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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EGO¹

By JACQUES LACAN, PARIS

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The development of Freud's views on the ego led him to two apparently contradictory formulations.

The ego takes sides against the object in the theory of narcissism: the concept of libidinal economy. The bestowal of the libidinal cathexis on one's own body leads to the pain of hypochondriasis, while the loss of the object leads to a depressive tension which may even culminate in suicide.

On the other hand, the ego takes sides with the object in the topographic theory of the functioning of the perception-consciousness system and resists the id, i.e. the combination of drives governed solely by the pleasure-principle.

If there be a contradiction here, it disappears when we free ourselves from a naive conception of the reality-principle and take note of the fact—though Freud may have been clear on this point, his statements sometimes were not—that while reality precedes thought, it takes different forms according to the way the subject deals with it.

Analytic experience gives this truth a special force for us and shows it as being free from all trace of idealism, for we can specify concretely the oral, anal, and genital relationships which the subject establishes with the outer world at the libidinal level.

I refer here to a formulation in language by the subject, which has nothing to do with romantically intuitive or vitalistic moods of contact with reality, of his interactions with his environment as they are determined by each of the orifices of his body. The whole psycho-analytic theory of instinctual drives stands or falls by this.

What relation does the 'libidinal subject' whose relationships to reality are in the form of an opposition between an *Innenwelt* and an *Umwelt* have to the ego? To discover this, we must start from the fact—all too neglected—that verbal communication is the instrument of

psycho-analysis. Freud did not forget this when he insisted that repressed material such as memories and ideas which, by definition, can return from repression, must, at the time when the events in question took place, have existed in a form in which there was at least the possibility of its being verbalized. By dint of recognizing a little more clearly the supra-individual function of language, we can distinguish in reality the new developments which are actualized by language. Language has, if you care to put it like that, a sort of retrospective effect in determining what is ultimately decided to be real. Once this is understood, some of the criticisms which have been brought against the legitimacy of Melanie Klein's encroachments into the pre-verbal areas of the unconscious will be seen to fall to the ground.

Now the structure of language gives us a clue to the function of the ego. The ego can either be the subject of the verb or qualify it. There are two kinds of language: in one of them one says 'I am beating the dog' and in another 'There is a beating of the dog by me'. But, be it noted, the person who speaks, whether he appears in the sentence as the subject of the verb or as qualifying it, in either case asserts himself as an object involved in a relationship of some sort, whether one of feeling or of doing.

Does what is expressed in such statements of the ego give us a picture of the relationship of the subject to reality?

Here, as in other examples, psycho-analytical experience substantiates in the most striking way the speculations of philosophers, in so far as they have defined the existential relationship expressed in language as being one of negation.

What we have been able to observe is the privileged way in which a person expresses himself as the ego; it is precisely this—*Verneinung*, or denial.

We have learned to be quite sure that when someone says 'It is not so' it is because it is so; that when he says 'I do not mean' he does

¹ Read to the British Psycho-Analytical Society on 2 May, 1951.

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mean; we know how to recognize the underlying hostility in most 'altruistic' statements, the undercurrent of homosexual feeling in jealousy, the tension of desire hidden in the professed horror of incest; we have noted that manifest indifference may mask intense latent interest. Although in treatment we do not meet head-on the furious hostility which such interpretations provoke, we are nevertheless convinced that our researches justify the epigram of the philosopher who said that speech was given to man to hide his thoughts; our view is that the essential function of the ego is very nearly that systematic refusal to acknowledge reality (*méconnaissance systématique de la réalité*) which French analysts refer to in talking about the psychoses.

Undoubtedly every manifestation of the ego is compounded equally of good intentions and bad faith and the usual idealistic protest against the chaos of the world only betrays, inversely, the very way in which he who has a part to play in it manages to survive. This is just the illusion which Hegel denounced as the Law of the Heart, the truth of which no doubt clarifies the problem of the revolutionary of to-day who does not recognize his ideals in the results of his acts. This truth is also obvious to the man who, having reached his prime and seen so many professions of faith belied, begins to think that he has been present at a general rehearsal for the Last Judgement.

