

Freud , Sigmund

Toward a general theory

If the troubled history of its institutionalization served to call psychoanalysis into question in certain quarters, so too did its founder's penchant for extrapolating his clinical findings into a more ambitious general theory. As he admitted to Fliess in 1900, "I am actually not a man of science at all. . . . I am nothing but a conquistador by temperament, an adventurer." Freud's so-called metapsychology soon became the basis for wide-ranging speculations about cultural, social, artistic, religious, and anthropological phenomena.

Composed of a complicated and often revised mixture of economic, dynamic, and topographical elements, the metapsychology was developed in a series of 12 papers Freud composed during World War I, only some of which were published in his lifetime. Their general findings appeared in two books in the 1920s: *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and *Das Ich und das Es* (1923; *The Ego and the Id*).

In these works, Freud attempted to clarify the relationship between his earlier topographical division of the [psyche](#) into the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious and his subsequent structural categorization into [id](#), ego, and superego. The id was defined in terms of the most primitive urges for gratification in the infant, urges dominated by the desire for pleasure through the release of tension and the cathexis of energy. Ruled by no laws of logic, indifferent to the demands of expediency, unconstrained by the resistance of external reality, the id is ruled by what Freud called the primary process directly expressing somatically generated instincts. Through the inevitable experience of frustration the infant learns to adapt itself to the exigencies of reality. The secondary process that results leads to the growth of the [ego](#), which follows what Freud called the [reality principle](#) in contradistinction to the [pleasure principle](#) dominating the id. Here the need to delay gratification in the service of self-preservation is slowly learned in an effort to thwart the anxiety produced by unfulfilled desires. What Freud termed [defense mechanisms](#) are developed by the ego to deal with such conflicts. Repression is the most fundamental, but Freud also posited an entire repertoire of others, including reaction formation, isolation, undoing, denial, displacement, and rationalization.

The last component in Freud's trichotomy, the [superego](#), develops from the internalization of society's moral commands through identification with parental dictates during the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Only partly conscious, the superego gains some of its punishing force by borrowing certain aggressive elements in the id, which are turned inward against the ego and produce feelings of guilt. But it is largely through the internalization of social norms that the superego is constituted, an acknowledgement that prevents psychoanalysis from conceptualizing the psyche in purely biologicistic or

individualistic terms.

Freud's understanding of the primary process underwent a crucial shift in the course of his career. Initially he counterposed a libidinal drive that seeks sexual pleasure to a self-preservation drive whose telos is survival. But in 1914, while examining the phenomenon of narcissism, he came to consider the latter instinct as merely a variant of the former. Unable to accept so monistic a drive theory, Freud sought a new dualistic alternative. He arrived at the speculative assertion that there exists in the psyche an innate, regressive drive for stasis that aims to end life's inevitable tension. This striving for rest he christened the Nirvana principle and the drive underlying it the death instinct, or Thanatos, which he could substitute for self-preservation as the contrary of the life instinct, or Eros.

id

in [Freudian](#) psychoanalytic theory, one of the three agencies of the human personality, along with the [ego](#) and [superego](#) (q.v.). The oldest of these psychic realms in development, it contains the psychic content related to the primitive instincts of the body, notably sex and aggression, as well as all psychic material that is inherited and present at birth. The id (Latin for "it") is oblivious of the external world and unaware of the passage of time. Devoid of organization, knowing neither logic nor reason, it has the ability to harbour acutely conflicting or mutually contradictory impulses side by side. It functions entirely according to the [pleasure-pain principle](#), its impulses either seeking immediate fulfillment or settling for a compromise fulfillment. The id supplies the energy for the development and continued functioning of conscious mental life, though the working processes of the id itself are completely [unconscious](#) in the adult (less unconscious in the child). In waking life it betrays its content in slips of the tongue, wit, art, and other at least partly nonrational modes of expression. The primary methods for unmasking its content, according to Freud, are the analysis of dreams and free association.

