Paul), 1927.

and temporarily at any rate rescued the theory of primal impressions from some unclarities with which it was beset.

*As far as the Ego was concerned* it was an organization derived from this psychic matrix but without any clear line of demarcation from the Id. At a later date the fact that the Id itself was no organization had to be restated in *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*. Now the necessity for this reminder itself suggests that the Id system was being credited with some features more characteristic of an Ego system, in other words, that an anthropomorphizing tendency was eating into a scientific concept. After all, study of primitive animistic systems together with some reflection on the use of rationalization as a late Ego defence against anxiety should serve to remind us that any attempt to strip the Ego of its dignity and independence even in the name of objective science is bound to provoke some attempt at restitution, no matter how unobtrusively this may be effected by anthropomorphising the concept of the Id.

Now the pre-Id view of the relation of the Ego to instinct and stimuli prevented this anthropomorphizing tendency, in so far as it related the development of the Ego to a primary separation of Inner and Outer world based on experiences of instinct tension and of the mastering of stimuli. This primary functioning is gradually complicated by the expansion of the pleasure-pain principle. This in turn leads to exploitation of the special reactive function of projection and hence to the formation of the Primary Pleasure Ego as distinct from a painful outer world. With the clearer differentiation of objects and the consequent frustration and foundering of impulses directed towards those objects, Ego differentiation receives much stronger impetus. It is at this point that we are justified in speaking of a Super-ego system and in describing its function. By the development of the Super-ego system, the Ego is placed in the advantageous position of being able to delegate some of its primary activities: the Super-ego becomes the instigator though not the executant of inner inhibition. At this point also we are entitled to speak of the Real Ego. Having delegated the exhausting task of scrutinizing certain instinct derivatives, the Real Ego can exploit its capacity for watchfulness as an organ of adaptation to external stimuli.

The formulation of the Id concept does not involve any alteration in these fundamental views of Ego development, but the postulate that the Ego had no sharp line of demarcation from the Id has resulted in some blurring of the *concept of the primary pleasure Ego*. As has been

suggested, in spite of the fact that the Id is to be regarded as an unorganized psychic mass, the tendency exists to attribute to it characteristics which imply some degree of organization, and hence are more appropriately reserved for a primary pleasure Ego. Moreover, it has the delayed result of obscuring what are the ontogenetic and functional relationships between the Ego and the Super-ego. Thus, for example, even if we ignore the infiltration of Ego by the Id and content ourselves with the rough formulation of distinct Id, Ego and Super-Ego systems, we are bound to assume that since the Ego is a structure imprinted on the Id by external necessity, and since the Super-Ego is a differentiated part of the Ego, there is a sort of historical precedence of the Ego over the Super-Ego.

Now in view of the close connection (inferred from clinical data), between the Id and Super-Ego systems, this is a precedence which can by no means be taken for granted.

At this stage it might be inquired whether much of the confusion which arises on this and other problems does not depend on the *latitude allowed in definition of the Ego*. This is undoubtedly true: for example, if we take a broad enough view of the Ego we are bound to maintain that all instincts the aims of which are apparent—and after all we know of the existence of instincts only through the expression of their aims—form an integral part of the Ego. This is particularly obvious in the case of certain self-preservative aims, and in the case of the restricted aims of the libido. Incidentally it is this all-embracing view of the Ego which gives rise to so much difficulty when attempts are made to define what is meant by 'character'. On the other hand we may take a limited view of the Real Ego focussed round perceptual consciousness and having a range extending through memory systems to the margins of the preconscious. Beyond that margin we have to deal with the territories of the Id and of the unconscious Ego, which latter tends to be regarded in practice as mostly super-ego. In spite of these fairly clear-cut distinctions a good deal of confusion exists, due to the fact that perceptual consciousness and the instruments of projection are at the service of the most primitive Ego formations. In the sense of organized reactive function we are entitled to say that a 'Real'-Ego system exists from shortly after birth. In spite of hallucinatory and other pleasure aberrations which obscure its reality function, this system is maintained unbroken down to the final formation of the actual Real-Ego. That battles are fought for the possession of these instruments is seen in the phenomena of split-personality

and is implied in, for example, paranoid personalities, to say nothing of the personalities of primitives.

