

Emancipation from Superego through the Soul



Sigmund Freud developed a pioneering theory that the human psyche is composed of three parts: id, ego and superego. The id represents the irrational, instinctive and primitive part of the personality that lives according to our basic instincts and the pursuit of pleasure. The id expects immediate gratification in whatever it wants, or it reacts with upset, tantrums, and even violence. The ego is the rational part of the psyche, with the function of satisfying the needs and desires of the id by realistic means, according to what is possible and socially acceptable. To achieve these aims, the ego has to learn how to control the irrational impulses of the id, making them more reasonable, which often calls for delayed gratification of the id's demands. The superego represents the component of personality composed of the internalized ideals we have acquired from our parents and society. While the ego is realistic, the superego is moralistic and idealistic. The function of the ego is to reconcile id's 'what I want to do' with the superego's 'what I should do', while ensuring its solution complies with 'what I can do' in the real world.

The superego uses two main features to control the ego: conscience and the ego-ideal. Through conscience, it controls the ego with the threat of remorse and guilt. Through the ego-ideal it motivates the ego to pursue and seek to attain a model of perfection. When the ego achieves this socially approved ideal, it feels some brief narcissistic pleasure and self-satisfaction, before it is given a new model to attain. But when it fails to achieve the ideal, it is left feeling unworthy and guilty for an indefinite period. The boundaries between the id, the ego and the superego are fluid, and they should not each be seen as entirely separate and segregated components of the psyche.

According to Freud, the id is the primal part of the personality that is present from birth. The ego develops during the first three years of a child's life, and the superego begins to emerge around the age of five. The role of the superego is to suppress the urges of the id and to impose socially acceptable moral values on the ego. The ego itself generally only seeks realistic solutions to satisfy the id's demands, but the superego calls for it to follow higher principles and ideals.

These three aspects of the psyche coexist in all people, but the degree of influence of each varies by person. The ego is torn between the id and the superego, having to find a balance between their conflicting demands. But, unless the ego is strong enough, it will fail in this task. Freud created the term 'ego strength' to indicate that the ego carries the burden of the overall integration of these three parts in one's personality. The ego itself is experienced on three levels: unconscious, preconscious and conscious. When the ego is predominantly unconscious or preconscious, it will tend to identify indiscriminately with either the id or the superego. Only when it becomes more conscious, does it begin to use its discriminative intelligence to reconcile the more primal demands of the id with the higher values of the superego.

Because the superego's ideals are often in conflict with the id's desires, the ego tries to mediate between these two to find some compromise. For instance, in the practice of celibacy or other repressions, the ego yields to the superego's idealistic objective and turns its back on the id's desires. In an opposite scenario of sexual indulgence, the ego ignores the superego in succumbing to the id's primal instincts for pleasure. However, it is not easy for the ego to reconcile the conflicting objectives of the two extremes and, even though it may feel very proud of itself (in the first scenario) for fulfilling the ego-ideal imposed by the superego, it will feel disturbed by the unfulfilled needs of the id. On the other hand, when the ego has managed to resist the superego and please the id, on its preconscious level it will feel guilty or ashamed because of not having lived up to the superego's ideals or moral code. Should the ego find a balance between the opposing demands of the two, this would normally result in a solution somewhere between the id's sexual indulgence and the superego's moralistic repression.

One psychological theory that was inspired by Freud and monopolized on his discoveries was 'transactional analysis'. According to transactional analysis, the human psyche is composed of three levels: child (id), parent (superego) and adult (ego). According to this theory ego is supposed to mature through psychological development in a way that it can begin to manage effectively the contradiction between id and superego. But this is wishful thinking. Many psychological models aspire to devise a solution through which our ego can solve our endless problems. But the truth is ego is simply not capable of it. All it can really do is try to find a way of coping with the many internal and external contradictions it faces, in order to maintain within itself a semblance of sanity.

Imbalance between Ego and Superego

Examples in which the ego, with a realistic but more selfish approach, dominates the superego, would be individuals who use every means possible to please their id, so long as they can avoid any social consequences. There are many people like this who manipulate others and society in order to gain power or wealth.

In cases where the superego dominates the ego, people seek to live up to a positive self-image based on their own ideals or on what is expected of them by society. These people either take narcissistic pleasure in fulfilling the ego-ideal or live in guilt for failing to do so. They live a rather pathetic, pretend existence, having no inner life and only seeing themselves through the filters of society's or their own contrived ideals and moral codes. They have adopted their ideals secondhand from their parents, schools, church, workplace, government and so forth. They live without having any idea how conditioned they are, unable to see themselves or reality except as the images for both have been imposed on them by third parties.

Is Superego Needed At All?

