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THE EGO OF THE ADOLESCENT

By Fritz Wittels, M.D.

{New York)

Let us begin this study of the adolescent ego by recapitulating what we know from observing the baby in his nursing stage. It is through this act of

nursing that his first experience of ego is obtained. It is a mother-child ego.

We might say that the first experience of an ego comes from without – it is sucked in. This discovery of his own ego is one of the definitive experiences

of a child's psychic life. Terminologically we may say that the birth of the

ego is the beginning of narcissism, because the concept of narcissism presupposes the existence of an ego. We therefore speak of the pre-ego period as of the auto-erotic stage.

Many authors have attempted to describe how the child makes this

discovery. By the third year the child is almost overwhelmed by the growing awareness of possessing a self which is like that of those who surround him .

This self-awareness is all-important and indeed becomes the center of the child's universe. Despite this ego-centering, however, and even at later stages,

we know the people surrounding us, particularly those needed for our support,

better than we know ourselves. These supportive people we group into the "yous" separating them from the more or less dreaded "he, she, and they."

The infant feels a gap between these yous (mother, nurse) and the alien "theys". Later this sense of gap between the newly born self and all other people deepens.

The infant is too weak psychologically to function without help and therefore includes in his new self a considerable part of the "you". His supporters

form a part of this self and this initial certainty that they are a part

continues until cumulative experience shows him more or less definitely that

there is quite a difference even between his mother and himself. This experience

forces him to depend on himself as though he reasoned, "If I do not take

care of myself, who will?"

The newly acquired ego is unfathomable. We see a child look at his own reflection in the mirror (I believe, Laretta Bender calls it the mirror

phenomenon) and kiss it. He has decided to realize the enigma by loving it.

I once saw a girl of about three look at her reflection and when I asked her ;

“Like yourself?” she answered with deep conviction: “Yes”.

The child attempts, at least in his imagination, to be independent of all these more or less unreliable supporters outside of him, by increasing his personal power. A good example of such attempts is the little boy cited by Anna Freud who possessed an imaginary lion. This lion was his inseparable companion, a totem animal of which he had no fear. On the contrary, the lion was the expression of his omnipotence. I knew a little boy who insisted on carrying around a piece of pink cloth, which was his fetish, without which he refused to go to bed and later even to the Kindergarten. To the child this fetish, which he called “pinky”, had supernatural powers and courage and also took over all the naughtiness that training forbade the boy. Pinky became the bulwark against frustrations. The ego of the child is and becomes more and more a narcissistic world of its own.

The following conversation is characteristic of the child’s situation. A three year old boy asked his nurse; “Do you like me?” – “I like you very much.” – Do you always like me?” – “Always.” The boy, after a pause for thought, said with faltering conviction: “I am a good boy.” He knows that he has to be a good boy in order to be liked. Beyond this he is not interested in civilization nor in the object called nurse. He yields to force. In a similar conversation later in life he would not say, “I am a good boy”, but “you

are a good girl”, and, maybe, “I love you”.

The beatitude of the narcissistic ego is in a precarious situation. It is hard for a little fellow to insist on being the centre of the universe. Reality proves all too often that he is not. However, the little hero fights for his position against older siblings, other children and even against parents, who may assail this position. Their attacks make it evident that he is small and weak. Even his own mother is not completely satisfactory, since her role, as Freud said, is dictated by destiny. She has to train the child against his will. Reality which, like a creditor, demands an accounting, pierces his beautiful narcissistic armor early in life. The child is forced to respond and to give something which resembles love, in order to save the bulk of his self from damage. But in normal training the child gets all the support, tenderness, and protection unconditionally, even if he gives very little in return.

The structure of the child’s ego is very different from the ego of the normal adult. Juvenile courts often are startled by misdeeds which can be explained only by a completely different structure of the offender’s ego, strangely devoid of any compassion for his neighbor’s suffering. About a year ago, a thirteen year old boy hanged an eight year old playmate just for the adventure. Another fourteen year old “sitter” strangled the baby in his care and the court psychiatrist succeeded in convincing the jury that even at that age the youngster’s ego was too narcissistic to permit him to realize his

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deed. When crimes of such extreme cruelty occur later in life, psychiatrists suspect an epileptic equivalent, which is a pathological regression to this profound narcissism, oblivious of human ethics.

