CONFLICT CREATES AN UNCONSCIOUS ID

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Abstract

In relating Solms’ framework of subcortical id and cortical ego to psychoanalysis we should bear in mind the particular circumstances of human emotional conflict. Freud explicated this in terms of the superego, which was the first internal object, and was also used in relating emotional conflict in the individual to violent group conflict. In describing conflict we specify conditions in which the translation of subcortical oscillation into conscious action-directing representation Solms describes should break down, and as psychoanalysis describes using the concept of an unconscious id. Considering attachment suggests likewise. This shows both that Solms’ framework matches psychoanalysis and that we should revise the latter not by regarding the id as conscious but by emphasizing that the unconscious and the id are created via the joint generation of motivation and consciousness in the evolved context of human emotional and group conflict.

Keywords: superego, attachment, RAGE, conflict, compromise-formation, projection

In a creative and far-reaching argument Mark Solms maps the id to the basic subcortical mechanisms of motivation and the ego to thalamocortical systems transforming ‘fleeting and wave-like’ activations from these into temporally ordered cortical representations informing bodily activity. This translation of id by ego enables our bodies to discharge the functions of the subcortical mechanisms in the cortically represented environment into which we have evolved. Since the mechanisms that generate emotion also generate consciousness he concludes that the id is both conscious and the source of consciousness for the cortical action-directing representations as well. This contradicts the psychoanalytic account according to which the motivations and representations in the id are unconscious. What revisions are required?

To answer this we must consider conflict. Many paradigms of psychoanalysis are also paradigms of disordering emotional conflicts that psychoanalysis seeks to mitigate. Such conflict might well originate in affordance competition (Cisek 2010), the psychoanalytic cases marking failure of winner-take-all in incoherent activation of multiple competitors. (Dreams show comparable multiple activation but serving homeostatic optimization during sleep.) The activations associated with the ego, superego, and id are a further special case, hypothesized in virtue of Freud’s growing realization (explicit in his notes on the Rat Man) that conflict characteristically involves not just the activation of multiple conflicting motives, but also that of accompanying constellations relating to conflicting parts or aspects of the self.

The most familiar is that of moralistic superego RAGE punishing the self/ego for activation of RAGE in the id. This can be seen in the Rat Man’s anxiety and guilt for the
unconscious RAGE at his father expressed in his phantasy of paternal torture. Freud reasonably regarded this as an evolved mechanism for controlling aggression via guilt, functioning to secure family harmony and facilitating ingroup cohesion for outgroup aggression. For internal identification with the superego locates (projects) badness outside, both into other individuals and into outgroups, against whom moralistic RAGE is therefore amplified as mandatory.

We see this in psychodynamic description of countless examples of the good us versus bad them pattern that underpins group conflict: in religious conflicts and wars, the facilitation of the holocaust by the idealization of Hitler, current demonization of muslims and idealization of militarism in the United States, and so on ad finem nostrum. The same holds for individual good-self/bad-other relations, as was first exhibited in full detail in the working of Freud’s moralistic superego as collector of instances of his own medical mispractice, brought against himself -- and threatening talionic death for his own daughter -- in his associations to his dream of Irma’s injection. The wishfulfilment in the first specimen of psychoanalysis was obtained by Freud’s evading the guilt-producing daughter-menacing superego whose nocturnal working his associations revealed, by projecting mispractice into Otto so as to vent RAGE on Otto in taking the superego role for himself.

The opposite phenomenon – conflict-relieving projection of the superego – is illustrated in the common passage from depression to schizophrenia vividly described after superego-self aggression in Elyn Saks’ account of her descent into psychosis. Similar superego/id dialectics are enacted in countless psychoanalytic examples, including children’s play as described by Melanie Klein. (Examples are discussed together with a Bayesian account of the superego and repression compatible with Solms’ framework in Hopkins 2012 with references to material in this comment.) As well as explicating many phenomena the superego-ego-id framework introduced subpersonal functional units whose personification embodies an insight fundamental for neuropsychoanalysis, namely that in our social species supersonal functional/causal roles for regulating emotion are cortically discharged by neural/mental representations of human beings themselves: by the superego and other internal objects.

Freud’s various accounts of drives (one involving RAGE always opposed to others, as in death/life) were framed to explicate such conflict. This is no accident, since such conflict specifies conditions in which the transformation of subcortical activation into conscious representation breaks down. Pre-superego conflict involves activation of RAGE together with other basics opposed to it towards a single object -- inevitable when all urgent activations must be directed at a nursing mother. But in this the cortical ego must deal with subcortical activations requiring transformation into contradictory representations in behaviour and consciousness. In such a situation we should expect the outcomes that psychoanalysis has repeatedly found: either one of the potentially conflicting id activations is denied translation, as in repression; or failing this both are get partial but incoherent translation, as in compromise-formations such as Freudian symptoms or the contradictory/incoherent behaviour of infants classified as attachment-disorganized at 12 months.

Frequent conflicting outcomes would be probable if subcortical oscillators superpose conflicting imperatives in a single waveform for cortical resonators to unfold and broadcast as the changing sequential patterns required for emotionally complex and changing situations. Here subcortical superposition would explain how fleeting waves manage the required information, integration of conflicting signals would be the ego’s normal task, and incoherent cortical activation would be probable in difficult conditions. Such conflict would naturally activate past conflict-engendering repression-causing representations from ‘the earliest parental imagos’, and would also be expressed in concurrent phantasies, conscious and unconscious, involving them. Such might be exemplified in a projected form in the Rat Man’s transference phantasies of Freud’s mother dead with swords stuck though her breast, as well as his imagining Freud as a murderous beast of prey (projected moralistic RAGE-filled devouring and body-invading oral superego) that would fall on him to search out what was evil in him.

