

Interface at the Edge of Being
The Origins and Function of *Ego*
By
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A couple weeks ago, upon seeing my coming topic for today, Bill Tracy, one of our members, told me of a conversation between a Rabbi and Hillary Clinton during a recent Town Hall meeting. After being introduced, Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett, said, “Another rabbi... taught that every person has to have two pockets, and in each pocket they have to carry a different note. And the note in the one pocket says the universe was created for me. And in the other pocket the note says I am just dust in the ashes.” He then asked her to take a moment to consider the notes in her two pockets (not to be confused with those in her two email accounts), then asked, “How do you cultivate the ego, the ego that we all know you must have, a person must have, to be the leader of the free world, and also the humility to recognize that... you can’t be expected to be wise about all things that the President has to be responsible for?”

It’s an extraordinary question on many levels, and I want to thank Bill for letting me know about it. It’s certainly not the usual sort of question we hear asked of a Presidential contender. The fact that it was posed during a nationally televised event also presumes that most people must know what the word “ego” means without need for explanation. The Rabbi presumed Hillary Clinton understood what he meant by the word, and since she didn’t ask, “Can you use it in a sentence please? Or, “Can I have the definition,” she presumed to know precisely what he meant by it. This exchange proves that since Sigmund Freud coined it more than a century ago the term *ego* has seeped in our common lexicon, used freely by all of us whether we have any formal training in psychology or not.

More importantly, for today’s purposes, the question also presupposes something about ego we don’t hear very often—that we need it. The Rabbi actually used the word, *cultivate*, “How do you cultivate the ego, the ego that we all know you must have, [that] a person must have...” Usually when I hear people use the word *ego* it’s used negatively, in reference to something that must be entirely suppressed, but rarely as something of value and necessity that ought to be cultivated in our lives. A few years ago, for instance, I heard New Age guru, Dr. Wayne Dyer call for the complete annihilation of the ego. “There was a time when I felt much more kindly toward the ego,” he says, “since it plays such a dominant role in the lives of so many people—but today I see it as something that needs to be destroyed.”¹

As one with mystical leanings myself, by which I mean one who doesn’t seek the Truth by adding new truths to my life, but by ridding it of old truths, I can certainly appreciate the tendency to expose the illusion of self. My favorite example comes from Thich Nhat Hanh who writes, “When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds,

¹ Dyer, Wayne W., *Inspiration*, Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, 2006, p. 33.

sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence.”² Hanh, like many other mystics, considers the self to be like that flower, a composite of relationships that has no independent existence. Once the relationships are gone the self disappears.

Another mystic, the 20th century American Quaker, Thomas Kelly, once prayed, “Lord, be Thou my will. Make me as sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow—utterly submitted to you. Be thou my will.”³ Kelly wanted so little sense of his self that he could become like the shadow of God, with no self-distinction or will of his own. This is not unlike Meister Eckhart who saw God as a the Oneness of everything, saying that, “all divided things are gathered up to unity and there undifferentiated.”⁴ Eckhart also strived to give his will entirely over to this Unity. “Where I do not choose for myself, God chooses for me,”⁵ he said, “A pure heart is one... which does not want its own way about anything but... is submerged in the loving will of God, having denied self.”⁶ As Christians, it should not surprise us that Kelly and Eckhart strived to follow the example of Jesus who did not wish to sacrifice himself yet prayed, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”⁷

Likewise, Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist tradition of shedding the illusion of self goes all the way back to its founder. The state of mind Buddha achieved upon reaching enlightenment, *nibbana*, which we have come to call *nirvana*, most accurately translates as, “nothing,” and literally means “snuffed out.” It is a state of mind in which the self is snuffed out like the flame of a candle. Hence Buddha also became known as *Tathagata*, a title that means “gone,” and he began teaching *anatta*, the doctrine of “no self.”

Although Buddhism originated from Hindu philosophy, Hinduism is a bit more like Christianity when it comes to the notion of self. In Hinduism the individual sense of self is but an illusion because all selves are really part of Brahman, the Supreme Self. So the idea is to give up the illusion to discover one’s true Self, one’s *Atman*, the Self or Soul that is beyond both body and ego. This is similar to Emerson’s transcendental idea of the Oversoul. “Within [humankind] is the soul of the whole,” Emerson said, “the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.”⁸

² Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Riverhead Books, Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 1995, p. 11.

³ Kelly, Thomas R., *Holy Obedience*, William Penn Lecture, delivered at Arch Street Meeting House, Philadelphia, 1939.

⁴ Blakney, Raymond B., trans., *Meister Eckhart*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, NY, 1941, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

⁷ Luke 22:42

⁸ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, Random House, Inc., The Modern Library, New York, NY, 1940, p. 262.

