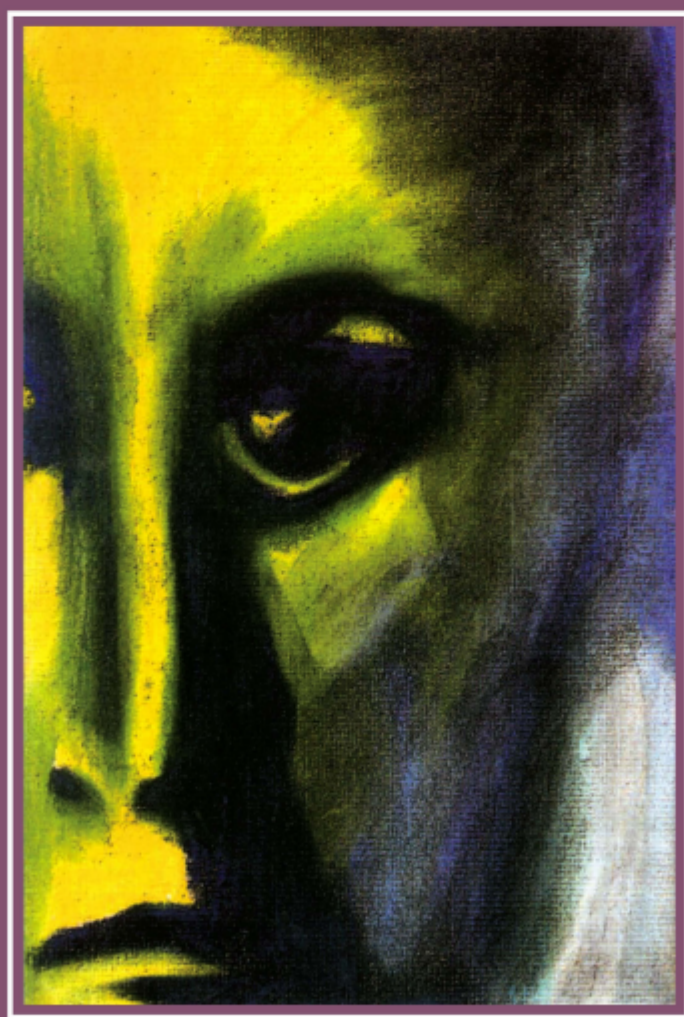


ANNA FREUD  
THE EGO  
AND  
THE MECHANISMS  
OF DEFENCE



KARNAC BOOKS

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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C.M.B.





*Part I*

**THEORY OF THE MECHANISMS  
OF DEFENSE**



# CHAPTER I

## The Ego as the Seat of Observation

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### DEFINITION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

There have been periods in the development of psychoanalytic science when the theoretical study of the individual ego was distinctly unpopular. Somehow or other, many analysts had conceived the idea that, in analysis, the value of the scientific and therapeutic work was in direct proportion to the depth of the psychic strata upon which attention was focused. Whenever interest was shifted from the deeper to the more superficial psychic strata—whenever, that is to say, research was deflected from the id to the ego—it was felt that here was a beginning of apostasy from psychoanalysis as a whole. The view held was that the term *psychoanalysis* should be reserved for the new discoveries relating to the unconscious psychic life, i.e., the study of repressed instinctual impulses, affects, and fantasies. With

problems such as that of the adjustment of children or adults to the outside world, with concepts of value such as those of health and disease, virtue or vice, psychoanalysis was not properly concerned. It should confine its investigations exclusively to infantile fantasies carried on into adult life, imaginary gratifications, and the punishments apprehended in retribution for these.

Such a definition of psychoanalysis was not infrequently met with in analytic writings and was perhaps warranted by the current usage, which has always treated psychoanalysis and depth psychology as synonymous terms. Moreover, there was some justification for it in the past, for it may be said that from the earliest years of our science its theory, built up as it was on an empirical basis, was pre-eminently a psychology of the unconscious or, as we should say today, of the id. But the definition immediately loses all claim to accuracy when we apply it to psychoanalytic therapy. From the beginning analysis, as a therapeutic method, was concerned with the ego and its aberrations: the investigation of the id and of its mode of operation was always only a means to an end. And the end was invariably the same: the correction of these abnormalities and the restoration of the ego to its integrity.

When the writings of Freud, beginning with *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), took a fresh direction, the odium of analytic unorthodoxy no longer attached to the study of the ego and interest was definitely focused on the ego institutions. Since then the term "depth psychology" certainly does not cover the whole field of psychoanalytic research. At the present time we should probably define the task of analysis as follows: to acquire the fullest possible

knowledge of all the three institutions of which we believe the psychic personality to be constituted and to learn what are their relations to one another and to the outside world. That is to say: in relation to the ego, to explore its contents, its boundaries, and its functions, and to trace the history of its dependence on the outside world, the id, and the superego; and, in relation to the id, to give an account of the instincts, i.e., of the id contents, and to follow them through the transformations which they undergo.