Many psychoanalysts now consider the conception of an id overly simple, though still useful in drawing attention to the unconscious motivations and irrational impulses within even the most normal human being.

ego

in psychoanalytic theory, that portion of the human personality which is experienced as the “self” or “I” and is in contact with the external world through perception . It is the part which remembers , evaluates , plans , and in other ways is responsive to and acts in the surrounding physical and social world. The ego coexists , in psychoanalytic theory , with the id and superego (qq.v.), as one of three agencies proposed by Sigmund Freud in attempting to describe the dynamics of the human mind. Ego (Latin for “I”) comprises , in Freud's term, the executive functions of personality ; it is the integrator between the outer and inner worlds, as well as between the id and the superego . The ego gives continuity and consistency to behaviour by providing a personal point of reference , which relates the events of the past (retained in memory) and actions of the present and of the future (represented in anticipation and imagination). The ego is not coextensive with either the personality or the body, although body concepts form the core of early experiences of self. The ego , once developed , is capable of change throughout life, particularly under conditions of threat , illness , and changes in life circumstances .

ego

Ego development.

The newborn human infant reacts to but cannot control, anticipate, or alter sources of stimulation, whether external or internal. Perception is primitive and diffuse, motor activity gross and uncoordinated, and self-locomotion impossible. Learning is limited to the simplest type of stimulus-response conditioning.

The infantile ego develops in relation to the external world and reflects, as psychoanalysis has emphasized, the helpless and dependent infant's efforts at altering and alleviating painfully intense stimuli. Such a possibility being inconceivable, mechanisms evolve for controlling tension while seeking means by which gratifications can be obtained, and these mechanisms in time develop into increasingly complex forms of mastery.

At the outset, perception and motor activity are closely tied. Immediately on stimulation there is motor discharge. To delay action, while tolerating the consequent tension, is the basis for all more advanced ego functions and is prototypic of the ego's role in later personality functioning. The learned separation of stimulation and response allows the interposition of more complex intellectual activities such as thinking, imagining, and planning. Instead of reacting directly, the ego has the capacity to test reality vicariously, to fantasize the consequences of one or another course of action, and to decide upon future directions to achieve its ends. The accumulation and retention of memories of past events is necessary for internal processes of thought and judgment. The acquisition of language, started during the second and third years, provides a powerful tool for the development of logical thought processes as well as allowing communication and control of the environment.

As the individual continues to develop, the ego is further differentiated and the superego develops. The superego represents the inhibitions of instinct and the control of impulses through the incorporation of parental and societal standards. Thus, moral standards as perceived by the ego become part of the personality. Conflict, a necessary ingredient for the growth and maturity of the personality, is introduced. The ego comes to mediate between the superego and the id (agency of primitive drives) by building up what have been called defense mechanisms (see [defense mechanism](#)).

Since the concept and structure of the ego were defined by Freud and explored by Jung, other theorists have developed somewhat different conceptualizations of the ego.



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ego

Ego strength.

Progress from immediate to directed behaviour, from pre-logical to rational thinking, is slow and moves through a number of intermediate stages during childhood. Even in physical maturity, persons differ considerably in the forms and effectiveness of ego functioning. An important dimension has been characterized as ego strength. The person of strong ego has the following characteristics: he is objective in his apprehension of the external world and in self-knowledge (insight); his activity is organized over longer time spans and he is thus able to maintain schedules and plans; he can follow resolves, and choose decisively among alternatives; he is not overwhelmed by his drives and can direct them into socially useful channels; he can resist immediate environmental and social pressure while contemplating and choosing a self-selected course. On the other hand, the ego-weak person is more like the child: behaviour is impulsive and immediate; perception of reality and self is distorted; he is less capable of productive work because his energy is drained into the protection of warped and unrealistic self-concepts; he may be burdened by neurotic symptoms. See also [psychoanalysis](#).

superego

in the psychoanalytic theory of [Sigmund Freud](#), latest developing of three agencies (with the [id](#) and [ego](#); qq.v.) of the human personality . The superego is the ethical component of the personality and provides the moral standards by which the ego operates . The superego 's criticisms , prohibitions , and inhibitions form a person's [conscience](#) , and its positive aspirations and ideals represent one's idealized self-image, or "ego ideal."

The superego develops during the first five years of life in response to parental punishment and approval . This development occurs as a result of the child's internalization of his parents ' moral standards , a process greatly aided by a tendency to identify with the parents . The developing superego absorbs the traditions of the family and the surrounding society and serves to control aggressive or other socially unacceptable impulses . Violation of the superego 's standards results in feelings of guilt or anxiety and a need to atone for one's actions . The superego continues to develop into young adulthood as a person encounters other admired role models and copes with the rules and regulations of the larger society . See also [Oedipus complex](#).