An important question to ask is whether we need superego in order to access higher values and a conscience? Yes, we do. Each person must evolve in worldly social and cultural contexts to understand, and learn to live in relative harmony with, the ideals and moral principles which have been developed by the collective mentality of their particular society. Even though the collective mind limits us on many levels, and does not support our spiritual evolution, without it we would still be at the level of beasts. Before we can transcend the superego, we must learn from it. A child cannot transcend dependence on his parents until he grows up. Up until that time, a child needs his parents, not only for physical sustenance and emotional nourishment, but also for the development of his personality and the acquisition of essential human values.

It is true that each creature has some natural goodness inside, but the lives of animals are much simpler than those of humans, and animals are instinctually able to maintain a basic harmony between their id and a rudimentary ego. And, among more evolved animals, a degree of social education and even some limited development of a basic superego can be observed. Human social life is much more complex, and we have developed many strategies for manipulating our relationships with others to get what we want. Humans have been killing each other from the moment they started to walk on two feet. It is because our id and ego are stronger than those animals have that we also need a stronger superego to counterbalance and control our id's greed and ruthlessness.

There is an ancient philosophical question as to whether the human being is naturally good or evil. In reality he is both. Because a human's evil tendencies can easily be triggered by numerous emotions, such as selfishness, greed, lust, anger, or when his survival is threatened, humans cannot really trust each other without having some agreed social, moral, and legal codes. Establishing these is the function of the superego, which is motivated by an internalized 'fear of god' imprinted in the hearts of humans by the collective mind.

But what really is the collective mind? If we imagine the approximate sum total of the minds of all humans put together and determine some kind of average mind applicable to the large majority of them, this would equate to the collective mind. Some of the people in this majority would be above the average level of collective consciousness and others would be below it, but these — together with the huge numbers in the middle — make up the median, or collective, mind. The meaning of becoming civilized is about becoming as close as possible in one's own personal development to this average of the collective mind (which represents the level of worldly civilization).

However, an essential aspect of growing into our individuality is about moving beyond and above the collective average. It is in doing this that we begin to question the hold of the superego over our psyche and lives. We do not do this questioning in the spirit of adolescent rebellion, or because our ego wants to be different and special, but because we have already assimilated what is important of the average collective mind, and our instinctive intelligence tells us it is time to separate what is real and worthwhile of the superego from what is superfluous, and even negative (the 'junk superego').

An example of superego's negative control, which can be let go of as 'junk', is the guilt that some Christians have been brought up to feel if they do not attend church, confess, or pray regularly. But on the superego's positive side, perhaps you learned some positive values from your parents, such as being kind to others and respecting animals, and these values are ones worth keeping. This is the meaning of finding your own way while learning from the collective human heritage.

Most people's psyches are like dough, molded by the collective mind of the cultures they are raised in. They have no real individuality or personality they can truly call their own. They are all the same, psychological replicas, shallow copies of each other. Each culture conditions people differently. The Italian superego is quite a bit less restrictive than the Japanese one, which is probably one of the most controlling ones on the planet. And yet each culture has something valuable in its diversity to offer as well. The important thing is to be able to distinguish what is truly helpful and constructive and to let go of the superfluous and negative.

The idea of patriotism is one of the expressions of the superego. Identification with a tribe or social group was often a survival necessity for the reasoning ego, but the superego made a worldly pantheon of worship out of this. It devised flags, national anthems, oaths of allegiances, and other symbols to make the heart beat stronger when thinking of one's own country. It is common for the superego to identify with the ideal of a country, tribe, race, or religion to the exclusion of others. However, a more developed and open-minded superego will consider itself more of a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, and of a world in which love for each other is natural.

Morality and Superego

The superego's constructive purpose and contribution is to teach the ego to be good. The problem with this is that there are many different, and often conflicting, interpretations of what good is, and the superego will be composed of varying ideals depending on its country, culture, ethnic group, and even neighborhood. Different subcultures have their own unique superegos which exist parallel with each other, and these mix their particular superego styles with their regional or national backgrounds. All of these factors blend together to influence the formation of an individual's own superego. A child with parents of different races, religions and nationalities will have a superego with influences from each part of his mix of backgrounds.

The definition of good is relative to the conditioning one received from one's parents and society. 'Goodness' to please the superego, or ego-ideal, for one person may include the invasion of another country based on the patriotic brainwashing he has received. For another, the superego's 'goodness' could be doing volunteer work or opening a shelter for cats, even though this person's own life may be in a complete mess.

The ego has to discriminate between moral values which are true and those which are false. When there is no more love between two partners, and the woman 'cheats' on the man, she may experience guilt for the wrong reasons. Instead of feeling guilty for being unfaithful, she should feel 'guilty' for remaining in a dead relationship and thereby continuing to imprison herself and her partner.

