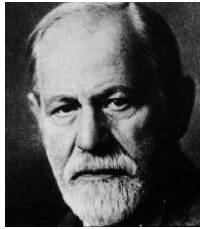


Freud's Id, Superego, and Ego [– and why they matter to us]



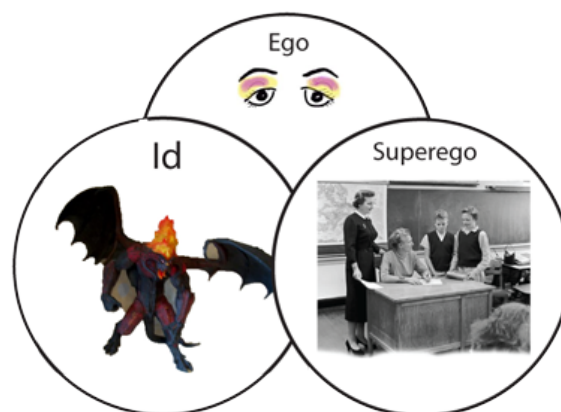
Each of the layers of Freud's three-part system is derived from different sources.

The **Id** is the container of biological and species history – embodied in our instincts: a 'seething cauldron' as it has been called. It is the energy that makes you want to push someone out of the way if you are hungry or thirsty, acquire status if you are envious or to be drawn to make love to an irresistible other.

This system is in conflict with the **superego** – a repository of social rules, inhibitions & permissions – also derived from previous generations and taught through parents, custom and norms. It is this system that warns you to keep off the grass, drive on the left, be polite & not to grab that irresistible other without permission!

The **ego** is the mediator and moderator, the container of contemporary experiences – though not a holder of them (it is made up of moments of 'now'). It is a referee but not a player in the internal drama. The ego is only a player in the sense of manipulating (or trying to) the external world in service of the internal.

So human beings are the arena in which two powerful, awesome armies confront each other, with the ego, powerless to limit their energies, engaged in a damage limitation exercise. In the picture we see a hapless ego overlooking the conflict between a beast and a highly compliant, well-ordered automaton.



For our work, the key issue here – and the reason why I focus so much on disinhibition, play, non-verbal exercises, empathic emotional connection & allowing the internal to express itself in my own practice – is that **while the external world is important, it is always subordinate to the internal**. Given this perspective it is easy to see why 'reportage' – just telling your client what they said - can so often be the booby prize!

In the focus group or interview the ego struggles to limit the damage that might be caused if the real motives were to be revealed. It tones down what might be a seething desire into something more socially acceptable or placates an overbearing superego with a veneer of polite attentiveness. In so doing *it maintains form but destroys content* – and is much more driven by the ego needs of the current situation (most commonly to keep the awesome armies quiet) than by any hope, desire, longing or fear for the future.

'Internal perceptions are more primordial, more elementary, ...[they have] greater economic significance' (Freud 1923, p22, adapted from Dalal, 1998)

That's really the key concern for us all. According to Freud, the internal world or sense of things has greater economic significance in individual's behavior than the external. If we don't get in touch with it, we fail to appreciate its influence; we are likely to end up with an erroneous picture of what people are up to!