Under normal circumstances, the child does not conquer reality before the end of adolescence. We can almost see him struggle to preserve his narcissistic paradise when confronted with the attacks of fate. Many intrusions break through the child's protective barriers. Usually, the child is drilled rather than educated by his trainers. If these trainers have a sympathetic understanding of the child's ego, they spare the child's mechanisms as much as possible. There has been considerable progress in education as well as in educators in this respect. However, fate cannot always be gentle and all kinds of abnormal family conditions may work inimically further to retard the slow progress of ego development. Loss of parents, and their replacement by step-parents leave indelible impressions. We see such effect not only in real orphans but also in the so-called "social orphans", children who have their parents nominally but not in reality. Many events in a child's life prematurely force it out of its narcissism. Among such factors are prolonged and particularly painful diseases, sexual shocks, and precocious sex life. Sometimes such precocious sexual life is the result of constitutional factors, but more often it is caused by external circumstances which forced sex upon the immature child.

The child's answer to all these attacks may be anxiety, neurotic repres-

sion, isolation, or annulment, in short all the defense mechanisms available to the human ego. In such cases the ego of the child is crippled by tasks beyond its age and assimilative power which would demand qualities belonging to a later age.

* ^ *

Puberty brings an increase in instinctual demands and consequently also a corresponding advance in the ego's defenses. We may speak of a second edition of the phallic phase with its castration anxiety. Some youngsters show this anxiety consciously, they feel scared by a danger to their genitalia.

I have not found in the literature any reference to a second phallic phase at the start of puberty, but it is so obvious that we all know it whether or not we call it such. The first period of the original phallic phase as we know it in childhood is still free from anxiety. Fear of castration comes only in the second phase. The simplest example is that of a child around its fifth year, who masturbates without anxiety at first, and later does so with anxiety.

In contradistinction to this sequence, the pubescent return of the phallic phase begins with considerable anxiety. We may lay down the rule that all pubescents feel anxiety on the occasion of their first orgasm even if the act is no more than masturbation. It is the pressure of the unknown pushing them on, which arouses their drive for self-preservation. To this is added the

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returning castration anxiety, all of which combines at first to destroy pleasure.

Such storms will be raging for a number of years.

All authors describe the ambivalence, the swinging pendulum that characterizes pubescence. Rebellion versus blind submission, cynicism versus

idealism, optimism versus pessimism, may serve as examples of that polarity,

which has so often been described in detail by various authors even before Freud. That polarity is the expression of the tendencies of the id versus those

of the ego: wish versus fear, often defiance versus anxiety. Some youngsters

cling to childhood, denying the signs of maturity as long as possible. These

adolescents appear to have no interest in the other sex, they play the part of care-free children but nevertheless betray their anxiety. I observed a girl,

not quite fifteen, who had remained particularly childish. Boys did not interest her. Though her contemporaries were chattering about beaux, using lipstick and attending dances, she was unmoved and preferred the company of six year olds and reading fairy tales and other children's books. Her mother was congratulated on having so "chaste" a daughter. One day this girl told her mother that a man in the crowded city park had touched her obscenely and then pursued her until she managed to hide in a ladies' room.

A week later she had to leave town by train, travelling alone. The same man, she said, boarded the train in a small station. She stared at him petrified,

becoming restless until the man asked whether anything was wrong with her. She answered: "You know". At that the man rose to his feet and

left the car in a hurry. We can understand his reaction. The story hardly needs comment. Anxiety permeated the girl's psychology because of the fear of and desire for rape.

Other youngsters, like swimmers who dive into the cold water because they are afraid of entering it gradually, anticipate adulthood by giving themselves to early flirtation and puppy loves. More often than not those two phases, the retrograde phase and the anticipation of love co-exist, e.g. in our college girls. On school days they wear mocassins and dirty slacks and insist on looking as unattractive as possible, but at week-end reunions they appear in splendid regalia and dance cheek to cheek.

In the midst of all this turmoil, as Anna Freud described it in her two superb chapters on adolescence,¹ a deep change of the child's ego is prepared slowly. Love and protection are no longer unconditionally given to the growing youngster. What he needs now, is a sex partner, a need that is biologically initiated with the mature functioning of the sex glands, although for social reasons it is inhibited in aim for some time to come. That partner is a tu¹ if we might use the Latin word as the complement of the Latin word ego. The tu has demands which have to be acknowledged; the relationship

1 The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence, New York, International Universities Press, 1946.

is no longer exclusively one between a maternal person who gives and a child who receives. The expanding demands of the adolescent ego would be unfulfilled if it were not coping with a tu which also demands and gives only on condition that such demands are gratified. Thus a new reality appears on the horizon: The reality, Freud's third "creditor" of the ego, the enemy of narcissism.