But apart from these sources of confusion I think it can be shown that *our interpretation and formulation of infantile stages of development has been affected by our theoretical conceptions*. Mrs. Isaacs has reminded us in her paper on 'Privation and Guilt'<sup>3</sup> that according to the accustomed view there is a definite temporal relationship between the passing of the Oedipus complex, the formation of the Super-Ego and the onset of latency. According to this view we have an approximate date of *completion* of Super-Ego formation, viz. the onset of latency (leaving out of account of course the processes of consolidation which take place during latency and after). The *onset* of super-ego formation is not so precisely indicated, but is nevertheless bound by the view that true castration anxiety cannot occur until the phallic phase of infantile organization has set in. Even if we allow for precocity in attaining the phallic phase, this view gives rise to certain difficulties. The analysis of obsessional neurotics has shown that it is possible for the Ego to achieve a high degree of differentiation (in the Super-Ego sense) under the primacy of the anal-sadistic phase, and the presence of distinct obsessional traits in a large number of so-called 'normal' individuals suggests that this early differentiation is a common occurrence. In the second place there has long been clinical evidence to support the view that in certain cases (until recently regarded as exceptional) organized Oedipus impulses could manifest themselves in the first year,<sup>4</sup> that is to say, at a time when the Real-Ego is obviously undeveloped. If then the existing views are strictly adhered to, we must assume that Super-Ego differentiation of unconscious components of the Ego takes place only at the stage of final renunciation of the Oedipus wishes—a time when by ordinary standards the Real Ego is already developed. But if the Real-Ego is the end result of renunciation of the pleasure principle it is difficult to see how it can take proper

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3 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS, 1929, X, p. 335.

4 It is often forgotten that, although Mrs. Klein deserves all the credit of having adduced evidence in favour of the view that Oedipus conflict commences *as a rule* in the first two years of life, it is many years since sporadic observations proved that it was possible for typical Oedipus reactions to occur at an extremely early stage, e.g. during the oral phase. The mere coining of terms such as that of Ferenczi of 'Sphinkter-Moral' was at the same time a confession of uncertainty concerning the date of origin of the Super-Ego and a concession to existing theory.

shape until incest wishes are renounced, i.e. until the new reality principle has been finally established. If this contradiction is something more than a mere nosological confusion we are thrown back on certain assumptions. We may say for example that the Super-Ego develops simultaneously with the Ego, a differentiation in function becoming more obvious with each stage of development. Or if we prefer it, we can say that both Super-Ego and Ego are struck out of a primitive pleasure Ego, itself derived from the Id, or we may say that the Super-Ego is first differentiated from the primitive pleasure Ego, the Real-Ego being as it were an important byproduct of conflict between the Super-Ego and the Primitive Pleasure Ego. What seems to cause confusion and difficulty is the postulation of an unorganized Id, and an organized Ego from which the Super-Ego is ultimately differentiated.

The final resolutions of these problems must obviously depend on the results of future psycho-analytical research, but there are three particular lines of investigation which appear especially promising in this connection. These are, first, direct analysis of young children; second, analysis of borderline psychotic personalities and, third, the working hypotheses of psycho-analytical anthropology.

Although there have been in the past many isolated observations of the behaviour of young children, as far as the *analysis of young children* is concerned, the only available evidence at the moment is that derived from the findings of Klein<sup>5</sup> and her school. This can be divided into (a) the material of observation together with primary interpretations of such material, and (b) inferences as to Ego structure and dynamics drawn from this interpreted material.

Concerning the clinical data we need only say that Klein's observations compel us to reassess certain facts which we had always been inclined to neglect or gloss over. The fact that the Oedipus situation occurs regularly at an early stage of development compels us to reconsider the early processes of Super-Ego formation; secondly, although emphasis had long been laid on the existence of sadism in early stages of libido development, the developmental significance of high and continued sadistic charges had never been properly estimated, especially their effect in stimulating the inhibiting side of Ego activity.

The most important of Klein's inferences can be stated as follows:— \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Mrs. Klein for the privilege of reading her as yet unpublished lectures on this subject. The digest given below was prepared from these lectures, but the responsibility for error (if any) is mine.

(a) That Super-Ego formation commences in the second half of the first year of life, —and that at first the Super-Ego is hardly differentiated from the Id. (b) That the growth of this system is stimulated by an early efflorescence of primary sadistic charges which, when linked to purely libidinal charges, set up a vicious circle of frustration and tension. (c) That this reactive system, patterned on unreal primitive object-imagines, can itself promote tension, and that as the result of these primary tensions an impetus is given to real Ego and real object formation.

From the structural point of view the logical outcome of her views might be put rather crudely in this way: *So far from the Super-Ego being a later differentiation of an organized Ego, the Ego in its relation to real objects is hammered out of the Id by the Super-Ego.*

Now as we are dealing here with inferences we are bound to ask whether the developments indicated are sufficiently plausible to justify their being made the basis of working hypotheses. I will recapitulate here only the most essential stages as described by Klein. Normally oral deprivation activates sadism (in the order—deprivation, anxiety, sadism). This sadism is directed *via* the libido to the object, but is thwarted, produces fresh anxiety, a cumulative charge of sadism and a stronger drive towards the object on which the sadism is projected. The existence of a sadistic vicious circle increases libidinal excitation, sets the Oedipus situation going, and Oedipus expression through the oral sadistic mode of incorporation leads to the early introjection of Oedipus objects, which are nevertheless, by virtue of projected characteristics, unreal distorted objects. These constitute the nucleus of the primitive Super-Ego.

