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The structure of the mind: Id, ego, superego

Models of the mind

Having discussed in the previous chapters how the mind works as a tense series of transactions between unconscious impulses and defences, we now turn to the way in which it is structured. Freud's understanding of the mind was complex and continually developing. Sometimes these developments led to quite radical changes, but Freud's tendency was to preserve earlier versions of his theory even when later ones came along – perhaps rather as the unconscious preserves earlier ideas and fantasies long after they have ceased to reflect reality. In the case of Freud's theory, this created problems where later formulations (such as the relationship between anxiety and repression) contradicted earlier ones, while some revisions were so extensive as to call into question previous work. An example here is drive theory. In his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as described in Chapter 5, Freud drew together supposedly opposed sexual and ego-preservative drives under the heading of the 'life drives', while a new drive (death) was proposed as their antagonist – a violently different account from the earlier one. Despite this, aspects of Freudian theory continued as if nothing had been changed, sowing some confusion and allowing plenty of space for later contention. Many psychoanalysts (for example Guntrip, 1973) have ignored the death drive completely, seeing it as an aberration, while others (in particular followers of Melanie Klein) have adopted it as a cornerstone of their work.

An advantage of Freud's method, however, was that if we are not too worried about tying up all loose ends, we find ourselves faced

with an overlapping set of ideas that do not always fit together neatly, but nevertheless say something important about the complicated and contradictory terrain of human psychology. We might even argue that the contradictions in Freud's account signal the healthy state of his mind. He may often have been irascible and dogmatic, but he was also able to live in doubt, to refine and shift his theories in the face of his observations, and to rise to the challenge of offering imaginative speculations when he could not be sure of the truth. This produces problems for those who prefer their theories conservative, cautious and completely logical; but it is a source of some inspiration for those who harbour doubts about the possibility of ever creating a totally sealed theory of everything.

One conventional way to understand the different accounts Freud gives of the mind is to see them as separate but overlapping perspectives or 'models' that address somewhat distinct questions about human functioning. It is usually argued that there were five or six such models to be found in Freud's work (Jahoda, 1977). The question 'what fuels the psychic system?' is dealt with in the *economic* model, where the ebbs and flows of psychic energy are traced. The workings of the drives and the conflicts to which they give rise are discussed under the general heading of the *dynamic* model, while the descriptive account of a child's journey through the various stages of sexual development is, not surprisingly, encompassed in the *developmental* model. These models often address similar issues but from different points of view. Thus, the dynamic model offers a way to trace the conflicts between the sexual and ego-preservative drives, while the developmental model shows how this is played out in practice as a sequence of stages through which a child might pass.

Two of the most interesting models are called the *topographical* and the *structural* models. The 'topography' of the mind has to do with the type of idea one is dealing with – most importantly, whether or not it is conscious. The 'structure' of the mind relates to the question of 'where' this material is held. Loosely speaking, Freud hoped that the structure would map onto actual neuroanatomical features of the brain. He was not overly worried about the precision of this mapping at the time he was writing, although he was interested in how brain science might develop and what revisions to theory that might require. As will briefly be described in Chapter 11, this interest of Freud's has

been taken up in recent links between neuroscience and psychoanalysis and the invention of a subdisciplinary area called 'neuropsychoanalysis' (for example Solms and Turnbull, 2002). But Freud's main concern in developing the structural model was to consider how best to theorize a growing distinction between an idea and the 'agency' of the mind that contains and manages that idea. Specifically, what we can see emerging here is an ever more complex model of the self, which aims both to encompass important distinctions around consciousness and also to provide a way to describe the 'sense' of oneself that each person gains. In important ways, this structural model is therefore 'phenomenological', if we understand this term loosely to refer to accounts of how people experience themselves. As will be seen, it also opens the way to a more relational approach in psychoanalysis, based on a set of ideas about 'internalization' and identification with others, which was later developed particularly by 'British School' psychoanalysts such as Klein, Winnicott and Bion.