I have shown in my earlier works that paranoia can only be understood in some such terms; I have demonstrated in a monograph that the persecutors were identical with the images of the ego-ideal in the case studied.

But, conversely, in studying 'paranoiac knowledge', I was led to consider the mechanism of paranoiac alienation of the ego as one of the preconditions of human knowledge.

It is, in fact, the earliest jealousy that sets the stage on which the triangular relationship between the ego, the object and 'someone else' comes into being. There is a contrast here between the object of the animal's needs which is imprisoned in the field of force of its desire, and the object of man's knowledge.

The object of man's desire, and we are not the first to say this, is essentially an object desired by someone else. One object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by this intermediary, in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared. This process tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular

object, but at the same time it brings into view the existence of objects without number.

It is by this process that we are led to see our objects as identifiable egos, having unity, permanence, and substantiality; this implies an element of inertia, so that the recognition of objects and of the ego itself must be subjected to constant revision in an endless dialectical process.

Just such a process was involved in the Socratic Dialogue: whether it dealt with science, politics, or love, Socrates taught the masters of Athens to become what they must be by developing their awareness of the world and themselves through 'forms' which were constantly redefined. The only obstacle he encountered was the attraction of pleasure.

For us, whose concern is with present-day man, that is, man with a troubled conscience, it is in the ego that we meet this inertia; we know it as the resistance to the dialectic process of analysis. The patient is held spellbound by his ego, to the exact degree that it causes his distress, and reveals its nonsensical function. It is this very fact that has led us to evolve a technique which substitutes the strange detours of free association for the sequence of the Dialogue.

But what, then, is the function of this resistance which compels us to adopt so many technical precautions?

What is the meaning of the aggressiveness which is always ready to be discharged the moment the stability of the paranoiac delusional system is threatened?

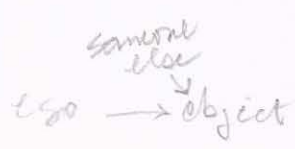
Are we not really dealing here with one and the same question?

In trying to reply by going into the theory a little more deeply, we were guided by the consideration that if we were to gain a clearer understanding of our therapeutic activity, we might also be able to carry it out more effectively—just as in placing our rôle as analyst in a definite context in the history of mankind, we might be able to delimit more precisely the scope of the laws we might discover.

The theory we have in mind is a genetic theory of the ego. Such a theory can be considered psycho-analytic in so far as it treats the relation of the subject to his own body in terms of his identification with an *imago*, which is the psychic relationship *par excellence*; in fact, the concept we have formed of this relationship from our analytic work is the starting point for all genuine and scientific psychology.

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It is with the body-image that we propose to deal now. If the hysterical symptom is a symbolic way of expressing a conflict between different forces, what strikes us is the extraordinary effect that this 'symbolic expression' has when it produces segmental anaesthesia or muscular paralysis unaccountable for by any known grouping of sensory nerves or muscles. To call these symptoms functional is but to confess our ignorance, for they follow the pattern of a certain imaginary Anatomy which has typical forms of its own. In other words, the astonishing somatic compliance which is the outward sign of this imaginary anatomy is only shown within certain definite limits. I would emphasize that the imaginary anatomy referred to here varies with the ideas (clear or confused) about bodily functions which are prevalent in a given culture. It all happens as if the body-image had an autonomous existence of its own, and by autonomous I mean here independent of objective structure. All the phenomena we are discussing seem to exhibit the laws of *gestalt*; the fact that the penis is dominant in the shaping of the body-image is evidence of this. Though this may shock the sworn champions of the autonomy of female sexuality, such dominance is a fact and one moreover which cannot be put down to cultural influences alone.