### THE ID, THE EGO, AND THE SUPEREGO IN SELF-PERCEPTION

We all know that the three psychic institutions vary greatly in their accessibility to observation. Our knowledge of the id—which was formerly called the system *Ucs.*—can be acquired only through the derivatives which make their way into the systems *Pcs.* and *Cs.* If within the id a state of calm and satisfaction prevails, so that there is no occasion for any instinctual impulse to invade the ego in search of gratification and there to produce feelings of tension and unpleasure, we can learn nothing of the id contents. It follows, at least theoretically, that the id is not under all conditions open to observation.

The situation is, of course, different in the case of the superego. Its contents are for the most part conscious and so can be directly arrived at by endopsychic perception. Nevertheless, our picture of the superego always tends to become hazy when harmonious relations exist between it and the ego. We then say that the two coincide, i.e., at such moments the superego is not perceptible as a separate institution either to the subject himself or to an outside

observer. Its outlines become clear only when it confronts the ego with hostility or at least with criticism. The super-ego, like the id, becomes perceptible in the state which it produces within the ego: for instance, when its criticism evokes a sense of guilt.

## THE EGO AS OBSERVER

Now this means that the proper field for our observation is always the ego. It is, so to speak, the medium through which we try to get a picture of the other two institutions.

When the relations between the two neighboring powers—ego and id—are peaceful, the former fulfills to admiration its role of observing the latter. Different instinctual impulses are perpetually forcing their way from the id into the ego, where they gain access to the motor apparatus, by means of which they obtain gratification. In favorable cases the ego does not object to the intruder but puts its own energies at the other's disposal and confines itself to perceiving; it notes the onset of the instinctual impulse, the heightening of tension and the feelings of displeasure by which this is accompanied and, finally, the relief from tension when gratification is experienced. Observation of the whole process gives us a clear and undistorted picture of the instinctual impulse concerned, the quantity of libido with which it is cathected, and the aim which it pursues. The ego, if it assents to the impulse, does not enter into the picture at all.

Unfortunately the passing of instinctual impulses from one institution to the other may be the signal for all manner of conflicts, with the inevitable result that observation of the id is interrupted. On their way to gratification the

id impulses must pass through the territory of the ego and here they are in an alien atmosphere. In the id the so-called "primary process" prevails; there is no synthesis of ideas, affects are liable to displacement, opposites are not mutually exclusive and may even coincide, and condensation occurs as a matter of course. The sovereign principle which governs the psychic processes is that of obtaining pleasure. In the ego, on the contrary, the association of ideas is subject to strict conditions, to which we apply the comprehensive term "secondary process"; further, the instinctual impulses can no longer seek direct gratification—they are required to respect the demands of reality and, more than that, to conform to ethical and moral laws by which the superego seeks to control the behavior of the ego. Hence these impulses run the risk of incurring the displeasure of institutions essentially alien to them. They are exposed to criticism and rejection and have to submit to every kind of modification. Peaceful relations between the neighboring powers are at an end. The instinctual impulses continue to pursue their aims with their own peculiar tenacity and energy, and they make hostile incursions into the ego, in the hope of overthrowing it by a surprise attack. The ego on its side becomes suspicious; it proceeds to counterattack and to invade the territory of the id. Its purpose is to put the instincts permanently out of action by means of appropriate defensive measures, designed to secure its own boundaries.

The picture of these processes transmitted to us by means of the ego's faculty of observation is more confused but at the same time much more valuable. It shows us two psychic institutions in action at one and the same moment. No longer do we see an undistorted id impulse but an id im-

pulse modified by some defensive measure on the part of the ego. The task of the analytic observer is to split up the picture, representing as it does a compromise between the separate institutions, into its component parts: the id, the ego, and, it may be, the superego.

### INROADS BY THE ID AND BY THE EGO CONSIDERED AS MATERIAL FOR OBSERVATION

In all this we are struck by the fact that the inroads from the one side and from the other are by no means equally valuable from the point of view of observation. All the defensive measures of the ego against the id are carried out silently and invisibly. The most that we can ever do is to reconstruct them in retrospect: we can never really witness them in operation. This statement applies, for instance, to successful repression. The ego knows nothing of it; we are aware of it only subsequently, when it becomes apparent that something is missing. I mean by this that, when we try to form an objective judgment about a particular individual, we realize that certain id impulses are absent which we should expect to make their appearance in the ego in pursuit of gratification. If they never emerge at all, we can only assume that access to the ego is permanently denied to them, i.e., that they have succumbed to repression. But this tells us nothing of the process of repression itself.