The system Ucs and its friends

Freud always distinguished between the state in which an idea might be maintained and the way in which these states might be organized – the structure of the mind. His first main version of this was a differentiation between ideas, which could be conscious, preconscious or unconscious, and what he called the 'systems Cs., Pcs. and Ucs.', which referred to the way these ideas worked (and which we first came across in Chapter 4). Conscious ideas are those being thought at any time; preconscious ideas are available, even if they are stored away (for example the words a person knows but is not using at the moment, or a straightforward memory) and unconscious ideas are repressed. Each of these states is organized in a different way. In his major paper called *The Unconscious* (1915c), Freud placed a lot of emphasis on the system Pcs, describing how it contains the important functions of conscious memory, language, reality testing and what he termed the 'reality principle'. He also emphasized how the system Pcs mediates between the other two systems, enabling communication to occur and being the locus of censorship between them. That is, the main 'place' from which repression and the other defences operate is the system Pcs. Derivatives of

the system Ucs may circumvent the earlier stage of repression to reach a certain 'intensity' in the Pcs, but they may still find themselves blocked from consciousness. Repression is not, therefore, located only between the unconscious and consciousness; it happens both between the systems governing the unconscious and the preconscious and again between the preconscious and the conscious.

The Unconscious also contains another vital recognition, which at first sight seems to be at odds with the whole thrust of psychoanalytic investigation but which began the process that resulted in Freud's reconsideration of the structural model several years later. This has to do with a rather surprising statement that Freud makes, in which he argues that whether something is conscious or unconscious is not the most important factor in drawing up an account of how the mind is organized. 'Consciousness,' he writes (Freud, 1915c, p. 192), 'stands in no simple relation either to the different systems or to repression. The truth is that it is not only the psychically repressed that remains alien to consciousness, but also some of the impulses which dominate our ego.' The point he is making here is that unconscious elements can be found in all the mental structures, so simply dividing the mind up according to where conscious or unconscious material is 'stored' will not work.

In practice, what matters in the way Freud developed his structural model is the degree to which it enables us to consider *what it is that is acting to defend what bits of the mind against what particular impulses*. However, before describing Freud's formal structural model, it might be useful to have a reminder of the relevant elements that have to be taken into account.

> ***The ego:*** this is the central structure containing the system Cs – consciousness – and therefore is what requires protection from disturbing unconscious impulses.
>
> ***Defence mechanisms:*** these are the strategies for defending the ego and they are unconscious. In Freud's earlier model they operate within the system Pcs; later on he proposed that they are part of the ego.
>
> ***The repressed:*** these are unconscious derivatives of the drives or secondarily repressed ideas (for example memories of trauma) that are kept away from consciousness and from the ego.

Perhaps the most important point here is that defence mechanisms belong to the ego (or, in Freud's other terminology, the system Pcs) but are unconscious. This means that there has to be a framework that can explain how the unconscious can be set against itself in the form of defences (unconscious) versus wishes (unconscious). The particular framework that Freud devised was to have far-reaching implications for our everyday language and ways of thinking about ourselves.

The ego and the id

As a preliminary point here, it is worth noting the difference between the associations of Freud's German-language terminology and the effects of the work of his English translators from the 1920s until the 1950s. To describe the conscious self, Freud referred to 'das Ich', the 'I'. What he was evoking was the sense each one of us has of being a centre of consciousness, from which thoughts and feelings proceed. The decision of the translators to render this homely notion as 'the ego' deliberately distanced psychoanalysis from this everyday mode and made it more seemingly 'scientific', but also more alien. The ego became a formal system rather than an experience. Similarly, 'das Es', translated (into Latin!) as the 'id', actually means the 'it'. This conveys very well the experience of having something within ourselves that feels alien and threatens to take us over, and this seems to have been exactly Freud's intention. The id is full of primeval and repressed unconscious impulses, which are both part of 'us' yet somehow not owned; we are constituted in large part by something over which we have limited knowledge and control. The third structural agency is similarly alienated in the translation. The 'superego' is in fact the 'over-I' (das Über-Ich), an internal entity that watches over us, judging and condemning us and originating feelings of guilt.