With regard to the *validity of these views*, it seems to me that there is one weighty argument in favour of their acceptance, provided of course we admit, as I think we are to a very large extent bound to admit, the accuracy of Klein's primary observations, and the correctness of most of her primary interpretations. It is that, apart from the special time relationship between Super-Ego and Real-Ego implied by her, and apart from the fact that she derives the Super-Ego almost directly from the Id, the early processes of Super-Ego formation she describes differ in no fundamental respect from the processes described and accepted by all analysts for what Klein would call later stages. For example, it might appear that the processes of object introjection she describes would be vitiated by the partial and rudimentary nature of these objects, and that the decisive element of abandonment of object cathexes cannot be presumed. Now whilst it may be true that in Abraham's sense real object formation does not commence

until the second of the anal sadistic phases, this does not invalidate the conception of introjection of part objects. The term part object is after all an object's view of an object. The completeness of an object depends on the whole-heartedness of instinctual aims. The only true sense in which early pregenital objects are part objects is in so far as libidinal strivings are polymorphous. If we agree that the primacy of the earliest stages of libido development is an oral primacy, then the object of that libido is correspondingly as complete as the object of genital libido. Similarly if we agree that one primacy gives way to later primacies, whether by frustration or as the result of processes inherent in development or both, we are bound to concede that the abandonment of this libidinal aim is as complete and as liable to give rise to introjection as a later abandonment of genital aims to a 'complete' Oedipus object. The difficulty is due to a confounding of perceptual syntheses with the objects of libidinal aims.

In short, I believe that when all due corrections have been made<sup>6</sup> the most important of Klein's findings will remain unchallenged, viz. the pre-phallic Oedipus phase, and the pregenital phase of Super-Ego formation. Even granting this, we are no better off as far as the primitive phases of the Ego are concerned. Indeed the tendency of her work is one of Super-Ego aggrandisement at the expense of the concept of the primitive ego. The primitive Ego is suggested simply as a weak Ego as little differentiated from the Id as the Super-Ego.

Now the mere suggestion that the early Super-Ego is very little differentiated from the Id necessitates careful examination. *Is it permissible to say that a Super-Ego is an immediate derivative of the Id?* The reply might be made that if it is justifiable to regard the Ego system as a whole as being a differentiated part of the Id, it is at any rate conceivable that the Super-Ego system represents some of the more direct modifications. To do so however is to put a certain amount of strain on the topographical aspect of Freud's psychic systematizations. An Id concept is after all the expression of ideas concerning instinct and concerning phylogenetic ego inheritance; apart from its special relationship to the 'repressed' its main justification in theoretical description is the extent to which it simplifies and clarifies the concept of an organized Ego system, and Freud has been content so far to represent the idea of an Id-Ego boundary in the most elastic terms. The

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., free use of the term 'sadism' is liable to obscure our understanding of early modifications of the destructive impulses, together with their influence on development.

expression of the aims of Id instincts and the record of Id tensions automatically constitute the groundwork and reckoning apparatus of the primitive Ego. To put the matter crudely: if we did not already possess the concept of a primitive Ego it would be as necessary to invent one as it is to postulate a primal Ego in anthropological study.

If now we define the function of the Ego as that of regulating psychic tension, involving primarily the employment of reactive instincts for this purpose, and proceed to re-examine the course of events sketched by Klein as leading up to the formation of the Primitive Super-Ego, it will be observed that the *primitive Ego* not only plays a large part in this process but that it must itself have attained a relatively high degree of organization before it could play this part. What is described briefly as the cumulative charge of sadistic impulses leading to Super-Ego formation can be translated in terms of the primitive Ego as a turning point in a *protracted history of reactive Ego functions*. These have arrived at the stage where they tend to defeat their own aim of reducing tension, and in face of defeat the primitive Ego develops in self-defence a specialized protective and inhibiting institution, viz. the Super-Ego. The ultimate factor responsible for this threatened defeat is the failure of the primitive mechanism of projection. But projection is by no means the only protective measure of the primitive Ego. To mention only two other systems, the discharge through the sensory end of the psychic apparatus is constantly exploited and continues to be exploited throughout the dream life of the individual. Again the distribution of reactive tensions through systems other than the oral system performs a protective function.