Furthermore, this image is selectively vulnerable along its lines of cleavage. The fantasies which reveal this cleavage to us seem to deserve to be grouped together under some such term as the 'image of the body in bits and pieces' (*imago du corps morcelé*) which is in current use among French analysts. Such typical images appear in dreams, as well as in fantasies. They may show, for example, the body of the mother as having a mosaic structure like that of a stained-glass window. More often, the resemblance is to a jig-saw puzzle, with the separate parts of the body of a man or an animal in disorderly array. Even more significant for our purpose are the incongruous images in which disjointed limbs are rearranged as strange trophies; trunks cut up in slices and stuffed with the most unlikely fillings, strange appendages in eccentric positions, reduplications of the penis, images of the cloaca represented as a surgical excision, often accompanied in male patients by fantasies of pregnancy. This kind of image seems to have a special affinity with congenital abnormalities of all sorts. An illustration of this was provided by

the dream of one of my patients, whose ego development had been impaired by an obstetrical brachial plexus palsy of the left arm, in which the rectum appeared in the thorax, taking the place of the left sub-clavicular vessels. (His analysis had decided him to undertake the study of medicine.)

What struck me in the first place was the phase of the analysis in which these images came to light: they were always bound up with the elucidation of the earliest problems of the patient's ego and with the revelation of latent hypochondriacal preoccupations. These are often completely covered over by the neurotic formations which have compensated for them in the course of development. Their appearance heralds a particular and very archaic phase of the transference, and the value we attributed to them in identifying this phase has always been confirmed by the accompanying marked decrease in the patient's deepest resistances.

We have laid some stress on this phenomenological detail, but we are not unaware of the importance of Schilder's work on the function of the body-image, and the remarkable accounts he gives of the extent to which it determines the perception of space.

The meaning of the phenomenon called 'phantom limb' is still far from being exhausted. The aspect which seems to me especially worthy of notice is that such experiences are essentially related to the continuation of a pain which can no longer be explained by local irritation; it is as if one caught a glimpse here of the existential relation of a man with his body-image in this relationship with such a narcissistic object as the lack of a limb.

The effects of frontal leucotomy on the hitherto intractable pain of some forms of cancer, the strange fact of the persistence of the pain with the removal of the subjective element of distress in such conditions, leads us to suspect that the cerebral cortex functions like a mirror, and that it is the site where the images are integrated in the libidinal relationship which is hinted at in the theory of narcissism.

So far so good. We have, however, left untouched the question of the nature of the imago itself. The facts do, however, involve the positing of a certain formative power in the organism. We psycho-analysts are here reintroducing an idea discarded by experimental science, i.e. Aristotle's idea of *Morphe*. In the sphere of relationships in so far as it concerns

the history of the individual we only apprehend the exteriorized images, and now it is the Platonic problem of recognizing their meaning that demands a solution.

In due course, biologists will have to follow us into this domain, and the concept of identification which we have worked out empirically is the only key to the meaning of the facts they have so far encountered.

It is amusing, in this connexion, to note their difficulty when asked to explain such data as those collected by Harrison in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 1939. These data showed that the sexual maturation of the female pigeon depends entirely on its seeing a member of its own species, male or female, to such an extent that while the maturation of the bird can be indefinitely postponed by the lack of such perception, conversely the mere sight of its own reflection in a mirror is enough to cause it to mature almost as quickly as if it had seen a real pigeon.

We have likewise emphasized the significance of the facts described in 1941 by Chauvin in the *Bulletin de la Société entomologique de France* about the migratory locust, *Schistocerca*, commonly known as a grasshopper. Two types of development are open to the grasshopper, whose behaviour and subsequent history are entirely different. There are solitary and gregarious types, the latter tending to congregate in what is called the 'cloud'. The question as to whether it will develop into one of these types or the other is left open until the second or third so-called larval periods (the intervals between sloughs). The one necessary and sufficient condition is that it perceives something whose shape and movements are sufficiently like one of its own species, since the mere sight of a member of the closely similar *Locusta* species (itself non-gregarious) is sufficient, whereas even association with a *Gryllus* (cricket) is of no avail. (This, of course, could not be established without a series of control experiments, both positive and negative, to exclude the influence of the insect's auditory and olfactory apparatus, etc., including, of course, the mysterious organ discovered in the hind legs by Brunner von Wattenwyll.)