In his earlier writing, Freud mainly used the term 'the ego' to refer to the conscious self. His notion was that the ego was an active part of the mind, present from the beginning of life in some form and containing the energy of the ego-preservative drives. Even after the development of his theory of narcissism, he still thought of the ego as the main source of psychic energy: 'the ego is the true and original reservoir of libido, and … it is only from that reservoir that libido is extended onto objects,' he wrote (Freud, 1920, pp. 51–2). But in his 1923 text *The Ego and the Id*, Freud revised his views. Interestingly, his source for his new way of formulating things was at least as much philosophical and literary as it was 'scientific'. He seems to have been searching for a way of expressing the insight that we are often 'lived' by forces beyond us.

> Now I think we shall gain a great deal by following the suggestion of a writer who, from personal motives, vainly asserts that he has nothing to do with the rigours of pure science. I am speaking of Georg Groddeck, who is never tired of insisting that what we call our ego behaves essentially passively in life, and that, as he expresses it, we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces. (Freud, 1923, p. 362)

This is the introduction to the 'id', the 'it' as the home of the repressed and of fundamental drives. It is the original source of energy, out of which unconscious drive impulses flow. It compels us to act in ways we do not necessarily think we choose, and its contents are unconscious, so hidden away. It is therefore the incarnation of alienation, something we are each haunted by, an 'other' within us. But although all that is in the id is unconscious, not all that is unconscious is in the id: as noted above, consciousness and structure do not go together. Both the ego and the second new invention in *The Ego and the Id*, the superego (which I will go on to discuss shortly), can hold unconscious material inside them.

With the creation of the id, Freud's notion of the ego changed quite dramatically. The ego was now seen as arising out of the id, developing in two main ways.

- The ego is the site of perception and consciousness. It gradually becomes more complex as a result of its experiences of reality. This enables it to mediate between the demands of the unconscious and what is allowable and appropriate in the world.
- The ego also develops by 'taking in' experiences of objects. This process goes by the generic name of *internalization*. Internalization is modelled on the physical events with which the infant is familiar. What this means is that the ego takes as its paradigm the experiences, fundamental to early life, of taking things in to build itself (just as the body is built by feeding) and getting rid of things in order to free itself of discomfort (just as the body excretes waste).

The ego is thus a perceptual and a *bodily* ego. As home to the perceptual apparatus, it negotiates the relationship of the person to her or his physical surroundings, testing the wishes of the unconscious against material reality. To the extent that psychoanalysis is a general psychology, it is the ego that is the seat of cognition and conscious understanding of the world. In addition, Freud's view of the ego as developing through internalization means that there is something *social* built into the ego from the start. In particular, faced with the unavoidable losses that all humans experience (for example separation from the mother), the ego takes in a representation of the lost object and makes it part of itself. The ego thus comes to be a home for lost desires and forsaken objects, which are absorbed along with the id-originated psychic energy invested in them. This, writes Freud (1923, p. 29), 'makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and that it contains the history of those object choices.' What this means is that the ego is developed largely through identification with things it values and loves in the outside world ('cathexes' can be understood as 'emotional investments'), taken in and made the template for structural development of the personality.

The superego

The third element of the structural model, the superego, also develops through the internalization of certain experiences along with the fantasies to which they give rise. In part, all that happens is that some important objects are set up as 'ego ideals'. The process here depends on the outcome of the Oedipus complex (to be described in the next chapter), but the main idea is that the child takes in the prohibitions placed on it by the father, developing an 'internal agency' that judges thoughts as well as behaviours, setting up a moral conscience but also an unconscious set of ideals. This is the superego, the 'over-I', the contents of which are unconscious, and it operates as a carrot and a stick, an ideal and a punishment. Perhaps showing the origins of this idea in nineteenth-century assumptions about patriarchy and child-rearing, the superego is thought of as compelling obedience to an internal authority in the same way that the child once was forced to obey an external one.