Where do we draw the line between morality and immorality? A simple way would be to categorize our values into one camp or the other. But a clearer approach is to use higher intention based on our natural goodness and compassion. The problem in doing this is that most people are unable to distinguish between their own natural goodness and the artificial ego-ideals which they have been 'indoctrinated' with and by which they are trying to satisfy their model of 'good'. People do all kinds of foolish things to feel that they have satisfied the superego's ideals of goodness. They stay in jobs that kill their spirits so they can be socially accepted, or they continue in dysfunctional relationships just to be 'good' and avoid the guilt that a break-up and 'hurting' the other person would incur.

People are afraid of being rejected by society and so do not rebel against rigid moral codes. They do anything to fit in, since being a member of the tribe is of great importance for their physical and emotional survival. But, in this kind of decision, it is not the superego that determines the conformism, but the ego. The superego is idealistic, while ego is realistic and opportunistic.

Superego in Social Interactions

It appears to be a paradox that society resists individuality even though it has developed high level of culture, art and philosophy which celebrates unique contributions of individuals. However, this is less true when we appreciate that the collective mind is still

only maintaining a mediocre ‘average’, or something of a ‘least common denominator’, which society seeks as a ‘balance’.

People who are different and revolutionary can tilt the balance and upset the collective comfort zone. And the world also has plenty of crazy people who bring disruptive energy to the relative social harmony. However, this is not all negative, because, if originality were repressed, society as a whole would stop evolving and would stagnate. Each person who strives to maintain the status quo of values in their society is unconsciously serving their conformist superego. Because they do it without being conscious of what they are doing, they fail to grasp that the superego’s standards and ideals are supposed to be evolving to keep the collective mind alive. Our values and ideals are meant to be questioned constantly, modified, and realigned to maintain harmony with changing times and human evolution.

Many of us face resistance from people around us when we want to break away from their conditioned views of what is ‘right’. They want us to be just like them, and don’t like anyone who is different. They want us to get married and have children, jobs, and careers, and not because they care about us, but because they fear ‘otherness’. They are afraid that the ideals and stability of their own lives are being challenged by anyone who is different. The whole foundation of their lives is threatened when we alter our fundamental perception of the accepted standards of illusory social stability and comfort. At a subconscious, or even unconscious, level, most people are deeply uncertain about their belief system, but they obstinately hang on to it for fear of losing the basis of reality they have been brought up to live by.

Some people are more open to questioning the collective societal mores, which means that their superegos are more flexible and can be modified. Individual and collective superegos are not just fixed structures from the past, but are constantly being adapted and reformed based on human interactions and evolution. But, despite this, almost all of most people’s superegos stay the same, because they themselves never change, but just keep repeating and recycling the past.

Emancipation from Superego

Successful evolution beyond the superego would be retaining its natural positive values while rejecting its artificial, negative idealism. To become an individual, one has to free oneself from the superego as an internalized imposition from third parties which must be obeyed rigidly in its entirety. To do this requires being able to use the soul’s intuitive wisdom to discriminate between what is naturally good and what is unnatural and contrived. What the superego judges to be good or bad is very often completely opposite to natural reality, because it is neither creative nor in touch with spiritual truth. The superego’s ‘ideals’ are most commonly characterized by dogmatism.

The superego’s key strategy is to use our own self-image to manipulate us. It is no different than the kind of manipulative control politicians, governments, religions,

companies and other organizations have used since the beginning of civilization. It works, because the morality of most people is based on the preconscious compulsion to please their ego-ideal and to avoid feelings of guilt. An average person is continually re-validating their self-image; in fact, their whole life is structured and revolves around this image. Using it, one refrains from hurting others because of the super-ego's conditioning and the penalty of punishment in the forms of remorse and guilt, rather than because of really caring about others. But, when people lose control, their id comes out and, suddenly, all of the superego's ideals evaporate. Then, when their normal self-control returns, they feel shame and guilt. The superego is our real life big brother, always watching, even in our dreams.

Freeing oneself from the control of the superego is an essential part of our individuation and a sign of positive progress in our spiritual evolution. An individual is someone who is able to rely on his own natural inner barometer in choosing ideals and moral values by which to live. Most seekers who want to reach enlightenment or to merge with the divine are still puppets controlled by their superego's concept of spiritual ideals. They have not yet graduated from serving self-important spiritual ego-ideals to a life based on having embodied natural ideals which serve the soul. Unless one perceives the path from the soul, one continues to be an unwitting and unconscious follower of one's superego's version of spiritual idealism.

As was noted, our standards and senses of good and evil have evolved in social and cultural contexts, and this could not have happened without the superego. However, as we learn to see reality through our own eyes, and truly become adult and autonomous, we must also seek freedom from the superego. If one does not become free of dependence on one's parents, one will remain frozen in an infantile stage of development even up to one's old age. One can love one's parents and be grateful for all they have done, but one must find one's own way in life. This requires graduating from blindly following parents' and others' beliefs and conditionings to listening to one's own inner guidance and truth.