Apart from these considerations, if we view the actual processes of object formation and introjection as described by Klein, it appears that these would be liable to founder but for peculiarities of primitive Ego organization, e.g. *primary identification*. Like the concept of the Id, primary identification is a necessary descriptive formula. It forms the basis of all later systems of identification and introjection by virtue of the fact that for the primitive mind all states having the same pleasure tone tend to bring about identification of the objects connected with these states. But we must not treat this primary identification in a one-sided way—for although by wrongly including the object, primary identification leads the way to introjection, it is also true that by faulty differentiation of the Ego the primitive Ego arrives at object formation. Indeed it might be held that the concept of a primitive Ego itself requires further elaboration. It is conceivable that at the stage we

usually describe as that of primary identification, there are as many primary Egos as there are combinations of erotogenic zones with reactive discharge systems: in other words, it is conceivable that the so-called primitive Ego is originally a polymorphous construction.

Finally, with regard to the *rôle of the super-ego in promoting object formation* the views held by Klein seem to imply that the early formation of the super-ego with the resultant loosening of anxiety promotes closer adaptation to reality, hence stimulates real object formation. That under favourable circumstances an early super-ego ultimately promotes objectivity cannot I think be denied, but the processes of adaptation remain essentially Ego processes, and in this sense are simply reinforced varieties of mechanism already put in operation by the primitive Ego. Possessed as it is of the instruments of cognition, the primitive Ego is driven by inner tension to make sharper perceptions of objects. It is moreover the primitive Ego which by virtue of its tendency to aversion gradually develops the system of denial which, as Freud points out, is the first step in the acceptance of objects associated with pain. It is the primitive Ego's first libidinal drive towards incorporation, which is the first step in adaptation to the outside world, and, as Ferenczi has suggested, it is the fusing or refusing of libidinal and destructive drives which promotes objectivity as distinct from the mere recognition of objects. Lastly, it is the primitive Ego's capacity for identification on a pleasure or pain basis which promotes displacement and maintains a sufficient spread of discharge. In short, it is difficult to avoid the presumption that the primitive Ego has attained a highly complicated stage of organization before the development of more complicated aims towards objects necessitates a subdivision of labour, which is achieved by the formation of the Super-Ego and the splitting of libidinal drives.

Considerations of space prevent more than a cursory review of the two other sources of evidence I have mentioned. A *study of psychotic personalities* shows however that in every case *two* factors have to be estimated, —first the amount of disorder of Super-Ego formation and, second, the extent of regression to a primitive Ego organization. In a paper given at the Innsbruck Congress on suicidal mechanisms I endeavoured to show that the suicidal act, although primarily the result of destructive forces directed through the Super-Ego, *could not* come about without a regression of the Ego to primitive animistic levels and the adoption of primitive autoplasmic methods of dealing with tension based on the processes of primary identification.

With regard to the third group of data the evidence of *psychoanalytical anthropology* is so familiar as hardly to require recapitulation. Nevertheless it is curious to note how little attention has been paid to a discrepancy between anthropological views and the customary teachings of a temporal relation between Ego and Super-Ego. If we had no evidence to consider other than the evidence of anthropological data, one would have presumed from the sequence animism, and magic, religion and objective science that the Super-Ego was a decisive factor in Real-Ego formation and real object formation. But we would also have to realize from the finished product of the primitive personality how far the primitive Ego had advanced in organization and in the exploitation of primitive mechanisms before the development of guilt finally instituted a drive towards culture.

To conclude: it would seem that a number of difficult theoretical problems can be resolved provided we do not set out on investigation with too rigid preconceptions as to psychic structure. For example, the apparent contradiction between Klein's views and the more familiar accepted teachings of psycho-analysis would seem to be due not so much to any fundamental incompatibility between the mechanisms involved as to a bias of interest in favour of one or other of the organized psychic constructions. There would appear to be a certain overestimation of the Ego in the customary teaching and an under-estimation of the primitive Ego in Klein's teaching. It is true to say that forces directed by the Super-Ego drive the Ego to the grindstone of objectivity, but it can still be held that the Super-Ego is a differentiated part of the primitive Ego, through which it maintains its close connection with the Id. The alternative to this view is to postulate a readiness for differentiation in the Id, whereby early Super-Ego formations gather impetus directly from racial impressions in the Id.

A few comments may perhaps be added as to the *specific obstacles to objectivity about psychic structure*. The most natural tendency is to aggrandize the concept of the Real-Ego at the expense of those of the Super-Ego and of the Primitive Ego. In the second place I think we may safely assume that the tendency to scotomise early stages of Super-Ego formation is a final attempt on the part of the individual to screen guilt. Lastly the anthropomorphizing tendency which manipulates the concept of the Id is one more example of the system whereby Ego irritation is solved by the same projective processes as originated animistic systems in the phylogensis of the Ego.