It seems to me that psychoanalysts are too quick to accept the statement that adolescence creates nothing really new. So Fenichel says: "All the mental phenomena characteristic of puberty may be regarded as attempts to re-establish the disturbed equilibrium." He should have said: to establish a new equilibrium. Anna Freud emphasizes that while the id does not change in puberty, the ego does. What she means is the different arrangement of the ego's defenses. The main difference, which probably is realized by all of us but not described in detail, is the change from narcissism to altruism which makes man capable of love. We remember that the child's ego grew out of the tus by which the growing baby was surrounded. In adolescence and post-adolescence, the ego feels that it has to return to the tu what it has taken from the tus of perhaps ten or twenty years before.

We can see that sometimes very slow, in other cases explosive process in the

magnifying glass called love. Freud says that lovers lose their ego by pouring

it into the other ego, the tu, of a beloved person. In this way they impoverish

themselves, become humble and would constantly feel their loss, were it not for a kind of megalomania that goes with the projecting and introjecting

mechanisms of love, which more than compensate for the humility of the lover: he serves with pride.

Even without that ecstatic phenomenon called love, the maturing ego,

actively standing in the current of life, feels the necessity of devotion, of surrender, and of renunciation. All three of these emotions are alien to the narcissistic ego of the child. The principle of reality, only partly recognized in childhood, definitely enters the pleasure-displeasure mechanism. Naturally, the recognition of reality is not completely absent in childhood, nor on the other hand is it realized without resistance in later years. We speak of narcissistic types. They do not sufficiently recognize the rights of the tu, they cannot love.

It may be that all recognition of reality is accomplished in the image of the tu. It may be that men love their property as they love a tu, e.g.: I and my books, which I hold in my hands, sometimes almost caressingly. An I and a tu. Here we have reached one of the borderlines of psychoanalysis: the inner experience [Erlebnis). However, we are on firm psychoanalytic ground when we describe the ego's change in the maturing man from narcissism to tu-ism, recognition of the love object, recognition of the world

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outside ourselves. We need objects for our completion^ sex objects and others. In our understanding of reality lies the main difference between childhood and maturity. Here indeed^ something new is added to the development of man, so that we no longer can say that all the psychological

phenomena of adolescence are second editions of previously settled problems .

With the maturity of the sex glands comes the maturity of the ego, both of them new in the growing body and mind. We have learned from Freud that "the ego is primarily a body ego*'. We may add: reality outside of our ego is primarily a body reality also. Adolescents and adults alike need a body, as a rule one of the other sex, for seizure and union. That body is the prototype of reality originating in the id. The ego has to "realize" it.

* * *

The process of accepting reality probably never ends. However, a relative lull follows the storms of adolescence. When? The law pronounces the age of twenty-one as responsible maturity. This is too early in most instances

and too late in others. We know that higher education begins at about the eighteenth year when it can utilize the relative peace of a kind of second latency period, mainly due to the desexualization and sublimation of the ego-tu problem. Apprentices have finished their apprenticeships and are sent out into the world as journey men. They are supposed to come back from their journeys as young masters. Neuroses and particularly the first depressions of a circular psychosis frequently break out at the age of eighteen.

The second latency period is shorter than the first, and less sharp in outline.

Yet such a lull does occur before the tides of life submerge all attempts at

classification.

We suggest the following four phases as subdivisions of adolescence.

(1) A second phallic phase with outspoken anxiety as defense against pubescence.

(2) The often described phase of ambivalence, the fight between

advance and retardation, in the main a subterranean struggle between the id and the superego. Reality, the third creditor of the ego, seems to be the loser in the struggle. The adolescent cannot decide what to do and that is why his clinical picture is sometimes reminiscent of an incipient psychosis. The psychotic in his initial stages feels at sea and is fearful and perplexed. But in his case the end is different. He tries in vain to regain something that was lost, whereas the adolescent is struggling towards a goal, something he has not yet possessed. Educators agree that we cannot help him very much in his struggle and should not even try to interfere in

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the struggle of all these growing and shifting strata as long as there is no immediate danger.

(3) A second latency period, preparing the post-adolescent ego: tu-ism in the place of narcissism.

(4) The mature ego, emerging from both the phase of ambivalence between advance and retardation and the second latency period, into the phase in which it is capable of love and of understanding the world outside the ego.