The development of two types utterly different as regards size, colour and shape, in phenotype, that is to say, and differing even in such instinctual characteristics as voraciousness is thus completely determined by this phenomenon of Recognition. M. Chauvin, who is obliged to

admit its authenticity, nevertheless does so with great reluctance and shows the sort of intellectual timidity which among experimentalists is regarded as a guarantee of objectivity.

This timidity is exemplified in medicine by the prevalence of the belief that a fact, a bare fact, is worth more than any theory, and is strengthened by the inferiority feelings doctors have when they compare their own methods with those of the more exact sciences.

In our view, however, it is novel theories which prepare the ground for new discoveries in science, since such theories not only enable one to understand the facts better, but even make it possible for them to be observed in the first place. The facts are then less likely to be made to fit, in a more or less arbitrary way, into accepted doctrine and there pigeon-holed.

Numerous facts of this kind have now come to the attention of biologists, but the intellectual revolution necessary for their full understanding is still to come. These biological data were still unknown when in 1936 at the Marienbad Congress I introduced the concept of the 'Mirror Stage' as one of the stages in the development of the child.

I returned to the subject two years ago at the Zürich Congress. Only an abstract (in English translation) of my paper was published in the Proceedings of the Congress. The complete text appeared in the *Revue française de Psychanalyse*.

The theory I there advanced, which I submitted long ago to French psychologists for discussion, deals with a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image. For these two reasons the phenomenon demonstrates clearly the passing of the individual to a stage where the earliest formation of the ego can be observed.

The observation consists simply in the jubilant interest shown by the infant over eight months at the sight of his own image in a mirror. This interest is shown in games in which the child seems to be in endless ecstasy when it sees that movements in the mirror correspond to its own movements. The game is rounded off by attempts to explore the things seen in the mirror and the nearby objects they reflect.

The purely imaginal play evidenced in such deliberate play with an illusion is fraught with significance for the philosopher, and all the

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more so because the child's attitude is just the reverse of that of animals. The chimpanzee, in particular, is certainly quite capable at the same age of detecting the illusion, for one finds him testing its reality by devious methods which shows an intelligence on the performance level at least equal to, if not better than, that of the child at the same age. But when he has been disappointed several times in trying to get hold of something that is not there, the animal loses all interest in it. It would, of course, be paradoxical to draw the conclusion that the animal is the better adjusted to reality of the two!

We note that the image in the mirror is reversed, and we may see in this at least a metaphorical representation of the structural reversal we have demonstrated in the ego as the individual's psychical reality. But, metaphor apart, actual mirror reversals have often been pointed out in Phantom Doubles. (The importance of this phenomenon in suicide was shown by Otto Rank.) Furthermore, we always find the same sort of reversal, if we are on the look-out for it, in those dream images which represent the patient's ego in its characteristic rôle; that is, as dominated by the narcissistic conflict. So much is this so that we may regard this mirror-reversal as a prerequisite for such an interpretation.

But other characteristics will give us a deeper understanding of the connexion between this image and the formation of the ego. To grasp them we must place the reversed image in the context of the evolution of the successive forms of the body image itself on the one hand, and on the other we must try to correlate with the development of the organism and the establishment of its relations with the Socius those images whose dialectical connexions are brought home to us in our experience in treatment.

The heart of the matter is this. The behaviour of the child before the mirror seems to us to be more immediately comprehensible than are his reactions in games in which he seems to wean himself from the object, whose meaning Freud, in a flash of intuitive genius, described for us in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Now the child's behaviour before the mirror is so striking that it is quite unforgettable, even by the least enlightened observer, and one is all the more impressed when one realizes that this behaviour occurs either in a babe in arms or in a child who is holding himself upright by one of those contrivances to help one to learn to walk without serious falls. His joy is due to his

imaginary triumph in anticipating a degree of muscular co-ordination which he has not yet actually achieved.