How pervasive is such conflict? Psychoanalysis apart it appears that mother-infant attachment -- which Watt and Panksepp (2009, p. 93) describe as setting the ‘massive regulatory-lynchpin system of the human brain’ exercising ‘primary influence over the prototype systems below’ -- must involve particularly powerful conflicts about RAGE. Attachment inhibits RAGE and FEAR that might conflict with SEEKING and CARE between
the attached. Central to CARE, in turn, is proximity, and this is regulated by separation-distress/PANIC/GRIEF (SPG), which is itself a cause of RAGE and FEAR. For these also are marshaled in maintaining proximity – as seen in the RAGE at separation from mother and FEAR of strangers (the first of many bad them) appearing in human attachment at 7 – 8 months – and also because, as with FEAR of strangers, they serve to prepare the potentially separated for the worst.

Powerful frequent activations of this SPG/RAGE/FEAR triad seem essential in early infancy, as their expression in infants’ uniquely penetrating, anxiety-arousing, and action-compelling cries are the main means by which those in urgent need can coerce the CARE that is a continual matter of life and death for them. The importance of this triad appears in its determination of attachment classification as secure, or again as insecure (avoidant, ambivalent-resistant, or disorganized). In the ‘strange situation’ procedure mother and infant settle in an unfamiliar (potentially FEAR-producing) situation, and infant begins SEEKING and PLAY. Stranger (potential bad other) enters and approaches infant, activating infant’s recently lessened FEAR of strangers. After this mother, following procedure, leaves infant alone by itself, activating infant’s recently lessened RAGE at maternal separation, and therewith infant’s SPG in this context of FEAR and RAGE. After reunion mother activates the triad still further, leaving infant again, this time at the mercy of stranger, who originally activated FEAR. This activates RAGE again at mother for doing all this, and despite infant’s previous protesting RAGE.

Classification depends upon how infant copes, particularly with RAGE at mother when she returns offering renewed CARE whose enjoyment conflicts with RAGE. (The situation, that is, has now manipulated the triad to activate the central evolutionarily significant conflict – RAGE and FEAR in opposition to the SEEKING of CARE – that attachment itself serves to contain.) In this situation secure infants show conflict but resolve it to return CARE, and thence to SEEKING in PLAY. Disorganized infants, by contrast, remain in conflict apparently involving activated RAGE and FEAR, and are confused in feeling and contradictory and incoherent in behavior, and can make no comparable return.

This is how it would be if the secure infants’ cortical egos had learned, as the disorganized infants’ had not, to regulate potentially conflicting subcortical activations so as to translate them for action situations demanding rapid changes in the direction of RAGE. The importance of early conflict, moreover, is further indicated by the fact that disorganized attachment can be predicted from emotional dis-coordination between mother and infant at 4 months (the time of coming to represent the mother as a whole object that Klein thought initiated her paranoid-schizoid-depressive transition). And the formative role of RAGE in the core conflict of attachment seems shown in the disposition of disorganized infants later to become violently controlling in respect of CARE.

All this fits with the psychoanalytic account in terms of superego ego and id, including Freud’s idea that early conflict-generating imagos play a key role development; and also with Klein’s hypothesized transition. For we should include the possibility that after the mother is singled out between 4 and 5 months as a unique and irreplaceable source of CARE (thereby prompting the separation-RAGE and stranger-FEAR apparent at 7 – 8 months) the infant’s experience of this might promote an infantile version of CARE in return. In this the GRIEF of SPG might become more distinctly human grief, so that the infant would now curb RAGE from something like gratitude and concern that RAGE might damage this source of CARE or provoke its loss.

Solms stresses that psychoanalytic claims about the id were framed to explain clinical data and remain answerable to them, and aims to provide an account of what is made unconscious and how. Together with the above this should encourage us to depart from his wording in integrating his valuable account. We have seen that the id is part of an explanatory structure introduced for, and serving, genuine explanatory purposes; and also that this is not just consistent with, but apparently a consequence, of the neuroscientific framework Solms advocates. Moreover the main limitation of this structural theory – that the superego is only the first-discovered of a variety of differing internal objects in distinctive causal-functional roles – is consistent with expanding it within his framework. The introduction of the superego as an internal object inhibiting, projecting, and amplifying RAGE so as to subserve ingroup cohesion subserving outgroup conflict, was also the introduction of a internalized object-relations as a potential theoretical framework. An ego that creates working representations of
objects will also organize the whole theatre of motivation- and conscious-regulating prototypes of emotional relationships embodied in internal objects, which are structured by within-attachment conflicts and so subject to repression.

Given such convergence we should not integrate Solms’ framework by describing the id as conscious. Assuming confirmation we should just accept the framework as current best account of the joint generation of motivation and consciousness, and in light of this make explicit that the unconscious and the id are not intrinsically linked with the motive/consciousness mechanisms. Rather they are to be seen, as indicated above, as consequences of the working of these mechanisms – and especially of the burden put upon on the id-deciphering infantile ego -- in our uniquely social (and so moralistically RAGE-limiting) and also uniquely and lethally group-competitive (and so moralistically RAGE-projecting and RAGE-amplifying) and therefore uniquely conflicted mammalian species.

