

THE EGO RE-REVISITED

A Reply to Frank (2007)

Richard Lettieri, PhD

New Center for Psychoanalysis and Newport Psychoanalytic Institute

G. Frank (2007) maintained that if psychoanalysts are to renew their interest in an archaic concept like the ego, 3 criticisms must be addressed: reification of the ego, the problem of impersonality, and the problem of the ego's evolution from the id. The author addresses these criticisms directly and from within the context of an updated view of the ego as rooted in contemporary biological and psychological science. He also comments on the place of the psychoanalytic ego in the postmodern era.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, ego, conflict theory, evolutionary theory, post modernism

Frank (2007) believes that if psychoanalysts are to entertain a renewed interest in the ego construct that to him seems archaic in this postmodern era, advocates such as I (Lettieri, 2005) must address “three major areas of criticism of Freud’s conceptualization of the ego that led to its downfall”: reification, the problem of impersonality, and the theoretical problem of the ego’s evolution from the Freudian id. I strove to, and thought that I did, address these issues, either directly or indirectly, in my original article, and I believe that a close reading of it would support my claim. Nonetheless, I pray this commentary helps.

Initially (Lettieri, 2005), I reviewed and critiqued not only Freud’s concept of the ego, but the more contemporary conceptions of the psychoanalytic ego that have developed since Freud published his seminal papers on the concept of the ego and the id (Freud, 1923–1925/1961b, 1925–1926/1961a).

I begin here by addressing the criticism of the ego’s parentage, the Freudian id. Frank (2007) pointed out that because the Freudian ego is but a modification of the id and maintained by the id’s “psychic energy” and “archaic heritage,” it is subject to all the epistemological and scientific criticisms of the id concept. Not only do I fully agree, but, in many ways, the *raison d’être* of my original article was to address this critique. I reviewed the literature of modern conflict theory (MCT) and noted that the ego is still seen as that part of the mind that modulates anxiety and conflict. Modern ego psychologists, also known as modern conflict theorists, view the classical metapsychological theory of

Richard Lettieri, PhD, New Center for Psychoanalysis, Los Angeles, California, and Newport Psychoanalytic Institute, Tustin, California.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Richard Lettieri, PhD, 7 Corporate Park, Suite 235, Irvine, CA 92606. E-mail: rjlettieri@cox.net

psychic energy and its associated biological imperatives as limited in their ability to account for the complexity of human motivation (Richards & Lynch, 1998.) In my critique of MCT, I said, “The economic model of mental functioning, with its emphasis on psychic energy, constancy, and homeostasis, has been deemphasized, as has Freud’s structural tripartite model of the mind” (Lettieri, 2005, p. 372), but I criticized MCT for its lack of a contemporary metapsychobiology to replace the old Freudian one that has essentially been discarded. I pointedly asked,

Is the ego still viewed as a structure that is differentiated from the id, with the id driven by only sexual and aggressive instincts? If the id is, in part, a product of identifications, are those love objects still cathected by the id’s sexual and aggressive energies, or is investment of the love objects conceptualized from within a different or broader motivational theory? (Lettieri, 2005, p. 373)

I went on to construct a view of the ego as a self-organizing, self-creating biopsychological processing system that functions on the basis of evolutionary biological constraints and from within an understanding of contemporary motivation. The psychobiological underpinnings of the ego concept outlined in my original article were built on the theoretical work of a number of theorists: psychoanalysts Slavin and Kriegman (1992) and Peskin (1997), systems theorists Kauffman (1993) and Thelen and Smith (1994), psychological scientists Block and Kremen (1996) and McAdams (1998), and, significantly, on the work of evolutionary biologist Edelman (1992.) The ego is viewed as a self-generating *process*, not as a reified structure. It functions within evolutionary constraints and the laws of biological systems, and it responds to contingent circumstances in a self-enhancing, self-referential fashion to create personal meaning.

The concept of the ego presented in my original article is indeed meant to replace the outmoded metabiological theory that, it seems to me, is still used by contemporary ego psychologists. As I pointed out (Lettieri, 2005) this is a crucial update for a theory such as MCT that views the mind as deeply embodied.