Islamic mysticism, likewise, suggests the truth begins where individuality disappears. Who hasn't heard Rumi's beautiful promise of meeting him in a field beyond all ideas of wrong and right? "When the soul lies down in that grass," he says, "the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make any sense." And Islam, in general, requires Muslim followers to submit to the will of Allah.

And if you're like me, and don't believe in a God to submit your will too, there's always scientists like the greatest of them all, Albert Einstein, who sounded an awful lot like both Rumi and Buddha when he said matter is only a localized field of energy, energy that has been squared by the speed of light. "There is no place in this new kind of physics both for the field and matter," he said, "for the field is the only reality."⁹

So that's a look at the note in the one pocket that says we're nothing but dust in the ashes and must eventually return to the cosmic unity from which we sprang. But one of my fundamental issues with religion in general is that it seldom talks about the note in the other pocket, about the necessity of cultivating a strong and healthy sense of self, which, to my mind, ought to be one of the primary purposes of religion. For, as many of you know, I've long been an amateur student of psychology, not for the purposes of understanding how to analyze or counsel others, but for my own self-education. I have studied psychology as a philosopher, in my quest for greater understanding and meaning. I even wrote my dissertation on the Psychology of Religion, and do think of myself as having some expertise on the subject. And what I have discovered in the process is that religion is too often used to drive us deeper into our delusions. It's used as a defense mechanism that helps us cope with reality by ignoring what's happening around us in favor of our own unconscious fantasies.

In the Western religious tradition the world, the body, and the mind, are all treated as fallen, sinful, and deceptive. Eastern traditions also suggest this world is but an illusion, that clinging to it causes us to suffer, and, as we have seen, that the conscious self isn't real. Thus, both these religious traditions urge us to transcend our Earthly, physical reality for some spiritual experience that's supposed to be out of this world. In the west, the self, the ego, the part of us that is individual enough to dare say, "I," is considered a sinful, degenerate thing that deserves damnation and needs salvation. The self isn't treated very positively in Eastern tradition either, be it Buddhism that says we should seek *anatta*, no self, Hinduism that says it's been broken off from and needs to return to the Ultimate Self, or Taoism that says it is only an fabrication of the dualistic thinking that prevents us from experiencing everything as it truly is, as One. Even modern traditions, like Transcendentalism, see the individual as but a drop of water heading back to the great ocean of the Oversoul; or New Age thought that says, like Wayne Dyer, "Ego denies our original invisible reality, so it must be removed and completely banished from our awareness."¹⁰

⁹ Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 2000, p. 211.

¹⁰ Dyer, *ibid.*, p. 33.

Religion and spirituality, by and large, have little use for the self, that part of us psychology calls, *ego*. Part of the issue might be that few of us use the word in the same way Freud did. Freud, you will recall, considered the *ego* as only one of three aspects of the human psyche, including the *id* and *das Uber-Ich*, or, “the Super Ego.” Except Freud actually used the German word, *Ich*, which simply means, “I.” For some reason, however, it isn’t translated into English as such, but has reverted to the Latin and Greek word for “I,” *ego*.

So we don’t usually use the word the way Freud did, simply as the part of us that says, “I,” the part that recognizes we are distinct from others and our environment. Nor do we ever mention it in relation to the *id* or *Uber-ich* either. Yet I suspect, when most people refer to ego they really mean *id* or *superego*. Most of the time, when we find ourselves condemning our own egos or the egos of others, or struggling to “get our egos out the way,” we are really referring to the impulsive part of the psyche, the *id*, which Freud likened to a child wanting immediate gratification of its desires with no thought toward the consequences. Other times, when referring to the authoritarian part of us that wants to control everyone and everything in our lives, we really mean, *superego*. The superego “retains the character of the father,”¹¹ because it is naturally authoritarian.

I have personally come to view the Super Ego as an outward projection of the *Id*’s desires. The *id* doesn’t want to acknowledge the facts or listen to reason. It doesn’t want to be told, “No, you can’t have your way right now. It’s not right. Others will get hurt. You’re going to break something.” So, in order to justify the immediate gratifications of its own desires, it overrides the authority of both reason and reality by projecting its desires onto a Super Authority, *das Uber-Ich*. And because they are projected outwardly, onto the Law, or a Ruler, or a father figure, or even onto an imaginary god, the *id* can no longer be accused of selfishly seeking the gratification of its own desires, for those desires now belong to the law, to the Government, or to God. Others are not harmed or treated unjustly because we want to exploit them for our own selfish gain, but because they have violated our just laws and angered our righteous God. As such, God becomes little more than the greatest scapegoat in human history. Some say, “not my will, but yours be done,” when they may really unconsciously denying responsibility for their own choices.