The same is true of successful reaction formation, which is one of the most important measures adopted by the ego as a permanent protection against the id. Such formations appear almost unheralded in the ego in the course of a child's development. We cannot always say that the ego's



attention had previously been focused on the particular contrary instinctual impulse which the reaction formation replaces. As a rule, the ego knows nothing of the rejection of the impulse or of the whole conflict which has resulted in the implanting of the new characteristic. Analytic observers might easily take it for a spontaneous development of the ego, were it not that definite indications of obsessional exaggeration suggest that it is of the nature of a reaction and that it conceals a long-standing conflict. Here again, observation of the particular mode of defense does not reveal anything of the process by which it has been evolved.

We note that all the important information which we have acquired has been arrived at by the study of inroads from the opposite side, namely, from the id to the ego. The obscurity of a successful repression is only equalled by the transparency of the repressive process when the movement is reversed, i.e., when the repressed material returns, as may be observed in neurosis. Here we can trace every stage in the conflict between the instinctual impulse and the ego's defense. Similarly, reaction formation can best be studied when such formations are in the process of disintegration. In such a case the id's inroad takes the form of a reinforcement of the libidinal cathexis of the primitive instinctual impulse which the reaction formation concealed. This enables the impulse to force its way into consciousness, and, for a time, instinctual impulse and reaction formation are visible within the ego side by side. Owing to another function of the ego—its tendency to synthesis—this condition of affairs, which is particularly favorable for analytic observation, lasts only for a few moments at a time. Then a fresh conflict arises between id derivative and ego activity, a conflict to decide which of the two is to keep the upper

hand or what compromise they will adopt. If through reinforcement of its energetic cathexis the defense set up by the ego is successful, the invading force from the id is routed and peace reigns once more in the psyche—a situation most unfruitful for our observations.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Application of Analytic Technique to the Study of the Psychic Institutions

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In my first chapter I have described the conditions under which psychoanalytic observation of the psychic processes has had to be conducted. In what follows I propose to give an account of the way in which our analytic technique, as it has developed, has accommodated itself to these conditions.

### HYPNOTIC TECHNIQUE IN THE PREANALYTIC PERIOD

In the hypnotic technique of the preanalytic period the role of the ego was still entirely negative. The purpose of the hypnotist was to arrive at the contents of the unconscious and he regarded the ego merely as a disturbing factor in his work. It was already known that by means of hypnosis

it was possible to eliminate, or at any rate to overpower, the patient's ego. The new feature in the technique described in *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) was this: that the physician took advantage of the elimination of the ego to gain access to the patient's unconscious—now known as the id—the way to which had hitherto been blocked by the ego. Thus the goal aimed at was the revelation of the unconscious; the ego was a disturbing factor and hypnosis was a means of getting rid of it temporarily. When a piece of unconscious material came to light in hypnosis, the physician introduced it to the ego, and the effect of thus forcibly bringing it into consciousness was to clear up the symptom. But the ego took no part in the therapeutic process. It tolerated the intruder only so long as it was itself under the influence of the physician who had induced hypnosis. Then it revolted and began a new struggle to defend itself against that element of the id which had been forced upon it, and so the laboriously achieved therapeutic success was vitiated. Thus it came about that the greatest triumph of hypnotic technique—the complete elimination of the ego during the period of investigation—proved prejudicial to permanent results and disillusionment as to the value of the technique set in.

### FREE ASSOCIATION

Even in free association—the method which has since replaced hypnosis as an aid to research—the role of the ego is at first still a negative one. It is true that the patient's ego is no longer forcibly eliminated. Instead, it is required to eliminate itself, to refrain from criticizing the associations, and to disregard the claims of logical connection, which are

at other times held to be legitimate. The ego is, in fact, requested to be silent and the id is invited to speak and promised that its derivatives shall not encounter the usual difficulties if they emerge into consciousness. Of course, it is never promised that, when they make their appearance in the ego, they will attain their instinctual aim, whatever that may be. The warrant is valid only for their translation into word representations: it does not entitle them to take control of the motor apparatus, which is their real purpose in emerging. Indeed, this apparatus is put out of action in advance by the strict rules of analytic technique. Thus we have to play a double game with the patient's instinctual impulses, on the one hand encouraging them to express themselves and, on the other, steadily refusing them gratification—a procedure which incidentally gives rise to one of the numerous difficulties in the handling of analytic technique.

