

Egogenesis and Egocentrism: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Interpretation

At its core, Freudian psychoanalysis swarms with genetic explanations for mental illness. Despite claiming to erase delusion, eradicate psychological dysfunction, and restore common unhappiness, its sole aim has always been to elucidate the etiology of diagnosed disorders. Implicit in Freud's work, then, is a seductive promise to his readers and patients: so long as you play along, we can unearth the causal components of your pathological existence. However, how are we to certify such a claim? Can psychoanalysis really ascertain psychogenesis? And can we truly say that Freudian concepts, such as the ego, ever act autonomously from Freud's own ego? To approach these questions, we'll proceed by stress-testing *Civilization and its Discontents*, one of Freud's key theoretical texts, for logical consistency. In this way, we will faithfully invest ourselves in Freud's psychoanalytic project, trace the limits of his words, and capture the moment at which they collapse into contradiction. Subsequently, we'll attempt to extract the motivations—some of which involve more than Freud's inattention—behind his inconsistencies. By drawing an analogy between the ego's interpretative privilege and Freud's own, we will unearth exactly what is gained from producing the ego-as-concept. In the end, then, we hope to arrive at a psychoanalytic—that is, genetic—explanation for Freud's inauguration of the ego.

In the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud defines the ego as an autonomous, unitary feeling of self which distinguishes itself from all else in phenomenological experience. Put differently, it is the psyche's arbiter of interpretation, its behavioral filter, its anchor to reality. Considering this definition's concreteness, it's quite jarring when Freud complicates matters with “an unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id” that reduces the ego to “a kind of facade” undelineated from the primary processes of the

unconscious (26). In this way, after conceiving the ego as a free-standing entity, Freud strangles his newborn with its own umbilical cord. Undesirably, his stillborn ego remains nourished by a disordered origin. Nevertheless, despite the gruesome nature of his approach, Freud believes that these definitions can be reconciled. To do so, he asserts that a mature ego “must have gone through a process of development” (27) to be stabilized in its present state. Freud’s traumatic birth, then, must precede mature phenomenology—for *egogenesis* is more fundamental than the ego itself. Thus, by Freud’s own reckoning, we find that egoic distinctions are emergent from undifferentiated, pre-egoic sensation. For all time, they remain mere fabrication of ontogenetic development.

Due to the preceding treatment of egogenesis, it’s surprising that Freud’s conclusions directly oppose such a process. Instead of affirming the ego’s fabrication, Freud subsequently proclaims that “our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive ... feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it” (29). In other words, there is no original moment of phenomenological fracture; egogenesis is a continuous process which widens a *preexistent* fissure between self and outer world. From this, we may deduce Freud’s first contradiction, namely:

(1) While the mature ego is constructed from egoless mechanisms, its features remain distinct along the history of egogenesis. Such features are, then, emergent *and* invariant. Phrased a bit differently, Freud’s argument implies nonlinear egogenesis, yet his conclusions merely diminish—rather than dissolve—the ego’s reference frame. In this way, he disavows his own logic and stagnates into egocentrism. For some reason, then, we cannot touch the ego’s ontological precedence.

Despite this contradiction, however, Freud's egocentrism *does* serve a practical function. For instance, Freud begins *Civilization and its Discontents* with an emphasis on the "great number of states in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain *or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly*" (26-7, italics mine). By outrightly assuming the ego's reference frame, this passage implicitly normalizes its own perspective while pathologizing psychical diversity. Its egocentrism, while hidden, validates Freud's normative assertions. Importantly, then, we see the selfsame pages which argue for egogenesis use egocentrism as the foundation for Freud's psychoanalytic empire. However, it's also critical that *Freud cannot judge the ego without being egocentric*. Without assuming the "correctness" of certain egos, Freud could say nothing about those deemed dysfunctional. There would be no patient to treat, no anomaly to interpret, no optimal state to reach. In this way, we should actually expect Freud's heavy investment in egocentrism; his entire livelihood as a psychoanalyst depends on it, while egogenetic conclusions only make matters more complicated. Despite being quite subtle, then, Freud's egocentrism underpins the entire project of psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, these concerns fail to curb Freud's fascination with the constructed nature of egoic boundaries. Thus, in the subsequent chapter, he admits that "the most interesting methods of averting suffering are those which seek to influence our own organism" (45). Instead of satiating the ego, some try to escape its tyranny entirely. Undeniably, then, these people share Freud's knowledge that "all suffering is nothing else than sensation, it only exists in so far as we feel it, and we only feel it in consequence of certain ways in which our organism is regulated" (45). In other words, no stimulus has ego-independent meaning; even the pleasure-pain axis is subordinated to our body's homeostatic processes. However, by recognizing the truth of this