We cannot fail to appreciate the affective value which the gestalt of the vision of the whole body-image may assume when we consider the fact that it appears against a background of organic disturbance and discord, in which all the indications are that we should seek the origins of the image of the 'body in bits and pieces' (*corps morcelé*).

Here physiology gives us a clue. The human animal can be regarded as one which is prematurely born. The fact that the pyramidal tracts are not myelinated at birth is proof enough of this for the histologist, while a number of postural reactions and reflexes satisfy the neurologist. The embryologist too sees in the 'foetalization', to use Bolk's term, of the human nervous system, the mechanism responsible for Man's superiority to other animals—viz. the cephalic flexures and the expansion of the fore-brain.

His lack of sensory and motor co-ordination does not prevent the new-born baby from being fascinated by the human face, almost as soon as he opens his eyes to the light of day, nor from showing in the clearest possible way that from all the people around him he singles out his mother.

It is the stability of the standing posture, the prestige of stature, the impressiveness of statues, which set the style for the identification in which the ego finds its starting-point and leave their imprint in it for ever.

Miss Anna Freud has enumerated, analysed and defined once and for all the mechanisms in which the functions of the ego take form in the psyche. It is noteworthy that it is these same mechanisms which determine the economy of obsessional symptoms. They have in common an element of isolation and an emphasis on achievement; in consequence of this one often comes across dreams in which the dreamer's ego is represented as a stadium or other enclosed space given over to competition for prestige.

Here we see the ego, in its essential resistance to the elusive process of Becoming, to the variations of Desire. This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety.

Nor is this all. It is the gap separating man from nature that determines his lack of relationship to nature, and begets his narcissistic shield, with its nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which he is for ever cut off, but this same structure is also the sight where his own milieu is grafted on to him, i.e. the society of his fellow men.

In the excellent accounts of children provided by the Chicago observers we can assess the rôle of the body-image in the various ways children identify with the Socius. We find them assuming attitudes, such as that of master and slave, or actor and audience. A development of this normal phenomenon merits being described by some such term as that used by French psychiatrists in the discussion of paranoia, viz. 'transivitism'. This transivitism binds together in an absolute equivalent attack and counter-attack; the subject here is in that state of ambiguity which precedes truth, in so far as his ego is actually alienated from itself in the other person.

It should be added that for such formative games to have their full effect, the interval between the ages of the children concerned should be below a certain threshold, and psychoanalysis alone can determine the optimum such age interval. The interval which seems to make identification easiest may, of course, in critical phases of instinctual integration, produce the worst possible results.

It has perhaps not been sufficiently emphasized that the genesis of homosexuality in a body can sometimes be referred to the imago of an older sister; it is as if the boy were drawn into the wake of his sister's superior development; the effect will be proportionate to the length of time during which this interval strikes just the right balance.

Normally, these situations are resolved through a sort of paranoiac conflict, in the course of which, as I have already shown, the ego is built up by opposition.

The libido, however, entering into narcissistic identification, here reveals its meaning. Its characteristic dimension is aggressiveness.

We must certainly not allow ourselves to be misled by verbal similarities into thinking, as so often happens, that the word 'aggressiveness' conveys no more than capacity for aggression.

When we go back to the concrete functions denoted by these words, we see that 'aggressiveness' and 'aggression' are much more complementary than mutually inclusive terms, and,

like 'adaptability' and 'adaptation', they may represent two contraries.

The aggressiveness involved in the ego's fundamental relationship to other people is certainly not based on the simple relationship implied in the formula 'big fish eat little fish', but upon the intra-psychic tension we sense in the warning of the ascetic that 'a blow at your enemy is a blow at yourself'.

This is true in all the forms of that process of negation whose hidden mechanism Freud analysed with such brilliance. In 'he loves me. I hate him. He is not the one I love', the homosexual nature of the underlying 'I love him' is revealed. The libidinal tension that shackles the subject to the constant pursuit of an illusory unity which is always luring him away from himself, is surely related to that agony of dereliction which is Man's particular and tragic destiny. Here we see how Freud was led to his deviant concept of a death instinct.