So what is it that challenges these selfish desires with reason and reality? It might surprise you to learn, at least according to Freud, that it is the *ego*, the very entity religion and spirituality most often call upon us to suppress. For, as Freud said, “Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, the super-ego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world, of the *id*.”¹² In other words, the ego is the part of the mind that interacts with the external world, with empirical reality. It’s like a membrane that allows the outside world to influence our beliefs, decisions, and actions. Do my beliefs hold up to the facts? How will my

¹¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Ego and the Id*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY1923, 1960, p. 24f.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

decisions impact others? What unforeseen consequences might my actions create? The *superego*, on the other hand, though an outward projection onto some perfect ideal, still only represents the interests of the internal world of the *id*, the part of us that, through repression, ignorance and an inflated sense importance, is entirely unconscious of empirical facts and of how our decision and actions might harm others.

Even so, we have largely come to view the ego, *das Ich*, the part of that is differentiated from others and the environment and can say, "I," as something entirely unconscious. Yet, according to Freud's original explanation, the ego exists almost upon the surface of the skin, like a sense organ, that may be the very reason we have any consciousness at all. "The ego," he said, "seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id..."¹³ Don't miss what Freud is saying here, that in contrast to the "pleasure principle," through which the *id* seeks immediate gratification of its desires while remaining oblivious to what going on around it, there is the "reality principle," by which the *ego*, a psychological membrane, filters the light of the world into our awareness.

So do we really want to destroy the ego, or "banish it from our awareness" as Wayne Dyer says, in favor of what he calls our "original invisible reality?" I can tell you this; that in psychological terms "banishing" anything from our "awareness" in favor of an "invisible reality" is the very definition of repression and a strong indicator of psychological issues. Again, as Freud put it, "The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions."¹⁴

In my journey, I have come to value empirical facts, reason, as well as the beauty and wonder of the external world, and my seemingly unique ability as a *Homo sapiens* to be somewhat conscious of my experience. And I would not want to give up my ego, my sense of self, the part of me that says, "I," if my only other choice is some kind of autistic existence in which I'm clueless about what's happening around me, or untroubled by the harm my actions may cause others, including other people, other creatures, and the environment we all share.

To be fair, there are problems with Freud and his triune theory of the human psyche, which may be why even some of our greatest psychologists, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, B.F. Skinner, Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow, and many others, just like the rest of us, hardly ever use the terms *id* or *superego*, though the word *ego* is dispersed throughout their writings. Instead, *id*, *ego*, and, *superego*, have all been rolled into the one word, *ego*. In truth, the distinctions between them is hardly a fine line, for they really just describe different ways all of us relate to the world at times. Sometimes we want what we want right now, without thinking about the consequences of our actions. Sometimes, because we don't want anyone accusing

¹³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

us of being selfish, we try to justify what we want by saying it's good, it's the law, it's the right thing to do, the Bible tells me so. And sometimes we actually consider the needs of others and take into account the potential consequences of our actions.

The ego, then, is that which helps us differentiate ourselves from others and the world, the part of us that can say, "I." Newborns are undifferentiated, and, thus, entirely unconscious of the world, at least until they begin to see themselves as separate. Growing up, becoming mature, requires us to differentiate, to develop the ability to say, "I." As adults, a healthy ego, a healthy sense of self, also helps prevent us from being codependent, from confusing our needs and wills with the needs and wills of others. And, a healthy sense of self, a strong ego, enables us to recognize what's really happening around us, to face the facts, to acknowledge others, and to integrate these into our way of thinking and being.

So that's a look at the note in the other pocket that says, "the world belongs to me." In the end, I agree with this old rabbinic teaching, that we need both perspectives to live balanced lives. As Simcha Bunim, the 17th century Polish Rabbi who first gave us this teaching, said, "*When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: 'For my sake was the world created.' But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: 'I am but dust and ashes.'*"¹⁵ For too many of us rip one or the other pocket from our lives, either despising ourselves entirely, or overestimating our own importance while ignoring everyone and everything else in the process. We need both humility and self, and, to do so, the question before us isn't how to get our egos out of the way, but how to cultivate a healthy ego that has compassion for itself and for others. It's a lesson for us all, but, especially at this critical time in our nation, like Rabbi Spira-Savett, I hope whomever our next President is, that she or he shows up on Inauguration Day wearing something with two pockets.

¹⁵ Buber, Martin (1948). *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*. Schocken Books. pp. 249–250.