The ego strives to appease it and to be loved by it, but it cannot escape the sense of guilt that arises from the demands and criticisms of the superego, which (in contrast to the id's immorality) is 'super-moral' and cruel. The ego therefore suffers in its role as responsible for keeping the person sane and well adjusted.

> We see this same ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego. (Freud, 1923, p. 56)

The superego is a major source of suffering, although it also acts as a guarantor of morality and hence helps preserve the individual in safety. But it is usually too strong, out of kilter with the requirements of the real world, a continually judgemental entity that punishes people not just for what they have done, but also for what they might wish – even when they are not aware of what those wishes are. The contents of the superego are unconscious, after all, yet they plague and prod us throughout our lives.

As can perhaps be seen, Freud's model of ego–id–superego is a useful one in that it allows us to picture what a mind might have to do in order to cope with the complexities of unconscious ideas as they make themselves felt in the real world. Unconscious ideas pump away, demanding things, and the ego has to mediate between them and reality so that the individual does not suffer too much. They are amoral and potentially dissolute, and it is the task of the superego to maintain standards, even if by doing so the individual becomes overly constrained. This explains why people so often feel at odds with themselves, and why it is so common to see good people wracked by guilt: they are 'good' because of the severity of their superego, which in turn explains why all their goodness does not stop them feeling bad. The structural model also offers a language in which one might describe some very complicated issues, such as how mourning takes place, why some people seem to have no conscience at all, and how it can be that in our essence, we might feel that we are 'other' to ourselves. But before we can get to some of these issues, we need to deal with the most famous developmental claim of Freudian theory: that each of us has gone through an Oedipus complex.

Summary

- Freud used a number of perspectives or 'models' to make sense of mental activity.
- Two of these are described here – the 'topographical' model, which deals with the state of an idea as conscious, preconscious or unconscious, and the 'structural' model, which describes the psychological (and possibly neuroanatomical) systems in which these ideas are embedded.
- The structural model began as a distinction between the 'systems Cs., Pcs. and Ucs.' and developed later into the famous tripartite organization of ego, id and superego.
- Structure and topography do not fully overlap. Everything in the id is unconscious, as the id is where one finds the material associated with the drives or repressed as a response to experiences. The superego is also largely unconscious, although some elements of conscience are conscious. The ego has within it the perceptual apparatus and is the site of consciousness, but it also contains the defence mechanisms, which are unconscious and which protect it against other unconscious ideas.
- The ego is formed from exchanges with reality and also by the internalization of lost objects. The superego is formed out of identifications consequent upon the Oedipus complex. It is the source of conscience and guilt.

8 *Oedipus, masculinity, femininity*

Why Oedipus?

Freud probably did more than anyone to repopularize the story of Oedipus Rex for a modern audience. In fact he did more than that: he made it the basis of the most significant psychological 'complex', the foundation of individual development and the core of what he termed 'civilization', meaning the structured order of society. He thought that the continuing emotional impact of Sophocles' ancient play *Oedipus Rex* was due to the way it resonated with a universal unconscious wish, which he understood fundamentally (from the masculine perspective) to be to kill the father and sexually possess the mother. In the play, Oedipus does precisely this, with tragic consequences. Freud used this idea not only to give an account of what happens in the life of every child, but also as a model for the development of civilization as a whole. The founding act of culture, he thought, was the banding together of the sons of an original tyrannical father to kill him, leaving the band of brothers in control of all the women (mothers) who he had owned but at the same time filling them all with guilt. Incest taboos and the regulation of sexuality follow from this, creating the universal structures of society. This idea was immensely important in the development of psychoanalysis, and is still one of the most widely shared notions in the discipline. For some other analysts, the 'Oedipus complex' has been more controversial, and in recent years in particular there have been moves to displace it from the centre of psychoanalytic theory. In the social sciences more generally it has been an embarrassment that has been more often than not quoted against psychoanalysis as evidence of its wildness, although *metaphorical* uses of the idea have been fairly