Frank (2007) noted that critics have claimed that Freud wrote as though the ego had a tangible existence, which, of course, it does not. He goes on to say, however, that this criticism is unfair, as the ego is actually a shorthand way of identifying certain psychological processes such as attention and synthesis. I disagree with Frank here, as I do believe that the original concept of the ego was easy to reify and also easily conceived of as a homunculus. On the other hand, this criticism can be leveled at many of our psychoanalytic constructs, including those typically considered postmodern. Where, for example do “relational configurations” or the “self” reside? Furthermore, I want to assert that viewing the ego as a biologically rooted self-referential process, subject to evolutionary constraints and capable of generating subjective experience and personal meaning, renders the reification and homuncular critiques moot.

It seems to me that Frank’s (2007) critique of the ego as impersonal is less than compelling. Many, if not most, theoretical constructs are quite abstract and by their very nature impersonal. Is the ego concept any less impersonal than the notion of, say, “the intersubjective field” or the idea of a “selfobject function”? Frank rightly noted that psychoanalysis is the study of the most intimate aspects of human experience. I applaud his acute sensitivity to the clinical encounter. However, I think the issue here is not so much the impersonality of the concepts we theoretically use, but how our ideas are engaged within the clinical encounter. The sensitive application of the theoretical concepts is most crucial, and this is dependent on the person of the analyst. For example, I discussed

(Lettieri, 2005) at some length the function of neutrality from within the context of an updated view of the ego, and I emphasized the centrality of a deeply personal characteristic of the analyst, authenticity.

Finally, I would like to comment on the place of the ego in the postmodern psychoanalytic discourse. The ego is viewed here as a self-generating processing system capable of organizing psychological experience in an adaptive fashion to create personal meaning and subjective organization. The theoretical foundation of the ego is rooted in contemporary biology and psychological science while at the same time capable of accounting for the uniqueness of human experience. Such a conceptualization of the ego has the capability, it seems to me, of bridging the unfortunate divide that frequently exists between our empirical and hermeneutic traditions. This kind of conceptualization—to be grounded in science while faithful to the psychoanalytic project of grasping the individual's unique subjectivity—is, I think, what is needed for many of our theoretical concepts, if our discipline is to assert its relevance in this 21st century. Not bad for an archaic concept!

References

- Block, J., & Kreman, A. M. (1996). IQ and ego resiliency: Conceptual and empirical connections and separateness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 349–361.
- Edelman, G. M. (1992). *Bright air, brilliant fire*. New York: Basic Books.
- Frank, G. (2007). A response to Richard Lettieri's "The ego revisited." *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 24*, 709–711.
- Freud, S. (1961a). An autobiographical study; inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety; lay analysis; and other works. In J. S. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 20, pp. 77–174). London: Hogarth Press. (Original published 1925–1926)
- Freud, S. (1961b). Ego and the id and other works. In J. S. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19, pp. 3–66). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1923–1925)
- Kauffman, S. A. (1993). *The origins of order: Self-organizations and selection in evolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lettieri, R. (2005). The ego revisited. *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 22*, 370–381.
- McAdams, D. (1998). Ego, trait, identity. In P. M. Westenberg, A. Blasi, & L. Cohn (Eds.), *Personality development: Theoretical, empirical, and clinical investigations of Loevinger's conception of ego development* (pp. 27–38). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Peskin, M. M. (1997). Drive theory revisited. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 66*, 377–402.
- Richards, A., D., & Lynch, A. A. (1998). From ego psychology to contemporary conflict theory: An historic overview. In C. S. Ellman, S. Grand, M. Silvan, & S. J. Ellman (Eds.), *The modern Freudians*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Slavin, M. O., & Kriegman, D. (1992). *The adaptive design of the human psyche: Psychoanalysis, evolutionary biology, and the therapeutic process*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Thelen, E., & Smith, L. (1994). *A dynamic systems approach to the development of cognition and action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.