When one follows a moral code of any external source or practice – such as those of yoga or Buddhism – without discrimination, one becomes a slave to the superego of that source or practice. As was noted, the superego forces us to be moral through social conscience and ego-ideals which, from the standpoint of the soul, are the wrong reasons to have standards that run our life. We are burdened with such a plethora of acquired beliefs and convictions that we no longer know what *our own* perception of reality is. An average person is not an individual, but a unit of the collective mind who is fully controlled by a 'consensual superego', but who still lives in the illusion that he is making his own choices. This is the greatest trick of the superego – to lead us to believe that our convictions are our own. People do not make their own choices. They only think that they do, but they are, in reality, just puppets of the collective mind.

Beyond Both Superego and Ego

Freud spoke about ego strength being required to reconcile the eternal struggle between the id and the superego. The limitation of psychology is that it wants to transform the psyche without severing the root source of our spiritual ignorance. This is not surprising, considering that the founding fathers of modern psychology and psychoanalysis did not themselves know who they were. Freud was a genius psychologically, but he was not only not awakened to his true self – he did not even have the concept of it. His pupil, Jung, was aware of the concept of enlightenment, but only at an intellectual level, so it remained relatively meaningless and unexplored by him. He was too occupied with the different levels of his mind to meditate.

Freud describes the three-part structure of the psyche of an ignorant personality, which is relevant to most people but does not apply in the same way to a complete human being. When the soul is awakened, and we solidify our individuality beyond the mind, Freud's three-part structure of personality is still present, but is now experienced from our unconditional self. When we have access to our pure nature, the ego is no longer so desperately dependent on pleasing the superego. It is important to understand that the ego submits itself to the tyranny of the superego not only because of conditioning by parents and society, but primarily because it seeks a higher meaning in life. Any beast can serve its id, but this is not enough for human beings. Humans instinctively look for a higher purpose to their lives, and the superego is ready to answer this call with its questionable solutions.

When we have discovered the true meaning to our existence by serving our light and surrendering to I am, the ego's need for a higher purpose is naturally fulfilled and channeled in the right direction, and this frees it from remaining a slave to the superego's ideals. The ego begins to learn to see the world from the higher intelligence and consciousness of the soul. It can experience love and empathy for others, no longer based on emotions conditioned by the superego, but now on the wisdom of the spiritual heart.

What is the ego when it is experienced from our pure nature? In our language, it is simply the observer, which is the aspect of our identity serving as the center of the conscious or semi-conscious mind. When the observer is integrated and unified with fundamental consciousness (our subjectivity) it reaches natural transparency and becomes an open window to the world for the soul, while at the same time remaining the hub for her discriminative intelligence. From now on, the ego belongs to the soul, and it is the soul that replaces the redundant function of the superego. At this point we have attained true individuality and existential independence from the collective mind. We have, at last, entered the realm of the soul.

As for the id, the alignment of our basic instincts with our true self is an important aspect of human maturation and the purification of the subconscious. Here, our pleasure drive, libido and animalistic compulsions can finally be integrated with our higher being. As the id becomes more integrated, its innate needs are no longer experienced as being in conflict with the will of the soul and the evolution of her light and intelligence. Our

primal nature reaches the condition of transparency and becomes infused into our pure nature.

Conclusion

Is Freud's model of the psyche an adequate representation of our psychological reality? It is certainly a valid way of looking at the composition of personality at the level of the mind. What is obviously missing is the soul, but as the soul is only at the level of a potentiality in most people, Freud has done a commendable and fairly accurate job of describing them.

The id is the base of our primitive instinctive nature, the drive for survival and pleasure. But we also have another preconscious drive which is activated as we mature in our existence – spiritual intuition and longing – that connects us with our original nature. We can call it the 'in'. The purpose of the ego is not only to control the id by satisfying it within reason, but also to support and nurture the 'in', our spiritual longing, so that our original nature can become our living reality. Once that happens the ego is no longer the only rational and realistic mediator between the id and the superego.

The ego contains the seed of our subjectivity which, when awakened, becomes the bridge to our soul. The ego is the embryonic awakening agent responsible for the realization of our pure nature. It is only the tip of the iceberg of our true self, but, without this tip, the iceberg would remain hidden forever under the dark waters of the unconscious. The flowering of the ego's service to the soul is its own surrender and merging with the original light of me. The superego, in the dimension of forgetfulness, acts as something of a substitute for the soul, as much as conscience acts as a substitute for compassion, morality as a substitute for love, and the ego-ideal as a substitute for the natural service to our true self. However, the true meaning of the concept of the superego, and literal translation of the term – 'above-I' – is a clear pointer to the highest value of pure subjectivity and the divine nature of the soul.

Blessings, Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology, you can visit our website: anaditeaching@gmail.com/glossary