The signs of the lasting damage this negative libido causes can be read in the face of a small child torn by the pangs of jealousy, where St. Augustine recognized original evil. 'Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother' (. . . *nondum loquebatur, et intuebatur pallidus amaro aspectu conlactaneum suum*).

Moreover, the whole development of consciousness leads only to the rediscovery of the antinomy by Hegel as the starting-point of the ego. As Hegel's well-known doctrine puts it, the conflict arising from the co-existence of two consciousnesses can only be resolved by the destruction of one of them.

But, after all, it is by our experience of the suffering we relieve in analysis that we are led into the domain of metaphysics.

These reflections on the functions of the ego ought, above all else, to encourage us to re-examine certain notions that are sometimes accepted uncritically, such as the notion that it is psychologically advantageous to have a strong ego.

In actual fact, the classical neuroses always seem to be by-products of a strong ego, and the great ordeals of the war showed us that, of all men, the real neurotics have the best defences. Neuroses involving failure, character difficulties, and self-punishment are obviously increasing in extent, and they take their place among the tremendous inroads the ego makes on the personality as a whole.

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Indeed, a natural process of self-adjustment will not alone decide the eventual outcome of this drama. The concept of self-sacrifice, which the French school has described as *oblativité*, as the normal outlet for the psyche liberated by analysis seems to us to be a childish oversimplification.

For every day in our practice we are confronted with the disastrous results of marriages based on such a self-sacrifice, of commitments undertaken in the spirit of narcissistic illusion which corrupts every attempt to assume responsibility for other people.

Here we must touch on the problem of our own historical evolution, which may be responsible both for the psychological impasse of the ego of contemporary man, and for the progressive deterioration in the relationships between men and women in our society.

We do not want to complicate the issues by straying too far from our main topic, and so shall confine ourselves to mentioning what comparative anthropology has taught us about the functions in other cultures of the so-called 'bodily techniques' of which the sociologist Mauss has advocated a closer study. These bodily techniques are to be found everywhere; we can see them maintaining the trance-states of the individual, as well as the ceremonies of the group, they are at work in ritual mummeries and ordeals of initiation. Such rites seem a mystery to us now; we are astonished that manifestations which among us would be regarded as pathological, should in other cultures, have a social function in the promotion of mental stability. We deduce from this that these techniques help the individual to come through critical phases of development that prove a stumbling-block to our patients.

It may well be that the oedipus complex, the corner-stone of analysis, which plays so essential a part in normal psycho-sexual development, represents in our culture the vestigial relics of the relationships by means of which earlier communities were able for centuries to ensure

the psychological mutual interdependence essential to the happiness of their members.

The formative influence which we have learned to detect in the first attempts to subject the orifices of the body to any form of control allows us to apply this criterion to the study of primitive societies; but the fact that in these societies we find almost none of the disorders that drew our attention to the importance of early training, should make us chary of accepting without question such concepts as that of the 'basic personality structure' of Kardiner.

Both the illnesses we try to relieve and the functions that we are increasingly called upon, as therapists, to assume in society, seem to us to imply the emergence of a new type of man: *Homo psychologicus*, the product of our industrial age. The relations between this *Homo psychologicus* and the machines he uses are very striking, and this is especially so in the case of the motor-car. We get the impression that his relationship to this machine is so very intimate that it is almost as if the two were actually conjoined—its mechanical defects and breakdowns often parallel his neurotic symptoms. Its emotional significance for him comes from the fact that it exteriorizes the protective shell of his ego, as well as the failure of his virility.

This relationship between man and machine will come to be regulated by both psychological and psychotechnical means; the necessity for this will become increasingly urgent in the organization of society.

If, in contrast to these psychotechnical procedures, the psycho-analytical dialogue enables us to re-establish a more human relationship, is not the form of this dialogue determined by an impasse, that is to say by the resistance of the ego?

Indeed, is not this dialogue one in which the one who knows admits by his technique that he can free his patient from the shackles of his ignorance only by leaving all the talking to him?

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