Even today many beginners in analysis have an idea that it is essential to succeed in inducing their patients really and invariably to give all their associations without modification or inhibition, i.e., to obey implicitly the fundamental rule of analysis. But, even if this ideal were realized, it would not represent an advance, for after all it would simply mean the conjuring up again of the now obsolete situation of hypnosis, with its one-sided concentration on the part of the physician upon the id. Fortunately for analysis such docility in the patient is in practice impossible. The fundamental rule can never be followed beyond a certain point. The ego keeps silence for a time and the id derivatives make use of this pause to force their way into consciousness. The analyst hastens to catch their utterances. Then the ego bestirs itself again, repudiates the attitude of

passive tolerance which it has been compelled to assume, and by means of one or other of its customary defense mechanisms intervenes in the flow of associations. The patient transgresses the fundamental rule of analysis, or, as we say, he puts up "resistances." This means that the inroad of the id into the ego has given place to a counterattack by the ego upon the id. The observer's attention is now diverted from the associations to the resistance, i.e., from the content of the id to the activity of the ego. The analyst has an opportunity of witnessing, then and there, the putting into operation by the latter of one of those defensive measures against the id which I have already described and which are so obscure, and it now behoves him to make it the object of his investigation. He then notes that with this change of object the situation in the analysis has suddenly changed. In analyzing the id he is assisted by the spontaneous tendency of the id derivatives to rise to the surface: his exertions and the strivings of the material which he is trying to analyze are similarly directed. In the analysis of the ego's defensive operations there is, of course, no such community of aim. The unconscious elements in the ego have no inclination to become conscious and derive no advantage from so doing. Hence any piece of ego analysis is much less satisfactory than the analysis of the id. It has to proceed by circuitous paths, it cannot follow out the ego activity directly, the only possibility is to reconstruct it from its influence on the patient's associations. From the nature of the effect produced—whether it be omission, reversal, displacement of meaning, etc.—we hope to discover what kind of defense the ego has employed in its intervention. So it is the analyst's business first of all to recognize the defense mechanism. When he has done this, he has accom-

plished a piece of ego analysis. His next task is to undo what has been done by the defense, i.e., to find out and restore to its place that which has been omitted through repression, to rectify displacements, and to bring that which has been isolated back into its true context. When he has re-established the severed connections, he turns his attention once more from the analysis of the ego to that of the id.

We see then that what concerns us is not simply the enforcement of the fundamental rule of analysis for its own sake but the conflict to which this gives rise. It is only when observation is focused now on the id and now on the ego and the direction of interest is twofold, extending to both sides of the human being whom we have before us, that we can speak of *psychoanalysis*, as distinct from the one-sided method of hypnosis.

The various other means employed in analytic technique can now be classified without difficulty, according to whether the attention of the observer is directed to one side or the other.

## INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

The situation when we are interpreting our patient's dreams and when we are listening to his free associations is the same. The dreamer's psychic state differs little from that of the patient during the analytic hour. When he obeys the fundamental rule of analysis he voluntarily suspends some functions of the ego; in the dreamer this suspension takes place automatically under the influence of sleep. The patient is made to lie at rest on the analyst's couch, in order that he may have no opportunity to gratify his instinctual

## THE EGO AND THE MECHANISMS OF DEFENCE

by Anna Freud

When *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* was first published in German in 1936 it was at once recognized as a major contribution to psychoanalytic psychology, and its translation into English quickly followed. More than half a century later it enjoys the status of a classic. Written by a pioneer of child analysis, and illustrated by fascinating clinical pictures drawn from childhood and adolescence, it discusses those adaptive measures by which instinctual life achieves control, as well as the ways in which painful or unwanted feeling-states are kept at bay or made more bearable.

Anna Freud's arguments have a clarity and cogency reminiscent of her father's, and the work is remarkably undated. Nothing stands still, but *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* has unmistakably passed the test of time.

Anna Freud, the youngest of Sigmund Freud's six children, and the only one to make her career in psychoanalysis, was born in Vienna on 3 December 1895. Starting her professional life as a schoolteacher, she became a member of the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society in 1922. She maintained a lifelong interest in education, and her extensive contributions in this field were matched by those in all aspects of family law, in paediatrics, as well as psychoanalytic psychology, normal and abnormal. Her work in Vienna was brought to an end by the Nazi occupation and she found sanctuary in London with her parents in 1938. Her father died in the following year, but Anna Freud maintained the tradition he began in her work as a member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society and as the founder of the Hampstead Child-Therapy Clinic — now the Anna Freud Centre. Her services to psychoanalysis were recognized by the award of the CBE in 1967 and by a large number of honorary doctorates on both sides of the Atlantic, including, as a gesture of reparation, an honorary MD from the University of Vienna. She died on 9 October 1982.

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