statement, does Freud not discount all judgment of good and bad? Does he not deconstruct the ego's interpretative privilege? In this way, we have reached Freud's second contradiction:

(2) We can uphold a model ego as our standard for qualifying interpretations of the world. However, *even this ego* must have (a) arisen from a pre-egoic state without judgment, then (b) arbitrarily reified the "correctness" of the constraints it suffers from.

Put simply, Freud concedes that a single ego cannot reliably define "correctness," but makes such judgments by erecting a monolithic model for the psyche. In this way, we confront Freud's vacillation between egogenesis to egocentrism for a second time.

From this, we might wonder why *Civilization and its Discontents* repeats such a pattern. Does Freud's inauguration of the ego as a concept, or *conceptual egogenesis*, have its own genetic explanation? To recap, we've learned that the ego grounds Freud's normative claims. Without the ego's conditions for correctness, Freud would be forced to approach psychoanalysis from beyond the ego's judgment. He would, in this way, renounce his capacity for definitive interpretation. As such, it's quite likely that conceptual egogenesis was purely motivated by pragmatism. Compelled by an overbearing desire for absolute interpretation, then Freud erects the ego as an infinity mirror for his own narcissism.

To support such a claim, we'll proceed by drawing an analogy between Freud and his concept of the ego. This is most clearly observed during Freud's analysis of the death instinct, where he asserts that displaying "control over nature" not only sedates man's aggressive tendencies, but also gives the ego "an extraordinary degree of narcissistic enjoyment" (110). In this way, egoic impositions of power are inherently self-validating. The mature ego's primary motivation, then, would be to exert such control—and it would feel "correct" in doing so.

However, does psychoanalysis not qualify as a display of control? Similarly, wouldn't conceptual egogenesis—by validating Freud's capacity for absolute interpretation—be an extremely pleasurable act for narcissistic egos? In this sense, it makes sense that Freud's egogenetic arguments regress toward egocentric claims. Despite condemning Freud with his own definition of narcissism, egocentrism both upholds his profession and the unrivaled pleasure of imposing interpretations on the psyche. In this way, then, narcissistic enjoyment becomes our psychoanalytic explanation for Freud's invocation of the ego.

Now, with our investigation behind us, we realize that *all* of our initial questions must be answered in the negative:

- (1) Without recourse to egocentrism—Freud's primary error—we cannot certify his claim to genetic understanding.
- (2) Since Freud chooses to constrain his concept of the ego with “correct” boundaries, psychoanalysis can do nothing but impose egocentric judgments on psychogenesis.
- (3) By pairing (a) the idea that Freud's interpretative power is magnified by the ego, and (b) his own admission that interpretation amplifies narcissistic satisfaction, we reveal the malignancy of psychoanalysis' conceptual core.

Nevertheless, by failing to follow his own logic in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud hides these unsightly insights via internal contradiction. He obscures the narcissistic origin of his concepts, and downplays the pragmatic utility of their creation. As such, most readers remain seduced by Freud's promise to provide genetic explanations—but not us. After our investigation, we stand disillusioned before psychoanalysis' repressed foundations. We observe Freud's shift from egogenesis into egocentrism, and recognize its normative utility. We stumble upon Freud's

concept of the ego, and notice its narcissistic origin. In the end, however, we're able to empathize with Freud's distaste for interpretative futility; we appreciate his behavior's intricate etiology, yet remain open to the uninterpretable nature of psychogenetic processes.

Works Cited

Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (2010). *Civilization and its discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.